The S.H.I.E.L.D. Codices: A Clear and Present Loki

by KhamanV

Summary

Loki is forced to see that all permutations of his future ultimately end at Ragnarok, and like so many iterations before him demands his own chance to unbind himself from an unwanted destiny. The odds are worse than terrible, but one path might be found in the company of his enemies: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. currently busy with enough troubles of their own. Spoilers for Season One.
Prologue: and in the beginning were the words

“...It was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice.” ~ J. Conrad, Heart of Darkness

“I am selfish, private, and easily bored. Will this be a problem?” ~ N. Gaiman, A Study in Emerald

1. and in the beginning were the words

He stood at the crux of time and space, his past veiled in the thin shadow he cast behind him. Countless doors surrounded him, each a mirror, each unlocked, each quivering with the whispering sounds that slithered out underneath them, calling to him, asking him to decide. He kept his bone-white hands clasped together in a pose of pure calm and contemplation, his glinting eyes narrowed as his considered his sizeable number of options.

I am, he thought, as every God ought at the outset of new creation. The words were the base of the purest of spells, making of him a fixed place, an anchor in a mutable jumble of possible universes. It stilled the swirl of confusion in his mind. He lifted his head and spoke them aloud to finish the seal.

“ I AM.”

“So you are,” murmured the secret-keeper. Loki turned slightly, glanced at the yellow robed figure where it sat behind a simple desk of wood and metal – another type of observer might instantly recognize it as a popular choice from an IKEA catalog. A bony finger with a ragged nail tapped the matte blue cover of a laptop impatiently. “You insist upon yourself, little deity.”

“I merely prepare.”

“Well, do get a move on. I'm not Drew Carey, the price is never right, and you'll never be satisfied with what's behind door number three. We both know this, so let's not dawdle overmuch.” The figure shifted in its seat, the laptop disappearing as if it never were. Now a slender silver fountain pen danced in its hands instead.

“I could use advice,” Loki muttered. He shifted his gaze back to the countless doors – here, a monstrously ugly version of him, green and gold and haggard with hate. There, a slender young man not much unlike his own self-image sang showtunes in a bubbling bathroom. Loki caught a glimpse of another trio beckoning the pretty manchild's attention, and his heart – dead heart, he told himself, he loved nor needed nothing anymore - twanged to see some echo of Frigga among this alien concept of the All-Mother. He unconsciously hissed breath through his lips and looked away again to his possibilities. There, discordancy: a mirror-Loki turning vehicles to ice cream, then another shot a fish with an improbably large rocket launcher. Another held Thor in his pale palm, the great golden warrior now a frog, smiles creasing the lips of tricksters both here and there. In another mirror, incongruously, a chimera-like figure of many colors tormented a field of tiny pastel ponies. Loki pondered that one a while, seeing that piece of himself still in the prankster monster, and yet recognizing that this was yet a bit too weird for him. On and on, more mirrors, more visions that began to blur together. And here, one tinted with the deadened colors of legend, a Loki that capered in madness – and died – at the end of the world and the end of all worlds.

He suppressed the shudder. His last meal lay cold in his belly.
“Viral memetics. Consensus reality.” He turned back to the secret-keeper and its hidden face. “No one of us can rewrite the world, Loki, not I, not any sole creature. It takes a thousand souls or more to make the barest shift. What you behold is destiny. Thousands and thousands of destinies. And they all end there.” The bony figure pointed an ink-stained feather at the mirror doors. Now all showed the same broken, terrifying vision. “Ragnarok.”

The shared vision dissipated, resumed their divergent histories. Rattled, he played his game face. “I rather like that one.” He gestured to the smiling figure on a grand stage, the meaningless words ‘COMIC-CON’ emblazoned on a banner nearby. Thousands of voices clamored for him, and his own name came as a rousing chant from under the door. “He seems well-honored.”

“They love a fiction, Loki. You do not exist there, save as a fantasy. The man you see is not you, though in those few moments he incarnated you to amuse a throng. Mere theatrics, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage. Quite a nice man, actually, or so I’ve observed.” The secret-keeper’s voice was low and heavy with irony. He bristled at the implication, but kept his expression neutral. “In that world, no action you could ever make would be your own. Your fate there is written, known, planned by committee – and you’ll die at any moment their whim suits. The play’s the thing, of course, and it serves the mighty dollar and its kingdom of residuals on the back end. No cut of the action figure profits, either.”

“There is no other choice?” Despite his best effort, a faint whisper of desperation entered his words. “I must end either in madness and hate, or in non-existence?”

“Has that not been the clear outcome of your every willfully made choice to this day? You dare step between all things and presume your innocence to ME of all creatures, when your crimes are recited clear? When a million words of your misdeeds fill scrolls of legend, Wiki articles, and comic sketches? We know you well, prince of mischief and lord of lies. What you think you seek has been tried before, to predictable ends.” The white noise voice rose in outrage and amusement. “You are not the hero of this story.”

He whirled on the secret-keeper. “Then I want a new story!”

A noise filled the timeless space, a rattle he eventually recognized as a hollow, clacking laugh. He wondered, briefly, what sort of creature was veiled within the saffron yellow robe, and then wisdom bade him consider that some secrets are kept for a reason. If he was beyond reality – all realities – then what sat there now with charcoal on its fingers, painting transient histories on blank red stone, was not for him to comprehend.

“Oh, but I do like you. New stories are always built on the bones of old, of course. Memetics, confluence, tropes, a skeleton built of campfire tales and lies whispered between children. History is made from jumbled memories and a little superglue of faith.”

Loki wondered if the secret-keeper was mad.

“You fought your way here, twice your kingdom lost, having slipped through your grasp after mistakes you made. Your allies leave you to die every time, and your family’s backs turned to you again and again as you betray them in search of something to fill your heart. A heart you leave empty. These were your choices, and your results are your own. I will give you almost nothing until the day you acknowledge this, and that day, funny prince, will be Ragnarok still.”

“No hope in truth, then.”

“Not from me to thee.”
“Then tell me of lies, the topic I know best.” He flashed the thing in the robe a brittle, hateful smile. He was growing weary of its strange rhetoric.

The secret-keeper pushed away from the tall stone stele and rose to its full height. Loose saffron puddled around its hidden feet and their strange sucking noises. The rattle-clack came again. “I'll do you one better. I'll share with you a riddle. I'll even speak the answer, should you fail to solve it.”

“Tell me.”

“What is a lie?”

He was taken aback. A simple enough question. “A story. A falsehood, a thing that is not true. A tool of manipulation, a weapon to hurt. A child knows these things.”

“And the man used that knowledge to his own ends. These are the answers to a question. I gave you a riddle.”

“Your idea of a riddle is...unique.”

The dry clack. “The answer, funny prince, is simple: A lie is a truth that hasn’t happened yet.”

Loki stayed still, considering the import the secret-keeper put into the words. Some implied meaning crept close to him, staying just out of reach of his clutches. He curved his lips into a distracted, scholarly sort of sneer, filing this away for study.

“Now lie to me, lord of lies. Tell me what you think you want.”

“I want out. I want better than this. I want a future that doesn't end with me as a mindless, mad destroyer. Mark me the villain if you like, it doesn't matter. But I want Asgard – not as rubble, a husk. I want my kingdom.” His voice rose at the end, nearly a roar.

“Oh, you.” The robes heaved in a sigh. “Fine. Take that door.” It gestured to a shimmering portal. In it, he spied a familiar human face and he grimaced. Nobility left his angry form and he looked back at the keeper with his head cocked like a puzzled mutt.

“Seriously? That seems poor judgment.”

“Through that door is potential. Your best bet, funny prince, not that it'll likely matter in the end, is to go entirely off the rails. What came before changes with every telling and matters little, except in a metafictional kind of way. That there was a prince once who went mad with the knowledge of his blood and his destiny, this is a piece that must be kept. The rest, eh, not so important. We know your kingdom is lost, the why and the how can be written by others later.”

He spread his hands, shaking his head at the creature. “I don’t understand.”

The secret-keeper crossed its arms, clearly impatient with him. “It means you take a chance on a story told for the sheer joyful fuck of it, with no certain outcome. Must bring your own weapons. Safety not guaranteed. I have only done this once before.”

He gaped openly, forgetting for a dangerous second that he stood in its realm and existed solely at its whim. “You are mad.”

“We’re all mad here. Take a chance. Tell us a tale, Lie-Smith.”

He stared at the darkness veiled in the yellow hood for a long time. Take a chance – it was, perhaps,
his only chance. At least in this telling. His mind began to whirl again.

“Tick-tock, said Spock, my soul is yet in hock. Time to fly, princes die, and I've got about six episodes of Game of Thrones backed up on the DVR. Book ‘em, Danno.”

“Once upon a time,” he said, backing away from the insane creature towards the door of last chance. “There were only the words in the place between time and space. The words were I AM, and when the god spoke them, somewhere, a man died and a child was born. Bushes burned and mirrors shattered.”

“Go on. One last step and you're through.”

“And the god said again I AM, and those words of power are an affirmation – the god is he who he is, and this is both the lie and the truth. And the secret-keeper looked on him with benevolent amusement, and lo, the young god's story begins anew with those most secret, most sacred of words.

For a single shattered second, he glimpsed the outline of a face in the cowl, but its shapes and angles meant nothing to his mind. Something squirmed there, a mad fever's dream of a smile, and he turned and plunged through the portal as he spoke the words of beginning.

“Once upon a time!”
He took his chance. Now he'll take another - and reach out to a man who owes him nothing but disdain or worse.

“You're looking quite well, considering.” Loki arched a dark eyebrow as he leaned back further against the plush red leather of the darkened booth. The light of a single decorative candle flickered along his cheekbone. The extra inch of distance would do him no good if things went sour, but it made him feel better anyway. He put a smile on his face, set sardonicism aside in an attempt to look affable. Harmless. He interlaced his long fingers together, keeping them well in sight on the table. “Please think carefully before you do this, the suit isn't an illusion and Dolce & Gabbana apparently sells its wares dearly.”

The man across the table from his kept his voice low and conversational. “Did you go to the Savile Row location? Not as good as some of the bespoke guys around there, but a nice starter choice anyway.” He gestured for emphasis with the improbably large weapon. It creaked against the stabilizing rifle stand.

Loki made a noncommittal noise and examined the weapon. Its menacing black outline was vaguely familiar. “That's not the same…”

“Later iteration. Even less recoil, tightened up the targeting matrix. Our guys use it for small controlled demolitions when shape charges aren't sufficient to breach. Also it blew up this one half-cyborg guy when he tried to get cute with my team. There weren't even chunks.” Agent Phil Coulson quirked a little smile. “Kind of gross, I admit, but we were pretty short on options.”

“I do know how you're not fond of being cornered.” Loki attempted to clear his throat, feeling the dryness click against his tongue. It had hurt the last time – not enough to stop him, nor even slow him overmuch, but nonetheless, it had hurt. And the suit cost him nearly half the false paper gold he'd acquired while staying under the radar of possible interested persons. Vanity, alas, a most pleasant sin.

“No.”

He raised the other eyebrow to match the first. “I...don't suppose you'd care for an apology?”

“Nope.”

He pursed his lips, considering tactics. “From what I've heard, you're rather big on second chances, Agent Coulson. Do I rate none of this largesse?”

“Loki, you killed me. You didn't skip a Christmas card, you didn't cheat at poker, you didn't even just go behind my back keeping secrets. You put a pointy stick through my heart and I died.”

“That did happen, yes.” He tossed it off with a shrug and a bright smile. “And here you are!” He cocked his head. “How'd that work? Normally your lot tends to, erm, stay dead. It's one of your better qualities.”
“It's complicated.” A small woman poked her head in through the door of the restaurant, a similar large weapon cradled in both hands. She mouthed the agent's name. “We're still good, May. Just having a nice conversation.”

“Any answers yet?”

“To be fair, I haven't really asked the question yet.” Coulson flexed his arms. The weapon was also much heavier in the back end due to a change in how it was powered, but he wasn't about to tell Loki that. He tilted his head slightly. “So let's ask that question – how the hell did you find me?”

Loki nodded politely to the other agent – one Melinda May. His resources were slim, but he knew that much. She ducked back out. “Google,” he said simply.

“I'm calling bull on that.” Coulson let the weapon charge up with a flick of his thumb, enjoying the wince on the demigod's face.

“It's true. No, I didn't just input your name, but let's face it, machines are far more tractable than you humans, and even more simply built. I asked it to compile a few news articles, triangulated some things based on certain geographic events that looked likely, found a couple of patterns and then, ah, sent you the electronic letter.”

“How'd you get the address?”

“You ordered a pizza under the name Pablo Jiminez through an online service. I looked in their database.”

“Well, that alias is totally dead now,” Coulson muttered, mostly to himself. Louder: “You can hack computers?”

“It's rather more like I ask questions and they tell me things because they don't know any better. It's not elegant, but it works in a pinch. I can probably refine my technique somewhat if I ever bother to give a rip for your technology.”

“I had better toys in the cradle, he added, but didn’t say aloud. He was making an effort to be subtle, there was no need to hammer on the fact that their civilization was so damnably primitive, it could be mistaken for a moderately organized ant farm anywhere else in the galaxy.

Patience, Loki. Needs must.

His teeth gritted behind the pleasant smile, fleetingly unsure if the thought was his own, or a slithering intrusion from the secret-keeper. Surely it was his own.

“Huh. And what, exactly, do you hope to accomplish with this meeting?”

“Not getting blasted through the back wall, for one,” came his first response, quicker than his thoughts and touched with glib humor. “Failing that,” he continued more evenly, “I thought to offer my help.”

“Your help?” Coulson's expression went blank while he tried to collate his thoughts on the topic. Nope. This was an impossible concept. The demigod was clearly lying out of every orifice.

“You seem to be having a spot of trouble of late, and through no fault of my own this time. It comes to pass that I myself am, shall we say, in between jobs.” Loki spread his hands apart like an offering.

“You're kidding me,” he said flatly. What if he's not kidding?
“For once, not in the least.”

_Oh, he is totally screwing with me._ “What do you get from this?”

“It's what _you_ get, really.” A modest smile.

Coulson huffed a quiet, disbelieving laugh. “What _we_ get? What, a genocidal maniac willing to, I don't even know, lick envelopes and entertain my plane with parlor tricks before you turn on us?”

“A _reforming_ genocidal maniac looking for redemption by any means necessary.”

“That's it. I'm pulling the trigger.” He braced the weapon and set his eye to its sight. Missing at this range was an impossibility.

“Wait!” Loki flung a hand up in the air, palm out, his words in a rush. “Impertinence aside, the core of my words are truth. You have the bindings, copies of what _he_ used to contain me after my invasion of your city. You know best how Lorelei was chained. Use these tools if you must feel better about our circumstances, but know this. Destiny is also described as a chain, and I mean to prove _that_ as a lie.”

“Explain.” His finger rested lightly on the trigger. Just a three pound pull and the weapon would do the rest. “Fast.”

The palm curled into one upraised finger. “All roads lead to damnation for me, I think you'll have little problems disagreeing with that. I want another option, and I'll do anything to get it. There _are_ things worse than death. There is annihilation.” He put his hand down and waited to see if his last ploy bought him any ground.


“That's probably wise.” Loki shrugged, unoffended. “I barely grasp that you're more than a decently evolved ape. I suppose we all have our little biases to overcome. I'm at least willing to try.”

“Against every bit of my better judgment, and knowing that every single person in my team is going to give me a deserved and absolutely staggering amount of crap for this, we're going to try it. Because you're right. I _do_ believe in second chances.” He lifted his head up to examine Loki one more time. “But I don't forgive you. You haven't earned that, and I don't know if you ever will. On two conditions.”

“Certainly. Name them.”

“One. We start with the bindings. Your activities monitored in all ways at all times. We're going to learn the circadian rhythms of an Asgardian up close and personal. You eat a cracker, I want to know if you nibble them, crack them in half, or just jam them in your mouth. I want each _crumb_ left behind from that cracker monitored for any cute stunts you could pull.”

“Right.” A bit of the good cheer had gone out of Loki's voice, but he took the demand with a stoic expression. “And the other?”

“I'm gonna enjoy a taste of schadenfreude anyway.”

“Wha-!”

Three pound pull. A resounding whirring noise, the hum of a thousand pissed-off bees, and Loki was flung back not just through the back of their booth, but through three other booths as well. He
wound up embedded in the deceptively cheap plaster and plywood wall, some burnt curls of wood-painted paper looping down to bonk him on his stunned head. Loki blinked once, then again, not really seeing. “Ow,” he said. Oh, yes. That still hurt. That hurt like a... he scrounged around in his numb brain for something to describe the sensation, found a suitable phrase in the local lexicon.

That had hurt like a motherfucker.

Phil Coulson watched the demigod twitch slightly, just enough tact in him to not start grinning at the sight. Damn, that was nice. The restaurant had cameras in the dining room. He should get a copy of the footage for home.

Politely, he said, “I’ll damage out the suit through what few people I still have access to, get you a replacement.” He considered for a moment, then cleared his throat. “And, I should probably help the owner here with his insurance claim.”

A soft whine answered him from the distant floor.

“I’ll have May and Agent Triplett bring you to the bus when you're up.”

Another whine.

He slung the weapon strap over his shoulder and strode out of the damaged bistro, giving May a sheepish little smile when she stared at him with that familiar, unreadable look.

She's probably going to think this is another symptom of me going crazy.

And... she might not be wrong.

He cast a last glance over his shoulder. God damn, but that had felt good.
Agent Melinda May stood before the command center's monitors, arms crossed, expression carefully and professionally blank. Her thoughts were neutral, centered only on Coulson's upcoming briefing and what would come after. That did not preclude careful observation of the new, variable element contained aboard. Each monitor showed the same image from different angles – the man in the plane's reinforced brig.

Occasionally, a lone thought trickled through her careful poise. Like easing the pressure on a dam. *Oh, my God, Phil. Are you serious?*

She sensed a presence behind her, assessed it, and said with perfect calm, “Skye.”

“Hey, May.” The soft thunk of a cup being set down. “Brought you a nice, hot drink.” She popped into May's peripheral view, another cup now cradled in both of the young woman's fiddling hands.

“And a question.”

“No fooling you.” Skye took a sip of her own tea, looking at the pale man on the monitor screen. He was sitting on the cot, one leg slung casually over the other, reading a book like any traveler in an airport lounge. A clean black suit rested neatly nearby, the clear plastic bag glinting in the brig's light. The man was wearing a spare S.H.I.E.L.D. hoodie and shirt meanwhile – clothes that were once set aside for Ward. That gave her a momentary hard swallow and she ditched the thought. Well, whoever this guy was, he was tall as hell. “What's the deal with that guy? Who is he? You've been staring at him for, like, hours, so I'm getting that he's not something we're all super happy about.”

“Coulson will give a general briefing tonight.”

Skye sagged a little, pleading. “Oh, come on. I don't want to be the only one with a dumb look on her face when he breaks whatever this is down.”

May flexed her fingers against her upper arm, finding some solace in the crinkle of the shiny leather. “Please?”

May pursed her lips for an imperceptible microsecond before relenting. “That is Loki of Asgard. He murdered Agent Coulson and led the attack on New York City.”

Fitz reached out for Simmons without looking, carefully adjusting the microscope with his other hand. “Could you pass me the third slide please? I don't know what Stark thinks they've done with this formulation, but if I can cross-match it with what we've got on file, then-”
“OH MY GOD MAY WHAT THE HELL IS HE DOING HERE?!”

The third slide dropped into the sink and crashed apart.

“I guess she hadn't heard,” said Simmons, glancing up at the open door of the lab with a startled expression. “Sorry, Fitz. I'll prep another right away.”

“No rush,” said Fitz, staring forlornly into the microscope. It now showed what a single crack in glass looked like at a remarkably small scale. “I've got to fix this one m'self.”

. . .

“If you ask Coulson and he gives you an answer that makes sense, please come tell me what it is.” May released her stoic pose to rest her butt against the briefing table, allowing a tiny audible sigh to escape her. She picked up the mug Skye brought her and took a sip.

“Oh. My God.” Skye rattled out an exasperated breath. “It's the second chances thing again, isn't it?”

“Yup.”

“I'll go talk to him.”

“Good luck.” There was no rancor in her voice, just sardonic humor.

. . .

“Skye, I'm not really interested in going over this with every single person on the bus before I give a full briefing. It's kinda what briefings are for.” Coulson nudged a tiny piece of fused resistor with an almost equally tiny set of pliers. The guts of the antique watch were being difficult. If he screwed up and tore the broken resistor too roughly out of its place, it was going to knock the internal circuit out of joint and he'd have a really cool-looking paperweight. Not good enough. He knitted his brows together and glanced up, gesturing at Skye with the pliers. “Do we really have to do this now?”

“He killed you.”

“And directly and indirectly caused the deaths of many others in many worlds. Yes, Skye, I'm pretty well aware.”

“And now he's on the bus.” She flapped her hand, frustrated.

“You know,” he said conversationally. He gave up and put the pliers down, leaning back in his chair to regard her. “I had this exact conversation with Agent May, although she managed to not yelp so hard that the whole plane heard her.”

“Sorry about that.” She skewed her lips and gave a floppy, apologetic shrug. “Does Fury know?”

“Yes.”

“And...how'd he take it?” She dropped into the seat across from him, careful to not jostle his static-free workmat.

Coulson shrugged gamely. “It went okay.”

. . .

Earlier, via phone:
“AGENT PHILLIP J. COULSON, YOU DID WHAT?”

He waited for the jangle of audio feedback to die down, glad he'd had the foresight to keep the phone a few inches away from his head.

“How the hell did you do it?”

I am so going to hear that a lot over the next week, he thought with a common sense sort of prescience. “Not as I am aware, sir.”

“Explain yourself.”

He opened his mouth.

“Never mind. This is your second chances crusade thing again, isn’t it? Holy damn, but I’d think that one would be exempt.”

“That is part of it, sir, but not all of it.” He spoke patiently, waiting for his turn to properly come around.

A weary sigh filled the connection. “Okay. I’ll ask again. Explain yourself.”

“Based on our limited understanding and the various debriefings Thor was willing to give us, it's fair to presume that no matter what, this guy is up to something. He likes to play games with his intentions, mixing up just enough truth with a slick line of bull that you have to play his game on his terms note perfect to smoke him out. He knows this – but he also thinks so damn little of us that he gets overconfident. And he likes to talk. That's how Romanoff played him on the Helicarrier. He's got an ego problem, and God help us if he ever fixes that. So he comes to me and mouthed this modest line and this noble goal, that's fine, we both know he's playing us. We just don't know for what yet.” He paused. Fury didn't take the opportunity to interrupt. “Until we figure that out, I'd rather have him exactly where I can see him.”

“Coulson, half the problem with this guy, and you know this better than most, is that what you see is not always what you're getting.”

“I understand that, sir. You can't deny I have a point, and you know full well I'm throwing as much prep and backup planning at this as I can think up. So while I have you on the line, sir, I'd like to prepare the safeword.”

“In case of emergency, scream for help.”

“You got it, sir. If I drop the word on a secure line anywhere in the world, you call Stark, you call Barton, you call Banner, whatever. I'll trust to your judgment. I'll take anything I can get at that point, because I'll be treading water.”

“Understood. What's the word?”

“Ragnarok.”

“He didn't flip out?” Skye looked at him disbelievingly.

“Eh.” Another offhanded shrug. “What time is it, anyway?”
Skye looked at the scattered pieces of the broken watch, then up at Coulson. “I'm just not going to make a joke.”

“Please don’t. Because if it's after five, you get to take our guest some food.” Her jaw dropped. He continued as if he didn't notice. “Briefing's at seven, so don't sit in there all night yelling at him.” He smiled wryly at her still-stunned expression. “No, really, don’t.”

“You think he'll get mad at me and blow me up?” Real worry creased her face.

“No, it's just kinda tacky.” He picked up the tiny pliers. “Now, unless you can help me get this stupid piece of junk out of my way, please go do what I asked."

“Is that really relaxing?”

“As compared to what? Our average workday?” He pulled his watchmaker's loupe down over his right eye, narrowing them both at the enemy resistor. “Yeah, actually. Way more.”
Chapter Summary

Dinner is served, and wheels begin to spin.

“It’s not gourmet, but we can at least do better than microwave.” Skye gave the man on the cot a fake smile and gestured at him with the tray. “Probably not as good as Asgard.”

He flicked to the next page of his book wordlessly, marking out the next with a neatly trimmed fingernail.

“So, how’s the room? You finding everything okay?”

flick

“You read fast.”

His eyes glittered up from the book without real expression, dropped his gaze again to the page. Numerous other books sat to the side of the cot, paperbacks and aging hardcovers mixed together in short haphazard towers.

“Dang, dude. Maybe Coulson'll spot you a Kindle. What are you reading?”

Loki seemed to pause, then lifted the book slightly to show the cover. A pale mask on a black background.

“Chambers, huh? I think I read they used that book a bit for some TV series.”

flick

“Okay...I'll just set this down.” She clattered the plastic tray onto a small table someone had left him, then popped a thumbs-up. “Good talk.”

“What happened to the man that once owned this jacket?”

She whirled in place and looked at him, her brow furrowed in surprise. “Sorry?”

The eyes were fixed patiently on her. “There was a man here once, roughly my height if not truly size.” He tugged at the hoodie to demonstrate, distorting the small SHIELD logo and wrinkling the green tee underneath. She heard the clink of something under the wrists of the hoodie, figured they were some of the bindings May had told her about when passing by with the food. “The shoulders are tight, but more importantly, space is at a premium on this vessel. You do not stock clothes for random possibilities, and there was no such figure present to 'help' me aboard earlier. Had you someone of my stature, he would have been there to, ah, ensure everything went smoothly.”

“All right there, Sherlock.” He stared at her. Does he know Sherlock? She cleared her throat. “Good observation.”
Again, nothing. Just that vaguely amused stare.

“Kay. Look, I don’t want to talk about that guy.”

“Ah.”

“He was evil, alright?” She crossed her arms. “Nobody wants to talk about him. So don’t ask.”

“I see. Left in the memory hole.” He glanced down at his book with a studiously blank expression, then up again, now an innocent look of curiosity on his face. The obvious falseness of it crepted her out. “Define evil in this case?”

“I just said-”

“Generally speaking, then. What, by you, is evil?”

She tightened her arms across her chest, then realized how defensive it made her look and dropped them to hang limply by her sides. No, that was worse. She shoved her hands into her pockets and shrugged. “Screwing over your friends because someone else tells you to. Murder. Deception.” She faltered under his stare. “Sometimes people are just born bad.”

He began to laugh soundlessly, his jaw stretched in a hanging grin like a mad dog. With elegant care, he marked the place in his book with a stray piece of paper and set it aside to glance absently at the tray that she’d brought him. Then back to her, the eyes piercing. “That’s funny.”

“Apparently. Want to share the joke?”

Loki arched an eyebrow at her, the smile tamed into something more sane. “You creatures are far too transient, too simple to be so stolid from birth. Little baby birds. Cruelty of the nature you attempt to define takes complexity. Time. Practice. You vastly underestimate your potential. No one of you could be born evil.”

“Were you?”

She thought his face tightened but couldn’t be sure. In his eyes were a warning and she unconsciously crossed her arms again. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable, she changed the topic. “You know, you’re really unpleasant about humans.”

“It’s carefully taught,” he deadpanned.

_No Sherlock, but I swear he just made a Rodgers and Hammerstein joke._ “I don’t follow.”

“I doubt you’ve personally met my opposite number.”

“No, but.” She stopped herself.

“Ah, you _have_ met other Asgardians.”

_Way to go, Skye._

“I’ll not mention your slip to the good Agent Coulson.”

“I don’t want to owe _you_ anything.”

He smiled again. “Consider it free, for the sake of pointed conversation. Now, to resume, did you notice anything about these other Asgardians that seem to relate here?”
“They pretty much all wind up in this little room at least once.”

He sniffed. Then sniffed again, leaning towards the tray and its neat piles of food. “Ah. Edible fungi.” He arched an eyebrow, gesturing languidly towards the browned mushrooms. “Don't ever trot that out if the lord of the thunder stops by, he's strictly the meat and mead sort. Boring, really. No variance in his palate, much like everything else he does. Anyway, I'm digressing.” The lazy gesture sharpened into a single quick wave, as if to brush off his own words.

“I'm guessing you don't like to miss a chance to pick on your brother.”

“Well, he is larger than me. I take my points where I can score them.” He examined the plastic fork, bemused. “He cares for a mortal woman of this world. I have just enough tact to not gossip overmuch on irrelevancy, but know this – for this quirk, those that know in Asgard think him a touch bent. For all my faults that my family-” he said the word like a curse. “Might enjoy telling you of, and at great length, my opinion of humanity matters little in their accounting. That much is a norm. We look upon your world as a conservancy; an environmental effort that is our – I will grant you – willing obligation. You do not fret overmuch for the deer and the flies as their seasons end.”

“I don’t buy that.” She made a face. “That sucks, Asgard should know better than that. You're all, like, advanced and stuff.”

“A regular utopia, so long as you're a great warrior. And male.” He gave her a sardonic grin. Skye thought of Lorelei and Sif and stifled a grimace. She didn't trust him, but that much had a ring of honesty. “And yet no less a personage than the All-Father thought his son a fool for his choice, that he lowered himself overmuch to care for a fragile, fleeting thing.”

“Well, we're all just going to have to disagree on that.” She wrinkled her nose, irritated with his sure nature. She did note one small thing that she filed away – Loki didn't like to speak his brother's name.

“As you like.” He poked his fork at a roasted button mushroom. “So,” he drawled. “How are humanity’s collective efforts on racism working out?”

Helplessness struck. She knew he was wrong with the implied parallel but wasn't going to be able to fight clearly for why with him fishing openly for some reaction from her. On this battle, she was going to be outmatched. Jerk. “Okay, you know what? I gotta go. I got a thing.” She jabbed her thumb at the door behind her.

“Of course. Come back any time, we'll continue our chat.”

“Yeah,” she said, unable to resist trying to get the last shot in. “We'll have a book club.”

That quiet, sarcastic bark of a laugh followed her out.

. . .

Agent Coulson met the eyes of his team, each one in turn, each with the same expression. Even knowing what he'd let himself in for, he was already weary with exasperation. “Okay, you know what? Yes, I know what you're all thinking at me. And I'm not crazy.”

“Didn't say anything, sir.” Triplett shrugged casually.

“Newp. Did you, Jemma?” Fitz gave Simmons a look with both eyebrows raised. She shook her head and gave up an awkward smile.
“Yeah, you didn't have to. Don't get snarky.” Coulson sighed and strode around the main table of the command center. “I made a choice, and I made it as the leader of this team. I've said it before – we're not a democracy.”

“It's all right, sir.” Simmons put her hands together, her fingers fidgeting together into a busy snarl. “We do all understand.”

“Yeah, and I can also tell you're all thinking 'oh, gee, it's the second chances thing again.'” He paced another circuit. “You know me better than that. On this one, it's always going to be more than another chance. That is not a man I am going to trust lightly, or at all. If Loki has a plan, then so do I. Can you keep faith with me on that?”

Yes sirs all around.

“Currently he remains in the brig. He was willing to accept that accommodation and a few other rules besides. He can talk with whoever wants to visit, read whatever the hell he wants, and be consulted for card tricks any time of day or night. If he gets too bored, I'll give him a typewriter and some envelopes.” He paused at the head of the table and knocked his knuckles against the digital display that made up its top. “Wrist bindings. A variation of the cuffs he was placed in when being escorted back to Asgard the first time. No physical chain for extra classiness and to make sure nobody has to help this guy put on pants. General, small movement is mostly unrestricted. Past that, an internally generated field means he's still going to have a hard time doing a Crossfit regimen.”

Triplett snickered.

“Throat collar. It's set low, most shirts obscure it. Standard setting means it's a tracking device at the very least. He doesn't get to hike five feet without the GPS tattling on him. Monitors vitals and certain energy signatures that we've come to associate with...magic.” The word tasted slimy in his mouth. “What Asgardians consider magic, in any case. This guy is supposed to be good at it, and I'll vouch that he can do things with illusions that would make Criss Angel hang it up for good.” Skye shot him a look at the reference. He shrugged. “I caught the show in Vegas. It wasn't bad. Anyway, this isn't a perfect solution, but it'll give us a heads up. Can be triggered remotely to generate enough power to interrupt whatever cute thing he's trying to do.”

“Choke collar?” asked May.

“A kind of shock, actually, directed at both the larynx and the nervous system. Easier and quicker to rev up, and seems to work at least temporarily on Asgardians.” Also, shooting him at the restaurant had verified that was still an option. The team glanced at him as a brief smile flickered across his face at the memory. “So, that's our houseguest.”

Expressions flickered. He allowed a broader smile, indicating he was done on the topic and not going to reopen it. He slid his hand across the LCD display to refresh the data.

“Now. Hydra. Still a pain in our ass. Ian Quinn has been on the Amway circuit since dropping off the grid when we popped Cybertek. We know based on scattered intel that Raina is with him. He's peddling a medley of our unrecovered wares to any buyer, so long as they can pay the big bucks. That means military or the extremely wealthy and unscrupulous. That's still a pretty big list of Christmas shoppers.”

Skye spoke up. “And I think Quinn's got more resources than we've really unearthed yet. I think Cybertek had some other big backer. Quinn barely slowed down after...” She cleared her throat. “You know. The crap with Ward and Garrett. He's still working like nothing's changed. That's bad. We got a lot from the time you and May went in for that job interview, but it's been slow to basically
Coulson tilted his head. “Which, considering what a pain in the ass Quinn's been so far, really bothers me. I want you checking through all recovered materials and duck-hunting every possible lead you find.”

“You got it.”

“Agent Triplett, you and May are going to do a little recon. I want to know Quinn's upcoming schedule. I want to know if Raina is flirting with any new job applicants. I don't have any idea how you're going to get that information, but that's why I'm putting the two of you on that job. Discretion is key. We look, we do not touch. I don't want that putz to smell us coming.” He looked for nods of agreement and clasped his hands together. “Fitz, Simmons, you've still got a lot of stuff to sort through. A lot of recovery still ahead.”

“We're always happy to help the team if you've got more.”

“Thank you, Jemma. I've got a little something upcoming I'll need your eyes on, but for now, you guys get the closest thing I can give you to a mini-vacay.”

“So what happens when we track Quinn down?” Skye rubbed at her arms, frowning a little when Coulson turned and glanced at the bay of monitors behind them.

“I've got an idea.” He turned back with that affable little smile. “Not one hundred percent committed to it yet, but I've got one hell of an idea.”
Chapter Summary

Ian Quinn’s obnoxious jet set style is getting kind of cramped. Let’s all try to feel bad for him. Hah, no.

Mumbai, India

Antoine Triplett stayed sagged low in the seat of the ostentatious looking SUV, its darkened windows drawing no notice from the locals. With a set of shades on, he looked like he was dozing for extra harmlessness. The luxuriousness of the vehicle blended in well with the upscale surroundings, but his appearance might draw a few unwanted looks from the hotel’s security. The Oberoi hotel hosted some of the richest visitors in India – and had also hosted a terrorist attack over half a decade previous. They’d learned a few things from the experience; security on the location was subtle and unobtrusive, but incredibly thorough. He admired their dedication, even as it added a little extra difficulty to the job.

The communicator resting on his thigh crackled alive. “May, checking in, clear.” That was all. He gave a short nod of satisfaction then resumed scanning the locals. He sounded a single tone in response, a low chime in a minor key. No eyes on the prize here, Miss May.

... Digital receipts told the story – for a man that was doing his best to lay low, Ian Quinn still liked to roll high where he could. A three day stay in a suite at the Burj Khalifa tripped Skye’s watchdog, a commerce tracker that would tattle on certain shopping patterns. Verification came when she paired the hotel stay with a forty-thousand dollar spree at the Dubai Mall. They liked the shiniest things in Dubai, and that meant a fancy new financial exchange network with a crap firewall gave up the goods to the SHIELD team on only a two day delay. May and Triplett were still well behind their target when they landed, but a bribe to an Arabian sheik shaved almost thirty-one hours off their lag.

From the UAE, Quinn jet-setted to Hong Kong, where he was shot down cold by a pharmaceutical corporation. One of their top suits was only too happy to complain about the arrogant American to a pretty lady who clearly traveled, but whose local accent was impeccable.

In Tokyo, they lost ground. Quinn clearly had friends there and information was hard to smoke out. A report to Coulson indicated something shady going on and he dropped a few quarters to some old friends to get some wheels moving. The likelihood of some yakuza business was obvious, but he wasn’t satisfied. Yakuza could be bought, but not by a jerk American. Not this easily. This was something more sinister and he dropped the Tokyo stay onto a high-priority list of things to check out more thoroughly.

Sydney. Johannesburg. Vienna. They nearly caught up to Quinn when an apparent deal with some distressingly interested FSB clients went on too long in Moscow. The legendary paranoia of the Russian intel service worked against them and Quinn made it onto the Trans-Mongolian train line going south-east into Beijing, never knowing that Triplett was delayed just twenty feet behind, the
tiny tracker he was trying to plant on the man's luggage lost in the sewage drain next to him. Damn near lost eyes on Quinn entirely.

And then he looped back into Mumbai after a scrambled business call, a lucky break. All they needed now was confirmation and one good chance to tag the prey.

. . .

May kept her head down and her manner demure. With a handful of big shots coming into Mumbai for a major tech conference, any sudden shortage in the maintenance staff meant rush temphirings at many premier hotels. That kept the Oberoi security on their toes, but also made them flustered. Posing as a new scut worker and all around hotel gopher, they kept at least one eye on May at all times... but not that observant of one. Still, twice she had to veer off from sneaking onto the upper floors that housed the best suites. Quinn was being just cagey enough to stay out of the lobby. She wasn't going to get into a confirmed orbit that way. She was going to have get pushier, but only a little.

She ducked into a supply closet set between the second and third floors, close to where the concierge and butler services did most of their behind the scenes traffic and on the very edge of one of the few true dead zones missed by cameras. Making sure her signal was good, she muttered into her communicator. “May, checking in, clear.” The tone came back. She nodded to herself. No point in worrying the new guy with her plan. Besides, she liked Triplett, but she wasn't giving him one hundred percent of her trust. Not so soon after Ward. Nothing personal.

To his credit, she suspected the young agent knew and understood. She did have just enough faith to believe he'd have her back on this if things went south.

She waited, patient. They had her off the clock and out of the building an hour past, and at least three other women in the kitchens could vouch for that. Seven in the evening, she waited. Eight. Then the nine o clock hour passed and the butler service began shift change.

The Oberoi touted an exclusive lady butler and chauffeur service, one of a few luxury hotels in the world that made such a claim. Progressive – and perfect for her.

She waited just a little longer, and found the sound she was waiting for. A little rustling in the hall, a little laughter, and then a set of lone footsteps. She counted them off just as she'd practiced in her head – one, two, three – and then let the door of the supply closet fly open behind the off-duty butler.

The butler saw a pair of slim, strong-looking hands appear in her vision, and then there was nothing.

. . .

The butler's shiny black dress shoes were a bit tight, but she'd make do for the time required to finish the op. With a practiced gesture, May tweaked the knotted tie into elegant perfection, picked up the woman's tablet, and made sure the unconscious figure was safely tucked away in the closet. She had twenty minutes before a sweep would come through the dead zones. Maybe up to twenty-five, if security got slow with the evening. With a check of her reflection in the clean blank face of the tablet – amazing how much a little contouring and a wig could change a face - she timetabled herself for fifteen minutes of work and made her way to the executive elevators as if she owned the building.

. . .

Ian Quinn looked out at the night-blue water of Back Bay with his hands steepled in front of him in deceptive casualness. A fresh breeze filtered in from the open balcony of the presidential suite,
soothing and quick-drying the sweat he was pooling under his crisp linen suit. He turned his face back to his companion, an affable smile under sharp eyes. “I must thank you again for your hospitality, Mr. Tsurayaba.”

“No need to thank me, Mr. Quinn.” Thin lips in an equally thin smile. Smooth black gloves encased the man's own clasped hands. “I only execute the wishes of my masters, and they wish our friends only the best.”

“And we are, of course, friends.” Quinn resisted the urge to clear his throat. He kept his poker face in play. “Not to mention the welcome role your sizeable investments play.”

“All above board.” The thin smile widened in subtle warning.

Quinn spread his hands. “Of course! Capitalism means everyone can put a little skin on the public investment game. Nothing to hide there.”

Tsurayaba waved the conversation off, his expression openly bored. “You wish to know why we asked for another meeting so soon after our last.”

Quinn smiled easily, resettling his damp back against the cushions. It was a demand, Tsurayaba. Not a request. A demand so brash that even Raina found it offensive, but here I am, eating it for us. “I would never put it that way.” He bobbed his head, not a single slick hair sliding from place. “I admit to some curiosity, particularly since it seemed we had nothing new to offer you in Tokyo.”

“Ah, but now it comes we may have something to offer you.”

Quinn resisted a cheek twitch. He wanted to owe this man and his handlers nothing. Raina, damn it, this was not a good plan. We should have skipped Japan. “That's wonderful.”

Tsurayaba inclined his head politely, the sleek dark head bowed low in ironic respect. “We wish to ensure and insure those investments you refer to. To that end, it's in both of our best interests that we protect you.” His tone was measured. Quinn caught the insult, obvious in its arrogance – since you cannot protect yourself. “You understand.”

I completely hate this guy. Quinn tweaked a fleeting grin, broad and huge and full of teeth. The quintessential American car salesman face. “Well, it is true our division has had a few difficulties over the last few...”

He was cut off. “Your mining operation is at a standstill, your supplies are running dry, Cybertek is in ashes, and your parent company has made plain its doubts. For a dead organization, SHIELD has effectively bankrupted you. I must applaud their strength. Further, I suspect Visa and MasterCard will finalize your downfall, if given opportunity.” Another polite bow of the head.

Eat me.

“That, Mr. Quinn, is the problem.” The head lifted again, dark eyes fixing on his own. “This is no game. There will be no losing. And so, we will take your problems to our heart. When you thank us for hospitality, be sure you understand the breadth of the gratitude you will come to owe us.”

Blood threatened to rush to every pore of Quinn's face. His hands remained calmly steepled, fingertips pressed against each other so tight he believed he could feel the lines and whorls of his prints scraping against one another. His mind screamed at him to pick up the glass table and fling it right at the sneering face behind the blank mask, watch it bleed, watch bones splinter.

Instead, he crossed one leg over another and let the smile slip into a serious expression. Reason
reminded him of the simple truth – this man could kill him before he touched the table.

Tsurayaba leaned back against the couch, a single finger rising as if to call off an execution. “Enough. The tea will arrive shortly. We will enjoy a space of peace together, as friends. Tomorrow, you and I will enjoy the conference. And then we will discuss our next moves.”

. . .

“Service, sir.” The maid knocked at the door of the presidential suite twice, knuckles rapping soft but insistent. May stood at her side, tablet in hand and an expression of cool officiousness on her subtly altered face. No joy, no clues at the other suites. Her last option was to go all in on the final occupied room on the top floor. Three minutes left on her watch. A bulky figure opened the door and peered out at them both with a studious face. May bowed just as the maid did, noting the muscles of the guard under the tailored lines of a Kiton suit. When her eyes flicked up, she saw the traditional lines of irezumi curling just under the collar of the crisp white shirt. *That is not a yakuza tattoo flash.*

“You may enter.” Another guard stood not far behind the first, this one slender and quick, dark eyes stuck fast to the maid and the silver serving set she pushed. Gigantor returned his attention to May. “Your business, madame?”

“Ensuring the supreme satisfaction of our guests, sir.” May gave another bow, sliding into the blurred accent of a Cantonese woman who had seen much of India over many years. She used the gesture to glance fast around the room.

Visual confirmation complete. There was Quinn, in the most tense posture she had ever seen him. In her favor, he had no interest in what was going on at the door. His frozen, polite smile was fixed on the Japanese man on the other side of a small glass table. May marked his face clearly; the bespoke suit, the lack of visible tattoos, the elegant gloves. The man's sleek head turned in her direction and she bowed again, lower this time to avoid his curious eyes.

“Our expectations are met,” rumbled the guard. *Not Quinn’s room. Explains why he's not on the registry. I'm not going to get any closer than this.*

“Of course, sir. May I please ask you to verify this courtesy check?” She presented him with the tablet, already set to a generic survey screen. The big guard took it with a brusque gesture, tapped through the selections as fast as he could and handed it back to her. “Thank you,” she said with a smile, the side of her index finger brushing just inside the sleeve of his black suit. “Please contact us at any time with your needs.” One more glance at the room and she took in the contents of a slickly printed lanyard tossed on a side table. Then the guard shut the door on her.

. . .

Agent Triplett hit the power button on the SUV the second Agent May touched the door handle. “Do we gotta bug fast?”

“Nope. Smooth as training day.” She favored him with a tiny but genuine smile.

“Awesome. Traffic is backed up all the way up this thing. Think something's going down at the opera late tonight.” He shrugged and kicked into drive. “You get anything good?”

“What do you think?”

“Expression says you did, ma'am, and I'm already sick of chasing this dirtbag. Give me the deets.” He gave her a grin as he pulled onto the boulevard.
“Quinn's the guest of a guest, which is why he's not listed anywhere here. Guest is unverified, Japanese, not yakuza, but packing heavy firepower. I need to consult with Coulson on that.” She pulled a plastic bag out of her jacket. Inside was the tablet. “I got a useable fingerprint off one of their guys. And dropped a tag on him.”

“Beautiful!” He crowed a laugh out the window. “We got any more views we can snag on these guys?”

“They're going to the tech conference tomorrow. I think that's the opportunity Phil's been looking for.”
Phil proceeds to commit to a sane and reasonable idea.

“They call themselves The Hand.” Coulson clasped his hands behind his back and examined his team. “Someone dropped a dime on them from an unverified Hell's Kitchen location several years back, but we've picked them up on radar before. They stay low and don't stir up too much, most of the other government organizations assume they're just a really juiced up pack of yakuza. Bad assumption.” He swiped his hand across the screen. A handful of fuzzy surveillance photos flashed by followed by a digitized image of a thumbprint and a GPS ping still close in Mumbai. “The main similarities are obvious – they're mostly based in Japan and they keep their fingers in a lot of pies that don't actually belong to them. Then it gets weird.”

“I hate that,” murmured Simmons, rubbing at her forehead. “I hate when you warn us it's going to get weird. It always gets so weird after that.”

Coulson gave her a brief look of sympathy, then continued. “Since the end of World War II, they've had some diverse interests. They're very political and extremely concerned about the future of their homeland. This would be touching and patriotic, except they show their concern by the slow infiltration and corruption of the country's power base... and the occasional outbreak of nasty assassinations. This sounding like anyone you know yet?”

“Hydra,” said Skye.

Coulson tilted his head with a little smile. “You get a gold star. I checked a couple of Fury's files, made a call to Hill, and yep, it's not so much sounding like Hydra. More like they used to date in Hydra's early years, according to recent analysis. I guess it was pretty serious.”

“Well, that's certainly bad, but not weird,” said Fitz.

Coulson continued, deadpan. “Many of their agents are highly trained ninjas, with what little we know of their central organization suggesting their commanders share a deep spiritual faith accentuated by a fascination with the occult. Sort of like Aum Shinryko, but with throwing stars and cooler uniforms.”

“There it is. That's the weird part,” said Simmons.

“Hang on, did you say ninjas?” Triplett arched both eyebrows in something like bewildered delight. Coulson gave him a look. “Come on. You have to admit it sounds kinda cool.”

“If they were someone else's problem right now, I might find that arguable. Anyway, apparently they work under the belief that their organization is watched over by the power of a demon.”

“Now it's weirder.”

“And because they're smart enough to not trust that belief when the chips go down, they've diversified an awful lot of money globally into advancing tech markets to make sure they can cover their own butts. Literally. Skye?”
“So, that sort of answers the question I was going to throw out there,” Skye gave him a self-deprecating grimace and crossed her arms across the loud flannel shirt she was wearing. “Which was initially what these dudes were doing with Quinn. But then I realized,” she clicked her tongue behind her teeth. “Nothing much happened in Tokyo. So something's changed since.”

May spoke up. “And not for the better as far as my read of Quinn goes."

“Not all eyes will weep for that jerk,” said Coulson. “That's where we are. The Hand wants something out of this partnership, something Quinn by himself isn't capable of giving. Therefore, he's a tool to them.” He had to pause. “Phrasing unintentional but frankly glorious. This possibly goes back to Skye's theory that something or someone else was behind Cybertek. Now, I think we follow these guys and their money, we'll get some more clues as to the broader view.” He swiped the screen again to show the logo of the Mumbai TechBreak International conference. Underneath were the smaller logos of dozens of different corporations. “Thanks to Agent May’s initiative and a bit of good fortune, we know exactly where some of them are going to be for a little while.”

“And you're just gonna walk on in there?” asked Skye. “I'm sure Stark Industries can get you in the door no sweat, yeah, but...” Her voice trailed off with worry.

“But I'd get made instantly, especially if I'm with their people. I'm not exactly Brad Pitt, but I think Quinn can pick me out of a lineup just fine. A public shindig, yeah, it'd be awkward going if I got recognized. Probably won't come to blows in the middle of a thing like this, but it sort of ruins the whole idea of watching these guys like a photo safari. Skye, I need two tickets into the conference, unaffiliated with any major corporation. There's always a bunch of freelancer techies at these things.”

Her worry deepened. “Phil, they're going to paste a microchipped photo on the lanyards when you get in. Any one of us is going to be tricky to match. You want to send two in?”

“Sure.” He smiled. “I've got some generic identities you can pick from when setting it up.”

“And none of them will look like y-” She stopped herself again. “Oh.”

“Phil.” May's voice was low.

He continued like he wasn't listening. “May, we're going to need a limo. Make sure it's got an accessible trunk. I've got to pack some stuff we might need in case of emergency.”

May considered trying to get his attention again and then shrugged, recalling the numbers of several auto services available from the Mumbai airport. He seemed sure of what he was up to. All she could do was hope that was true.

...\n
Loki set down the book he was reading and examined Coulson critically. “You're not wearing that, are you?”

He refused to react. The suit he'd chosen was perfectly fine, equal in quality and tailoring to the replacement Dolce & Gabbana Loki had already switched into. “Figured you could tweak it if we needed to upscale the look.” He got a slow blink in response, took it as acknowledgment of an acceptable parry. He flashed the counterfeit passports along with the additional photographs and paperwork kept with each one. “These are the faces we need. Skye found guys pretty close to how we look, so it wouldn't be difficult on you.”

Loki made a slight moue, arching an eyebrow over half-lidded eyes. He flicked a hand lazily. “I could send us in as pink and purple oxen in togas and thigh boots, it's the same amount of effort.
Unless we were particularly large oxen. That takes a little more finagling to ensure the illusion interacts properly with your surroundings.” He leaned back. “So. You're not going to automatically choke the air out of me the moment I waggle my fingers for this, correct?”

“Do you actually do that, the finger waggling thing?”

“Not usually.”

“Huh. Also, no.”

“Very well.” Loki glanced at the photographs without real interest, then leaned back after a long, still moment. A device in Coulson's pocket chimed a soft alert, but not a warning – he'd set it in advance, essentially authorizing this. Bonus, it proved the damn thing worked. “Done.”

Coulson opened his mouth to say something, then stopped himself. Loki was different, the change so quick and seamless that it seemed to his eyes that the tall man had simply always looked this way. The wild long hair was now short and slicked back, the angular facial structure slightly softened, the skin ruddier and markedly different than the man's nearly unnatural pale. Only the suit remained the same. He pulled out his phone and checked his own unrecognizable reflection.

_Huh._ Then something else struck him. His eyes itched when he looked at himself. Badly.

“The itching will become negligible as you accept and adjust to the flexible nature of visual reality. But yes. The first hour or so, they will itch like all hell.” Loki was examining the back of his hand with open distaste before reaching it out for his identification papers.

“Will other people's eyes itch when they look at us?”

“No. They know no better, so they simply accept what is before them. Same for machines, lest you ask. I've detailed their stupidity before. Fortunate for us, yes?” He waited for a curt nod, then continued with a small smile. “Now, your people may try to peer through the illusion, try to fight and see you as you are, but without something like a proper anchor – your sense of self, essentially – they have little choice but to see what they see.” He put the documents down next to him, save for the passport, which was casually tucked inside the suit.

“How do you break an illusion, then?”

“Carefully.”

_To be fair, I didn't expect to get a clear 'Dummies Guide to Magic' answer from him._ Coulson sighed and jabbed his thumb towards the door. “Okay. Time for some fresh air. Please do not make me regret any of this.”

He did not like the pleasant, easy smile he got in return.
“I can smell the desperate excess from here.” Loki poured himself out of the open door of the long black limousine, not bothering to glance at May in her chauffeur's disguise. He tugged at the lapels of his suit jacket, smoothing the elegant lines of his clothes back into place. He glanced down at Coulson, already at the curb with his hands clasped calmly in front of him. “Go on.”

“You're clear on the rules and your background information?”

Loki theatrically rolled his eyes, the effect not at all muted by the illusion he wore. The planes and lines of his face were different, yet he was still irrevocably, obnoxiously himself. “I read your little file twice. I know who I'm supposed to be.”

“And you know what you're not supposed to do.” Coulson smiled easily, vaguely wondering how it looked on his own false face. He patted his pocket - the GPS tether was necessarily on an extension, meaning it was possible for Loki to get a limited run of the building without the monitor in Phil's pocket going berserk. He kept the tension out of his face. May had more than enough in her tight posture for everyone.

“Be me, essentially. You're no fun.” He flicked a long-fingered hand in Coulson's direction.

“We aren't here for fun. We're here for information, nothing else.” He kept his voice even. “May, everything in the trunk?”

“Yes.” Her voice was a monotone, her eyes never leaving the demigod's unprotected back. Coulson made a note to eventually find her an excellent bottle of scotch and a nice apology card. Maybe something with a kitten on it. Wouldn't change the stress of keeping a pet alien madman around, but at least the scotch could help the recovery. “I'll be available every second you're inside.”

Loki turned slightly to regard her, then slid his gaze back to Coulson. “I'm assuming my favorite improbably large weapon is in there?”

“Just give me an excuse and you'll find out.”

“Right. Of course.” Loki sighed. “Let's get this over with.”

They passed underneath the massive Roxxon banner and mutually ignored the twin lines of the the energy corporation's representatives trying to press a deluge of PR materials onto them. Coulson glanced at the pamphlets as they dodged, noting the glossy stock photos of untouched wilderness that showed they cared enough about the environment to pay a few bucks to Getty Images. Loki didn't appear to even bother with that much, a standoffish arrogance that would, for once, be to their benefit when wandering the convention floor.
Coulson had to fuss with getting their lanyards taken care of. True to his nature, Loki spent the time in the short line drifting off to stare at pre-convention displays with an expression so carefully blank that it was openly insulting. “Take yours,” he said, trying to shove the green corded lanyard in the demigod's direction.

“It clashes with my tie.”

“They won't let you in without wearing it, and if you push me, I swear I will find a way to make you eat it.” Coulson kept the threat conversational, attempting to guide them both in the general direction of the internal convention entrance.

Loki looped the thing around his neck, making it clear he felt he was being asked to wear a dead rat on a chain. Fortunately, he didn't say anything to the final check-in volunteers. Coulson spared each of them a long-suffering smile of empathy. They gave him one in return. Well, at least the basic cover story of an arrogant tech investor and his handler was going to work out just great.

I do not know why I even entertained the idea that he might not be just a gigantic pain in the ass about this. I should get a CAT scan later.

“You know, the last time I was at a human affair like this one...” Loki drawled, gamely being hauled through the thronged entrance.

Don't say it. Coulson mentally braced himself.

“...It was quite a sight.”

You son of a bitch. He did his best to not say anything aloud, feeling the skin twitch under one – still itching – eye. His hand reflexively tightened on Loki's upper arm, drawing a slight smile from the masquerade face.

It was like steering a toddler, only the toddler was over six feet tall and prone to making insulting declarations just barely under his breath. Texas Industries got a long, cool look of boredom when a young techie tried to demonstrate an upcoming chip, a genuine breakthrough in memory storage. Boeing's graphene and carbon fiber displays drew an outright sneer, causing one of the attendants at the booth to recoil from the pair. He stared directly through Elon Musk when he passed by. He wouldn't even go near the miniature kingdom of Stark Industries, an ostentatious layout that took an entire corner of the show floor. Coulson had to fight a personal desire – since he was there, he desperately wanted to take a peek at a new engine they were flashing for small industrial vehicles. A memo Hill had sent him indicated it could work great in Lola. But Loki was being balky, letting his gaze flit around the tinier booths and looking increasingly uninterested.

“If you want to go look at whatever damned thing's caught your eye, I'll wait,” Loki sighed. “I can feel you trying to pull in that direction. It's like a tiny but insistent pony.”

Coulson ignored the insulting parallel to his own thoughts. It's not like his were being that complimentary either. “We're under disguise anyway, why won't you just walk over there with me and spare a worry?”

“Principle.” He gave the Stark Industries banner a look of pure spite. Coulson waited for it to just melt right off its hangings, but it remained firmly in place while the monitor in his pocket stayed silent.

Okay. You get a fraction of a point for not doing what you clearly wanted to do. “Is there any point
to me asking you to promise you won't wander off?"

“No.” A dry little smile. “However, I will not stir any trouble. I'll promise you that much, freely.”

Coulson blinked at the compromise offer.

“I did say I was trying to help. Causing outright chaos while you go poke at some primitive piece of metal is intransigent of me.”

*And you know damn well neither of us believe you. On what planet do you think I'm just going to hope for the best while you sail off?* He couldn't resist taking another glance at the velvet rope between him and the Stark displays. They'd done something to increase horsepower while reducing weight and fuel usage. That'd give him an even quicker response on her handling.

“May all the Gods weep.” Loki put a hand over his heart. “On what fragmentary honor I hold, on the firepower of your stupid little reverse engineered weapon, and on the knowledge that you're already half to just tossing me out the back of your ridiculous aircraft in a fit of pique, I will just wander the tiny booths over yonder for the next several minutes. Please, just get it out of your system so we can get this turgid bit of reconnaissance over with.” He looked down into Coulson's face. “Go.”

He raised a single finger. “Don't make me regret this.”

. . .

The upgraded engine looked even better than he'd hoped, mostly failing in his attempt to not just bowl the assistant over with his enthusiasm and his need to hurry. Slightly stunned, the Stark intern managed to answer most of his shotgunned questions while forgetting to ask for contact information should he want to get on a purchasing list. That was perfect, he could get a connection through Hill later anyway.

In an attempt to act like an adult and a professional again, Coulson rearranged his priorities the moment he got away from the new engine – thus far, there'd been no sign of Quinn or his new friends.

*There's also no sign of Loki.*

He braced himself and listened for any screaming. No, just the standard intense din of a convention center. Easy to confuse the two sometimes. Did a fast visual sweep – nothing. He glanced at the device in his pocket – supposedly still in the building. No alerts. He swiveled and looked away from the big displays.

*He said the tiny booths. There's a bunch of little indie devs along that wall. Don't panic yet. He's within the boundaries of what he said. So far.*

Loki was not perusing the indie devs, although a few flashes of irritation suggested that he had been by, and recently.

*Ah crap.*

He was not lingering by the nearby restrooms.

*Not my best call.*

He was not staring hatefully at a small cluster of food services in the center of the hall.
Okay, great, do I go to guest services and tell them I misplaced a homicidal demigod and please don’t panic, or do I just text May and have her help me contain him? He took a single swallow. The problem with the GPS tag extension meant that Loki was currently out of range of throat collar activation as well. So that avenue was out, although at least Loki couldn’t know that.

He found himself glancing down another alley of tiny booths from the midst of a moving throng, excluded physically and psychologically from the high profile attendees – young achievers, scholastics, and a handful of innovators from smaller countries. Someone from a major metallurgical corporation referred to the zone offhandedly as a ‘pity party' as Phil went by. Phil glanced at the face as he passed and tagged it with the mental note ‘total dick.'

“-do this for what?” The voice was low and arrogant and familiar. Coulson sagged with relief, then tensed again. Loki was interrogating someone not far down the aisle. He swiveled his head and tried to pick out the tall figure and his familiar/not familiar mask.

“-yet you try.” There he was, an unrecognizable expression on his face. Coulson minnowed through the crowd towards the comparatively empty alley. The eyes glanced over to him, then back to whoever he was talking to. “I see. Excuse me.” Loki pushed away from the unremarkable booth. Coulson saw the kid in it, a tall, skinny figure in a brightly printed chitenge. The young woman looked suspicious but calm. Maybe even a small light of hope in her eyes. There were no other visitors to her booth.

“What were you doing?”

“Conversing.” Loki glanced down at him. “Don't start. I said tiny booths, these are utterly miniscule. Why do you segregate the young like this?”

The young woman was still watching them. “I don't really have a good answer for that.”

“Foolish of you. The ones in the big booths, they're cynical and feed on their own excesses. They iterate, not innovate. These ones – still rudimentary.” He shrugged. “But they try for the enjoyment of trying, or the necessity. They have drive and some imagination. These children are not fat. Even your Starks are fat and boring. Their master has some fun with his work, I will grudgingly grant this. But his pets are dull drones, virtually mindless.” He glanced back at the staring woman, then spoke again, abruptly. “Go tell them to buy what that child is peddling. Your Starks.”

Coulson crossed his arms, allowing his confusion to crease his face. “What for?”

“Whimsy.” Loki narrowed his eyes when Coulson opened his mouth again. He flicked his hands, as if sending off a pet. “Go do the thing. Make a call. I don't care how.”

“I'm going to ask one more time, what for?”

A long-suffering sigh. “She's found a mildly interesting manner of water extraction and purification. Something new and agonizingly simple to reproduce. Useful in arid environments. Consider it an act of conservation, as I've said before.” He smiled blandly. “No use in having power over a dead world. More importantly, your larger corporations look upon this aisle with a kind of magnanimous alienation – they allow it to exist, so they need care no further on the matter.” Loki allowed his smile to thin, ignoring faded memories of being the odd one out, the strange little creature with a book. The other. He marked them as irrelevant to his present decisions. What he did, he did for curiosity's sake only. “I find this rude and I will take no more questions on the matter. Go shove the child in the face of these boring sorts. It will amuse me to know they are forced into some action. Come find me when you're done, I'll make it worth the while.”
“How so?” Coulson filed the small monologue away to consider later. Despite the casual act, it was jarring to notice Loki giving a rip about anything, even to such a minor degree. He wondered why.

“I found your particular pack of idiots.”
“I've got bad news.” He found Loki lounging near a robotics display, watching a tiny dancing toy with dark hilarity in his face.

Loki didn't bother to look at him, preferring to watch the toy attempt its best Beyoncé moves. It toppled mid-swivel. “That was not my fault.” He glanced at Phil. “This conference lasts three more days and I have to be here for all of them?”

“Worse. And no, you cannot upgrade the little robots with death rays when nobody's looking.”

“Aw. Cancel the holidays.” Loki crossed his arms and jutted his chin towards the central area. “What's worse? Not only do I have to be here, but I have to eat the terrifying looking food they're serving? I can smell it from here. It's mostly chemicals.”

“You would have a point there. The better stuff is at the private parties. Anyway, I called a friend at Stark, who kicked your request – obviously I didn't name you – upstairs. Mr. Stark was apparently ecstatic about the purification abstract from that booth. He's been looking for some more humanitarian efforts to diversify into and has selected someone personally to go make some arrangements with the young woman you met.”

He got a blank look.

“He also fired half the staff here today for not examining other developers for investment opportunities as they were apparently supposed to.”

“Well, at least there's that.” Loki shrugged.

Phil gave him a broad, deliberately annoying smile. “Congratulations. You did something nice for mankind.”

“I ought go home and have my mind scanned for permanent damage.”

“You should have done that years ago,” Phil deadpanned quickly before reconsidering the wisdom of his insult.

Instead Loki slowly arched a single eyebrow as if to say not bad and unfurled himself from the wall he leaned on. He began to walk away. “Follow.”

“Wait-”

“Roll with it,” he drawled. “Trust me.”

...
“Quinn! Ian Quinn!” Loki burbled the name loudly in a broad Midwest accent, flagging the man down from amidst the crowd with a wildly gesturing hand.

Coulson froze in shock for a split second, then remembered what he'd said. It was either shit bricks or, yea verily, roll with it. He rolled with it, trotting to catch up. He said nothing, a confused, feckless look on his face, the properly baffled assistant. There was little acting involved. He tamped down the rising dread. *I thought this was a good idea*?

“Quinn!” Loki slowed down and reached out a hand. Startled silent, Quinn offered his in return and got a hearty, back-slapping shake in return. Not a single glimpse of recognition when he looked towards Phil as well. “My God. You don't remember me, do you?”

“Of course I do,” said Quinn quickly, ever the salesman. “You're-

“Lucas. Lucas Bellweather. You know, I pitched you a startup a couple of years back.” Loki shrugged affably. “Bad timing, you were seriously busy with some mining disputes in Bolivia, some random crap with a quinoa collective. I know how *that* is.” He rolled his eyes and gave Quinn another firm shake before letting go. Quinn suddenly looked much more at ease – match a glad-handing jerk with another jerk, and they're comfortable among their own. Loki went on about Bolivia for a few more minutes, making some distressingly astute observations about the country's previous president and their effects on international corporations trying to buy in. Quinn nodded eagerly in agreement at the right moments.

He *actually did read the file. I'll be damned.* Coulson offered Quinn's giant Japanese companion a meek smile, recognizing him for the figure May tagged. Same tats and everything. The tag was still transmitting from the Oberoi, but a bespoke suit jacket would eventually travel with this guy. Not a concern.

. . .

“So what brings you to TechBreak, Lucas?” Quinn pulled a fresh bottled water from a bin behind a silk-bedecked guest table at the rear Roxxon stronghold, an even flashier match to the front end. Something began to tickle at Coulson's mind as he stared at the various gee-gaws and promotional videos.

“Looking for something *interesting* to invest in and not finding jack.” The familiar theatrical eye roll as he took the offered bottle. “It's just as well you forgot our last meeting.”

“Lucas, I swear I didn't.” A big car salesman grin. Loki returned it, even cheesier. He took a swig from the water bottle. “I know. Anyway.” He gave a grand wave of his arm. “It was doomed to fail. Big plans lead to ever bigger pratfalls, you know how it goes. You think you're going to take over New York City, be a big shot in Times Square, and it just doesn't happen.”

Something tweaked slightly in Quinn's face. Something tweaked in Coulson's at the exact same second, but for very different reasons. “Yeah, Lucas, I definitely know how that works.”

“So I've just been knocking around, looking for the next big thing, dragging poor old Franklin around with me.” He gestured vaguely in Coulson's direction. “You remem- no, hell, I forgot. I hired Franklin just a few months ago.” He leaned in conspiratorially, muttering just loud enough for Coulson to hear. “He's dull, so I just think he's been there forever. Feels that way, you know? He's good, though, keeps me on my appointments, watches the money. I can't be bothered with the little crap.” He got out of Quinn's personal space with a shared chuckle. “You know anything that's
opening up some ground floor action? I still specialize in the good stuff. Cyber, nano, new materials. Lotta possibilities opened up after certain breaking news, if you knew where to look.” He gave a quick wink.

“Well…” A shrug. “Honestly, I'm looking to go in some new directions myself. Got to rebuild.”

“No kidding?” Loki made a solid pass at looking dismayed, just fake enough to fit the tone of the entire meeting. It was perfect. Coulson felt a kind of grudging awe. “Damn, don't let me step on your toes. I know it goes, Ian, I definitely know how that goes.”

Quinn gave a sidelong glance at his bodyguard. His own discomfort was briefly clear on his face. “Well, I'll tell you what. Cybernetics just took a brief step back, so if that's where you were first looking, you may want to move slow.”

Loki looked crestfallen. “Aw. With a couple wars winding up all over the place, I was watching a lot of veterans on their way home. Lot of opportunity there. I had a line on this new bio chip…” He made a little see saw gesture – easy come, easy go.

Quinn brightened. This was definitely a guy he could talk to. “I know, right? Just be careful, everyone's being a little twitchy since, ah, Cybertek's stocks took a dive. You'll be able to move that eventually, no problem. There's always another war.”

“Right? I've got bills meanwhile. Franklin doesn't tell me how bad it is, but there's like three credit cards I'm not supposed to use.” Loki gave a big sigh, heavy with the woe of the eternally put-upon. “The next tech con's in Paris, what the heck am I supposed to do with a credit limit in Paris?”

Ian leaned in, using his own mock conspiratorial voice. “Open more cards.”

They both laughed like hell.

_He turned into some horrible dark mirror of Quinn. I don't know if I want to applaud or drown them both for the safety of all mankind._ Coulson glanced to his side again and caught the tired, annoyed glance of the Japanese guard. _Oh good, I just shared a moment with an assassin._

Quinn slung an arm around Loki's shoulder, giving it a squeeze. Lost memory or no, they were in the brotherhood of slimeballs. “Lucas, I'll give you something straight. Come with me tonight. I've got a private party we can get in on, and if that doesn't open some fresh connections for you, well, you're screwed.”

More mutual laughter. “Give me a little warning here. Should I throw on a better suit than this bargain basement sucker?”

Quinn chuckled and tipped him a wink. “It's Roxxon. They rented out the rooftop at Le Sutra, practically own the place. The snappiest thing you've got is probably still underdressed, but don't stress it too much. They like their stringers looking a little hungry.”

Loki grinned. “I'll come up with something.” He jutted his chin towards Quinn. “What time?”

“Ten tonight. I'll meet you in the lobby there.” Quinn tipped his own water bottle towards him. “Bring your best game face.”

Loki clicked his tongue. “Always do.”

...
“I want a shower and the strongest drink you mortals have.”

That made Coulson stop, halting a surprised chuckle in his throat before it really got going. Loki’s face was tense. “What, you didn't like him?”

Loki whirled, walking still backwards towards the way out of the convention center. “Look, I know we don't get along, and I know perfectly well the sort of reputation I have. I can be arrogant, pernicious, untrustworthy. Occasionally fun at parties. I'm sure you could add a few things.”

“Us mortals are on a short life span. I'd need an extension.”

Loki barked a small laugh. “You're getting better at this. Now, I can be troublesome, gleefully.” He pointed towards the hall. “That man is slime. Criminally boring slime. You smell it on him. He feeds on carrion. And in five hours, I have to be within radius of his fetid breath again. I want. A drink.” The k sound clinked hard behind his teeth for emphasis. “I could erase him. It would be more merciful. And quick. And would spare me the hell of this near future. A whole roomful of these petty little insects. You would thank me for their obliteration.” He turned around and kept going.

“I want to know how and why he's got access to Roxxon,” Coulson said to draw him out, keep him talking. Loki's perspective might actually be useful, shine a light on what he was pulling together in his head. He ignored the histrionic ideas of destruction. With Quinn, it was a nice mental image.

“It's because all your miserable little sots are connected to each other somehow. Money and a contemptibly short-sighted idea of power. It's not difficult. In fact, it's painfully obvious. Yon Roxxon owns him, down to the man's intestinal bacteria. And they are unhappy with their investment. I assume there is a whole layer of unhappy people involved to ensure this is clear to him. There always are.” He stopped for a second to roll his eyes in open exasperation. “Gods, politics in every sphere can be so dull sometimes. Never any innovation there, either. Your scenarios just move more quickly.” A dry little laugh. “I'll tell you about the All-Father's ideas about economic parity sometime, it'll cure any trouble you have sleeping for the rest of your tiny life. But they'll be familiar.” He muttered something under his breath. Coulson wouldn't have been surprised if it was an example of alien profanity.

“I think you're conflating a couple things. The unhappy guard was acting for another party,” Coulson waved off the departure attendant. *Keep going. You're being unusually useful.*

“Were they? You're certain?” Loki searched Coulson's face as he caught up, the two of them sweeping out of the building. May was out of sight, but Coulson was certain she was just up the street at the corner.

“I've identified another actor in the mix. Roxxon's a well known company, been around over a century. The most evil thing they've done is get wrist-slapped for a number of oil spills in protected zones.”

“Ah, yes. The...” He flapped a hand, finishing the sentence visually. “Them. From the file. They're certainly tied together. You said these Hand people, they make tech investments. Roxxon is at least said to be publicly traded.”

“You understand what that means.”

“Please don't insult me, I've been bored with nothing to do but eat airplane food and read a great many books.”

“Sorry,” said Coulson. He didn't sound remotely sorry. “So the Hand is a major buyer in Roxxon.”
“Or outright given a faction of the corporation as appeasement, like parceling out a fiefdom to a worthy steward. They're muscle. Not the brains, much as I'm certain they're prone to presuming.”

There was the limousine. Loki allowed Coulson to take the lead towards it. “The Hand is part of Roxxon. Roxxon is more than The Hand. But because they are muscle, and because Quinn is stupid and greedy, there's your access.”

“You mean your access.”

“Have I mentioned drinking in the last couple of minutes? Because I am deathly serious, Coulson. If you don't have anything, I'm going to hijack your plane, go to that ridiculous tower I had so much fun in last time, and steal all Stark's alcohol, because he appeared to have plenty.”

“He'd be thrilled to see you,” Coulson deadpanned.

“Yes, just like you were. I'm certain it would be just as cordial.” Loki sighed.

“Please don't sigh like you're the victim here.”

“It was just a sigh.” He sighed again, aggravated.

“You did that one just to be tweaky.”

“Obviously.”
In which partying hard does not actually happen in any literal sense. Loki does however bring some noise, if not any funk.

Quinn got them in the door all right – dragged them upstairs while garrulously holding forth on some new biogenetic procedure he'd been told about earlier. Quinn was already several drinks ahead and thrust a glass of whiskey in Loki's still-disguised hand the first chance he got. Loki nursed at it now and again, apparently as yet sober from a certain degree of damage he'd done to Coulson's private supply. Coulson was at least pleased to note that his table manners were consistently better than his brother's. The drinks trimmed his visible irritation. He could still feel the dislike coming off of Loki in waves.

Coulson, in his role as Our Boy Franklin, kept an eye on the crowd as they entered the party proper. There was a cluster of major officers from Roxxon right inside the door, nodding generously at arrivals from the luxurious couches but uninterested in actually mingling with the rabble. Most of them were recognizable from television, either making statements on technology advances on Capitol Hill, or waxing favorably about industry on CNBC and its ilk. Coulson spotted a familiar face walking near the rooftop ledge and recognized it for being Mr. 'Total Dick' from earlier. His welcomed presence among various small cliques told Coulson a lot about the tone of the partygoers. Insulated, elite, and boring.

It galled the crap out of him to admit, even privately, that Loki had a point. But he did. This party was going to suck – best to get right to what he had planned with Skye ASAP and get out before the glad-handing and the cutthroat networking got too unbearable. He resisted the urge to doublecheck the tiny USB sticks concealed in his suit. He knew perfectly well they were there.

Quinn did as he promised, the least he owed to the brotherhood of car salesmen and glib politicos. He introduced Loki – Lucas Bellweather, the impoverished tech entrepreneur – to a handful of executives in turn. Loki made a remark about the nattily dressed group of Japanese men off in their own little corner. Coulson identified Tsurayaba among them. He watched those who came close with a knife-like gaze.

“You don't want to talk to those guys.”

“But Japan is always a terrific mark-” Wide eyed innocence, cut off by a hearty chuckle from Quinn. Coulson still heard the nervousness in it. No way Loki was going to get him anywhere near their group. He spared a thought for May, engaging in a quick break in at the Oberoi to check for any laptops or smartphones left by the attendees for them to crack. The big guy and his suit was here with the group, it left a possible opening.

“Buddy, believe me. If they want to buy, they'll come to you. Don't worry about them.” Quinn slapped him on the back. “Follow me over to this side, I've got one of Roxxon's subsidiaries that
Coulson hung back and watched them go. As an assistant and gopher, he was functionally nobody to any of the party goers, and even most of the on hand security wasn’t looking at him much. Perfect.

He sauntered off towards the restrooms, tagging two unattended Roxxon laptops with sticks for five seconds each as he went by. That opened up each computer to the local wifi, which Skye had already boosted for her own purposes. From there, she took over remotely, scanning contents and copying potentially useful stuff. Just as he went in, someone from Brand left their smartphone on the counter when going into a stall. Phil didn’t even need a stick for that one, just slid it awake and opened the network settings. Done. Probably nothing good, but by God, he was a completist.

He came out again, drying off his hands and giving the hallway he was in a proper look as he passed through. There was a lot of security in this corridor, and a lot of high-tech keypads on doors. He rolled through several possibilities in his head and settled on the likeliest one.

\textit{Roxxon owns this entire floor and gets first dibs when they want the rooftop. It's a temporary storehouse for traveling suits.}\n
He assessed the security again, scurrying through back to the party and tagging another laptop on the way.

\textit{I want inside those rooms. I'll need Loki. And if I have to think those three words again, I'm going to have to go back to the men's to barf.}\n
. . .

“Sir?” Phil smiled up at his ‘boss,’ who favored him with a slow, bleary blink. “Could I talk to you for a few?”

The eyes sharpened for a microsecond, grasping the tendrils of what Coulson needed from the vapor of nuance in his tone. He excused himself from a small knot of eager beavers, all of whom were looking at one of the Roxxon CEOs with intensity as he blathered on about something. “We could just explode the entire roof,” he hissed low into Coulson’s ear.

Way too tempting.

“I need inside those rooms. I’ll need Loki. And if I have to think those three words again, I’m going to have to go back to the men’s to barf.”

“Turn off your stupid monitor for a moment, then.”

Phil put his hand in his pocket, muting the device but leaving a vibration alert active. “All you.”

The fire alarm went off a few seconds later, ricocheting sound across the rooftop and startling a handful of people into dropping wineglasses. “That won't be enough,” Loki said as he swept towards the staircase. “Minimal damage, you say. There'll have to be a little.” He put his hand on the wall by an electrical outlet. Coulson would swear under oath he saw light spring from the man’s palm, with a silently reverberating twang in his pocket to back him up. Things began to smoke inside the wall. The power flickered, then died.

“That's going to snap the doorlocks sealed,” he managed to say, unpleasantly startled with how
easily the chaos flickered around the party.

“So I tell them to open back up,” Loki dragged him past a hurrying security guard who didn't bother to glance at them despite coming into restricted range. The monitor buzzed another soft vibration.

“Did you just make us invisible?”

“I did mention I'm fun at parties, yes? Keep your voice down, that part's trickier. You step softly when hidden and save the energy. Invisibility comes dear in the long game.” He examined one of the keylocks, then put his hand on it. Then took it away, looking at his palm. Then put it back on. “Needlessly overcomplicated.”

“Don't tell me you can't open these.”

“Of course I can,” Loki snapped, irritated, bending down to examine the lock. “Just need to figure out – oh, I wager they're internally secure and not at all wired to each other. Masquerading as a difficult closed system. Yet still mere mechanics. The rest is illusion. I almost approve.” His palm twitched and something clinked. The door cracked open. “Ladies first.”

“Oh, screw you.” Coulson followed it up with an annoyed but unhurt laugh. “Oldest sting in the book.”

“All in the timing.”

Three rooms were just offices, no unsecured devices. The fourth was a jackpot – a small repository meant for data storage. Phil tagged every machine he could and dropped a transmitter on the server rack. Loki perused a few file cabinets, reading quickly through what was better left off networked computers. “Mostly rubbish here. Did you want listings of some of their holdings?”

“Anything good in those?”

“Did you know they actually owned my old staff for a few months before loaning it off somewhere? Smart enough not to say to whom, just lists that a private deal was made. After that, it trails into a bunch of nonsense, same as the other listings.”

That gave Coulson pause and he asked cautiously, “You're not going to go after it, are you?”

A dry little laugh. “Never do the same trick twice for the same audience. They can keep it. Frankly, between the two of us, Phil – can I call you that?”

“No.”

“Frankly, Phillip,” Coulson's teeth clicked together in annoyance. “It wasn't that terrific of a gift. Narrow usage and there were a few side effects. Regardless.” He tugged a handful of files out and waggled them. “I have a listing of storehouses. A few notes here indicate they acquired some of your things recently, though I can't suss out what. They use a code. I expect your interest in retrieving these artifacts of nostalgia is stronger than mine. Most of the potentially interesting items seem to be in European storehouses. I have some GPS data noted here.”

“Good call.” His phone beeped. “Skye's scanned everything in here.”

“Then we should get out with the crowd. I hear sirens.”
Matsu'o Tsurayama threw Quinn up against the wall, ignoring the American's sputtering protests. "You utter fool."

"Matsu'o," Raina said the man's name so softly it was almost a whisper. She kept her hands clasped together in the front of her light blue floral dress, looking sedate. She shook her head. "He didn't know. He still doesn't know."

"Ignorance is no excuse!" spat the assassin.

"He was kept ignorant," she shot back, still perfectly calm. "There is no blame here. Only... complications. Divergent paths." She gave Tsurayama a bright smile. "They all wind up in the same place, well in our gardens. Please let him go."

Tsurayama narrowed his eyes at her, dug his arm once more into Quinn's throat, hard, and then released him. He dropped, gasping for air and hissing what he could muster up at the Hand's tool.

"You son of a bitch!"

The assassin stared balefully down at him. "You think carefully upon who you speak to. I will not take your insults again." He snapped at Raina. "You may explain to him."

She tilted her head politely. "I will." Her gaze followed the slender figure and his pack of cronies as they left, dropping to Quinn when the door shut. "That could have gone better."

He coughed, rubbing at his neck with a tense and angry hand. "What didn't I know?"

She smiled. "You were bait." Fury filled Quinn's face. It changed nothing in hers. "Let me show you." She turned and guided him to the wall screen. It filled itself with the data from both Bellweather's convention ticket and his bland looking assistant's at her touch.

Quinn looked at it in disbelief, then at Raina. "That guy? He was just some skeevy tech brat, one of thousands at the convention. Maybe I even did meet him once before, maybe I didn't, it didn't matter. I did him a favor. That's the business, making connections. He knew how the game worked, he was just there to get his foot in the door."

"And he sure did, Ian." Her calm tone was starting to get on his nerves. "Watch."

The screen filled with surveillance footage from the fire alarm evacuation. Amidst a throng of Mumbai firemen, dozens of Roxxon partygoers pushed their way to the street.

He shook his head. The footage was meaningless chaos. "I don't-"

"Watch."

The footage panned out a little and caught some of the first to flee, now mostly up the street. Ian furrowed his brow, spotting the tall figure of Lucas and his shorter assistant. Then they were gone.

No, that wasn't quite right. He squinted. There was still a pair of men where Lucas and Franklin had been. "Back it up. Let me see that again." She did. One second – Lucas. The next – unidentifiable. "Reactive camouflage? Some sort of net cloak?" he asked, impressed enough to forget the crap he was seemingly in with The Hand. His breath caught in his throat when the smaller man turned.

"Coulson."
“It isn’t camouflage. No relevant energy signatures were detected at the scene. You don’t recognize the other man?” Raina arched a dark eyebrow, the little smile full of amusement.

“Well, I apparently screwed up IDing him once already,” he snapped, exasperated. “Who is he?”

“That’s the man that led the alien invasion onto New York City.” She enjoyed his expression as he recoiled backwards in open horror, a latent bit of basic humanity thrown into shock at seeing an inhuman destroyer. At having touched one.

“What the hell is SHIELD doing with him?”

“I don’t know. No one does. Agent Coulson is playing this quite close to the vest. I’d like to know more.”

“And you used me to lure them in to see about getting a better look. Jesus Christ, Raina.”

“You did make it rather easy. I knew they’d still be trying to watch us. I wanted to peek back.” She closed the footage, opened another file. New York splintered to pieces under the assault of enormous alien beasts. Now and then there were quick flashes of a slender humanoid figure on a flying device, black hair and a wild expression on his sharp face. Ian looked at the images, slightly ill. He was happy to profit on the attack’s leavings, but he’d shook that thing’s hand. Christ.

Raina watched his expressions change, noting the usual internal lines of self-justification and hypocrisy. Quinn was little better than the alien man. If anything, the alien had at least been open with his intentions.

“So you got a nice look. Now what?”


“Okay, are we watching the same footage? He's dangerous, and probably nuts. Find a way to kill him and inspect the corpse, fine.” He looked absently around the security room, disgusted with the topic. “I need a shower.”

“Not good enough.” She glanced at him, his hands spreading in stunned surrender. “SHIELD keeps their toys on leashes. So do we.” She smiled. “He'll be tractable enough, with the right preparation. Motivation. The Hand is prepared to assist us, despite their... misgivings with my methods. I've already made all the arrangements.”

“Oh, honey. You've got issues. Did you set this up while we were still in Japan? Or even before that? When the hell did you go behind me back with this?”

She laughed gaily, ignoring his questions. “They accessed Roxxon's on site data storage. I don't know how, isn't that amazing? He did it. Got them in the door, used you perfectly along the way. And now they know where a lot of little secrets are hidden. Matsu'o doesn't like that, but he'll adapt. I'm sorry he took it out on you. All we have to do, Ian, is go pick him up when they get curious about some of them.” She put a comforting hand on his upper arm. “And they always get curious.”
“Well, at least it's not Germany.” Loki looked at the co-ordinates as they pinged silently on the Bus's data screen. No one said anything in response. “That's, what, France? Austria?” He craned his head towards the screen as Triplett stepped further away from him. “France. I grow confused by these little countries. I suppose it hardly matters.”

Coulson shifted his weight, crossing his arms as Skye kept mouthing at him why is he not in his room? Instead he said, “Yeah, France. We've pinned down likely storehouses at four of the GPS locations you found in Mumbai. We know two of them have been gone through recently – Agent May found receipts in the Oberoi that match up with travel to those regions. Been busy.”

“How. Yes, they have. These other notations here - “ Loki tapped on several sheets of paper from the Roxxon files. “They're classification tags with shift notices. Without a way to decode the tags I'm unsure what they're moving, but they move things rather frequently. This unidentified item goes here, that one goes there. Mostly to this one of the pair. Rather like a kind of library transfer system.” He glanced up when Simmons made a soft noise. “We do have libraries in Asgard. Not that they're oft used much for anything other than checking the lyrics of lusty madrigals and turgid ballads, but they're there.”

Still no other response. Loki glanced across the data screen to Coulson, pretending to ignore the tense faces circled around the room. His voice was light and amused. “Do you know, I think I'll just nip off to my private little prison cell? The atmosphere is better.” He delicately sorted the papers back into their file and placed them neatly in front of his place at the table. “Just going to stop by your kitchen for something on the way. Ta.”

Dead silence in his departure.

Coulson sighed. “Okay, you know what? I realize it's incredibly weird, but he was almost trying there.”

“Oh my God, Phil.” May rubbed two fingers across her forehead.

“He's not getting free roam of the plane. His presence just now was relevant.”

“I don't know that I trust him in the kitchen,” muttered Fitz. “Razors in the apples or suchlike.”

“He's creepy,” added Triplett.

“I'll just toss in that I'm a little freaked out by the whole 'instant chaos – just magic up some fire and invisibility' thing you said he did,” said Skye.

Phil knocked his knuckles on the tabletop, openly exasperated. “Does anyone here believe for a second that just keeping him locked up in that room is going to stop him if he pulls something? I saw what he can do to a door.”
Skye looked down at her shoes, biting her lower lip.

He continued, pacing peevishly as he spoke. “That's what the backup devices are for. If he gets out, I'll know. We can do something about it. We have plans, and we have tools. But he tricked his way out of a sealed glass case once before. The room we have isn't going to hold him if he gets feisty and we all damn well know it. Now, treating him with basic human decency? That might buy us some time. He has – and God forgive me for saying this, but it's true – held up his side of the bargain so far. Not without certain incredibly annoying quirks, but he's done it.” He tilted his head, the annoyance starting to fade from his voice. “The least I can do is honor my side until the very second until I have to drop a hammer on him. Possibly literally. At least try to help me with this.”

Another round of silence met his brief monologue, this one touched with sheepish undertones.

“May, I want wheels up in an hour, no hurry. We're going to check this thing out in France, but we're going to do it carefully. Skye, you'll be working on decoding their filing system during the downtime. I'd like to have some guesswork done on what we might find in that place when we go in. We'll get out there, get the lay of the land, maybe even pick up some French pastries, have a picnic.” He looked around at his team. “Sound good?” He waited for his nods of assent. “Right. Skye, I want you by my office in five. We're going to discuss this Roxxon revelation and see how that matches up with our past theories.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Fitz? Any trouble with that thing I asked you?”

He shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Terrific.”

“Look, I'm sorry we're all being kind of ratty about that guy.”

“That's fine. Take a seat.” He gestured to the chair on the other side of his desk. He spared a longing glance for his antique watch – there hadn't been any time to work on it for about a week now. At least the burnt resistor was out. He sighed as he tugged down on his shirt and suit jacket. “He pulled together the Roxxon thing, not a hint of surprise. And he seems to have been right thus far. Just like you were, calling that there was more behind Quinn. Behind Garrett, even. All that stuff we thought might have stopped or slowed down at Cybertek, you're looking at it being kicked to these guys. Those hardcopy listings are even more concerning.”

“Okay. I'll play devil's advocate.” Skye dropped into the seat and clasped her hands together on her knee. “Is there any chance, any at all, that he knew the Roxxon thing before either today or when he got on board? Like maybe it's part of his play?”

He fiddled with his tiny repair kit before replacing it into the desk drawer. Maybe soon, but not today. “That requires him to care a lot more about the interplay of human society than I think he's generally capable of. You have a point about him and forward planning and that's worth keeping in mind. I'm not ruling out that he's up to something and we just haven't sniffed out what. To me, that's still the likely scenario.”

She nodded.

“That said, I really don't think he gives a damn who Roxxon is, or The Hand. They're on his radar either because we care and that's what he signed himself up for, or a means to an end for him.” He
lifted his eyebrows thinking. “Or possibly both.”

“What's bugging me is the sheer lack of clues. He's almost inert when he's in the cell. He only reacts when you talk to him, or ask him to do something. There's nothing for us to read off him most of the time. So we're spending all this energy worrying about what's going on in his creepy head instead of focusing entirely on whatever Quinn's led us towards. I mean, Roxxon? They're huge. Thanks for saying I got somewhere with my theory, but I didn't guess that.” She sighed. “Maybe I should have.”

He nodded slowly. “You make a good point. Don't cut yourself up over the rest. It's not unlike how we got played leading up to New York. We were so focused on figuring him out, we didn't realize his game was already well in motion. Even Romanoff stealing a hint out of him didn't change the outcome far enough or fast enough. We got hit, he got out, I got nailed, and the invasion happened. He's good.” His brow furrowed, remembering something Loki had said. “But you never do the same trick twice for the same audience.”

“Okay?”

He leaned back in his chair, staring at a point over Skye's head. “Getting out isn't the game here. He can do that any time. Letting him stay, now that's a twist on the routine. So he offers his help and he actually keeps to it. He's even underlined that – he knows I could throw him out anytime, make a call to people perfectly happy to beat his ass. So despite some groaning and cranking and the bare minimum of limit-pushing, he does what he's asked.”

She watched him think out loud. “What does he gain from sticking around us specifically? Because it ain't the food on the Bus, I'll tell you that.”

“Access. Mobility. Information.” He spread a hand, waving it aimlessly to underline that he was spitting balls.

“To what, though?” She shook her head. “You just said, and I believe you, that he doesn't give a crap about what humans are up to. So what do we get him access to that he can't just get from some other society that offends him less?”

He dropped his gaze to her, his face lighting up with realization. “Choco Tacos.”

“Ugh.” She sagged in her chair and laughed.

Coulson laughed with her. “Yeah. I'm out of guesses. I'm gonna need a little more observation. He'll slip up.”

Her smile faded. “What if he's being genuine about trying to redeem himself and be helpful and whatever he was going on about?”

Coulson regarded her for a long, silent moment. “Frankly, Skye, that possibility scares the crap out of me.”

“How so?”

“Because then he really is going to be completely unpredictable.”

. . .

He spread his pale palm across the page that he wasn't reading any longer, noting the number of the page, noting that the tale was almost done.
Rabbits, he thought in weariness. I'm reduced to spending my time in this cell reading a fable about rabbits. Desperate, flitting little creatures with a lifespan like a fleeting spark in a long night. I assume there is some parallel about mortal existence to this story. It is their way to spend much time agonizing about the inevitable. They treat it like a nightmare.

He set the book aside and stared at the geometric grey wall across from him. The ugly suspicion that other lifeforms, perhaps even people he'd personally known were ultimately little different, crept in close and was duly shoved away again.

I weary of little rooms and long waits, with scant to sup on but my thoughts and mortal's sparse hospitality. At what point in my life previous would I ever guess that I would long for the grandiloquent feasts of Asgard? Their interminable excesses of drunkards and preening lords, each trying to outshout one another for the All-Father's favor? Hours like years when I was a child at Odin's side, and the smell of bitter mead had filled the very walls, thickened the air we breathed. Thor sang with them, and that light on his happy face. Like a star. Never for me. I sat quietly, waiting for the dullness to be over, playing little games with my mo- with Odin's queen. Waiting to go back to my books.

His thoughts trailed off into silence, the lingering memories discomfiting him.

Loneliness was not a word he permitted himself, hiding it amidst concepts like solitude and privacy. So he lacked a word when looking at the beige cover at his side and the plain black eye of the rabbit that adorned it. He had no name for the emptiness that always met him on the other side of the door. He filled the hole with other ideas instead.

I did not come here for their adoration, much less acceptance. Their open dislike is meaningless. That was better. That marked his place, standing alone willfully. A shadow of a smile touched the corner of his mouth. If I do not find what I think I seek in these stolen toys, I'll find clues for certain. Till then, promises shall be kept. If his minions cannot bother with honor and pleasantry, I can at least humor myself by playing at it.

I am yet a prince, and princes have responsibilities. A guest's courtesy is the least of these.

He smoothed his face over, making it charming and mild to match his efforts to center himself within. He picked up the book again, glancing down at the page where it had fallen open.

“All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies. And when they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you; digger, listener, runner, Prince with the swift warning. Be cunning, and full of tricks, and your people will never be destroyed.”

He abruptly flung the book away from him as if it had grown teeth.
a few good men and women

Chapter Summary

Raina's right. They do get curious.

Saint-Lary-Soulan, France

“I feel like I should be sipping some really obnoxious drink and staring rudely at people.” Coulson tugged at the puffy winter coat he had on over his black suit, making it squeak against his fingers. He looked past the skyline of the small village at the distant peak of Pic de Bugatet where it sat among its snow-covered companions in the Pyrenees.

“You could let the pro out of his room and take notes on his style.” Skye gave him a quick grin and kept working on her laptop. “He’d probably enjoy it. He hasn’t even tried to snip at people bringing him food the last couple of days. Hell, last night he settled for ‘hello.’ It was weird.”

“You think he's getting depressed?” Phil puffed out a visible breath just to watch it float away. He didn’t sound particularly serious.

She stopped typing and looked at him for a moment, then shrugged. “I bet he'd stab someone for sugge- sorry. Sorry!” She dropped her forehead to the table. “I wasn't thinking.”

“Relax. I’m pretty much over it.” He waved his hand dismissively. “Well, the actual stabbing at least. I don't twitch when someone accidentally drops a butter knife in my lap. Change of topic, you picking up anything?”

“The mountains block everything, Phil. If it's where you think it is, I'm not gonna hear anything until we're super close.”

His shoulders heaved in a sigh. “Not surprising. Always kinda annoying.” He tilted his head and watched the waitress leave a tray of drinks for some loud ski tourists with a terse thunk. “How come nobody ever puts their evil lair somewhere that doesn't involve a frickin' five step road trip and a Sherpa?”

“We did just recently blow a place in a barbershop.”

“That was Cuba. Cuba fits the cliché. Hell, Cuba was in a Godfather movie.”

“Was that the really crappy one with the director's kid?”

“No, this one was still good. And the third one wasn't that crappy, it was just.” He shook his head. “Never mind. We're off topic.”

Skye went back to to tracing and identifying local internet signals while muttering, “I bet it was totally the crappy one.”

...
Loki poked at the small plate lined with several desserts – a petite eclair, a tiny lingonberry tart, a wee square of cake - his face unreadable. After a long moment, he lifted his head to regard his unexpected visitor with an arched eyebrow.

Agent Simmons smiled back, feeling awkward under the glittering green-grey stare and talking quickly to mask it. “I had one of the tarts, they’re lovely. We’ve got a whole box still in the kitchen. Well, up until Agent Triplett sneaks in there again. He was tracking them all the way in. I think he’s got a thing for petit fours.” She laughed a little, so openly nervous it came out with a kind of crescendo perkiness. “Probably be easy to just make him go get more to replace them. The bakery’s really not that far from here, the whole village, actually. It’s a very pretty place.” She trailed off as he shifted his position on the bolted bench. “I’m sorry, I’m not thinking. I could bring something to drink. We’ve got some coffee.”

He dropped his stare.

“I’m really very sorry we’re all still being a bit rude. I’m sure it’s not too surprising, considering.” She cleared her throat, tugged at the pale pink sleeves of her jumper. “But we could at least make the effort.”

“Did he ask you to bring these? Coulson?” The eyes flickered up again, narrowing in thought as she shook her head. “Hm.”

“I just...” She shrugged. “Well, no one's trying very hard to be polite.”

“As you say, it is not particularly surprising. I am not owed much.” His voice was smooth, courtly gravel while his mind was suspicious. Why change tone with him so quickly? This nervous creature had said next to nothing to him previously, yet clearly she had little gift for lies. “Politeness would be... nice.” The corners of his lips quirked. “But why make such a demand? I have little right to.” He looked at the plate again and said in a more thoughtful tone, mostly to himself, “The tart looks similar to ones from, ah, Asgard.”

*I almost said 'home.'* The thought filtered away and he resumed the tightly controlled mild expression. *I need this matter done and myself away.* Despite himself, he looked away. His gaze caught the cover of the stupid rabbit book where it still lay in the corner. Damn the long hours. His mind was growing slow in boredom. His nerves were a touch frayed from too many humans. That's all it was.

She tapped his shoulder with a single finger. “Are you all right?”

The brief contact startled his attention back to her, recoiling slightly from the touch. “What?” He peered at her earnestly concerned expression, finding it strange. “I'm fine.” He shook his head. “Thank you for the plate,” he remembered to say.

“You're welcome!” She gave him a smile. A genuine, perky little beam of one. He felt a drifting sort of confusion cross him at the expression. “If you want any more, just drop a signal.” And she left in a flurry of cotton and softly clacking shoes.

The trickster prince, hateful invader and consistent prisoner, familiar with alien societies that might be incomprehensible to these lesser races, blinked once at the plate of desserts and muttered to himself, “Well, that was all rather odd.”

“*We should just let him out.*” Simmons sighed to Fitz. Fitz nearly dropped the tray he was moving.
“Oh, don’t be like that. Act like I’m discussing a three headed piglet.”

“Jemma, he’s better off in there, and we are definitely far better off with him in there.” He readjusted the tray, scratching his free hand through his curly hair. “I’m still checking food for razors and he was only in the kitchen the once.”

“And have you found any razors?” She arched an eyebrow at him expectantly.

“Well, no.” He sagged, sighed an exasperated sigh. He gave the tray another shove and crossed his arms. “I get that you’re taking Agent Coulson’s bit of frustration to heart.”

“It’s not going to hurt any of us if we’re a bit more polite.”

“It might, that’s the entire point of why we’re all being a bit nervy. I know what Coulson is up to and I trust him, but it’s kind of ridiculous to not act like we have a man on board that tried to take over the entire planet. It’s not like he’s on jaywalking charges. It’s not like he even only hurt Agent Coulson, which would be enough for me to hate him.”

“Well, he just seems to be getting so withdrawn in there and he’s really only been out the once. It’s not healthy to just stay cooped up in a little room with all your thoughts.”

“He’s not human. It's ridiculous to think he's – ugh.” He pulled the palm of his hand down his face. “I should have gone in there with the treats.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “It’s not like that, and besides, I got the contact done perfectly fine. You did push the upgrade, yes?” He looked away and nodded. “Good. Then that’s done and I’ll go tell Coulson when he's back.”

“What's done?” Skye ambled into the room, unzipped her winter coat, and noticed a spare eclair on a plate near Fitz. “Oooo.”

“Don’t you touch that!” Fitz lunged for the plate. “I was saving it.”

“’Kay.” She gave Fitz a look and a crooked grin. “About to kick off a deathmatch for that eclair there. It's all you. So, what's done?”

Simmons flapped a hand, grinning nervously. “Oh, just a little thing Agent Coulson wanted us to do. A side project. Nothing important.”

“Kay.” Skye nodded slowly. “Big conspiracy. No talking about it. I gotcha. It's cool.” She jabbed her thumb towards the plane's cargo, where she'd just come from. “So, I can't get any major signal from this place, but Phil and I just sat in a corner, drank coffee, and watched these two dingles from Roxxon fall all over themselves on their way out of a bar. So he tagged their car while they tried to find their keys. It was kinda goofy. We've got the storehouse for certain, about forty miles into the park off the road that goes to the ski resort. Way closer than I thought. They probably wanted to be sure they could get to the resort for, I don't know, Taco Tuesday or whatever it is suits do for fun.” She considered. “Besides get drunk and topple out of bars.”

“We're going in?” Fitz stayed close to the eclair.

“We're waiting on May to help us figure that out.”

...
the rest of the details she'd acquired in a file off to the side. "Best I could get, and they're at least ten years out of date. They rented the land over twenty years ago in a deal with a local nobleman, old enough that the details are mostly off the book. Private business, and the French are big on privacy."

"Bribery is a universal language." Coulson leaned his butt against the wall and watched his team assess the chalk lines of the facility's architecture.

She lifted her head and raised a single sardonic eyebrow at him. "It is, but institutionalized bribery is hard to outspend with my personal checkbook and some euros we found in the lounge cushions. It got us these and got me a spare hour in the library after closing." She tapped the blueprints with a leather glove. "The noble gave Roxxon carte blanche to do whatever they wanted with the land parcel. Because of local environmental laws, ten years ago they had to go up the food chain to authorize a bunch of underground drilling to expand their holdings. This is what they did."

Agent Triplett narrowed his eyes and broke down what he saw. "Public facility, four aboveground floors, standard office layout. Top floor is executive, guarantee they've updated that for bling if nothing else. And it's never just bling. It'll be top of the line." He picked up the file and flipped through it. "Yup, freshly rewired the place last year through a local business. That got taxed on the books. Still, pretty generic. Luckily, not our main problem. Main problem is worse." He tapped the other side of the blueprint. "Looks like they went way underground. Got one entrance here to some sort of bunker slash lobby, no doubt a security checkpoint. Notice the entrance is outside and not connected to the public facility. Suits inside don't deal with it, whoever's down below wants nothing to do with the bean counter boys. Two different worlds."

May nodded approvingly, tracing from where he pointed. "This suggests three floors of smaller rooms, offices, storage, opening into a few large storehouse bays underneath those. The entire substructure was about one hundred meters deep. It's probably bigger than that by now."

A low whistle met that. Triplett grinned at Coulson. "So, kinda like that scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but on steroids."

"And this is just one place like that. Just like us." Coulson shook his head. "All of us, just playing hide and seek with each other constantly. You get why people look at SHIELD funny sometimes. We're supposed to be the good guys, but sometimes, you can't tell at a glance." He curved his brows together, briefly contemplative.

"Just why we have to try twice as hard, sir."

"Thank you, Jemma. Needed a little idealism boost there." He moved away from where he was leaning and put both hands on the table. "This is what I don't like about the scenario ahead: We can get in, but getting out is made of a lot of variables. This map suggests one entry, and if I'm going to make any assumptions on an outdated source, it's that the worst situation is true. One entrance, and it's also the exit. If we get cornered, it's gonna be a bad time. And we still don't know what they might actually have." Skye grimaced even as Coulson didn't look at her to fix any blame. Their coding system was randomized, possibly utilizing one-time passes – she had been unable to figure out anything useful about what was on hand.

"If we're the good guys, then they're the bad guys, sir." Triplett crossed his arms. "It's certain from what you got in Mumbai that they've got stuff, a lot of secrets that don't belong to them. Stuff we should probably get back to The Fridge, or just plain get rid of."

"You're not wrong. But for a tiny-ass group against a big complex, we need more than curiosity or the whim of the righteous. We need a solid plan. We can't infiltrate this stealthily. Either we go in hard, or we hope something interesting comes out. The only thing we have in our favor is that
Roxxon probably isn't going to go public saying someone blew up one of their secret lairs of mystery crap.” Phil rubbed a hand across his forehead. The call would be easier if they had backup. Someday they’d rebuild and he could have all the resources he’d need to make this a sure thing. Someday – but their enemies weren’t the type to wait. He wondered, not for the first time, what Fury would do. None of this doubt showed on his face – cracks in idealism he could share. But confidence? His team needed that much from him, no matter what.

Triplett unfolded his arms again to tap at the blueprints, then the topographical map. “If we go in, we can blow out this large bay wall here and make another exit whenever we want. It’s a retaining wall, so it’s gonna be there. Do some serious damage on the way out.” He traced a short, deep line. “It exits onto this valley here. Got a long stretch about five clicks away or less that we can drop the Bus into if it has to evac away from the drop-off point.”

Phil raised both his eyebrows and bobbed his head once to the side. “Well, that takes this from shot-in-the-dark-we-could-all-die-for-nothing territory into ‘why the hell not, we’ve got plenty of firepower on hand.’”

May pursed her lips. “If we can be sure we can get to that segment of the complex. That’s all the way down into the storehouses. I don’t need to stress that these aren’t updated blueprints.”

“And we’re back to shot-in-the-dark.” Coulson sighed. “Let’s tangent while we think this over. May, you run down who the noble was? If he’s buddies with Roxxon, we might need to keep an eye on his place in the mix.”

Another tiny sardonic smile. “I didn’t get much. His name’s Count V. Vernei and I can just imagine what the stationary looks like. He’s private and influential, big into local charity of course, a descendent of the ancien régime out of Roussillon whose ancestors spread their money very far west. This region’s been in their purse since at least the fifteenth century, and the family’s had the spiffy title since the Carolingian kings. I can find tons of books on the family history, but what the current heir has been up to since tie-dye was in fashion? Tougher.”

“Nothing came up cross-checked with Roxxon?”

She shook her head once. “Looks like it could just be a sweetheart land deal. Actuality could be anything.”

Phil sighed, decided to put his own questions out there in the guise of a test. “Our enemies won’t wait while we look for the best opportunity to move. In everyone’s opinion, is this site an active threat?”

“Yes, sir,” said Triplett, no hesitation in his voice. Coulson looked at him. “History drives the point home. Good people die if we let opportunities slide.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve spent my whole life making sure I’m not in the shadow of my grandfather, to make sure things stay right on my terms. But I also got to learn from his light. The Howling Commandos never shied away from the tough jobs, and they went hard after every enemy, every scrap of Hydra that they found. It was never about what they thought they could accomplish. It was about what could happen to all of us if they didn’t try. I’m proud of that, sir. I believe we can do the same.” He looked around the table at the rest of the team. “Every person here can do things those guys would die for.” A wry little grin. “And hey, you’ve got a barely controlled alien nuke in the brig for that fun ‘why not?’ factor.”

May looked across the table to Phil and pitched her voice low. “I’m starting to like the new kid.”

“I take it you agree.” He watched her nod, looked around the table at faces set in solidarity. “Yeah, he makes a stirring speech. All right.” He tugged the blueprints towards himself and took a long moment to consider, roughing out the details in his head. “This is the plan – Triplett, myself,
Simmons, and Skye. We're going to walk right through the front door. Skye, you're with us to shut down any alerts, any backup that might come from the aboveground facility. Simmons, you're the brains. Whatever we find, you tag it. Think fast and be safe. Whatever we can grab, we haul. What we can't, we're gonna bury so deep on our way out that our descendents are gonna wonder why dinosaurs had laserbeams. Triplett, you're running demo and helping me knock out whatever gets in front of us. Fast and damaging, that's our play.” Curt nods all around.

“Meanwhile, May, you keep the Bus warmed up and ready to go. We'll time out when you should switch landing zones. Fitz, you'll handle communications. You'll also be Simmons' remote backup. As for the wild card? If things look really bad – just let him out.”

“Sir?” asked Fitz.

Coulson smiled as Fitz's eyebrows raised into his curly mop of hair. He patted the scientist on the back once for comfort. “He's still playing the game on house rules, and we're sitting in the dealer's seat. Tell him to pull us out.”

“And... if he balks?”

“I don't think he will if it means a chance to wreak a little havoc. If he does? You'll have the leash. Yank it.”
Chapter Summary

Did anybody think this would go off without a hitch?

The initial breach went clean and by the book. Coulson and Triplett took the lead on an underground lobby maintained, blessedly, by a small three-man security team. They had no problems dropping the trio while Skye put the finishing touches on cycling the networked camera feed with footage from the last hour previous. No alarms went up, no reinforcements from the aboveground facility. Just the soft tingle of bad elevator music.

The next lucky break was accessing a basic overview of the updated layout through the security console. Simmons ran her fingers across the digital image, marking up the information in her mind. “They chewed up part of the storerooms to add another floor, then put in another compartment. Not much, actually. Expands them another ten meters deep, but didn't change the width of the facility.”

“Outer walls?” asked Triplett. He shifted the arsenal on his back – a rifle, a go-bag with explosive devices and backup firearms packing it tight, and the just-in-case Destroyer gun Coulson seemed so fond of. Triplett named it Mr. Friendly; not wildly original, but it gave them both a smile.

She flashed him a bright smile. “They're the same. No apparent major architectural changes there. I'm uploading a copy to Agent May.”

“Good. The exit's looking more secure, and that makes me happy.” Coulson gave her a firm nod then double-checked the status of his main weapon. “Rest of plan goes as we set out. Non-lethal combat right up until they force our hand. Expect that they will. Skye, what's the resistance look like?”

“We've got...” She tapped rapidly. “Three more guard stations spread out at regular intervals that I can see. I can seal up two of them from here, that'll lock in about twelve dudes. The other is a patrol station that handles what they're labeling the 'big box storage.' Those're the big compartments, obvs. Looks like another ten guys there, two man teams walking a route. Security's compartmented otherwise, there's a chance of some other nodes.”

“Possibly not so bad. Trap the twelve, try to keep the pat from being alerted. Once that's done, we move down.”

“On it.”

May monitored the data stream from Coulson's squad, arms crossed tight across her chest. Fitz paced, restless and nervy. She couldn't blame him, though if he could stop filtering abruptly into the corner of her vision, that would help her own nerves. The first minutes of an operation, any operation were tense. It was up to her to never show that stress, to be a rock for others. “Anything from Simmons yet?” She glanced at him, her voice pitched low and calming.

“Just regular tone to maintain contact. They're only now getting through the first big hallway of the
second floor. Nothing good on the first.”

“Yep. Looking clear so far.” She gave him a small smile. “Nice to have things start off all right for a change.”

He managed a sheepish grin in return. “Sometimes they do. Never often enough. Always just waiting for something to fall awry, though.”

Something beeped on the console, as if cued. May tapped the notification to bring it up, marking the traveling GPS tag. She did a few mental calculations, missing Fitz's inhale as her brows knotted. He realized what she did. “Maybe I spoke too soon.” She tapped a few numbers into a trajectory app on the board and looked at the results. She liked none of them. “Double-check me.”

“You're right,” he said immediately. His face was drawn with fresh tension.

She nodded. “Get Phil on the line right now.”

Fitz lunged for the comm, toggled it to transmit. He toggled it again. In frustration, he shook the console, rattling something inside. Then he lifted his head and looked at May helplessly.

“I spoke way too soon,” she said, perfectly calm. Her mind darted through several emergency decisions and settled on the best tactical course. “Go let him out.”

. . .

“Fitz?” Simmons tapped her transmitter. Again, nothing. “Sir!”

Coulson backtracked around the steel-reinforced corner, stepping gingerly over the unconscious patroller. His buddy was catching z's several yards away. “It's bad news, I'm guessing.”

“Communication is down.”

He contemplated that with a still, stony face. “Any chance it's simply due to our location?”

“I suppose it's possible, sir, but it's a clear break in transmission.” She pulled up the logs on the comm's tiny screen to show him. “The break doesn't line up with a change in floor or anything else environmental. According to this, one minute and eight seconds ago, it simply cut off.”

“Right,” he said. “Kinda was hoping otherwise. I was enjoying how easy this was going.” He tossed off an easy shrug. “See if you can get around whatever's blocking us, keep an eye out for anything you can use to re-acquire communication with the plane. Skye!” He barked the name over his shoulder. She popped out of one of the side rooms she was investigating, a tangle of torn wires dangling from her hand. “Help her with that if you can. I want us on double-time.”

. . .

Fitz couldn't stop staring at Loki's black-clad back, his hand sweating on the monitor device in his pocket as he thought about May's warning. He took his hand out to dry it on his trousers, following it with an audibly hard swallow that got him a look from her. He nodded rapidly to try and show he was okay, that it was just nervousness. She let go of his gaze to regard Loki instead. “Do I have your attention?” she asked him flatly.

He tilted his head with a pleasant smile. “Of course.” He looked down at where she was pointing. “I think I already see the issue, but I'll hear your explanation without comment.”
“Three minutes ago, we lost communication with Coulson and the rest of the team inside this Roxxon compound. You recognize it, it’s the one you identified here in France.” She tapped on the updated digital map of the place as he scanned it. “The loss of signal was abrupt. I’m calling outside interference. So far we’re unable to bypass the jam.”

He waited for her to continue, now watching her and not the map. She pulled over another data stream. This he glanced down at for a quick scan before lifting his head again, still silent. “This is the other half of the problem. This is the GPS tag I put on a man in Matsu’o Tsurayama’s entourage in Mumbai. For the last three days, it’s been circulating around Europe doing nothing interesting. You’ll note it now appears to be heading precisely this way on a rapid trajectory.” Still silence, though a single arched eyebrow acknowledged this evidence of a possible trap. “We’ve got maybe fifteen minutes before they arrive. I need to move this plane to the extraction point and I need to get backup to the team to make sure they know what’s going on and to ensure they can get to the exit zone.” She straightened up, her palms still flat on the data display.

“And I’m the backup,” Loki said. He lifted his glittering gaze to match her dark one, keeping his words light. “How delightful. I’m honored.”

Not so much as a twitch in her face. “I’m sending Fitz in with you.”

“To be certain I behave.”

She gave him the thinnest of smiles. “I don’t think we need to go over the obvious. And for what it’s worth, I want to be sure you can get to Agent Coulson. Two will do better than one.” He grimaced slightly. “That’s tactics, Loki. I don’t give a damn about your people’s ideas of self-importance, nor do I take your ability as a guarantee. I want our people back safe and that means teamwork. It may even mean fighting. It will almost certainly mean running. You’ll need a little freedom to work. Do not test it. Do not test us.” She reached out and unsnapped the thin cuffs from his wrists with the release fob she’d hidden in her palm, leaving the collar. Loki rubbed his wrists with a small nod of acknowledgment.

She jutted her chin towards the ever more concerned looking Fitz, her voice sharp with command. “Ninety seconds lost on debrief. I want you through that bunker door and on your way to Coulson in one minute. Move.”

Much to her quiet surprise, Loki followed the hurrying Fitz without argument.

Fitz grabbed an icer gun from the armory supply and a second go-bag loaded with tech tools and non-lethal devices. The first he’d already flung towards Loki. He moved quickly, his plaid-shirted back spending scant seconds at each shelf. His back tensed visibly, swiveling his head to glance when Loki cleared his throat behind him, thin pale hands shoved into the pockets of the spare black hoodie he wore. “Do I get a weapon?”

“No,” said Fitz, putting a firmness in the word that he didn’t feel. He went back to the rapid scramble for gear.

“As you like.” Loki glanced along the shelves, following a trace of scent, a metaphysical tickle in his nose to match the faint itch along his now-bare wrists. Magic left unique marks; a trail much like any physical one and the kind he could follow best. He recognized this one, vaguely, the smell of it webbed in old memory. *Warrior’s toys, scattered and lost upon Midgard like rubbish after a picnic.* He narrowed his eyes, spotting the thin case. A quick glance at Fitz told him he had to decide, and quickly.
Oh, you never know.

He yanked the case free in quick, easy silence and shoved it into the bottom of the duffel bag Fitz had foisted on him. Harmless fripperies the boy might use to buy time or fox a pursuer. Such noble intentions. He resettled the bag over his shoulder as if he'd merely shifted his weight. “We best move. Yon Agent May seems the type to mislike giving an order twice and time is a commodity we've in sparse supply.”

“Right. Right.” Fitz inhaled once, counted off a quick handful of seconds, exhaled. He turned around, the confidence he found in the breathing exercise faltering at the sight of the towering figure looking down at him. He gave it his best shot anyway. “Don't... try anything. Coulson is trusting you on this. Right now I'm in charge, and I'm not going to trust blindly.” He put up a finger towards Loki in something like command, managing to not shake.

The demigod tilted his head politely, fixing Fitz with a gentle, almost eerie smile. “Such wise little creatures. Come, then. Let's go be grand heroes to your friends.”
Chapter Summary

In which questions of combat ethics are chewed over with the last person in the nine realms you should be discussing combat ethics with.

“Are they going to stay unconscious?”

Fitz whirled and stared at Loki where he loomed over the prone pair of guards in the second floor hall. “We’re not killing them. We didn't do anything to the ones in the lobby when we sealed the entrance, there's no need to faff about with these.”

“That was not my question.” He reached a pale hand towards the closer figure. It looked subtly threatening.

Fitz remembered how Coulson described the white fire that came from underneath Loki's palm. He'd offered to help ensure the lobby stayed sealed – forever. An offer Fitz turned down. He frowned, but the monitor Coulson left with him stayed silent. “They'll stay unconscious.” Fitz shook his head while trying not to fret and resumed staring at the corridor junction, working to suss out the trail. “Coulson and the rest were definitely through here.”

He moved forward. “Easterly – to your left. Scrapes on the walls there. Probably from struggling with the figure closer to you. They realized they lost communication around here and tried the machines in these rooms. Look at the doors. Backtracking. Obviously no good done for them.” He swung his head around to regard Fitz evenly. “I'm adverse to leaving enemies at my rear.”

“They're out!” He took a breath and then snapped, “I'm not going to kill helpless men.”

“You'd prefer to wait until they're shooting back. How honorable.” The deadpan words didn't come out like a compliment.

Taken by a burst of actual anger strong enough to forget his fears, Fitz took a step towards Loki. “It's not about honor, it's about being a better person than these gits. They get another chance, just like you did. If they flee, terrific. If they come at us, then we take them down.”

A dry little sniff. “Still sounds like honor nonsense. Regardless, I'll abide.” He arched an eyebrow at Fitz's long, cool look. “You sound as if you give a damn, and if you do, your superior certainly does. They live. Until circumstances demand otherwise.” He flicked a hand towards the matte chrome corridors, seeming no longer interested in the topic. “They're not on this floor, we've bellowed loud enough to summon attention. We best keep going down.”

“Aye. Nothing on the local channels, either. Still scanning. Likely they've already tried to head towards the exit point.”

...“Okay, so we found a guard station that wasn't on the upstairs map. Should probably have seen that coming.” Coulson shrugged a little, both hands clasped firmly around the grip of his gun. He kept his voice pitched low. “Triplett, you got any of the grenades left?”
“Yes, sir. Plenty.”

“Excellent. Wait for the guy on the left to get back into range. I want to drop all four that way if we can.”

Triplett hunkered against the other corner and waited for the scenario to play out right. With a curt nod from Coulson, he rolled the grenade down the hallway. Two seconds later, it popped. Three of the four dropped, frozen in time and unconsciousness. The fourth, not the patroller, dove for cover behind the desk. “Crap.”

“It’s okay.” Coulson braced himself and waited for the shot. The guard came around the side of the desk, took an icer bullet high on the right side for his trouble. “See? No big.” He saw Skye coming up the hallway behind Triplett, a heavy bag nearly dragging behind her. “If that’s too heavy, we bury it. We can’t afford to get bogged down getting out.”

“We’re not burying these, Phil.” She heaved a little but kept going. “Simmons found a bunch of stuff we can use. Upgrades, you know? Data encryption briefs.”

“That’s all data?”

“All data. Not finding a lot of cool toys, though. Maybe in the big storehouses, maybe they shoveled them off before we got here.”

“Well, we’re almost to the storehouses. She getting any signal?”

“Nothing yet. She’s broadcasting all channels, figure May’s sent someone in after us by now.”

“Safe bet.”

Skye readjusted the heavy bag, then studied Phil’s meditative expression. “You think this was a trap?”

“Mmmyp.”

“…”

“They do quick work.” Loki examined the long hallway lined with burst open doors. The acrid smells of smoke and burnt wiring lingered heavy in the air. “I have to grant that.” He reached out casually and checked the disregarded, still-sealed door blocking a small turn-off. The lock on it was untouched, forgotten in the scramble. It looked like it led to a service staircase that went down into darkness. His instincts were telling him differently, tickling with potential.

Fitz didn’t seem to hear him. “Got a crackle on the comm. I think we’re getting close. I should be able to get a signal…”

Something rumbled above, a rolling sensation followed by a thud of low pressure that could be felt inside their skulls. It shook the entire floor for several seconds, rattled grey dust from the ceiling. Fitz’s eyes went huge. “Bugger.”

Loki arched an eyebrow, his words drawling and sedate. “I hate it when guests arrive overly early. It’s quite rude.”

“I should have let you seal the damn place more thoroughly.” Fitz shook his head and checked the transmitter again. The crackle was lost.
Loki stepped away from the sealed door and craned his head as if he could see through the ceiling. What he was actually doing was testing the air for an increase in heat. “For what it's worth, it feels like they used something needlessly overenthusiastic to doorbust. Even my work might not have held against that. Not nuclear, they're not that stupid. Large, however. Quite large. What grand tools they must have.” He reached up to touch the ceiling. Yes, it was warm. “I don't think they're too interested in keeping all of us alive.” He looked down. “Well, certainly not you. And not to belabor a point, but I suspect your merciful rested did not survive the intent of their own allies. Ethical quandary there.”

Something twitched in Fitz's jaw. He'd come to most of the same conclusions. “We've got to catch up.”

“You must catch up. See if you can regain communication.”

Fitz instinctively put his hand on his pocket.

“Oh, don't.” Loki crossed his arms, visibly amused. “The first wave will likely be a small one. Scouts. I can stop them handily, I'm sure. That will buy time for you and presumably your friends.”

“We're not splitting up.”

“Tactics, Fitz.” It came out like a purr. “Don't trust me, that's basic wisdom. But I'm uninterested in a burial here and that puts my motivations alongside yours. A few humans won't stop me, and that will mean we all might get out.”

Fitz looked unmoved, his hand still tense at his side.

A slow smile came across Loki's face. “Try this, then – what would your Agent May do?” He had the grace to not laugh as Fitz visibly gritted his teeth.

*She'd drop every one of the bastards,* Fitz thought. *Damn him, he's right. On all counts.* “Non-lethal,” he said, knowing he wouldn't be able to put teeth to the order if he had to split off.

“I'll keep this bag of tricks, then.” Loki spread his hands like an offering, then curled one hand in the single pointing finger of a well-studied student. “Delay, not destroy. Unless I must. And I advise you, I might have to. Leave that weight on me, it won't trouble my peace. You've done what you could.”

“Don't moralize for me.”

Loki bowed his head. “I apologize.” He looked up again, the moment of sincerity lost in a jackal's grin. “Tick tock. They're coming.”

Fitz ate his doubts and fled.

Loki looked at the sealed door and murmured to himself, “Just enough time.” He put his palm on the handle and waited until he was relatively certain Fitz was out of range. He stilled himself, and then gently pulled the door free from its lock with a *click!* The jackal smile widened. If Fitz had seen it, all his doubts would have returned in a rush. If – but he was already distant enough to not be alerted by the tiny cantrip.

*Quick as cats now, we've other jobs to do and promises to keep – but first, let's see what you lot hide down here.*

Less than a minute later, he found the room at the bottom of the path, the neat industrial stairs making
way for carved stone deep down into the bedrock. He hurried, his words to Fitz couched in some honesty. Oh, the approaching invaders would be stopped. He'd do his part; a better option was unlikely. But coming from beyond the old door of ancient wood and stone and bronze, wafting thin underneath it was the smell. Pure magic, heady and wild, contained for those that might best command it. His grin was manic.

*This is surely the sort of thing I'd hoped to find!*  

He rejoiced inside and opened the door to behold the black book on its white marble pedestal, rising tall from its place in the center of a still pool of blood.

...  

They were the first wave, the expendable ones. Fourteen mercenaries commanded by a single member of The Hand who had no illusions about his worth. If his masters – or even the foreigner woman – declared he lay down to die, then that is what would occur. Without hesitation. Without regret. His life was cheap, his death would be priceless. He marched soundlessly amidst the heavily armored team, watching his scanner for life signs as they moved.

It pinged softly, a pleasant chime as they approached the third floor.

“Below!” he barked. “Single contact. Do not engage until ordered.”

They spread around him, double-file down the staircase.

“He's waiting inside a checkpoint, sir,” said one of the mercenaries. He held a massive weapon in his hands, a recoilless AR-15 loaded with experimental explosive rounds. Each mercenary carried a secondary weapon – even larger rifles loaded with the strongest tranquilizers they could engineer. Raina was taking no chances with the humans, and being even more cautious about the acquisition of the alien. One way... or another.

“I can see that,” snapped The Hand's minion. “Take positions.”

They scurried around corners, four of them at each side of the door and the rest lagging behind to back them up. When they were in place, he took the slender connection device from his pocket and nodded to the mercenaries' subcommander. If something were to go awry, it would be his duty to finish. He received a nod back – all was prepared.

The Hand's man ran a hand across the lapels of his suit and squared his shoulders. He opened the door to the checkpoint and made a short bow to the pale figure seated peacefully behind a guardsman's desk. He raised his head to see the alien man's dry little smile above a green t-shirt and black jacket, fingers steepled and elbows leaned behind a black duffel bag he had laid across the top of the desk. “Loki of Asgard. I greet you in the name of The Hand and at the insistence of one who is sure to become a mutual friend.”

“And of course I'm just thrilled to meet you,” came the answering purr. The alien man rose easily and returned the slight bow, towering over the small, lithe ninja. The Hand's ninja presented the device, head bowing again. He felt no fear of the tall man, his confidence in his role was secure.

“This is certain to amuse.” Loki motioned to him to get on with it. The guard pressed the device against the guard's control console, authorized its remote connection, then stepped away again to wait.

*“Good evening, Loki. My name is Raina.”*
sometimes a wild god

Chapter Summary

When the wild god smiles too long at you, be afraid. (title from the poem by Tom Hirons)

Fitz fled down stairs and corridors, the communicator still fritzing in and out. No solid connection could be made – but he'd heard Jemma's voice at least once amidst the white noise, and that goaded him to go faster. He kept enough caution to not just charge blindly around corners, but each intersection was either empty or, occasionally, littered with one or two solidly knocked-out Roxxon employees. He was panting and out of breath when he reached a huge metal door that had been forced open. “First big storeroom. They can't be far,” he gasped, using the hope to gather some wind back.

“Fitz!” The delighted yell came from somewhere deep within. His name jangled again from the communicator, suddenly sharp and clear until it broke into a screech of feedback. He slapped at the volume control, his ears ringing.

He saw Simmons first, her hair stranding free from its knot. Then Coulson, dropping a wrench from where he was fretting at an absolutely enormous crate. That's at least thirty feet tall, thirty-five maybe, Fitz thought absently. Then Simmons was giving him a bear-hug and his thoughts scattered.

They came back in a rush when Coulson got close. “You were sent in alone?”

He pulled away from Simmons and looked at the rest of the team. “No, sir. I-he-um.” Why had he thought Loki's plan to be a good one? “They've – a team from The Hand's blown through. May tracked them coming, we tried to get a march on 'em. May's moving the plane. Loki stayed behind to delay the first wave and buy us more time.” He watched a visible pause crawl over Coulson's face, like a beetle that had just been shown a Michael Bay movie and asked to consolidate its ideas on Stoic philosophy. “I thought that was a good idea then.”

“He's got a way of making you think dumb things are good ideas.” Coulson put a steady hand on Fitz's shoulder. “Not saying you made the wrong call yet, Fitz. We heard them breach the lobby from here. Meanwhile, you're with us, and that ups our odds of getting a workable solution on that exit.”

“Things got complicated, sir?”

“Always do.” Coulson glanced back at the gigantic crate. “Let's go check on your clutch call first. If things haven't gone totally screwy, we could use him down here, too. Triplett! Toss me Mr. Friendly.”

. . .

“Is it a good evening? Rather hard to tell from so far down here... through the wreckage of explosions... a small troupe of armed mortals. I'm told you use little programs to check the weather. I'll be honest, I haven't bothered and the wireless seems to be a bit unreliable at the nonce.” Loki watched the small man step further back, placing himself among his warriors.
“Oh you are amusing. I'd heard stories of the trickster prince, a charmer even as he all but defeated SHIELD's finest.” A bell-like tinkle of a laugh came from all the speakers in the room. “It's an absolute pleasure to meet you. Well, not face to face yet, of course. We'll remedy that later.”

“Pleasurable meetings seldom require an armed force.” He resumed his place behind the guardsman’s desk, choosing to lean against the pockmarked wall rather than take his seat. He glanced at the cameras set at several places in the ceiling, no doubt offering this Raina a show.

“Consider it an honor guard.”

He smiled, amused by the easy tone of her voice. “You try to vie for my attention. Flattery... grants you a little time to plead your case.”

“I shouldn't need to flatter. The outcome is obvious, as I suspect our goals are similar. What I can offer is what you've desired. A unified planet to stand watch over, to rule justly. All you have to do is help us reach out and take it.”

“If it were that easy, I'd have thought the matter long since complete. I've certainly given it my best shot.”

“We're a fractious people, Loki, though we're at our best given a cause. You gave them one and it drove your plans to disaster. Together, we might have another cause. A simpler one. A better one. For both our species.”

Oh, he could smell her avarice even through the electrical current. It had a familiar twang, touched with the sort of demand for conquest that drove countless lords among the nine realms. This one had drive. Motivation. He spared her a tiny piece of admiration, though her human arrogance was in itself not vastly unusual. He tilted his head, his eyes never leaving her emissary from The Hand while he thought of her other tool, the petty creature named Quinn. “I've heard such speeches before. You seek ascension for yourself.” His voice took a slightly disapproving tone.

“Of course! Well, of a sort. Humanity is faced with finding its place among the great races we're only just discovering. Your race chief among these. We need to survive, and to do that, we must adapt. Evolve. Only the strong will survive this, but those that do will be ours. Yours, if you desire.”

“These will be greatest of your warriors.” The smile widened. Behind his eyes, something else began to flicker. His admiration left without a whisper.

Pride filled the connection between them. “The best we can make, without flaws and without equals. We look to Asgard for inspiration. We honor you.”

“Oh yes,” Loki said mildly, the flickering light in his eyes beginning to burn inside his mind with the images of the strongest men of Asgard. Of Odin in battle. Of Thor in his storms. Of himself, alien even among his family, ever set aside to fester amidst his tomes and his magic. Incongruously, unwillingly, he thought of the flusterly woman that brought him a tart flavored with transient memories of home, of Coulson's bemused and cautious trust, of Fitz's open and easily startled face. Fleeting, weak little misfits. They had no place in this woman's dream, even as he held no place in Asgard without taking it. His anger and pride spread to fill the dark places inside himself. He placed his hand on top of the duffel bag, glancing at each of the guards in turn with a charming smile.

“Asgard is a regular utopia.”

... Coulson grabbed Fitz's arm, assessing the group he'd glimpsed before ducking back beyond the
junction. “Too many in there!” he hissed into the scientist's ear. “Have to wait for a better play.”

Fitz turned to him, eyes wild. “He's going to turn on us,” he whispered back, frantic. “Stop him. Trigger the damn thing. We have to do something now!”

Coulson's grip tightened, both on him and on the destroyer gun. “Wait.” Fitz openly gaped at him. He mouthed the word again, then went back to calculating just how screwed they were if Fitz was right.

...“Help us stop Agent Coulson and his friends now, and you'll have everything you could ever use. Access to everything we've found, in this world or from others. We've stolen things from SHIELD that – well, I'm certain you'd believe in them, but your usage of them might be even better than what we could ever engineer.”

“It sounds so very thrilling. On the face of it, I don't know how I could ever refuse.” The ninja was watching him carefully. He smiled back, estimating how much their weapons would sting, whether their tranquilizers would have any effect. The answer, to his dismay, was a troubling 'maybe.' His hand slid imperceptibly inside the duffel bag, feeling a little taste of triumph in his forward planning. Yes, he thought coldly. For their arrogance, their presumption, not this mercy I might grant instead. They will show me none.

“Then you'll join us.” She sounded delighted.

His hands flexed, shifted carefully inside the bag to unsnap the thin case where it now lay atop precious cargo. The ninja still saw nothing, heard nothing. “I regret that you've a grave misunderstanding.”

Now the ninja moved, stepping back with eyes widening. Loki's pleasant smile grew and melted into something insane to behold, his jaw falling into the hanging grin of a wild animal about to lunge on the kill.

The Hand's minion barked a series of orders. Loki moved quickly, completing the job he'd so cautiously set in motion. The unburied case flicked open, and he put the pieces of the Berserker staff together in a flash before permitting its power to take hold of him.

He let his fury ride.

...“Oh, crap.” Coulson dragged a stunned Fitz further down the hall, taking cover in a side room and waited for the sounds of destruction. The device in his pocket began to scree in a soft, insistent alarm at odds with the scale of what it registered.

...In seconds they would learn what others had been hard-taught. The quickest of the mercenaries took their shots, bullets thudding off the barely budging chest of the alien demigod. Startled by the lack of reaction, they paused for a microsecond. Paused again at the rising staff and its orange glow, at the bone white hands that clutched it, at the rising, flowing tower of pure motion – regally armored now in green and gold and black and a mask made of hate.

He slammed into them with only the sound of a rattling laugh deep in his throat, scattered three with a swipe of the staff and then brought it down upon the closest figure. His vision was still straight
through the veil of red, his tactics still clear if alight with the need to destroy. More bullets pinged off of him without drawing notice. His hands clenched, noting the rest either sacrificing themselves for a return volley or taking cover to regroup. He needed more than mere fury to withstand what was coming.

He needed his rage.

...

There is more than fire in a Frost Giant's anger, even in one raised secretly beyond their traditions. There is a bitter cold.

With his spirit encased in that ice, Loki could burn.

Magic crackled along him, through him, and men died before they could scream.

...

Raina shoved herself away from the console, her breath caught hard enough in her throat that her hand flew up to grasp at it. Her eyes were wide and white, looking at the dead monitors. The carnage had stopped the feed, probably snapped the relevant machines right off the walls. She was blind and deaf to the aftermath, but she'd seen enough to know her men lay in pieces.

Quinn poured another shot of whiskey and saluted her with it before downing it. “It's not often I get to say 'I told you so,' sweetheart. But I did tell you that guy was nuts.”

She whirled on him, not really seeing. “He's mine,” she said, her voice thin with surprise and a serene fury of her own. “Your way, Quinn. We'll kill him since we must. But he's mine. We send the rest in as soon as they're ready. Go tell Matsu'o.”

...

More!

He whirled at the sound of footsteps behind him, a thirsting wild joy still flickering along the lines of his face. Blood spattered his boots and his pale hands. *Come to me and die!*

“Loki.”

He gave a ragged inhale, not fully comprehending the short outline of a man in the doorway. What dared speak his name?

“Loki.” The sound of something powering up, a tickle of familiarity.

Exhale, the slow rasp. Something intangible stayed his hand. His glittering eyes narrowed at the figure.

*I am Loki of Asgard, and I am my rage's master. It obeys me, serves me, and for this I will feed it at MY whim.*

Coulson watched the green-grey eyes flicker in the bone-white face, half-masked by strands of wild hair. In his Asgardian armor, the effect was familiar and dangerous. He readjusted his grip on the destroyer gun and waited to see if he was going to have to make a shot.

It wasn't like he minded.
“Coulson.” The man’s name came in a slow, haggard drawl. Loki licked his lips, looked at the gun and then down at the staff he still held. With a reflexive spasm of his hand, he dropped it. It snapped into its three fragments. “Just a relic for would-be warriors,” he managed to say. His voice became rough gravel as his energy abruptly drained. Despite himself, his now-free hand flung out to steady his body against the desk. His chest stung in a dozen places, faint bruises that would ache for some few hours. Adrenaline long since ate the few tranquilizing shots the dead managed to send his way. A bitter smile touched his lips. “A wearying toy, I’ll confess.”

“Do you need help?” asked Coulson in a careful voice. He took a single step towards the sagging demigod, offering his hand. His eyes itched for a second when Loki’s regalia suddenly decided to be an unassuming sweat drenched T-shirt and hoodie combo again.

Loki shook his head, ignoring sweat as it ran into his eyes to sting them. “I will be fine. I have enough fury left to feed on, keep me moving until we leave this hole.” The gaze lifted to regard him, something like sanity filtering back in along with a sour grimace. “You watched.”

Coulson said nothing, his hand still outstretched.

“I did this for myself,” he spat, tired enough that the words held little anger and a taste of exposed defensiveness.

“Thank you anyway.” Coulson said earnestly, almost a whisper. “Now. Let's work on getting out of here before the next band arrives.”
robot jox

Chapter Summary

In which there is a side conversation pertaining to things some humans might actually have in common with Asgard. Arguably tacky things.

Skye left Triplett's side when Coulson led the pair into the storehouse and then paused when she got a better look at them. Phil's expression was calm and otherwise unreadable, Fitz looked permanently stunned, and Loki looked like he'd been dragged bodily through a car wash. Not his best look. “I... take it things went okay. We heard noises.” Something of an understatement. Chaos might have been a better term, but after looking at the guys she was going for being tactful. She cleared her throat.

Loki dropped the bag he was carrying and then dropped himself next to it about as unceremoniously, eyeing flecks of blood on his hands. “Things went terrifically,” he chirped, the fake perkiness deadened slightly by his obvious exhaustion. “Just lovely. How are matters here?”

Skye looked at him for a long, weirded out moment, then shrugged. “Could be better.”

“I'm sensing a theme for the day.” Loki glanced up at Coulson, then Fitz, whose expression was suddenly changing from stunned with shock to, apparently, stunned with delight.

“Holy crap,” he said. He left Coulson's side and half-staggered towards the huge crate he'd seen earlier. The front was now off, splintered and shoved out of the way. “Holy crap,” he said again, reduced to repetition. The carnage upstairs was forgotten. “That is awesome.” He spun around to stare at Agent Coulson, his eyes lit up like Christmas. “Can we keep it?”

“It's probably not going to fit on the plane, Fitz. Even if it did, I suspect we'd be pushing the weight limit.” There was a slight note of regret in Coulson's voice. The giant blued-steel mech was pretty damn cool to look at, he'd decided. It was a mobile combat unit, squat oval torso over thick biped legs. Wrapped industrial cording visible along the joints gave it an uncanny muscular look and its stumpy 'arms' were adjustable combat platforms. Clearly a prototype, but an effective one.

As interesting as the thing was, he felt glad they were going to blow the damn place up.

Simmons spoke up, muffled from somewhere behind one of the massive steel legs inside the crate. “We're also having a spot of bother getting it to work. Preferably without acquiring all of us as intruders and popping its entire ordinance load at us in a single volley.”

Loki ran a hand up across his face, smoothing back the wild snarl of his hair. “You people don't see large constructs much, I take it?” He sounded earnestly amused, his gaze flickering from face to face.

Triplett kept poking through a commandeered toolbox while he spoke. “Pretty much just in movies or at Stark tech demos.” He considered, then tactfully left out the one Loki himself had dropped on Earth. “And when they're in movies? We go watch the hell out of 'em.”

“You poor youthful race. You're deprived. Giant machines fighting giant beasts is akin to your monster truck rallies among other civilizations in the universe. They'll sell tickets and everything.” He absently wiped the back of his bloody hand on his pants, no insult in his voice.
“I'm just not going to ask why you know about monster truck rallies.” Coulson joined Triplett, looking at the plating and other unlabeled pieces they'd torn off Roxxon's experimental robot.

“Please don't ask about the equivalent giant mech fights while you're not asking things.” He looked around, noting that everyone save Coulson clearly ached to. He sighed and spread a palm out, reluctantly offering a few fragments of better memories. “They happen fairly commonly when we are at war, a standard occurrence from my younger years amidst my brother's warrior friends.” He was still being watched expectantly. Triplett had stopped sorting through the toolkit, sipping on a bottle of water in open interest instead. “Also in arena events, yes. I liked them briefly. When I was a very small child.” His expression dared someone to call him on that. Nobody did. “Regardless. The lord of the thunder adored them, of course, and at that age such fondness is an infection. Every feast and naming day he'd plead to go watch mechs beat the hell out of something. He usually got his way.” Bemusement crossed his face. “I'd wager a great deal that he'd still attend them if he wasn't keeping himself so damned busy.”

Fitz looked delighted, his imagination clearly alive with potential. “Did they name their favorite mechs? Like with the trucks we've got Bigfoot and El Toro Loco and Grave Digger and -”

“I am done with this conversation.” Loki's voice was abrupt and firm. He looked away, a trace of discomfort on his face at odds with his tone. “We ought be leaving.”

Fitz visibly deflated, the abrupt slump of his shoulders drawing Loki's attention back to him. He rolled his eyes in weary good humor and beckoned Fitz close. With only a second's pause, Fitz hunkered down next to the demigod to hear him whisper. “I jest with thee not, one was named Thunderball. Most ridiculous thing. The name came from its electrified mace, though you can make your own japes. I assure you, everyone did. There were also Sentinus and Wrecker, very popular. I've forgotten others. You could always tell when they weren't interested in being imaginative with the nicknames.” He waved Fitz off, sharing the slightest of chuckles with the scientist's earnest grin.

Coulson watched the pair communicate, vaguely concerned he was hallucinating the almost friendly moment. Ten minutes ago, Fitz was howling at me to activate the choke collar. Now they're bonding. There was nothing in the SHIELD handbook about this sort of thing back when I was going through training. He picked up a piece of the robot and tapped it on top of the wooden crate they were using as a work table for attention. “He's right on one thing. We need to get out.”

Fitz sobered up. “Right. I didn't catch what the problem was?”

“Dire and immediate,” came the muttered guess from Loki. “And here we are diverting.”

“Dire is a good word. The retaining wall in the next storeroom is still a retaining wall and the only thing keeping us from getting out the back way. Unfortunately, it's been reinforced considerably. We blew half our shape charges trying to dent it.”

“Hence the machine.”

“You got it. While we unpacked the sucker, Triplett ran around and wired this substructure to blow with everything else we had left and whatever we could hijack. Should drop the above floors into the storerooms and bury the whole thing. Before we launch that, we're hoping we can use Gort here to do what we couldn't.” He looked around at his team's blank faces. “No one knows Gort? Gnut? Okay. I'm old. I get it. Anyway.”

“And like all critical tools in your time of need, it's not co-operating.” Loki pulled himself up onto his
feet with a small sigh.

“Yeah, we call that Murphy's Law.”

“I don't know Murphy, but I'm uncomfortably familiar with the concept.”

“I suspect every planet in the universe has had this conversation at least once.” Coulson jabbed his thumb over his shoulder towards Simmons. “Jemma's running lead on getting the thing working. Triplett's already done some heavy lifting. Fitz, Loki, do what you can to help her out. Skye, what else can we wire up to delay these guys?”

Loki reached out to accept an unopened bottle of water from Triplett, then raised his hand. “Mind if I toss out a question?”

“Oh God. It's going to be something horrible and incisive, isn't it?” Fitz grabbed a tablet with the mech's schematics on it and furrowed his brow both at it and as a way to brace against what was coming.

Loki took a long drink of water, then gestured to the retaining wall. “Since we are yet unable to speak with your Agent May, how do we know they're not also lining up a platoon of warriors beyond this space? Surely they've a notion of tactics we might use in our defense.”

Fitz closed his eyes. Simmons reached out and patted him on the arm.

“May will be on top of that. Good question, though.” Coulson picked a set of pliers out of the kit.

“We've a backup plan?”

Coulson gave Loki an easy, cheerful smile. “Always.”

... 

Agent May cycled the power, buying another ten minutes for the plane's active camouflage. With the rest of the systems in standby, it kept her masked from the patrol lurking close in the snow-dusted forest. Maybe not a magical illusion, but effective enough for her needs.

They'd set up a center of operations forty yards away from where Phil was likeliest to force an exit point, clearly waiting for their opportunity.

May watched her weapons system readout. Five target points locked and she kept the guns as hot as she could without sacrificing cover. Once that wall busted, The Hand's people were going to get one hell of a surprise.
domo arigato mr. roboto

Chapter Summary

In which things are shot at, and sometimes they explode.

Skye sidled up beside Agent Coulson, her voice low and her arms crossed in front of her chest. “Two things – first, Simmons intercepted a signal coming from upstairs. Don't think we have much longer before they throw another force at us, and it sounds like it's going to be a big one.”

He nodded, quietly watching the scene before him. “And the second?”

“Didja ever think you'd see that guy buried up to his butt in the guts of a giant robot like the world's crankiest car mechanic?”

He kept his voice neutral. “Even exhausted, he's the strongest one here, Skye, and they've got to be able to reach the secondary control panel to rewire the mech's brains.”

“Yeah, but what a floor show.”

Muffled language came from inside the mech, nothing recognizable, all of it dour. Loki wiggled back out, looking even more bedraggled than previous. “I'm a sorcerer, not some thrice-damned engineer. Don't know what these people did with this thing. Can't get the bolts this way. If I had some time to rest I could summon them out, but this? Feh.” He dropped the small wrench he'd gone in with.

Coulson saw an opportunity he didn't want to miss. He passed by the toolbox, grabbed something, and then offered what he'd found to Loki. “Could you use this?”

Loki narrowed his eyes and gave the claw hammer in Coulson's hand a long, cool look. “Are you offering help or cracking some sort of little joke at my expense?”

Phil smiled. “Can't it be both?”

Loki gingerly plucked the hammer from him and disappeared back into the access gap with an annoyed puff of air from his nostrils. Coulson stepped away again, nearly missing the grudging words “not bad” that echoed from inside the machine. He couldn't resist a grin.

Simmons monitored almost thirty targets surging quickly down the hallways and staircases towards them. “They're here.” She lifted her head and gave Fitz a single nod. “Estimate two minutes to the door.”

Fitz nodded back, crouching behind the cover granted by a set of steel crates. “We're ready.”

“Are we?” asked Loki. “Are we, truly?” He looked warily up at the strung wiring and the idling mech.

“Have a little confidence. It's gonna be fine.” Coulson checked his firearm, counted the ammo. “Okay, people, one minute warning. These guys are coming in hard and they are coming in fast. We
know what that looks like. We've dealt with it before, and that means we've taken the element of
surprise from them. Drop the front line; they're shooting to kill and that unfortunately means so are
we. This is survival now, not idealism. Hold them until they think they've got positioning. Then we
get serious. You all know how it's going to go when the wall blows, correct?"

Skye's hands flexed on her own gun, leading the nods.

“They're down the last staircase.”

“Okay.” Coulson gestured to Triplett to bring him close for a second, took a spare gun from a pack
that started the day much heavier. He presented it to the still-weary Loki, who looked at him with
open surprise. “All in. Please shoot them, not us.”

He took the gun with a slight look of distaste. “Having declined a most generous offer, I'm
uninterested in becoming an experiment instead.”

“You think I wouldn't do that?”

Loki examined Coulson's wry smile, the human's gaze fixed on the far door instead of him. “No.”

Coulson braced himself into firing position. “Yeah, probably right.”

. . .

Despite her preparation, May was still surprised when the rock wall blew out into the valley. Not
because of the sound or the range of the explosion, but because the smoking hole immediately filled
itself with a thirty foot tall biped mech, two automatic weapons on each arm spinning up and
acquiring The Hand's attackers with its single gleaming red eye. The attackers surged towards the
breach and then scattered just as quickly when they realized what was happening. Small arms fire
 pinged off the matte blue steel of the machine's armored shell to ricochet off into the forest. She saw
return fire from near the mech and marked it for her team still just inside the facility. Instinct took
over and her thumbs activated the short range missile launch.

The operations cluster just up the ridge vanished in a rush of fire and sound. Mercenaries dropped for
cover, crawling back towards thick pine trees and tall boulders. The mech marched several meters
out to spin briefly on its torso, scanning for targets. It launched a second, smaller volley at reacquired
targets. Brown dirt geysered up where it shot, followed by yelps cut short.

Shame we can't keep that thing. No room. Maybe they managed to steal the specs.

May watched the console spring up new data from the now unblocked communicators, followed it
with visual confirmation. Agent Triplett led a charge out of the facility, the five others close behind
him under the mech's covering fire. They dove for cover behind an outcropping of granite embedded
in the snowy earth, flecks of stone flying as The Hand and their mercenaries shot wildly at them.

She spotted Coulson amidst the group, taking a second to risk his position to flag in her direction.
She understood instantly what he meant – there was too much open space between them. Without
cover, they were certain to take casualties. She was going to have to drift the plane nearly into the
fray. She dropped a quick line of suppressive fire on a ridge and prepared to hover into closer
position.

The alert nearly cost Coulson his life. An enterprising merc sprung out of cover himself to try and
target the team's leader. May took her concentration off the controls long enough to see Loki bark
something to Triplett. Someone's hand shot out – her eyes recognized the hand as thin and pale while
her mind immediately questioned the detail - and reflexively yanked Coulson's suit jacket back while
Triplett took a single sniper's shot. The merc dropped. Phil took safe position again, scooting towards Fitz and Simmons to ensure they were covered as well.

A chime sounded from the panel, drawing her attention. Skye was remotely asking to control the cargo bay door and ramp. May authorized her access, then launched some machine gun fire as the mech lurched further into the opening to target a charging squad.

The plane rumbled as if sensing the low vibrations of a nearby earthquake. May held the controls firm, glancing quickly up at the cragged rock face as it began to visibly tremble, then seemed to melt into itself before vanishing behind a cloud of darkness.

*Internal demolition,* she noted clinically. *Whole thing's coming in. Well done, guys.*

She maneuvered in slowly, nodding to herself when the cargo door began to peel open.

. . .

“We're going to get one more close charge before we rush to the plane. Looks like one of their command dudes are with 'em.” Triplett eyed the opposing team as they tried to flank the SHIELD agents from their rear and left. “Want to drop them?”

“Fitz, get the mech to acquire them.” Coulson considered. “Shoot to wound.”

“Sir?”

“I want one that can talk.” He craned his head to peek fast at the squad of six enemy targets, recognizing the one barking commands. “You know what? Preferably the big guy.”

“Oh yes, that one. I vaguely recall him from that awful soiree.” Loki drawled the words, peering around the boulder and then plunging back when a shot plinked by. He looked at the fresh wound curving along the rock where his head had been with a slow, unamused blink, readjusting the duffel bag that he'd managed to keep with him. He was out of ammunition for the primitive weapon, but he'd made what he was given thus far count.

“Do we know him?” Skye passed Loki a fresh clip out of Triplett's bag before going back to maintaining remote connection with the plane.

“That's the Amazing GPS Man. Think May might enjoy saying hi again?”

Triplett grinned at Coulson. “He did shut the door in her face back in Mumbai, sir. That's pretty rude.”

“Kind of what I was thinking. Skye, lead the charge to the plane. Simmons and Loki are next, covering fire when you're there if we need it. Triplett, you and I are gonna jump this guy if Fitz can manage to not blow him up. We three clean up the rear while we're at it.”

“I've almost got targeting, sir.” Fitz sounded more than a little sad. He knew what was coming next.

“Don't be too upset, Fitz. He's going to a better world and he's taking bad guys with him for company.” Triplett patted him on the back.

“Ready?” Coulson watched the plane glide the last few meters towards the safer landing zone. “Touching down in five. Go.”

. . .
Skye scrabbled onto the cargo bay door while it was still a couple feet off the ground, listening to bullets whiz close by. She glanced up as Simmons scrambled next to her, noting that there was now a fresh hole in a tarp just a foot away from Lola. She whistled low and pulled herself over to the door button, not really noticing the dark shape of Loki clambering in and grabbing one of the tarp belts for balance. He steadied himself and waited for Fitz.

With the press of a button, the mech lunged with remarkable speed towards the last bastion of The Hand's assault and then self destructed with an unceremonious beep from the control. Fitz let himself be hauled aboard by the demigod and got out of the way so that Triplett and Coulson could bodily roll their bleeding prisoner up onto the floor.

Skye shut the cargo door when everyone was in, wavering a little as the plane began to regain altitude. Her voice was shaky. “That was fun. I get to pick where we go for vacation next, though. And I gotta tell you, I'm thinking Hawaii to do exactly diddly squat.”

“I can go to my little cell and do that right now.” Loki sighed. “A less hostile change of venue would be welcome, I confess.”

“I'm with that guy.” Triplett jerked his thumb towards Loki, then got an odd look on his face when he realized what he said.

“Small problem with all this first.” Coulson nudged their currently unconscious prisoner with the toe of his shoe. “I'm gonna need the brig.”

Loki glanced down at the bleeding figure, then up at Coulson. He spoke cautiously, as if concerned he'd misunderstood something. “Have a glass cell around by chance? I'm rather getting used to those.”

“You're just gonna have to use one of the spare residential rooms on the main level.” Coulson matched Loki’s stare with an even one of his own. “Anyone have any objections?”

Fitz and Simmons were already plopped on their butts, examining the few bags they'd managed to haul out of the facility. Neither seemed concerned. Skye arched an eyebrow but had nothing. Triplett managed a shrug. “I'm too damn tired to worry, sir.”

Coulson gestured at the exhausted looking demigod. Of the group, he looked the most openly puzzled by this turn of events. “Get all those books out of the brig for me, then. Everyone's on downtime for the next five hours. Go clean up, take naps, let the tinnitus ease. We'll figure out what the hell happened in there when we regroup.” He glanced at Loki's duffel bag. “Don't keep the stick.”
That's rather ironic. My expanded freedom is shown in the shape of a room smaller than all my prisons, by far. At least the door locks on both sides, and I've the sun again through this plate of glass. Strange, to feel I've missed that sight. You would think me used to the dark. Used to being out of place. And yet for these last few hours... I have been less hated. Yes, strange indeed.

He let his thoughts drift and put his hand on the clear glass. He could feel its chill under his palm, feel the plane vibrate gently as it flew through the dawning sky. A corner of his mouth creased into a bemused half-smile, dropping the duffel bag onto the narrow wedge of the bed. It was easy to move the bag and its cargo; no one questioned his use of it to help ferry books from one place to another. Nothing more than a convenient truth.

He took some time for himself, found the spare clothes the humans had left him in the drawers of the tiny private room, and an hour later felt clean and rested again. With damp hair tamed against the back of his neck, Loki glanced at his still-closed door and sorted the books he took from the brig onto the small shelves. He gently plucked the thin paper cover from one, some dull tome on human machinery. It looked to be the right size for the last book in the bag.

In the bloody, secret room beneath the facility, he'd taken off his hoodie and used it to remove the tome from the marble pedestal, wrapping it in spare fabric from Fitz's toys and burying it in the duffle bag. It was always best to be cautious with such artifacts. Sometimes the real traps lay within. Now he took a spare shirt from the drawer and wrapped it around his hand like a thin mitt. With deliberate care, he took his stolen book from the bag and laid it across his knees to regard it properly in the light.

At a glance, it seemed unimpressive. He did not trust that assessment and looked more closely. The cover was bound in black leather that creaked as it was moved and smelled nothing like the hides used in his world or this one. That gave him his first sense of disquiet. It was a rich, earthy leather smell, but underneath it was something else. Meatier and long since spoiled, like an animal's corpse left under a haunted house in a summer's night. A single 'D' was etched into the cover, ornately outlined and filled with a dark red dye. He decided to not think overlong on what the source of the carmine might have been. The blank spine held no clues for him, and the thick edges of the pages showed yellowing parchment inside. The binding was frayed and very old – he arched an eyebrow as he realized the pages were loose ones, fragments of ancient scrolls rebound within that mysterious skin.

Against his other senses, ones honed over centuries, the inert book reeked of living magic. Power in its rawest state lay inside, chaos untamed. Perhaps strong enough to break the boundaries of destiny itself, if he could but master it. He felt the thrill of hope inside his chest, then tamed it.

No human made this book. Likely no human mind wrote on its pages. I must take great care.

He kept the shirt around his hand and took another from the drawer, musing that he should have nicked a pair of gloves and deciding that he would do so later. With another glance at the door and
listening for any approach, he pulled his legs underneath him and stilled his thoughts. He looked carefully inside himself to find his center and to gird his mind against what threats may lie inside the book.

_I am_, he whispered to himself. The incantation was made from a piece of his soul – no magic necessary now, no risking an alert from the throat collar he still wore. No one could take his core of identity from him. So prepared, he opened the book.

An hour passed as Loki attempted to process the squirming letters on the first page. The book wanted to make it easier for him. He could sense it trying to whisper to him, tell him how it could help him see, but he blocked it away. He would master the words on his terms. To let the book take command would be impossibly dangerous.

After divining only the book's name, he shut the cover against what he saw. Enough effort. The next attempt would surely be easier.

He clumsily slid the cover over the book and buried it amidst tamer company on the shelf. He eased his tension with a flex of his shoulders and looked down to unwind the shirts from his hands. As he did, a single drop of red fell to the back of one of them. Surprised, he touched his fingers to his nose and found a nostril slick with blood.

The first sliver of doubt sheathed itself in his mind.

... Raina kept her arms crossed tight, not caring if it made her look defensive. She felt defensive; betrayed and angry at the cross examination by short-sighted men with grey faces and poorly done expensive haircuts. Even digitally veiled by the displays meant to blur their identities, she knew what Roxxon's upper echelon looked like. They looked like all men of power who had wielded it bluntly for too long – fattening, slow, thick-fingered. They muttered numbers to each other like mantras while she waited for their decree in the boardroom of the virtually unharmed public facility.

The destruction of the underground facility would cost them two billion dollars, and they marked the loss of several prototypes and data centers as priceless. It did not impress her and their rages felt impotent against her calm. She took their anger silently, a small price in her own private war.

The man with Matsu'o, and the words Matsu'o might bring from his masters... now those concerned her. She pursed her lips when she smelled Ian Quinn's alcoholic breath. He was taking the dressing down with his own kind of serenity. She didn't fault him for it, but she wished he could at least breathe on someone else.

“Circlejerk's about to end. Any theories on what The Hand's got to add?”

“None, Ian.” She watched Matsu'o glower at something one of his attendants whispered to him. “Be patient. We'll find out shortly, and then we can move on.”

“It's not like we dinged the paint on Daddy's car.” She heard him swallow. Ice clinked against glass. “Two billion might be chump change to the corporation, but it's still a high price to take out of our hides. Moving on is going to be a little painful this time.”

“Perhaps.” She tilted her head, considering. “But I'm not out of the game yet.”

... To her surprise, it wasn't Matsu'o who stepped forward next. It was the man that she'd watched with
him. He had an unlined face, the kind that masks a man's age in soft, fleshy curves, and his eyes were moist and bright over thin red lips. The sort of face she could press her thumb into, pull it away, and watch the little depression remain for a long time. It wasn't that he was unattractive – rather, soft, like he was a suit over something else. He disturbed her, though she refused to show it.

One of the veiled Roxxon executives addressed him. “Count Vernei. I believe you wanted to make a statement.”

“I do.” His voice was low and cultured, with an accent Raina couldn't place. Not French. His pudgy pink hands trembled atop his walking stick as addressed the projections. “I acceded to Roxxon's request many years ago. This was a matter of mutual benefit – that you made your homes and businesses upon and within my land. Do you remember how I was to benefit?”

Murmured conferring. Then one of them leaned forward. “We were to safeguard certain of your property.”

Count Vernei nodded once, brusquely. “Yes. You told me much of your growing capabilities. That your very best work would guard what I found most precious. That you would build your facility around my holdings.” He looked unimpressed. “And here are.”

“Your lordship. We are collectively sorry to have failed in this regard.” The response was clinical, though there was an undertone of wariness. “Despite the thoroughness of the attack, we will be dredging the site to recover what we can. We will take special care to - “

Vernei waved them off, now quivering openly with rage. Raina was careful to hide a small smile at the gesture. “You do not see. You do not listen. You cannot know. Foolhardy swine, you will not recover my goods with your machines. You are no good to me.” He snapped his fingers at Matsu'o, who turned off the projection feed. With the electrical hum fading, the Count turned to regard her. “Likely neither can you. But you are the one who has, by your actions, caused this offense. You used my largesse in your plans. You will assist. Likely you will do no good either, but I will have my debts paid. Through that, though I owe you nothing, you will get another chance at your prey.”

*Who are you that you can simply hang up on Roxxon?* She smiled, going with the flow. “Of course. It's only fair.” She bowed her head to him, ignoring Ian's soft snort behind her. “You sound as if you believe these items of yours are recoverable?”

“Only one item that matters. Stolen.” He took a few steps toward her, raising his head and looking down at her over a thin nose. “A book.”

“A book?” She smiled again. “I'm sure this will be no-”

“Hush!” He snapped the word, put a stubby finger to his red lips. “Do not be like them, not listening. Hear me, and carefully. You will serve these men, put your few tools at their disposal.” At this he gestured towards Matsu'o. “No more of your games. This is a matter greater than yourself and your goals.”

She unfolded her arms and looked steadily at him, waiting. This was not to her preference, but that hardly mattered. Play his game, and she could resume hers. He mentioned prey. *Loki.* The easy grace of her arms swaying at her side hid the clench of her fist.

Vernei looked back, his eyes gimlet wet and the pupils wide. “The book is the Darkhold. Name and purpose both. It is not yours to lose, not mine to give.” A thin, worming smile. “Perhaps it has finally left of its own accord. Called a new owner to it. We will see. It will speak in due time and then I will know for certain. Until then, its recovery is supreme.” He studied her face and exhaled sharply.
through his nose. “You are wise enough to believe in things beyond, yet you doubt me in this.”

“Am I to assume you're telling me this book is magic?” She kept her voice neutral.

He moved away from her, tapping his walking stick against the boardroom's long table as he crossed the room. He sat down at its head, eyes glimmering at her in the shadows. “It is more than magic. It is prophecy, doom, damnation. A book of sins, of this world and others.”

“Others.” That sounded interesting.

He put a meaty palm on the table and leaned forward. His eyes were now very bright. He spoke quickly, like delivering a sermon. “In the beginning were the words, and the words were lost in the primal sea, that dark ocean that we all float upon. Before the sea was the darkness and before the darkness marked our boundaries were the others, with their many eyes and their many angles, a vision to drive the first children of Chthon mad. I was there, but I was not ready then.” He paused to lift his head, as if listening to something meant only for him.

“The words were gleaned from that blackness, put only to paper countless years later. I remember the priest; for a few coins he spoke a mass that was corrupted by his impurity and greed. Suitable for our needs. I was granted the pages then to guard, bound it together in a book made out of the skin of a damned and broken thing there by that mephisto's font in the little chapel of Rennes-le-Chateau. The rumors will tell you a secret of God lay hidden in that place.” He laughed, a moist little titter. “There was no God there, for what we did in the darkness under that chant would have struck Him blind. Only the others – and their missionary. That one bade me guard the book, guard its secrets. Until the day they could come back, and claim this world for their own. Until the balance could be broken, reality could be sundered, and all the sleepers could come into our day.”

He closed his eyes, a beatific smile. “The keeper of the book told me all of this. The keeper veiled in the yellow robe.”

“He's crazy,” hissed Ian into her ear. She took a soft swallow, not inclined to disagree, not about to agree openly.

Count Vernei cracked an eye open, still smiling that gentle, childlike smile. If he heard the insult, he didn't otherwise react to it. “The book is in the hands of your prey. I am sure they seek to conquer it. Hunt your enemies and you will find mine. Return the book if you can, if it chooses.”

“And if it chooses otherwise?”

“Then rejoice, young woman. For the hour of their return is nigh, and I will be glad to lay down my burden. I have waited a very long time for my destruction.” He smiled and his teeth were bright and sharp. “So very long.”
Life on the plane is returning to normal in the wake of the facility assault. That will absolutely last. You bet.

“This is the inventory of stuff from France.” Skye slid the tablet in front of Coulson as the rest of the plane's residents filed into the room. Bringing up the rear was Loki. “I know you said we were on downtime, but I wanted to get that sorted out. It counts. It was relaxing. There wasn't any gunfire.” She smiled a little and said in a low voice meant just for him, “Maybe I should stop giving you crap for messing with your watches.”

Coulson harrumphed a little laugh for her and scanned the listings. “Seems like the mech was literally the most useful thing we found, and we blew it up. Everyone have a moment of silence. The data files you found, Skye? You're right. Looks like they're mostly optimization. Well, that'll at least tell us a few things about how they operate, and I'm sure we can do something with it on our end. Still kinda disappointing.”

“Well, we did indeed get the specs for the mech, sir.” Fitz gave a shrug. “That's something, at any rate. Lots we can reverse engineer out of that. Maybe lots of little mechs someday. Keep the dwarves company.” He bit his lip, trying not to show how the mental image delighted him. Simmons caught his expression and gave him a roll of her eyes.

“That's true.” Coulson sighed. “So. They figured out we were gonna hit a storehouse and moved the good stuff ahead of time, figuring rightly that we weren't going to be able to crack their system that far in advance. Then they dropped in hot on top of us when they knew where we were going. As I've said before, it was a trap. One with a specific purpose in mind.” He scratched across his creased forehead and glanced over at Loki. His brows knit in concern. The Asgardian still looked worn, his face almost ghostly over the hoodie. Coulson wasn't sure if Asgardians truly slept or how much if they did, but he seriously looked like he needed to get his head down.

And all this – and that you seemed to genuinely not know anyone would overhear - lessens the possibility that you set this up in advance. He still didn't know how he felt about that. “You want to outline what that was?”

Loki shrugged. “You heard the woman.”

“Woman?” Tripplet asked, a thick eyebrow arching.

“Raina,” explained Coulson to darkening expressions. “Fitz and I overheard her monologuing at him over the facility's comm system.”

Tall shoulders heaved in a bored sigh. “I admit, she was almost interesting. Standard delusions of grandiosity, vague plans with no real focus, acquisitive.” Coulson's lips twitched then widened into an amused grin. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Loki narrowed his eyes at the smaller human, the rest of his expression deadpan. “I had a tightly focused plan, thank you very much. Regardless, her ideas go down pitifully trite roads well-trod over
millennia. It was not a tempting offer. Frankly, it came to border on insulting.”

Coulson recalled the sounds coming from Raina's men, noted that Loki was deliberately underplaying the encounter. Not surprising, but still. Interesting.

“So, wait, she flat out tried to recruit you?” Triplett shared a glance with May.

Loki flicked a hand lazily. “It was fairly obvious that if I declined, any follow up offer would be less pleasant. I suspect those options remain on her agenda. I'm not much for recruitment at knifepoint, I find it not only rude but that it undermines her attempts to convince me that I'm her one true alien savior or whatever nonsense she was spoon-feeding me. So I said no and then killed her men.”

Silence met the finish of his summary. Fitz glanced around the room with an expression that suggested Coulson's own thoughts on the understatement in play.

Coulson cleared his throat. “In a nutshell, the goal of their trap was to not only kill us, but to acquire Loki.” He glanced up at the taller figure. “We must have been identified at some point.”

“On the way out of that horrible party, no doubt.” He sighed. “I was weary and irritable. Should have left the illusion on a while longer.”

“You didn't know.” Coulson shrugged it off and pretended to not notice Loki's odd, speculating glance. Think he thought I was going to yell at him for that. Sometimes I kinda wonder what Odin was like when the kids were growing up. I don't think Asgard's exactly got Dr. Spock over there.

May pushed away from the table and leaned back. “So that leaves us with two priorities right now – sequester and fully analyze the little bit of data we did manage to pry out of that place, and interrogate the guy in the brig.”

Loki blinked, rubbed a thumb and forefinger across his eyes, and then muttered, “Thought I was still being talked about for a moment.”

“You can't be the center of attention all the time.” Skye rolled her eyes at him.

“Oh, please. I read your Wilde. There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.” His tired face creased into a lopsided little smile, one that bordered on self-deprecation. “Well, your new resident is large and uninteresting and probably won't offer much in the way of information.”

May pursed her lips. “True, but I like being thorough. He may also become useful in ransom.”

Coulson shook his head. “Probably not; these guys seem willing to drop on a moment's notice if they think that's furthering their goals. This one's been around, has some weight in the organization, but let's not fool ourselves. They've probably already counted him among the dead. Can try playing that angle, the nothing else to live for angle, the 'better life in Montana' game. You're welcome to have a little fun with it, May. If you get anything out of him, bonus. Otherwise, we'll just ship him up the food chain into the justice department somehow.”

Triplett nodded. “I recall from the original briefing something went down in Manhattan a while back. Can always feed him to those guys. Bet they'd be happy to take him.”

“I bet they would, too.” Coulson nodded, then indicated Fitz, Skye, and Simmons. “You three, go over the inventory Skye made. See if there's anything we can use in the short term. We'll set a course for the safe house in Virginia to store it in a few days.”
“Not the Playground?” asked Fitz.

“Maybe later. We got snookered in France, I don't want to lead them straight home to meet the folks. Take it slow, watch for any trackers on radar. We'll stay in the air for a while, bop around.” He clapped his hands together once. “Okay, break it up.”


Coulson didn't quite grab Loki's arm on his way out. “Are you all right?”

The demigod looked genuinely puzzled at the concern. “I'm fine. A touch weary yet, that's all.” He gave Coulson a mild smile and tried to deflect the question. “I might help your scientists meanwhile.”

“I'd rather you took it easy first.”

“As if your technology is any difficulty for me.” He paused, his voice tinged with reluctant realization. “But your concern is well intended. My appreciation.”

Screw it, let's hit him head on. “You don't deal well with people being something other than hostile at you, do you? I mean, I get that's been a prominent feature of your life for a while.”

A quiet, uncomfortable look. “Particularly from your species, who owes me nothing and whom I maintain I'm not particularly fond of in the general sense. No few of you would disagree that I oft invite the treatment. I can hardly complain.” He shook his head, his closed face forestalling any more questions. “I am quite weary. I'll retire to my quarters for a time, as you suggest.” He gave Coulson a small, polite bow and then swept out of the room.

Coulson looked thoughtfully after him for a long time.


May finished spraying bactine on her knuckles and looked up at Simmons as she came into the lab with a furrowed brow. “Am I in your way?”

“Oh no, not at all.” She opened several cabinets in turn, scanning their contents and then moving on to the next set. “Drat.”

“What are you missing?”

“Just a book. Schematics, mostly, mechanical systems theory. Fitz and I wanted to line up what's established with what Roxxon was trying. Not only with their robots, but with the internal wiring. How they locked us out of communications and suchlike.” She sighed. “I thought to check the lab for it. It's probably in Fitz's room, that's where all the tech manuals end up.”

May sounded thoughtful. “Actually, more likely to be in Loki's. I think he's read every single piece of printed material on the Bus, including the instructions for the microwave.”

“Good point.” Simmons looked up at May and gave her a little chuckle. “I'll check Fitz's first anyway and leave the other room for another time. Besides, Loki ought be resting now and I'd prefer not to disturb him.”

“Understatement?” May arched an eyebrow while smiling.

Simmons flexed a few fingers atop a cabinet door in consideration before giving up and straightening with her hands resting on her hips. “Actually, no. He's getting a taste of actual privacy, and it seems
like he's earned it. Can't hardly barge in on him just because I'm looking for something terribly minor. I wouldn't do it to anyone onboard.”

“Skye does it all the time.” May put away the bactine, amused.

They both looked up as Skye walked into the lab with the inventory tablet in her hands, her gaze glued to it. “I do what?”

May and Simmons looked at each other and shared a laugh.

. . .

He was not then sleeping, nor resting. He held the black book in his thickly gloved hands, divining its history in strenuous single combat as it whispered to him, courted him. With each hard-fought word, Loki's doubt deepened into gnawing concern. The book was indeed more than he'd hoped... it left doubt behind and crossed into the first taste of real fear.

Still, he struggled through comprehending the tome. He no longer knew what else to do except forge on, and attempting anything with only partial comprehension would be certain to lead to disaster. Surely this was nothing for humans to bear. He took frequent breaks, checking himself for further bleeds and testing the defenses of his own mind.

When the plane broke through into another dawn, he'd found his way to the first pages that chronicled individual sorceries. A single glimpse of these and he shut the book with a disgusted grimace. Even the darkest arts he'd studied over centuries looked simple and kind compared to the atrocities the book detailed. He put it away on the shelf again, leaning back into the little cubby formed by the thin walls and the small, comfortable bed. He shut his eyes with a sigh and then, much to his own later surprise, fell into a hard, unwanted sleep. He knew it for sleep, because he dreamed.

Behind his eyes, buried in the unmapped places between dreaming and day, impossible things squirmed and screamed in unintelligible delight in a green-tinted darkness. All around their vast misshapen forms, shining threads of reality snapped apart and faded into the blackness of the between.

Soon, they whispered in the discordant language of the void. Oh yes, soon.
Skye glanced up from her spread of notes and files at Loki as he descended into the cargo bay. He wrinkled his nose at the smells of motor oil and metal, but whatever. She liked the way the plane felt from the bay sometimes. Its sounds and engine vibrations could be soothing through the reinforced hull. It made her feel focused. “Yay, you're here.”

“That is a phrase that I quite literally have never before heard in my life,” he drawled. “You asked for assistance?”

She looked him over, seeing the same thing as Coulson had previous. “Two days later and you still look like you need more iron in your diet, dude. ‘Kay, since you're all ‘our technology is primitive and useless,’ take a look at their communication controls system here with me and figure out what they did to block us, ’cause I'm stumped. Wasn't a standard jam.”

He held out his hand for the tablet and looked around for someplace to lean. Skye flapped her hands at him in a rush as he picked a direction. “Not against the car. Phil will tweak out, I promise.”

“What is it with that man and these things?” Loki swerved and found a heavy crate to sit on instead. “Everyone's got a hobby. Don't you?”

“There's a jest here about world domination and I'm just not going to be the one to make it.” He sighed, privately grateful for the change of pace and tapped his way through the schematics, running through possibilities in his mind.

. . .

“Jemma, did you ever find that book we were looking for? I utterly forgot to ask the other day.”

“Ugh, no. I'm sorry, Fitz.” She put a hand to her cheek and considered. “I've got one more place to look. I'll go do that right now.”

“Well, it's not that important.”

She laughed. “Of course it isn't that important, but I meant to do it previous. Might as well just get it done. Be back shortly.”

. . .

Agent Simmons stood outside Loki's open door, one side of her lips curving in a nervous wince. He wasn't in, and she couldn't decide if she ought go in without warning or not. She could see the corner of the bookshelf from where she hovered into the doorway, craned forward a little and then sighed. 

*You've either got to go in or not. I could check around, see where he is. That'd be the polite way.*
Her thoughts paused as her roaming gaze picked up the book under question, right in the middle of the shelf next to a handful of other technological tomes that had been swept up by the demigod's voracious need to read.

*On the other, they are our books and it's right bloody there. Ugh.*

She chewed on her lip for a moment and then took a single step inside. She darted out a hand and grabbed the book to pull it free. Its companions tottered off-balance into the empty space and then toppled to the floor with a rustle of crumpling paper and thunking hardcovers.

"Drat!" She snapped the word to herself and tossed the book she'd come for onto the bed. Then she crouched to sweep the books back into a proper pile to get them back on the shelf. She paused, looking at the incongruous black cover peeking out from underneath its paper sheath.

*That's not the right book for that cover. Should be a ratty blue, as I recall.* Her brows knitted together and she picked the book up. The paper slid free easily and fell to the floor, like an old snakeskin. The black leather felt warm in her hand. *What is this?*

She touched the single red letter, then opened the cover and flipped to a random page, scanning the jagged, angular language. No, she was mistaken. It was just a looping, wild cursive. She tutted at her mistake, narrowing her eyes at the book before realizing the letters were squirming into new shapes as she watched. For a second, they pulled themselves into something almost like recognizable language and she widened her eyes before realizing it was still incomprehensible.

"I don't under-"

A vision filled her mind and she cried out once in denial before falling into a heap against the bed.

... 

Loki left the cargo bay behind, wended his way through the plane back towards his quarters and paused at the sight of his door. Had he left it open? He thought perhaps he might. *Gods,* he'd been weary lately. The book was a terrible opponent. With a sigh of irritation at himself, he came up to the doorway and froze at the sight of the collapsed figure. At her side was the book, and for a lone blessing, its cover was shut.

He studied the unmoving Simmons, hoping in a chilly panic that she was perhaps asleep, a silent sufferer of narcolepsy or something similar. Then he noticed the thin trails of blood that seeped from her nostrils and couldn't discount the obvious any longer. His thoughts moved quickly.

*I could hide her. Delay the search and get off the plane before their fury batters against me. The bay, perhaps. Behind the shelves where that Fitz leaves his toys. There was dust beyond. Just a little time is all I'd need.*

His throat clicked a dry swallow and thought of one fleeting moment of kindness given to him, flavored in lingonberry. No. He shook his head once, sharp and hard, dismissing the thought. All he had to do was move her. A little while and he'd be away. Surely the small woman would be fine. The humans were ridiculously resilient. *Just look at Coulson,* reasoned that darker inner voice.

Loki crouched and used his thumb to pull gently at the lid to check her pupil. It was dilated almost pure black, locked into a terrible, mortal fear. That was a thing Loki understood. He'd begun to feel it from the book himself, emanating subtly into the atmosphere around it. Few beings deserved such cruel emotion forced on them.

He looked again into that frightened, unseeing eye, the distant hums and soft ticks of the gliding
plane marking the slow time as his thoughts churned.

I can't, he thought disjointedly, his fingers cold. He gathered her prone figure into his arms and hurried down the hall.

... Fitz looked up at the flutter of motion, threw the tablet he was studying onto the counter when he realized Loki was already inside the lab and laying Jemma across the long table in the center of the room. Loki's elbow shoved tools out of his way as he finished setting her down, letting the stainless steel implements clatter against the floor without much notice. “What happened?” Fitz snapped in a fright that began to feed itself rapidly into anger as he saw the thin trail of blood on her face.

Loki glanced up at him with glittering eyes that looked through him without really seeing, then scrambled for a penlight. “Can you act as a medic?”

“What did you do?”

He switched on the light and peeled open her eyelids again, checking them both now for any visible damage. “Are you trained to heal? She's going to have, if we're lucky, minor bleeding in the frontal lobe. I'm unsure of the rest without a scan. I need time to see.”

Fitz flung himself at the demigod in a single minded rage. Loki absorbed the shove without protest or even a stagger, then grabbed the scientist by his shoulder. “Call for Coulson, then get your machines on her. Then flail against me and not before.” He pushed Fitz away with something almost like gentleness.

... Agent Coulson stormed into the lab, May not far behind. “What happened here?”

Loki held the medical scanner steady while Fitz input commands, his ruddy Scottish face still alight in baffled fury. Loki glanced up at the new arrivals, his eyes still glittering and focused elsewhere. “If we're fortunate, she'll awaken as if from a nightmare and nothing worse.”

Coulson stared at him, noting Loki's stunned, almost glassy expression, filing away emotions until he had facts. It was difficult to not assume the worst. “I will not ask you again.”

“I need to speak with you. She's stable. The information from your scan will be available shortly. It looks hopeful, but I cannot be certain yet. We need more time.” He looked up from the device to meet Coulson's eyes. “Please let me speak with you. Privately.”

“Phil.” May's voice was low and even.

Loki glanced past Coulson's shoulder and read the deadly threat in her tranquil eyes. He spoke rapidly. “This was not a thing I did on purpose. This is the result of a terrible accident, and yes you may lay that at my feet without hesitation. Let me tell you.”

“My office. Now. You will get one chance to explain. One.” Phil stepped aside to let the demigod through. His eyes met May's as Loki disappeared up the staircase – her angry doubt, his even fury. She mouthed his name again. “He had one chance already to sell us out and he chose not to. He had another during the blow-out. Instead, he saved my life when that sniper drew down on us. Figure that out, 'cause I've been chewing on it for days. This buys him one more chance in return, no more and no less than I'd do for anyone on this bus. Am I mad? You damn well better believe it. I'm not gonna make this easy.” He looked into the lab, found Fitz also staring at him from over the medical
machinery. “He brought her in?”

“Yes, sir.” The words were clipped. “Asked if I were a medic.”

“Okay.” Phil took a deep breath, absorbing that. “I'll be upstairs.”
“You ought just let me off the plane. You'll be better that way.”

Coulson didn't look at him as he entered the room, didn't respond to the statement. He passed around the edge of his office and stood by his own chair, gesturing across from him. “Take a seat,” he said with automatic authority, and then settled into his own with stony faced calmness. After a moment Loki settled himself into the chair, long legs folding up awkwardly. He looked like he'd been kicked.

Despite his anger, Phil couldn't help but notice that it seemed like Loki had a good start on beating the crap out of himself without any help from him. The once-proud Asgardian still looked drained, more pale than ever. He kept his voice even, letting no emotion or nor inner thought waver it. “I'll start this off one more time. What happened? How did we get to this moment?”

Loki studied his face, then spread his hands in empty surrender. “I'm sorry.” He shook his head and looked away, his expression stormy with conflict. “I stole a book.”

“Not from Barnes & Noble, I take it.”

“...No.”

“So you lied to us about your intentions.” The warning in his voice was clear.

“No. No, I did not. I didn't ever lie.” He pulled a long fingered hand over his haggard face. A sigh came from behind the palm. “Not about that.”

“What have you lied about?”

The palm slid down another half an inch, still masking silence. Finally, “Hang on, I'm still trying to think.” A glittering eye peered out, squinting at nothing. “Actually, except for wholly omitting this little stunt until just now, I've been relatively up front.” He dropped his hands into his lap and regarded the ceiling thoughtfully. “That's odd.”

“Okay. I'm way more pissed off than I look, so we're gonna start at the part where I'm most ticked and see if we can de-escalate from there. I have someone injured on my team. How did that happen and why?”

“A genuine accident.” He raised a thin hand when Coulson sharply tilted his head as if to speak and went on to explain. “Never attribute to malice what can be explained by stupidity... or a tradition of being mistrusted and dismissed.” He grimaced. “You can choose whichever of those you like. The book I stole was disguised and hidden away in my quarters because I simply decided that was best. Fewer questions, and perhaps in some backwards way, I thought that might be safer.”

“Safer.” His voice was incredulous, his face locked in its best 'you've got to be kidding me' expression.
“Yes, out of your harm's way. So I hoped. The book is dangerous magic. I've been fussing at it for a few days and my headway has been slight. You've... noted my recent appearance. Each session leaves me this way, and I fool myself and claim that the next battle with it will be more in my favor.” He shook his head, glum. “The lie's gleam begins to fade. The contents of the tome are disturbing. Upsetting. I was called away, and in a moment of weary foolishness my room was unsecured. The young woman must have been looking for another tome and came across this one.” He described the scene, the black book near to her hand and the spilled pile near her feet.

“You're sure that was the cause, Jemma looking inside this... spellbook of yours?”

“Yes.” The single word was firm. “There are certain things I know better than most, and magic has been my dominion for some time.”

Coulson considered that for a while. For once, the statement didn't come with any preening arrogance. It was also, undoubtedly, truth. In a corner of his mind, he felt a kind of peevish annoyance with the entire concept of magic. The anger took precedence again. “Will she recover?”

“I believe so.” Loki spread his hands again, pained. “I can't be certain until your scans are complete and there is the risk of the unknown from the book itself, but humans are unusually elastic. Her exposure couldn't have been for long and that lessons the chance of anything lingering, anything untoward.”

“Please don't tell me there could be some Exorcist style crap out of this.”

Loki looked at him for a long moment, seeming to fight to divine the meaning of the reference. “Oh. The religious matter. I suppose it's possible, but strikingly unlikely.”

“Okay.” He tapped the tips of his fingers together on his desk and shooed away the intruding mental image of making an Asgardian watch horror movies. “Why didn't you just leave? We both know you can probably just skulk outta here before we could stop you.” He watched Loki's eyebrow rise, the face drawn into that weird, uncomfortable expression again. He took a long time before answering the question.

“The girl has never meant me any harm, acted with nothing other than civility when directly encountered. The accident was my due cause. I could do nothing else.” The discomfort deepened, like an open wound. He lashed out with it. “I couldn't just bloody leave the human there.”

Now Phil's eyebrows rose, the expression of mild surprise masking something more startled at the grudging admission. Maybe I didn't entirely screw up letting him on board, he thought. Thinking chronologically trying to sort this out. He responded thinking of Simmons first. That's... not what I expected.

“Why didn't you just leave when you found the book?”

Loki looked away again. “Natural camouflage. Staying mobile with the book seemed easiest, least likely to draw attention overmuch. Because of its origins, I certainly didn't want to try to drift off world with it until I knew better its limits and design. I didn't realize at first the tome could be that much of an active threat. Besides, I said I would help you. I honor my obligations.” His voice trailed off. Coulson was about to ask him to clarify what he meant by threat when he muttered abruptly, low and clearly irritated with himself. “And I have nowhere else to go.”

Coulson let that sit in an awkward silence. Loki continued to examine things on the wall, shelves of collectibles and antiques. His voice took a somber tone, as one might narrate his own funeral. “All roads lead to the twilight of the gods for me, Coulson. I suspect it's happened before. Countless times; subtly different iterations. A room full of mirrors, all with a slight warp to them. When this story of mine is finally ended, it will resume anew and end again in damnation. I want to break
through that. End the cycle. Just as I've told you.”

“So make different choices while you can.”

A low, bitter laugh. “You say it's as easy as that. Look at the path of my life. Look at the things I do. What I've done. Every kindness fails. Every kingdom, any thing I've ever cared for slips through my grasp. Your sole pitiful charm as a species is your unbreakable grasp on free will. Meanwhile, I have front row tickets to hell. Mine for eternity. Your own foggy mythology of Asgard knows my road better than to feed me such false hope. No, I looked for another way, in my way.”

The green-grey gaze flicked back towards Coulson at last, the eyes flickering in despair and frustration. “You have no idea what it cost me to get this far. I beheld the possible results of my future in a glimmer, screamed off to search for this chance. I tore my own road through places no sane being ought go and found my way to a nexus, a place between all possible worlds. And there, for all that, I learned that my desperation might be nothing more than a cosmic joke to some creature living on the razor beyond madness. It bade me to chance a path, this path – and here we sit. Sometimes I wonder if we are real, or if we are pawns in some game of another's devising. Perhaps this is all naught be lies. Perhaps in it is a truth.”

His voice grew contemplative, glancing down at the workmat. “A truth that hasn't happened yet...” He trailed off for a moment, then narrowed his eyes. “And now this book. Accursed and damned by its own accounting. We'll be over a body of water soon. I can drop out.” A little of his wry arrogance returned to his voice. “I've survived harsher landings, I assure you.”

Coulson examined Loki's thin face, absorbing the monologue. It didn't make sense to him entirely, but he could get the gist. Through it was the unsettling acknowledgment that the demigod had dropped a crapload of honesty in it, whether he'd wanted to or not. So what does it mean when a self-avowed lord of lies and mischief drops the routine?

I have a bad feeling about all of this.

The suspicion must have showed on his face in some subtle way. Loki shifted in the seat, passing a hand across his eyes again in a fit for something else to do. His gaze roamed Coulson's desk as the agent spaced out in his own thoughts. Loki's dark brows furrowed. He reached out and plucked the antique watch from its little case next to the workmat.

“Don't mess with that,” Coulson said automatically.

The furrow deepened, touched with disbelief as he ran a fingertip across the comparatively tiny clockface. “What can I possibly do to the damned thing? It's broken.”

“It's broken in a particular way.”

“What way?” He toyed with the band, wrapping the old, well-oiled leather gently around his fingers to examine the contrast.

Coulson set his jaw, making a number of private decisions quickly. “A way I can fix.”

Loki looked up from the watch. He gave a soft, dour snort. “You can't fix everything, Coulson.”

“I can damn well try.”

Loki's free hand slapped abruptly at the desk, emphasizing his frustration with the human with its flat smacking sound.
“Don't do that, either.”

Loki seemed like he hadn't heard him, but stilled anyway. “This book. The Darkhold, it names itself. Bitter name that is. Overwrought in its portent. It is beyond reality itself. I thought I could harness it in breaking the cycle. I think my presumption was in grievous error. In changing reality, you can weaken it. I fear that might already be beginning, just by letting the book into the light of day.” He sighed, deep creases lining his eyes. “I'm sorry.”

“Okay. How do we undo it?”

Loki shook his head. “You owe me nothing. Let me off the plane. There are others who may seek this book now. The people I took it from. Your enemies are yet a threat. I'm a risk.”

“No,” said Coulson. His voice was firm. “Let us help you.”

“You owe me, your murderer, nothing.” It came out in a whisper, utterly defanged. Loki reached for the watchbox and gently placed the broken timepiece back into it. He nudged it back into place on the table. The kicked look crawled across his face once more.

His anger long since faded and replaced with something like empathy, Coulson folded his hands together, speaking firmly. The principal at lecture. “You're on my plane, and like it or not, that means you're part of the team. That may not mean much to you, but it means an awful lot to me. Now, you're still in trouble and you will be at the very least until Agent Simmons has a clean bill of health. Pursuant to that, you are under orders to complete two duties.”

Loki's gaze glittered up, waiting for the guillotine strike.

“First, you're keeping an eye on Jemma under Fitz's supervision. I want you there when she wakes up. You will help assess her medical standing, do whatever you can to be damn sure she's going to recover cleanly and without... whatever it is you think the book could do to her. If, as you say, she comes up like she's had a nightmare, you get to help her through that. And you owe her one hell of an apology. Do not assume she has to accept it.”

“Young Fitz is probably going to shank me the first time my back's turned.”

“Don't worry about that. Besides, we both know you'd survive.” A wry smile touched Loki's lips at that. It was oddly comforting to see it back. “Once we know she's stable, you're fully debriefing all of us on this book. It's your responsibility to keep it secure meanwhile. What you've figured out, what you think it's capable of. If you think there is some way of containing it, we'll work on that. Be upfront. That's non-negotiable. We'll put all the resources we can on the problem. You haven't screwed up this chance yet, but you came close.”

His expression made it clear this was not the retribution he expected. “How in the nine realms am I rating this much potential forgiveness?”

Coulson smirked. “Because it clearly bothers the absolute hell out of you.”

The mock-adversarial tone got him the effect he wanted. The demigod regained a little of the sardonic gleam in his eye, straightening in his seat. Coulson followed it up with a thought meant only for himself. And because if that book is as much trouble as you seem to think... you're still the best shot we've got at stopping it.
bedside manners

Chapter Summary

Skye has a particular style of trying to cheer people up.

Fitz did not shank him, for a wonder. The first hours at Jemma's side were hostile and quiet. The others on the plane came by regularly to check in and make small talk. There wasn't quite a chill in the air, but the stillness and the mistrust had returned, if – to his mild surprise - lessened. Loki took their fresh caution with grim acceptance. *I am not one of their own, despite Coulson's words. This is merely reasonable. She is theirs, though, and if she awakens still-hurt, I am in grave straits. Damn the book, damn that keeper, and damn my whole malformed 'plan.'*

When Fitz finally gave into his curiosity and asked what the hell had happened, Loki told him in a flat, clinical voice. A shared glance with the currently visiting Coulson and the accompanying nod made him less angry and more outright worried. They ran another brain scan. Still nothing unusual, no trace of lasting damage. Loki didn't want to test her with his magical senses until she was awake, claiming a sense of *some* ethics.

When Coulson left, Loki observed the still fidgeting figure. He said, “I don't owe you an apology, save for the fright. And you have that much. She's the one wronged here.” He glanced over as Fitz flushed again. “You tend to overprotectiveness. It's clear in your behavior.”

“Don't pick on me for that. You don't have much right to drill people.”

“Perhaps not.” He fell silent again, finding no entertainment in the attempt to rile the scientist. His weariness still left him drained, on edge. The boy didn't deserve it, anyway. None of the humans on the plane did, and damn them too. He bared his teeth at nothing when Fitz wasn't watching, irritated with everything and particularly himself. A nagging worry slid under his thoughts, the subtle fear that his touchiness came not entirely from himself. He shook it away. The book was locked down, its cover sealed with a set of straps from cargo.

Long hours passed as they kept watch on Simmons' vitals. Suspicion gave way to weariness, and well after midnight Fitz allowed the lurking demigod to look after her alone.

... 

Loki looked up at the rustle in the doorway, arching an eyebrow at the clearly still-half asleep young woman in the massive raggedy flannel shirt. Skye gave a huge yawn and pinched her hand in a crab-like wave of greeting. “She still doing okay?”

“There's been no changes thus far. I remain cautiously optimistic.”

“Well, that's something.” She plopped into the seat left vacant by Fitz. “Am I bothering you? I woke up, couldn't sleep.”

“Nightmare?” He kept the caution out of his voice.

“Naw, just worried.” She rubbed a fistful of shirt across her eyes, missing his eyes flickering once in relief. If nightmares began to spread without direct exposure... a muscle in his jaw flexed at the
thought. She missed his expression, reaching out to push a stray tendril of hair off the sleeping face.

“Seems like everyone around here gets hurt regularly somehow. Shot, stabbed, thrown out of planes, taken hostage, psychically hijacked by aliens, you name it. Guess it was her turn back around on the wheel of misfortune.” She looked up at him. “But we all come back out of it okay. If she's been good this far, she'll wake up just fine. Fitz leave you alright?”

“He is aggrieved and shall be for some time.”

“He gets a little wound up. If she's okay and tells him that herself later, maybe by whacking him over the head with a non-evil but really heavy book, he'll be fine. He's just super clingy, like they're the Wonder Twins or something.”

He quirked an abrupt smile. “Don't accuse him of that. He'll not take it well.”

“Oh God, did you?” She chuckled at his innocent shrug. “Yeah, don't. Pick a fight some other way.”

“There's no fun picking fights on this vessel regardless. Coulson ever likes the idea of shooting me and yon Agent May's never wavered on her desire to drop me out the cargo.”

“Yeah, but I think Coulson also started to sort of kinda like you. Probably because at least you're up front about being a giant jerk whenever you get a chance, and you stick to the rules on it. He's weird like that.”

He thought of the entire conversation in the human's office. It buttressed Skye's point. Still. “I find that magnificently hard to believe.”

She put her elbows on her knees, checking her fingernails once before rolling her eyes at him. “Dude. Do you know how much stupid crap I've pulled on this bus? I am in trouble, like, weekly. I really pissed him off once and that wasn't any accident.” She pulled down her upper lip with her teeth, chewing on it for a second, remembering. “He forgave me, but I really had to work on it.”

He contemplated that, then spoke carefully. “Not to be insulting, but I see the parallel you're trying to comfort me with and there's a few questions of scale to consider.”

“Yeah, okay, but speaking only about Coulson? He's not judging based on the past. He starts the clock from when you get on the plane until given a reason otherwise.”

“That's nonsensical.”

She giggled. “Like ridiculously honorable, right? It's not like he forgets things, though. He's not erasing what you did. Like, okay. You wanted a chance. You got one, and you managed to not be a dead weight about it. Side effect, everyone on the plane isn't scared crapless of you anymore. Maybe not what you wanted, but deal with it.”

He couldn't resist looking amused as she continued. “Then you took a detour and yoinked an evil artifact that got away from you. Everyone's pretty ticked again. But. If Simmons comes out of this all right, we line up behind her because she's awesome. And she's really not the vindictive type. She doesn't go up to Coulson and say 'hey, let May drop him'? Congrats. You get another shot at not being the designated troublemaker on the plane. Because that's usually my spot, and dammit, I like my spot.” She grinned at him.

“It's probably not going to be that simple. I come to expect the worst.” He pursed his lips. “Can I make an observation under the promise that it's not actually my intention to be cruel?”

“Shoot.”
“It seems as if you hold a fondness for talking even more than I've ever been accused of.”

She stared at him for a second and then broke into fresh giggles, popping a middle finger at him.

. . .

Simmons came awake all at once in the hour before dawn, sitting up in a rush with her hands flying to her face, fingers curling into claws as the cut-off shriek tried to resume. Another set of hands intercepted hers, stopping her from accidentally harming herself with granite strength. “Soft now. It's over.” He pushed her hands down until the tension eased. Finally she dropped her hands onto her own lap, breathing and swallowing hard.

Loki watched her for a moment to be sure the urge to claw didn't arise again, then took up the little pen light. “Please excuse me. I'm going to check both of your eyes. If you tell me to stop, I will, and I'll go fetch someone else to do it.”

“Why?” she said. Her voice had a ragged edge to it. She couldn't remember why she'd started to scream, furrowed her brow to try and search her memories. Her hands clenched, reacting to something in the hole of her memories.

“You've had an extended dilation of your pupils due to a hopefully minor trauma, and I have other things to look for.” He clicked the light on. She wasn't looking at him. “For what it's worth, you seem quite well thus far. All medical scans thus far show no lasting damage.”

She allowed him to reach for her face, his touch clinical and quick. His voice filtered from somewhere behind the LED. “Do you remember what happened?”

“I don't.” She bit her lip, watching spots appear and start to fade. “Last I recall was a conversation Fitz and I had, about that mech.”

Loki checked each pupil. They reacted to the light, dilating and contracting normally now. There was a relief. And with her awake... He narrowed his eyes and looked within, testing his other senses and looking for tracks unseen. He left the barriers of her mind alone, looking for cracks made by other forces only. He was no trained telepath, no psychic. Trying anything other than a sniff-test would be inviting further unintended damage.

There was nothing, no trace of darkness. Only the natural borders of self. He released her with a soft sigh and pushed away from the medical bed. Coulson would be pleased to hear it. And the others might cease their unnerved looks again. Distrusting the outsider. He hated this feeling of displacement, shook his head to focus on matters before him instead. Of course the book might not linger overlong on her psyche...

His thoughts were interrupted. “Why did I wake up so afraid?”

Now she was looking at him. There was no anger in her face, and he studied that with bemused curiosity. “Do you trust me to answer? I might awaken Coulson instead.”

“Did you do something to me?”

He shook his head. “It was an accident. I left an artifact too easily found... and you found it.”

She jerked, startled. He reached out and steadied her for a moment before letting go again. That book!

“Ah. There's a memory back you perhaps didn't want.” He fiddled with the pen light before realizing
what he was doing. He set it down with a soft clink.

_I remember now...the changing letters, the unknown language. I couldn't make anything of it._

Abruptly, she said, “I couldn't read it, but then I _saw_ it. I saw something. I can't describe it; I couldn't have then.” Simmons looked at him, horrified. “I don't think there _are_ words for that thing. And then all it said was _soon_. Then I woke up just now.”

“Yes.” He studied her, noting her pupils were still normal, her skin still healthy. Truly resilient. A tiny grudging piece of him was starting to admire that feature of the race. “It's unpleasant in any form, to any eyes.”

“So you've looked inside.” She watched him nod in response. “But the book didn't do this to you.”

Loki gave her a small smile. “The art of magic is a complex thing. In Asgard it's as much of a science as any other such discipline, if somewhat less honored by the warriors. And a far more dangerous one, sometimes. In its particular way, it will always leave a mark on its practitioners. In risky work it will come to leave those marks; scars well-hardened over your mind. The incautious might go mad from the process alone, given time and recklessness.”

He huffed a tiny laugh, mostly for himself. _Madness_. He knew there were those who questioned his sanity. Perhaps rightly, though he'd never look to his art as the cause. He worked too hard to prevent that much. Surely the book would not, could not overcome him. He clarified his thoughts aloud. “My scars were earned in long years of magical study, centuries of difficult effort. In this way, thus armored, I try to protect myself from artifacts like this one. Like building resistance to poison. And still I think I know your nightmare quite well. That you yourself know that vision... is _my_ fault.” He tilted his head deeply. “I am sorry.”

She looked at him for a long time without saying anything, her mind still full of the shadows around that _thing_.

“I'll go awaken yon Fitz. Morning comes soon and the others will be glad to hear your voice for themselves.” He rose silently from the chair and turned to go.

She reached out and tapped his arm. That drew his pale face back to her, brows knitted in puzzlement. She nodded once, feeling her grip on reality resume its firmness. “Thank you. For the apology.”

“I am hardly owed the gratitude,” he murmured. Then he left in silence.
Chapter Summary

Loki hosts a Darkhold show and tell session on the Bus just in time for things to get worse.

Triplett chewed over the initial summary, trying not to stare at the alleged artifact where it sat strapped on display in the center of the data table. Loki stood close by, ensuring that the closed tome remained inert. “And you're certain the book itself is an active threat?”

“Well, among the other details I've outlined, I should specify that I found it on an ancient stone pedestal rising from amidst a coagulating, odiferous pool of blood. Nothing good ever seems to come of that.”

Skye crinkled her lips, grossed out at Loki's description. Fitz looked slightly green.

Triplett raised both his eyebrows almost to his hairline. “And you took one good look at that scene and said to yourself, 'Damn, dog. I got to lay my hands on that action?'”

Loki shrugged expansively, as if he picked up horrifying primal artifacts from subterranean hellholes all the time. “Yes?”

“You gotta reconsider your life choices, man.” Triplett shook his head.

“I've been hearing that a lot lately. Maybe someday I'll try it. Of course we all know it'll just end with me on a throne of skulls or something to that effect. Let a grand matron get on the bus ahead of me, oops, missed my connection, might as well just take over a planet.” Loki gave Agent Coulson a deadpan stare. Coulson returned it, then gave him a theatrical roll of his eyes to match the demigod's better efforts. Loki smirked in approval.

“Okay,” said Skye. She inhaled. “So if we're hearing this right, the book is a living, breathing biological weapon, and is now probably gonna try and crack reality on its own terms.”

“Your summary is apt, if crude. There's also the bit about it being in league with horrifying malformed entities from beyond the borders of our universe.” Loki caught Simmons shiver out of the corner of his eye and vaguely wished he'd undersold that part a bit more. She noticed his glance and lifted a shoulder in a wry shrug.

“I think I like boring old techy science better. At least the wi-fi router hasn't tried to eat a planet yet.” Skye puffed a sigh as she crossed her arms to think.

Loki watched the team, each face drawn in contemplation as they spared uncomfortable glances at the book. His own face kept trying to form itself to reflect the puzzlement he felt, despite his best efforts to remain unreadable. He'd just announced that he'd smuggled a monstrosity onboard without warning anyone and the general sentiment in the wake of Simmons' good health was 'Well, crap. Must be a Monday.'

A vague sense of unreality settled in. Coulson sidled up by him and muttered for his ears, “Yeah, it's pretty much always like this. It's what we do. Find a problem that needs to be fixed, then solve it. No
matter what. And, in a roundabout way, finding and ending any threat from that book is exactly the kind of thing we went to France to do."

"Just perhaps not quite how you intended."

Coulson shrugged, followed it up with a grin. "We've faced strange mutations, alien technology, human maliciousness, ordinary espionage... What's one more category? Though we're gonna have to rewrite the SHIELD handbook with a section on how to deal with magic pretty soon. Maybe I'll get you to write the introduction for it."

Loki settled for giving him a long, cool look before Skye spoke up again. "Can we – and yeah, I don't suggest this sort of thing lightly, y'know – just burn the thing?"

"It won't work. It's not merely a physical artifact and thus not bound by such simple elementalism."

Coulson gestured down at the Darkhold, not quite touching it. "Not unusual for books of magic. It's more than just its contents – if it were merely that, you could put it on any shelf in a bookstore and have no troubles. The book is; the culmination of itself. Not just a catalog of dark power. Words were put to paper, yes. But through a process where every slash of every letter is an affirmation of its creation. A truly dark ritual forged this thing. One even I hesitate to imagine the details of. And that ritual of creation is as important as the contents, giving it something like its life."

"Then can you use magic to destroy it? Magically torch it, like undo the ritual or whatever."

"That's more viable in theory, but this is a raw thing. I don't have the power to do it. Not sure any sole living creature does."

Coulson rubbed the heel of his palm across his forehead before crossing his arms again, still at Loki's side. "Well, you didn't walk in here that depressed looking, so you must have some ideas."

"I've been trying to get to that slowly; not out of implied insult but because you are admittedly unfamiliar with sorcery. Skipping details –“ He stared up at the ceiling, mentally scrabbling around for a comparison and finding a good one in some of the books he'd collected from around the plane. "This isn't like that Potter child's magic. A solid course in Latin and a good wand isn't all you need. This is more akin to neurosurgery; forty different tools in orchestrated play and a single misstep means you've scrambled someone's brains. Literally."

"Point taken. Good analogies, you might want to keep 'em for that intro course."

Coulson gestured to the book, ignoring Loki's sigh as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. "It was sealed away when you found it. Could we just do that again?"

"Not as simply. It was still when I found it, less so now. Back to viable theories, it could be restrained in another ritual into that quiescent state. A difficulty: I don't know of an applicable ritual. But you've drawn the conversation in the direction I was going towards. There is one possibility I've considered longer than the rest."

Coulson nodded. "Go on."

"Something as massive as this... in magic, there are certain rules. The art itself is chaos bent into order and order shattered into chaos. These are the extremes with the sorcerer in the center trying to keep their balance in the countless shades of grey through sheer force of will. This book is as close to pure chaos as I've ever seen. Conversely, by these rules, there ought be something akin to pure order."

"Another book might exist, you mean."
“Yes, I'm near certain of it. The two in opposition. Find the other one, and it can likely impact this one.”

Fitz sounded dour. “I gather we don't just call every library on Earth and see what they've got.”

Loki shrugged, feeling a tickle of discomfort along his skin that he couldn't place. “Certainly not how I found this one. No, of course, if this other exists it will be pointlessly difficult to discover. Probably on a mountaintop guarded by mad goats or suchlike, I expect.”

Coulson started gnawing on an inside corner of his mouth. Memories of revising and collating files from the HYDRA incursion against SHIELD tickled his mind. Priority targets... “We'll start internal.” He held up a finger. “No promises, no false hopes, but I swear I think there's a lead in our files. I gotta chew it over, see what we've still got.”

Loki folded his hands before him. “That'd be useful. I'll try to keep my hopes in reserve, but I'd advise working quickly.” He smiled to belie the gnaw in his stomach, then instinctively flicked his gaze to the monitors that watched the brig. The prisoner sat quietly, yet the gnawing sensation deepened.

Coulson watched his attention drift, his own brow furrowing.

...Matsu'o Tatsuyama sat crosslegged across from Vernei, his small hands trapped in the moist, grubby-feeling palms of the count. Matsu'o's eyes were closed and he thought with perfect recollection of his assistant, his trusted and now lost warrior, Yuuto. Yuuto prized his ritual tattoos; curving delicately down his throat to end well hidden beneath only the finest of suits. Even Matsu'o only ever saw them twice, a mark of real trust between them. Brothers of war. He allowed a taste of grief; Yuuto was dead the moment the foreigners captured him. A true shame, but he could do his distant ghost a single honor – to ensure he would die in service to The Hand as beacon for their next assault, a conduit for Vernei's unseen masters.

“No emotion,” reminded Vernei, his mind full of barely contained chaos. Through the slimmest path he could forge from Matsu'o's memories, his will called out to the Darkhold and asked it to sing for him through a forced soul. “Only vision. Lest you share the pain I need to free the words. Let the book speak for us and guide us to where it lays hid.”

“Use my emotion, then!” snapped Matsu'o, irritated enough to forget his wariness.

“As you like,” came the count's dead, distracted voice. The slimy grip intensified and Matsu'o felt the bones in his fingers began to squirm and grate against each other before he could change his mind. He hissed once but made no other sound. He would not make any other sound, he vowed. Then his universe went dark... and he could feel it slither against him once, lovingly.

By then, he had no choice but to scream.

...May glanced at them both, then at the monitors. The prisoner's head was beginning to sway back and forth. She instinctively checked for the gun at her hip as Loki started to move towards the doorway. “Magic,” he said, distracted. “Something's got into him.”

“What?” Skye's eyes opened wide.

“Someone or something's forced their way into him. That's monstrously foul sorcery. I can smell it
from here. Move!” And he was on the way to the brig, May right behind him.

“Triplett, weapon up and bring up the rear.” Coulson didn't like the sickened expression on Loki's face just before he'd ducked through the door. He had enough presence of mind to switch off the ever-present collar control in his pocket before taking his place at Triplett's, then promptly forgot about the device. At this point, if the demigod needed magic to get things done, Coulson was not going to ask for permission slips.

... 

May kept her hand on the brig's latch, firearm down, finger near the trigger but not yet on it. The brig would resist a breach, but ricochet was always a hassle. The sound of rising moaning came through the door and that put a ripple down her spine — the brig was designed to be sound resistant. The prisoner had to be in utter agony. She looked up at Loki — magic was his scene, fine. Let him take point.

The expression on his face showed he understood and agreed with that assessment. His hand was raised and she would have sworn there was a light in his palm. He caught her narrowed glance and nodded once, shortly, as the other pair took flank nearby.

She flung the door open and took cover back behind the door's frame, Loki at the other side.

The moan rose into a scream at the sight of the demigod, a roaring mix of languages beginning to spill from his bleeding lips. The body contorted in constant seizures, crackling with the sounds of broken bones. None of the voices matched the prisoner's own. “I AM — I AM ALL — I AM MANY - I SPEAK FOR THE DARK – WE ARE COMING – CTHON – CHILDE OF DEAD GODS - WE ARE COMING – YOU WILL ALL DIE – DIE – YOU WILL BE DEVoured – THE DARKHOLD – OH – WAKING – RISING – SCREAMING – BLOOD MUSIC.”

“Holy crap, man, make it stop!” Triplett howled in startled fury. Loki seemed frozen. Coulson paled when he realized the expression on the demigod's face was that of stark horror. He felt suddenly grateful he couldn't sense what Loki clearly could.

The body continued to thrash, the stretching throat distending so unnaturally that it seemed to coil. “WE WILL MAKE YOU SCREAM FOREVER AND IT WILL BE THE SONG OF OUR GLORY – WE WILL FEAST ETERNAL – OH YOU WILL BLEEEEEEE-”

May took the shot, placing it high between the brows. For a microsecond, it seemed like the man's face was filled with gratitude. Then he was gone along with the light in his eyes.

Loki sagged against the door's frame, his hand shaking slightly as he brought it up to his face. He sounded shamed. “I am so sorry. That was... much more than I was prepared for.”

“You okay?” Her concern was curt but genuine. He gave her a short nod, eyes closing as his face flushed, revealing just how pale he'd gone. “Focus on me here for a second. I need to know something.”

“Yes.”

“Someone got to this guy, spoke through him. Can whoever they were focus on that magic like a beacon? Track him?”

“...Yes. Almost certainly what they did this for.” He swallowed once, hard.

“Okay. Phil?” She craned over and met his look. “I'm gonna go get on the radar and start looking for
company."

“Good idea. You okay?” he asked her.

“I'll freak out later.” She patted Loki's arm as she took off, startling him.

... 

“I think a little pee came out, personally.” said Phil conversationally after she left. Triplett slumped to the ground onto his butt. “So, one thing I wanted to point out while we're all here looking pretty creeped.” He stepped into the doorway to look at May's handiwork, nodding a little. “I mentioned The Exorcist, right?”

“I recall. Some archaic ritual to cast out demons.”

“I specifically meant a movie. Where, uh, said demons do pretty much things like that,” he gestured at the mess. “Guess I called this sort of thing happening after all. Although the ending was kinda different.”

Loki said nothing to that. His lips were thin and pressed tight.

“You're underplaying how much this whole thing is scaring you.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “I had your world on the brink, tore a hole through one of your greatest cities. I've got a bit of a reputation to keep, wasn't going to lose it on a book. Certainly I knew the book and its seekers serve eldritch abominations, but all you might see—”

“Nope. On your wavelength now. Super solidly.” His tone was still calm and even. “On a scale of tsunami to galactic annihilation, how bad could this be, really, in your honest opinion?”

“Phil - because if we are being honest, I'm going to be an ass about it for my own peace of mind. Phil, we are collectively and utterly *screwed* if the book's masters gets loose.” He gave a small, faltering smile.

It was the most human expression Coulson had ever seen on the demigod's face, and that put another run of gooseflesh up his arms. “Welp. I'm convinced. You two want a drink? Because I want a drink.”

“Drink,” said Loki, immediately.

“Drink,” said Triplett from the floor, more firmly.

“Right. Drinks for everyone, and I swear to God next time we get an overhaul I'm expanding the bar.” He took in an inhale. “Let's get everyone else on the way and make someone else pour. I think my hands are gonna shake for a while.”
The plate landed with a gentle *clink!* near his elbow. Loki looked up from where he'd briefly rested his head and noted the small, dark treat centered on the durable porcelain. He recognized the sound of her footsteps. He shook away the drifting feeling of muzziness. “Always you with the offerings.”

“Don't feel too singled out. Fitz and I made brownies in the lab,” came the voice of Simmons behind him. “They come out better than in the kitchen. Better temperature control from the bunsens, we think. Tend to do it in the middle of the night when we're all wrought up and need something to make us feel better. We made a bloody big batch this time, let me tell you. Fitz is delivering the rest all over the plane.”

“And you think I need to feel better?” His voice was cautious.

She gave that little bell laugh, less nervous than the last time he'd heard it. “My goodness. Absolutely.”

He said nothing to that and tugged the plate in front of him. Fine, it smelled delicious. A fleeting sense of utter sadness filtered over him at the admission, immediately followed up with the more familiar tickle of irritation. “This is not turning out to be my best year.” He managed to keep the worst of the tension out of his voice.

“What was your best year?” Simmons grabbed another chair with her free hand and pulled it over to the data table, glancing once at the book where it was strapped and covered on the far side of the room. She put her own brownie down on the table and plucked up a crumb.

He watched her, assessing how serious she'd intended the question. She arched an eyebrow, clearly waiting for at least some answer. “I don't know any more.” He shrugged, then pondered. “Yes, I do. A poor lie. I could have done better. The year I learned to read.”

“I bet you were very young.”

“I was, yes. We were tiny little creatures with fat in our faces and no cynicisms yet forged. When my brother and I were still friends.” He nudged free a corner of the brownie and ate it, eyes half-lidded in memory. “Better times. They don't last.”

“Did you and Thor read books together?”

That gave him a laugh, an honest one that surprised him out of his tired stillness. “*Gods*, no. He loathed reading, would only be forced to it at lessons. He's no illiterate, but it's simply not how he spent his time. He had to be forced to learn the handful of ballads he ought know as the All-Father's son. He'd coax and wheedle his way from the halls to go play with a trainer's weapons at every opportunity instead.”

“Other friends then?”
He gave her a sideways look. “Your tone tells me some of you raggle-taggle lot know the answer to that.”

She gave him a sheepish grin. “I did alright, I think. If you don't know any better, why fret at it? And besides, we've all got each other now on the plane.”

“Yes, I suppose you do.” He ate another corner of the brownie, missing a roll of her eyes in favor of his new nervous habit – glancing at the book every few minutes, checking his senses and the borders of the artifact’s influence. He finally looked away from it and noted her watching him. “A concern?”

“I'm still having nightmares. They're mild, but...” She grimaced.

“But you're worried.” He lifted his hand in a ritualistic motion, noted the fleck of chocolate stuck on it. That didn't look particularly dignified. On the other, a waste of a pleasant treat. He nipped the crumb off with a quick motion, getting a little laugh for his effort. “Compliments to the laboratory burners, then.”

She watched his eyes go half-lidded again, feeling nervous, noting how strung-out he looked. A long moment passed, though she felt nothing. He opened his eyes again. “You're clear.”

“You're sure?”

“Utterly.” He gave her a wry smile. “And I suspect it will remain that way. I mean this kindly and with comfort – you're not much of a useful target for it. The damage you could do under its influence is meager compared to other tools it could attempt to control.”

“That's why you look so tetchy and worn.” She blurted the observation, then rubbed her forehead. “Sorry. I could have been less tacky about that.”

“Accurate, however.”

She bit her lip and looked at him, saw again how truly tired he was. The thin flesh under his eyes was so dark it looked nearly bruised. The proximity to the book was clearly having some sort of effect on him. She turned to look at the imprisoned artifact. “What happens if it tries to...”

He abruptly cut her off, not unkindly. “End me. By whatever means you have, if I've not done the deed myself.” He looked down at the small plate and picked up the rest of the brownie. His stomach lazily flipped over once, thrown into passing nausea by the image in his mind. “I don't want to live with that thing in me.”

. . .

Another round of brownies made their way among the plane’s inhabitants while May watched the radar close for any stray contacts. They were over the eastern coastline of Georgia, not far from Savannah and a well-hidden fuel depot just outside city limits. The SHIELD Globemaster was solidly in the green in terms of its gas tank, but she liked knowing where every stop was just in case.

She kept the plane on its autopilot, watching the bright city pass by underneath while she kept a weather eye on the radar. Six hours since the mess in the brig, and no contact. Waiting made her edgy – she faced it with serenity, but deep down she hated the tension of that slow time before danger. Wanting to move first was one the hardest things she’d once learned to overcome. Jump us already, guys. We know you’re coming.

When the soft chime came, she was ready.
Simmons popped a hand out to stop the slide of her small plate, noticing Loki doing the same thing. “They must-”

She was interrupted by a low, sonorous boom that rattled through the plane. Her guts felt like they were falling forever as the plane took a sudden dive, then gasped and grabbed the table with her other hand when their previous altitude was retaken and surpassed. The plates were forgotten, but they were durable enough to bounce around without shattering.

May's clipped, even voice came over the intercom. “Second wave of UAV inbound. Gonna take another drop, guys, and if you're not strapped in by now, no time. Hang on.”

She braced herself and felt her reality lose all connection with gravity for another long, terrifying second. She hissed a startled inhale of breath, instinctively looking around for others in trouble when the plane evened out again. Loki wasn't hanging on. He'd pushed away from the table and stood on wobbling legs as the plane continued to sway. “Are you alright?”

He waved her off. She realized he seemed to be staring at nothing, pale lips moving in something unheard. Gravity settled back in with an almost physical locking sensation. “Extremely temporary effect,” he said, sagging a little. “I can do that much. Go get your friends and strap in while you can.”

“Coulson!” She gestured towards his office.

“I'll check on him.”

She took him at his word and fled towards their rooms.

Agent Coulson noticed Loki barging into the doorway but wasn't particularly interested in the demigod's assessing concern. He himself was standing, firmly gripping the secured display on the wall. He was busy surveying the mess splayed along the floor with tight-faced annoyance.

“You're all right?” asked Loki, in a voice that teetered with stress. Said mess was mostly scattered paperwork, a freshly dinged tablet, and the workmat. He noted the ridiculous broken watch was safe in the display case, so what could possibly be the man's problem?

“My goddamn pliers,” groused Coulson.

Loki was baffled. “The-”

“They're so small.” He shook his head. “I think they might have fallen into some joint along the wall. Probably gonna be stuck in the vents for all time.” He lifted his face and glowered at Loki. “Do you know how long it took me to find a pair I really liked?”

“Can we discuss your priorities?”

Coulson flapped a hand irritatedly. “May's got this.”

They dropped again, Loki clutching at the door's frame as his cantrip wore off. A startled shriek came from somewhere below as the plunging rules of gravity set in again. Coulson let his legs crouch and sway, absorbing the motion like he was on the subway. “I'm pretty sure she's got this.”

“Phil.”
He reached out and tapped at the intercom. “You've totally got this, right?”

“We're gonna land real damn hard, real damn soon.” Her voice was an iceberg.

He nodded, absorbing that. “Okay.” He switched the intercom off and looked at the increasingly pale Loki, gesturing at the seat across from him. “That one's got a seatbelt built in, too. So, how's your day going?”

... Raina watched the combat drones do their work on the tracking monitor, the dots and numbers scrolling along making their deadly aerial art into something distant and impersonal. “The EMP is charged, Ian. The dull part will be over soon.”

“They're not going to get close enough to land to survive that drop.” He had his arms crossed, watching The Hand's selected engineers control his 'donated' tech.

She laughed, delighted in his constant cynicism. “Of course they are. They're far too used to worst case scenarios to not have a plan for this one. They're a tiger team at heart.”

One engineer called to another. They set off the short-range pulse and watched the specialized Globemaster take a final careening drop out of the sky. She watched the mathematics of its arc go chaotic, then straighten out on a controlled new flightpath. “See? Matsu'o's already preparing the next phase.” Whether he wants to or not. Vernei was wholly in charge, now. He squatted in the center of the observation room, his hands clasped serenely atop his cane. It seemed to her that his outline had begun to shift slightly since his private meeting with Matsu'o, fuzzing somehow. Becoming fluid. She spared a glance for The Hand's senior figure – still dead white and expression well-closed, with his arms hidden behind his back.

Ian watched the calculated landing arc, asked the question he really wanted an answer to under his breath. He shot a glance at Matsu'o as he spoke. “What happened to that guy's hands?”

She grabbed at his upper arm, pinching it with surprising firmness. “Neither you, nor I, ever want the answer to that, I think.” She gave him a little smile. “But if you'd like to get into Matsu'o's good graces again... I might have a suggestion for a later date.”

... May held onto the controls with a grip like steel, manually steering the plane's now powerless glide. She already had an open stretch of South Carolina wilderness all picked out and ready for runway. She couldn't take time to look, but she made an educated guess that Skye and Triplett were strapped in just within shouting range. “Skye! When we hit, I need the power spun back up ASAP. Get Fitz, prioritize active camo followed by weapons systems just in case.”

“Got it!” The words drifted up from about where she'd figured. She narrowed her eyes and watched the treeline approach.

... Coulson waited for the last chaotic bump with his hands folded in his lap, felt it rattle through every one of his vertebrae as the plane taxied down as relatively safe as possible, considering the nature of their joyride. “Fun, huh?”

Loki looked at him like he was the crazy one. Phil ignored the demigod's expression, rescuing his tablet and waiting for it to power back up so he could check the GPS. “Oh wow,” he muttered,
raising an eyebrow. “You are gonna just love the name of the area we've crash-landed in. It's not completely portentous or anything.”

“Dear gods,” Loki sighed. He waited for it, exhaustion creasing new deep lines in his face.

“Welcome to scenic Hell Hole Swamp.”
As Loki’s tension rises, Coulson offers a hopefully game-changing discovery.

“Camo is online, we’re working on the rest of the main systems now.” Fitz looked up from the plane’s readout as Coulson, followed by Loki, entered the room. Loki still looked about as rattled as Fitz felt by the hard landing. “Utilities are already back up; internal devices, lab equipment, etcetera. Very short range pulse and not a lot of lasting damage, grateful for that much. Core systems were reinforced for just this sort of thing. May’s already prepping for attackers, said the drones peeled off. No idea when they’re going to strike, sir.”

“Yup. Means they wanted us intact. Didn't want to sift through too much garbage and figured we'd land all right. Two points for the bad guys.” Coulson sighed and puttered with the table, tapping what he was relatively sure was the activation controls. He glanced at the Darkhold as he did so and saw it was still strapped in place. “I've got something I wanted to get to before we draw up battle plans. Again. Did you say this thing was up?”

“It's got to finish cycling, sir. Essentially rebooting.”

“It doesn't jingle or anything? That freaky orchestra clash some computers do?”

“Macs. No, sir.” Fitz shrugged, thinking. “I could make it do that if you wanted.”

“I'm considering it. Right now I'm just sort of standing here looking at a table... just being a table. That's kinda existentialist.” He crossed his arms and shrugged, then flinched when the top lit up abruptly.

Fitz pointed at it with his tablet stylus. “There it is, sir.”

“I can see that. That's great, Fitz, thank you.” He waved Loki over while syncing the data table to his office tablet. “Okay, so, I told you I might possibly have something in the files.”

“And I recall saying such a possibility would be a pleasant change of pace.” Loki decided to not bring up the fact that most of the rest of the plane’s inhabitants were whipping around in full recovery mode whilst they were kibitzing. The human seemed rather intent on what he was doing. Whatever he was doing. He rubbed a hand across his face, feeling the tense skin prickle under his touch.

Coulson tapped his fingers across the screen and brought up a world map with a data overlay. He swished off most of the layers, focused the blue-line digital map onto the United States, then focused in again on the northeastern states. “I just bet I’m doing this the slow way,” he muttered to himself. Fitz huddled his tablet against himself and wisely opted to not jump in and assist him.

Data streams popped in again, long coded streams of numbers. With an input from Coulson, he centered in on a specific one – localized in the New York area - and and decrypted it.

“STRANGE,” read off Loki. He arched an eyebrow, bemused. “Well, yes, this all very much is-”

“It's a name.” Phil rubbed two fingers along the bridge of his nose. “He got on our radar not all that
long ago, but I don't have too much info on hand. It was pretty compartmentalized. You're gonna
love his file, though. So to speak.”

He brought up more information. Loki scanned it as it scrolled, picking out odd details and possible
highlights.

activity – cschk 'ancient one' unknown entry – Tibet cschk – the input 'Agamotto' is an unknown
value, enter new data into table at... - Sorcerer Supreme – file redacted

Loki puzzled at some of the shorthand and acronyms, then sounded out two of the most dramatic
words. He pursed his lips, managing to summon at least some dry humor. “If I hear another jibe
about my ego after reading that title, I promise I will throw an absolutely astounding tantrum.”

“They say it ain't bragging if you can do it.”

“Granted, and you're certain he's not merely some jumped up telephone psychic? I've noted the
advertisements.”

“Wouldn't be in our files if he were.” Coulson considered, then explained part of his conviction.
“The internal issues we had with HYDRA? Not overdoing a summary here, but I've gone over the
post-party breakdown a bunch of times since and as part of their big finale, they were pretty intent on
blowing out everything and everyone that could be a threat. To them, listed originally as targets we
were watching. This guy was a priority. I always thought that was weird, so it stuck in my memory
somewhere. The guy never knew how close he came to having a gift pack of missiles redecorating
his place.”

“And said place, which, if I may be allowed to bemoan fate... New York? Truly?”

“What, you don't want to go back?”

“I've heard I missed out on the pizza.”

“Yeah, they've rebuilt most of the best places since you blew through.”

“Isn't that something,” he intoned morosely. There was a growing edge to his voice that got
Coulson's notice. “So, that's the good news. You've found yet another sorcerer.”

“With a title like that, the way he was filed in our system, he's got to be our best shot. Either he's a
lead, or he's straight up got his hands on this possible other book.” Coulson looked briefly pleased
with himself, watched Loki's continuously dour expression darken his face. It knocked a few chips
off his good cheer. “Okay, what?”

“The plane's down, a pack of warriors are certain to be coming this way, you've got red all over your
brig, the book is getting stronger, and it's a long damned walk to New York. Don't get me wrong,
Coulson.” He gestured at the data. “That possibility vastly exceeds my hopes. It's tempered with the
fact we're presently trapped quite far away in a place you just told me is called a literal hellhole!” His
voice creaked up the vocal register, several weeks worth of stress singing out from a near-hysterical
throat.

“Relax. I've had worse days.”

“How ARE YOU SANE?”

Fitz backed up at the sudden roar, his butt banging into the nearby counter. Loki appeared to be at
the end of his rope, no longer hiding the extent of his exhaustion. The thinness of his face made him look frail in the half-light the plane could barely manage. It was a stunning change from his first arrival on the plane.

“Sit down.” Coulson said it with a quiet, firm voice of command so implacable that Skye automatically headed for a chair as she entered the room. She looked confused. Loki looked at him for a moment and then, verily, sat down.

“Okay. You're burning yourself out fretting at that book.”

“I'm not fretting at it. It's fretting at me,” he snapped. He took a long inhale, resisted the urge to sneak a glance at the artifact. “I don't think we have a lot of time.”

Coulson absorbed that. Yeah, that'd be a good reason for the Asgardian to look a little tweaky. He kept his voice calm. “You didn't seem quite as worried yesterday.”

“That was yesterday.” He glanced up at Coulson. “Ask Simmons. She saw it plain on my face scant hours ago, and much to my regret, she'd know. That thing is not going to wait around for us to get airborne again. We can ill afford delays.” A muscle jumped in his jaw as he gestured at the Darkhold. “I'd wager it knows we're attempting to be on the attack.”

“All the more reason for you to take a deep breath and work with us here. I want to get everyone on the bus prepped, and then you and I are gonna focus on the bigger problem.”

“How?”

Coulson gave him a pat on the shoulder, noticing how bony it felt under the thin fabric of his clothes. “Once I know our team's ready to handle incoming, you and I are gonna start our road trip in Lola.” Loki gave him a puzzled look. “The car's not like the watch, Loki. Car works terrific.” He spread his hands and grinned. “AM, FM, satellite, CD, a full tank of gas and some sunglasses. I just wish I'd been able to buy that engine straight off the rack back in France. Get a little extra horsepower under the hood.”

. . .

“All you guys gotta do is hold them long enough for them to realize that what they want isn't here anymore. It should take a while, apparently Loki's done something to make sure the whole place keeps stinking – so to speak – like both he and the Darkhold's still here.”

Loki allowed a small nod, the glint of the collar still at his throat. He looked calmer, if still heavily strung-out. “An easy trick. Some can track magical energies, as this one has proven. So you leave your trail around with deliberate intent. Like baiting deer.” He caught Skye's bemused, considering look. He rolled his eyes. “It does not involve wandering around rubbing your rump and your cheeks on the walls like a cat, no.”

“I'm gonna picture it anyway,” she said cheerily.

Coulson jingled the car keys in his hand in response to that unwanted mental image, the rest of his team milling around the cargo bay. “Once they do get wind that we're gone, that'll take the bulk of the pressure off this line of attack. You've got the contingencies ready if they decide to try and just blow you up at that point.”

“Yeah, and then they're hot on your butt.” Triplett rubbed a hand across his face. “That's not super optimal, sir.”
“We're gonna have a lot of lead time, and we're a fast moving target. Loki's got enough juice to muddy our trail as well. Bonus, they don't know where we're going.”

“We think,” added Loki, dourly. “It's probable that our sorcerous pursuer is aware that there's unfriendly competition in this country. There's the ever-present risk that they know more about this Strange than we do.” He shifted the heavy duffel bag on his shoulder – densely packed, triple-latched shut, with the book wrapped up inside some pure white bath towels in the center. A pair of heavy gloves were snagged inside the straps. The towels weren't an optimal choice; smacking of the same sort of desperate logic that might draw one to use a red SOLO cup as a ritual chalice, but what the hell. He'd slapped some protective magic on them anyway and made a quasi-sanctified burrito wrap with the book as the carnitas filling. It was, literally, better than nothing.

The large shot of whiskey he'd taken in Coulson's office just before coming down for the meet was more comforting. His mouth still felt tingly and numb, heat settling into his empty – if nervous - stomach. It beat out the over-bitter mead in Asgard that the warriors preferred.

“We'll hope for the best, and as always, prepare for the worst. The 'scent' you're leaving here should help. May, you're in charge.”

From her place in front of the rest of the assembled group, she gave him a sharp nod over crossed arms. “We'll be fine, Phil.”

“Damn right you will be.” He backed up two steps towards the car, giving it a quick glance to be sure she was ready. As usual, she gleamed. He quirked a tiny smile, forever the proud papa. “Any last questions before we take off?”

“Can I drive?” Loki's drawl had a hint of his usual amused arrogance in it.

“Not a chance in hell.”

“Phrasing, please.”
Chapter Summary

Coulson and Loki take their road trip while the team pulls a little Vegas Strip magic act of their own.

There's a deleted scene somewhere around here involving chocolate chip pancakes. And, on another note, the next few updates will be two chapters each until the story wraps up. We're getting to the end times! (Loki reiterates: "Phrasing, please!")

May stood over Fitz as his hands moved rapidly over the plane's inner workings – wires and blinking LEDs shifting positions and patterns in an easy flow as she watched him work. He glanced up now and again, looking for the latest string of failure indicators with eyes crinkled with tension, waiting for the one that told him he'd succeeded. “You've got plenty of time and we're well on schedule,” she told him, trying to share her stoic serenity.

“Three hours minimum isn't really that much time for a full experimental recode, May.”

“It's an eternity, used right. You've got this,” she reassured him. “It's going to be far less hectic than France this time, no matter what. Shouldn't be much in the way of open conflict.”

“Like a walk in a park on a Sunday.” He sighed. “This was not in the training manual.”

“But adaptation was.” She put her hand on his shoulder and favored him with one of her little smiles.

Skye had Triplett watching the readouts on the tablet. “K, you seeing the new inputs from Fitz?”

“Got 'em. Looks like we’re almost charged back up.” He glanced from the flickering display to Skye as she reworked code through her laptop. “You really think this is gonna work?”

“Fitz and I've been listening to Loki for a few weeks now. Doesn't run his mouth as much as you'd think, and I never got a chance to ask him about that horse thing in his mythology, but the stuff about how illusions work? That's neat.” She looked up at Triplett and grinned. “With him not here, we can't really pick his brains or just slap this on without all this reprogramming mess, but active camo was always about being adaptive from the surrounding environment. Technically, this should be simpler. It doesn't have to adapt to what it sees around itself, except for lighting conditions. It just looks within, sort of. We just tell it how it's supposed to look and it goes 'ok boss, we do that.'”

The horse thing? Triplett forgot the question as his attention was drawn away by the pop-up notification. “He's ready.”

“Dress rehearsal!”

Simmons watched the plane shimmer from where she sat on a mossy stump, having just read the instant message from Skye inside. Instead of vanishing, the slightly banged up but intact plane
suddenly looked half-scraped. An engine creaked loosely on the left wing. The tail assembly was bent into uselessness while the trim tab appeared completely snapped off. The landing gears were popped, tires shredded. The paint job underneath was battle-worn, supposedly from the treetops. The whole plane seemed just a little off kilter, tilting slightly to the side. All just shadowplay. Simmons was impressed by the completeness of the illusion. Poor baby looks like she went a losing round with Godzilla.

If the viewer didn't realize there was no sign of any debris under the plane, much less anywhere else, they'd think the plane was trashed from the hard landing with no way of getting airborne. The perfect 'sick prisoner' act.

. . .

*somewhere still in South Carolina*

Loki watched the blocky black and yellow sign whisk by. “What the hell is a 'Waffle House'?”

“An arguable downgrade from an IHOP.”

He rolled his eyes. “That's wonderfully helpful, thank you. What is an IHOP?”

“Pure corn syrup and and carbo heaven. I've never once left the place without feeling kinda disgusted with myself.” Phil watched the freeway signs, looking for the familiar logo and finding it advertised as coming up in about twenty miles. “You hungry?”

“With that ringing endorsement, I'm truly not sure.” His stomach grumbled at him, registering its own opinion of his snark.

Regardless of whether he'd heard the peanut gallery or not, Phil snorted behind Lola's wheel. “Well, whatever. I'm hungry. I'm tired, I'm worried about my team, you look like crap, and there's a demon book in the backseat of my car. I wanna stop real quick and eat my emotions.”

. . .

“We just got buzzed by a lone drone.” May watched the tiny dot disappear off the radar map. Three hours estimate apparently meant closer to five. They were taking their sweet time, waiting for dusk to draw long shadows across the already gloomy swamp. “They're doing their last check, I think. Not much longer.”

“God, I hate waiting.” Skye sighed and took a long sip of her coffee.

“Tell me about it.” May rubbed the skin under her right eye, pulling it taut to keep her alert. “The traps set up outside?”

She gestured over her shoulder with a point of her thumb. “Yeah, I asked the guys. We're all set. It's literally just the wait now. Like, I can't even relax and read something because I'm afraid the moment I do, all hell will break loose. So to speak.” She winced. “So we just... wait.”

Yep.”

“Ugh!”

“Mmmyep.”
Raina kept watch on the readout. The plane seemed immobile; little movement, no energy signatures from the engines. “It's been hours,” said Quinn. “If they haven't powered on now, they're not going to.”

“I wouldn't be sure of that.” She had her doubts. 'Tiger team,' indeed. The SHIELD agents had something up their sleeve, and there'd been a single blip several hours previous. Her suspicion that someone fled the crash site went dismissed by Tsurayaba, though. If she were right... it wasn't going to be a good time to preen at the expense of his mistake. She'd be better off benefiting from seeming to act at solving the problem when it was realized.

Meanwhile, Matsu'o remained close by Vernei's side, ready for the ground attack. His expression was that of a man that experienced a true religious revelation – that hell existed, and its masters knew his name perfectly well.

*And here I thought The Hand would be pleased by proof of demons in the world. Suppose it's just like the other side of the aisle, she mused. We're always better off with the demons we know than the angels we don't. But in a choice between demon and devil, I'd think I might do anything to get away from Vernei's patrons.*

Anything.

... later, traveling

“Explain this music to me, please.” Loki rubbed a hand slowly across his forehead, like he had a headache. He probably did. The bass was up pretty high.

Phil glanced down at the CD readout and checked the track number. “What don't you get?”

“They start off with one song and then it just bizarrely turns into an almost completely different song midway through. I don't understand it. It's maddening.”

“It's just a style shift. These guys really don't do it as much as you think, there's just a few songs where it's really noticeable. Freddie was a great experimenter, stylistically. Fantastic artist.”

“It's *jarring.*”

“It fits them. You should have seen them live back in the day.” Phil smiled to himself.

Loki sighed, then jammed the button to loop the CD back to an earlier track. Freddie Mercury brought his best epic roar, rattling the speakers hard enough to give Coulson a jolt of pride at going top of the line on those, too.

“Here we are, born to be kings!

*WE'RE THE PRINCES OF THE UNIVERSE!*”

Coulson grinned at Loki's clear – if subdued - enjoyment of the song as he checked his rearview mirror out of habit. They were still clear of trouble, no sign of any followers. He glanced to his side again. The demigod was tapping a single finger in time to the music.
Freddie continued rocking on until the sweet guitar solo kicked in and they both listened to that part quietly for a few. Loki had the ghost of a smirk on his drained face. Coulson didn't have the heart to break the silence until the tune was over.

“Should have got some coffee to go. Tell you what, next time you take over a kingdom, I'll bring a boombox with a copy of this CD in it as a gift.”

Loki huffed a single dry laugh through his nose. “Right before you help organize the rebellion to take me down.”

“Well, yeah. Obviously. How you doing over there?”

“I'm exhausted, Coulson. I don't wish to talk.”

“You need to stay awake. Talk to me.”

“There's nothing to talk about.”


May popped the first line of traps when the radar finally pinged incoming; a set of bait lines and low sounds cobbled up by Fitz and Simmons to help draw alligators to their festive little area of swamp. Likely wouldn't do much, but a scan of the area noted a lot of gators, and hey, anything to give their attackers pause.

She flicked on the remote monitors that had been set up to watch the approach. It gave her a grim smile to see the mercenaries slow down. A handful outright stopped when a knot of roiling alligators broke the surface near their broken path, apparently arguing loudly with a senior officer. The smile vanished when the gators swam away again, as if following some other invisible signal. The water rippled, like a rush of heat passing over it. Great. This other sorcerer guy is physically with the group.

May manipulated the remote cams to get a bigger view of the group, using it to calculate when to pop the next line of defense when she spotted the leading figure. It was impossible to not notice him; pink flesh marked pale and blotchy, somehow spongy. He didn't look right, as if his very form was falling out of phase with the reality she knew. Then his black eyes glanced up towards the monitors and the screens went dark.

Baring her teeth in a grimace, she popped the patchy mine field and ran to prep the rest of the team.


Vernei watched a handful of The Hand's men splinter against the plinking mine field with disinterest. Mortal flesh was good for little but fodder. He scratched idly at his own throat, shuddering disgustedly at the feel of his own loose skin. Soon, burbled his other self inside his own mind, that part of himself that remembered capering in the long dark before the world's dawn, before he formed his flesh into something the humans might not attack outright. He bared thick fangs at the dark shape in the distance. He could smell the thief inside, that pale, alien whisper of magic.

He had never tasted alien blood, alien magic before. It might pair well with wine.


Coulson watched mile markers pass. The Virginias were coming up. On that leg of the journey, he could press Lola considerably harder. Maybe even engage flight mode. Only a couple hours to New
York either way. He shot a glance to his side. Loki's eyes were fluttering, mostly shut. “Still with me?”

“Mm.” He slumped further into the passenger seat. The eyes opened again, taking in the road signs.

“What was growing up in Asgard like?” He waited for a response, opened his mouth again when he thought one wasn't coming. He closed it when Loki stirred, his face lifting slightly from his chest.

“From what viewpoint? Generally or my own?”

“Whichever.”

“Uninteresting and private.” He crossed his arms against himself, eyes drifting shut again.

Phil stared at the broken yellow passing lines, his jaw clenching at the terse tone. He forced himself to relax. *He's tense and tired, so he's gonna be extra dickish. It's not personal.* “SHIELD gets a lot of types through its doors,” he said instead, conversationally. “We keelhaul good people straight outta school, or off the streets, or from other agencies, usual thing. We get some people from the bureau, you know, the FBI. Solid folks. Once in a while, we yank a profiler that's really good at thinking outside of the box. Someone that specializes in figuring out how people tick, when they go wrong.”

Loki sat silently.

“They're interesting to listen to. Kinda creepy sometimes, especially if they've been in violent crimes for a while. Now, nothing's ever a constant, but you can get them talking about cycles of abuse, or particular trigger events in a person's life. Over and over, these kinds of patterns that make people who they are, or how how they break.”

“Your idle conversation has a point. Kindly get to it.”

“Did you grow up thinking you were going to roam around with a taste for planetary conquest or what?”

“That's not what you want to know.” Loki shook his head. “Nor are you self-important, egotistical enough to question why I killed you, to look for some greater meaning there. You know perfectly well how battle works, what a war forever costs its warriors.”

. . .

Matsu'o kept his gloved hands at his side, one half-crushed but yet useable, the other mangled and without sensation, gesturing at the plane in the open field with a sharp jut of his chin. “They're out of traps. We rush the plane, cut it open if need be, and overrun them. I'm weary of this chase. Let us have done.” He glanced to his side, noting Vernei's roiling face. It held an expression of open avarice that nauseated him. He looked away again, filling his nostrils with the smell of swamp instead. Instead of shame, he felt hate for the man creature and his magics.

“Wait,” hissed Vernei. “I wish to savor the return of my damnation. Let them sit in fear inside their metal prison. Until full dark.”

. . .

Loki lifted his head and marked the rise of the distant mountains against the purpling star-sparked sky. “Not a bad view,” he murmured.

“What is it you think I want to know?”
“You want to know what happened to me. To make me what I am.” It came out flat, devoid of emotion. In truth, it came with a hidden pang of pain.

It was Coulson's turn to go quiet. “Putting it that way makes it really sound like it's none of my business.”

Loki pulled himself up in his seat and turned his head for a moment to check the duffel bag, counting its latches and testing himself. There was no way around it – his defenses were long since cracked, and the need to sleep was drawing close. And if he slept now, the Darkhold would have easy access to every part of his mind. *I weary of fighting. I could just give in. It'd almost be expected of me, I think.*

Instead, he fought to rally. He spoke again. “There's a moment for many, I’ve seen. Always at least one for every lifetime. It demarcates cleanly the *before*, presages the *after*. Everything about your fate can crystallize in that moment, shatter everything that you thought you knew. Destroy even your own identity and leave you collapsed amidst the rubble to try and decide what comes next for you. It's a black, horrifying moment when you realize you don't have any answers for that, because you had the questions all wrong. And you never understood why. No one would tell you.”

He arched an eyebrow, stabbing himself with the memories to keep himself awake. “I was lied to, Coulson. I will give you that, because you ask kindly, and for all the blood I've spilled I suppose I owe that much.” A low, slow sigh. In his mind, everything was still raw. “I was lied to by them that meant well, and them that meant to make a currency of the truth behind the lie. I don't want to talk about it any deeper than that.”

“You don't want me to ask what the truth was.”

“The truth is the same lesson you’ve learned over and over for yourself.” His lips pressed together against teeth that, for a second, clenched bitterly. “Monsters exist.”

... 

Matsu'o watched his men charge the plane, a line of guards protecting the breachers. The cargo bay abruptly popped open by mere inches and Matsu'o saw the tall man inside with his weapon, the one named Triplett. “Move!” he bellowed, aware of the SHIELD agent's ability in combat. “Incoming!”

They didn't hear the warning. The man inside the plane shot the short range launcher, spraying its small but effective payload on the group. Next to him, Vernei stiffened as if realizing something and then roared once, charging forward himself.

“NO!”

Matsu'o froze at the fury in the scream, layered in multiple voices. The count screamed again, his hand reaching out to snare one of the injured men and screeching insanely at him. “*YOU SCREWED IT ALL UP. ALL OF YOU. MISTAKES YOU ARE, FETID CREATURES. CAN'T YOU SMELL?? THAT?!!*”

Matsu'o looked away when Vernei buried his face in his victim's throat in a violent frenzy. He could still hear the soft sucking sounds, the gnaw of the man-creature's teeth. The rest of his men scattered around the scene, regrouping and looking at their commander with frightened faces.

Vernei let the corpse go and raised his pale head to bare a mouthful of sharp, gore-flecked fangs at Matsu'o. Suddenly his voice was filled with eerie calm. “We are duped. I am tricked by your alien. ME, TRICKED.” The voice spiraled up into a mad screech before settling into faux calmness once
more. “An echo, only echos of magic inside. Destroy the plane! They are worthless!” With what seemed like a single step, the man with inhuman eyes was in Matsuo’s face, breathing his copper breath as he spoke. “I will not abide such insult before my masters. Find them. Or you are my next meal.”

“They went north, your lordship.” Raina smiled and put a protective hand on Matsu'o's shoulder as she came up behind him. Vernei’s eyes blazed as he considered that detail.

“Strange.” He hissed the word, dully. It meant nothing to Raina. He turned his bloating face north, hate lining his features.

“I tracked a blip earlier, but we thought it was in error, then. No matter. It's easily traced-” Her easy words were cut off as the lights blared on all over the plane and the sounds of the engines spun up. Vernei screeched again, the sound of it spiraling into the mossy trees. “Oh my,” she murmured, impressed with the now-intact plane's steady rise away from its ground-bound attackers. “Not such weak prey after all, were they?”

Matsu'o pulled away from her with a glare. Lit up in the blare of the plane's lights, she looked evenly back into his face, then arched a single eyebrow at him. She made her implication clear. *I've got the plan now. And if you stay with me, we'll survive this mad count. Are you in?*

His nostrils flared, his gaze flickering back to the quivering lord. Then he looked back to her, eyes narrowing. She smiled, then reached out to pat comfortably at his arm.
house of cards

Chapter Summary

To be honest, Dr. Strange really does have a sweet house. It'd be a real shame if anything happened to it.

As dawn drew into morning and the sun pounded down onto the city, Loki seemed to recoup some energy. He complained about the route into the city, about the traffic in midtown, about the gnarl of side streets they needed to take to find the nestled corner of Greenwich Village their digital map indicated. He complained about bicyclists, about the smell of the dumpsters, and thoroughly insulted the New York radio hosts on the FM band. Coulson took the ceaseless complaints with weary good humor; it meant the demigod was making an effort at pulling himself out of his funk. Also, all the complaining could have him pass as local in a pinch.

Backed up in early morning rush hour traffic, Phil checked his phone for updates and pursed his lips at the new details in his mail. Loki caught the expression on his face and left off the snarl he was saving for a distastefully large F-250 truck trying to merge in front of them. “What?”

Coulson shrugged.

“Oh, now, don’t you become the truculent jackass in the car. There's room for but one of me. If it’s bad news, just spill it.”

“The team had to jump their lift-off ahead by like an hour.” He broke down the short assault.

“Anyway, sounds like almost the exact same time Triplett popped the butt of the plane to repel The Hand, this guy we think is your other magician whiffed out we played a decoy. He visibly flipped, and May made the call to bug out. Verified that a command was sent out to just bust the plane.”

“Your people are unharmed, I'm sure.”

Coulson glanced over, deciding that was in fact an undertone of concern he'd heard in there. “Yeah, no major injuries. Fitz got some sparks off an overloaded piece of tech, I didn't get what. Some burns, but he's alright. Other than all that, their plan worked great.”

Loki watched him. “Any word on if pursuit is attempting to catch up?”

“They don't know. I'm assuming they are.”

“A fair assumption.”

They parked Lola in a guarded lot a block away from the private homes and their masking green canopy, walked the last way in relatively amiable silence – the shorter figure in a dark suit creased from the long drive, the tall man in a black hoodie with the duffel bag slung over one shoulder. To a passerby, it looked like the tall man carried a great weight, and his face was drawn and pale with effort when they found their way to the front of a nestled little nook somewhere along Bleecker Street. The narrow alleys between the homes and the rustling trees hid the sprawling dimensions of the mansion, all but out of place amidst the memories and old stones of bohemian New York.
The early morning's light caught the circular window that was the centerpiece of the building's face, a design on it Phil had never seen before. Like a game of tic-tac-toe in a melting LSD dream. It made him feel odd to look at it, a sensation he now knew could directly indicate magic. He spared a look at the still demigod next to him.

Loki stood for a long time with his head down and his eyes closed. Coulson let him be, recognizing that what he was doing was a kind of searching with his magical senses. When he opened them again, his face was creased with a kind of naked relief. It looked odd on his thin features, lines and angles better suited to tension and arrogance. “It's here. The other.”

“You're sure? We literally just took a nice, amiable overnight road trip and ended up exactly where we needed to be?”

“Hush, I'm going to enjoy this for a moment. One thing in our lives that was not a massive hassle. We'll probably pay for that later.” Loki glanced down at Coulson, who was fiddling again with his phone. “So, we knock on this Strange person's door or what?”

“We could try that.” _tap-tap-tap_ went his fingers. He didn't look up at the demigod.

“He's not going to simply let us borrow his ancient artifact of mystical white magic with a please and a coupon for cookies. If it were ever _that_ easy, I would have accomplished a lot of things in my life in very different ways.”

“It's cool. I got a trace in, turns out he's out on vacay anyway. Nobody knows where. Maybe he's out getting to be one with the oneness of stuff.” Coulson lifted his head and grinned up at the demigod. “So we're gonna break in. Please help make sure we don't get our heads exploded by mystic energies or whatever he's got besides a burglar alarm.”

Loki leaned forward and squinted underneath the doorbell and read off the name of the security service. “Do they offer giant three headed canines with their monitoring service?”

“Probably not.” A set of lockpicks appeared in Coulson's hands. “I got this part.”

...  

“This is a _really_ nice house.” Phil instinctively checked his holster for his sidearm as he glanced around the doorframe that marked the line between the lobby and what appeared to be a vast parlor intended for guest arrivals. The parlor held an artfully arranged set of Victorian chairs with lush gold and red detailing. They kept company with an elegant darkwood chaise lounge. At the back was a polished, gleaming desk with silver serving bowls scattered along its top. He lifted his head to double-check. Yeah, he was pretty sure one of them held M&Ms. “I should've gone into neurosurgery. Am I nuts or does it seem way bigger in here than it did outside?”

“Can't it be both?” Loki kept close along the walls, his free hand up as he tested for things only he could see. He paused at an engraved brass wall sconce, then moved on to the bookshelf with its harmless collection of photo portfolios, finding nothing except some nice detail work around the recessed screws that kept all the furniture in place.

“...And you take that round.” Phil sighed, realizing he should have seen that one coming. “I feel like if this guy ever moves, they could put a really nifty bookstore and cafe in here.”

“I've been through enough of your cities. You know full well it'd be bulldozed for one of those anonymous chains that offer bland uniformity, overpriced treats, and free wi-fi.” Loki came to a stop on the other side of the doorframe. “It's absolutely bigger inside. He's got a dimensional fold in here,
a kind of controlled housing tesseract. Rather impressive, actually. I wonder how long it took to make.”

“What?”

“Fourth dimension construction, only possible on the three dimensional plane of reality by using magic to tell physics and your interpretation of the known world to go soak. A kind of hypercube.” Loki looked at Coulson's still-puzzled face, realizing he had a way to make it even simpler. He spread his hands. “It's like the TARDIS.”

Coulson stared at him from across the doorway.

“Look, it was the only thing palatable on television while I was waiting for my nice suit in London.” He left out that the wait took several days and he'd binged on over two dozen random episodes, along with some other sordid show where everyone seemed to die in job lots during weddings.

“Okay.” Coulson shrugged. “Just threw me. So, if this entire place is magic, how do we navigate from here? Are all the hallways just gonna loop back to a guest bathroom and the front door in self defense?”

Loki raised his head as if sniffing the air. “First floor seems relatively straightforward, can move around it normally. I sense little unusual, no magical restrictions in place. There were two more floors at least, based on the external appearance of the place. Upper floors will be more thoroughly protected, might not even be what we need.” He considered. “All things in parallel. I wager there's hidden nooks; sanctums within sanctums. We move carefully, check room by room for other entrances to places unmapped by rational blueprints. What we need is certainly here, but where is going to be a bit of a puzzle. One that I don't suggest we dawdle solving.”

...  

One of Matsu'o's men flew the tiny plane, Matsu'o himself and Raina sitting in the back in grim silence. Vernei, enraged by Loki's decoy trail, had gone on ahead using the darkness to slip through space quickly. In curt tones he'd explained his destination and stated his orders for assistance. Raina had been the one to bow her head low and agree pleasantly.

The weaponry sat latched and boxed in the back of the plane – along with the weaponized laser sat Quinn's private project, an expanded prototype from SHIELD's stolen files. Reverse engineered from Asgardian technology, it was almost certain to blow a hole in Loki. Fully overclocked, it could be cataclysmic. Once upon a time, it might have been destined for the Deathlok project.

Now, Vernei was adamant in his demand. Raina's few protests went soundly ignored; he declared not only death on the rival sorcerer for shaming him, but annihilation. There would be nothing left for study when he was through with his revenge. Naturally, she'd accepted his decree with open respect. Privately, Quinn had met her eyes before leaving him with the others in the Carolinas. He knew the score, knew to pave a trail off-grid for both of them after all this was over. With or without a viable Asgardian corpse in tow.

She leaned forward and checked the plane's console over the pilot's shoulder. They had less than an hour to the city in the dawning light. Vernei, with his need to remain amidst shadows wherever possible, was almost certainly already there. She imagined his melting form, slipping from tree to tree amidst the yuppie joggers. The monster made vastly less powerful in the light of day.

The sun broke through the peach colored clouds of the morning. Ever the optimist, Raina gave it a smile.
Behind the staircase on the second floor, they found their first clue. “This place hurts my head.”

“Because you know the ordinary rules are out on break.” Loki looked at the mirror that reflected the room, absently shunting around the bag on his shoulder. It seemed to exude heat against his body, the flesh underneath his clothes itching like radiation poisoning. Neither he nor Coulson were in the reflection, but the finely wrought details of the stairs seemed even brighter in that alternate view. “I truly think that's it. The library on this floor is harmless, except for some of that old would-be magician's bad poetry. You can see the doorway to it reflected, however. That's another library entire.”

“The right one?”

“Probably not, but it's a waypoint on the path.” He reached out and placed his palm flat on the mirror. It was warm to the touch. He pressed, gently. The 'glass' began to flow around his hand like water. He pulled away again, fingertips tickling from magical energy. “Safe enough to pass through.”

Coulson looked unconvinced. “You don't actually know what's on the other side. There could be anything.”

“Yes, like a library. It's just a door, Coulson, though I grant that for you it's an unusual one.” He looked up abruptly, nostrils flaring.

Coulson recognized the expression. It was the same one he'd had before the incident in the brig. “What's coming?”

Loki whirled in place, gaze flickering back along the way they'd come. “We're about to start paying for the easy part.”

“Loki-”

The demigod grabbed Coulson by the arm. Even with his faltering strength, bodily moving the human was going to be no difficulty. Phil instinctively began to pull away and then froze when the sound reached his own ears. “What the hell is that?”

The sound rose, a sundering shriek that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. The glass vases that decorated the wall sconces began to shiver and clank, like a mild earthquake was rattling the foundations of the home.

“That's an arriving threat that doesn't give a hot damn about being subtle any more. We're out of time,” said Loki. A shelf toppled next to him, crashing its display of tiny ornamental vases to the ground. He spared the mess a glance and unceremoniously shoved Coulson through the magic mirror.

“TRICKSTER!” came the howling cry, pausing the demigod before his own lunge. The house shook, then trembled again when the splintering front door blew in. Loki crinkled his nose at the rushing smells of brimstone and decay, narrowed his eyes at the billowing black smoke that began to filter up from the top floor. “I WILL NOT BE SHAMED BY THEE BEFORE THE DARKHOLD.”

“Making friends wherever I go,” muttered Loki, eyes now a little too wide. He turned and pushed himself through the membrane on the mirror.
Scrambling through the heart of the Sorcerer Supreme's own sanctum, Coulson and Loki come face to face with their pursuer. The day is pretty much shot to hell from there.

“Okay, so, yes, it's another library.” Coulson stood in the doorway down the mirrored hall, glancing back at Loki as he emerged from the rippling silver portal. “Two things I'd like to mention – first, that door made me feel funny all over and that weirds me out. I'm gonna get real tired of feeling weird today, I know that. I'm still allowed to complain. The other is, what the hell kind of library is this?”

Loki took a look over his shoulder, moving quickly towards the new room's entryway. “I'm not going to spend a lot of time being comforting, Coulson. We've kind of got some sort of enraged primal vampire magician lord... thing coming in fast and he's not going to be foxed by that mirror for overly long.”

“Hold – did you say vampire?”

Loki stood next to Coulson and examined the magnitude of their next problem. He craned his head up, looking out the round window to note the morning sky, then down the spiral staircase as it went down... and down... and down. The 'library' they faced was a grand, sprawling silo of artifacts, displays, and glittering miscellany. Countless shelves lined the walls, dotted now and again with arched stone entryways to other rooms containing who knew what. He sighed tiredly. “Oh, come on.” His gaze scrabbled over the nearest displays. “Did he at least install a map of local attractions? 'Go Here For Mystic Tome'?”

“Guessing not. Vampire?”

“Showed up in a malefic puff of smoke, you said he struck your team after full dark, sounded like he had an arseload of teeth in his mouth when he started screaming in my general direction. We're instantly friends, is taking the whole I-tricked-him thing rather personal, despite the fact that it wasn't even that much of a trick. As per usual. I am also still allowed to complain.” He tugged on Coulson's arm with more gentleness than on the other side of the mirror. He waved his other hand at the staircase. “Come, come. We're going to get an extra few minutes from the mirror gag, but not many.”

Vernei stormed along the halls of the sorcerer's sanctum, mouthing the owner's name. It pleased him to smell that one was not present. Though he would enjoy nothing more than a chance to face yet another do-gooder halfwit magician, his current entire being was focused on the thieving Asgardian. The Darkhold could care for itself, even this close to its opposite number. It was his pride that was bruised, and as the current keeper of the book, any weakness could bring him to suffer before it. He would revisit that possible suffering on the thief's corpse ninefold. He bared his teeth, sharp and pointy, plucked the slender device the mortals had foisted onto him from his pocket to check the messages.

Yes, his pets were close now. Their plane had been swapped for a small helicopter, some vehicle
more easily controlled in the airways of the city. They would wait for his signal. No, he did not want push notifications enabled. He shoved the device away into the depths of his coat and resumed his roam, coming again and again to the mirror on the second floor. There the stink of the alien was greatest. The lesser stink – some pet human of the alien's own – drifted away with each moment.

He snarled at the mirror, as uninterested in his lack of reflection as he was on the day he embraced the primal dark at the dawn of the world. Striding away again, his shoe clattered against the ruins of small ornaments, crunching their ceramic dust into the thickly woven carpet. He thrust his foot out, knocking the scraps from him. One clinked against the base of the tall mirror as he looked away.

Then he looked back, eyes narrowing. His red lips pulled back from his teeth as conclusions clicked firmly into place.

In the mirror world image, the ruined shelf stood intact.

Vernei hissed and flung himself at the mirror, flowing through it after his prey.

..."TRRRRIIIICKSTERRRRRR!"

“Oh, hey, listen. It's my new fast friend, catching up too damned quickly.” Loki finished scrabbling around the walls of a nook, some glinting sword holding the spot of honor. His voice was ratcheting up the octaves of nervous worry. “Nothing here. You?”

Coulson finished banging on the walls one room over and rushed out of the room to meet Loki on the staircase itself once more. “I have no idea what I'm doing. No rocks are moving, there's no passages behind curtains.”

“I can smell the damn thing permeating this place, but that's not much of a beacon to fix on. It's simply here. And so's he.” He nudged Coulson hurriedly down the stairs, his own face lifted up to watch for incoming. No darkness filled the entryway to the library. Not yet, anyway.

“Can we use the Darkhold to, I don't know, clue us in on whatever we're looking for?” Coulson raced down to another landing and looked into another alcove. Some cool-looking samurai mask on a pedestal and a handful of sumi-e paintings lined the incongruously papered walls. He felt fairly sure the elegant inkwork dragon in one of the paintings was breathing slowly around the pearl it clutched.

“No.” Loki said the single word curtly. “I'm in no shape to try wrangling the damned thing. It would use me and kill both of us if I let it out of the bag. Keep searching. And don't give me that panicked look, I'm stressed enough already.”

Instinct told him to look up again, so he did.

A figure stood frozen in the doorway, glaring at him. The wretched, roiling face was all darkness and teeth and Loki permitted himself a hard swallow at the sight of him. Not mortal now, was never mortal. I cannot duel something like that, in the fury he smells of, in this hour or the next. I have no such power left to me. All burnt away by defending myself against the Darkhold's presence. That's just terrific. He took in the nature of the space between him and the other and noted the single blessing left to him – the sky brightening into a cheery afternoon left great streaks of light between them. “Move!” he cried. “Daylight yet burns.”

... Vernei watched them flee down the staircase, noting with furious glee that their time was out and the
dark could only rise in his favor. In the rubble he would summon would be shadows enough for him to use, and he would feast well on the human pet. He lifted his face to the skylight, cautiously stepping back to avoid the light pouring through it. A shadow passed across it, the small vessel that carried his own pets. With a cry he summoned the magical beacon – a blazing light show of red sparks flying up from his hands.

*Tear away my prey's cover! Reveal them to me!*

. . .

Above, Raina held the door of the chopper for Matsu'o. His mangled hands would allow him enough control for the first cuts. He shouldered the laser and, bracing himself against the frame of the chopper, looked through the imaging monitor to calculate the angle he wanted. Then he adjusted again and fired.

The northern section of the sanctum's roof peeled away and slid off the house to crash to the green grass beyond. Matsu'o looked again and noted the second beacon, recalculated his strike based on Vernei's guidance and not his own eyes. He fired again.

Floor splintered away. The internal silo was exposed now and Matsu'o allowed himself a feral grin as he noted the pair of figures pressed against a ledge. He imagined their expressions must be those of shock. He glanced down at Raina by his side and nodded once.

With a pleasant smile, she took his place in the doorway and lifted Quinn's prototype gun, fixing the scene below in her sights. The chopper began to hover low enough to frame it in the ruin of the doctor's roof.

. . .

Coulson looked around wildly. They had no cover and the staircase was splitting away from the wall, its bolts tearing away under the shifted and off balance weight. “She's not gonna miss that shot,” he said, too focused on survival to be frightened. There was more ledge and jutting stone exposed to their right, attached to a relatively stable bit of construction. He slapped Loki, who seemed frozen, on his shoulder. “Juke for that spot and hope for the best!”

. . .

“Hello there, gentlemen,” Raina murmured to herself, taking in with her own eyes the face of the pale Asgardian. He did not seem happy to see her, and that was a pleasure to savor. He was her prey, and no one else's to end. She shifted her aim and marked the roaring, triumphant face of Vernei in the sights of the prototype weapon.

“What are you doing?” breathed Matsu'o, horrified.

*He sounds rather like Ian when he whines like that.* “Fixing our little problem in one clean shot.” She smiled down at the scene before her when the gun maximized its charge. “Easy as cherry pie,” she said as she pulled the trigger.

. . .

Coulson fell across the exposed stone as the world shook around him. He looked up, dazed by the impact and startled by the inhuman shriek of the man-creature on the upper ledge. “Oh, wow,” he mumbled through a mouthful of concrete dust and ash. For all the damage, the pair were certainly not the primary target. Their pursuer's ruined ledge looked like a postcard from a volcano's summit. “Not what I saw coming. That was not a miss.” He flipped onto his back and looked for Loki behind him.
The demigod was also sprawled, prone and unmoving in the aftermath of the explosion above. A fragment of the now wholly destroyed staircase had just missed impaling his legs. “She's crazy,” came the dull voice. “I would know from crazy.”

“Yeah, kinda.” Phil scrambled to his knees and reached for Loki. He paused, eyes widening and red with irritation. “Loki?”

“Mmf.”

“Bag. Loki, the bag!”

The black-haired head, streaked grey with rubble, lifted to look at him questioningly. Then the gaze shifted to his side. “Here. Tore off my shoulder, but still here.” He reached out to grab the now-fraying, melted plastic strap where it lay a few feet away, worryingly close to the edge. Coulson felt a quick tremble of relief.

A braying scream rushed towards them. “I WILL NOT LET YOU FIND THE VISHANTI HERESY!” The hellish noise was followed by some monstrous figure slamming down onto the still-prone demigod from the ruined ledge above, pink flesh and elegant European-made suit burning away in patches to reveal something that bristled with coarse hair and stank of some feral, musky horror that had no name. Coulson shoved himself away from the once-humanoid figure to get range, watching it single-mindedly pounding and clawing against Loki. He pulled his gun and checked quickly to make sure it was at full and lethal load – no pleasant night-night for this thing.

Another push with his feet and he steadied his hands. He unloaded the full magazine into the back of the creature and rapidly reloaded the weapon as it turned to bare what seemed like countless white fangs at him. I want a raise and a pony and a long relaxing trip to the REAL goddamn Tahiti after this, Phil thought around the frozen ball of his combat instincts, then unloaded the second volley into the core zones of the thing's chest and throat.

It roared and moved to lunge at him, insane with fresh pain. Coulson struggled to his feet and looked for anything, anywhere to go. Smoke and ash still filled the air. No sunlight! Oh crap!

A pale hand reached out and snagged the creature's foot, blazing pure light where the fingers curled. The roar turned into a screech and now the two figures were flailing at each other once again. Coulson reloaded his gun – his last magazine – and took aim at the thing's skull.

He didn't need to fire. Loki summoned some small reserve of energy, fed from pain and his own easily stoked rage and blasted the sorcerer-thing off of him and towards the edge of the breaking ledge. The monster hissed at him and lunged once more, taking a second blaze of forking light and ice to the face. It knocked his opponent backwards and off balance and it toppled into the gap, the clawed hand digging into the stone to save itself. The other hand flung out further in and caught the edge of the duffel bag. A shriek of triumph came from the darkness below.

With dwindling strength, Loki shoved himself forward to grab at the bag with both hands, trying to tug it away from the monster's slipping grip. His own teeth bared as the sound of tearing fabric filled the air. He swiveled onto his butt and heeled the creature hard in its face with all his remaining physical power as it tried to pull itself up. More fabric tore and the victory cry became a new wail of terror as it plunged down into the black, gone. Perhaps for good.

White towels scattered down after his opponent like fluttering flags and Loki watched them go with dawning horror.

“Loki!” came the voice behind him, and the sound was muted. All sounds were fading, all thoughts,
all hopes. In the spreading silence, only one whisper began to emerge.

He looked down to behold the Darkhold, its black cover slithered open in the ruins of the duffel bag, released by the struggle. Free at last, and its parchment pages of broken darkness stared back into him. Through him. Through the gaps of forever, demanding to fill everything with itself and the horrors it spoke of in loving, slurping tones in the countless languages of dead gods.

*We are lost,* was Loki’s sundering thought, the words of the book entering all the corners of his mind, curling around his deepest memories to feed. His self-sense shattered down into the void and left him to become the Darkhold's empty vessel, all but unable, unwilling to fight it.
Chapter Summary

In which the unseen is seen, to much pain and horror.

WE are.

Oh, we are, little god. Listen now, and speak these words of opening.

Speak them for us from your cold lips and be lost with us, down in the dark, in the void. Eternal.

O we are SO HUNGRY

Loki?” Coulson's lips were numb. He dropped onto his butt, heaving rapid, shallow breaths while trying to think of what to do next. He felt like his brain was out to lunch, overloaded by the sheer strangeness of the day and the subtle, growing horror of the scene before him. The demigod's face seemed made of wax. The book was in his hands and his lips were moving noiselessly. He didn't bother looking down at it, instead he stared into the gap at something only he could see.

Coulson said his name again, hoping. The demigod with a will of iron. Nobody could wear down his armor of arrogance for long. He would have bet the bank Loki could talk shit to anybody in the known universe and eventually swagger out of the encounter no worse for wear. He was still in there, had to be in there. Coulson wasn't a sorcerer and his bullets weren't going to do anything to an Asgardian. And, ultimately, he didn't want to shoot him. The unkindest cut of all – he'd come to like the son of a bitch, genocidal nut that he was. There was a moral quandary. “Jesus, Loki, snap out of it, I'm getting kinda worried here.”

Loki's face turned to his, the grey-green eyes dull and unseeing. There was a trace of red at the corners, a trickle of blood at his nose. The tip of his tongue flickered out and he said in voice so dead it seemed to come from somewhere far away, “Cthoga m'haluga goun. Chthon, Chthon, Chthon, n'yarleth obwede et muh'gwesh.”

“Okay,” said Phil carefully, scooting away. His skin crawled.

“Chthon, ia, ia! Delende et'we!”

He raised the gun anyway. It was his last best shot. His finger paused on the trigger.

“They're coming,” said the Darkhold's chosen vessel in a soft, weak voice, and he closed his eyes. For a split second, a rictus of pure grief crossed his face.
He is in there. Relief came tempered with a new distraction. The earth was rumbling all around them once more.

Raina watched the scene below with real puzzlement. That Vernei had survived her shot was no lasting concern, thankfully. The Asgardian had put an end to that nonsense as she looked on. Now he seemed to be holding some book and looking down into the ruined hole beneath the residence. She craned out of the helicopter, carefully, to try and see what he was looking at.

“We're getting some bad wind,” called the pilot. “Got to consider peeling off.”

“Wait,” she said, distracted.

Matsu'o inhaled behind her. “I have an alert.”

“What alert?”


She furrowed her brow. “There's no fault here.” Nonetheless, the neighboring houses were visibly shaking. She leaned out again as windows blew and cars began to scream their tinny alarms.

“I tell you what my messages tell me.” An edge entered his voice. “What's going on down there?”

She turned her attention back to the scene of battle and squinted. It seemed to her as if the rubble in the exposed pit were gone, replaced by darkness. A change of shadow, she rationalized. Then the darkness itself seemed to squirm. She took a single, sharp gasp as her gaze picked out what appeared to be a single enormous sucker, like the grip of an octopus. The size of a sewer plate or bigger. Then it moved... followed by more in a chaotic, writhing pattern. Nestled deep within it was a single misshapen eye with a monstrous iris made up of angles that hurt her to look at.

I'm hallucinating, she thought desperately, and looked away, her mind going blank in an attempt to erase what she saw.

A hand flew to her mouth as she fought to not vomit. She flapped the other at the pilot.

Get us out of here!

Coulson could hear it beneath, the first harbinger of them. He wished he couldn't. Thundering, massive, slithering, a thousand horrible adjectives and more. Nightmare itself. It moved amidst the newly growing darkness that made even the exposed sun above seem as if it shined upon a different planet far away. Rocks thumped against it as the stone underneath the pair shifted, a wet sucking sound as they fell away and slid against something he thankfully couldn't see.

Loki raised his head as if listening and in the action, looking at the pale throat exposed as if waiting to be sliced open, an utter miracle came to Coulson's mind.

We never ditched his shock collar. He never asked and I forgot after that action in the brig. His armor always had that metal ornament near his throat. He had to be used to it. It never came up. Oh crap, will that work?

He lowered the gun and felt in his pocket for the collar's control device. It was off, another mark that
he'd simply forgotten the damn thing. It shook in his hand. *If the batteries are dead, we are so screwed.* With an inhale of breath and a silent prayer to anyone that would listen, he flicked it on and hit the panic button.

...  
*Pain!*

His body became *his* again just in time to let him know all about the new and exciting ways it could be offended. His nerves were alight with streaking agony and the book fell from his hands as he clenched at empty air instead. The air was knocked out of him and he gasped a hard, rattling inhale just so he could let it out in a howl. And then, just as abruptly, the worst of the pain stopped. His skin still felt flushed and burned.

He slumped to his side and let out a soft moan, his emotions jagging between the lingering echo of suffering, directionless anger, and the sudden rush of relief that his thoughts were again his own. He curled into a ball, too tired to allow himself a chance to mourn his own identity's sense of security. He felt empty, hollowed out and left with nothing.

A flurry of motion at his side drew him out of the cocoon of jangling sensation and he lifted his head slightly to see Coulson with his eyes shut, flinging ruined scraps of bag over the book. “What did you do to me?” The question came out in a creak.

“You okay?” The human cracked open one eye, patting down. Yes, the book was covered now. He opened the other to match and looked down at Loki with real worry.

“Not even remotely,” he creaked again.

“I'm sorry, Loki. That had to suck.”

“In so many ways.”

Coulson winced once, and pulled himself close to the prone demigod's side. “The collar we put on you, way back when you climbed onboard my plane.” He gave a little smile. “We never once needed it to control you, but now I got to use it to save you.”

“Stronger than you warned me.”

“I had it upgraded while you were still living in the brig. The day Jemma came to you in France, she set it to be accessed remotely via touch and Fitz pushed the update over wireless. You never suspected.”

Loki rolled onto his back, a trembling hand rising to his pale face. A noise seemed to be gurgling inside of him. Coulson watched him with fresh concern.

“She came to me later that day and said she felt the whole thing was pretty pointless. Made the case you should get let out. I mean, she's a crap liar. Her being nice was real. In case you were pissed.”

The noise began to shake through Loki's body. The hand dropped and he began to outright caw wild laughter, tears flowing from his eyes and washing away the slight trace of blood down his cheeks. “You crafty little bastards,” he gasped. It sounded like a compliment.

“Oh thank God, you're not mad.”

“You just saved my arse. And prior to that we at least got the name of this stupid thing we're looking
for.” He chortled again. “Take this damned collar off me, please.”

“Yeah, it totally burnt out doing that. I apologize again if it cooked you at all.” Phil leaned down and looked for the touch-contact latch. It pulled away from Loki’s neck easily and he paused, unsure of what he was seeing.

The skin underneath was blue.

Phil swallowed once as the edges of the color change seemed to flow as he watched, turning ghostly pale again once more.

“What?”

“It's nothing.” He shook his head. Loki's thin hand reached up and plucked the mostly-inert collar from him. There must have been some residual canceling effect left, because it instantly turned his fingers blue around the points of contact. Loki froze, fresh horror on his face.

“Loki—

“DON'T LOOK AT ME!” The snarl was that of a wounded animal. With his remaining energy, Loki flung the collar away and pulled himself to the other side of the ledge, eyes shut and teeth bared at nothing. The snarl faded into a soft keening noise. For a second before they closed, Phil could have sworn the injured demigod's eyes were crimson.

... . .

“Loki is beyond reason, but he is of Asgard and he is my brother!” The warrior stared at the gathered room, daring anyone to argue his claim.

Natasha crossed her arms. “He killed eighty people in two days.”

With too little pause, Thor said, “He's adopted.”

... . .

Adopted. The word echoed in Coulson's mind. Possible nuances clicked together in his mind, theories, empathy. Traces of things said before. Monsters exist.

“What happened to you?”

“I was lied to, Coulson.”

He took a slow swallow. “Loki.”

The demigod all but hissed at him by way of response.

“I don't care, okay? Maybe I should, maybe there's an entire 18-wheeler shipment of issues we should be unpacking, but not right now.” He took a shuddery inhale and spread his hands. “I get that I just saw something I was really not supposed to. I get that hurts you in a way I'm probably never going to understand. I'm sorry. It was unintentional, but for what it's worth, I'm pretty much half past giving a rip. You're still you, the only version of you I know, a complete pain in my ass. Although if we're speaking literally, I'm never gonna forget that's not the right target body part. And I need you to get your business together, and help us stop whatever that is roiling down there. I know you're hearing that thing squish around. I wish I didn't.” He took a wild guess. “If we survive this, we are gonna get blazing drunk somewhere and talk about crappy dads.”
Loki dry-heaved once, soundlessly. The wild fury was rapidly draining, the effort in maintaining it more than his abused body could currently give. In his face was only raw pain.

“ Seriously. If you can't make some cutting remark out of all this, I know we're screwed. Come on, man. Help us out.”

With another wheeze, Loki settled onto his rump. His face crumpled, first into that mix of shame and suffering, then back into a single burst of anger. Ultimately that slow, steady anger won out. He looked up into Coulson's eyes, his own glinting gaze burning bright. Coulson braced himself for another lash of pain and found it bypassing him entirely. “We need more than your hectoring and my fury, Coulson,” came the ragged words. “We need a way to buy time to finish our search, or this is going to be the end. I have no weak jest for that, and no energy to spare to spite you for what you've seen. Oh Gods, I wish you had not.” The teeth bared again, not meant for the human but for someone else that wasn't there.

Coulson blinked as the demigod fought to collect himself, the obvious answer coming to him. “Think we're still getting cell reception down here? I gotta send a message.”

. . .

Nick Fury half-dozed in the back of a closed and otherwise empty bar in a Glasgow back alley, his one good eye always cracked a little ways open. His phone buzzed once inside his leather jacket, then buzzed again. His second phone buzzed immediately after. Then the multi-band receiver in the back of his jeans jingled.

And what fresh hell is this? he thought dourly, instantly recognizing that this many alerts meant high priority bad news. He fished out the receiver.

“Ragnarok. This is Agent Phil Coulson. We are attempting to stop a potential mass casualty event in New York City. This is a highly volatile situation, supernatural in nature, beyond anything we've encountered before. I am working with an Asgardian advisor to resolve the situation. Be advised that I can verify that engaging in contact in any way may be dangerous to your mental as well as physical health. Again, call signal is Ragnarok." Coulson's voice rattled off co-ordinates and a handful of other coded alerts to help inform any possible response before the message began to repeat.

“Well hell, Phil. Time for some cavalry action,” Nick muttered, absorbing the odd clue that whatever was going on, Coulson's nutty social experiment wasn't the target. He started preparing his phone calls.

. . .

“Ragnarok? Truly? You couldn't use any other code word? That does little for my already splintered confidence.” Loki ran a hand through his snarled and damp hair, the Darkhold tied up once more in the tattered remnants of the bag. He looked up at Phil climbing down from the ledge above, a mix of raw emotions still settling heavily in his chest.

“It seemed to fit at the time I set up the emergency alert.”

“Well now it's a damned bitter omen!” He snapped the words before reaching out to steady Phil's final drop to his ledge with incongruous care. “I found a way further down while you were doing that. Last chance pays for all, right?”
true believers

Chapter Summary

Action! Drama! Fanservice! Horrifying entities from beyond!

“This is Nick Fury, sending out a targeted alert. I've got men on the ground in New York City that need specialized assistance.”

Tony Stark flung the set of bolt cutters across the work bench, tugging the collar of his mangled rock t-shirt up to wipe some sweat off his face. “Pepper?” he belted out, ignoring the forced voicemail message coming in stereo surround sound from not only his personal prototype Starkphone, but all of his suits lined up in their displays. “Sweetie? Where's my soldering iron? The one I got special last week? The one that was really expensive and you were all pissed at me because I was supposed to be at some boring charity thing instead of a Home Depot?” He bit his lip and winced to himself. “I should really not be bringing that up right now.” He craned his head around the door of his workshop, trying to spot her somewhere in the tower's sprawling penthouse apartment. “Look, honey, I know you're probably busy checking for damage from that random-ass earthquake-”

“Sir.” JARVIS interrupted him with its dulcet, vaguely peevish tone. “Ms. Potts is not present at this time. I believe she's still in Singapore at a separate charity event that you outright declined. On-site crew is active and assessing tower damage in her stead. Updates have been sent to you at two minute intervals, which I note you have examined none of them.”

“Oh, right.”

“-that need specialized assistance. All personnel on deck in Avengers Tower are requested and-”

“JARVIS, turn that thing off.”

“I cannot, sir. Mr. Fury has coded this specific version of his message to be quite insistent.”

Tony put his hands on his hips and glowered balefully at his blueprints. “I'm busy.”

“Your help has been personally requested, sir.”

“Oh, my God.” He flung his hands in the air. “All right, sure, whatever. I'll go do the thing if it'll stop all my crap from whining. Prep me.”

“If I may, sir, I would recommend the rather dramatically named Godkiller iteration? I have been assessing the missive from Mr. Fury and-”

“Sure, okay, whatever.” He flapped his hand hurriedly. “I want to get this done by lunch.”

“It's past lunch.”

“You've got my point.”

“Of course, sir.”
Thor does not text.

His mighty hands are strong and broad and his mind is far quicker than his brute strength belies, but he cares little for the tiny and primitive device foisted on him by his human friends. He does not question the anger of tiny birds, nor does he think overlong on what fruit did to upset ninjas quite so thoroughly. Jane can communicate through it, those hours he spends upon Midgard, and once he used it to order a ridiculously large pizza. Which he ate. Alone. With great satisfaction. For these reasons and the purposes of his friends he keeps the device close. Just in case.

Now the slim toy fumbles through his fingers as he fights to turn the blaring voice off. He understands the worry in Fury's voice and he will go, bringing all the strength of Asgard in his hands to bear on the behalf of his friends once more. But by Odin's beard, why did no one teach him how to turn off the speaker function?

Privately, grimly, he wished his brother was around to pluck the toy from his hands and fix it for him. Always with that long-suffering arrogance and pity mixed deep together into the lines of his pale face.

Not for the first time, always touched with old regrets, he wondered where Loki was.

Bruce Banner rubbed two fingers in long, slow circles in the sweet pressure spot right between his brows. The message on his phone repeated, the target location close to where he was finishing lunch. Another repeat cycled, insistent, the sounds of it muted in his durable pants pocket. He could tell it had something to do with the mild earthquake that had rattled the city, a simple logical conclusion. A news broadcast discussed the breaking alert on a TV bolted to the wall above the sandwich counter, talking heads with professionally concerned expressions. And still the scientist sat in his contemplative silence, thinking to himself that he really rather quite liked the shirt he was wearing.

The urgency in Nick Fury's voice was palpable, though, and he knew he could just go down to the shop and replace it after. There would always be an after for him in his permanent symbiotic relationship with his monster.

Whatever horrible thing he was being warned of in the tense message, he felt sure the other guy would get over it with no lasting problems.

He finished his sub sandwich, licked the last taste of Italian dressing from his fingers, and tossed his garbage with polite fastidiousness. He might as well enjoy the next few minutes of being a rational, civilized person. Already the barely tamed rage was simmering just below the top layer of skin, waiting to be needed.

Waiting to go feral.

Deep down his heart leapt in joy. Somewhere close by there was a thing that needed smashing. He liked smashing. He was good at it.

By the time he had only a couple blocks left to Bleecker, he was smiling in a way that made people cross the street.

“We've got to be near the bottom of this place. There can't be much more left to check.” Coulson ran in Loki's fast-moving wake, the demigod using his recent burst of fury to feed him enough recycled
energy that he seemed nearly revitalized. Like an energy drink of pure emotion, he figured. And like the drinks, Loki was bound to crash at some point. Phil hoped like hell it'd be a while yet.

The tunnel they'd found creaked frighteningly every few seconds, fragments of mortar and brick drifting down onto them. Now and again they heard sounds filtering through the subterranean path, something like a sonorous whale song filtered through a modulator set to Hell Incarnate.

“Don't say things like that out loud, Coulson. If we get down here and find a mirror set to a whole other system of rubbish to sort through I may, quite literally, snap for all time and space. I will open this gods-damned book and eat the pages in futile desperation. And I will blame you as I do it.”

“That would probably be fair at that point.” He nearly ran into Loki's back when the tall figure stopped abruptly. “Oh god, now what?”

“Be cautious. The wall's broken through again; we'll have to climb and I don't know what we're going to see.”

. . .

Tony set himself to hover over the ruined house on Bleecker Street and slapped at the faceplate of his recent experimental Iron Man suit. The Godkiller was optimized to neutralize Asgardian technology up to a point. That point was, so far, when Thor's test-punching started denting the crap out of the paint job. Well, it was still experimental. It also one of several suits that could function blind, using JARVIS as an external operator. It was an option meant for deep sea jobs or other places with limited visibility. “Okay, cute stunt. Turn my eyes back on.”

“I cannot advise that, sir. Please allow me to control the visual input/output from here.”

“JARVIS, I swear I am going to downgrade you to a toaster oven if you don't start listening to me the first time I tell you to do something.”

“I apologize, but I am reading a single multi-dimensional entity emerging below. An unaltered visual of this event may induce severe mental damage to standard homo sapiens neurology. My readouts speculate that a number of lesser targets are preparing their imminent emergence from underneath its, ah, tentacles. I recommend allowing me to guide you towards these targets for combat.”

Tony kept the hover toggle on standby, eyebrows arching up into his hairline as he double-checked JARVIS's figures on his suit's HUD. “Okay, then.”

“STARK!” The joyous roar filtered into his audio feed as dual proximity alerts chimed on the display. “By all the gods, now we've a fight!” The words were followed by a whirl of sound – the warrior god chucking Mjolnir at something rushing close. Stark heard the critter squeal as something wet and fleshy tore. He reflected that, no, he was not going to turn JARVIS into a toaster oven today. “Disgusting things begin to rise from this monstrous pit, Stark. There shall be no soft rest this night after such battle.”

He toggled the speaker with a grin, nailing something with a tracked repulsor shot as it boiled up from the wreckage of the house. “What's up, Mighty Mouse?”

“Stand fast with me, my friend, but not alone!” Thor laughed as a monstrous bellow joined the unseen fray. “Banner is here!”

. . .
Coulson pushed himself away from Loki, more than a little jarred by how abruptly his face had gotten pushed into the fabric of the black hoodie. The slithering sound that had for a long second been too loud and too close began to drift into the distance. “ Couldn't take a second to warn me we were gonna have a big ol' bear hug moment?” He looked up at Loki's white face and immediately regretted saying it.

“No, Coulson. That was nothing for mortal sight.” He readjusted the straps of the ruined bag and glanced over his shoulder, gesturing at the wide gap that opened out onto the hole where much of the library once was. “Nothing, in any world, should have so many eyes, made of so many shapes. It saw us, Phil. It saw us well, and to my horror, I think it didn't care. It spared us no further thought, did not bother to strike.” He laughed, no mirth in it. “They believe we can do nothing. If you had seen, you might think it correct before your brain bled out in a bleating struggle with your lost sanity.”

Coulson looked past Loki to the ruined entrance of some small cistern at the end of the path, not really up to chewing that mental image over. “Well, I didn't. Thanks. And that room up there looks like our best shot yet.”

“I hope so. Truly, I hope so.”

. . .

The stumpy, trunklike man plucked the ruined stogie from his lips, flaring his nostrils to give it a sniff. No shame in wasting a bad smoke. He dropped it and crunched it underneath his heavy boot, flickering his sharp gaze up to watch the fight going on a few neighborhoods over. Around him, humans surged to get out of the area. Some stopped to vomit, many wept. He took his hands out of the pockets of his thick leather jacket and crinkled his nose as he breathed in a long, deep whiff to mark the scent of participants.

Yeah, I don't like the smell of those things, either. Never seen anything, any man or mutant, with that many arms all bent up like that. And I just bet the professor would have a few things to say about bein' neighborly when your neighbor's in need.

With a roll of his shoulders and a feral grit of his teeth, his claws came out of his knuckles with an easy snikt!

Besides. I always like me a good goddamn fight.

. . .

“Stark!” Something clanged against Thor's hammer and dropped with a whining scree.

“'Sup?” Four targets incoming. He revved up the close-quarters contingency and let his firepower fly. Three dropped. The last banged into him and they spun together for a wild, whirling few seconds before Tony put his fist through what he could only assume was the thing’s head. He swore he could smell something like ancient rot and sea water even through the airtight pressurization of the suit.

“There is something small and blue and red whipping around on what appears to be a white rope.”

“...Okay?” The tactical readout on the faceplate monitor kept informing him of different varieties of ‘this is not good.’ He ignored it, trying to figure out what the Asgardian warrior was going on about.

“More of the white rope is wrapped around his head to shield his eyes.”

“I know that feeling.”
“HEeeeey guuuUUUYS!” The young male voice doppled by with a merry cheer. “THIS PARTY KINDA SUCKS! ANYONE FOR PIZZA AFTER?”

“Thor, I have literally no idea who that guy is.”

“He fights to help, at least. I have seen several of these squamous things caught in web and dropped back whence they come. What about some grunting little man in black with a great many claws upon his fists?”

“Oh yeah, that guy. I know that guy. He punched a friend of mine once.”

“He is an enemy?”

“No, he's just really into punching people.”

“Oh, good. He fights viciously and well. I believe I like him.”

“He smells and I think he's Canadian. Yes, I consider that a negative in this context.” A warning jangled on his screen. “Uh, look out!”

“SMAAAAAASH!”

... 

“Do you hear that?”

“What, the chaotic sounds of what is surely an absolutely epic fight complete with my brother posing strongly every time he thwacks something in the general region of the face with his ridiculous magic hammer?” Loki sighed and jammed his shoulder against the splintering, out-of-joint door again, grunting. “I've seen that show before. Not really in the mood for a repeat viewing right this moment.” He sagged away. The door gave slightly, but he was still going to have to hit it at least one more time. He took a second to shoot a glance at Coulson. “You didn't tell anyone I was here, did you?”

“I don't think it went out on the alert, no. You don't want to say hi?”

He flung himself at the door again, grim satisfaction filling his face as the top bolt popped free. “I'm not dressed for company. Help me. One more, together, and we're in.”

Coulson set his shoulder beside Loki's, taking charge of the count. On three, they slammed in and for their victory nearly tumbled into the room.

“OH, COME ON.” Loki's voice was a bitter, agonized howl.

The room beyond the broken door was layered in glittering white stone, iridescent in its beauty. A single blue pennant etched with some mystical design still fluttered, but half of the wall it once decorated was gone. Along with most of the floor, and worst of all, whatever once stood on the splintered marble pedestal in its center.

... 

His claws plunged through the gelatinous flesh of some small, hideously mewling creature, tearing some organ free he was pretty damn sure he never saw in any field medic manual. Close by, the gigantic green beastman who, weirdly, did not smell like a mutant, absently wiped goo off a fist the size of a mailbox before wading against another line of small, tentacled monstrosities. “I don't know about you, Jolly Green, but I'm probably gonna have to put my claws right through my skull and
erase this whole damn day after this.”

“SMASH!” said the hulking figure, just before it smashed something unrecognizable into something more unrecognizable.

“Right? I like you, bub. You know what you're good at, and there's nothing like being the best there is at what you do.” He grinned at the possibly amiable response roar and plunged back into the fray, not wasting his time with noticing that the hole within the ruined house appeared to be getting bigger.

Coulson scrabbled at the ruined edge of the room, staring down into the pit and hoping like hell nothing horrible would drift up directly towards him. More than once he squinched his eyes shut as some motion started in the terrible blackness below the white room, waiting for Loki to tell him it was clear. He pulled himself nearly off the ledge and caught his breath in hope. Maybe ten feet below him, he saw the edge of a book. Another inch – yes! The cover bore the same image as the mansion's strange and still-intact window. He could see the edges of its pages fluttering in the hot, fetid breeze coming up from the void below.

“Loki, I see it. I swear, that's it. Come here.”

“I'll lose grip on your ankle.”

“I'll be fine, check this.”

The demigod's profile filtered into his side view. “Coulson,” he said. His voice was weary and full of grief. “We can't get to that. It hangs on mere inches. One more creature from the depths swings too closely and it's gone, utterly lost to us.” He started to pull back from the ledge. “Just let it go. Let us face the end with some honor.”

“What? No!” He pushed himself half-up to watch Loki shake his head slowly, his face a rictus of exhausted despair.

“I've failed. Again. As forever. As eternity dictates. It ends.”

Coulson went slack-jawed as something snapped inside him. He grabbed the black hoodie on either side underneath Loki's throat and shook him with all his strength, so much raw adrenaline behind it that he actually made the Asgardian wobble. Slightly. “YOU HAVEN'T EVEN TRIED!” He roared the words into the struck man's face, his green-grey eyes going wide and startled at the violence implied in his tone. Something rushed up from below and Coulson turned his face away with a wince. Instinctive nausea from the mere presence of the Chthonic slave-thing turned his gut even as the demigod sat limp in his hands. “God damn it, we're not out yet. We get things done 'round here.” He let go of his grip on bunched fabric.

“Coul—” Loki put a hand out to stop the human as he rolled to pitch himself over the side and into the hole. His mouth dropped in shock and he crawled forward once more.

“Incoming!”

He jests with me, thought Loki, still stunned. Then he nearly took a heavy book to his face, reeling backwards as his hands flew up to grab the tome and check its condition. It tingled against his fingers in a warm, comforting rush of sensation as he read the title, writ plain upon its face. Unable to fight off the sudden flood of relief that made his eyes blur, he gave the Book of the Vishanti a full-bodied hug before gently tossing it to the side to check on the human.
Coulson appeared to already be halfway back up the crumbling wall, clinging to treacherous fingerholds like a crazed spider-monkey. At the sound of his rustling above, Phil looked up. “I don't skip arm day.”

Loki’s mouth opened and closed, his face flushing once. “I'm a faithless arse this day.”

“Yeah, yeah you really are. But we're having a super bad time of it here and that makes hope look extra distant, right? Now, can you give me a hand? I'm not as whipped as you, but our last meal was a crapload of pancakes ages ago and I'm heading for a carb crash like you wouldn't believe.”

Wordlessly, Loki pushed himself half down into the ruined gap and reached his hands out to pull Coulson safely up to him. Much to his own surprise he found himself hugging the human, too. *Oh sweet stars, don’t tell me now this other book is going to force me to do nice things until I kill myself in saccharine despair.* The thought was half rationalization, half morbid private joke. Phil's muffled voice came out of the mass of thick-woven wool, the confusion in it still crystal clear. “Did another one of those things just fly up?”

“Sure, yeah. Go with that.” He uttered a tiny, exhausted laugh.
chaos reigns

Chapter Summary

Everything comes back to the beginning as Loki takes the first steps towards what may be the only way to close the book on his unleashed nightmare.

Full dark yet reigned on the other side of the world from New York City, and through it the children of Chthon spread their whispers of dread and despair into the sleep of millions. Around the world, babies screamed for their mothers and men shot upright in bed only to drop their faces into their hands, weeping in fright. But not all. Hope fights for purchase even in the dark hour.

In the northeast of Africa, in the capital of secret, sacred Wakanda, the hidden people stirred awake and cried warnings house to house, many families gathering in the glittering streets to clutch each other comfortably, rushing towards the home of their king, their great panther, to learn what nightmare was upon the world. They had faced a thousand threats and more. This one would be no different.

A shrine miko at the base of Mt. Fuji, achingly close to the suicide forest, wept for the crying voices she heard from within the sea of trees. Not all of the sounds seemed human, and she thought back to the tales of her training, of the kodama that knew every tree that was cut down. Tonight they weep too, she thought.

She padded out in the blinding darkness to the himorogi and knelt in its center, praying for the rise of the morning sun. It would come, she knew. It would always come.

A mine full of sleeping Russian workers rustled awake with a unified start. Hushed, blunt words were passed from cot to cot, followed by long pulls off their secret stash of vodka bottles. Cigarettes lit the dark now and again like a stream of hot red beacons and as the hours drew on to the still-distant dawn, they told each other the stories of all the things that lurked under the bed in the dark. And they laughed, their brute will their strength.

The psychics had it the worst, for more than feeling the things that awoke, they could see.

Phone lines lit up around the world, voices reaching to each other to spread what comfort they could. And in New York, the darkness grew to blot the still-daylight sky.

... "Great, we've got both books. Now what?" Coulson watched Loki place the books side by side, an expression of intense concentration on his face. "Although if you already know what you're doing, don't let me interrupt you."

The expression broke as he look up, hands flexing inside the gloves that he'd thought to bring along and that, by some miracle, hadn't been lost to the gap as the white towels had. "I haven't the foggiest, Coulson. Optimally, I still need time. Much time, to recoup energy at the very least. This Vishanti tome seems a kinder tome but still a source of pure power in its own right. It could carry me off with its sea of needs and wants just as easily as the Darkhold if the whim took it. Its methods might appear to be just and right in fain opposition, but still just as damming. I'd lose myself, and that's happened
oft enough for my life entire. Twice in one day? I would prefer not to, not even in service to light.”

“Okay. I can respect that. But we can't do optimal.”

“Yes, I know.” He looked back down at the books, each sealed, his defenses a battered ruin and his last burst of rage dwindling into guttered flame. That twinge of panic entered his guts again before he tamped it down. He needed to think.

Beyond them, a slab of ledge tottered into the unceasing darkness. Coulson watched it go. “The gap's getting bigger.”

“Yes, I know.” That stressed creak came back into Loki's voice.

“Does that mean we're going to get more than one huge awful thing?”

“Coulson, there are countless amorphous damned and dead gods beyond that rift, waiting to suck down the universe and all the universes ours has touched. Their many angles aching to devour every source of light we've ever known. Their first harbingers have no doubt tasted the innocent blood of those that could not flee faster. I've glimpsed some of these things and can surmise the rest.”

“You could have just said yes!” The last word came out in a yelp as the ruins of Dr. Strange's home shook violently around them. Phil dug into the cracking stone with his fingertips, eyes going wide. “That was way bigger than the first quake.”

Loki traced a finger across his lips, grasping at possibilities in an attempt to force some sort of plan together. Nothing came to him, nothing that would work. There was no way around it, he needed time. Going in blind would damn everyone thoroughly. If only he could step outside time itse-

His throat clicked in a sudden, dry swallow. “Damn me. I know what to do.”

..."Stark, the void beneath grows at a terrible pace.” Thor stared down at the roiling dark mass of scales and sickly gleaming flesh. Not even he dared meet the massive triangular eye that peered up now and again from the side of the flow, king among all the other staring eyes. He watched the glorious red and gold streak of his friend instead.

“Yeah, JARVIS is sounding outright unnerved, which would be amazing for an emotionless program I made except that I know full well I'm projecting that instead of just taking a wee inside my suit. Jesus, how big is that reading down there?”

Thor decided to not answer the stated question. He could see and see well. He wished that he could not. A mortal mind would boil to save itself. His own would not rest well for some time. “Do your machines read any hope? Any further backup coming? Does the Lord of the Fury speak a plan?”

“Thor, bubbeh, all I got is keep punching things until opportunities change up.”

A crackle of radio static filtered into one of Tony's ears. “Hey, guys. This is Agent Melinda May piloting SHIELD Globemaster 6-1-6 and we're coming in hot at the New York border. Sorry for the delay, we had to shake some unfriendlies down the coast. We're advised to not engage in close quarters combat, but if you could light up a few targets for us, we can lay down some extra suppressive fire for you from here.”

“Lady, this is Tony Stark coming in live as the DJ of this aforementioned sucky party, and I'm gonna buy you all the drinks you could ever want.”
Thor looked at him expectantly. The hovering exosuit gave an offhanded shrug in response. “You heard the agent. Let's set up some shots.”

Coulson watched Loki hurriedly gather up the books into a bundle, his confusion and worry growing. There was a look of serene determination on the demigod’s face. This was now clearly a man with a plan, but at the same time, he’d seen expressions like that one before. Typically on soldiers that knew they were lunging towards their last charge into battle, their glassy gazes locked onto the hope that something better lay on the other side of the field of the dead. The disquiet deepened, overriding any trace of hope that Loki’s efforts would bear fruit.

Loki looked up from his knotted bundle and met his eyes, his jaw tensing in response. “You need to find your way above. Get safe, await your team. I have no doubt they will look for you, and if not, there are your heroes watching the skies. Watch the walls as you go and not the gap. And spare me some wish of luck if you deem it worthwhile.”

“What are you going to do?” The dread deepened.

“I need time, but time cares not for my need. So I must take it by force, and I know but one way to do that, a way I’ve trod just once before. I must go between.” His lips spread into a faltering, humorless grin. “Should I succeed then you will know, no doubt quickly. I do hope for that, yes.”

“How?”

Loki turned to face the gap beyond the ledge, looking back over his shoulder at the human. “Much of the journey is arranged in the mind; risk enough at my strongest. But no choice is left. I can only hope I remember that journey well enough to walk it without error. Otherwise, all it takes is one single step through the veil of what we know. One I’ve taken before.” He moved closer to the ledge.

“Wait!” He put his hand out, knowing he couldn't stop him from falling, still wanting to try.

“We can't. Must we not get things done? Is that not what we do, in your own words? The time for choices may be long past. Good luck, Coulson. If this works, perhaps I will come find you. If it does not... well. It won't be long now.” Another smile, skull-like on the pale face. “Ta.”

Coulson mouthed the word no as Loki dropped soundlessly into the tear in the world, that mouth of endless void.

...

flip-flip-flip go the pages, countless realities rustling and scraping along each other like parchment bound in an endless book.

...

Out flew the web and floated wide-

And the mirror crack'd from side to side...

...

We need help, the poet reckoned.
and in the darkest hour he tumbled to the bleak black stone of the between and he struggled once more to his feet to stand at that crux between time and space, his past veiled in the thin shadow that fell behind him. Still, countless doors surrounded him. Each a mirror, each locked, each reflecting nothing but nothing itself. There was at first no sound but for the rustle of his human clothing as he righted himself, tattered now and stained with all the sweat of the journey that took him back to that moment for the first time and the last time and all the blending seconds in between. His bone-white hands trembled as his shoulders shifted under the weight of the burden he carried, those two books, bound forever in the tangled weave of order and chaos. His eyes glinted not with plans and clever trickery, but with exhaustion, the last tendrils of fleeting hope, and thoughts of small creatures whom he might have called friends, if he would but permit himself the word in anything other but the most secret of places buried in the darkest corners of his heart.

I am, he murmured in the language of his soul, as every God ought at the alpha and the omega. He lifted his head at the soft, rustling sound of a dragging yellow robe.

“Oh,” whispered the secret-keeper, and Loki stepped back once as he now recognized something horribly familiar, grotesquely delighted, in the dry and dead voice. “You've come home.”
lost carcosa

Chapter Summary

At the edge of everything, at the nexus of the Between, Loki faces his future and must decide what truly guides a given life - his hard-taught ideas of fate, or Coulson's insistence on the power of choice.

Coulson fled through the ruined halls of the mansion and burst up through its still-standing facade in a steady flow of motion; the great magic window still filtering its dimmed light across the rubble. His scuffed shoes padded against concrete and blacktop as he drove himself further away from that spreading wound in the world, not looking behind, not looking up, not looking at anything but his own wisp of shadow as it spread before him with the veiled sun at his back. He could hear the battle above; the Earth's mightiest trying to hold back the tide of things they couldn't understand, released on them for reasons they might never know.

A jangling thought occurred to him as he moved out of range from the loudest sounds of the battle. There's gonna be paperwork for days. Do we even have paperwork for something like this? We probably do.

He never stopped moving, charging down the block towards the parking garage with his thoughts in a jumble. Never paused, not until Lola fired up and he found a handful of survivors huddled in the dark close to him, waiting for it to be over. He bundled them – a shellshocked jogger, a young woman clutching a child that she said wasn't hers, explained in a spiraling voice of terror that they couldn't find her mother, and she couldn't get her own on the phone and what was going on, until she wept with the child cuddled close to her chest, and a construction worker that muttered things about goddamn aliens, goddamn aliens again, into the backseat, because that's what Coulson did, never leaving anyone behind that he didn't have to.

He pulled out into the street, his head down for safety, and marked the city speed limit as a guideline that could go right to hell until hell stopped screwing around. As he shifted gears, he thought about Loki, whom he did have to leave behind and wished he hadn't.

The battle was still roiling, unearthly screams shattering the skyline. It showed no signs of stopping.

Phil grit his teeth and drove, each new second of the lasting battle making him wonder how the demigod was faring on his end of the fight. What he was even doing.

Come on, you jerk. Don't let us down.

... 

The keeper's misshapen face remained veiled in the deep cowl of its saffron robe. “Oh, little deity. How you've exceeded every expectation. I have waited for you, young and pretty thing. I remember that look, still eager, still full of life.” That rattling, deathlike inhale, the exhale of clacking laughter. “I have waited to give thee thy gifts, earned thrice over now and in the past and in the future, honored now in the place between All Things.”

The keeper stepped forward, closing the space Loki tried to put between them as he continued to
back away, the books clasped tight to his chest. Between its bony, grey hands appeared a vision that shimmered once before locking into place. A golden flowing robe fit for the greatest of kings, each thread in perfect weave. “Is it not glorious, little god? Take your robe, my young king. You have earned it. A thousand souls or more to change a fate, and how many have been touched this day? How many consumed for our lords?” The voice was now low, sibilant, and alluring. “Take it! Did you not demand a kingdom? I have a fine one to give you at last.”

Loki’s clenched hand trembled as his eyes itched. This can’t be true, he thought. I don’t know what I’m really seeing anymore.

“Are you not honored?” It thrust the garment towards him and he staggered away, gagging at the smell of desecration that followed the golden flow of fabric and the thing that held it.

Oh please no, I do see it well, he thought in crawling shock. The keeper was too close to him now to get away with that lie, and he beheld the gift of the robe as it truly was: ruined, yellow, tattered and frayed. He made a soft keening noise and looked up into the keeper’s face as the other drew close enough for him to breathe its dead fetid breath. He looked up into its rot to recognize now the ghost of his own face etched like a lost print underneath the yellow keeper’s pallid visage, ruined by things beyond death. Worse than death. A face marked by the sight of annihilation, scarred and malformed by the caress of those dead gods that capered and slept beyond the borders chronicled by the Darkhold.

“I did not recognize this before,” he cried out.

“You were not ready to see. I was not yet fully born in you, the timeline had not been opened. You had to earn your way back here with your fine treasures in tow and a skull full of despairs. And thus the flat circle comes around, broken against all odds and forged into a new chain at the behest of those that sleep in the darkness. Did you think you would slip the Darkhold’s grasp so easily with mortal’s pain? Oh no, it knew then to wait. That you were ready for the next step.”

The monster that was once himself cackled and continued its rambling. “My slow spider, is this not our great year of becoming? I and you in this gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things. Must we not have been here before? Must we not eternally return, if not to the old path then to this one? Is this not your willfully chosen destiny? Is such freedom from that old fate not your desire?”

“Not at this price!” Loki snarled the words in fear and fury, recognizing some of the creature’s mad rambles from things he’d read, things he’d seen in his travels. He turned half away from the ruined creature and scrabbled his hands along the black mirrors finding no purchase, no exit. “This is not the story I chose!”

“Oh, but I did warn you, funny prince. You’re not the hero of this story.” The keeper’s ruined face – that shattered mirror of his own - hissed as it slithered after him on its changed feet. “I Am. This is my story, and thou art me. From you, from the dreams of the Darkhold that sleeps nestled amidst your memories, I am to be made at last. I told you true; I will give you nothing until the day you know the results of your path... and this day is a Ragnarok still. Bitter words, indeed.”

“I have both of the books,” he snarled, giving up on the mirrors and darting towards the keeper’s dusty IKEA table. The silver fountain pen clattered to the ground. “I can undo all of this, as I planned. You’re not going to happen. I can still steal enough time to stop this.”

“You think you can wheedle a happy ending yet, gamble it from the mouth of the end itself. How marvelous. I’ve read ahead in that book, little deity: rocks fall, everyone dies. It’s been written over again so oft that the vellum grows worn. You should accept this fate in peace, watch a little television
with me before they remake you. It's summer sweeps week somewhere. Always. Did you realize they're still making new episodes of Spongebob Squarepants? I tell you, funny prince. It's insane.”

He kept an eye on the keeper even as it seemed content to wait, amused, as he tore the twinned books from his abused luggage to display them on the table. With a ragged inhale of breath to steel himself, he flipped open the cover of each book, summoning all his courage, his will to bear. And then he let his held breath out with a slow, gasping wheeze.

The books lay empty of words.

Loki flung himself away from the table to stare in bleak horror at the keeper. It raised its gnarled hands up to pull open the robe at its sunken, leathered throat. Skin that had once passed for pale, truly a rich, sapphire blue, was now some filthy grey in between and each inch of it was marked with tiny black letters that seemed to change as he watched.

“I carry the words with me. I can because you will. The books ferried their power here, and my masters marked which was the stronger. It took millennia, each spell, each horror, each ritual, each glimpse of a thousand sundered realities through the mirrors. It burned.” It bared its teeth at him.

“I. Am. So sayeth every deity at the outset of new creation. And we have one last to make, do we not?”

He backed up, his shoulders slamming into one of the locked mirrors.

“Always you run, little running man. You've been running from this since the day you were born, mewling and blue and damned.” The keeper bared its teeth at him in a feral smile, the lips cracking from disuse. “Stop running and accept what you are. What you've always known you are. You monster.”

White hot hate flared up in Loki's heart, for the keeper, for the past, for his own cursed self. “Yes. Stop your flight. Face me, and become.”

The mirrors flared alive once more, burning with dark light.

“There is no hope left, little deity.”

He gave a soft sigh and waited for his broken future to draw close, its cracking lips spreading in open avarice. Another step, and the mirrors showed all the futures, all the pasts that led to this moment once more. Choices. The word came to him as he thought of humans and their gift of free will. Of Coulson's fierce insistence in that fable, strong enough to tumble along the edge of an abyss to steal a last chance. His skin prickled as his thoughts came around to the beginning, noting a flaw in his future self's attack. Even the keeper had flung the word at him once, then used as a prod to push him to this road.

Meanwhile, all his own life he had believed in fate – the path of kings, the glory road of the Gods, the culmination of the cycle. The unbroken chains. If not one end, then another. Denying the impact of his own choices as the cost of destiny... as the keeper itself had accused.

And in the wake of noticing the keeper's one little mistake, there came a cold rush of thoughts that felt like a razor's cutting edge.

I have been lied to before. About my fate. About my destiny. By them that meant kindly, by them that would have made of me a currency, and why not now? For if anyone were to ever lie to me most thoroughly and well... it would be myself.

The keeper took another step. And because he now realized the edges of a truth that had been sitting
inside a lie the entire time, Loki took a chance on a choice, his gaze locked on the shifting mirrors and their multitudinous realities.

He chose, willfully, to run one more time.

He smashed through the shifting mirrors again, looking quickly for another chance to change the path before him. A choice that only he could make. As the glass crashed in outrage at his passage, he heard the inhuman roar of fury close behind.

This time, he would be chased.
Running Up That Hill

Chapter Summary

Fighting for one final hope to guide him, Loki crashes through countless realities (including a couple put in solely to amuse some invisible watcher) only to realize that what he truly seeks isn't on the road ahead of him, but buried in a past he thought he didn't need.

Loki skipped through realities, arriving and departing as quickly as a blurred dream – realities that sometimes felt as flat as a page and stunk of ink and ideas, clutching the air for balance as the ground beneath him shifted shape depending on the artist. Before him now was a world made of green inhabited by animals that looked up, puzzled, from their toymaker's duties as the shape in black and green fled through only to be chased by something awful in yellow. One seemed to be a raccoon, a look of outright disdain on its muzzle. He had no obvious connection there, couldn't stop to consider why it'd been on his path. Perhaps there was yet to be something he couldn't know, some tangent that tied him here. As he passed through its boundaries he thought he felt a glimpse of some incredible power, some concentrated essence and he thought of the Tesseract and the Aether and the shadows of other things scattered across the universe.

Later, his wild path took him through the pastel discord world that he'd glimpsed once before, and the confused bellow of a zebra mare followed him as he slammed through a closet of potions incoming and left through a cupboard of drying herbs outgoing.

“And through my home some tall creature does flee! What strangeness in its wake do I now see? Some nightmare in yellow flows through, glad I am that I do not see it true.” The mare shook her stiff bristle mane and nudged her slopping cauldron back into place. “Someone else's story, to be certain. I do not wish to look beyond that curtain.”

He crashed through worlds made of fire and ice, of metal and stone, worlds that would never know his name as anything other than some distant demon there to bring mischief, worlds that told some legend of the Conquerer God, and he spared a glance of horror for the destruction some possible future idea of him would wreak. He glanced once down a rising hill once to see something, someone, impossibly enormous with its armored hand placed firm on the world. Each finger a mountain ridge fading into the distance, each knuckle a summit, deep canyons where the tips had dragged. And as he fled through the other side, he watched the head grow ever closer, ready to consume, and he recognized this for another kind of Ragnarok, another end of some galactic cycle. All things come to the end, and he had so often forged of himself a tool for that purpose.

I can't run forever, he thought, leaving worlds in his wake and finding no road to follow. Still, though, he ran.

Speeding up, he tumbled through another closet. One that banged in protest against him with its cheap metal and flecking paint as he stumbled against some large piece of luggage, falling. For a quick, confused second he looked at a tousled mop of black hair and wondered if he'd gotten scalped.
in his tumble before recognizing it as a wig stuck fast on its plasticky mannequin head.

A startled gasp reached down to him and he glanced up at the slim, slightly familiar face of some ruddy-skinned man, dyed black hair going blond at the curling roots. Loki looked at the wig and then up at the human male again, piecing together what was going on with an arched eyebrow of bemusement and a fleeting quirk of a smile despite his need to keep moving. Oh, yes. He'd seen this poor player once before, the vibrant actor on some adoring stage. The actor himself stayed frozen stiff in shock.

“Hey, you all right in here? Heard all the noise.” The door to the trailer banged open and a young woman with a tablet clasped in her arms stuck her head inside, assessing the situation and apparently finding nothing worth getting worked up about. “Oh, wow. Your stunt guy looks fucking amazing today.” She glanced down at her digitized notes as both men stared at her. “Right, he's gonna want you on set 3 down the block in like twenty. I guess Joss is visiting today? Okay? Okay.” She left without looking back, the door slamming shut.

“Love your work!” blurted Loki for lack of any other way to break the silence, feeling that slither of unreality drift around him as the rustling sound of his pursuer began to drown out all the other little background noises. He hauled himself up, quick as a cat, and plunged out of the world through the narrow door that led to the bathroom.

The actor settled his tall figure heavily onto his stool when the yellow thing snaked through in the impossible man's wake, then decided for the sake of his own mind that he would forget the entire thing happened. “O, that way madness lies,” he muttered to the empty trailer, fleeing back to Shakespeare for comfort. “Let me shun that; no more of that.”

And he ran, looking for the way, watching countless worlds wither and die under the command of the keeper's monstrous masters, elsewhere down the road of his travels watching worlds mark their remaining seconds to death as Thanos, that being whom he had sold himself to in treacherous alliance, bore down on them. I help make those futures, too, he thought grimly as he fled. What choice did I not think I made when laying there, half-mad, in some Chitauri cell? What was the puzzle there? A piece of him thought he might owe them a war, over broken promises, pain, and abandonment at the very least, but not now. There was no time, as he fled between the fleeting ticks of time itself.

So he ran.

On a thousand worlds he saw the echoes of his own mad face, burning its way towards the end of times.

Still running, watching genocides and atrocities, and countless futile attempts to escape the cycle. Haggard or young, the God-King in some monstrous green jerkin, a child with a magpie at his shoulder. They ended the same; lost and destroyed and Asgard in ashes.

And yet he fled, knowing he was losing energy looking for a hope he didn't know if he could find, unsure if it existed. And at last, somewhere in the black places of his heart, where he kept the memories that didn't suit his needs, he remembered a thing that might be nothing more than desperation's ghost. That final call for rescue, no longer sure he could rescue himself.

He shattered through, looking for that one road, that one piece that might solve his puzzle, and the word that was the key left his lips in a soundless cry. He reached out for the doorway, the last chance.
Mother!

With sweat on his brow, he dropped between an ornate set of statues, a gateway on one of the paths to Asgard’s great castle. Before him spread the green field of his buried memories and not far away were figures that seemed enormous despite their place as those forgotten things he thought he didn’t want. With a trembling finger, he turned his tattering black hoodie into a tattered black robe, pulling the hood up to make it a cowl, shuddering as he thought how close he must resemble that ruined future self, now a little further behind than when he’d started his race, never far enough.

And with a whisper of a thousand regrets, Loki looked up and saw clearly now the dark little child at play in the field, and the child’s mother – his mother – lost Frigga, queen and sorceress, standing guard over him with a smile. She hadn’t noticed his arrival yet, but she would certainly sense him within seconds. After all, she had been his first and still greatest teacher.

He nearly tumbled down the hill, his legs unsteady from his run. Or so he told himself, for he could still be tempted by self-delusion. She’d turned to regard him, and he knew what she saw – some pale jaw in a cowl, stinking of fear and magic. She kept her arms crossed against her flowing dress; a dress he knew held more than one magic-sharp knife. “Name yourself, traveler, or please be gone,” she said carefully, unafraid of him. “You are no warrior for Odin’s army and so have little right to be on these lands.”

That gave him a laugh, low and full of tired gravel. He stopped his advance, a good few meters away from her. When was she ever so short? His memories always made her a giantess. “That I am not, nor ever was, nor ever will be. But I am also no threat,” he said, and he wished not for the first time that it was the truth. That piercing blade of self-blame cut deep once more.

She shifted from him in such a way to keep both him and the young boy in view. The boy took no notice of what was going on, enthralled instead in a book that lay heavy on his short legs. Loki watched him from under his hood, noting the smile playing on the still-pudgy face at the legends and fables contained within. Oh, he remembered that book. It still lay in a chest, hidden among those few things that were his and his alone. It gave him a fresh twinge of pain, interrupted by her address. “You're a sorcerer, but you say you are no threat. Cowled in black, and here in Asgard, unheralded.”

“And if I am fortunate, as yet unseen by Heimdall,” he murmured, not realizing he spoke aloud at first.

“Now there’s a comforting thing to say, threatless traveler.” She lowered her arms with a grim smile of challenge.

Something hurt inside him, listening to her speak. He realized he was gamboling, rambling for time instead of getting to the point. For no other purpose than to hear her voice again, while he could. But, as ever, I have no time. “Mark me a prophet, then, a brief dream by day to be mostly forgotten by dusk.”

“Speak then, prophet, before I whisper a call for my guards.”

“You already have, m’lady, for you're wiser than that. A space of minutes or less before they come over that hill to keep watch.” A smile curved his lips. Her wisdom would keep him from dithering
overlong, if nothing else. Before he could open his mouth to speak again, a shrill boy's call came from further up the hill.

Now this I did not remember, he thought forlornly, his wisp of an idea going all but forgotten at the sight. The little golden child, already taller than his changeling brother as he charged down the field with his arms full of wooden swords and hammers. And he in his younger self looked up and smiled bright as the sun at the sight of him. The book set carefully down, the boy rose to clutch the bigger one in a hug fit to bring a wheeze from this tiny Thor who looked down at him with raw love. The toy blades scattered, forgotten.

“I bade you speak,” she said, and he couldn’t at first. Not through the mass of jangled emotions in his chest. She watched him cautiously.

“They care for one another,” he said thickly, at last.

“Of course they do. They are my sons, and they grow well.”

“Both of them.”

She gave him a sharp, contemplative look and in it was a warning. “Do you come from afield to threaten my children?”

“No!” he managed. “Gods, no.” He managed a shuddering gasp. “Let me ask thee, as a prophet...no matter what, please, I beg you, hold some hope for the younger one. Let not all things grow dark for him.”

She stared at him outright, growing visibly nettled. “This is not something I need some rambling madman to patronize me for.”

He gasped his response, stung. “Please, my Queen, you cannot know how important it is-”

“To have only the greatest of hopes for their future?” She snorted. “How dare you think so little of me?”

“Because I know of doubt!” he snapped, his pleading tone gone with that old fire rising. Frigga did not flinch at his outburst, and the children spared barely a glance before going back to their roughhousing.

“Your doubts are your own, then, and none of mine.” She stepped towards him. “My children, and yes, the dark one you seem to look at so cautiously, are my pride and whatever darkness you think may befall them, you ought know that I am ever steadfast. I do not waver. I do not flee. I am Frigga of Asgard, mate of Odin the All-Father, Mother to Asgard, mother of Thor and Loki, and I will fight to my last for all of these and more.”

In the distance, the rustle and rumble of torn reality came at last. He was out of time. “Then teach them of hope, because in darkest hours it’s a lesson easily forgot!” he snarled, more out of fear than anger. That cautious, contemplative look came back to her face.

“Every day we have is a hope made true. There is nothing more. And my sons, even should they forget me in this darkness you warn of, can save themselves this way. This I believe. It is their nature, and my gift to them. Is that your offering, prophet?”

The noises rose and she glanced beyond him, her face darkening as she could sense what he could. “In this last second, then, I admit I did unintentionally lie. I have no worthy offering.”
“Then why come and spar with me, hooded one? Why question their fates when you see very well that their fates are already well-girded with my hopes?”

“Because I think I had need to recall that hope,” Loki said with an honesty that burned him, moving away to find the path out, to lead his pursuer away from his past. “Try and remember that, then.”

“And have you found the hope you needed in our little joust, stranger?”

“Lady Frigga, I hope so. Because I’m out of road to run.”

...  

She watched the man in black flee, chased close by some shimmering trail of yellow that left her cold and her heart hurting, wondering what she'd just seen and feeling a tremble of some amorphous worry. A new rustling caught her attention and she turned to smile at her boys, Thor's already strong arm flung gleefully over his brother's thin shoulders. In the distance were a brace of warriors overseeing the now-peaceful scene, waiting for the order to withdraw again. “Oh, Thor. You've run from morning lessons again. Shall you take your wiser brother now from his this eve?”

“Oh mother, please.” They both gave her those toothy smiles of children that knew a thing they wanted and would wheedle hard for it, but it was Thor that pleaded for both. “Bor and Buri go this night to the mecha fights! If we leave soon, we could join them!”

She rolled her eyes hard and theatrical, setting the young Loki to giggles. “Can either of you recite the sacred names of your fathers and theirs, in that cant of the elder sages?”

“I can!” boasted Loki.

“Then you are your brother's salvation this hour. Tomorrow you both redouble your learning. But tonight...” she smiled, opening her arms to the pair and kissing each of their heads as they burrowed close. “You may go about your foolishness.”

As they left, she turned to look down the road after the ersatz prophet to spare him a thought. Seek your own salvation, traveler. In the end, at the edge of that hope forged for us by others, we must always find the rest of it ourselves.
Chapter Summary

The final battle has come round at last.

And so he let his feet take him on the road of returning, coiling back to that place between all things; where it began and, he realized, where it must end. As he waited for the keeper in yellow, that ghost of his own possible making, he watched those mirrors yet intact flicker and change, thinking of the things he’d seen and the people he had known.

Left to his own thoughts, with truly no other place to run, he chose at last to look within himself with the mirrors as a guide. And it occurred to him to wonder, in the silence of that place, waiting for the closing of the book, did he succeed in his last chance? In planting the tiniest seeds of hope within himself?

Or was there always a mother’s hope, despite his doubts, just waiting to be needed?

He turned away from the mirrors, stepping over the discarded yellow robe that had been meant for him, and went to the great stone table that held the twinned books. One dark and one light. He understood now, relearning how to see as he’d watched the effects of his dire future on countless worlds. Now he opened the books once more and placed a spread and ungloved hand upon the pages of each. If the keeper wore the words, he wore them then, but not yet. Another illusion veiled the books meanwhile, his own speciality. The truth was now obvious against his renewed and chilly calm, the ready emptiness of one who knew he had nothing left but hope, and thus nothing to lose. And, he reflected, he had a promise to keep. To a human, true, but an oath to give his help all the same. His duty was not complete, and that would be the rock he needed.

Under his palms, the pages grew warm. And then the books began their whispering.

... "Step away from them, little deity.” The cracking voice was all a warning behind him, punctuated with those wet sucking sounds where its feet had once been. Loki did not let himself wonder what the rest of his echo’s body looked like under that garish wreckage of a robe. “You know well by now the truth.”

“ Oh yes,” he murmured, his fingertips afire with the words he could not see. “ I see your lies very well, and in them, the truth you would not tell me.”

“A truth that hasn’t happened and your hope is thus a lie.”

“No, old monster.” In his mind, the whispers warred with each other and he used their sibilant struggle to track down the Darkhold’s grip along his soul-self, its tendrils of despair locked firm in his memories. He held fast to that pure recollection he’d found, two brothers in arms with all the future before them and their mother’s love standing an eternal guard, renewed in his heart. It would be his prybar, set against the stone of promise. “ I will make my choices and forge my own hope. You can push me, goad me, pretend to guide me onto a path you carefully picked out for me for your goals and your whimsy. But you, yourself, you cannot harm me. You cannot force this future, unless
I allow it. "The snarl came, fed with his rage. "I do not allow it."

It wheedled at him, taking another step. "We are ever creatures of fate, despite this new capriciousness of yours. Come and let me show you again the End. It's so beautiful. Step away from the books, pretty prince."

"You used the word choice against me well enough at our first encounter, to goad me to the ones you wanted. I wager you hoped I would forget. Instead it now proves you lie. Damn fate and damn you." Loki hissed without looking at the keeper. The Vishanti began to burn his fingertips and that roil of pain inside and out began again as this creation of pure order would not permit any of his lies. Not even the kinder ones. He chose to bear it, had to bear it, and a soft noise of self-loathing left his throat as that secret blue crept up his hands.

"Pretty monster. The Vishanti is hurting you, can't you see that? The Darkhold can heal it for you. You'll never see such monstrous flesh again. We can be pretty forever, if we like."

"Regular runway models, you lot." He bared his teeth through dark azure lips at the pair of books. Inside the chaos of his memories, he heard all the voices of the Darkhold squeal in anguish. He imagined its black leather torn by glistening white teeth and it gave him a bitter smile. Underneath his hands, the cover split just a little along its edge. Black ink spilled to the pure white Carrara marble altar that Loki decided ought replace rough stone and incongruous IKEA furniture, unsurprised now that he and not only the keeper could make that change. First blood to the Vishanti, the only blood perhaps.

Behind him, the keeper in yellow screeched in pain fit to match. "You don't know what you're doing!"

"I know precisely what I'm doing."

"You return to Ragnarok's path! Everything you've struggled for on the road to these precious seconds!"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. These are choices I must make another time, of my own will."

"Fate-"

"Oh, do stop your banging on. I'm not buying your cheap wares any longer. I expected better from a lie designed for myself." A flare of triumph glittered in his alizarin eyes. The Darkhold gave an audible whine, a single thread popping in its spine as it admitted defeat in its soft-whispered combat. Darkness left his memories and inside his soul, that horrible, gazing eye that was the avatar of the Darkhold's master closed at last.

He was free.

I cannot destroy you, he thought as he felt his soul-self grow lighter in the wake of that monstrous, reluctant departure. No, not enough power even in this moment. Because there must be balance, and I cannot bear the cost to take your twin with you. The rules remain steadfast. But you will sleep now, until some other poor damned fool touches you. I can do that much. He lifted one hand to flip its cover closed, even the ornate red D now looking dull and faded against the dry, cracking leather.

And for a second, he was lost in the Vishanti's pouring, healing light, perhaps a moment of gratitude from whatever Gods forged its elegant blue spine. A blue not unlike his own skin. And was that so ugly?

His throat closed on a hard swallow, questioning things he had believed his whole life. And then,
because he could, because he could choose to, he let his hand fall free from the great book of order. Releasing himself from the bonds of both. He turned, trembling with targeted fury, to behold the withering keeper in its paling yellow robe. He gave his malformed echo-self a last snarl of undoing, his mind abruptly full of stories and their endings. Best to end it in a language his mad echo understood.

“You're nothing but a pack of cards!”

The keeper put out a gnarled, grey hand as if seeking rescue, and then was gone into the void of its denied future.

The rumble in the heart of the world ceased, leaving instead a soft, slithering noise. The great mass, that amorphous nightmare that had begun to flow out from the ruins of the Bleecker Street mansion halted its advance with a wailing, offended scree that drilled lingering nightmares into all life still within earshot. And then it poured back into its stinking, smoking hole, unable to fight the demands of the awakened and living world. Deep within the earth, the veil between reality and the nightmare of Chthon and its monstrous children healed itself with a hiss.

In the sky, its minions, those coiling things of many arms and many eyes dropped and melted as Thor watched in disbelief. “Stark,” he said as his friend paused in flight at his side. “By all the names of my ancestors, I do believe it ends.”

“Oh, thank God.” Tony's snarky tone belied quavering exhaustion. “I'm on like 4% charge here and I'm super hungry. Where's that pizza kid?”

“Last I saw him, he was riding Banner like a pony.”

“You are legit kidding me.” JARVIS abruptly ceased external control of his visual input as the things below quivered and died, letting Tony peel back the metal mask to show Thor his look of total disbelief.

“I took a photo as I flew by. With the Starkphone thou didst foist upon me.”

“Okay, you have to text me a copy. That is going on the corporate website the second I get it. Bruce Banner: Head Scientist. Free Pony Rides every other Thursday.”

“I do not text.”

“You know how, right?”

“...The keyboard is too tiny.”

“Did I not teach you how to change that? Dammit. My bad.”

The SHIELD Globemaster sat on the green of Central Park, carefully balanced to leave no lasting damage to the lush space. Coulson looked up from the faces of his team as the sky lost its dull grey tint and returned to the brilliant sapphires and reds of the gloaming; that sacred twilight between day and night.

He bit the corner of his lip as his team broke into relieved smiles, Jemma's hands clapping together in delight, and wondered just how that had come about. And if the demigod had survived it. If he had,
he owed the pale little bastard all the drinks he could want, and he owed them gladly.

... And in the nexus, that place between the seconds of Now and Then, there was silence but for the soft, shuddering sounds of Loki's exhausted breathing. Free of the grasp of both books as they lay wrapped together in the discarded and now-harmless yellow shift, he put a trembling hand to his face and noted absently that he was veiled again in his gentler lie. He clenched his now-pale hand and admitted to himself that, yes, he was more comfortable in the skin he had since chosen, skin that had once been forced on him without his knowledge or consent, than the flesh he was born with.

Perhaps that was also a deep thing to contemplate even as it hurt him to think about such matters, but not in that place between with his soul-self just barely beginning its long journey of healing. Not yet, anyway. There would be time enough to come.

He looked up and beheld the glimmering mirrors and understood what they showed him – nothing but their sparkling gleams. In the end, they were mostly another way of looking within when he had denied himself that ability. To force himself to see the results of his choices. Well, for his place in that strange nexus. He wondered briefly what the place could become for another traveler, should one fight their way there. He found it in himself to bid them good luck.

Meanwhile, at last he had what he wanted: an open road, free of guideposts. Perhaps it would yet end in Ragnarok. In failure, in tears, in damnation. But he had fought for himself a choice, and that choice meant it was possible it might end somewhere else. He could not yet comprehend the expanse before him, and took a drifting kind of comfort in that lack of knowledge.

Then his heart hurt as he realized fully the cost that had gone into this freedom he'd earned, and recognized a thing that he should have known all along. He looked up at the mirrors once more to ask them to verify what he saw, and he saw her well as she lay on the cool stone of Asgard's great keep, Odin's thick hands grasped tight around her as he grieved. He saw the love in her still face, uncompromising love for everything – everyone - she'd fought to keep dear.

To her very end, lost Frigga believed hope still lived in Loki's hidden heart. It was up to him now to decide if that would remain forever true.

It was enough. I am, he thought. I am he who he is. And I will ever make my own destiny. With a whisper, he asked the now battered and aging mirrors, all but one, his chosen exit, to crack.

Amidst their sundering noise, he dropped to his knees amongst the rubble of that nexus, his nexus, to weep at last. As a child might.

It was over.
epilogue: credit cookies

Chapter Summary

In which we keep the Marvel tradition of sneaking future possibilities into the ending of the current story.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I think you've got the attention of every bird in this part of the park,” said Coulson by way of greeting, looking at the swarming flock of birds in eager attendance around the man on the bench. It was some fleeting kingdom at least; a small and hungry one.

Loki didn't bother to look up as the agent settled himself on the other half of the bench, his half-smile greeting the human for him. “An unkindness of ravens, possibly the most delightfully florid name for a collective you people have. I like it.” He tilted his head. “And further know that they are, let me tell you of such ravens I have known. Well, fortunately for our kindness, I merely feed a murder of crows and a raggle-taggle of other little opportunistic things. I think sparrows and well-traveled magpie among them perhaps, but I don't think on them overmuch.” He tossed another handful of crumbs to the little creatures, enjoying the pleasure of their scattered song.

“I owe you a drink or ten, I'm thinking.”

He harrumphed a little laugh. “I suppose you might see it like that, your vociferous notion of comfort in that dark hour aside.” He glanced over to Coulson, for once without his seemingly ever-present tie. “You'll do me a single favor if you please, and ask not closely what I did for that victory.” A little of his lingering weariness seeped into his face as he smiled more fully for the human.

“No, I didn't plan on it. Sometimes battles have to be fought alone.” Coulson bent forward, his elbows on his knees and his hands steepled towards the birds. They ignored him, knowing he had no food. “I've been in a few of those.”

“Yes. I can see that on you. The lord of the thun- my brother would not have given you such regard otherwise.” A quiet snort as he ignored Phil's raised eyebrow. “Not to mention you've dealt with me more than once now. Battle-hardened indeed.”

“Ehh.” Phil shrugged. “Wasn't so bad this time.” He caught Loki's eye as the demigod gave him a sardonic look and they shared a brief moment of dry, darkly humorous laughter. “Except for that whole 'apocalypse beyond reality' thing.”

“Yes, except for that.” Another snort. “I'll advise you of certain decisions I made – the sorcerer's book ought be returned to his door by now, or what's left of it. I sent it by courier this morning, marked it for him alone. He seemed a fain keeper of it, and so I have no qualms sending it home where it began.”

“Right. I'll update our files.” He grimaced. “And the other one?”

“I'll not specify where for safety's sake, but I'm sure you'll think to guess a few possibilities. As before,
I did not think it wise to take it too far from this world, much less away from its partner. Better to let it rot here. To that end, there are certain places in this world where the earth is torn open and what's within burns ceaselessly. I found one of these and dropped it down the darkest hole in the centermost of these hellish fires. The book will not burn, no, but it will deter all but the most insistent. And I did what I could to fox the trail to it, besides.”

Coulson gave a slow, approving nod. “Well, meanwhile, Raina and Quinn are off the grid again and The Hand seems to have packed their toys and gone home. I think what went down here drove them off for a bit. They'll pop up again, though. Always do.”

Loki quirked a corner of his lip. “We bad seeds do that. I'm sure the lady's not about to forget my face. But for now, we've won some brief season of rest.”

... They were quiet for a time, the birds cheeping eagerly at the pale man and his shorter companion, fluttering away only to come surging back as joggers and strollers passed too closely by. One such elderly human straggler in a bright red windbreaker took a breathless second to snap in a sharp local accent, “You know you're not supposed to feed 'em, right?”

Coulson watched the irate man continue down the path, noting the words 'Stan the Man' embroidered on the back of the flapping red jacket. He arched an eyebrow as Loki spoke. “So, you'll arrest me now. Genocide, terrorism, theft of federal property, theft of occult artifacts, assault, B&E, property damage... bird feeding.”

“I can get that collar fixed if you really want.”

“Gods, no.” He crumpled the empty paper bag and tossed it artfully into the nearby bin. “I mean to ask for a raincheck on that drink.”

That got him a look of concern. “Something come up?”

Loki shook his head slowly. “I yet recover and thus could probably not hold my liquor as well as I ought. A totteringly drunk would-be conquerer-god is not what you want careening around this city. Besides, they rebuild here again. Far be it from me to mung it all up once more and so soon.”

“Never do the same trick twice. Yeah, maybe we should reconvene somewhere a bit more durable.” He tapped his fingers together. “I take it you're not coming back to the Bus.”

Loki shook his head. “Not at this time. My quest seems ended and you find yourself with a little space of peace. I think it would be selfish of a guest to insist upon continued hospitality.”

“Gotcha. Going to go back to Asgard, then?”

The demigod went quiet for a time, a tone in his voice Coulson couldn't identify for certain. He thought it might have been grief. “No, though I will admit to a certain wish – that there would yet be one there you might have met, had time flowed differently. I think you would have liked each other a great deal. You could have shared your insistent ideas about optimism.” He finished his thought with a soft, wry chuckle. “I will journey for a while, and take my fill of this restful space.”

“You know, Skye told me about a discussion you and she had a while back. I keep thinking about it for some reason.” He looked over to see Loki arch a dark eyebrow at him questioningly. “As it happens, I agree with you. No one is born evil.”

“You think not?”
Coulson shook his head. “We all have choices to make; every day another choice. We're never out of hope until the last one is made. I think we start with that hope and only learn how to lose it later. Sometimes, if we're lucky, we remember how to find it.”

“There's a truth in that, though I see my saying it surprises you a little.” Loki leaned back against the bench, spreading his long arm across the back of it while he thought. “A truth I hadn't seen before. Perhaps I am not out of hope as I once feared, but in this hour, I still feel I am out of family and friends. Lost or sold all that I might have cared for. Some of this might heal, given opportunity. Much may not, not in this lifetime or the next.”

Phil shook his head. “Not really true anymore.”

Loki quirked a wry smile, taking his meaning. “Do you presume? We should have no friendly care for each other, and scant kindness, though our time together... was well spent, yes.”

“Well, I'm not going to fight you on the topic. You have to make your own calls, sort out your own ideas of semantics.” Coulson shrugged, finding a compromise to offer. “How about we call it respect?”

“Should we be somehow forced to meet again as enemies, Agent Coulson, respect would not save you.” There was no threat in his voice, only a caution.

Coulson held his steady gaze. “No, Loki. But it might save you.”

Loki was the one to look away, a contemplative look on his face. They watched the sun move across the sky, another warm day in the heart of New York City. Then he rose, quick and agile, ready to leave. “Ah. I near forgot.” He plucked a tiny box from the pocket of his fine black suit and tossed it to Coulson. “For you.” He touched two fingers to his forehead in a salute. “Respect, then. Till that next, for I do think there will be a next... and for drinks still owed,” he said, and then he was gone with the rustle of a breeze through the trees.

Coulson looked at where the demigod had been, then pried open the little lid of the box. He caught the folded note that drifted free with two quick fingers, furrowing his brow in quiet surprise as he touched the jeweler's pliers inside. They were exactly like the pair he'd lost. He put the box carefully in his jacket pocket and unfolded the note to read its clean and elegant script.

. . .

*The pliers themselves hold no special gift for you, save one. They will not help your strange and insistent work, make that weary effort of yours any easier. There are always things that cannot be fixed, Coulson, this I believe. But for those things that perhaps can be remedied, I suppose you will not ever end your trying. And so, their single gift to you.*

*These pliers cannot ever be lost. Now that they have touched your hands, they will always come home.*

*Good luck.*

*And thank you.*

. . .

Tokyo, Japan
Ian Quinn presided over the most delicate of the cyber-work, watching his specially chosen engineer ensure that all the wiring connections were cleanly functional. “Okay,” murmured the engineer. “From the little finger to the thumb, flex for me. Great, now the left hand?”

Matsu'o never took his eyes off the engineer, feeling the ghosts of muscles where his broken hands had once been, where the new silvery pair now shifted and stretched instead. As his new hands transmitted their successes to the readout, he asked the question he'd been holding onto. “And you are certain I will come to feel through them?”

Quinn took charge of the answer. “It'll be a bit numb at first, like they're always asleep. But so long as we keep pushing upgrades and troubleshooting the synthflesh layer, after a while, you're gonna think you were born with them.” He patted the assassin gently on his shoulder. “This is work I can guarantee. Cybertechnology is my jam.” He popped a thumb's up and swaggered out of the operating center to find Raina in the observation room next door. He jutted his chin at her by way of greeting. “Good call. He's almost friendly again.”

“And now he'll owe us, Ian.” She favored him with a bright smile. “That's terrific news. We can always use a good, staunch ally. There's always more fun to come, isn't there?”

He huffed a snort through flared nostrils. “Still thinking about the one that got away, babe?”

“He'll return eventually.” Raina crossed her arms over her softly crinkling dress, secure in the future and never one to dwell on the past. “I told you. He's mine. Living or dead, now or later. It's all the same to me. Sooner or later we'll cross Loki's path again, and when we do, I'll take what I want.”

Quinn crossed the room to find the decanter of cognac right where he left it. He poured two small shotglasses, one for him and one for her which she took with a slight bow of her head. “To relentless drive, that first angel of good business.”

“To the future, Ian.” She smiled and clinked her glass to his. “To our future.”

. . .

He unfolded himself from the rented vehicle, having chosen to take the last stretch of his long road home in something like style. Though humility had come to Dr. Stephen Strange late in his strange life, he was not above the occasional temptation. And the trip from the airport had been incredibly, unusually long. It seemed another catastrophe had struck the Big Apple, psychic remnants of some great chaos striking against all his senses as he half-watched scattered news updates from the luxurious backseat of the stretch limo. Not bothering to glance up at his sanctum yet, always full of faith his home awaited him, he paid the driver and gave a judicious tip to boot.

With his small amount of luggage in hand – once he'd gotten to Tibet, he hadn't needed much on the physical plane this time around – he turned around to smile. And then frowned. And then flapped his hands in wild shock, noting its ruined facade, noting the small FedEx package leaned carefully against the tottering, half-ruined front door as his horror struck him full in the face.

“What the hell happened to my house?!?”

. . .

In the new nexus of his mind, never needing to walk that dark path between again, Loki centered his mind as his body rested, temporarily peaceful at the sunset of some uninhabited but pretty world, in hopes that one day soon he would call on those owed drinks with those small creatures that,
grudgingly but less secretive now, he might call friends. I AM were the borders of his spirit, and in that place in his soul that no longer knew of boundaries, he walked out through the door of countless probabilities towards an eternity of unknown futures with a wry and ready smile.

. . .

~Fin~

“There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.” ~ Albert Camus.

. . .

Jul 2nd, 2014. All relevant rights remain in the hands of Marvel with no infringement intended. All realities are fair game. All half-mad demigods do whatever the hell they want. Namaste.

Chapter End Notes

A couple notes: On occasion, and naturally I figured this out towards the end of the project, I slightly goofed up a name. The character’s correct name is Matsu'o Tsurayaba, and this is useful if you decide to look him up on the Marvel Wiki or something (and thank god for the Marvel Wiki and Wikipedia, all I'm saying). Matsu'o is best known for being pure, unadulterated 90's; a central figure in the weird-ass Revanche/Psylocke X-Men storyline. His continuity here is made up as all hell.

I have also taken enormous liberties with Count Vernei – AKA 'Varnae,' the first vampire in Marvel continuity. His appearances are a mash-up of Conan the Barbarian, Blade, run-ins with Doctor Strange, and all sorts of nutty stuff. The original Varnae was indeedly created by The Darkhold (itself, yep, a creation of Chthon) to serve Thulsa Doom. I mostly mention this because Thulsa Doom was played by James Earl Jones in the 1982 film Conan the Barbarian and that is awesome.

Other details are made up or adapted as seen fit – The Between/The Place Between All Things is based (very) slightly on the existing Marvel concept, and Chthon has also been based somewhat on Marvel's gleeful notion of Lovecraft's Mythos. (Another fun example is the Fear Lord 'Dweller-in-Darkness,' recently found in Kieron Gillen's run on 'Journey Into Mystery.' Which I heartily endorse, along with Loki: Agent of Asgard.)

I'd like to thank everyone for their comments and kudos! It makes me happy to know people enjoyed the story enough to take the time to say something about it.

Loki and the Agents of SHIELD will return... eventually.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!