What Lies Beneath

by asktheravens

Summary

All Tony wants is to make amends after a thoughtless reaction leaves him in danger of losing Steve, but a mission intervenes. The Avengers travel to a laboratory in a remote part of Appalachia expecting a routine job, but an ancient evil slumbers within Old Crow Mountain that will test much more than their relationship.

Notes

Thank you as always to my lovely beta readers, Mari-the-mole, Onemuseleft, and hallsofvalhalla. I couldn't have done this without you guys! And remaining issues are my own and in no way reflect on their careful attention.

You don't have to have read Lovecraft to enjoy this, but those who have will find little easter eggs throughout. I drew much of the inspiration for this from "The Colour Out of Space", my favorite Lovecraft work, and Laird Barron's excellent short story "Old Virginia".

This piece does not lend itself to the tag system, but I am NOT kidding about those warnings, so be safe out there, and thanks for reading!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Jimmy Buckman knew he’d cleared the right tunnel when he started to find bone. The old exo suit made more ominous grinding and clanking sounds every hour, and he didn’t want to have to ask his employer for another. He clamped the metal arms around the stone and shifted it off the brittle skull. Its empty sockets stared up at him in the light from the suit’s lamps, warning or accusing. Or nothing at all, he reminded himself. It was easy to get fanciful down here all alone, but these bones had been dead for better than a century, and they had nothing to say. He pulled his arm back inside the cramped suit and tapped a brief message into the comm panel: 38C CORRECT TUNNEL. CLEAR SOON. Then he had a tense few moments, as he always did, waiting for a response. These old suits weren’t meant for mining and the communicator relay was unreliable this far underground. When he could no longer get a human work crew to come down here and he’d taken over clearing the tunnels himself, he’d been tempted constantly to keep a conversation going over the comm link. Under the WVU score or the price of gasoline, however, the whole thing would have been a plea not to leave him, a reminder that he hadn’t been swallowed up by the earth like a corpse.

COMING. Doctor Machen’s response appeared on his screen and spurred him to return to work. He longed for some dynamite and a crew of miners to speed things up, but the old machine—Hammer Tech with the serial numbers filed off, if he wasn’t mistaken—got him through the thick slabs and drifts of gravel left by the long ago cave in. Something was wrong down here, but Jimmy couldn’t quite place it. The disaster in 1903 had left no survivors, and much of what had happened remained an insoluble mystery, but the rocks weren’t where they should have been, and he was becoming increasingly sure of it.

He broke through the rock with the wonky hammer attachment and the lamplight shone into the sunless dark beyond for the first time in over a hundred years. Jimmy widened the opening, keeping an eye on his improvised meters and gauges for instability or poisoned air. He settled in to the work, calmed by the soothing routine of shifting and breaking and smoothing down a path. His mother had had her cross stitch and her soap operas when the skies were clear enough to get the signal, but ever since he was a child, Jimmy had loved to dig. He set a final brace and guided the mechanical arms back, then put the suit into drive. All his gauges went off at once, warning beeps discordant in the silence as every display in the suit read a pixelated, maxed out glitch. He scrambled to do something, anything, but he had no idea what had caused the suit to malfunction so completely. He felt a rising, irrational panic and longed to run, though the suit couldn’t turn in the tunnel and couldn’t be put in reverse without five minutes of cursing and a wrench to the drive shaft. Then it all stopped as quickly as it had begun. The darkness and silence was so sudden and absolute that he thought for the space between his breaths and heartbeats that he had died, and he heard his mother calling him in for lunch. For an instant he could feel the warm, splintery wood of the bowed front step under him, smell the grass and the fresh biscuits and the tinned beans, see the endless blue of the summer sky up on the mountain. And he could hear her calling from beyond the stone, deep within the house, deep within the earth.

The exosuit rebooted with a stutter, and the lamps flickered back on. The whir of the motor idling and the faint hiss of the ventilation system replaced the total silence. He took a deep breath and cleared his head. Maybe it was the depth, or the solitude getting to him. The long hours down here alone trying to find the tragic turn of the century cave in for his inscrutable employers. He wanted to turn back around, head up the shaft and out of this state, take Sarah and the baby and move to a huge soulless city with no untamed woods, no view of the stars or low, ancient mountains. But he had to finish. Once the doctor and his team had the right tunnel and it was stable, the contract was over and he’d take Machen’s final payout and never see Old Crow Mountain again.

He thought of Brandi off at boarding school and tapped the commands into the controls with only a slight tremor to his hand. The suit surged through the rest of the barrier and into the chamber.
beyond. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected— more tunnel, more than likely, or a little dead end where the work had stopped— but he found himself in a vast cavern. The beams of light couldn’t penetrate to the far wall. Jimmy felt a bit dizzy, but he unhooked the harness and popped open the suit’s hatch. He took the brightest lantern he had with him and clicked it on, leaning over and shining it around the floor. He hopped down on the layer of freshly pulverized gravel and clipped a safety line to the suit. He took two cautious steps to the left and knocked over another skeleton. The sound bounced strangely through the undefinable empty space and he knew with some certainty he shouldn’t be here. He skimmed the light over the ground and illuminated the bones of the lost miners, trapped down here a century ago. Jimmy crossed himself and whispered a prayer, though he’d never felt so far from his mother’s God before.

They hadn’t been crushed by the rocks, was the worst thing. The bones here were whole and clean, held together with a tattered but recognizable overalls. Tiny wooden beads from a broken or disintegrated rosary lay scattered around the body and flaky streaks of something stained the rock black in the harsh white light. He looked away from the row of skulls and noticed odd scratches on the wall. He wondered if they had been trying to write something. But for who? And how? He doubted many of them had been able to write at all. Curious, he played the light higher to get a better view.

What had seemed random scratches at first glance coalesced into something horrible. An enormous carved mural covered the side of the cavern with the grinning face of a massive black goat, horns curled into a sinuous twist. Though crude, the demented artist who had executed the thing had clearly had a talent. The swollen body was shown from the side but a dark pit yawned between the hind legs, the distended vulva picked out with vile detail, and from it dropped monstrous young, tangles of serpentine blackness that spread far past where he could see. Some of the lines were cut and some black pigment rubbed into them, but others were the natural lines of coal, though he had never seen layers of strata like them in all his studies. He backed away from the wall, one deliberate step after another, taking in the vast multitude of tiny human figures carved all around the black goat in a hopeless throng. He thought he heard his mother again, behind him, and he turned around to look for her just as he stepped off the ledge into the lightless abyss of the chasm.

He didn’t even scream as he went over. The safety line slithered and went taut with a hiss, and he felt absurdly disappointed for some reason when it caught him. The lantern tumbled away and was lost in the darkness. He never heard it hit bottom. He brought his hands up to climb the rope and found his fingers were playing with the buckles of his harness, toying with the idea of dropping, and he didn’t know why. He shook his head again and climbed toward the faint light of the idling suit.

Jimmy located the edge of the chasm and reached into the dark to get a grip and haul himself over. The rock, for it had to BE rock, felt loathsome and soft, slippery with sourceless moisture that smelled like sea water and the slime of long-rotten vegetation. Putting his hands on the surface took all his will, as the stone was in shadow and he couldn’t see what he was touching. Still, no need to get hysterical over a little fall and some weird deep-dwelling fungus. He pulled himself over the edge and stood, shaking and glad no one would ever know, and clutched the metal frame of the clunky old machine. After a moment he put his back against the suit. He hated having the bottomless pit behind him but he found he couldn’t look away from the hideous goat. Who had carved the relief? He was no expert, but the figures didn’t look like they were all the same age or made by the same person. Had people been coming here for years, adding more crudely sketched worshippers to the image? He thought of the lost miners, of the faint incisions he’d seen near their bodies. How long had they been down here before they tried to add themselves to her cult?

“This region of Appalachia is quite fascinating,” Doctor Machen said behind him. Jimmy managed not to jump too much despite the frayed state of his nerves. The doctor thought everyone in Old Crow was an uneducated, superstitious hick and he would have hated to give him the satisfaction.
“I knew the story about the lost miners, but…” he agreed, hating the tight breathlessness of his voice. He didn’t have words for this, but at the same time the black goat felt familiar, as though he should have recognized it, known its name.

“There are many things the townsfolk do not know, and many that they know but do not speak. You are an educated man, are you not, Mr. Buckman?”

“I went to WVU…engineering degree. And I worked in Pennsylvania and Ohio before I came back here.”

“To care for your mother. But your time away makes you an outsider.”

“I guess.” He hated this pompous old prick with his weird untraceable accent. He just wanted his money and out of this hole for good.

“The people who lived here before the white man came knew Her as their mother. So did the first European settlers. I dare say this cavern has seen far worse than the tragedy that befell these poor wretches.” Jimmy didn’t believe he gave a bent nickel about the lost men from the turn of the century, any more than he’d cared about the bizarre chain of misfortune that had followed every crew he’d brought down here to clear the abandoned shafts.

“This is what you were looking for? This hillbilly Satanist…thing? Thought you lot were scientists.” Actually he thought they were Men in Black types, black helicopters, tinfoil hats, the whole works. But he’d lost friends down here. Santana’s suicide, Defoe’s sudden and aggressive cancer, the six new hires from North Carolina who had all vanished overnight…all of it he’d rationalized away, but he’d always felt in the dark byways of his mind that it was the shaft, the job he’d given them, that was responsible.

“No. This is merely an anthropological curiosity, a way for primitive minds to deal with power beyond their comprehension. In fact I rather hope word doesn’t get round or I’ll have all manner of charlatans and archaeologists bumbling around. Thank you, Mister Buckman. Despite the delays it appears my faith in you was well founded. You have done a great service for your country, and you shall have your final reward in your account on the morrow.”

“Will you be OK down here?” Alone, he kept from saying. Not that he wanted to stay. The clammy damp of the cavern clung to his skin and he felt a cough tickling at the back of his throat. He wanted to go home and sleep, maybe even in his bed with Sarah, but even out on the couch with the light of the TV sounded good right now.

“Of course. My team will join me with the rest of our equipment soon. We have no further need of you.”

He borrowed a lantern from Dr. Machen’s kit since he didn’t have leave to take the suit back up. They might need it down there, doing whatever they were really doing. He felt nothing wholesome or worthwhile could come from that filthy pit. As he trudged back up the marked and stabilized shafts, he realized that he had no idea if the sun would be up when he got out, but he hoped so. He had worked in mines most of his adult life, but the grime from the lost cavern felt vile. It felt like the glistening tentacles of the goat ran through the whole mountain, following his footsteps, there in the total darkness where his puny light didn’t fall.

It was after one in the morning when he came out the mouth of the main shaft. Even the moonlight felt cleaner, though it threw long shadows from the trees. He clicked off the torch with relief. His
old truck was there in the lot, usually the only vehicle up at the mine any more, but tonight there was another, a black cargo van with no markings, and three men unloading some bulky dark cases from within. Machen’s team, he presumed, down from on high. They wore odd suits, reminding Jimmy of that Outbreak movie with the monkeys. He nodded to them, but they did not nod back.

He considered putting a trash bag on the seat to protect the battered old upholstery, not wanting any lingering traces of the goat’s cavern to remain in his life, but he didn’t like the way the light shone off the black plastic. He climbed in and started it up, still adrenaline jittery from the close call in the cavern. His stomach hurt and he wondered when he’d last eaten.

The winding back road down the mountain was nearly as dark as the shafts of the mine, trees blocking most of the moon, and the few neighboring houses slept far recessed from the dirt track. The splinterly swaybacked stairs of the front porch creaked under his feet in a counterpoint to the chains on the old swing and a cool damp breeze sent the first fallen leaves of the season skittering across the boards. He paused for a moment to enjoy the feel of it on his burning face. He let himself in and undressed in the mudroom, dumping his gray denim coverall in the washer for the morning. He stepped into the shower, not wanting to go to bed dirty despite his exhaustion.

The phone was in his hand; he didn’t remember putting it there. Water dripped off his body onto the floor and the upstairs phone jangled loud and discordant in the quiet house. He listened to the ring once, then put the handset down. As soon as it clicked back into the cradle, the ringing stopped upstairs. He didn’t know why he’d called his own house. His mother’s house. He felt the need to hear her voice, was all. His mother had died two years ago; she wouldn’t be answering her phone anytime soon. Like so many people in Old Crow, the cancer had gotten her. He coughed a few times as he headed, still dripping from the shower, up the stairs. He had a headache and wanted to lie down.

Sarah was in bed, of course, and she murmured sleepily when he joined her, a wordless question.

“No one, babe. Just mice in the wires, that’s all.” She settled back to sleep at the sound of his voice and he stroked her heavily pregnant belly. He couldn’t see her expression. A spreading pool of total mine shaft darkness had replaced her face and he wondered what was wrong with his eyes. He shut them tight and curled against her back. The money would be in the account tomorrow, he thought like a mantra, like saying the Lord’s Prayer each night with his mother. They could pack what little they really needed and get out. Leave the house for the taxman, for the mountain, to claim, and move to Boston, near Brandi’s boarding school, or anywhere with lots of light. He drifted off longing for the bright skyline of New York or Los Angeles, places he’d heard of but never seen where the light never went out, one arm draped over his wife, ignoring the way the black goat’s hideous leer seemed to wait behind his eyelids.

The standard Avengers communicator was designed to beep with a steadily increasing volume until answered; by the time the sound penetrated Tony’s skull it could probably be heard in New Jersey. He grabbed for it, ready to hurl it against a wall or stuff it under the mattress just to restore blessed silence. Midmorning sunlight stabbed through his eyes straight into his aching head and it tasted like something furry had crawled into his mouth and died. Still fumbling for his stridently bleeping pants, bits of the past evening started to filter in to his memory.

Drinking. Drinking with Thor. One of those things he’d sworn off many times, only to return in times of crisis. Crisis. Steve. STEVE. He didn’t know what he wanted to say to him, but he knew he wanted to say something.
“Gwah?” he said into the wrong end of the communicator. He’d sat up too fast and the room spun dizzily. He tried to hold still and fumbled the stupid device the right way around. He worked his tongue around to wet the inside of his mouth and tried again. “It’s OK, I didn’t mean it we can…”

“Stark. You say the nicest and least coherent things.”

“Fury?”

“This is the official channel, Stark. The less I know about your personal life the happier I am. Get your tin ass in here. You have a briefing fifteen minutes ago.” The communicator clicked off and Tony flopped back on the bed and shut his eyes. He wanted to go back to sleep. He was in his own bed, and that was good, and he was wearing his own boxers, which was better. The balcony door was open, admitting a clammy, foggy draft. Thor must have brought him home; he always went overboard with the blankets.

He lay still and tried to pretend for a minute that this wasn’t his life. The more details returned to him through the haze of sleeplessness and alcohol, the more he wanted to call in sick to work and hide like a normal person. He thought about staggering off in search of water and painkillers and found someone had left them out on the night stand for him. From the number of pills, it had been Thor; he cared nothing about dosing and always just dumped out a generous handful. Tony was tempted to take the Thor-sized dose and was even scooping them up, but he thought of Steve and stopped. He counted out the number Steve would have given him, if he’d been there and Tony hadn’t blown it last night, and one extra just because he could. Deeper in the room the timer on the coffee maker chimed and it started up with a whir. Thor was keenly interested in anything that could dispense caffeine or alcohol, so it surprised him less that he could program the fancy machine and more that he would think to do it. The scent of coffee reached him as he crushed the pills in his mouth, the bitter burn of them spreading across his palate like a well deserved punishment.

Forget Fury, he needed to talk to Steve. He reached for the communicator, but he needed to talk to him like a boyfriend, not an Avenger. He found his phone as he sipped coffee and started several times to make the call. Each time he terminated it before it went through. What did he want to say? He wanted things back as they were, like last night never happened. He thought about Steve’s idea of moving in together and it was like standing on a high narrow ledge, the dizzy rush of vertigo that came from looking down with nothing between him and the fall. The thought of losing him entirely was much the same, but he thought he’d told Thor last night that all paths seemed to end with him losing Steve. Like he’d run the numbers and the equation never came out favorable. Finally he thumbed the buttons too quickly to let himself think and listened to his heart beat louder than the ringing of the phone. Steve always sounded exasperated in his voicemail message, and Tony rarely left them. He tried again and still no answer. He put the phone down with a sigh. Not that he blamed him for not wanting to talk to him right now, but he had really wanted to hear his voice.

He made it to the Helicarrier still fashionably, or as Pepper would call it, infuriatingly late. He walked in to the briefing room with the faceplate still down, not sure who would be around or what they would see in his face if he raised it. Natasha greeted him with a tiny nod, her look cool and knowing. She always seemed to know what was going on, and Tony had attributed this to her super spy abilities, but he had the terrible thought that maybe she was Steve’s Thor. Maybe he had told her about the…well not really a fight, per se. His latest screw up. Thor and Clint had their horns locked over the box, empty save for one glazed cake donut, and they each seemed to be waiting for the other to back down or glance away long enough to snatch victory.

“Stark. Nice of you to join us,” Fury drawled. Clint turned to smirk at Tony, but his face fell when
Thor grabbed the donut with a rustle of cardboard.

“Sorry. Caught in traffic.” Tony slouched as nonchalantly as possible while fully armored in his usual chair next to Thor and tried not to wonder why Steve wasn’t on his left where he belonged.

“For once, you aren’t the last one. Still waiting on the Captain.” He felt tension in the room, his fellow Avengers quiet and on edge as they settled in to wait for Steve. Thor slid the donut box to him. Tony shook his head in refusal. Thor shoved it closer with a very meaningful look. Apparently he’d decided to look after Tony and that included making him eat some form of breakfast, even if it was already afternoon and he didn’t want it. He gave in and raised the visor to eat, debating between going fast to get it over with or slowly while Clint glared at Thor. He was surprised to enjoy the taste. He kept his gaze down as if that would keep them from noticing how red his eyes were.

When Steve stepped into the room, the armor snapped shut without his conscious command of it, earning him an odd look from Natasha. He studied Steve intently through the visor as a series of readouts appeared on his screens, assessing his pulse, his respiration, his injury status, shield and armor integrity, everything except for what Tony really wanted to know without having to ask. Steve was fully encased in his own set of armor, one hundred percent Captain America, and he gave Tony nothing more than a nod of greeting, with perhaps fractionally less eye contact than he made with the others. Tony still caught a slight difference. Although much was covered by Steve’s winged cowl and general stoicism, his eyes were a little red and puffy.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said and sat down without further excuse or explanation. He took his normal seat but the air between them was tense with the things they weren’t saying.

“As soon as we are done here, you are leaving for a mission,” Fury began without preamble. He tapped his control panel and a map of West Virginia appeared on the screen between him and the team, showing sites marked with different government logos. Fury selected one in the southeastern part of the state and images of an ugly, blocky concrete building on a lush green mountain came up. “This is Crow Mountain Laboratory. Six days ago all communications from the facility ceased and someone is getting antsy about it. I need you to go down there and find out what’s going on, salvage what you can. Report only to me.”

“Wait, why are they wasting our time with this? Don’t we have someone else to go look? Interns or something?”

“Three days ago, Agent Barton, we sent a team of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents to have a look around. I haven’t heard anything from them for the past two days, so see if you can figure out what happened to them as well.”

“What aren’t you telling us?” Steve asked. “What did they do at this lab? Who even runs it?”

“I’ll have a few other things for you in the jet, but it’s deeply classified. The place is government affiliated, contractor I think, and I haven’t been able to get much even unofficial on what goes on down there. Its reputation is pretty unsavory. Black ops, human experimentation, that kind of bullshit. Built on top of an old coal mine. Someone has some pull, though, to convince my superiors that it’s worth sending you lot.”

“So that’s it? We trapeze out to Bumblefuck County on some shadowy uber-spook’s say-so without even a clear objective?” Tony didn’t have time for this now. Steve would be hard enough to talk around anyway; Captain America on a mission was impossible.

“That’s about right. You have two objectives: neutralize any threats and secure the facility and its
data. My theory is they are afraid of a rogue agent or sleeper cell, and you should be able to handle that. This is your team. Cap, Iron Man, you two are in charge. You’ve got Agents Barton and Romanoff for the delicate parts and Thor just in case you need to move a couch up some stairs while you’re there.”

“No Doctor Banner?” Steve was clearly unhappy with all of this, from having information withheld to having his team chosen for him.

“I was advised,” Fury said with a tone of voice that indicated he’d been ordered, “That Doctor Banner’s talents would be better used in a consulting capacity, from a safe distance. They want the place back as intact as possible.”

“But we need…” Fury held up his hand, palm out, and ducked his head.

“I know. The place is spooky. And I think sending all five of you is likely overkill. Just get it done quick and clean and come back, and if it maybe isn’t possible to salvage the place, I would not weep for its tragic loss.”

Clint gave up his view out the front window of the jet and took one of the back corners, fastening in with a “mom and dad are fighting” look at Natasha, who took the seat next to him. Steve and Tony both settled in to their usual places, the same awkward silence that had been between them in the briefing personified by the empty middle seat where their friends usually rode. Steve began the preflight checks and Tony settled into the routine; they didn’t need to speak to handle this part of the mission. When the jet was nearly ready, Thor flopped into the empty spot and set his hammer between his feet. He leaned forward until his head was between them, gleaming hair filling Tony’s peripheral vision. Thor gave him his most harmless, charming smile, then turned it on Steve, then back.

“What is that?” he asked, pointing at the altimeter. Tony knew that Thor knew perfectly well what the altimeter was. He could even fly the jet in an emergency.

“Don’t you usually fly point, big guy?” Steve asked him.

“But there is an empty seat since Bruce remains behind.”

“We’ll teach you to play I Spy. Remember the bottles of beer song?”

It was going to be a long trip. Tony started to think that maybe he would rather try to get his boyfriend to take him back.

Thor succeeded in cracking the ice between them, at least superficially, by the time they landed—mostly because he was willing to steamroller his friends with sheer charisma—but the rift was still there. They still weren’t really talking to each other, and Thor looked about ready to grab them and shove their heads together. Crow Mountain loomed beneath them, taller than the low green ridges around it. Fog hung over the wooded hills, obscuring all but the rounded top of Crow Mountain and the cluster of grey buildings that grew over it like a scab. Tony was at a loss to explain it, but the sight of those woods seemed to silence everyone. Steve’s forehead creased as he set the jet down on the lab’s small landing pad, and as soon as they were stable he unbuckled his safety harness. He couldn’t wait to get away from Tony, it seemed. They filed cautiously out of the jet, Steve in the lead, and no one came to greet them. The building’s few windows were dark, and all was deserted.

“These mountains are old,” Thor said. He stepped across the muddy ground, Mjolnir in his tense
hand, and a low rumble of thunder growled above them. “Something ancient slumbers here.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Clint told him. “But the fog does smell weird. Like dead fish or something.”

“That’s just the great outdoors,” Tony quipped. “This place is so far off the ass end of the world it doesn’t even have a McDonalds. Maybe that’s what happened. Everyone just got so bored they fucked off to find a decent cheeseburger. I hope we don’t have to spend the night.”

“All right everyone, let’s check it out,” Steve ignored Tony entirely. “Keep an eye out for anything that might be a threat. Thor, you have point. Iron Man, get me a quick aerial recon while we go through the front, then join me at the rear.” Tony longed to make a sex joke about coming in the rear, anything to break the weird tension, but Steve hated it when he brought up their personal life on missions. He deserved it, though, for ordering Tony around. And he hadn’t referred to him as “Iron Man” outside of a judicial hearing since before they started dating, no matter how mad he was. Tony took off to fly a few loops around the site, irritated at every single one of these scientists and Fury because he didn’t have time for this. He needed to get Steve alone, get past the Captain and try to explain.

He only half paid attention as he flew, letting the scanners do most of the work for him. He didn’t think there was anything to see up here. He thought instead about last night, pouring his heart out to Thor. Thor wasn’t big on relationship advice, mostly providing a sympathetic ear and a steady supply of alcohol, but he’d been right last night when he finally put one heavy hand on Tony’s shoulder and told him, “You tell me all the things you ought to tell Steve.” Which was true. Tony just knew he needed Steve back, but he still doubted that attempting to pour out his true feelings was a good plan.

He landed before the rest of the team entered the building.

“Perimeter’s clear,” he told them, and Hawkeye hopped down from the roof and nodded to confirm. Thor still had a look on his face like he was stuck smelling garbage as they approached the door.

“Did you guys open it?” Tony asked. The heavy sliding bay gaping wide, lit within by emergency lights.

“Nope,” said Clint. “First sign we’ve seen of anything odd. Should be locked down tight with a retinal scanner, even if no one is home.”

Thor’s head momentarily eclipsed the dim light as he stepped inside with the others following. Natasha knelt down and examined the inner control panel. Tony shone a beam of light onto it for her as his suit adjusted to the dimness. The glass had some sort of residue on it, like it had been splashed with dirty gray water. Steve stood patiently as Thor and Clint restlessly scanned the narrow corridor and the darkened doorways that branched off.

“Not forced,” she reported. “Whoever left it open knew the proper override codes.”

“Who were they letting in?” Steve wondered.

“Mayhaps they let something out,” Thor said. Tired of waiting, he strode off down the hallway. Lightning crackled around the head of Mjolnir, forming a flickering corona of cool white light that bounced off the sterile off white walls and the laminated posters about information security. It showed drips and smears of the same dark residue on the floor and walls as well.

The doors to each side led only to abandoned offices, dark and lacking any clue about what had
gone on, and a guard’s desk surrounded by a bank of monitors. These were all off, blind and showing nothing more than a reflection of the abandoned dinner tray on the desk. The food was congealed into a week old mess, stale coffee growing fur in a cup next to it.

The hallway ended in a little alcove with an elevator and entrance to the stairs. No one wanted to get into the elevator; it went without saying. The door to the stairwell was also jammed open and they started climbing down.

“Don’t get careless,” Steve told them. “We haven’t seen anything yet, but we know something happened here.”

The stairwell seemed to go endlessly down into the mountain, floor after floor. Tony soon tired of clanking down step by step and he and Thor took off into the poorly lit gloom. There were more stains here where something dark and clotted had been tracked across the floor and smeared up the handrails. Some of them were even recognizable as footprints. Tony wondered what, if anything, might have taken the elevator. They landed at the base of the stairs, an unknown number of floors beneath the surface, at another open door that should have been locked.

“Iron Man, report.” He could hear the anger in Steve’s voice through the comm link, mad at him for going ahead, for being Tony, but he was a leader too. Thor was with him. And there was NOTHING here.

“Nobody home. Unless they are holed up down here somewhere I think the place is deserted.”

“Do not proceed until we reach you.”

Tony cut the comm link and headed into the room. It was brighter down here as there were more emergency lights, but it was still dim and shadowy. Thor followed him in and tried the switch, throwing harsh, clinical white light across the main work room of the lab. Broken glass glittered and crunched under their feet where a table full of flasks and beakers had been overturned, the first sign of violence they had seen. Two operating tables equipped with restraints dominated the front half of the room, the walls and counters on either side ready with an array of gleaming saws, drills, and surgical implements. A closet-sized refrigerated cabinet was set into the wall as well, a display showing precise temperature and humidity levels, and through the glass front he could see jars and tubes full of blood and various tissues. He made a note to check their computer set up once they completed the initial sweep. Classified or not, he wanted to know what they were up to so far away from any oversight.

The back of the room was similar but the table had no restraints and faced a half dozen morgue style drawers. The slab was sticky with thick black gunk which had run over the sides and clogged in the drain. Whatever had been there seemed to have burst, leaving jelly like slime in the center of the table and a radius of dark cast off droplets against the burnished metal of the walls and ceiling. Someone had knocked a tray of instruments askew, or perhaps the explosion had done that, and the scalpel blades were stained with the same dark substance. The bright light made it more disquieting than the semi darkness had. Tony did not want to approach the rear door, labeled ZONE A, through the strange and eerie tableau. He was getting to the point where even bodies would be reassuring. Bodies he could deal with. But where had they all gone if they weren’t dead?

“By the Norns,” Thor’s voice was muffled by the hand he had over his mouth. Tony was excessively glad he couldn’t smell anything.

“Thor, really do not touch that stuff. Not until I figure out what it is.”

“I was not going to.”
“What did you find?” Steve asked behind them. He didn’t say anything about how they were supposed to wait but Tony could hear the annoyance in his voice.

“What the fuck died down here?” Clint lowered his bow and pulled his collar up over his mouth and nose. Natasha picked her way over the glass with a sour expression as well. “Did...did someone explode over there?”

“Maybe they saw your PornTube history. Probably not, actually. Scanners say it’s organic but not human, whatever it is. Still cross-checking it.”

“What’s through here?” Natasha asked. “Why is this the only door that they shut behind them?”

“Blueprints were among the many things Fury didn’t include for this mission,” Steve admitted. “Along with any hint about what the hell they were doing here. Look at this stuff. If there’s an explanation for it that doesn’t involve medical experimentation on humans, I’d love to hear it.”

“I’m going to ask their computer about it once I get in. It’s just taking a while because a lot of it is offline, and if I boot it all back up the security measures could get a little annoying.”

“Allow me to open the way,” Thor said, hefting his hammer. “I think there is something alive in there. Can you hear it?”

They all went silent and still, listening at the heavy double sealed door. Tony could, with the sensors turned up, faintly hear something from the other side, a hiss of metal scraping metal and a soft clink at uneven intervals that made him think there was something human causing the noise.

“Hang on Thor. I can get it to open without your signature persuasiveness.”

“Suit yourself,” Thor said. Their orders had been clear that they were not to cause any more damage than necessary, but Tony didn’t care about that. He just had a feeling that he would want doors he could close and lock around here.

His teammates continued their investigation while JARVIS argued with the computerized locking mechanism. Now that he’d heard the faint, irregular scrape of metal, Tony found it impossible to tune it out.

“Got it,” he reported. “Get ready.” His teammates raised their weapons and fanned out, Thor in the center in front of the door with Steve just behind him and Hawkeye and Black Widow to either side. Tony gave the command and the door slid open with a familiar hiss, revealing another dark room lit with the irregular flash of emergency lights.

Something lunged within the room and gave a wordless, guttural wail, but it pulled to a halt with the scrape and jangle of restraints.

“Hold,” Steve said. The pathetic figure strained forward, one arm pulled behind it and the other outstretched and grasping. “Iron Man?”

“Human,” he said. “Brain activity is minimal and the vitals are all over the place. There’s something in there that my scanners don’t know what to do with.”

“Proceed with caution, then,” Steve said. He and Thor moved forward and the others followed. Clint tried the instrument panel and a row of fluorescent lights in the ceiling came on. The shadows cleared to reveal a decontamination room, lined with showers and lockers. At the far end, a serious set of metal doors stood gray and immovable and the controls for them included a glass plated hand scanner. CLEAN ZONE ALPHA stood out in big red letters against the flat steel.

What was left of the SHIELD team crouched against the far wall, to the left of the doors, and he
sobbed in the harsh light. He used his free arm to cover his eyes and struggled, blind, to cross the room. He had handcuffed himself to a narrow water pipe and could not escape, though his mangled wrist and the dark clotted blood on his hand, the floor around him, and the sad remains of his somber dark suit testified that he had tried.

“Hostile?” Clint asked. He kept his bow trained on the helpless agent.

“I don’t think so. Turn the light back off.” Clint did as Steve asked and they approached the man.

“What’s your name?” Steve asked. He crouched down and tried to catch the man’s eye. He lowered his arm, but he still kept his eyes turned away from the emergency lights. Even through the view plate of the armor, Tony could tell there was something wrong with the whites and the blood vessels stood out stark black against the pale gray of his skin.

“Mmmhmmm…” the man pleaded. He groped again for the far door and the handcuffs rattled.

“Can you tell me what happened here? We’re here to get you out.” Tony didn’t point out the lack of facilities or the agent’s dropping vitals. Even as Tony watched, he faded. His heart beat quickened and fluttered and his brain activity spiked as he looked at Steve with his ruined eyes.

“Mhh…” he moaned. He pulled his hand back to reach for something, fumbling at his suit coat, but whatever rode him drove away his last sane urge. He clutched his abdomen and lunged for the door. His shoulder joint gave with a gristly pop and thick, dark blood glistened fresh on his hand.

“Mother!” he wheezed. “Mother!” With each call, he tugged again, growing weaker each time. Black drool ran over his lips and down his chin and he collapsed to his knees. He could not form any further words, only wet retching sounds as he brought up more fluid onto the sterile green concrete floor.

“We’re losing him,” Tony said. It seemed unnecessary to even comment. He felt tempted to shoot the poor man himself, but his scanners were really freaking out now and his mind raced to make sense of the impossible data they reported. As the agent’s vital signs plummeted, another set seemed to impose over them and grow stronger, like a parasite. “Stand back. Get away from him,” Tony ordered. Steve shot him a look full of disobedience and for a moment Tony feared he would get closer instead, out of compassion for the agent and spite for his co-leader, but the others backed off.

“We are not going to watch him die,” he said, but he took a few steps back.

“No choice. It’s too late for him.”

The agent sagged, the handcuff and his dislocated shoulder bearing his whole weight. He couldn’t breathe well enough to cry and his whole abdomen heaved with motion. He vomited and a flood of clotted, gelatinous fluid pooled at his feet. The muscles in his neck and the veins in his forehead bulged, his throat straining against whatever was inside of him. He retched again, but only a little came out of his mouth at first. Then, something thicker and more solid slid out of his mouth and writhed about, a single black tendril tasting the air for the first time. Like the crown of a newborn’s head, the rest followed in a slippery rush. More of the tentacles punched out of the man’s mouth and a spray of broken teeth clicked against the floor. His cheeks ripped and his jaw broke and the infant horror fell into the world. It writhed on the concrete in its vile amniotic fluid, a ball of sinuous appendages, and even though it had no sign of a face, it shattered the silence of the abandoned lab with a deafening psychic wail. It turned its blind, demanding need on its host, grasping for the body with new found strength. The tentacles burrowed and sucked wherever they found blood or thin skin, and immediately began to grow larger.
“I know it’s a baby whatever it is, but I think we should kill it,” Clint said.

“Agreed,” Natasha said.

“Thor? Iron Man? Any idea what that is?”

“I know of nothing like it in all the Realms,” Thor said. “But I do not think it should be here.”

“I guess it’s alien, but it doesn’t match anything from my databases either.” Even the armor couldn’t entirely stop the thing’s screaming from reaching him. He heard it in his head like a remembered conversation or an annoying song, and the longer it went on the more he wanted to pick up the hideous creature instead of kill it. His teammates had to be feeling the same thing, only worse. They had all frozen and seemed to struggle to keep their weapons raised. Even Thor started to bring his free hand up to his ear, but there was nothing audible to block.

“Yeah we’re killing it,” Tony said. He set his blaster to full power and shot the thing, its coils now thicker than his wrists. A spray of black liquid hit the wall behind it and the scream stopped. The monster sprang away from the agent as he at last faded completely and died. It hit the wall with a faint splat and clung for an instant before it launched itself at Tony. He tried to dodge but it was too fast, and it spread out in midair, changing from a ball to more of a net. It was still almost impossible to see if the thing even had a central mass when it hit his helmet and latched on. Black tentacles began probing at the eye slits and seals and Tony lost visual and auditory communication with his team as his armor activated various defense systems against it. Though clearly alive, it behaved almost like liquid, seeking any tiny vent or opening to get in. Tony fought panic, cut off inside the armor and listening to it try to pry its way in. He shook his head and scrabbled at the thing with his gauntlets, but it clung like tar, sticky and amorphous.

Steve and Thor tore it away from his face and held it between them. Lightning sparked off Thor’s hammer as the thing tried to climb their arms, reaching for any purchase it could get. Before Thor could strike, they had torn it in two. It screamed again and convulsed, spraying all five of them with noisome fluid, and fell still. They each dropped the half they were holding and looked at Tony. He nodded at them, glad he’d had the faceplate closed. Steve held his slimy glove out away from him, though a dark stain slowly spread around the waist of his pants. Thor looked as though he’d like to wipe his fingers on something, but couldn’t find anything handy.

“Well, that was disgusting,” Clint said. He lowered his bow and wiped his mouth. “I’m never eating oysters again.” Behind him on the wall, the glass access panel for the Clean Zone flashed red. CONTAMINATION DETECTED blinked rapidly beneath the main scanner and a numeric pad appeared for an override code that none of them knew. On the floor, the two pieces of the dead baby monster began to writhe again and each formed new appendages to replace what it had lost.

“Well, that was disgusting,” Clint said. He lowered his bow and wiped his mouth. “I’m never eating oysters again.” Behind him on the wall, the glass access panel for the Clean Zone flashed red. CONTAMINATION DETECTED blinked rapidly beneath the main scanner and a numeric pad appeared for an override code that none of them knew. On the floor, the two pieces of the dead baby monster began to writhe again and each formed new appendages to replace what it had lost.

“Time to try something else,” Steve said. “Go ahead, Thor, and try it your way.” Thor grinned and raised his hammer, but above them all a series of sluices opened up and hosed the entire room with something pale green that smelled of ammonia. It drenched them all and the tentacled horrors disintegrated under the deluge like salt on a snail. They writhed and withered and their psychic shrieking echoed through Tony’s head again, changing character rapidly like a radio going up and down the frequencies, as though they tried to find one that affected the system that was causing their death. Soon they fell quiet and broke down into formless lumps of sludge.

The disinfectant sprayed at such high pressure that it dislodged stains and scoured the blood and gore off the concrete, until it ran off the middle of the room into drains at either side. Steve knelt and checked the agent’s pulse, but it was much too late for him. Black fluid ran from his ruined face, diffused into the rain of antiseptic and flowed away.
“What happened here?” Clint said. “Think there are more of those things around?”

“If there are, then where are the bodies?” Natasha asked, echoing Tony’s thoughts. Fury had only lost contact two days ago, so where were the rest?

“Let’s see what he had to tell us,” Steve said. He opened the man’s filthy suit coat and located his SHIELD badge clipped low against his ribs. “Alexander Carlton,” he read. “Field leader.” His badge photo showed a pleasant, olive-completed face, a man who barely contained his smile for the staid work picture. Tony had his database entry almost as soon as Steve finished speaking.

“An up-and-comer,” he reported. “High ranks in interpersonal skills and marksmanship.”

“Did he have a family?” Steve asked. The deluge stopped as quickly as it had begun and the lights came on with a click and a hum.

“None listed,” Tony said. There would be someone, he knew, if he dug deep enough.

“Where’s his… there,” Steve said. Across the concrete floor from Agent Carlton, Steve spotted the dark gleam of his field recorder. The man had sealed it in a plastic pouch and set it with the end of the bag tucked neatly under it next to his gun. They were near the door to the Clean Zone, where they would be found, and it seemed he’d deliberately put them both out of his own reach before he handcuffed himself to the post. Steve picked up the bag but left the weapon. True to protocol, the agent had dated and sealed the bag. As Steve reached inside, Tony realized that Agent Carlton had been preparing himself, alone, in here about the same time that Steve had been asking him to move in together in New York. He wondered what Carlton had seen, and if he had really known what would happen to him. Tony thought not; if he had known, he felt sure he would have kept the gun close enough to use on himself. The thought that Carlton might have secured himself to the post in the hope that his rescuers would be in time to save him, or at least take his report, hurt even more than the idea of his despair.

“Where is the rest of his team?” Natasha asked, but not as if she expected an answer.

“Maybe in there,” Clint said. He pointed to the Clean Zone door.

“It would be nice to find them alive,” Steve agreed. Tony kept his opinion about the odds of that to himself, but from the looks on their faces Thor and Natasha shared his pessimism. Clint stepped up to the door and placed his hand on the scanner panel. After a moment, a green light flashed at the top of the panel and the heavy door slid open.

“Guess I’m clean,” he said. The door slid shut after him and one by one the rest of the team pushed the scanner and got the green light until only Tony remained. His suit wouldn’t open. Even though the alien threat had dissolved and drained away, the suit read something hostile in the room and wanted a Level 3 override to expose any of his body to the air. He hesitated. He could give the code, but what if the suit had picked up on a real threat? He put his hand on the scanner still encased in the gauntlet, just to see what would happen. To his surprise, the door opened, although the green light did not come on.

Beyond the heavy door was a small, bare hallway that ended in another door. The closed door appeared seamless and had no visible locking mechanism at all. The door he’d just come in closed behind Tony, and they stood in the crowded chamber for a moment in silence.

“Is it some sort of panic room?” Natasha asked. A fine, cold mist of antiseptic surrounded them, and even though the filters in suit made it impossible, Tony felt like he could taste it at the back of his throat. Thor shrugged until his cape would cover his shoulders, Steve acted as though it was not
“Really?” Clint asked the ceiling.

“One of us must be wearing something that doesn’t permanently smell like cat piss,” Natasha said. The faint hiss of the sprinkler cut off and the far door slid open, admitting them to the Clean Zone.

“It is a panic room,” Tony said as the door slid shut behind him. One entire side was devoted to an enormous screen and the cool LED lights of sleeping computers winked below it. The other side had a few folded cots, a crate of MREs and two large drums of water. Ventilation grills in the floor and ceiling blew a constant, steady stream of air that dried the antiseptic quickly. “No sign of the weird residue in here, or any of those… things,” he said. He tried an experiment and this time the face visor of his suit opened without giving him any warnings. “This room must be safe."

“Stay here, then,” Steve said. He did not look at Tony. “See what you can get out of this.” He tossed the dead agent’s recorder in his direction, still not turning. “The rest of you, come with me. We have to make sure there aren’t any other survivors.”

“Be careful,” Tony said. It was out of his mouth before he’d had a chance to think about it, and there was no way it didn’t sound like he was talking to his boyfriend, no way to play it off as a comment to his team and co-leader. Steve turned to look at him finally, and although his face remained neutral his eyes still read anger, confusion, and hurt. Tony wished he could take it back, because it seemed they were still going for “cool and professional” in front of the others. Their friends all clearly picked up on the awkward pause, as well. Thor met his eyes with a question, Natasha looked at Steve, and Clint suddenly found it necessary to devote all of his attention to making sure the disinfectant hadn’t damaged his bow.

“I doubt we will find anything,” Steve told him. His voice and the set of his neck were stiff and Tony longed to ask him to stay, but he couldn’t do it. “But I want to know what’s going on here.”

“I’d like to know where those drains empty out,” Natasha said. “And I’d like to believe that there’s an innocent explanation for what they were researching, but I don’t have faith.”

“It is in the mine,” Thor said. He looked with unfocused eyes into the distance and seemed to speak to himself.

“What is?” Tony asked. Thor’s blue eyes went grey when he was troubled, and now they were the color of thunderheads.

“The answers we seek,” Thor said.

“No one is going down there until we have some more information,” Steve said. Thor came back to himself and gave a slight nod, but he still seemed to hear something that the rest of them could not. They went out the heavy door and it sealed behind them, leaving Tony alone in the Clean Zone.

“All right,” he said aloud. The eerie quiet of the place had started to get to him. “Let’s see what we can see.” He woke up the computers and found the familiar hum comforting. He set JARVIS to bypassing the security codes and passwords on the lab’s files while he opened up Agent Carlton’s little black box.

He had no idea how much time had gone by when Steve’s voice next reached his ears.

“Tony! Are you…?” Steve stood in the doorway, shield up, and let in the acrid stink of disinfectant.
Tony startled and the visor of his armor clicked shut. Steve’s brow furrowed with annoyance, but not before Tony saw something near panic fade from his eyes.

“Is something wrong?” he managed to ask. A loaded question, no doubt. He flicked the visor back open with irritation.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Steve said. “Why haven’t you been answering me? I know you aren’t interested in talking to me, but you could at least try to behave like a… a professional, while we’re working.”

“I couldn’t hear you,” Tony said. “The doors must block the comm links.” It stung to know Steve thought he would refuse to answer just because he was sulking.

“The comm links work in the vacuum of space,” Steve said. “What the hell can block them?” Steve at least tried to keep it from sounding like an accusation, and Tony tried to keep from taking it as one.

“I don’t know offhand,” Tony said. “I’ll put it on my list of things to work on.” Steve snorted, faint but still audible, telling Tony that he had a list of things Tony should work on himself. He realized that the armor had clicked shut over his face again but this time he let it stay. The familiar turquoise tint made him feel better, as did the display of readouts telling him that Steve was unhurt, though he did have an elevated pulse.

“What did you find out?” Steve gestured to the computers, encased in his Captain America uniform almost as thoroughly as Tony was in his armor. He had Steve alone, at least for the moment, and he knew he should take advantage of that.

“More questions than answers,” Tony said, and the moment had passed. What he’d found on the recorder made him think this mission was much more important than Fury had said, or even known. “They arrived and found most of the same thing we did. Facility unsecured and no sign of the staff. They checked in here for survivors, but after the first time, they couldn’t get back in. The door wouldn’t open.”

“How long ago was that?”

“One day after they arrived, the Clean Zone became inaccessible. After that, things get hard to piece together.”

“But he was the field leader. Everything should be in his log.”

“That’s the trouble. There are entries in his recorder, but they are less than helpful. All I have to go on are the supplemental notes he typed in after he gave his verbal report.”

“What’s wrong with his verbal reports?” Steve seemed, for the moment, to have forgotten the night before and even the anger and panic of a few minutes earlier in his curiosity.

“I’ll get to that in a minute. From his notes, it seems that his team decided to ask the locals for information. They encountered something in town— and that’s all he says, “something”— and then retreated here. Something went wrong with his team and got progressively worse. He writes a lot of “Lost so and so in the night” or similar. His last entry says: ‘It’s in me now. I can’t go, I have to warn the others.’ He cuffed himself to that pole and waited for us. He wanted to warn us.”

“But what did he want to warn us about? What was that thing, and what does it have to do with the missing scientists?”

“An alien, I’d guess. This is more “little gray men doing butt stuff to yokels” territory, but we’ve
heard of parasitic offworlders before. I can’t identify it, but I don’t think that’s the whole story. If all the people had gone for incubators, you’d think there would be a whole swarm of the things. The one we saw was certainly aggressive enough.”

“Let me hear the recorded logs,” Steve said.

“OK, but I don’t think you, or any of us, should listen too long. Each entry is a different length, like you’d expect, and the date and time stamps are intact. But the audio is… corrupt, for lack of a better word, and I can’t figure out why.”

“Just play it. People are dead, and I want to know why.”

Tony turned to the main computer and queued up the first entry he’d downloaded from Carlton’s recorder. A low, almost melodic hiss filled the room. The sound popped and crackled every few seconds as though the machine that recorded it, or the machine that now played it back, had struggled to render what the agents had heard.

“It’s blank?” Steve asked. “I thought the field recorders were supposed to be difficult to tamper with.”

“They are,” Tony confirmed. “I don’t think anyone erased his log. It’s not blank. I wish it was. Here, this one is the next to last. The date on it fits, but the year is gone.”

“Gone?” Tony pointed to the screen, where the date showed October 13, but where the year should read there was only a line of corrupted graphics. Privately, Tony was starting to worry that the data was not bad, only trying to indicate something impossible. He did not want to play what he’d found for Steve, or anyone else he cared about, but he hit the button anyway. The hissing continued in this entry, but much louder, even though he had not changed the volume.

“Can you hear it?” he asked Steve.

“Hear what… wait, what is that?”

“I’m not sure,” Tony said.

“It sounds like voices.”

“It does. Not human ones, though.” The sound was faint but unmistakable on the later entries, a low repetitive drone that sounded like whispering. Even after he turned the speakers off, Tony felt like he could still hear it in his mind, mixed in with the normal white noise of the armor and the hum of the reactor. “It’s on all of them. I had to filter and enhance the sound on the earlier ones, but it’s there under everything. By the last few, you can hear it distinctly.”

“Is it really words?” Steve cocked his head and listened with unfocused eyes, trying to make out the sounds. Tonyswitched it off in a hurry. It made no rational sense, but he didn’t like it.

“I think it is. I can let Thor have a crack at it, see if his Allspeech can get anything out of it.” He didn’t want to let Thor hear it either, if he were honest. It felt like he’d found a snuff film or some other blasphemous thing that should be buried far away from any innocent minds.

“What about the last one?” Steve asked. Tony had known he would.

“Carlton’s last log entry just says, ‘I have to go home. Mother is calling me.’ At about the same time, he made this recording.” He pushed play, and Carlton’s last words came through the speakers. The man, a fully trained agent of SHIELD, had sobbed in his last moments, and the sound crackled
with his ragged breathing. They listened in silence as he choked and gasped and called out one word, over and over again: Mother. Near the end of the clip, he drew a long, shaky breath and must have rallied, for the last sounds from him were footsteps and the faint jingle of the handcuffs. After that, he could be heard to mutter and sob, mother mother MOTHER in the distance, but the audio broke apart into the sinister hiss of the whisper repeating its terrible message. The last few seconds were filled with a strange sound that reminded Tony of both an animal braying and a nasty chuckling laugh, and then the recorder shut off for good.

“What the hell did I just listen to?” Steve asked.

“The last words of Agent Alexander Carlton.”

“But what was that at the end?”

“I couldn’t tell you with scientific certainty. But it’s creepy, isn’t it? I’ve transmitted the contents of the recorder to Fury’s secure channel. They have more equipment than I do here; maybe they can get more out of it.”

“Would you judge me harshly if I said I wish we hadn’t sent it?”

“No. I feel the same. But it’s just a recording. I think it’s this place. The quiet gets to you, and then that shit is even worse than the silence.”

“A lot of things are worse than silence,” Steve said. He turned away.

“Steve… About last night…”

“Not now, Tony. It was a casual thing to you, I get that, maybe I’ll even accept it eventually, but right now we have much bigger problems to deal with.”

“It was never…” Casual, Tony wanted to say. The words caught in his throat, but the overwhelming feeling made his chest pull tight. He wanted to grab Steve and make him listen, make him see, but Steve had closed him out and they could hear the outer door of the Clean Zone whisking open again. Steve schooled his face and Tony’s armor once again flipped shut and sealed.

“We found something,” Natasha said. “Can’t get it past the doors.”

“What did you find?” Steve asked them. Tony’s sensor array checked his teammates and reported that Hawkeye’s temperature had increased one and half degrees since they had left and his lung function and O2 saturation had dropped. He switched to his regular, blue-tinted vision and could see a faint sheen of sweat on his nose.

“We need to check the town,” Thor said. “This was in the woods, near the entrance to the mine.” He handed them a small bioshield bag and Steve shifted the contents until they were visible in the little clear window. Whatever he had expected, it was not what he saw.
“A teddy bear?” Steve said. A familiar dark substance had stained its worn, smiling muzzle, hand sewn from castoff corduroy by some mother or grandmother. The pale nap of the fur was damp with rain and plastered with fallen leaves.

“Whatever happened here, it didn’t stay limited to the lab. We need to know what the locals know about this place,” Clint said.

“And we need to know if they are missing a child along with this bear,” Steve said, and the others nodded in grim agreement. “Hawkeye, I want you to stay here,” Steve said. No one seemed surprised, so Tony thought they had all noticed Clint’s exhaustion.

“But this place is creepy,” Clint said. He sat at one of the computer terminals farthest away from the mess and glared at the ruined lab like he dared it to try anything.

“We’ll keep regular comm check-ins,” Steve said. “But I want someone here in case something changes.” Clint shrugged and rested his forehead on his hand. His eyes slid closed and he waved them on.

They went out to find that an early dusk had darkened the mountain. According to Tony’s readouts, it was only three in the afternoon. They climbed into one of the lab’s long black SUVs and Tony joined them for the drive down to the town of Crows. He would rather fly, but there seemed no point in wasting the suit’s power just to avoid a few awkward minutes with Steve. Natasha took shotgun next to Steve, and Tony and Thor sat behind them. Even though they had their own seats, Thor’s shoulders still crowded into Tony’s space and his friend asked him a question with only his eyes: Did you talk to him? Tony answered him with a small shake of his head, and Thor rolled his eyes in most un-godlike gesture. He set Mjolnir across his lap and stared out the window while Tony wondered if Steve and Natasha were having a similar wordless conversation in the front seat.

They drove down the mountain into deep November. Tony knew that all around the area a damp, mild October still warmed the east coast, but here on Old Crow Mountain it seemed much later in the year. The afternoon temperature was already falling into the forties and a clammy mist stretched grey tendrils through the skeletal limbs of the trees. Most of the leaves had already fallen here and formed a thick carpet over the roots of the gnarled oaks and maples. The bare branches wept sourceless moisture onto the damp ground, and even the evergreens looked brown and brittle. Dirt or gravel paths appeared like the mouths of caves in the wall of forest and vanished just as quickly, without a sign or even a mailbox to mark them. They did not pass any other vehicles. The road snaked through switchbacks and sharp drops, an incongruous ribbon of fresh black tarmac, though the builders had not bothered with signs or guardrails. The yellow dividing line in the middle was the only color in a whole landscape that should have been ablaze in red, orange, gold, and pine green, even on a dank afternoon. He shivered even inside the suit’s climate control.

They passed a sign of weathered wood painted with the words CROWS, WV POP. 213. Only the final digit looked fresh, as though someone in the town still bothered to change it to reflect births and deaths.

“Shouldn’t it say ‘Welcome to Crows?’” Natasha asked, breaking the silence in the vehicle.

“I don’t think we are welcome,” Steve said. They rounded a final bend and the town itself came into view.
“It could take us a whole hour to talk to all these people,” Tony said. The road they had been on ended in an intersection with Rural Route 741 that seemed to form the center of the town. “There isn’t even a traffic light.” On the corner next to them was an old Queen Anne style mansion. Although some of the gingerbread trim had broken off and the window glass was dark and milky with age, someone had painted it in recent memory and a crisp sign in the grass explained it was the Crow Mountain Municipal Building and Library. Behind it, Tony could just make out some ancient railroad tracks, the gravel embankment grown over with weeds and stained with rust, and the ruins of a turn of the century train depot. An abandoned freight car had rotted through sometime in the past and dumped some of its cargo of raw anthracite coal down the side.

“We can try there first,” Steve said. A little sign on the front door of the house said “Back in 15 Minutes” but there were two trucks with current plates in the small gravel parking lot.

“Try there if you want,” Tony said. “Thor and I are headed over there.” He pointed across the street to a tired, dilapidated building of unpainted wood. Its weathered sign proclaimed it the Crow Mountain Mining Company Store, and it might have been abandoned along with the entire company store system, but the old manual gas pump out front had current prices, a satellite dish protruded from the roof, and a small neon Budweiser sign still glowed above the door. Several more trucks and a Jeep were pulled up outside, all American and at least twenty years old. Beyond it he could see a dirt road littered with broken bottles and cigarette butts that led to the peeling plastic and aluminum hulks of trailers and old modular houses. If Tony had to guess, this was the true center of civic life in Crows.

“Suit yourself,” Steve said. He and Natasha headed for the municipal building.

“What about there?” Thor asked. He pointed to the last structure of any size, an old clapboard country church that had been painted an odd dark greenish gray. Tony instantly disliked it, more so even than normal religious buildings. The windows were so dark that they had to be covered or painted, and in the poor light he could barely discern the outlines of an angel and a lamb in the stained glass rosette above the door, as though whoever was in charge did not like to see the traditional images. The iron cross on the spire was rust spotted and bent. A modern sign outside the door said it was the Crow Mountain Congregation of the Old Ways, and the remaining letters of its announcement section seemed to promise a fish fry in honor of the ascension of the Blessed Alhazred, whoever that was, but it sat on a weathered hump of stone the same odd off-green color as the church and streaked with dark inclusions of coal. The overall impression it gave Tony was of an imposter, a camouflaged predator trying to masquerade as something harmless and familiar. Thor was correct; the local church should have been a great source of local information in a little place like this, but Tony did not want to venture toward the building.

“No cars outside,” he said, and tried to brush aside the off feeling of the little church. They were probably just backwoods snakehandlers or something. “We can check that last.”

“Look at this,” Steve called. Thor and Tony turned and walked to the corner so they could see what he had found.

“A grave?” Thor guessed.

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“Look at this,” Steve called. Thor and Tony turned and walked to the corner so they could see what he had found.

“A grave?” Thor guessed.

“What about there?” Steve said. “It’s a monument, but not like any I’ve ever seen.” An over life sized bronze sculpture of a man dressed in miner’s overalls knelt on top of another piece of weathered, black-striped green stone. He covered his face with one hand and held the other arm out as though in supplication or terror. An old fashioned lantern sat at the figure’s bent knee and gave off a faint light in the dim afternoon. The sculptor had left some of the details vague, giving the piece an impressionistic sense of motion. The bronze had an uneven patina that left the miner covered with
dark stripes, but they seemed an intentional part of the work, shifting coils that bore him down or bound him.

“I recognize the artist,” Steve continued. “Henry Wilcox. He was active in the early thirties, part of the elite circle that formed in Boston after Pickman disappeared. I saw a few of his pieces in New York, but I never knew he did anything this big or realistic. Most of his stuff was messed up, all tentacles and weird fake inscriptions that he was supposed to have seen in dreams.”

“So how does an avant garde artist from New England end up doing a huge bronze for someplace so far remote as this?” Natasha asked. She traced a finger along the lantern and studied the light mechanism.

“It might not have been so remote, once;” Steve said. “Somebody had the money to build this house, and if there was coal in the mountain, it made somebody wealthy. But I don’t know how Wilcox could have been connected, unless it was through his family or something. The story I heard was that he became more and more obsessive about his dreams and started chasing them with drugs. Eventually he shot up enough morphine to drop a draft horse and ended up dreaming permanently.”

“Thanks, Captain Wikipedia,” Tony quipped, but the look Steve shot him said he was far from forgiven enough to tease. “In Memory of the Old Crow Mountain Mining Disaster, 1903,” he read from the bronze plaque. The line below the dedication did not bear a prayer, thanks, or any other normal inscription. It read only THEY ARE IN DARKNESS, followed by a list of 97 names, presumably the lost miners. At the bottom of the plaque, true to Steve’s artistic opinion, small letters said the statue had been created by an H. A. Wilcox of Providence and dedicated 1934. Much like the odd church, Tony felt revulsion for the thing that he couldn’t rationally explain.

“I doubt a bunch of dead miners from a century ago have anything to do with the problems at the facility they built eight years ago,” Tony scoffed, but he didn’t really believe it. The rational part of his mind denied any connection was likely, but he could feel that their present mission was the latest detail in a very large picture.

“Maybe,” Natasha murmured. “Let’s find out.” She and Steve continued on, feet soundless despite the gravel lot, to the stairs of the house.

“Shall we?” Tony asked Thor. They went to the decrepit Company Store and Tony was surprised the rotten front steps would even hold him, much less the massive thunder god.

“Wait,” Thor said on the front stoop. Rain began to fall in the street behind them and on the porch wind set the old rocking chairs with their scabby paint into creaking motion. Tony paused at the door.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Look,” Thor told him. He crouched down and pointed to faint stains on the old boards, a familiar trail of dark drips.

“Those could have been here for ages,” Tony said.

“Do you think they lead in, or out?” Thor asked.

“One way to know for sure,” he said. He opened the wooden door and found it unlocked.

They stepped inside and found no one in sight, and no one responded to the jangling bell on the door. To the right of the door was the most depressing bar Tony had ever seen, four wobbly formica stools pulled up to a scarred, splintery counter with a shelf full of dingy mismatched glassware
behind it. An old television showed a muted golf game in short bursts interrupted by long patches of static next to a pair of small beer taps under the shelf and off to the side there was a blank door labeled MEN in uneven letters. The rest of the building held a half dozen rows of shelves cobbled together from wood and aluminum and sparsely stacked with cans and boxes. Against the wall a set of refrigerated cases hunched dark in the dim fluorescent light. Thor opened one and let it bang shut again immediately.

“Rotten,” he explained. “And not cold at all.”

“This place is abandoned,” Tony agreed. A quarter of a glass of beer sat on the bar with a scum of mold grown over the top. He nearly had to force the ancient register, but he was not surprised to find a few crumpled bills and yellow carbon copy receipts inside. “These are all over a week old. Now what do we do?” Thor did not answer him, but he went behind the counter and took down a filmy mug. He hesitated at the tap, lip curled in distaste, and then drew himself a pale golden beer that fizzed like soda.

“Tastes like piss and water,” Thor said with a grimace. “Do you want one?”

“No thanks,” Tony said. Thor gingerly sat on one of the stools and it creaked and swayed under his weight.

“It is cold, at least,” Thor offered. Tony didn’t want to explain that his armor even now didn’t want him to open his seals. He was growing tired of the taste of recycled air.

“Iron Man, report,” Steve said in his ear. Tony toggled his communicator and responded.

“No one here,” he said. “The place looks like it was abandoned the same day that the lab was. Anything over there?”

“Much the same. We’re skimming some of the records now, but I’ve got a World’s Best Grandma mug full of fur on a desk and nothing past that date anywhere. The door wasn’t even locked. It’s like everyone just decided to step out at the same time and never came back.”

“We have traces of the same black sludge that’s all over the lab here. I’m analyzing it right now. You see any there?”

“Possibly some traces in a few places.”

“Don’t touch it,” Tony said. “Wait for us to get there. Steve, I’m…”

“Roger that,” Steve said, and cut him off. Tony sighed and began scanning the building for traces of the compound he’d seen at the lab.

“You still have not talked to him,” Thor said. He took a long pull of beer and grimaced again, as if he found the taste more offensive each time.

“He doesn’t want to talk,” Tony said. “He’s on a mission. And now we have a whole town full of missing civilians on top of everything else. He’s in full Captain mode.”

“You need to try harder,” Thor said. Tony rolled his eyes inside his helm and gouged some potential samples out of the door frame.

“What would you do, if it were you?” he asked.

“Has that ever worked?”

“Nay, if I am honest. It might impress him, or anger him further.”

“I’m going to guess the second one at this point.” Thor thought and drank while Tony analyzed.

“He wants to see that you are serious,” he concluded. “Are you ready to wed?”

“What?” Tony said. His mini laser gouged a long line into the wall and Tony was glad that the place wasn’t on the historic register.

“It seems not. You do not wish to shack up with him?”

“I don’t… I don’t know. I wasn’t expecting him to ask to move in so soon.”

“It has been half a year,” Thor said. “And he only lives downstairs.”

“That isn’t the point. He wants to move in. Like permanently. And since when do you say ‘shack up’? Did I teach you that one?”

“What should I say instead?”

“Ugh, never mind. I’m just not sure he knows what he’s getting into.”

“You love him, but you cannot let him choose the wall coverings?”

“There is no way he will want to stick around if he has to deal with my crazy 24 fucking 7, Thor. I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“I am trying to understand. So it is not the loss of control you fear, but the intimacy?”

“I don’t want to let him get close enough. It would only screw things up. I’m not long-term relationship material.”

“Says who? I will fight the man who disparages my friend this way, even if that man is you. Tony, you cannot mend this unless you come to a consensus with yourself. You go to battle without a plan.”

“You do that all the time,” Tony said.

“And my lovers rarely stay long,” Thor pointed out.

“They’d stay longer if you let them.”

“My wall coverings are my own,” Thor quipped.

“This stuff is definitely a match to the goo at the lab,” Tony said as his analysis finished. “Finish your beer and let’s go see what the others found.”

“Are you going to heed my advice?”

“Yes, yes, I’ll think about it. I don’t know why I talk to you at all.”

“Because I care for you and your happiness, my friend. For such a brilliant man, you are quite stupid when it comes to your own worth. If you cannot see it, at least trust that he does.”

“Don’t get all mushy on me, Big Guy. Come on, we still have work to do.” Thor swallowed the
last of his beer in a final slug and slid off the stool. As his feet touched the floor, the overburdened stool fell to pieces with a clatter. Thor laughed and clapped Tony on the shoulder; if he had not been in the armor, he knew, it might have been a hug. Thor was a hugger.

“Iron Man? Do you read me?” Steve’s voice sounded different, less annoyed and more worried.

“I read you. We are on our way to you now.”

“Negative. Change of plans. We need to get back to the lab quickly. Hawkeye is in trouble.” Tony and Thor hurried to meet up with them.

“How is he in trouble already? We left him in an empty building for an hour,” Tony asked.

“Not sure. He almost didn’t respond to the routine check in, and then he said we might want to come back as soon as was convenient. You and Thor go on ahead and we’ll take the car.”

“We can take you back faster,” Tony said. He didn’t want to fly with either Steve or Natasha right now, but he would.

“Negative. We have intelligence to bring back. Let us know if you need help.”

“Not likely,” Tony said, but not into the comm. Thor already had his hammer swinging as he fired up the suit’s boosters and they took off into the thickening oily rain.

They landed at Crow Mountain and went down, past the abandoned floors and dim emergency lighting. They made it all the way to main floor where they had last left Clint with no resistance, and Tony wondered what had changed.

“Hawkeye?” he called into the dim lab.

“Over here,” came back the response. Clint had been aiming an unsteady arrow at the door, but he lowered it when he identified them.

“We found him,” Tony said into the comm. “Don’t wrap it around a tree or anything.” Clint sank back into the office chair and folded his arms on the desk, then rested his head on them. “Why did you call us back?” Tony asked him.

“There’s something wrong with this place,” Clint told him. “And I think they knew about it.” He pointed to the computer in front of them. “I haven’t been able to crack all the encryption, but Tasha can. Still, they knew what was in this mountain. They were working with it, experimenting, but I think it got away from them, whatever it is.”

“It seems it spread to the town, as well. That’s all good to know, but why call us back?”

“Because I think it’s in me.” Clint turned and vomited into a metal office trashcan next to him.

“Look at his eyes,” Thor said as Clint gasped for air. Tony had wanted to blame the light, but the gray pallor of Clint’s skin did seem to have spread, turning the capillaries in his sclera dark. Tony turned his scanners on his stricken teammate and they reported a fever, a sluggish heartbeat and poor oxygen saturation.

“I got that shit in my mouth,” Clint continued when he was able to talk again. “And this place… this place, it’s never quiet. But you can’t hear it, can you?”
“Hear what?” Tony asked.

“It whispers, all the time. Out in the woods… even down here. It wants me.”

“What wants you?” Tony asked. He felt his face grow pale inside the suit, because he had never shown Clint the dead agent’s logs, or let him hear the strange recordings.

“Mother. My mother wants me,” Clint said, and Tony knew his worst suspicions were correct. He closed his eyes and wished he were a praying man. Hawkeye shook his head, his short blonde hair plastered to his head with sweat, as though to clear it. “Not my mother. She’s been dead for years. The mountain, maybe. That’s what it feels like, anyway. Hang… hang on…” Clint turned and vomited again, and when his head came up Tony could see a mass of thick, black bile hanging in strings from his lips.

“Stay with us, Clint,” Tony said. “Thor, watch him.” Thor nodded and crouched next to Clint. “Steve,” he said into the comm, “Steve, we have an issue here.”

“Go ahead, Iron Man. Report.” Tony noted he was still not back to first name status with his boyfriend, but he had bigger problems to deal with.

“Hawkeye is down,” he began. “Whatever this is, it’s contagious.” There was a brief pause, but just as Tony prepared to repeat himself, Steve replied.

“We will be there in less than five minutes,” he said, and cut the link.

Clint could no longer access the Clean Zone. Not that Tony was surprised, but even with Thor’s help to hold his hand steady, the scanner returned an angry red light and the door remained shut. Thor went instead and brought out a cot, food and water for him, though he refused to eat and only sipped the water. Tony’s armor now required a Level 5 Override to open the face mask, and he resigned himself to another interminable period of stale, plastic flavored air.

“We need to know what this is,” Steve said. His voice was calm, but Tony saw his intensity in the tension of his jaw and the tight line of his back. “Natasha and I brought back what little we could find in the library and records, but I want to know what was going on up here, and who was funding it. Fury’s file says the head scientist was a man named Doctor Machen, but everything on the guy is very, very classified. Recognize the name?” He looked to Tony and Natasha, but they both shook their heads.

“What should we do?” she asked.

“Thor, stay with Clint for the time being. Clint, just take it easy. You two get me anything you can on Crow Mountain, and I don’t care who you piss off or how you get it.”

“What are you going to do?” Tony asked.

“I’m going back up to the jet to check in with Fury. He needs to know what we’ve found out, and I want him to organize an emergency extraction.”

“For Clint?” Natasha asked.

“For him, and for you. Iron Man too, maybe. Thor and I will stay here to keep an eye on things.”

“I’m not going back,” Tony said.
“You need to. If there’s a breach in your armor, you’re as vulnerable as Clint is. The serum will protect me, and Thor is not human. I don’t know how it’s possible, but the signs say that all the missing people contracted some unknown disease that caused them to leave willingly, and I can’t risk you.” Steve’s eyes met his for an instant, and Tony knew he’d danced closer to the truth than he meant to. For the first time that day, he felt some hope for them, even if it was mixed with irritation that Steve wanted to send him away.

“I’m safe in the suit,” Tony told him. “I’m staying.”

“For how long? We don’t know how it’s spread. How long can you stay sealed in there?”

“Indefinitely,” Tony lied. He’d never tested for more than eight hours without exchanging the air, at least. “See what Fury says before we argue about it anymore.” He turned to Natasha and flexed his knuckles. “Let’s get to work.”

He and Natasha pulled up tables in the room full of shattered glassware and spent the rest of the evening in tense research. Steve left and was gone for over an hour, and returned with his face white with anger.

“We’re under quarantine,” he said. “No extraction until Dr. McCoy and who knows who else get a chance to examine the data I sent back.” In the pause of the conversation, they could hear Clint in the other room, retching and calling out, and Thor’s answering low murmur in response. Natasha looked up as though she would be able to see through the wall before bowing her head and focusing on an old sheaf of yellowed papers with renewed vigor.

“So give me a stack,” Steve continued. “And let me help. Have we gotten anywhere yet?”

“I haven’t been able to locate Dr. Machen’s personal files yet,” Tony told him. Steve liked the bad news first. “I have to be careful how I go about it, because a lot of these records are set up to delete if they detect an effort to decrypt them, but JARVIS will ferret them out. He seems like an old school kind of guy, though, old enough to maybe even have some ties to the Third Reich.”

“He’d have to be…”

“Pushing ninety, at least. I’m not sure, it might be his father or something. What I’m saying is, someone cleaned up after this guy, and I can’t find much on him. Also, he’s ancient. His personal files might be hardcopy only.”

“So what can you tell me?” Steve asked.

“I think your hunch at the library was right,” Natasha said. “There’s always been something here, it looks like. Legends that predate European settlement talk about the mountain, but they found coal there in 1890 and founded the Old Crow Mountain Mining Company to go after it. The landowner, a Wiseneath Whately, remained local; that was his house we saw. But most of the other shareholders chose to stay away from the town of Crows, and they were constantly bringing in new crews to work the mine. In 1903, one of the new shafts collapsed somehow. Some twenty-seven men were trapped underground, their bodies never recovered. Of those that escaped, another seventy fell ill not long after and died of something that officials referred to as ‘black consumption’. Apparently there was an investigation into the deaths, but I can’t find any records of it. The bodies were burned. The mining company went bankrupt but soon reformed elsewhere, absent Mr. Whately, who stayed on here.”

“So what’s the link?” Steve asked.
“Machen’s research,” Tony said. “It looks like the CIA thought they were running pretty standard telepathy and mental manipulation experiments up here to develop tech that can protect the brain from interference, but there’s one item of equipment Machen purchased that he didn’t bill to his official backers: an old mining exo-suit.”

“He wanted to reopen Crow Mountain Mine,” Steve said.

“That’s what I think,” Tony said. “I think he always had an ulterior purpose up here.”

“But what did he want out of a mine that’s been closed for a century?” Steve asked.

“Why not ask him?” Natasha pointed to her screen. “I think I found the man who did the digging.” Tony and Steve came to stand behind her, and Tony’s hand went out on its own to wrap around Steve’s waist. He stopped it in time.

“Machen was diverting funding from the lab to pay for whatever he was really after, and it doesn’t look like he cared if anyone found out later. He’s been making regular payments to a James Buckman for a few months, and the guy was even having his taxes withheld.”

“So who is he? Probably not a merc if he wanted to file his income taxes.”

“A mining engineer,” Natasha said. “I haven’t gone all the way through his file, but Machen vetted him extensively before he brought him on board. He grew up around here, left for high school and got a degree from WVU. Married young and has an eleven year old daughter. Machen has a detailed list of her activities and locations, and I find his thoroughness chilling. Buckman sent her to a boarding school up north two years ago when he and his wife returned to nurse his mother through the last stages of an aggressive cancer.”

“I take it he didn’t live in town,” Steve said.

“He lives here,” Natasha said. She brought up a photograph of an old house at the end of a dirt lane. “Machen monitored his house, but never had anything to report. He received a last, much larger payment right around the time everything seems to have gotten exciting, and he might still be there.”

“I guess it’s worth a shot,” Steve said. “I’d rather not take the team into that mine with no idea what was going on down there.”

“Steve, there are over a hundred people missing at this point…” Tony started, but Steve shook his head decisively.

“No use adding a few more. They’ve been unaccounted for for over a week now, and we’ve got no ransom demands. That tells me that they were either involved or they ended up like…like Carlton.”

“All right,” Tony said. He didn’t want to go down there either. “What’s your call?”

“Natasha, you stay here.” He held up a hand for silence before she could begin to protest. “We need someone to stay with Clint, and you will do a better job digging around here than Thor would. I’ll take Thor and Iron Man to the Buckman residence and see if we can talk to anyone. If it’s abandoned, we’ll find whatever intelligence is around and come back here to plan a trip into the mountain. See what you can learn here while we’re gone, and keep me posted.”

Tony had difficulty locating the house even from the air. Ancient pines and maples formed a dense canopy that obscured the unlit houses and even the roads from his perception, and it took almost an
hour to find the right house in the deepening dark. Clammy mist still shrouded the ground and the trees still dripped with damp when he landed, but the rain had gone and left the moon veiled in shreds of cloud. His suit reported that the temperature had fallen to thirty-six degrees since sunset, though the cold didn’t bother his teammates.

Cold, filmy moonlight shone on the old house, but no light came from the windows. A late model Jeep Cherokee with a Mountaineers bumper sticker sat outside next to an older pickup, and Tony could see boxes or suitcases stacked inside the Jeep. They climbed the swaybacked front step where an old porch swing creaked next to a pumpkin and pots of red and gold chrysanthemums.

“Nice to see not everyone around here is trapped in the time of the Robber Barons,” Tony said. He would have hated it here, but the signs of life were all around; a garden and a woodpile in the side yard, a bike with pink streamers in the handle bars and an ATV in a lean-to shed, even an old generator. Steve lowered his cowl and knocked on the door.

“Anyone home?” he asked. “We’re here to help,” he added. They listened to wood creak on the porch for a long few seconds and Steve knocked again. “It’s Captain America?” he tried. Still nothing. Steve tried the knob and door swung open. “I guess they are gone, too,” Steve said. The three of them went through a small mudroom.

“Smell that?” Steve asked, and Thor nodded and grimaced. “Like dead fish, but worse. It’s been here, too. Be careful.” Tony was again glad of the plastic taste of his recycled air. They continued into a spacious kitchen, wooden shelves loaded with Ball jars and lacy yellow curtains hung from the window over the deep sink. Floorboards creaked in the dark room beyond the kitchen and a woman stepped into the doorway.

“Get out,” she said. The sharp click of a cocked rifle punctuated her request, and she aimed it at them with the ease of long practice.

“Ma’am, we aren’t here to hurt you,” Steve said. He raised his hands, palms out, and spoke low and soothing. “We only came here for information. Is your husband home?”

“No, but he’s about, and you’d best pray he doesn’t get here before you’re gone.” She chuckled a little after she said it, but not like anything was really funny. She had the faint twang of Appalachia in her accent, but was better spoken than Tony would have expected.

“We really need to talk to him,” Steve continued. “But we aren’t going to hurt him.”

“We need to know about Crow Mountain,” Tony said. The file hadn’t talked much about Buckman’s wife except to say she existed and could be used as leverage, but that seemed like Machen’s old school chauvinism. Buckman was an educated man in his early thirties, and Tony thought he might have chosen a wife he could talk to.

“Why? Think you can do better than those spooky assholes down in the pit? They’re gone. Everyone’s gone, or will be, soon enough.”

“That’s what we’re here about,” Steve said. “We want to find the missing people, and understand what happened here so we can stop it.”

“Are you from the government?” she asked.

“Not…not really,” Steve said. “We’re…”

“I know who you are,” she interrupted. “Jesus, you must think we’re all stupid or something. You’re Avengers. I’ve seen you on the news. I’m Sarah Buckman. Is this aliens?” She did not
sound curious, only tired. She lowered the rifle but kept it handy.

“I really couldn’t say,” Steve said. “We were hoping you and your husband might know more about what’s in there.”

“You really should leave before Jimmy gets back,” she said. In the dark, she was little more than a collection of dark and pale smudges.

“We’ll just wait for him to come home,” Steve said. She cocked an ear and listened, though Tony only picked up the faint rustle of dried leaves outside. She stepped into the pool of moonlight from the window and the curve of her heavily pregnant belly came into view, swathed in a loose pink nightgown. Her dark hair hung unbound and lank around her face. Her lips quirked up and a feverish gleam came to her shadowed, sunken eyes.

“He’s almost home,” she said. It didn’t sound like she was even speaking to them. “Come out on the porch,” she said. “I’m sure he’d love to meet you.” She drifted, light of step for her condition, past them and out the front door.

“She is mad,” Thor said.

“I’m not reading a second heartbeat,” Tony said. “But there is something…”

“We have to get her out of here,” Steve said. “She needs help.”

“Quarantine, remember?” Tony said.

“At least back to the lab, then. She can’t stay out here alone, waiting for a dead man. Buckman’s probably lost with all the others.”

“All right. Let’s see what she wants to show us. I hope we aren’t about to have a Norma Bates moment.” Tony made the joke, but he was still troubled by his scanners’ inability to find the second heart rhythm. He had, on several sad occasions, scanned a woman after fetal demise, and she did not match that pattern either.

They joined her on the porch and Steve considered the best way to get her to leave with them. Nothing moved in the quiet country night except the trees that swayed in the wind further up the mountain. Sarah leaned against one of the support posts and looked into the distance.

“We were fixing to leave,” she said to no one in particular. “He was done up on Old Crow, and we were going to get Brandi and move to the city, have Jimmy Junior here and get a kitten and a little apartment in the middle of everything. He promised.” Tears tracked down her hollow cheeks and left dark stains on her pale skin. She let them drip, blacker and thicker than blood, onto her breasts. The wind shook the tree tops closer to the house now and the branches rustled.

“Sarah, we are going to get you to someplace that they can help you,” Steve said. “And we will do our best to find your husband.” Tony tuned him out. Something was wrong. He focused on the details. The shaking trees, tossed in in the wind…except Thor’s cape hung still. Steve’s bangs flopped into his eyes, undisturbed.

“You don’t need to find him. He’s right here,” Sarah said, while at the same moment Tony put it together.

“There’s no wind,” he said. “Steve, get her out of here! Thor, we have incoming!”

Steve put his shield over Sarah and himself and pulled her into the doorway of the house. Thor and
Tony left the porch as Jimmy Buckman cleared the treeline, or at least what had once been him. Lightning arced from the sky and lit Mjolnir like a floodlight, but even that did little to make the thing in the yard make visual sense. It reminded Tony of the awful thing they’d seen emerge from Agent Carlton, but much larger. Oily, featureless black tentacles whipped and writhed above the tops of the ancient trees, and it moved forward on a similar mass that left a slimy trail through the fallen leaves. It had no face or other anatomy, but in amidst the motion of its tentacles he could see a central column, ropey and pulsing and thicker than a tree trunk.

Tony blasted it from the air, aiming for that middle pulse, but too many tentacles were in his way. The thing blocked him and one of the many lashing arms fell smoking in the dirt. He could not hear it scream, but he felt vibration in the air all around him as the countless remaining arms flew his way. He darted and zapped, distracting it while Thor got in position, but his tracking systems had a hard time with them. One caught his knee and he gave extra power to his repulsors to keep it from reeling him in. Other tentacles closed in on him, but the burning white light of Mjolnir burst through the central column and left a smoking hole in its path. The thing collapsed around itself and thrashed, and though it still screamed too high or low for him to hear, it seemed like Thor could.

“Nice of you to join me,” Tony said. The pressure had dented the suit but fortunately had not punctured or immobilized the knee joint.

“Had to line up the shot,” Thor shrugged. They landed next to each other and stood to watch the thing die.

“He said She chose him,” Sarah said. She and Steve now stood on the porch, but he still kept her behind the shield.

“Who chose him?” Steve asked. Tony thought he could guess the answer.

“Mother. Mother chose him. He was the first to see Her.”

“What is Mother?” Steve asked. “What does she…Look out!” He called. The thing that had been James Buckman, Mother’s first born son, was not yet dead, and its long black fingers wrapped around Tony faster than anything he had seen. His view of the world disappeared as tentacles wrapped around his head and limbs, but dozens of warnings appeared as the thing tightened its grip and pulled him in different directions. It seemed, in a horrifying echo of his memories, like it would rip him apart. He fired blindly, but for each one he hit it seemed another two took its place. Though he was afraid to use the chest canon with no idea where the house, his teammates, or the very pregnant civilian were, he had only moments to get free or-

“Tony!” his vision cleared, leaving behind a black smear where the tentacle had touched the faceplate. Steve stood beside him with black ichor spattered all over his suit and his face, but Tony didn’t have long to see him before he returned to the fight. His shield cut through the tentacles that held Tony and the suit’s systems came back online rapidly as they fell away. Tony soon saw he’d been grappling with only one end of the monster, and that his shot with the canon would likely have been wasted.

“Are you hurt?” Steve asked.

“No.”

“Good. We have to get to Thor,” Steve said. “It got him first.” Tony looked around and realized that the light of Mjolnir had gone out. He used the reactor in his chest to illuminate the scene and he and Steve moved forward in practiced unison. Out here, nothing came between them and they had no need to speak as they blasted and battered their way past the pursuing tentacles toward the
heaving bulk of the thing’s other end.

Very few things were a match for Thor’s strength, but when the cool blue light fell over the scene, Tony saw the God of Thunder was in trouble. Ropes of tentacles enveloped him, leaving little visible, and pinned him to the slimy carpet of fallen leaves. Thor struggled and Tony could see the muscles in his arms strain to pull away, but the thing continued to draw him deeper in, closer to its center.

“Hang on, Big Guy!” Tony called, but even as he approached it moved to claim Thor. An especially thick tentacle worked free of the others, up and over Thor’s unprotected face. Shadows shifted and waved madly as the writhing tentacles roped and bound Thor, so the horror of the scene had a slow-motion strobe effect. The tentacle stroked Thor’s jaw and then plunged between his teeth. His eyes bulged, showing the whites in his shock, as Mother’s chosen forced its way down his throat.

“Cover me,” Tony told Steve, and he did not wait for a response. He waded in and used his strongest laser to carve tentacles from the body. Though it had no face, the creature rounded on him and bent double, attacking him with the end he’d wounded moments earlier. Shadowy arms struck like snakes, but Steve was there, as Tony had known he would be. He interposed himself, blocking and slicing at the tentacles so Tony could cut Thor out with precision.

Though it seemed like for every one he severed, two more appeared, Tony freed one of Thor’s arms before he and Steve were overwhelmed. Mjolnir burst through the creature with a spatter of black gore and smacked into Thor’s waiting palm. Lightning arced all around the clearing, striking the grasping arms, and they withered and smoked where it struck them.

“Hit it with all you’ve got!” he yelled to Thor. He overrode the normal failsafe on the chest canon and blasted at nearly full power down into the thing, the light so blue it looked white, and Thor’s lightning matched it.

The tentacle in Thor’s throat tugged at him as the thing writhed and died, and Steve sliced through it with his shield. The creature shuddered and lay still. The vibration of its final scream broke a dead oak nearby with a wet crack and the tree crashed to the ground as Thor went to his knees.

“Thor? You all right, Big Guy?” Tony crouched down and helped hold Thor up, noting as he did that the knee joint was sticking and would need to be repaired. Thor braced himself against Tony’s shoulder and almost brought him to the ground with him. He tried to nod, but when he opened his mouth he only gagged. The tentacle had begun to dissolve and he coughed up chunks of thick black slime. Tony held his hair back for him as he wretched and wished he could banish the clumsy gauntlets. Steve joined him, supporting Thor’s other side.

“Just like being back in college,” Tony joked. A feeble attempt, but he needed something to distract him from the sound of Thor laboring to breathe. Steve smiled for a moment before Captain America took over.

“The bulk of it is dissolving,” he said. “Think there are more?”

“I’ve got its bio signature now,” Tony said. “I’m scanning for…” The crack of the rifle behind them startled them both, and in the long heartbeat of silence that followed they both heard the wet thump of a body hitting wood.

“Shit,” Steve said. “Stay with him.” He left Tony holding Thor’s weight and ran for the house.

“Go,” Thor gasped.
“Thor…”

“I will recover,” Thor said. His eyes were shut tight in his pale face and he shook his head as if to clear it between bouts of retching, but he supported himself on one knee. “Go,” he insisted and waved Tony on. He took off and followed Steve to the porch.

Sarah lay on the porch with the rifle next to her. Steve still tried to apply pressure to the hole she’d shot in her belly, but more and more blood spread over the bowed boards and dripped over the top stair. A huge dark stripe had sprayed from her back along with the bullet and drenched the doorframe and the flowers. He wanted to blame the moonlight, or the blue tint from his visor, but Tony could still tell that all the fluid was too dark, and too thick. Her nightgown and even Steve’s uniform were black and stiff with the stuff. His suit was going insane with muted warnings, and he wanted to scream at Steve not to touch her, but it was much too late. Steve would never have listened anyway.

“Hold on, Sarah,” Steve was saying, “Stay with me.” But when he caught Tony’s eye, he gave a slight shake of his head. Something moved under the skin of her deflated belly and Steve reached for the wound. “The baby…” he began to say, but she interrupted him.

“It’s not a baby,” she whispered. “Not my and Jimmy’s baby, anyway.” Something sinuous and black had begun to work its way out of the bullet wound, and it wriggled weakly in the light.

“What happened here?” Steve asked her. “What is in that old mine?”

“Mother,” she said, just as Tony had known she would. She held Steve’s hand and for the first time looked him in the eye. “You don’t have to go into the darkness,” she said. “It will come to you. It’s in you already. We all go to Her in the end.”

“What is Mother?” Steve asked, but it was too late. Sarah did not close her eyes as she died, but Tony still saw the life leave them. The blood vessels in the sclera burst and flooded the whites of her eyes with black. Her jaw unclenched and as it fell loose more of the viscous black substance poured out of her mouth. Whatever had been working its way out of her made one last effort, grasping and straining for the outside world, but it fell limp and began to disintegrate. Steve bowed his head and shut his eyes, and Tony wanted more than anything to know what to say to him. Steve let the body fall and straightened her out on the porch. He muttered something over her as he gently pressed her vacant eyes shut, though his gloves left a few more dark smears on her face.

“I don’t think we’re going to find anyone alive up here,” he admitted. He looked up at Tony, and his eyes were so young and vulnerable that it made Tony’s chest hurt.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “We were too late before they even sent us.” He held his hand out, but Steve didn’t take it. He could tell that had been the wrong thing to say, because all it got him was Captain America back.

“Let’s get a few samples of this crap,” he said, and he no longer met Tony’s eyes. “And get Thor back to the lab.”

“So there’s some strange things about this mountain,” Natasha told him. She sat backwards over a chair and flipped through a legal pad full of notes.

“How’s Clint?” Tony asked. Steve had gone to wash the worst of the gore off, and Tony hadn’t been brave enough to offer to join him in the showers. Thor had said he would keep watch, but he
and Tony both knew he wanted to lie down, and Tony let him.

“First of all, people disappear here,” she said, ignoring his question. “I had to call all the way over to Charleston to get any info on this place. No one wanted to talk about it, and it seems like the police departments in the neighboring towns don’t like to come up here. It’s been worse since they built the lab, but it goes back as far as you can find. A hunting party went up there in the eighties and never came back. A ten year old kid never came home for dinner in the fifties. Two entire parties of explorers were lost in the seventeenth century. The Whateley family founded the town, such as it is, in 1819, but before that I don’t think there were any white settlers on the mountain. It seems like it was a real scandal that he converted the natives and encouraged people to intermarry with them.”

“Forward thinking of him,” Tony commented.

“Makes me wonder what went on in that weird church we saw, though. The place has a bad reputation.”

“What about the lab?”

“Seems like it’s been worse since Machen and his team came here. Still haven’t found out what they were doing, but last spring they hired a whole crew of miners, undocumented workers from out of state, and every one of those men disappeared. The foreman, by all accounts a cheerful man with a new fiancée and no history of mental illness, hung himself from a tree outside the front gate a week later.”

“Have you talked to Steve?” he asked, and he didn’t need to say that he wasn’t talking about the new information on Crow Mountain.

“Then there’s these,” she said, again ignoring his question as though he’d never spoken it. “I found them in one of the medical suites upstairs.”

“What are they?” he asked. He raised an eyebrow, then remembered she couldn’t see his face.

“Medical files,” she said. “It seems like the lab retained a staff to gather and collate records on the local population, and I can see why. Just in the last twenty years, seventeen people who lived within a small radius of the mountain have died of rare and aggressive cancers. One six year old girl died of ovarian cancer at Virginia Tech, and it looks like Machen had all her files sent here and then someone made them classified.”

“It must have taken ages to gather all this,” Tony said. He hated turning pages with the gauntlets on, but it seemed Machen had been as old school as everything else around here. “These go back ages,” he said. He found yellowed obituaries, brittle as old skin, clipped from long defunct newspapers. He scanned each one until he found the cause of death couched in gentle and unscientific euphemism, but always similar. “How far back do they go?”

“They get spotty once you go back to before the mining boom, but there are cuttings and journal entries all the way back to Makepeace Whateley, who came down from New England and founded the town. Some enterprising intern even found a few mentions of the place from before white settlers came. They aren’t definitive, but they are telling.”

“Thor was right. There is something here.”

“It seems like there always has been,” Natasha agreed.

“Steve wants to wait until we know what’s in the mountain before we go in, but I’m starting to think it doesn’t matter. It has to be stopped, and it seems like Machen is the least of our worries.”
“I did talk to him,” Natasha said. She accompanied the shift in the conversation with a shift in her body language, relaxing until there were just Nat and Tony, two friends talking, instead of Iron Man and the Black Widow.

“How mad is he?” Tony asked. *How mad are you,* he wanted to add.

“Mad?” she asked. “You hurt him. He thought you were serious.” She crossed her arms and gave him a cool stare.

“He surprised me,” Tony admitted. “I didn’t think he was that into it. I want to talk about it, but it keeps going wrong. And it feels weird to talk about it here.”

“Like something is listening,” she agreed.

“Yeah. What… Do you know what he wants to do now?”

“I told him to break up with you,” she said, but her mouth quirked into a smile. “I told him he had options, and no point waiting around for someone who didn’t share his priorities.”

“I…”

“He got so pissed at me for suggesting it,” she continued. “So I told him he had his answer. If he wanted to stay so much, he just had to work it out.”

“He still doesn’t want to leave?”

“Nope. Tony, you are my friend, you know, but you are so goddamned useless at this. Are you trying to fuck it up? Because if you are, you could just break up with him while there’s still a chance to save your working relationship.”

“Our working relationship?”

“No, on second thought, that’s already toast. Put on your big boy pants and talk to him. You want to be together, so try admitting that to him for once.”

“I’m not… He’s never going to stay with me, Nat. He should find someone…”

“If you say ‘more deserving’, I will literally slap you. But I will wait until you are not in the suit and you’ve forgotten why, just to be sure it’s a surprise.”

“I wasn’t going to say that,” Tony lied.

“Bullshit. I know how you think, Stark. It’s my job to read people. You think he’s perfect?”

“Kind of,” Tony admitted.

“He’s not. And you aren’t, either, but I see the way you two look at each other, and you would be an idiot to let him walk out of your life because you were afraid to have a little faith in him.”

“He’s not the one I don’t have faith in,” Tony said. He’d wanted her advice, but now he was sort of sorry he had it.

“Then I think you have to ask yourself what you’re most afraid of,” she said. “Besides the thing in the woods that wants to eat us all, I mean. What happened out there? Steve is spooked.”

“It was… pretty bad,” Tony said. “There was nothing left of him. He almost got Thor. And his
wife… we lost her, too. Come on,” he said. He found he wanted to be on the move. “You’ll be safe in the Clean Zone. I think I can get our communications back online so we don’t have to go back out to the jet, and I could use your help with the decryption.”

Natasha let the subject change stand, and Tony was grateful. She followed him back through the dim laboratory to the Clean Zone. They did not see Steve but it felt as though he walked behind them, their shared affection for him like a physical presence.

“Oh, Clint is in there,” Natasha told him. She pointed to a sealed door off the room with the gore spattered table. Tony could hear him calling out incoherently beyond, muffled by the heavy steel door. “He’s getting worse,” she added. “He kept trying to leave, so I restrained him.” The look in her eye said Tony should not ask for the details, any more than he wanted to talk about what had happened at the Buckman’s house. Tony thought of and immediately discarded a variety of questions, and they crunched their way over the broken glass in silence.

Natasha removed the glove from her right hand and pressed her palm to the scanner. Tony had enough time to notice the tremor in her fingers and the way the veins in the back of her hand stood out dark against the pale of her skin before the light above the panel turned red. She pulled her hand back and held it, balled into a fist, against her breast as they both took in the implications.

“Try again,” Tony said. She stretched her shaking fingers back toward the panel, but paused before she touched it. Data began to filter in from Tony’s scanners, and he tried to ignore it. “Nat. Try again,” he said.

“You have work to do,” she said. “I’ll go check on Clint.” She turned to leave, but Tony caught her shoulder and held her back.

“Nat, we can still…” but he found he didn’t know what to say when she looked him in the eye and he saw the tiny blood vessels staining her eyes grey. Any promise he could make sounded hollow.

“Stay safe,” she said. “Keep an eye on Steve.” She turned again to go, and Tony let her.

He entered the Clean Zone alone, his heart clenched tight in his chest and a cold, watery feeling of despair in his guts. He forced his mind clear and sat in the chair in front of the command terminal. His armor at last decided he was safe enough to open up, and Tony let himself be glad as his helm folded up and he felt air on his face. It wasn’t much of an improvement: musty from constant recycling underground and harsh with the lingering scent of disinfectant, but at least the carbon dioxide meter in his suit would soon edge out of the orange warning range. He’d learned as a child to channel all his emotion, all his energy, into work, and as a result he soon had the lab’s communication array back online and able to contact the outside world.

“Fury,” he said. The momentary calm he’d achieved while working dissipated instantly when the Director appeared on the screen.

“Stark, report,” he said. “You missed your last check in.” The picture flickered even though Tony had triple checked the signal strength, and the audio hissed and crackled in a familiar way that he refused to contemplate too closely.

“I need an extraction now,” he said. “I need an extraction yesterday. What the fuck was going on up here? You sent us in blind and now half my team is fucking compromised.”

“I didn’t know about the contagion,” Fury said. “No one did.”

“Bullshit,” Tony said. “They were experimenting with it. The signs are all over the place. I need to
know what’s in this mountain, and I need my people pulled out.” My friends, he thought. I need my friends away from here.

“I’m sorry, Stark. I really am. But no extraction until we know what we’re dealing with. We have men on the ground blocking the roads and the Helicarrier is en route to patrol the sky. Anything that leaves the area is going down.”

“Hawkeye and the Widow are already…”

“I am sorry,” Fury said, and this time he sounded sincere. “But what if we can’t contain it? You want it loose in Manhattan? Even Morgantown or Blacksburg is too risky. Dr. McCoy is working with the data you sent earlier, and I have new reports from the Captain to show him as well.”

“Thor could bring back the samples we took,” Tony said, and he hated how pleading he sounded, but even one person away from this mountain would be a victory. “He’s Asgardian, he won’t be affected.” He tried to sound confident, and not think about how pale Thor had been on the way back, or the rasp in his voice and the gleam of fever in his blue eyes.

“I have my orders,” Fury said, and he looked away from Tony, down at his desk, before he continued. “If Thor tries to return, I have authorization to send up Lt. Col. Rhodes in the Thorbuster prototype.”

“You son of a bitch,” Tony said. He felt the blood drain from his face. “He doesn’t even know I have it. No one was supposed to know about it. That was the deal.”

“No one does. Not yet. But even if Thor can’t catch whatever it is he could still bring it back. Desperate times.”

“I’m not going to wait around with my thumb up my ass for everyone to die while you fuck around from a safe distance,” Tony said. “I wouldn’t expect you to,” Fury said, but Tony cut the connection.

He sat with his hands braced on the console and took a few deep breaths, seeking the distance he would need to work. At last he felt like he could function, and he set to his first task.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed when the door opened behind him.

“Tony?” Steve said. He walked in, damp with disinfectant and dressed in just his undershirt and briefs. His skin was pink from the shower and Tony found his concentration had instantly switched from calibrating the communicators to checking Steve for any sign of illness. To his relief, he did not see a single hint of grey in his veins or any other sign he was less than perfect. It was not until his scanners came online and began checking also that Tony realized his helm had snapped shut again. “That is really gross to do without my suit on,” Steve continued. “But I couldn’t get in here until I took it off.” Tony thought about the spray of gore as Steve sliced through tentacles and Sarah Buckman’s blood soaking him up to the elbows and wasn’t surprised. “What are you doing?”

“I’m boosting the power to our communicators over short range and borrowing some juice from the equipment here. I want to be able to talk no matter how much gets between us.” Tony winced at the unintended weight of what he’d said, but he didn’t try to amend it.

“You almost done?” Steve didn’t remark on it either. He came to stand behind Tony and leaned over with his hands on the back of Tony’s chair. If they had been in his workshop back home, and Tony hadn’t blown it, those hands would have been rubbing his neck. Or they might have, if he could have taken off the armor.
“Yeah. Just tinkering now, trying to see how much rock we can ignore. I talked to Fury.”

“You did.”

“No extraction. Still under full quarantine. Have… Have you seen Nat?” Tony asked. He shut his eyes for a moment and braced himself to deliver the news.

“We’re going to get her out of here,” Steve said, and the hard, stubborn hope in his voice told Tony he already knew about her. “She’s going to be fine. Clint too. All of us. We’re going to stop this thing and we’re all going home.”

“Steve…”

“And I’m sorry I pushed you. I’m not happy about it, but I can accept that you need space. I don’t want to force you into anything, and I’m not asking to take over your life. I wanted… I think I wanted a sign that we were going somewhere. That you wanted me in your life, not in charge of it.”

“Steve…” but Steve was not looking at him. He’d decided what he wanted to say, and there was nothing Tony could do about it.

“When we get back, we can renegotiate something. You can tell me what you are ready for, and I will respect your boundaries, even if you decide to break it off. But I’d like you to consider taking me back.”

“Taking you back?”

“I would rather have a casual thing with you than nothing at all.”

“I never…broke…up…with you,” Tony tried to say. Now that Steve was close to him, his visor refused to stay open and kept snapping shut as he spoke and he had to flip it open every few words. “It’s not that it’s casual, I just didn’t realize you were so serious about…about us. It’s been a long time since I was part of an ‘us’.”

“You had better get used to it,” Steve said, and he gave Tony one of his million dollar smiles, dimmed by worry and lingering hurt, but real. “I’m not letting you go unless that’s really what you want.”

“No, that’s not what I want,” Tony said. Their faces were so close he could smell Steve’s skin even under the layers of strange soap and harsh disinfectant. He leaned in closer and longed for the familiar touch of Steve’s lips on his, but his visor snapped shut again with a decisive tang! And would not reopen without a code. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I don’t know what’s gotten into this thing.”

“It’s right,” Steve said. He sighed and pulled away. “The mission has to come first. There’s too much at stake here.”

“But still boyfriends?”

“Still boyfriends. Want to shake hands on it?”

“I’d like to do more than that, once I can get out of this thing.”

“I think that sounds…” but Steve was cut off by Natasha’s voice, scratchy but unmistakable, coming through their communicators.
“...Anyone hear me?” she asked. Her voice trembled, just a faint quaver, and they heard the crackling start of a cough before she cut the feed.

“We hear you, Nat, go ahead,” Steve said.

“I have something to show you,” she said, and though it might have been the start of the illness taking hold of her, she sounded worse than sick to Tony. She sounded scared.

“We’re coming,” Tony told her.

They found her in the room off the medical lab. Clint tossed and moaned in a heavy bed. He muttered and fought to break the restraints that bound him to the bedrails, and although someone had covered him with a scratchy, industrial green blanket, the skin of his hands and face showed grey against it. Tony looked away quickly, but he could not avoid seeing the dark veins that stood out against his neck of the way his fingers twisted helplessly as he struggled. Another cot had been prepared next to his, with an IV stand and a tray of loaded syringes lined up next to it, but Natasha sat at the room’s computer console.

“What is it, Nat?” Steve asked. His voice was soft, gentle even, and not one Tony usually heard when they were working.

“I’m in,” she said. She gestured to the screen in front of her. Thor stirred in the darkened corner of the room where he slumped against the wall, wrapped in another of the scratchy blankets.

“I thought you were resting,” Steve began, but she glared at him.

“I’d rather work while I can,” she said. “I found out who was really controlling this place, who at least who thought they were.” She typed something into the keypad and brought up a document. Thor got to his feet and picked up his hammer as if he were, for the moment, conscious of how heavy it was, and he came over to join them.

“These go all the way back to when Machen took over here,” she continued. She stopped for a moment to cover a wet, racking cough and gestured with a shaking hand. “You’ll never guess who was holding his leash.” The top of the memo bore a familiar and hated sight, the tentacled skull of HYDRA even more obscene in this blighted place.

“What were they after?” Steve asked. He did not waste time with the hows and whys of their history, because they were already out of time.

“Machen knew what was down in the mine, or he thought he did. He’s been bothering HYDRA and organizations like it for decades to get a facility here, and when the CIA built one for him, he finally got someone to listen. He showed them proof of what the toxins here could do, and he convinced them that he could weaponize it. Increase the range, override the simple commands with his own, that kind of thing, and develop the tech they were building here at the same time so he would be immune to it.”

“You don’t think that’s what he was really doing?” Tony asked. He recognized what she was doing; like him, she found calm in her work.

“Maybe to start with. I can’t be sure. But I think he ended up serving it, whatever it is. He wanted to increase the range, all right, but I don’t see any sign that he wanted to control it. He just wanted… whatever this is to get loose.”
“That’s insane,” Steve said.

“We must go into the darkness,” Thor said. His voice rumbled with quiet intensity. He should have looked ridiculous, his hair mussed from his short nap and still loosely wrapped in an ugly blanket, but something about the way he spoke filled Tony with dread. “We must stop Her before She claims any more.”

“Can we? Can we stop it?” Natasha looked up, at Thor and Tony and Steve, and over to the wall where Clint muttered and struggled.

“We must,” Thor said. He held out his hand and for a moment Tony thought he would stroke her hair, but he seemed to think better of it and gripped her shoulder instead. “But you have done your part. You should rest, and care for Clint. We will defeat Her, and the extraction team will come.”

Tony wasn’t sure any of the others knew Thor well enough to see the doubt in his eyes, but he spoke with all the conviction he could summon.

“They don’t have restraints good enough to hold me,” she whispered.

“What?” Steve asked.

“I can hear Her. I hear Her calling, and I’m not sure how long I can hold out. Clint would be gone already if he could think clearly to escape.”

“Nat, don’t…” Steve crouched down so he was looking her in the eye.

“I have a plan,” she said. “I’ll…I found some IV Haldol. A lot of it, actually.”

“That’s…”

“A chemical restraint. I can start the drip on both of us, and you three will have about twenty hours to solve the problem. Or, you know, hang a new bag for us. I’ll leave you instructions.”

“Nat…”

“What, Steve? I don’t want to do whatever She wants me to do. Do you want me to say I’m scared? Because I’m scared. But this way, I can work until… Until it’s time.”

“I will stay with them until it is time to depart,” Thor said. “You should both rest.”

“What about you?” Tony asked.

“I do not need sleep. It is more of a luxury for me. I will keep watch.”

“Come to the other room with me for a moment,” Tony asked. He could tell from Steve’s eyes that he wanted to talk to Natasha alone for a moment. “There’s something I want you to listen to. The SHIELD team left a recording and we could use your help interpreting it.”

“Very well,” Thor said. He squeezed Natasha’s shoulder again and nodded to Steve as he followed Tony out of the room. He took a step back and adjusted Clint’s blanket where it had slid down so that it covered him again and murmured something in his own tongue over his fallen teammate.

Tony shut the door behind them and Thor led the way out, past the dim vivisection room with its record of nameless horrors to the more neutral research room beyond.

“Do you truly wish my assistance, or did you want to allow the Captain some time with his friend?” Thor asked.
“Both,” Tony said. “We were going to ask you earlier, but things got a little hot for a bit and we haven’t had a chance.”

“What is it?” Thor asked. He sank into one of the uncomfortable swivel chairs, dwarfing it with his size. He coughed, a low, rasping bark, and covered it by arranging the green blanket around his shoulders with exaggerated dignity.

“You OK?” Tony asked. It didn’t matter what Thor said; Tony was far too observant to need the information. He just wanted to hear it from Thor.

“I will recover,” Thor said. “The experience was most unpleasant, as is our continued presence here. I shall call the lightning on this blasted place, and knock that benighted mountain into a fine dust with Mjolnir if you but say the word.”

“You think it’s going to be that simple?” Tony asked. He couldn’t help but smile.

“I am a simple man, Tony. What is that saying you told me? To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

“I look forward to seeing you wipe it off the face of Midgard,” he said. “But I want you to listen to this. The audio was all messed up on these logs, but there’s something there instead that we can’t make out.”

“Let me try,” Thor said. He leaned over and propped his elbows on his knees. He looked tired and ill, and Tony wanted more than anything to find him somewhere to lie down in the Clean Zone, to take care of him as Thor had done so many nights, but they had no time and Thor would not have welcomed it. Tony did not want to hear Agent Carlton die again, and he didn’t want to expose Thor to the awful whispering. He thought of Natasha’s face, and the grey-shot whites of her eyes, and queued up the file.

It was not quite so distinct this time, muffled by his helm and distorted through the tinny speakers on his armor. He had done that on purpose, as though Thor could still be protected if he diluted the sound somehow. For a few minutes, they listened in silence.

“It is nothing I’ve ever heard before,” Thor said. “Though I agree it is speech.” Tony let out a breath he did not realize he’d been holding. They had not yet gotten to the final few sounds of the tape, and he was glad.

“I thought you could understand any language,” Tony said.

“It would seem… Wait.” Thor held up his hand and cocked his head. His eyes went distant and a veil of gray mist passed across his eyes like thunderheads forming. “Come into the darkness from whence you were born. The Mother who gave you life calls you back to Her womb. Serve Her. Let Her feed… I will go to you, Mother. I will heed…”

“OK, that’s more than enough of that,” Tony said. He cut the audio with as much haste as he could, but Thor continued to stare into the distance, mumbling the rough, heavy syllables of his own tongue. “Come on, Big Guy, come back to me,” Tony said. He shook Thor’s shoulder, gently at first and then with more insistence, until his blue eyes cleared and he shook his golden head.

“It would seem there are some forms of speech too old even for Asgardians to recognize,” Thor said. He continued as though he had never translated any of the whispering, but he hunched into himself and Tony read confusion in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Tony told him. “I’m sorry I even played it for you.”
“Tis an evil thing,” Thor agreed. “Please,” he asked, “Stop the tape. I do not wish to hear any more.”

“No, Tony thought. Not you. You’re the strongest of us all. It can’t get you.

“You did? But I swear I can still hear it.” Thor asked. He looked up at Tony, and in that moment Tony did not see the ancient Norse god, the kind and cocky Lord of Lightning who strode into battle with his hammer held high. He saw a young man, with fear creeping in his eyes. What could he say to that?

“It’s going to be all right,” he tried to sound confident. He hated not being able to open his visor. It made everything he said taste like a lie. “Maybe you’re just sensitive to it. Maybe it’s something… Something like you,” he finished. He’d been thinking it for a while now, but hadn’t wanted to give it voice. What if they did face something as strong as Thor, or even stronger?

“An Elder God.” Thor said. “One so ancient I do not even know Her name.”

“It’s just a thought,” Tony said.

“She is not my Mother, then.”

“Thor, that thing isn’t anybody’s mother, OK? It’s just a trick.”


“Doesn’t have the same ring to it, does it?”

“No,” Thor chuckled, but it ended in another short bout of coughing.

“Can we kill an Elder God? If that’s what it is?” Thor looked pensive for a moment, and Tony noticed a faint sheen of perspiration on his upper lip and forehead.

“I rather doubt it,” Thor concluded. “But we shall not know for sure unless we give it a try.”

“You are so reassuring,” Tony sighed.

“So did you speak to him?”

“Really? You want to do this now?”

“Tis the eve of a great battle, my friend. Who can say what will happen on the morrow? If I am to go to Valhalla, I would prefer to see the matter settled.”

“You are not going to Valhalla or anywhere else! Talk about that again and I’ll make sure you spend a month on long-range patrol with Squirrel Girl.”

“I like Squirrel Girl,” Thor shrugged.

“Well, you would.”

“She brought me maple sugar,” Thor said. “A great quantity of it.”

“Fine. I will cut off your Starbucks card.”

“You would not dare.”
“I absolutely would. Everyone is coming out of this alive, and if you try to imply otherwise, no more Trenta Pumpkin Spice Lattes for you unless you find a place in Manhattan that can give change for a gold coin.”

“As you say,” Thor subsided.

“Come on, let’s check on the others,” Tony said. Thor got to his feet so slowly that Tony almost offered him a hand.

“Is that a no, then?”

“You are relentless. Yes, I actually have talked to him."

“And? To what outcome?”

“Are all the gods as nosy as you are?”

“Some are more so,” Thor conceded. “But none are so stubborn as the Mighty Thor.”

“Fine then, O Mighty Gossip God, we made up. Sort of.”

“How does one ‘sort of’ make up with a lover?”

“We aren’t breaking up. We’re going to talk about everything else when we get back.”

“That is better than nothing,” Thor said, though he looked disappointed. He paused and looked behind him, up the shadowy stairwell and around the room, as though he heard something. Then he shook his head and followed Tony out of the room.

Thor refused to join them in the Clean Zone.

“I will stay with Clint and Natasha,” he said. “You need to rest, and you can do so knowing that both the God of Thunder and some serious doors stand between you and harm from the outside.”

“He’s right,” Steve finally agreed. “We can’t leave them out here alone.”

“We’re at least going to bring you a cot and some food,” Tony insisted.

“Unnecessary,” Thor said. He looked away from them and added, “I am not hungry.” At this, Steve and Tony turned their heads to look at each other so fast that Tony’s armor made a tiny whir of protest. Thor was always hungry.

“You will be later,” Steve said. “Better to be prepared.” Tony could see in his face that Steve had the same thought that they all refused to voice: What if Thor tried to access the Clean Zone, and couldn’t?

Tony took as much extra time as he could ferrying provisions out of the Clean Zone, but it still seemed too soon that the door shut behind him with a final puff of disinfectant and left him alone for the night with Steve. He was still in his underwear, sitting on the narrow cot. He had a clipboard and a pen, worrying at a sheet of paper with his brows furrowed in concentration. Tony was at last able to raise the visor and breathe air that, if not fresh, was at least different.
“Please tell me you have another suit,” he said.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” Steve asked without looking up. “I have fought HYDRA in less before.”

“First of all, if you aren’t kidding I demand to hear the entire story of how you punched Nazis in a corset and frilly panties right now, and second of all, I need you to find something else because you are making me nervous.” He sat on the other cot and weighed his desire to take off the armor against his desire to have as much between him and the mountain as possible.

“I’m not kidding,” Steve said. “Though maybe you should tell the story. Your version will be better than what happened. It was one of the Liberty Girls’ spangly dresses, if you must know, and it was kind of embarrassing.”

“Will you wear the dress for me?”

“I think it belongs to a private collector now. Maybe for your birthday.”

“Christmas is sooner.”

“There’s an occasion even sooner than that,” Steve said. He smiled at Tony with his hair flopped into his eyes.

“Our anniversary?” Tony guessed. Steve seemed to find his issue with remembering dates more comical than infuriating, for which he could only be grateful. He decided to show off a little. “But that’s only four days before Christmas.” Thor’s first annual Midgardian Yule party, to be exact. Fortunately, they set off fireworks to remind him to buy Mister Fourth of July a birthday present. “What are you going to wear in the meantime?”

“As it happens, I do have a spare suit, but it’s in the jet.”

“Good to hear.”

“And I hope you won’t think too badly of me if I admit I don’t want to go out there in the dark again.”

“I would not encourage such a thing.” They sat for a moment, and the scratch of Steve’s pen was the only sound. “What are you drawing?” Tony finally asked.

“Nothing fancy. Just anatomy studies,” Steve said, with such practiced nonchalance that Tony had to see.

“Oh. You meant hands and stuff.”

“Of course,” Steve said. The paper had dozens of tiny sketches, hands doing all sorts of things, and a few hazy figures in repose. “They’re your hands,” he admitted.

“From memory?”

“I always seem to draw you when I need to calm down.” Steve kept looking at the page, still working on a pair of outstretched palms in the lower corner, but the tips of his ears turned pink. “Want dinner?” he asked. He gestured to their crate of food. “It’s PB and Js for everyone.”

“No thanks.”

“You have to eat anyway. We have some lovely room temperature water to go with it.”
“I’m going to complain about the wine list,” Tony said. He accepted the MRE from Steve and began the mechanical process of eating it. “I should take you somewhere nice to celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“To make it up to you, then.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Steve said, but he was not looking Tony in the eye.

“Bullshit. I screwed up, Steve. I’m sorry.”

“That’s a date,” Steve promised. “But let’s make it to celebrate surviving this mess.”

“Hey, if we all live through tomorrow, I’ll take you to the place Thor found in Iceland. Neither one of us will be able to pronounce anything, but he tells me that you can get an entire goat spit roasted and served to you on fire.”

“Sounds romantic. Dibs on the head.”

“All yours, along with any other choice morsels you might desire.” Tony again leaned in to kiss Steve, and again his visor snapped shut of what seemed to be its own accord. “This damn thing,” he muttered. “I’m going to take the suit off.”

“Don’t,” Steve said. “Not that I don’t want you to,” he added quickly. “But what if it knows something we don’t?”

“My armor does not want to protect either of our virtue. Nor does it get an opinion on my love life, even if it should happen to have one.”

“But it does protect you,” Steve said. He raised his hand, palm out, to keep Tony from interrupting. “I have the serum. All you have is that tin can of yours, and I would prefer we listen to it. You’re safer in there. Can you sleep in that?”

“If I have to. Sadly, I built Waterbed Mode into the model with the roller skates, so that’s off line.” Tony sighed and slid off the cot. “But no way am I tired enough for that yet. You go ahead and turn in. I’m going to work on these files for a little while. I’m not sure Natasha cracked everything, and I want to take a look myself. There must be something… something I’ve missed.” He sat at the computer instead and tried to focus, though his ears strained to try to keep track of what Steve was doing behind him.

“You should come to bed,” Steve said. “It’s not that long until dawn and you need to sleep.”

“In a minute.”

“Tony. I know you’re a genius and all, but it’s not going to help anything if you get yourself killed.”

“We don’t have any time,” he said. “Thor’s sick, too.”

“Shit. Are you sure?”

“Yeah. He didn’t say anything, you know how he is, but we need to act fast before they get any worse. I should never have played the Carlton recording for him.”

“Tony, this is not your fault. Could he make anything out?”

“Yes, but it was just the same shit we’ve been finding everywhere. Nothing useful. But after I
stopped the audio… Steve, he could still hear the whispering. He was scared.”

“So this is your punishment?”

“No! Not exactly. These HYDRA fuckers were the ones who started messing with whatever it is. Maybe they found something useful.”

“Send it to Bruce. You know he wants to help.”

“Bruce is a physicist, not an MD.”

“Well, you’re an engineer,” Steve pointed out. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Exhausted.”

“So come get some rest.”

“I will. Soon. I promise,” Tony added. Steve didn’t argue with him any further, and Tony heard the cot creak as he settled in. Steve could sleep anywhere, and under any circumstances, and soon his breathing evened out. Tony opened the visor again and turned to the files, both on the computer and in their yellowing folders, and combed for anything that would keep them alive with tired, burning eyes.

He woke up on his cot with the blanket balled under his head and did not remember how he came to be there. He thought of the previous morning, but it only made him remember that Thor was in trouble and could not have done it. He found Steve and Thor in their makeshift hospital, watching over the still bodies of Clint and Natasha. They nodded to him when he entered, but there seemed nothing to say.

“How long?” he asked them.

“In the hour before dawn,” Thor said. “She feared she could no longer resist. They are resting.” They each had more blankets than he remembered, and Thor watched over them with sunken, bruised looking eyes. “Are you prepared to enter the mountain?”

“No,” Tony admitted. “But I doubt I ever will be.”

“I hate to leave them here,” Steve said. “But SHIELD has their position. Fury will get them out if he can.”

“Then shall we?” Tony asked.

The woods on Old Crow Mountain were no more lovely by day. Even the morning frost was not crisp here, but formed a rotten cobweb film over the damp brown carpet of leaves. The bald trees they passed were still veiled in heavy gray fog and the light that filtered through the dim white sky did little to burn it off. Steve and Thor’s breath drifted away in little puffs as the mountain air stole their warmth and they all trudged along the road to the mine in a huddle. Along the way they found more signs of a migration than just the isolated teddy bear. Bits of clothing and strands of hair had
caught on the rough gray bark and tangles of bald, thorny black brambles and a few more small personal items turned up amid the damp muck. Thor scanned the trees and looked over his shoulder every few moments, and three times he paused so long to listen to the low rustle and drip of the mountain that Steve and Tony had to stop and wait for him to catch up.

“I swear if we find CROATOAN carved into anything, I am out of here,” Tony joked. Steve gave him a quick, hard smile, and Thor seemed not to have heard him at all.

The double gates stood open despite their razor wire crown and severe notices about trespassers. Like everything else, it seemed that the human minders of this place had abandoned its security for more pressing concerns. Half a dozen modern vehicles, all black and unmarked, sat parked in the lot, but on inspection they were configured to hold cargo or equipment, but empty and abandoned. Throughout the compound, Tony could see high-contrast lines of delineation where the modern facility had updated the nineteenth century mine works, gleaming steel and concrete jointed on to pitted and scarred iron and wood. The pit itself stood open beyond a deserted guard tower and four wide-open gates. The emergency lights were still on, but few and far between, and all three of them had to bow their heads inside the cramped shaft. Only one lift had been repaired and updated, the others left to rot and rust, but even the new one didn’t inspire much confidence.

“You can only fit maybe twenty guys in here, max,” Tony said.

“So?” Steve said. “There’s only three of us.”

“But if everyone went down into the mine, what did they do? Wait in line for the elevator?” The image struck him as funny, in an awful way.

“There are other ways down,” Thor said. He stared down the dark mouth of the tunnel beyond the lift, shored with century-old timbers and lit with crude electric lanterns. “We could follow Her voice,” he offered. Steve shot Tony a look and his eyes mirrored Tony’s own concern.

“Don’t listen to it, Thor,” Tony said. They rode the empty lift, smudged with streaks of black foulness that were far worse than mere soil, in silence.

“This is the place,” Thor said when the door slid open. “As far as we can go with mortal aid.”

“This is the part that collapsed,” Steve said. “The area they were clearing.” The faint glow of Tony’s armor let them see the shadowy bulk of an old exo suit in the tunnel and a pile of crates half emptied against the rough wall. Further down the tunnel, a few flickering emergency lights still fought to illuminate the darkness. Tony switched the suit to full spectrum scans.

“I have heat signatures on the infrared,” he said. “Very faint, about five meters ahead.”

“I’ll take point,” Steve said. “Tony, bring up the rear.” Steve raised his shield and started down the tunnel, approaching the dark hulk of the suit with slow caution. Thor hefted Mjolnir and followed, but he moved in a daze and Tony could see why Steve wanted him between them. He had to hope that Thor could still fight, but part of him wished they’d left him behind. The blue light of the arc reactor made the dark streaks of gore on his red cape stand out in stark contrast and gave his skin the grey pallor that Tony dreaded.

They rounded the silent exo suit and Steve signaled them to a halt. The darkness breathed around them. Faint, rasping breaths hissed in the shadows all around them and the pale heat signatures flickered on this screen. Tony cycled through his scanners, but none of his night vision modes could
“Something is here,” Steve said. “Tony? You got anything on this?”


“What are they?” Steve said, his voice tense, as he stared blind into the deep dark of the tunnel.

“Scans say human,” Tony said, but the way they crept along against some unseen wall, low to the ground and slithering… “But they don’t move like humans,” he said.

“Hell with this,” Steve muttered. “Give me some light, both of you.”

Tony complied gladly. Anything he might see couldn’t be worse than the deep, whispering darkness of the place. He engaged all of the suit’s exterior lighting and aimed the main beam straight ahead, so bright that Steve blinked watering eyes at it and Thor flinched away as though it caused him physical pain. Still, Thor answered the order, and a weak white corona of lightning crackled around the head of his hammer.

The light bounced off a monstrous, shadowy face surrounded with writhing black lines. All three of them recoiled from the huge, insensible thing before realizing that the lines were not tentacles but veins of coal and dark-stained carvings etched into the stone. The black goat leered down at them, gloating among Her enormous throng of carven worshippers. At the base of the rock face, a bank of electronics sat next to a cold and silent generator. Crude candles, melted and dark now, sat incongruous atop the monitors and above them the rock had been smeared with dark gore in rough human shape. The new figures, some of them still tacky and glistening, stretched arms out to the goat’s face far above, but instead of hands and legs their appendages ended in a clutch of tangled and elongated fingers.

“Mother…” Thor whispered. He broke from his place and took a few halting steps toward the picture. Tony reached out to hold him back while all around him the vague violet outlines of figures otherwise invisible crept and slithered in the deep darkness beyond their ragged circle of light. Tony could hear them now, and Steve’s jaw tightened and his eyes swept back and forth. He couldn’t see them, but he knew they were there. They all heard the faint ghost of the awful sound that had been at the end of Carlton’s recording, the same wet chuckle with its note of caprine bleating.

“They are trying to surround us,” Tony told Steve. He kept his voice low, but he had no doubt everything down here could hear him.

“How many?” Steve asked.

“Can’t be sure,” he admitted. The way they moved made him sick, and they seemed to flow through blind spots in his scanner’s vision, as though they were only partially present.

“Triangle,” Steve ordered. He turned to one side and moved his shield to cover Tony’s left. Tony turned also, and as he did the bright light of his armor swept across the tunnel. It plunged the hideous goat mural back into the blackness, but revealed the lip of a chasm beyond, a plumbless depth of unknowable void that was worse than the crude attempts of man to depict the thing within. For an eye blink, it caught one of the things in the light. It fled the illumination much too fast for him to get a good look, but it cried out something wordless with corrupted vocal cords. It left him with only an impression, of the rolling, fluid gait of an octopus and the oily glisten of sinuous appendages trailing a tattered scrap of stained cloth. He faced his repulsors into the dark, and to his side he saw the flickering light of Mjolnir as Thor stood against the great crevasse at their back.

“You can hear Her, can’t you?” Tony and Steve followed the voice, pinpointing the source
somewhere up the darkened mural wall. Tony turned one of his repulsors toward it and lit up the palm of his hand, primed to fire, as Doctor Machen at last made an appearance. He crawled face first down the wall, holding on with the long, serpentine tentacles that emerged from the tattered remnants of a containment suit and had replaced both his legs and one hand. His skin had gone necrotic dark and clung to his bones like a squamous, papery afterthought, and his eyes shone with a feverish gleam from his sagging face. Only a few wisps of hair, thin and colorless as cobwebs, clung to his scalp, but a metal circlet sat at his temples. The sensors and electronics that studded it had gone dark and lifeless, and the metal looked as though it had burned or eaten into the flesh until it had fused with the skull itself. “Her lullaby is as sweet as the end of the world,” he continued. “Your godling hears it now.”

“Don’t come any closer,” Steve said. “Are you Doctor Machen?”

“I was, when I was a mere mortal.” His voice had a German accent, noticeable on certain words. “We are—”

“I know who you are,” he said with contempt. His tentacles shivered and twisted with agitation and there were faint sucking sounds as he slunk closer. “You see a future in which humanity still clings to their electric replacements for campfires and numbs themselves to the true horrors of the universe with the pabulum of glowing screens. Mother is pleased that you have come. The man I was would even have been jealous, to have Her favor so callously transferred to another, after all my years of tireless work to find Her. But She has shown me the world to come, and She will need more strength than this old husk can provide to give birth to it.”

“Where are all the missing people?” Steve asked. He hated when they started to give a monologue. “Tell us where they are and we will accept your surrender. We can help you,” Steve said, though it clearly left a bad taste in his mouth to offer it.

“They have gone where we all must go,” Machen half sang. He began to giggle and the sound of it was both familiar and vile. “They are in darkness. She has blessed them, taken them within Herself to fortify Her for the labors to come.”

“We aren’t going to get anything out of this guy that isn’t batshit crazy,” Tony said.

“If it’s such a blessing, why didn’t you go with them?” Steve asked.

“I am chosen,” he said. “She heard me. She chose me to open the way, and She chose Mr. Buckman to guard it.”

“We are not going to let you,” Steve said.

“Oh, I know. She warned me there would be struggle. We are ready.” He reached his remaining human hand to his temple.

Without further warning, one of the things grew brave enough to leave the protection of darkness. It leapt at Steve’s face with its mutated appendages whipped forward to grapple, but he was much too fast for it. He knocked it out of the air and with the same fluid motion he brought the shield down on its head. The blow made a sound like a rotten fruit bursting and a long streak of fluid showed black on the shield, but despite the fatal blow, the thing did not die. It crawled and lurched about at Steve’s feet, blind and mewing. Its ruined head hung limp amid the rolling mass of its tentacles, blind and dragging a rope of dark clotted brain matter along the ground. Tentacles reached for Steve’s ankles and he struck again out of pure revulsion. This time he used the edge of the shield and sliced the entire mass of tentacles off at one shoulder. Inky gunk flowed from the stumps and
they began to lose color, like a vein devoid of blood. The thing collapsed, off balance, and it cried out in pain or fear, but only some of the sound came from its tortured vocal cords. A plaintive psychic wail echoed through the cavern, but only in the mind, like a lost child crying in a memory. The sound from its throat cut off as the black ooze that dribbled from its ruined face gave way to a more solid form. It choked and gagged pathetically for a few breaths before a surge of new tentacles punched out of the neck and obliterated the last of its human facial features.

The entire transformation had taken only seconds.

Though the thing at Steve’s feet remained prone and stunned, Machen continued to giggle on the wall above them. His team had had over a dozen researchers and assistants, Tony knew, and he still had no way of knowing how many were down here in the dark, but he knew they were about to find out. Something lunged for him at eye level and he shielded his face with his hands out of instinct as something far back in his brain seemed to be screaming. He tried not to remember how it felt to have those awful things grab his helm and plunge him into total darkness, but the memory of it questing to find a joint or weak spot threatened to overwhelm him.

Steve was with him, though. He plunged one gloved hand into the writhing mass, grabbed ahold of whatever he could, and yanked it away from Tony. A flash of blue-white light lit the cavern for an instant as he blasted it with a repulsor, and in the flare he saw another moving behind Steve. Steve ducked without needing a warning and Tony shot it, burning through part of it so a chunk landed behind Steve with a wet plop. The next few moments passed in a blur of lunging darkness and light that swung crazily around the irregular rock of the cavern. The bright flashes of the repulsor beams gave the scene a strobe light effect, like the worst carnival fun house imaginable. He saw Steve only in images, bright flashes in the dark like single stills of film, but he could not stop himself from trying to keep track of Steve along with the shifting mass of their enemies. It was only a matter of time before his frantic scanning distracted him from a closer danger.

One latched onto his right gauntlet and knocked his shot wide. Instead of grappling him as a fighter would, though, it only tried to hold his arm out of the way so the rest of it could seek his face and neck. He struck at the thing with his left fist and felt another, or maybe part of the same one, slithering up his back. Panic rose within him and fought to override the tactical part of his mind, but he put his left hand taser to full power and shocked the one on his arm. Electricity crackled over the black coils of it and it emitted another scream that he heard deep within his mind as it began to smoke. He shocked it again as the one on his back tried to pull him off balance—and toward the edge of the chasm. The third shock depleted the taser’s power cells and he diverted more energy away, noting with a moment of concern that his life support systems were already at nearly eighty percent of their capacity just keeping him in decontaminated air. He tried not to think what would happen if the filtration failed as it finally lost its grip on him and fell away, shrieking and burning. The awful fleshy tendrils worked up his back to his neck and wrapped his helm. Tony had a flash of memory, Thor pinned to the ground with one shoving its way into him, but the thing seemed just as likely to rip his whole head off. He fired the boots to give him some thrust and leapt up, kicked his legs out straight and hammered the thing on his back between the slime-fouled stone and his shoulders. Something softer than bone crunched and squelched beneath him and he sprang back to his feet with nothing on his neck, looking for Steve.

He heard another knot of fighting off to his right and turned the beam of light toward the sound. Tony couldn’t tell if it was three of them, or if one of them had fused into a single thing with two heads. Though Steve kept them at bay with his black-streaked shield, they drove him closer and closer to the edge.

“I’ve got this,” Steve said, though he did not take his eyes off the monsters. “Where the hell is Thor?” Tony tried to scan, but his equipment behaved strangely, giving back strange colors streaked
with black instead of life readings. He turned them off and switched to regular visual input, increasing the light from the suit as much as he could even though it felt like painting a target on himself. Thor should have been at his side, should have kept them from swarming him. Tony had not heard him cry out, and even the flickering light of his hammer had vanished. He swept the beam over the empty space, still unable to get a sense of how big the cavern truly was. Finally a black, sodden scrap of red caught his eye, and he turned the beam onto Thor like a spotlight just as the god took a heavy, limping step toward the chasm’s edge. Mjolnir hung from his left hand so heavy he was almost dragging the head on the ground and black streaks ran through the prominent veins of his arms and neck. He lifted his foot again and struggled, tense with exhaustion and fear, to keep from bringing it forward. “I do not fear death in our battles,” Thor had told him once, late one night while in his cups, “For my death is already foretold. The great World Serpent will rise from the depths and I will wound it mortally. I will take nine steps and fall, its venom burning through my veins.” Tony had not believed the story, but he had seen that Thor believed it, and as he watched his friend walk toward the unfathomable inky darkness before him, the engineer within him could not help but calculate the distance in steps.

He swept the light back over the wide ledge, illuminating the hideous goat and Machen still clinging to it. He still had his hand at his temple, but his eyes were focused on Thor as though the darkness was no impediment at all, and he whispered and crooned tunelessly to himself. Tony increased the audio and heard that it was not German he spoke, but some much more ancient and foul tongue that human mouths had never learned to truly replicate.

“Machen,” he said into his communicator, and Steve met his eyes for an instant before he cocked his arm and threw his shield at the old man. Tony heard it hit, but he was already on his way to Steve, slicing through the awful things in their tattered filthy lab coats as they flinched away from the light. Steve caught the shield and let Tony pick him up under the arms. He flew them over the remaining mass of tentacles, but with Machen distracted they seemed more inclined to flee or stop to consume their wounded.

Mjolnir hit the stone with a heavy, resonant thud. Like the screams of the mutated, the sound seemed to echo through more than just his ears. Tony turned and in the spotlight of the beam he saw Thor, now only one step from the edge. He stared down at his immovable hammer in desperate horror as he tried to drag it with him, the black veins bulging in his arms with the effort and his brow wrinkled with the confusion of one who has just seen a major pillar of his entire world melt away like an illusion. He held the haft with both hands for an instant, eyes closed as if in prayer, but something even stronger than his bond to his weapon pulled him away.

“Thor!” Tony shouted. He flew for the edge, taking Steve with him. Thor turned, pale and grey in the gloom, and caught Tony’s eye one last time. Tony saw the fear in him, and the exhaustion, but also the stubborn resolve that Thor was known for and knew he was still struggling with whatever held his mind as he took the last step off the ledge.

“No!” Tony screamed. He set Steve at the edge and flew over the chasm, and so had a last glimpse of Thor as coils of black like the bottom of the sea wrapped him and pulled him into oblivion. Tony made a figure eight over the pit, vaguely conscious that he was muttering to himself, no no no, as though this were any place for mortal will or prayer. His scanners still showed nothing; Thor might not have ever existed as far as they were concerned, and he could not sound the depth of the chasm at all. His reading returned ludicrous numbers, distances from ten feet to ten miles to something like ten light years, more zeros than he had bothered to program digits for.

“Tony,” Steve said into his communicator. From the sound of his voice, he’d said it several times before. “Tony, come back.”
“We can’t leave him here,” Tony said. He tried for a reasonable tone of voice, but suspected he had failed to achieve it. “He would never... He would never leave us here.”

“We won’t. We’ll find a way to help him,” Steve said. “But I’m going to need your help with Machen and the clean up, and I really don’t know what we can do for Thor right now. Come back, Tony, it isn’t safe over that thing.” The adrenaline rush of denial began to fade, leaving Tony with a cold, empty ache in his stomach, numb and unable to process the thought that Thor had truly gone. The impenetrable, immeasurable darkness below him remained mute, too uncaring for his grief to even gloat, and he could no longer bear to peer into it. He returned to Steve and touched down on the relative safety of the ledge, but he still felt the vast empty space behind him and his skin crawled beneath the armor.

Machen lay crumpled against the wall and the dark glisten of his blood had stained the goat’s leering muzzle. The shield’s edge had left a gash and a deep dent where it had fractured his fragile skull, and the severed metal circlet had embedded in the wound. Black, sludgy fluid seeped out slowly and the bit of brain visible appeared shrivelled, dry and grayer than a lab specimen, but Machen still tittered and chuckled to himself. His hand plucked at the rags of his once-white coat while the tentacles that had replaced his other limbs spasmed and wriggled as though they were a separate thing from the rest of him, and would have liked to escape. Tony took hold of the front of his clothes and hauled him up, and though he heard the rotten tearing sound his metal gauntlet made, he didn’t know or care if it had been fabric or skin that made it.

“He is in darkness,” Machen whispered. Black flecks stained his lips and his voice gurgled with wet choking. “They are in darkness, they are all...in darkness.”

“Where is he?” Tony asked. He kept his voice and his hand steady, and pinned Machen against the stone wall with its line of crudely carved worshippers. Machen laughed and his eyes rolled back and his back arched, mirroring the carvings in their barely human ecstasy. “Where. Is. He?” Tony shook the old man and fought the urge to crush him against the wall as Machen giggled. Black fluid ran from his head wound and out of his mouth.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he told the flopping corpse. He turned and saw that four of the monsters were still whole and motivated enough to fight, but they flinched from the light of his reactor. He waded in with Steve behind him and this time, the remains of the research team had no chance to gain an upper hand. Steve could cut or bash them down and pin them to the rough stone, and Tony could keep the others back with his light and burn them to a second, merciful death. In minutes they had the ledge clear.

Tony turned back to where he’d left the doctor, determined to get something useful out of him. The man had been a monster long before he’d come to this mountain, and a fanatic, but Tony thought he had always been a coward as well, someone who never wanted to get his own hands dirty, and he might still be capable of feeling fear. His light played over the stone and spattered gore. There was no body at the base of the long smear where he’d left Machen.

“How did he go anywhere?” Tony asked. He swung the beam wild, looking for movement amid the wreckage. He caught a glimpse of lab coat, the filthy gray still shocking white against so much black, and a final snatch of mad, wet tittering as the thing that had been Doctor Machen scuttled over the lip of the chasm and disappeared from view. Tony flew after him with no thought of taking him alive again, but like Thor he had vanished into the deep and absolute darkness beyond the ledge.
Also like Thor, Tony heard no screams or impacts from below, though he strained to catch any sound.

“He’s gone?” Steve said behind him. Tony nodded. In the dim blue light, Steve’s eyes were in shadow as he looked into the abyss. He cocked his head as though listening, and Tony wondered what he heard.

“We have to go down there,” Tony said.

“It’s probably suicide,” Steve said. They both looked to the ledge, where the vague outline of Mjolnir waited one step from the brink. Tony had no idea how it could be possible, but the hammer looked both sad and stubborn, like a dog waiting for his dead master to come home. “Do you think we should take anything with us?” Steve said.

“I left the nukes in my other metal pants,” Tony said.

“We have to go back first,” Steve said.

“Why?” Tony asked.

“We have to warn someone. Just in case.”

“Just in case?”

“If we don’t make it back. Or…”

“Or what?”

“You saw Machen, and that thing at the Buckman’s… What if it gets to us? What if we come back, but it’s really whatever this thing is?”

“Go on and say it,” Tony sighed.

“What if Thor comes back like that?” Steve finished, putting into words a thought Tony had been trying to avoid.

“You’re right,” Tony admitted. “Once I get out of here I have no idea if I’ll be able to make myself come back, but they need to be prepared if this goes even further south.”

They left Mjolnir to stand her lonely watch. Tony heard a final click as the emergency lights died one step behind him. As the lift rumbled into life, they stared into the absolute darkness of the cavern, and from somewhere within it came a last bleating chuckle of laughter.

Once Tony heard the hiss of the door behind him, he raised his faceplate in relief. Even the awful disinfectant smell didn’t bother him anymore, and from the look on Steve’s face he should be grateful he couldn’t feel the shower that had sluiced his armor more or less clean. He took a few steps and started to say something before he realized that Steve wasn’t behind him. He went back to the door and looked through the plate to where he was still standing on the other side of the decontamination barrier.

“Steve? Come on, get in here.”
“I’m going to check on Clint and Nat,” he said, but he didn’t immediately leave. Tony’s stomach clenched and a series of tiny fans clicked on within the suit to dry the chill sweat that broke out on his skin.

“Come in first,” Tony said. “Please…I’d like you here when I do it. I’d feel slightly less horrible. He was…He’s your friend too.”

Steve smiled at him, though his eyes were sad. He raised his left hand, took the glove off, and placed it against the glass sensor on his side of the barrier. Tony spent the longest fifteen seconds of his life without even breathing. He didn’t know why, but it reminded him of their first night together, of seeing that look in Steve’s eyes and knowing that what happened next was going to matter. The light over the sensor turned red. Another soaking spray of disinfectant began and two sets of heavy doors clanked shut between them and sealed.

“Thor would…he will understand,” Steve said through the comm link. No mistaking the rasp of a suppressed cough in his voice once Tony made himself listen for it. “Do what you have to do. I’m going to check on the others.”

“Steve,” he said, but he wasn’t sure he’d even opened his communicator. He walked to the chair and sat in front of the sleeping computer. His only thought was the white noise hum of the ventilation. He wiped his face with a rough towel hard enough to scrape and split his dry bottom lip. The tiny bit of pain might as well have been someone else’s for all he could feel it, and he hated the disconnected, clumsy feeling of his gauntleted fingers. He couldn’t even touch his own face, and he would have given anything to feel Steve’s hands, or even air moving against his bare arms. The sting in his lip and the dull flare of anger sputtered out within him, faded away before the empty, howling, insensible numbness in his mind. Clint and Natasha were gone. Thor was gone. Even Steve would soon be gone, and Tony had expected to see him strong and handsome as ever when he himself was hobbling around a nursing home and raving about rocket canes. He was safe, and totally alone.

“Fuck this,” he said to no one in particular. He called the computer back to life and began trying frequencies. Soon Fury appeared in a box on the screen, and whatever he saw in Tony’s face made even the unflappable master spy blink and flinch away.

“I have something to report,” Tony said. He waited for Fury to meet his eyes.

“Go ahead,” he said, and his gentle voice made the emptiness in Tony start to fill with the dull ache of anger.

“My team,” he said, “Is compromised.”

“Doctor McCoy and Doctor Banner are nearly…Wait, where are you?”

“I’m in the Clean Zone,” Tony said. “Alone. My armor kept it out. But I’m the only one.”

“Stay there,” Fury said. “They are working on a treatment for it based on the information you were able to send back.”

“It won’t be in time,” Tony said. “Mother is trying to come through. She got Thor. She’s…She’s getting to Steve.”

“Thor’s dying?”

“No. Thor is fucking compromised. Do you hear me? She got him. I came back to warn you, you son of a bitch, in case She can use him like She did with all the others.”
“Tony…”

“Shut up and listen. We are going back down there to try and stop Her. But if we can’t, you had better be ready to bring this mountain down. Get Rhody into the Thorbuster and tell him… Tell him I said not to scratch the paint. Then go to my lab. Catch DUM-E and get my date book from Pepper. There’s a phone number written down on her birthday. Put that in to get access to his secondary programming, and tell him “Santa Claus is not real” and he’ll give you the information for the rest of… Everything I’ve got that you can have.”

“What did they have down there? Missiles? Bioweapons?”

“Worse. Listen, I have to go stop the end of the world, but I want you to take care of my team. Whatever is left of it.”

“Tony…” but he cut the link and stood up. Fatigue washed over him, too little sleep and too long within the confines of his suit. He wanted a plan, or at least something to build, but there was nothing about this he could plan for. He fiddled with his suit instead, checking the power levels and the range of motion after the fight in the cavern. He shoved a stale cracker in his mouth and enjoyed it about as much as a square of cardboard. He took a last sweep around the room and noticed Steve’s drawing paper on the floor under his neatly made cot. He studied it for a moment, his own face and hands and body captured in action and repose. He folded it up and tucked it within his helm, for lack of anywhere else to put it, but he liked feeling it against his only accessible skin. He left the safety of the Clean Zone without looking back.

He followed the sound of Steve’s coughing, wheezing and asthmatic. When Steve heard the heavy step of Tony’s metal boots, he straightened up and forced himself to stop, but not before Tony saw him force himself straight and swallow hard to keep it in. His pallorous, grey tinged face was hard and closed off with suppressed pain, but he managed a smile for Tony.

“How are they?” Tony asked.

“No change,” Steve said, though his eyes said they’d gotten worse.

“How are you?” Tony asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Steve said. Thor had promised that, too, and Tony discounted it. “The serum will fight it off. Let’s go save the world,” he said, and Tony let it drop.

“Did you call in the cavalry?” Steve continued.

“Fury says they are working on a treatment. They’ll come for Nat and Clint.”

“Good. I tried to make them comfortable.”

“Steve, I wanted to say…”

“Later,” Steve said, but he smiled.

“What if there is no later?”

“There will be. We’re together. Just have a little faith, Tony.”
The cold, damp air made Steve cough and choke and twice they had to halt so he could get his breath back. He took a handkerchief out of one of his suit pouches and held it in front of his mouth.

“It’s this fog,” he explained. “It feels like… It feels like it’s forcing its way in. Like it’s too thick to breathe.”

“I find that easier to believe than the evidence that you carry a handkerchief around with you. Is that why you never tell anyone what’s in all those pouches? Are they all handkerchiefs?”

“Every gentleman should have a handkerchief.” Steve said. He wiped the sweat from his pale forehead and returned the cloth to his mouth. He smiled at Tony, and Tony returned it. The flat helm of his armor showed no expression, but Steve swore it did, able to read such minute changes in Tony’s voice and body language that he could usually tell what he was feeling even without seeing his face. With death, or worse than death, almost certain in the hours ahead, they both found a center of calm. They did not speak of their lost friends, nor the fate of the world, the missing people, or of themselves. They didn’t speak much at all as they made their way through the chuckling woods of Old Crow Mountain and down into the twice-abandoned mine.

Steve weakened as they got closer. Cold sweat dripped, thick and ever so slightly gray as it ran down his clenched jaw and his stride lost its strong, easy grace, but his eyes remained grim and focused in their bruised, sunken sockets and the shield never wavered in his grip. He stopped briefly to vomit just inside the entrance to the mine, but waved Tony’s hand off. As the lift shuddered into clanking life, he began to cough. It shook him to his knees and the shield clanked against the floor as he supported himself, one hand flung out to brace against the wall and the other clutched to his side. This time he let Tony hold onto him, and Tony thought his heart would stop when he began to retch again and brought up a thin viscous rope of pitch black bile. The slow moving lift slammed to a hard stop, enough that he felt the impact through his suit but still held them both upright. Tony vaguely registered the distant sound of the chain breaking far above them and the rusty, tortured squeal of the old gears slipping and jamming.

“Sounds like we’ll have to take the long way back up,” Steve said. The muscles in his throat and chest still spasmed and he hung on Tony, but his mouth twisted into a black-stained, genuine smile. Tony couldn’t believe he’d even heard the sound, but Steve never ceased to amaze him. “Don’t worry,” Steve continued. “I’ve had worse.”

“When? When have you ever been worse?” Tony put as much skepticism into his voice as he could manage. It was a lot of skepticism.

“December 19, 1938,” Steve said. His voice had gotten stronger and he used the wall and Tony to pull himself to his feet. “I had typhus and pneumonia at the same time. On top of everything else. Bucky kicked Father O’Leary out of the flat for being too pessimistic.” Steve steadied himself against the lift door, digging his fist into the surface as he suppressed the pain and forced himself to uncurl. “I forget, sometimes, that this is the only version of me you’ve ever known. But I’m no stranger to stuff like this, Tony. You’ve seen my file. I was a disaster.”

“You were still cute,” Tony said. “And it didn’t say anything about alien parasitic fungal infections that make you lose your mind and throw yourself into a bottomless hole.”

“It’s not alien. Not technically. Thor thought it was terrestrial, just old.”

“Duly noted, Captain Pedantic. Either way, Machen said there was more of it trying to come through from somewhere else, and we have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”
“Besides, if it’s terrestrial, there could be more of them somewhere else.”

“So let’s go with the ‘Thor is wrong’ theory and go see what’s down there.”

He stood before the yawning crevasse, sensing its immensity even though he couldn’t see it. Even on full power, the light he threw into it vanished without touching the other side. Steve stood on his left, still leaning on him, and on his right he could feel the forlorn weight of Mjolnir grieving as the earth breathed around them.

“How?” Tony asked.

“Hear what?” Steve said.

“Thor told me he could hear something. Voices, calling him here. I should never have brought him to this godforsaken place.”

“I hear my mother,” Steve said. “But I know it’s not her. Once I thought…”

“Thought what?”

“I thought I heard you, in the communicator, calling for help. Right before Thor…”

“Yeah.”

“But I knew it wasn’t you, either.”

“How?”

“I know you,” he said. “I’d know your voice anywhere. It’s just a trick. A cheap, cruel trick to lure prey. So let’s go. Pick me up and we’ll fly down there.” Steve put an arm around Tony’s neck, but another violent coughing fit ruined his confident demeanor. Tony picked him up and held him as he shook, not caring about the dire warnings his suit tried to show him. He set Steve down near the lift entrance and input the penultimate string of override codes. The visor slid up and at last they were eye to eye in the dim blue light of the reactor, as they had been on so many happier nights before.

“Steve, there’s just one thing I want to tell you.” Steve looked up at him, sweat dripping from his bangs. The whites of his eyes had begun to go gray. Tony brushed the hair back from his forehead as tenderly as he could manage with the armor’s gauntlets. “You can totally pick the wallpaper.” Steve’s eyes went wide with surprise but Tony silenced his protest with a kiss, willing Steve to feel everything he didn’t have the time, or the words, to say. He could taste death in his mouth, a whiff of decay as Steve sucked in his breath.

“Tony,” he gasped. He started coughing again and had to support himself against the damp rock. “What the fuck Tony…I swear I am never speaking to you again…” Tony took Steve’s hand as he wheezed and retched, patting his arm. He wanted to hold him, but they were long out of time.

“I love you. I couldn’t do this without touching you one more time. Wait here for me.” He took one last, dim look at Steve before the visor clicked shut between them. Steve reached out for him, but Tony turned and dropped off the ledge. He plunged into darkness so deep none of his scanners could penetrate it, even the bright blue beam of the arc reactor barely visible in front of him. I swear I’ll come back for you, Steve, he thought. But first I have to meet Mother.
Once he thought he was out of sight of the ledge, he cut the thrusters and just fell. He hoped Steve would be all right if he didn’t make it back. He hoped Fury would send someone to rescue Clint and Natasha. He hoped the abyss wasn’t literally bottomless. That was the leap of faith he’d talked himself into. Even the Marianas Trench had a bottom, somewhere. While he was having faith, and falling, he pep talked himself that maybe Thor was down here, alive and in need of help. He was sort of counting on it, actually.

He wasn’t sure how long he fell into darkness. He thought of all the missing people, wondering if there would be anything recognizable left of them. It felt like the darkness wrapped around him, cradled him and slowed his descent. It set him on an even, sloped surface, a tunnel or trench so narrow that he could brush both sides with his fingers. Coils of black, soft and sinuous, sucked at his armor insistently and pulled him along the way. The lights of his armor still did little to show where he was, so he gradually brightened them. The tentacles detached with a meaty squelch and fled into the shadows.

“I guess I wasn’t too far wrong calling this the asshole of the world,” Tony quipped to himself, but he didn’t like the sound of his voice in this deep, secret, inhuman place. His mouth was going numb and he felt a headache coming on.

He found the missing SHIELD agents and townspeople a little further in, bound to either side of a narrow slit in the rock. Loathsome ropy tendrils held them, burrowed into mouths and eyes and navels. Tony walked past them, forced so close by the cramped confines that he had to brush against them, even weave between them. He didn’t want to know, but he scanned them for vitals. Their hearts were beating, sluggish and failing, but he got no readings for brain activity. A noisome black sludge squelched around his ankles. Things within it clicked and crunched against his boots, as well, and he made out filthy bones stewing in it, the round dome of a skull, the thick length of a humerus, the curve of a rib. Hundreds, or even thousands, of victims, picked clean and left to rot.

At the end of the row of victims, the trench opened out into another vast, pitch dark space where no light had ever fallen. His scanners displayed nonsense numbers as he peered into the darkness, but the bright beam of his reactor fell on Thor. His matted hair was plastered to his pale, gray face and he slumped limp and motionless. Ropes of shadow held him up and more than a dozen tentacles fed on him. They burrowed into his abdomen, thick as Tony’s wrist, suckling from him in an obscene parody of an umbilical cord, drawing out his great strength from bloodless, black-rimmed wounds. Thor’s power crackled down them in surges of dull light and revealed the source of the tentacles. A portal yawned beyond Thor, draining the god as it had drained so many others. It towered over them, Tony saw, great fleshy lips that glistened with thick, black fluid. A massive sound, something like Thor’s thunder and something like the awful goat laugh he’d heard several times before, shook the cavern and the portal quivered and shuddered and, to his horror, widened. Tony could see now that the darkness of the portal was even greater than the lightless space beneath the earth, untouched by any light. It reached a tiny part of itself into their world and sought to draw in the life it found.

“Mother,” he said. He took a step closer. Tentacles began working their way up his armor, caressing him and probing for weakness, vulnerable places where they could gain access to meat and marrow. He heard Machen’s mad tittering as the great void pulled him closer. He was so small and She was so vast. There was nothing in Her that his science could fight, or even quantify. She would snuff him out and feel nothing, no satisfaction or happiness or anything at all that a human could understand as She consumed his meager existence in a span of time infinitely shorter than even the blink of Her immortal eye. *Come home to me, Tony,* Steve’s voice called to him from the infinite dark. *Come lie down with me.* Sweet exhaustion spread through his limbs like the drowsy aftermath of sex. His eyes fluttered closed.

“Tony!” Steve’s shield sliced through the tendrils and clanged against the stone. Despite the wet
coughing he battered the blindly writhing tentacles away from them.

“Steve?” Tony blinked and returned to himself. Maxed out meters and dire warnings flashed in his view as his suit diverted more and more power to basic life support and integrity. He overrode them, set them back to minimum levels and rerouted power to the weapon systems. “I told you to wait.”

“Yeah, fuck that.” Despite the asthmatic wheeze, Steve’s voice was still strong and steady. “What’s the plan?” He made his way over and stood with Tony. Thor moaned in the darkness and struggled, jerking and trying to twist away from the tentacles that pierced him from all sides.

“Cut him down,” Tony said. A reckless, fatalistic sense of rage burned through him hotter than the fever that was taking root. He took off and dodged the reaching tentacles that snaked after him, but they flinched away from the blue white heat of the jets. He sliced through the tentacles that bound Thor on one side and they fell away without a fight. Thor’s body slumped sideways, off balance, but his head came up and his gaze locked onto Tony. Tony paused, shocked by the look in his eyes.

“You left me,” Thor said. The heavy syllables of Thor’s speech slammed into him like slabs of iron, the Allspeech unmoderated and ungentled without Thor’s normal restraint. “I would not have left you.” The words were meant to delay him, he realized. Thor’s eyes had vanished and pools of darkness shifted overlarge in his sockets, the same deep, cosmic emptiness that Tony had seen beyond the portal. “I will tear you apart as you cry out in ecstatic joy to feel my smallest touch.” A cruel smile twisted Thor’s blackened lips into an expression that he had never worn. Mother was still using him as a weapon. Tony tore himself away from Thor’s awful stare and sliced through the tentacles, hacking them away until Thor fell. Tony caught him in his arms and the propulsion system whined with the added strain, but he brought them both to the ground.

The smoking stumps that still protruded from Thor’s wounds began to lose shape immediately, sublimating into gelatinous fluid and gas that drained from his body. He couldn’t think of anything to do that might make Thor more comfortable, but he laid him out facing away from the portal.

“Is he alive?” Steve asked.

“I think so,” Tony said. Thor’s body was alive, though critically wounded and weakened, but he had no idea how much was left of his mind.

“You are too late, too late,” Machen crooned, his voice only partly human. Tony swung the light around and black things scuttled away from it. “Too late to stop Her,” he sang. He descended from above the rows of bodies like a spider, the lower part of his body now organically connected with the cave. His ruined face shone in Tony’s arc light, suffused with ecstasy. He vanished into the deep shadow and they heard a soft, wet sound, like pulling out after sex. “The new world will be born. She has shown me,” he continued, but Tony could not track his voice. It seemed he was above them, on either side, and even below them, tittering madly and slipping between German, English, and something else as he spoke. Tentacles stirred behind him, filling Tony’s puddle of light with whipping shadows. They shook those they fed on, and the line of living corpses did a grotesque puppet dance as She siphoned the last of the life from them. The bodies dropped, one after another, into the sludge at their feet and sank within the mire. The fleshy, rot-soft lips of the portal shivered and parted further, and Machen capered at the gate, his mutated limbs rolling with the fluid grace of the deep ocean.

“You are a man of science, Herr Stark,” he crowed. “And yet you doubt Her power. Your faith in your armor insults Her.”

“Tony, watch out!” Steve called, but all around him the darkness surged forward and caught him. He fired the jets on pure instinct, but the snare induced total vertigo, unable to fall or fly. The light went out and the darkness poured in. Every warning in the armor went off at once and then the
power died, leaving him blind and deaf to every sound except his own ragged breathing. Mother’s hands were gentle as She tore the armor apart. They found purchase at the joints and vents first, and Tony screamed as they broke through the thinner plating at his groin. Something cold and wet latched onto his inner thigh and began to burrow, seeking the heat of the femoral artery where Her corruption already flowed. He twisted in panicked revulsion to escape, but as the skin gave way his leg went numb. More had come through now, mindless and ancient as the lampreys they resembled. The prickle and burn spread from both thighs up into his belly and from his right armpit into his chest. He heard his mother’s voice calling his name, far away and faint as a memory, and he struggled harder, thrashing in vain with the tiny bit of strength he had left. Though his sensors were gone, he could feel the armor failing, Mother’s tentacles peeling away his protections layer by layer. The helm itself began to buckle and liquid darkness seeped within the face plate. He sucked in a last mouthful of air as the vile fluid filled his nose and eyes and felt nothing except the animal will to survive, a stubborn refusal to surrender in her grip. Unable to see, hear, smell or even breathe, he still felt the portal pulling him in, ready to enfold him in the endless, godless dark of Mother’s realm, his own life and will no more significant than a candle flame at the bottom of the ocean.

Something heavy landed on him and ripped him away from Her embrace. He opened his mouth to cry out and something thick filled his throat and threatened to choke him. He could not, at that instant, have said if he was glad of the reprieve or sad to have lost his chance to join Her. He gagged and struggled to stay upright as the world slowly reoriented around him, solid ground under his hands and an awful feeling like being dismembered or disemboweled as Steve tore the tentacles away and out of him. A strong hand tugged his face plate open and he was able to spit and retch the black jelly from his throat and nose. It left his lips and tongue numb and his head throbbed from fever and lack of oxygen, and it left him with a lingering taste of salty water and mold, an oily and pervasive essence that he could smell more than taste. He heard a faint clank and a high-pitched, overheated whine, but the secondary circuits kicked in and his armor struggled to come back online along with him. Most of his weapon and propulsion systems were gone, as he’d feared, ripped away along with the primary plating on his arms and legs. His own limbs felt heavy and clumsy, and only his right arm still felt like it even belonged to him. The light in his chest flickered back to life as his heartbeat stabilized, diffused and unfocused after the damage to the chestplate and housing, and the suit began trying to eject the sludge that clogged the exhaust ports and vents.

“You’d better be alive in there,” Steve said next to him in the dark. Tony nodded and wheezed. “Good enough,” he said.

“We are all meat for Her feast!” Machen raved. He danced on his many limbs on the very threshold now, arms spread wide to welcome the endless dark into the world. “You only delay—“ but Steve cut him off. He flung his shield with weary accuracy. It struck the old man in the narrow remains of his chest and bounced back. Steve caught it as Machen vanished into the portal, his shrill scream of terror and ecstasy cut off as the membrane between the worlds rippled and then went still. The lips of the portal quivered and spread.

“I hate that guy,” Steve sighed. “Can you stand up?”

“Maybe,” Tony said. Steve held a hand out and Tony took it. Steve pulled him to his feet but his numb legs spasmed beneath him and he toppled into Steve’s chest.

“I think it’s almost fully dilated,” Steve said.

“Can we please stop talking about it like that? It’s not a…” Tony found he couldn’t make the comparison out loud, but they both knew what he was thinking.

“Yes it is.”
“Fine, but we don’t have to continue the analogy,” Tony conceded.

“Any thoughts on how we stop it?”

“One. But you won’t like it.”

“Try me.”

“I can detonate the reactor core. Like a solar flare, more light and heat than concussion. I don’t think it likes the sun.”

“Are you referring to the reactor core that currently resides in your chest, keeping you alive?”

“I left my spare in my other other metal pants,” Tony conceded.

“And that would kill you,” Steve said.

“It would kill all three of us, I think. Maybe all five, if the mine collapses.” The portal no longer seemed aware of them, as though Machen had been its only eyes, but the whole cavern vibrated with the impending labor.

“No way. Give me Plan B.”

“We all die anyway and then whatever is on the other side of this gateway comes through and eats our entire galaxy,” Tony said. “Don’t be so stubborn. Just drag me as close as you can and try to get clear.”

“We both know I’m not going to do that.”

Tony sighed. He could feel something thicker than blood running from the wounds in his inner thighs and his whole body felt fever chilled and tired. He unhooked the last intact seals on his chest and torso and allowed the whole plate to fall away. The cavern’s deep cold seeped through the thin layer of his breeched undersuit and the first serious shiver shook him. He removed what was left of his gauntlets, though Mother had done most of the work for him.

“Tony,” Steve warned.

“I’ll leave the secondary in place,” Tony said. “It will keep me alive for a few days, if that even matters.” It was more like sixteen hours, actually, but he’d never live tested it before. He reached in and disabled the safeguards. With a shaking hand, he removed the glowing blue core from his chest and reconnected it to the chest plate of his armor. He hoped the remnants of the Unibeam could still amplify it enough to do what he wanted. Chills shook him and he was glad that the dim blue light made it hard to tell if the fluid seeping down his chest was blood or more black corruption. Above them, the portal rumbled and quivered, but Tony tried to ignore everything around him as he reverse engineered the reactor into a weapon. He had spent a great deal of time trying to make an explosion unlikely, but it still wasn’t so hard to undo. He’d always had a knack for destroying things.

“There,” he said. He stopped struggling to make his numb fingers perform and slumped against Steve.

“How long?” he asked.

“A minute or two. It has to charge up and… Well, it doesn’t matter much.”

“Let’s find Thor,” Steve said.
“Yeah.” Steve lifted him against his hip and they felt their way through the darkness by the feeble light of Tony’s secondary arc reactor, flickering dimmer and brighter in time with his failing heartbeat. Thor still lay where he’d fallen and Steve lowered them both to the ground next to him. Steve seemed to sense what he wanted and tugged Thor across their laps until another bout of wet coughing forced him to stop. Tony held out his right hand and Steve took it. They held each other in the rumbling dark.

“I love you,” Tony said. His whisper filled their tiny candle-bright island in the dark. “I always hated saying that. It doesn’t really get it across.”

“I still like hearing it,” Steve said. “I love you, too.” Tony wasn’t so scared to die now. Even if it was the same endless, indifferent void he’d glimpsed through the portal, at least he would be with Steve, and not banished to the gloating darkness that consumed life and birthed endless horrors.


“Is he even alive?” Steve asked. It was true that Thor lay limp and heavy on them, and cold as a stone.

“I am,” Thor mumbled. He coughed and jerked and struggled to sit up. “My aid is yours. Such as it is.” With Steve’s help, Thor sat against Tony’s left side and peered at them, his face still gray and cadaverous in the darkness. Tony shivered again and black streaks swam before his eyes. The light dimmed to almost nothing for a moment and came back, though not to its former brightness. Thor raised a heavy, shaking hand to his neck and unfastened the tattered, filthy remnants of his cape. He wrapped it clumsily around Tony’s shaking shoulders and Steve caught it on the other side and tucked it around him.

“What can I do?” Thor asked.

“Can you get us out of here?” Steve asked.

“Bring it all down,” Tony murmured. “Not much time left.”

“I can do both,” Thor promised, though his voice sounded strained and weary. He struggled to his feet, swayed, and dropped back to his knees, fresh black blood draining from his rent armor. He steadied himself against the cavern’s wall with one hand and held the other out, palm up like a prayer. For a long moment, nothing happened. Steve coughed and black fluid dribbled over his lips. Tony’s light faded by another dim degree and off in the unlit darkness the portal continued to rumble and chuckle to itself while the flare charged at its base. Thor flexed his fingers and muttered under his breath as his corrupted blood pooled at his feet.

Mjolnir slapped into Thor’s outstretched palm with a blinding flash of lightning, and Thor’s thunder rumbled through the cavern. He stood up, strengthened by the added weight of the hammer.

“Come,” he said. He began to spin the hammer in his hand and stretched his other out to them. Steve stood as well and Tony tried but failed to do the same. Steve placed him in Thor’s grip and he wrapped his one responsive limb around Thor’s waist. Steve held him in place from behind and Thor pulled them both as close as possible. Steve raised the shield to protect Tony’s face as well as his own. Lightning crackled down the walls of the cavern on all sides and Thor’s eyes glowed blue-white as he called the full power of his storm. Bolts of electricity fed into the arc reactor mechanism and the portal shrieked with each one. Thor launched into the air and thunder shook the mountain like an earthquake. Rotten stone crumbled and fell, glancing off the shield. Far below, the armor detonated with a bright flare, burning through the cavern and the portal. Mother’s final screams
ripped through their minds and Tony heard the metallic crunch and the impact of flesh, the accident that had killed his own human mother. He wondered what the others heard, but neither the shield nor the hammer wavered as the cavern below them caved in. The leering face of the black goat shot past behind Thor’s back, filling Tony’s sight for one last moment before lightning ripped her and her blasphemous throng apart and hurled them into the depths along with tons of stone and coal and brittle human bones.

Mjolnir opened the way for them, but Thor let his own body punch through the roof of the cavern and widen a passage out of the top of the mountain, slamming into layer after layer of stone and wood as the Old Crow Mountain Mine collapsed. Tony got a breath of cold mist, heavy with the rotten taste of autumn, and he gulped at the rushing air like the sweetest of wines. Thor struck a tree and lost his grip on Mjolnir. They fell to the molding carpet of leaves and Thor rolled to cushion his teammates. He hit the soft, pungent soil and plowed up a deep loamy furrow. Tony bumped against his chest one last time as he came to a stop, and then Thor’s arm went limp and spilled them onto the frost-rimed ground. Tony raised his head and heard the sound of Mjolnir splintering trees in the distance and a low rumble of thunder as it came to a stop. Steve struggled to sit up, racked with wet, breathless coughing. Tony wanted to go to him, but he had to fight impossibly hard to even keep his face out of the dirt, the muscles in his right arm straining and shaking with the effort to raise him even a few inches. Thor lay still, his hair fouled with mud and blood and tentacle fluid. Tony could not see his chest rising at all, but he could hardly trust the shaking, rushing dark at the edges of his vision. Crow Mountain rumbled and heaved beneath them and Thor’s lightning raged uncontrolled over the dark afternoon sky. He let his face sink into the leaves and pine needles and took Steve’s hand as the first shockwave made the ground pitch and heave. Rain pattered around them and a strong wind whipped the trees, but Tony couldn’t fight anymore. He sank into a warm, buzzing darkness that closed over him like a wave.

He was back in the cavern, at the edge of the crevasse. He didn’t have his armor anymore, and he didn’t have a billionaire’s custom suit to protect him, either. Not even the familiar sweaty, greasy comfort of his lab wear to provide him with a shield, no tiny bulwark of ego or pretense of identity to hide behind. He was naked, and worse than naked, helpless and unformed as a baby.

Shadowy tendrils reached out of the chasm before him, more than he could count, moving like smoke. They reached for him, beckoning to him, and became hands. Natasha’s hands, dainty and deadly, gestured with her dancer’s grace. Clint’s did, too, wiry and callused in their distinctive way. Thor’s looked warm and inviting, but the sight of them filled Tony with a spark of inexplicable anger and he turned away from them. It had been so long since he’d seen his own mother’s hands that he recognized them first by her beautiful Art Deco diamond ring. The coroner had given it back to him after the accident, pristine once the blood had been washed away. She’d wanted him to have it, for her future daughter-in-law. He had hurled it into a snowy wood one drunken, angry night, and in the sobering light of day had never managed to find it. Steve’s hands reached out of the chasm and beckoned him closer, and Tony took a step forward, then another. He let Steve’s hands hold his own, though they radiated a deep cold up his arms and into his heart. They pulled him, steady and gentle, toward the edge. Steve’s voice called his name, but something was wrong. He looked behind him and heard it again.
“Tony?”

“Steve,” he whispered through dry, fever-chapped lips. He opened his eyes to the bright, clinical white of a hospital room and winced away from the light. He forced his watering eyes open and found Steve watching him intently. The whole room was swathed in white plastic and biohazard symbols, but Steve wore soft cotton scrubs and a bracelet with his name on it. A drawing pad and pen lay discarded on Tony’s bedside table, open to a sheet covered with sinuous, abstract black designs. Steve followed his gaze and shut the sketchbook.

“Hey,” he said. He held Tony’s hand, but now that he was awake he could see that the burning numbness spread from an IV in the crook of his elbow. Steve held a cup of water to his lips and let him sip slowly. “How do you feel?”

“Like shit,” Tony croaked. “What did they do to me?”

“They dragged you in here almost dead, then they pumped you full of blood and amphoteracin and you almost died again. Don’t move around too much. You have a central line but you can’t feel it right now.”

“Are you dead?”

“No, Tony, I’m not dead, though you have tried to give me a heart attack three times since you’ve been here.” Something dark and fearful flitted over Steve’s eyes before he made himself smile again, and Tony had to wonder how close he had been to dying. “Whatever we did to close the portal worked, I guess, and once the link broke, the disease lost a lot of its strength. I’m stuck up here until my blood work comes back clean, but every time they test me I’ve gotten more of it out of my system.” Steve held his hand, warm and solid as ever, and Tony nearly let the comfort of his touch wash him away into the cold, buzzing dark of unconsciousness.

“A thought caught him and jerked him back to the pain and he fought, irrationally, to sit up.

“What happened to the others?” he asked. “Where are they?”

“Calm down, OK?” Steve pressed him, firm but gentle, back to the mattress. He worked the controls, out of Tony’s sight below the edge of the bed, and the back rose up enough that Tony could see where they were. Everything was either blinding white or harsh medical green, and thick plastic closed off his little island from the surroundings. “You’re on the Helicarrier. If you look over there, you can see Clint.” Beyond Steve’s gesture, though blurred by the layers of plastic and his own dizziness, he could see another cell like his own, another bed surrounded by monitors and sealed off inside a translucent barrier. “He hasn’t woken up yet, but Dr. McCoy tells me that he’s starting to make progress and they think he’ll pull through like you did.”

“Is that Natasha with him?” Tony could make out a familiar splash of auburn and a pair of scrubs like Steve’s next to Clint’s bed.

“Yeah. She’s worse than I am but better than you. She’s supposed to be in bed. And she’s not supposed to be inside the bubble.”

“But they can’t keep her out.”

“Not at all.” Steve smiled fondly.

“Are you supposed to be inside my bubble?” Tony asked.

“Not even a little. Want me to leave?”
“No. Not even a little.”

“Good.”

“Is Thor dead?” he asked. He had to know, but he suspected the dull ache of grief would spike sharp and piercing with the answer.

“He’s not dead.”

“No, I am not,” Thor said. He unfastened the sealed ring around Tony’s bed and came in carrying a small paper bag in one hand. His face was still gray and he moved with the stiff, halting gait of unhealed injuries. Tony could see bandages under the loose scrubs he wore and a plastic bracelet around his wrist, but his eyes were clear and smiling. Some last dark knot in Tony’s chest loosened to see Thor had survived as well and he relaxed against the starchy pillows. A brief look passed between Steve and Thor, and Steve got up from his chair.

“I’m going to go get some coffee,” Steve announced. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He went through the complex process of leaving the bubble and sealing it after himself.

“Tis good to see you awake,” Thor said. He perched on the side of the bed, one leg bent over the low railing and the other braced on the floor. Tony struggled to sit up and several monitors began to beep in distress, but he did not care. Thor wrapped him in the gentlest hug he could manage, and though his vision swam Tony rested his cheek against the soft cotton of Thor’s hospital gown and tried to return it.

“You punched through a whole mountain with your head,” Tony said.

“It sounds foolish when you say it that way.”

“It was. But thank you.”

“Any time you have need of the hardest head in all Nine Realms, you have only to ask.” Tony closed his eyes and tried to think of what to say.

“I built a suit that can kill you,” he said, and immediately wished he could suck it back between his lips. Why had he thought of that now?

“You aren’t angry?”

“I mean, it’s based on what you can do, and I made it out of what was left of the Destroyer. I… I called it the Thorbuster, but it’s really to neutralize any Asgardian level threat, and I would never…”

“You know, in Asgard, putting on special armor so you can give me a good fight would be considered foreplay.” Thor’s face could be incredibly difficult to read if he chose, and the longer Tony sat up the more everything hurt, but he thought his friend was joking with him.

“You aren’t angry?”

“I might have been in other circumstances,” Thor admitted. “But you are a defender of Midgard, and my friend. I will look forward to us getting out of here so I can give it a proper trial.” Thor’s smile was pure indulgence, a sure sign that he did not even believe that the prototype could hurt him.

“Now lie back and take this before Steve returns.” He guided Tony back to his pillows and pressed the bag into his hand.
“What is it?” Tony asked.

“Something that will make you feel better faster than flowers. Lady Pepper helped me with it. Though I could bring you a stuffed bear, if you require one.” Thor stood and opened the plastic for Steve. He accepted a cup of coffee but wordlessly declined an invitation to stay. Steve resealed the plastic and sat back down, on Tony’s bed this time. He held Tony in the curve of his body, careful of the tubes and monitors and bandages, and cradled Tony’s numb arm in his lap. Tony gave up on dignity and cuddled against him as his body began to gain awareness of all the places it had stiffness and pain.

“You should sleep, you know,” Steve said. He kissed the top of Tony’s head.

“Stay with me,” Tony said.

“I will. What did Thor bring you? If it’s donuts I will have to confiscate them.”

Tony didn’t even want to move enough to see. Curiosity got the better of him, though, and he peeked in the bag with his untethered arm. He found a ring of keys inside, familiar ones, and though a few were missing (Thor didn’t know about all of his places, of course), it was a good start. They were bound together with a shiny enameled keychain, a perfect replica of Steve’s shield. Tony lay back again and laughed, even though it hurt, filled with love for the people in his life and a second chance to do this properly.

“So what’s in the bag?” Steve asked.

“It’s actually for you,” Tony said. He put the ring in Steve’s hand and knew that someday, it would be a wedding band.

“What are all these?” Steve said.

“Keys to the Tower, my house in Malibu, all of it. I’ll take you on a tour when I get out. It’s sort of symbolic, of course, but it will hold you until we can add you to all the biometrics.”

“Something you want to ask me?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “What kind of wallpaper do you want?” Steve smiled down at him and Tony could no longer remember why he’d been afraid of this. He might remember later, but at the moment he’d never been so sure of anything.

“I’m thinking something blue.”

“OK.”

“With little yellow duckies. Fuzzy ones.”

“Anything you want. Or are you trying to say you’d like to build a nursery in Avengers Tower?”

“Hell no,” Steve said, and Tony sighed with relief. “I’ll wait to talk about kids until you have another bottomless hole nearby to jump in.”

End Notes
Crows, West Virginia is a real place. I used to drive through the southern and central parts of the state on my way to my parents' house in Morgantown, and I saw the signs for it from the interstate. Though the name intrigued me, I never went there, so any resemblance to the actual town or any real ancient cults that might dwell there is entirely coincidental.

Works inspired by this one: [ART] What Lies Beneath by krusca

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