Summary

No criticism, please. Hate/trolls will be deleted to keep our sanity. Thanks!

This is Part 2 of the Chaos Theory Saga: Tony Stark contracted an Asgardian poison meant only for Loki. The trickster was forced to keep Stark alive, if he wanted to stay on a path to redemption. Loki bound their life forces together in a last ditch effort, but he gave away more than anticipated. The two now share a weak empathic link. Loki fled in the threat of exposure, leaving Bruce and Tony to continue to try to find a cure that is not dependent on the God of Chaos. That cure may be within Maya Hansen's Extremis formula.

With the Winter Soldier now in SHIELD’S custody, Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff struggle to bring the man they knew back to working consciousness. They soon realize many versions of James Buchanan Barnes exist. Their fear is that the new man he will now become will hate them both.

Phil Coulson and Clint Barton discover betrayal within SHIELD’S highest echelon that threatens to destroy the organization and tear the Avengers apart, one by one. They must outwit the conspirators by utilizing every asset in their arsenal, including their worst enemies.
This is a collaborative work of fiction. No copyright infringement is intended. It is for our amusement only. This series is set after The Avengers in the MCU but is not Iron Man 3, Thor 2, Winter Soldier, or Age of Ultron compliant. We will incorporate aspects of these movies into our story. AU according to our imagination.
"Tony, can you hear me?" Bruce called out. The man was warm to the touch and his color was back. Tony looked healthy and alive. Gone were the dark circles under hollow eyes. Pale lips that whispered of death were now pink and healthy. "Just take it easy. Sit for a minute. I admit, that was impressive, even if I don't really know what went on but I can imagine it was a rough ride. How do you feel?"

"I’m not sure." Tony looked up with dazed eyes to see Bruce squatting in front of him. "I don’t understand. I feel… strange."

"Strange?"

“What happened?” was all Tony could think to ask. The possibilities of a spell gone wrong were too awful to contemplate, but he knew that was now their fate. He turned and looked at Loki. “What did you do?”

The spellcaster took a breath to speak but words failed him. Fear and confusion trespassed into his soul. These were not his emotions. They distinctly did not belong to him, though fear suddenly seemed to become a shared sentiment…

He realized the door opened on both sides.

Stark was meant to be the one exposed to Loki’s awareness, not the other way around. He would grant no one, not even Frigga, familiarity of his emotional state. It would rob him of his defense mechanism perfected over hundreds of years. He was the Trickster, the Deceiver, the Liesmith. This could undermine the very essence of who he is.

“You don’t understand. This cannot happen,” Loki shouted. "I did not mean for this to happen."

Thor shook his head slowly, eyes full of compassion. “You never do, brother."

The sheer weight of Thor's sincerity was too much for Loki to bear. “Leave me alone!”

“Loki, no. Don’t run!”

The dark prince held the reactor in a crushing grip, closed his eyes, and vanished from the Tower in a swirl of blue and green.

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Tony stood up, and even though he felt better, his limbs were still tingling with the after effects of Loki’s magic. He was a bit shaky and numb. Bruce steadied the billionaire and sat him on the edge of the bed, where just a little while ago he’d been at death’s door. The abject panic that flitted at the back of Tony’s awareness didn’t belong to him, although he was feeling a healthy dose of his own now.

Thor’s last words to Loki left him cold.

Tony wanted to trust Loki, he really did. But now the trickster was gone. He’d taken the spare
reactor Tony had given to him, against every instinct, save survival. He could destroy it in an
instant, take away Loki's syphoned power, but where would that leave him? They were now bound
to each other. One dies, the other goes with him.

So Tony resisted the urge to command Jarvis to kill the device. His life depended on the belief that
Loki really did give a damn. He needed more information.

“Thor, what exactly did you mean when you said, and I quote, ‘I knew you were up to no good and
it has come back to bite you’? Because that is not instilling in me a whole lot of confidence in
magic. Also, I’m now feeling emotions that don’t appear to me mine. Is that… normal?”

"You are… feeling what?" Bruce stuttered, tearing off his glasses to squint at Tony.

Thor hung his head and shook it once. He spun Mjolnir's handle in his hand tensely.

"The way he marked you for the spell," Thor began ominously, "I cannot say why I had my doubts,
and yet, the binding has succeeded. You appear far healthier than I've seen you in days, Stark. That
much of the incantation has succeeded."

“I feel better physically, yes. I'm no longer at death's doorstep and for that, I'm grateful. But didn’t
I have enough emotional baggage of my own? I don’t need someone else’s tagging along for the
ride.” Tony rubbed at the tension in his forehead. "Did this happen when he bound himself in
battle? Because I think this could be rather distracting.”

Thor scowled and pointed Mjolnir at Tony. "Stark, you will have care with this unforeseen
complication. This was unintended. By no means did Loki simply allow you to have this empathic
link to him. He will wish to sever it immediately - in any way possible."

The God of Thunder lowered his weapon, gripped it tightly in his hand and walked towards the
window. "You have been put in grave danger, Stark. Loki would allow no one such a luxury, and
no, this certainly did not happen when we were bound for the sake of battle. He would never have
performed the spell if there was a chance that I'd glimpse into his soul as you are. You must
understand, Loki's manner of conducting himself is to shroud his emotions in deception. Without
that defense mechanism, he will feel vulnerable. I fear for your safety."

Tony took a deep breath. This had turned into one giant clusterfuck. The upside he wasn’t dying
anymore. The downside? Tony now had an unstable god loose with one of his arc reactors.

He ran his hands through his hair in a nervous gesture. Anger, fear, and loathing simmered in the
back of his mind. It was barely there now but still noticeable. They were separate from his own
emotions but invasive, startling when they spiked, like nails on a chalkboard.

“So you think Loki is going to hurt me? Because severing this link so he doesn't have to feel
"vulnerable" will also cancel my benefits of the spell and I go right back to dying." Tony was
inches away from panicking himself.

"He could end this at any moment. The fact that he hasn't yet shows his intentions to try to manage
this, try to regain some control, or at least think this through before he acts on the impulse of self-
preservation."

Thor walked closer to Tony. "From what I saw, I believe that the link between you will go both
ways, meaning he will be able to connect to you in the way you are to him. If you can calm your
emotions, it may help him. Otherwise, this may escalate into catastrophe."

“Okay. Calm, you say?” Tony repeated, spinning on his heels to find a friend who'd understand
panic like this. "Bruce. Now would be a great time to impart some wisdom on achieving your zen like control."

"I'd rather you just send him murderous thoughts."

"I'd rather you not," Thor said, posturing offensively.

"I can't send him anything. I feel and he feels it too, to a degree. Vice versa. I don't want to murder him. I want to stay alive. If that's a feeling, then that's what he's getting from me at the moment."

"Yeah, well, it's a good thing he's not bound to me," Bruce said, rolling up his sleeves. "But this isn't about me, so we'll work this from any angle that keeps you alive."

"I have to trust Loki," Tony admitted. "He's fled to lick his wounds. I get that. I have to believe that we can work through this glitch. And it's not like I have a whole lot of options here."

"That's what we need to work on next," Bruce stated. "Options."

"Fine, but we need to focus on the unstable Asgardian with arc reactor first."

"You manage this with Loki or you perish," Thor said bluntly. "He knows his purpose right now is to keep you alive. Loki deserves a chance to restate his intentions."

"You can track it, can't you?" Bruce asked.

"Well, yeah. It has a very unique energy signature," Tony answered. He walked to a monitor on the wall and used his fingerprint to access it. "Jarvis, give me a location on the modified arc reactor."

"Sir, the energy signature has been fluctuating, appearing and disappearing through greater Manhattan. Since Loki left the building, it first appeared on top of this Tower. Next, it moved to spire at the Empire State building. Seconds later, it pinged in the subway system near the financial district. Now, it is moving back towards Central Park at a pedestrian pace. I've accessed New York Police Department's closed-circuit cameras. The person holding the reactor is a young woman with a backpack. I have no explanation for this."

"Okay, since I know Loki would not give up his little toy to some random woman, what's going on, Thor. Does he suddenly have an accomplice?"

"No. You would call it shapeshifting. It is a much harder task than illusion," Thor explained. "But with the power source you gave him, he can now change into male, female, bird or beast. Loki can blend in anywhere. However, he must know your potential threat to deprive him of that energy source is real. Loki will not go far. He could not outrun SHIELD in his natural form, should you take away the reactor's energy. He is also still dealing with the debility from the poison that was transferred from you to him. He is most likely tired and in need of rest. He will want to regain his balance."

And he must be frightened, Thor realized.

"Magic shapeshifting. Yeah, okay." Tony studied the image in a combination of intrigue and disbelief. "J, can you tell if that form has solid mass?"

"It does, sir, and the energy signature of the arc reactor is emitting from the backpack."

"Huh." Tony watched as Loki walked along the streets of Manhattan as a typical young woman, nothing outstanding that would scream diabolical mastermind sorcerer here.
The shapeshifting thing was going to take some time getting used to.

"Where's he going?"

"Nowhere. Anywhere," Tony suggested. "Where do you go when you want to think?"

"Point taken," Bruce admitted.

They were content to observe for a while. Tony noticed lady Loki avoided any contact at all with the general populace. Even when occasionally jostled by another pedestrian, Loki continued to move away. "He’s not trying to hurt anyone. It's like he is running scared."

"Running from what?"

"Me? Us? What he's done?" Tony suggested.

After some time, he stepped away from the monitor. "Keep tracking him, Jarvis. I don’t want him cornered but I don't want to lose him either."

"Yes, sir."

Tony walked towards the window, stared at the lights of the city. "So Thor, are you going to go after him or should I?"

"I will go. I should offer him shelter, a place where no threat exists."

"Do you really think that exists on earth?" Tony joked weakly.

"Excuse me, sir. I must point out that Dr. Banner left the building two minutes ago. He appeared distressed."

"Fuck! Why would he go after Loki? This doesn't make sense," Tony said in frustration.

"If I may, sir, it almost appeared Dr. Banner recognized someone along Loki's route. Perhaps his actions do not involve the Asgardian at all."

"One could only hope," Tony mocked. "Keep your electronic eyes peeled for any signs of increased levels of gamma energy. Fury is going to have my balls on toast if this escalates into a brawl."

Thor noticed Loki stopped, seemingly frozen on the sidewalk. "Stark, he is reacting to your spike in anxiety."

"Shit." Tony tried to quell his panic, attempted to halt the fear that was rushing through his veins like ice water. But how the hell was he supposed to do that? If Loki and The Hulk decided to get into a grudge match, they'd level a good portion of the city.

Loki would fight to survive. Knowing that, Tony still hesitated in telling Jarvis to initiate the kill switch on the reactor. If he did, Loki would be lost to him forever.

Thor headed for the doorway. "Dr. Banner must not approach Loki. The two of them will destroy all you've rebuilt of this city until one or both of them is dead."

"Got it." Tony had to get to Loki before Bruce did, if that was even the doctor's intent. "I, prep the Mark VIII for flight. I'm heading up to the workshop now. Thor, find Banner if you can. If Bruce Hulks out, you have the best shot at containing him. I'll deal with Loki."
"Stark," Thor called out. "Remember. Your life force is linked to my brother's. Should he fall, you will die too. What Loki needs most is time to adjust to this empathy you share, time without coming under attack. We must provide this for him, for your sake and for his."

Tony hesitated at the door. "I know the consequences if something were to happen to Loki. I believe I can talk him down. Neither of us are used to having someone running roughshod over our emotional psyche. It's something we can work towards solving together. I just need him to see that too."

"I wish to communicate with you throughout our search."

"Jarvis, have Dummy bring Thor a comm patch to use. It's just like the ones we had during the Invasion," he reassured.

"What are you going to say to my brother?" He followed Stark down the medical bay's corridor towards their point of exit.

"No clue. We'll figure it out together. If nothing else, I can take him back to the manor. Jarvis had a new security system installed. The work crew finished yesterday with wiring, new windows, etcetera. No one is going to get in this time. If Loki needs alone time, he can get it there."

Thor understood the intention of reinforcing a previously weak stronghold, but like Loki, Thor would not trust it until it was tried and proved true. There was no where for Loki to go that he would feel safe. They were at crossroads, and how Loki would behave in the next hour was beyond Thor's mind to grasp.

"Be careful, Stark. Remember what I told you about cornering Loki. If he is threatened, he will strike first with no hesitation."

"Gotta. Approach with caution." Hopefully, Loki was not so freaked out that he did decide to do something Tony knew he'd regret later.

Not wanting to waste any more time, Tony ran from the room and to his workshop. He let out a sigh of relief as the armor closed around him and the HUD flickered to life.

"Okay, J. We have a godling to find. Point me in the right direction." Tony walked to the landing pad and engaged the boot repulsors lifting him skyward.

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Loki slid into the shadows of a nearby alley, removing himself from the crowded pedestrian flow of the city. He let his head fall back against the cold stone of the brick building. To his left in the darkness of the alley, someone or something knocked over an empty bottle. The hollow sound echoed in his ears. To his right, a siren wailed loudly as a police vehicle roared past him.

The pedestrians gave no notice to any of this. Most of them were focused on the phones in their hands, the music in their earphones, the monotony of this Midgardian life swirling around them. He was just a typical girl walking to her destination. No one was eager to seek out conversation or even acknowledge her presence.

Loki felt both lost and safe in it's calamity. And there was the ever-present anxiety mixing with fear in the back of his mind that wasn't his own. His only hope was that the doorway didn't open both ways, that Stark was not able to venture into his emotions, but he was almost certain that hope was in vain.
A passing ambulance lit up the opening of the alley in flashes of red and white. He turned towards the shadows to seek its gloom. Loki clutched the reactor in his palm and closed his eyes. Instantly, he took to the skies in the black-winged form of a raven.

He didn't land until felt himself begin to weaken. The desire to run, to fly away, and to flee was so strong that he thought he might give in and try to create a portal to somewhere relatively safe in the Nines but he knew he was bound to this place.

What was uncertain was when they'd come for him and who would be sent to retrieve him. Worse if it was not of Midgardian origin.

He wanted to have formed a counterspell before seeing Stark again, one that would break this unforeseen bond, but if he did that, the man would perish, and the entire purpose to Frigga sending them here would be for naught.

Loki landed in the large park in the middle of Manhattan and hid himself fully under a footbridge. The last time he was in this small forest, he was in chains and a muzzle. Thor ushered him home with the Tesseract. It was the last place Thor would think to look for him.

Loki couldn't help but look at the stars, fear gripping at him again, wondering if Heimdall would send the Bifrost to retrieve him.

Heimdall was the least of his worries.

Loki transformed from the sleek black raven he wore into that of a familiar white-haired, one-eyed, old man with deep scars of battle, weary from life. He conjured a tin cup with some loose change and shook it gently, mockingly. The coins rattled in the hollow basin, ringing loudly in his ears. If the Allfather could see him now.

That made Loki smile wryly.

He could hear water dripping nearby. It was cold and damp and so very lonely. And through the fear that continued to plague him, and no matter how many times he tried to keep his mind on designing a counterspell, what he ended up thinking about most was Stark.

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Iron Man flew over the city, hoping that Loki had not disappeared to somewhere he could not follow. The HUD display showed fluctuating energy signatures that would vanish and then spike. He could surmise that this was happening when Loki shifted or used magic. It messed with his calibrations. It was something the engineer would have to work on later.

“J, how we doing?” Tony asked anxiously. "The signal just blipped again. Can you pinpoint it this time?"

“Sir, the fluctuations have again stabilized and appear to be stationary at the moment, although I cannot say how long they will remain that way. I have plotted a direct trajectory,” Jarvis promptly replied.

“Central Park?” he said, surprised. "Okay. At least with it being dark, the odds of attracting a lot of attention would be minimal. It’s not like we need an audience for this."

Tony rounded the corner of a building and dipped below a traffic light before gaining altitude again.
"Thor? I found Loki," he relayed, as he jetted towards Jarvis’ coordinates. "He’s in Central Park, you know the place where you rainbowed back to Asgard?"

"I would not have expected Loki to seek out refuge there. If he is near the Bifrost impression, do not approach it. I will be there momentarily."

Tony hovered near the ornate Asgardian energy signature burned into the ground. He took a deep breath as a wave of loneliness washed over him. It was painful in its intensity. Is this how Loki felt pretty much all the time? Tony wondered as he landed.

“I don’t think that’s such a great idea, Point Break. Loki is still pretty freaked out. I can feel it. Let me get to him first. If it all goes to hell, I imagine you’ll be the first to know, but give me some time to approach and talk to him.”

Tony slid the faceplate up and peered into the gloom. The intermittent lighting did little to dispel the shadows on the walkways in the park. He carefully made his way down a footpath to an ornamental gothic style bridge. As he approached, Tony could just make out a huddled figure hunched on the ground far back under the bridge supports. It did not appear to be Loki-shaped, but then Tony had learned that appearances could be deceiving. Plus, the feedback from the trickster’s emotional state was sharper the closer he got.

Tony cautiously entered the sheltered area under the bridge and stopped. He really didn’t want to spook Loki. The Aesir had taken on the guise of a one-eyed old man in worn and tattered clothing. He even had a cup for loose change sitting nearby. How very Charles Dickens.

Loki watched as Stark landed nearby. The suit looked threatening, able to injure Loki, even kill him at this point. Loki could feel several emotions rippling off the Midgardian. Among the anxiety was a steady thrum of desperation, most likely relating to his bond and the mortality that came with it. Loki began to pull power from the arc reactor tucked away under the illusion of loose clothing.

Then Iron Man raised the faceless mask and Tony Stark appeared beneath it. Loki knew that face too well. So much had happened between them in such a short time. Too much.

Their eyes met and Loki felt a wave of something he recognized; a fear of loss, almost like abandonment. A shiver ran down his spine. That this feeling was strong enough to cause a physical reaction in him made him angry.

Stark approached without aggression, but Loki’s first instinct was to attack, knock the man off his feet and gain the upper hand through surprise. He knew it wouldn’t last, since Stark had the power to kill the reactor Loki held. He was still a prisoner no matter how he looked at it, and that brought back all the feelings of rage he had towards Odin.

Tony crouched down a fair distance away. Thor’s warning was still ringing in his ears as Tony looked this version of Loki in the face. What he felt rolling off the Asgardian right now should have made Tony fear for his safety, but he was tired of being scared. What Tony really needed was a hot shower and then bed. It had been one hell of a day. He just had to convince Loki to join him. Now was not the time to hurl accusations about what had gone wrong with the spell. They could review that in the morning, if they made it to dawn, that is.

“This is a new look for you, isn’t it?” Bravado was probably a bad choice, but Tony always did have problems reigning in his mouth. “I got to admit, I would not have expected you to pick something so mundane. I’d have thought you’d go for more pizazz.”

"This? Mundane?" Loki repeated and chuckled in spite of himself. It was an odd sound, Odin's
laughter. It was not something Loki heard often. "I hope the universe can hear you," he admitted and rattled the change in the tin cup.

"You’re not expecting me to add to that, are you? Because I left my wallet in my other suit."

The quick grin on the face of Odin certainly belonged to Loki. "I suppose is a little too dramatic for this era, isn't it?" he admitted. The cup and change disappeared into the ether.

Loki fanned out the empty hands of his illusion. They were wrinkled, the fingers gnarled and scarred, thick and cruel. They weren't the long and elegant hands of a sorcerer. He folded them together, no longer wanting to be reminded of the Allfather.

Loki cocked his head to the side and watched Stark. How this man could disarm him so quickly should be a warning siren in his mind. Instead, Loki was drawn to the Midgardian again. It was infuriating. The longer the silence grew between them, the more he could decipher the emotions running through Stark. He realized that it could work to his advantage, except the fact that Loki still didn't know if he was exposed too.

"Are you going to let me in on the joke?" Tony asked, lifting a finger to wiggle at the illusion. At least he'd managed to amuse Loki, which diffused his anger a little bit. Tony really didn’t want to get into a fight. He had no idea what Loki would do, and that was more unsettling than he was willing to admit because Loki still held Tony’s life in his hands.

"The joke?" Loki said with a wry chuckle. He stood to Odin's full height, tattered gray and blue clothing draping over his form. "It appears I am the joke, no matter what the form, does it not?"

Loki couldn't bring himself to ask the one question plaguing his mind. If Stark could access his emotions, it may very well destroy him. He paced to the other side of the tunnel and raised the reactor in his hand to look at it.

Tony also stood, and damn if Loki wasn’t still taller than him.

"You appear well enough," Loki began, trying to lead into the question plaguing his mind. "I am both stronger and weaker since the bond. Your reactor certainly provides what I can utilize, but your life force was nearly extinguished. It is difficult to regulate that. It will take some time to balance out the weaknesses you've dealt me."

"Weaknesses?" Now it was Tony’s turn to snort in wry amusement, though nothing was even remotely funny. "Hey, this was your idea, remember? You knew what you were getting into. And yeah, I feel loads better now that I’m not at death’s door, but we both know this is not a cure, just a method to give me more time. But I have to say, I could have done without the added baggage. Way too many feels to take in when half of them aren’t even mine."

"Added... baggage," Loki repeated, his face slack with shock at such a foul term for the empathy Stark confirmed they now share.

All his life, Loki strived to hide his emotions. They were a burden. They were a weapon to be used against him by everyone from Thor to Odin and the royal courts, to lovers for which he'd developed a deep affection. Sentiment clouded his thoughts and obstructed logic where the course of action should be obvious. And now, Stark confirmed that Loki's confusion, fear, anger, affection, and curiosity were indeed a burden to him too. It was another validation that the very essence of Loki was burdensome, misfigured, and displeasing.

With a zealous snarl, Loki morphed into his formal battle gear, horns sharp and gleaming in the
moonlight. He lunged at Stark in a murderous rage and pinned the Iron Man against the wall of the tunnel, pieces of cement and plaster dust exploding around them.

Surprise had Tony hesitating the second he felt Loki’s rage pour over him, but the faceplate reacted and slammed down for his protection. The suit groaned under the impact but held, and Jarvis was there with a status report: “Sir, the suit is currently at full capacity but a battle is not warranted at this time, due to your health. I can contact Thor--”

“Fuck no,” he told Jarvis. "I can handle this,"

"Listen," he said to Loki, through the mask. "You think I asked for this, that I wanted you to screw up your spell? I did nothing but put myself at risk since you were dumped in my lap. So if this is the way you want it to go down, then fine. I've had enough."

"I did not ask for this either," Loki yelled back. "This is all your fault! You and Thor and your ideas of saving me from myself. I did not ask you to remove the bindings he placed there, so I will not take the blame for this," Loki shouted, shaking the suit again and shoving him harder into the cement block.

Oh so this was all his fault now? Tony seethed. Now matter how he tried to make things right, this was always how it turned out.

Tony brought his armored arms up. The servos whined as he tried to break Loki’s hold. The strength in his armor and tech didn't let him down. He pushed Loki backward, out from under the bridge. He raised his gauntleted hand, the repulsor glowing as it powered up. “Back off!”

"No. I will not yield to you," Loki screamed. He couldn't breathe, couldn't hear for the ringing in his ears. His fingers were breaking through the reactor's casing in his hand but all he felt was paralyzing panic. "End this now, Stark. Neither of us will have to endure the burden of sentiment any longer."

He raised the reactor and mirrored Iron Man's position, pulling energy from its source and converting it into magic to collect in his hand to use as a weapon.

Tony didn’t know whether he was being affected by the emotions pouring off the both of them, but it was getting hard to tell where he ended and Loki began. It became difficult to breathe as fear pulled him under.

He knew if he fired now, he’d most likely vaporize Loki, killing them both because of the life-force bond they now shared. They were a heartbeat away from unleashing death, aimed at one another.

But Loki’s desperate plea to die was like a bucket of ice water thrown over him. “No,” Tony screamed. "You are not going to use me to commit suicide. I won’t have that on my conscience too!"

"You cannot stomach it," Loki screamed and raised his hand to unleash the magic he'd built for his assault. "But I can."

The air went white and sharp when with a thick bolt of lightning struck between them. Loki was thrown backwards as Thor with Mjolnir landed. A wave of electricity rippled through the park like a tidal wave before dissipating.

Loki gasped as he lay on his back, momentarily paralyzed, looking up at the stars who mocked him and his strife.
"Stark, are you injured?" Thor inquired, gripping his hammer tightly.

“It doesn’t matter. I am done!” Tony yelled as he got up, the shock wave from Thor’s hammer having knocked him flat on his ass.

Tony closed the distance between himself and Loki. He stood over the fallen Asgardian and looked down on Loki’s limp and defeated body. His voice filtered through the suit and came out mechanically cold and emotionless.

"Surprised from the fallout from this binding spell? Well, I’m right there with you, but at least I’m man enough to try to deal with it. Stop acting like a fucking child. I expected more from someone who calls himself a god.”

The titanium alloy was a comforting shield against the sting of betrayal. He turned and walked away, trying to ignore the prickle of apprehension between his shoulder blades.

“Keep your damned promise,” Tony demanded of Thor, “and control your brother. I can’t keep shielding him from harm if this is how he’s going to act. Someone's going to get tired of his bullshit and take him out, and next time, I might let them.”

Tony's head ached fiercely as he tried, in vain, to control his temper. He really didn’t know what to do next. The genius was inches from telling Jarvis to kill the reactor Loki still clutched in his hand. But if he had any hope of coming out of this situation alive, it had to remain in Loki’s dubious custody.

"Stark," Thor began.

“You know what? I don’t want to look at either of you right now. Go straight back to the mansion. Jarvis will grant you access. And do not make me regret my choices, Thor. I don't want to be responsible for the consequences Loki is going to face.”

Tony engaged the boot jets and hovered a few feet off the ground. “Give me your word, Thor.”

"You want my word that I can control the God of Chaos?" Thor asked. He shook his head in frustration. Controlling Loki was like trying to control the wind. Still, he had to say something. The man had been so generous and accommodating. "Midgardians are so naive," he said to himself, suddenly feeling very old.

He returned his gaze to the Man of Iron. "Not even the Allfather can control the influence Loki has on the Nines. It is why we are presently in this situation, Tony Stark. Even in his prison cell, far removed from all, souls still felt the desire to act on Loki's behalf. Do you not truly grasp the power of his authority over you, over many of us? Loki is…”

Thor sighed heavily, unable to even finish his sentence. It was hard to believe Loki could find his way into anyone's heart, yet he did often, and time after time with Thor. And Loki was presently entwined with yet another life that would be forever changed because of it.

"All I can tell you is I will do my best to lead him down a righteous path. To promise you any more would be a lie.”

“The righteous path? Yeah. See that you do. It’s not as if I’ve had any luck, so I’ll have to take your word.” Tony shook his head. He really needed to leave, to go somewhere and question all his life choices, preferably with a large bottle of scotch. Not that he’d ever found any answers in the bottom of a bottle before but there was always a first time.
“Sir, If I may,” Jarvis began.

“Not one word, Jarvis. Not one fucking word. I command you to take me home. I am more than done here.” Now, Tony willingly surrendered control of his suit to his silent AI.

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As the park fell from his peripheral vision, he let his mind wander into dangerous territory as Jarvis navigated the armor towards the Tower. There was a dark little voice in his head echoing over and over that he should have known better, that everybody uses him for their own ends, that he wasn’t good enough to be wanted for himself.

Well fuck them all, Tony thought as the armor landed on the disassembly unit. Each piece was removed as he walked across the platform to be whisked away to the sub-level to be stored until needed again.

But the problem was, and the part that hurt the most was, that Tony really believed this time that he’d finally made a connection with someone who understood, someone he could care for again.

Tony could still hear, even after all these years, his dad’s voice in his head telling him that emotions made you weak and vulnerable. That there was always someone there waiting to take advantage, that Tony needed to be a man. All that wisdom imparted to him when he was ten years old, along with his first glass of bourbon. Because according to his father, alcohol was the solution to most of his problems.

He walked into his living room and noticed he wasn’t alone. Rhodey was rooting around behind the bar. Tony really didn’t desire company, especially when said company would most likely provide a lecture. But he wanted to walk over to that bar and hold out his hand for a glass. Tony needed to resist the urge to lose himself in the amber depths of the finest 98 proof. He feared that this time he would not be able to crawl back out again, but god he wanted to, so very badly.

James Rhodes gave Tony the once over with keen eyes. It was a mere glance, the kind you would give to a roommate when they came back from the store with pizza and you hardly acknowledged them because you were deeply involved in a video game.

But it was time enough for Rhodey to pick up on all of Tony’s tells.

"Last year, I gave you one of those professional-grade bottle openers," he said, pulling open yet another drawer. There were two panties and some jelly beans on top of a Statue of Liberty collectible. He shut it without a word. "All I can find is this plastic red sumo wrestler with a big penis to open my bottle. Really, man? Don't you have anyone to sort this shit out after a party?"

Tony sighed but could not muster the energy for a suitably snappy comeback. “The cleaning service refuses to go through any of the drawers considering what they found last time. I think the poor lady was scarred for life. She was happy about the five hundred dollar tip-apology though.”

Tony collapsed heavily onto the sofa and dropped his head into his hands. The distance from Loki made the swirling miasma of his emotions more bearable but the headache that came with it he could do without. "What do you want, Rhodey? Were you sent here to see if I’ve come to my limited senses yet?"

"So narcissistic. I'm not here for you," Rhodey lied. "I'm here for leftovers."

The microwave underneath the bar chimed and he bent down to retrieve a generous plate full of Chinese food. He tested a piece of beef with his fingers and thumb, popping the steaming food into
his mouth and then regretting it. "Hot, hot," he panted, wiping his fingers on his jeans. He grabbed the fork and napkin from the other drawer and walked to sit where Tony had planted himself.

He was also carrying two glasses pinched between his fingers and a bottle of 99 Blackberries brand under his arm.

"So," Rhodey said, after placing everything on the coffee table. He took a forkful of food in his mouth before opening the bottle and pouring out two healthy glassfuls. "Has that magic mumbo jumbo Loki and you worked out allow you to have something to drink without harming your body?"

Truthfully, the smell of the reheated Chinese and the strong berry-scented alcohol made his stomach churn. He waved the glass away and turned his head to look at his best friend."Are you spying on me now? Got a mole in my organization? Tell me you didn’t get the med tech drunk, because once was enough."

"I'm your power of attorney and your health care surrogate," Rhodey reminded, the look on his face added, idiot. "Upon your imminent death, Jarvis is to notify me so I can sell all your shit and retire in peace, remember?"

He took another bite of his food and then sipped his beverage. "Imagine my panic when I was informed that you had a 77.35% chance of dying tonight? And you didn't think to give me a ring? You're coldhearted, man. Happy would tell you the same thing.

"Thanks J for ratting me out."

"It is in my programming, sir."

He glared at Rhodey. "I was a little busy trying not to puke out my liquified lungs."

"Well, next time you go off to die, try and think of us. Or, you could just call for help, jerk." James wiped his mouth with his napkin, sat back on the couch, arm thrown up on the cushion. He studied Tony for a while. "So what's Loki emoting right now? Tell me it's fear or panic or one of those nasty feelings that eat away at your soul. Is he like Oogie Boogie in the Nightmare Before Christmas?"

"Oogie what?" Tony dismissed the confusion but stopped to consider Rhodey’s question and how much he wanted to impart. It was obvious that his friend was fishing. Now he was seeing ghosts in every corner. If he couldn’t trust Rhodey, who could he?

Truthfully, Tony could feel nothing from Loki at the moment. That was alarming. Did that mean the spell was severed or that Loki and Thor had left earth? But, he still felt mostly fine. He didn't know how long it would take for the symptoms to return if Loki really did up and leave or even die.

"Thor is supposedly watching him. Loki is not good, but then neither am I. I think what you are asking is if I’m going to go on a god-induced homicidal rampage, and no, that's not likely.” Tony got up, unable to stay still, now that his head was filled with thoughts of where the fuck is Loki? “J, location of our celebrity Asgardians?"

"Thor has just returned to the mansion with Loki, at your request. Using the new security system I have locked down the area and quartered off the sections of the house they are not permitted to enter. Would you like a visual hologram? Although I am limited to the parameters of the installed security system."
“No I’m good. Inform Thor that I’ll have Happy bring over groceries and supplies and they are to let you know if they need anything else.” Tony leaned against the bar in relief that they had done as he’d asked without incident.

Well, that relationship didn’t last very long, Rhodey wanted to say, but no need to add salt to a wound. "So let me get this right. You and Loki are bound to each others life force? So if he were, to say, meet up with the ugly end of a ballistic missile, then it would hurt you too?"

“I’d be dead as a doornail. Sucks to be me right now, right?” Tony’s attempt at humor fell woefully flat. "At least I’m not currently dying of poison anymore. So, yup, a magical marriage but without the honeymoon.”

"That's because your bride is the Antichrist." Rhodey stood, carrying his plate to the sink behind the bar.

“Yeah I always seem to fall for the wrong ones. Remember that guy in the leather pants in that club in Soho? His girlfriend had a mean right hook.”

"So did his boyfriend."

"Who knew they didn’t want a foursome?" Tony tried a smile but it too fell flat. "So again, mon frere, why are you here?"

What Rhodes wanted to say was, because of your obvious near-death experience, the intense half-hour long conversation with Pepper about you making inter-galactic mistakes to end all life as we know it, and then SHIELD'S inquiry as to why you and Thor were playing whack-a-mole in Central Park.

Instead, Rhodey said, "I wanted to talk to Banner. There's some weird shit going down with a side project Ross may be working on. I want some answers about things that happened in their past and with some research papers, but it's late. I can talk to him tomorrow. I'm going to crash in one of the suites, unless you've rented them all out to your new playmates."

Fuck! This was all Tony needed now, another player entering the field. "What does that dick weed Ross want now? I am convinced the military all have their heads up their collective asses, letting Ross have any authority at all, present company excluded."

Rhodes rolled his eyes. "None taken, as I agree with you where Ross is concerned."

"Oh shit," Tony muttered, going pale as things started to click in his mind. "I wonder if that's why Bruce left the Tower?"

"Excuse me, sir. The medical staff is quite concerned with your well-being and wish to perform another evaluation. They are insisting that you rest and try to conserve your strength. They are also inquiring as to whether Dr. Banner will return."

"J, tell the medical staff that I don’t pay them to be nosy. They can all go home for the night."

"Yes, sir."

"He doesn't look like he's going to give up the ghost tonight," Rhodey reassured Jarvis, and himself once more. "As for myself, I've got a belly full of food and drink, and I'm ready to sleep," hoping Tony would take the queue and try to rest himself.

"Mi casa es su casa, and all that," Tony said. "Pick a room. Jarvis can tell you which ones are
empty. Or you know, you can crash in my room.” Tony waggled his eyebrows suggestively to tease his best friend.

Well, that would solve everything. Rhodey clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. "Alright. Let's go. Tonight's your lucky night, Stark."

He headed towards the elevator that would whisk them away to Tony's penthouse suite. He couldn't have asked for a more perfect invitation, because in all honesty, he didn't want to leave Tony to his own devices tonight. He could envision all the roads to hell Tony would travel, be it alcohol, engineering until the sun came up, losing himself in nightmarish memories, or wallowing in all the ways this last week had blown up in his face. What Rhodes wanted most was for Tony to sleep in his own bed in his own tower without any Asgardian freaks around. Just Tony, James, and the bots, like old times. Usually not in the same bed, but this was one night he'd make an exception.

He wasn't there to lecture, he wasn't there to play nurse. He was there to watch his best friend's back and keep Tony's head above water so he didn't drown.

"This way, cupcake," Rhodes teased, holding the door open for Tony.

Bemused, Tony followed. “Okay, but I get to top, nothing too kinky, and I get to pick the lube. Not strawberry, I hate strawberry,” he could not resist adding. Rhodey was so straight it was painful, but he did love to poke at Rhodey's sexuality.

At least someone in this fucked up world gave a damn about him.

Tony hesitated on the steps. “J? Location of Dr. Banner, if you can find him."

"His cellular phone pinged off the tower closest to Battery Park a couple of minutes ago. There has been no indication of a situation involving the Hulk reported to the authorities. Would you like me to contact him?"

“Yeah, Bruce needs to come home," Tony said in all seriousness. "I've got a bad feeling about Ross."

"I'll handle Ross," Rhodey said, trying to calm Tony. "Right now, I'm taking you to bed."

"Yeah?" Tony could see right through his best friend. He appreciated it. "J, have Bruce join us when he gets home. It'll be like a slumber party. You up for a threesome?" Tony waggled his eyebrows.

"Don't push your luck, man," Rhodes teased. "Jarvis, just tell the doctor that all threats have been contained and we'd like our little family back together for peace of mind."

"I will advise him of your inquiry and request that he return to the Tower. The rest, I will use my discretion when relaying, if you don't mind."

“You’re no fun J.” Tony pouted as he let Rhodey drag him to his suite.

"It is all in the programming, sir."
Bruce had wandered far after losing track of his intended mark. Inside him was a miasma of emotions. The ever-present voice of rage spurned him on, his eyes blurred with memories instead of the sidewalk under his feet.

His shoulder collided hard with another pedestrian. It spun him completely around and he stumbled. “Pardon me,” he began, but any other words died in his mouth.

Thaddeus Ross removed the fat cigar from his mouth and purposely blew smoke into the space between them. He was flanked on either side by men dressed similarly, in long coats with collars turned up.

They were military. Bruce could practically smell it on them. Their eyes were harsh and judgmental, quickly dismissing him and roving the vicinity for any unseen threat.

“Banner,” Ross spat out. It sounded like an accusation, even over the ringing in his ears.

A fourth man more or less stumbled out of the front door of the restaurant they stood outside. He was definitely civilian. He was tall and wiry with glasses and short hair. The briefcase he carried was smooth and unmarked, identical to the one Ross’ lackey held.

A transaction, that’s what Bruce had stumbled upon.

“So they let you out of your cage? It amazes me that SHIELD even lets you walk around free. But then you are somewhat obsolete. Last year’s model. Ineffective.” Ross eyed Bruce with disdain as his cronies watched curiously. “Personally I’d have sold you for spare parts.”

"Last year's model?” A shiver worked its way down Bruce's spine. The insults hurt, some of them were actually of sound logic. What bothered him was the way Ross spoke about him as a project, as if they were working on something new and improved.

The Other Guy was on the brink of tearing loose. He finally found a target to pummel into the ground. Bruce's only form of control was the thought of Betty standing over her father's grave, knowing he put the asshole there.

"Does the military even let you wear a uniform anymore?” Bruce scoffed.

“What the military does or does not do is not your concern Banner. You’re not even on my agenda.”

Bruce backed up a step as the strangers that were flanking Ross closed ranks. They ushered the ex-general away into an unmarked car that pulled up to the curb.

Ross so obviously wanted to boast about his latest exploits. What they were piqued Bruce's curiosity in a morbid fashion.

It was a testament to his hard won control that he was able to calm the beast enough that he could think clearly. Enough so that he pulled out the Starkphone so graciously supplied by Tony and snapped a few pictures of the trio as they retreated to their vehicle.

The fourth man had darted away like a snake around the corner and disappeared.

The car pulled away from the curb and merged with the evening's traffic. Bruce leaned against the brick facade of a nearby building, taking deep breaths and willing his pulse slow by small increments.
Ross was someone they really didn’t need added to the mix of the already monumental problems they faced. But knowing the maniac, he was cooking up a scheme that would only end in disaster. Bruce had seen it all before, intimately. But who to tell? Tony had enough on his plate with an Asgardian plague and diva for a quasi-wife.

He still had no idea what mischief Loki was causing right now or if Thor could even control his sibling. He had to leave it to the God of Thunder.

Finding a cure for Tony was paramount.

But now Ross.

Bruce's phone chirped at him and he began walking again. Jarvis had texted him. The thought that he was being hailed by an AI amused him. It said Tony was home and wanted him back at the Tower. There was no urgency, so Bruce shoved his hands deep in his jeans pockets and walked the rest of the way.

If there was comfort to find in anything, it was that his life was still one big clusterfuck. At least that felt familiar.
The Delta Team needs medical attention after their rescue of the Winter Soldier. Natasha and Steve find little healing for their emotional state but continue to bond over their hopes for Barnes. Clint regains his respect from SHIELD and his self-confidence. Fury warns Steve not to trust anyone.

Clint landed at the Incirlik base with the battered Delta team on board. The injured team was immediately swarmed by SHIELD's medics and divided up into ambulatory transport vehicles.

Fury helped Coulson out and onto a stretcher while a specialized team dealt with Barnes. Clint winced in sympathy as he watched Steve, shoulders slumped, following along in their wake.

Natasha almost took the arm off of the first med tech that tried to peel her top aside to get a look at her shoulder. But for Clint's quick actions, the medic would've become the injured. “Natasha,” Clint began. He forced the assassin’s chin up until she met his eyes. "Let them help you."

“I’m fine.” She tried to get up but the the archer would not let her. "Let me go."

“Your shoulder is still bleeding. The bullet is still in there, right?” he reminded rhetorically. "This isn’t Budapest. I will not go digging around in your body with my knife for stray bits again."

The redhead continued to physically resist, though it was futile, and they both knew it.

"This is about Barnes, isn’t it? I know you're conflicted but you have to trust that they’ll take care of him. Cap will make certain they do."

Nat’s eyes on his plainly conveyed that she didn’t have a whole lot of trust left. It was then that he was sure that he had to stay with her. Natasha just might disappear to go lick her wounds in solitude.

“Look,” he explained, "Fury could have screwed us all, but he didn’t. He is invested in Barnes now, which means he's under the Director's protection. Crazier, Fury's invested in the Delta Team again.
That's... that's big, Nat. I know that will be important to you too, to have Fury's confidence again. You just can't feel it right now."

"I'm not sure what's important anymore."

Clint’s hand rested on Nat’s uninjured shoulder. He lightly stroked the side of her neck with his thumb. "I can see you’re hurting. I’ll be right there beside you all the way, okay? When you chose to come on this mission, you threw your lot in with us, as crazy as that may be. Now, let us take care of you. I'll be right here."

Finally, Natasha agreed, and they made their way towards an examination room.

When the doctor entered, one glare from Clint kept his comments strictly business. He made no attempt at a bedside manner. The archer kept one hand on his partner while her shoulder wound was carefully probed and diagnostics were done to determine the next step.

By the time she was sedated and on her way into the operating room, Clint had a raging headache. He hadn’t even been able to stop long enough to take a piss. He was worried, tired, hungry, and in desperate need of a hot shower. He also wanted an update on Coulson’s condition.

There was also the imminent lengthy debrief, which may include some yelling by Fury and Clint defending his teammates.

The archer retreated to a nearby bathroom. He stripped off his gear and made use of the facilities. Clint washed his hands and ducked down to splash water onto his face and hair. Most of the concrete dust washed down the drain. He glanced into the mirror at the small cut on his cheek. It was odd that for once he was the one not lying in a hospital bed.

Clint exited the bathroom then headed to the cafeteria for some much needed food and caffeine to fuel his vigil.

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Fury found the agent he was looking for in the commissary, head down, fork gripped tightly in a fist, shoveling in food Barton probably didn't taste. At least the man knew he needed to refuel.
The director approached with purpose, agents parting in the walkway for him to pass through. He made it to Barton's side, where the archer sat alone at one of the long tables. He thought about looming over the veteran agent but instead chose to slide into the seat across from Clint. He pushed the salt and pepper aside and laid the thin laptop down on the table between them.

"That's for your first debrief. You're the only one conscious and/or able to type at the moment." Fury eyed him intensely. "Why do you think that is, agent?"

Clint shrugged. "I had their backs. I followed orders, sir, and stayed with the evac jet. Laid down cover fire and kept their retreat open."

"I would've bet money you wouldn't hold your ground when they were taking fire," Fury stated. "Was that apathy or honor that kept you in your position?"

"Neither, sir. Seems that someone had faith that I would stick to the mission parameters. If I hadn’t held my ground and our evac had been compromised, we’d all be dead." Clint pushed his food aside. His stomach too unsettled to eat it now. "Despite what psych thinks, I can do my damn job."

Nick stared at him silently for a full three seconds.

"I think we all witnessed that today, Barton." Fury picked up the abandoned chocolate chip cookie on the archer's tray and took a bite out of it. He pulled a face and put it back while he finished chewing and swallowed.

"So," he said, slinging an arm over the back of a chair in a relaxed manner. "We are now the proud owner of a rabid killer: half-man, half-machine, completely brainwashed. From what I witnessed, once he broke out of his fish bowl, the Winter Soldier wanted nothing more than to take out anything with a pulse, even while he went down swinging. What do you think about that, hmm? Romanoff and Rogers," Fury muttered, waving his hand towards some distant hallway, "they were pulling punches because of sentiment for the ghost of a man they once knew. They almost got the entire team killed, did you know that? So what do you think we should do about this killing machine, Barton?"

What did Clint think? Realistically, they should have put Barnes down. Any other team would have determined he was an extreme threat and taken him out of the equation. The Winter Soldier was just too dangerous to leave alive in case someone else snatched him up.
Phil had been fucking shot again, and so soon after coming out of a coma. Nat was injured badly enough to end up under the knife too. And Rogers? The one most capable of subduing said threat had almost ended up their biggest liability, not to mention, dead - which seemed impossible. No, the Winter Soldier was too great a risk to invest in.

“I’m pissed that I had to stay on top that roof and listen to a royal clusterfuck. Romanoff and Rogers aren't thinking clearly where the Winter Soldier is concerned. As for me? I would have put an arrow in his eye for going after my team. But as for my risk assessment for James Barnes? Honestly, I have no idea. I don't know him. I just understand there's a difference. Like when I was forced to work for Loki. But you get that, right, sir? You understand there are two different men inside his head, don't you?"

"Maybe," Nick said, not breaking eye contact. "We both know I've seen it happen before."

"For you, Barnes is an asset," Clint continued, not missing a beat. "And a valuable one at that, if you can control him. I’ve never known you to discard an asset, being that I'm still here, as a testament to that theory. But it really doesn’t matter what I think. I'm just the crazy bird with good aim."

"You see more than you understand, Barton." Fury wondered if the psychiatrists ever got this far. He was revealing things about himself that he probably wanted to take to his grave, but because this was about Barnes, not himself, Clint was able to make observations and share his opinions without the immediate threat of exposure. It was times like these that Fury could see what Coulson respected about the agent.

"Where this matter is concerned, it appears you may be the only one in your team to have your head on straight." Fury lowered his head and gave him a look that said, who would've thought?

The director stood and pushed his chair under the table. He parted his coat and rested his hands on his hips. He nodded towards the laptop. "Coulson's out of surgery and resting in recovery. Write up your debrief while he's still under sedation, then try to get some rest, agent."

“"Yes, sir."
James was taken for assessment and detainment, so Steve was left with a hard-eyed senior SHIELD physician who threatened to restrain him if he did not allow treatment of his wounds. He didn’t even consider arguing with the woman. She would have done any drill sergeant proud.

Led to an examination room, she asked if he needed help out of his torn and bloodied clothing, which he declined. Steve was left with a thin cotton sheet for modesty and an admonishment to strip and sit on the table.

Slowly, the Captain stripped out of his torn and filthy gear. He’d already surrendered his firearms on the way into the facility. Steve’s shield was at his side, since he refused to let anyone touch it. It wasn’t long before the doctor was back with a couple of nurses and his wounds were being assessed and treated.

Setting his broken nose hurt like the dickens and brought tears to the soldier’s eyes. The break had been partially on the way to healing due to the serum in his body. The deep bruises would have to heal on their own, but all the debris from the shipping crate he’d been flung through would have to be dug out of the nearly closed lacerations. Anesthetics wore off too soon with his metabolism but he appreciated the gesture.

So lying on his stomach, Steve gripped the exam table edge hard enough to bend the metal frame. He was asked if he wished to be restrained as the wounds were reopened and the bloody splinters pulled from his inflamed flesh. He grit his teeth and shook his head. Anything they used to bind him he could easily break. Steve assured them he could stay still. He’d been through this many times. Not every mission with the commandos left him unscathed. He’d gladly taken the hits to save his team. In the field, bones were reset and shrapnel was dug out with little worry about infection. The serum would take care of it all, even if he did have to suffer through the unsettling crawling feeling and the agony of mending bones and muscle.

Steve would need food to fuel his recovery and sleep to help his body heal. But now, he just had to let the medical staff do their minor surgery.

By the time the last splinter was dropped into a waiting receptacle and the sterile dressings applied to staunch the blood, the Captain had bitten his lip nearly through to stifle the pain.

Shakily, Steve sat up and was handed a set of soft, clean scrubs to wear while the room was tidied and cleared. He was bone tired. The thought of food now made him queasy.

He wondered where the rest of his team ended up. Agents Coulson and Romanoff had been injured badly. He was thankful they all made it out more or less intact, but he wanted an update about their
status for the sake of reassurance.

When the door opened and Director Fury walked into the room, the Captain pulled himself off the exam table and slowly stood.

Fury gave him the once over, noting the deep purple-reddish bruising, the way Rogers was slow to move as if everything hurt. The serum was a curse in instances like this when morphine and stronger painkillers were useless.

"Doctor," Fury said, nodding once to the physician who was finishing up in the room. "Seal your records on Rogers at level 9."

"Understood," she affirmed with a curt nod.

When they were alone, he turned away from Steve and wandered over to the hologram station, pulling up the assessment of the soldier's current medical condition. The majority of the report said Rogers was healing so quickly that they had to open up the closing wounds to do their work. That was just nasty and painful.

"I'd ask how you're feeling but those ugly bruises and fresh incision marks tell me all I need to know."

Fury turned to face him then.

"I can't have you wandering the halls like that," he said, motioning towards Steve's face. "You're still an icon, Captain. They look to you for reassurance, and although they've all heard the reports of what happened when your team went looking for trouble and brought it home, they don't need to see the results of it on your face."

He leaned his back against one of the walls and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm sure you've got questions."

Steve wanted to laugh. An Icon? He hardly felt like one at the moment. In fact, Fury’s words made him think of the trained monkey picture he’d drawn so long ago, the one that Bucky had found on one nosy foray through his stuff and never quite let him live it down.
Steve sat back down on the edge of the exam table. When he spoke, he could not keep the hard edge out of his voice. He was exhausted and wasn't going to tolerate any bullshit. He was not going to lose James again.

“I’m not going to dwell on the fact that James' survival was kept from me. I can see there's more to it than recovering a U.S. soldier from the enemy. He wasn't himself all those years. It isn't right that you left him in enemy hands, but I need more intel before I can figure out how I feel about decisions made.''

"I'll see what I can do as far as getting you records on his history and missions. It may help you understand his significance to our cause and why the best decision was to allow him to remain a double agent.”

Steve's stomach turned. In no way was that going to ever sound like the right thing to do, but he had immediate concerns and wanted those answers instead. "What’s going to happen to him in SHIELD? There will be a lot of people wanting to get their hands on him. They'll want to find out how he survived and what was done to him, just like they wanted with me. How are you going to protect him, or are you going to be the one to order those tests?"

Fury shrugged. "I won't deny that there are a lot of people who want to know how a soldier survives all those years. We have our assumptions, have drawn many conclusions over the years. He's provided us with enough intel over the past decade to allow us to see the big picture and the powers involved. I don't need to know how the serum works to see he has a form of it somewhere between yours and Dr. Banner's version."

"Dr. Banner?" Steve questioned. "You mean, the Hulk."

Fury shrugged. "Our records indicate Barnes was protective to a fault, but not aggressive like the Winter Soldier. We have our theories that the serum exaggerated that trait and blew it out of proportion. It may be something he cannot control."

"Or it may be because he's been in the wrong environment for decades without support from the people who should've had his back."

"Calm down," Fury pacified. Clearly, Rogers had not come to terms with the lost years while he was asleep. He let out a deep sigh of frustration. "The problem with Barnes is he has become unstable, unpredictable, and clearly a danger to all. I'd have put him down had he not uttered that
pet name for Romanoff, which gave some indication the man she once knew was actually still inside there somewhere."

Steve's eyes fell to the floor. God, that hurt. Did James remember him at all? Would he ever?

"And need I remind you," Fury continued, "that the Black Widow knows a different man than you do. He may share the same face with your best friend, but the Winter Soldier has no allegiance to you, Rogers. No memory of you that we can tell, given his aggression and desire to kill you with his bare hands. So I can't make any promises about his future here at SHIELD. It is entirely up to his rehabilitation and what it reveals about who he can become."

When Rogers met his eyes, Fury felt something really close to heartache. With sympathy, he asked, "How many times can a man be remade without losing his soul entirely?"

And there it was, Steve’s biggest fear since being briefed on the Winter Soldier, that Bucky was gone forever. As hard as that was to swallow, Steve just could not abandon his childhood friend, even if Bucky never remembered him. He was going to fight for him to the end of the line.

Steve stood up confidently, resolutely. “I’ve thought about that, but I still believe I’m your best bet in helping contain Barnes. He may be fast and agile, but I’m stronger than him. I can control him."

"But will you?"

"Yes," Steve said, understanding the importance of keeping him from injuring other agents and his teammates. "He deserves a second chance. Agent Coulson says that James has been working as a double agent for years. Because of the allegiance he's shown SHIELD, you owe him that much."

"I happen to agree with you about second chances, but," Fury said, pointing in his finger decidedly in Rogers' face, "you are going to have to trust me. Are we clear? People are going to come calling, trying to convince you that they are the one to follow and I'm in the wrong. But remember, Rogers, I put the Avengers together and I intend to keep them together. All I ask in return is that you follow my lead. Copy that, Captain?"

“Copy, but is Agent Coulson aware of your plans?” Steve crossed his arms over his chest with his brow furrowed. "I don’t want to get caught in a pissing match between you two. I’ve had my issues with chain of command in the past. If you work together on this, I’m willing to follow your lead. But know this: I’m through being lied to. Don't dick around with me on this. You'll lose us all, I'll
Fury smirked at the ultimatum. "Agent Coulson has spent entirely too much time snooping around in my servers, but yes, I will work with Coulson. He's been your handler all this time and will continue to be so. What you need to understand is there will be lies, Captain. People are going to lie to Coulson and he may not see through them. But I'm asking you to trust my word."

"The more you talk about trust, the worse it's sounding."

"Welcome to my world," Fury took a deep breath and exhaled. "I've got my tech working on your boy's prosthetic arm. They're going to remove it to help subdue Barnes when he's conscious, make him less of a threat. I saw the damage he did with it. It's still written all over your face," Fury said with an insincere smile. "When your team is fully debriefed and recovered, you'll return to Stark Tower. Barnes will remain in the Manhattan headquarters for treatment and rehab. The locations are only nine blocks away from each other. That work for you?"

"Seems like I have little choice but it's better than I expected. If that means I'll have access to James, then I'm on board."

"Eventually," Fury compromised. "Obviously, he's made some kind of jump in his memory when he recognized Romanoff. We'll utilize her to assess his mental state."

Fury walked to the door, paused in the open entry way before turning back.

"Cap, don't get your hopes up. Your history with Barnes was seventy years ago. He's had false memory implantations since 1957, started showing signs of breakdown in 1973. Fifteen years later, his owners decommissioned him. They put him in storage, kept him for experimentation only. They called him a twisted creature. What's it mean when a terrorist cell is afraid of him?" Fury asked rhetorically. "If he can't be stabilized and controlled, his latest actions are not something we can condone."

Steve briefly covered his eyes with his hands and took a deep breath. The thought of James stuffed in that cryo tube, forgotten in some warehouse like unclaimed baggage made the soldier want to shove his fist through something.

"I'll have his records sent up for you to sort through. It may help you see the big picture, where James Barnes ended and the Winter Soldier began. I hope it helps you understand."
He looked up at Fury’s retreating back. When the door closed, he was alone again. “Hope is about the only thing I have left.”

~*~

Clint sat at Natasha’s bedside, their fingers laced together. They always kept these rooms too chilly to suit him. He didn’t have to wait long before she was stirring and muttering in Russian. She blinked a few times at the overhead light before turning to face him. She licked her dry lips and tried to clear her throat.

Clint had a cup of water ready and lifted the straw to her mouth. She sipped most of the liquid before pushing the cup away. “How long?” She rasped.

“A few hours. Coulson is still out but his surgery went well, as did yours. Cap went with Barnes and I haven’t seen him since. Fury already cornered me for a sit rep. So that’s that.” Clint raised the bed a bit as Nat’s eyes slowly closed again. "How you feelin’?”

“Like they used a chainsaw on my shoulder. Looks like they are being stingy on the good drugs.” Natasha brushed her hair off her forehead and looked down at the IV in irritation.

Clint knew she tended to metabolize painkillers quickly and the hospital, not aware of her tolerances would dose her according to recommended amounts. At least he now knew why she handled the drugs the way she did.

“You had more than one bullet inside, and there were shards of bone to make it extra fun.”

"So that's why it hurts like a bitch."

"Yeah. He tagged you like a pro," Clint said bitterly. He noticed her discomfort at his tone and reeled himself in a bit. "You want me to find out how Barnes is doing?”

She turned her head towards the wall. After a few tense moments, she finally answered, “I can’t do this.”
“Do what?”

“I can’t see him again,” Natasha whispered.

“Yes, you can. I remember someone else telling me the same thing, not too long ago, when I didn’t think I could face Coulson.” Clint smiled a little as he continued to hold onto her hand. He’d done it and look at them now.

“This is different.” Natasha stubbornly protested.

“How? How is this any different? We both thought we lost someone we cared about. Now you have a chance to get him back. Are you going to waste that?”

“What if there is nothing to get back?” Nat whispered.

She sounded lost. It killed him. “You’ll just have to take that chance. I think you owe him that much.”

Natasha lapsed into silence. Clint sat with her as she tried to work out everything that was going through her head. Finally, Natasha dozed off again. The archer glanced up as the infirmary door opened. Steve poked his head in, looking every bit as beat up as his partner and twice as weary.

“Hey.” Steve's eyes instantly found Natasha and took in her condition. "Just wanted to check on her."

Clint wasn't sure what he thought of that. This friendship that Natasha had struck with the Super Soldier frankly surprised him more than a little. But right now, she needed all the friends she could get. Rogers appeared pretty lost too, and his bruises told no lies. Clint could not help but think they might be good for each other. Weird.

“No, please stay. She should not be alone right now. I need to go check on Coulson, so,” Clint stood up and gestured to the now empty chair.
It took Steve a lot longer than normal to enter the room and get to the chair. His shoulders were slumped and he was still limping a little.

“Really, it's okay. She likes you,” Clint reassured. "She doesn't bite the people she likes, unless you ask her, but that's something different entirely," he finished uneasy. Still weird.

Steve ignored the sexual undertones and simply sat down. He really didn’t know what to say. He was beyond tired but could just not find any rest. Steve looked up when Barton rested his hand on the Soldier’s shoulder.

“Hey, if either of you need anything, I’ll be down the hall checking on Coulson. Don’t let any of the SHIELD goons bully you. Keep Nat here for a while, she needs to rest. So do you. It might not be a bad idea to stretch out on that other bed. She would not think any worse of you if you did.” Clint squeezed Steve’s shoulder and then went to the door.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll watch over her.” Steve didn’t feel right touching the redhead like Barton did, so he just folded his hands in his lap and leaned back in the chair, trying to find a comfortable position while he waited for her to wake up. Maybe she would feel like talking.

~*~

Clint closed the door and briefly leaned against the corridor wall. He scrubbed a hand over his eyes and knew he’d have to crash soon too but not before seeing Phil. It was his reward for a job well done. Barton pushed himself tiredly upright and headed down the hallway.

Phil’s room was quiet, save for the beeping of the monitors. It was like a punch in the gut to see the man he loved hooked up to all those machines again. Clint had to remind himself that the doctors were just being cautious, given Coulson’s medical history. The surgery he had to have to repair his leg was pretty straightforward, according to the doc that Barton managed to waylay.

Still, it was so hard to look at Phil lying in that bed, leg propped up and heavily bandaged. Clint just had to hold it together a little while longer. He’d promised. The archer lingered in the doorway. He couldn’t say what made him not want to enter the room other than abject fear. On the mission, when Clint heard the firefight and Phil’s shout of pain, he had to stop himself from leaving the rooftop to go to his rescue. He knew he’d made the right call but that didn’t make it any easier to see the fallout.
Clint knew they had to be careful with their developing relationship, but at this point, he didn't give a damn about public displays of affection. The need to touch Phil, to know he was okay, was nearly overwhelming.

He approached the bedside and reached out with his hand. He didn’t want to wake Phil but he wanted to be certain that the senior agent was healing, feel the warmth of his skin, and to make sure Phil opened his eyes and recognized him.

Barton carefully perched on the edge of the bed and laid his hand on Phil’s cheek, relieved to find him warm and alive. He slid his hand down and rested his fingers against the pulse point on Phil’s neck. Reassured by the strong, steady beat of Phil’s heart, Clint let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

“Sir, seeing you in the medical bay again is so fucking hard on my psyche, and you know how fragile that is. Are you trying to drive me insane?”

Coulson became aware the moment he heard Barton's voice. He'd been drifting in and out of consciousness in the recovery room; the doctors had told him that much. There'd been no reason to surface to converse with any of them, but the moment he heard Barton's voice, it was if he came back to life again.

He just couldn't quite fight through the fog of sedation to open his eyes or speak yet, though he was trying very hard. He wanted nothing more than to reassure Clint that he just needed a few more hours before he was back to what the archer knew as 'normal'.

He also wanted to see Clint to be sure the man was unharmed by the mission's nearly fatal flaws. Physical touch wouldn't be bad at this point either.

"You gotta promise me not to get hurt again for at least a couple of months. Never would be better, but I’ll take what I can get. Cause I gotta tell ya, it's killin me,” Clint whispered.

Fuck this, Coulson thought. He'd be dead before he'd be the cause of Clint's suffering again. He scowled with the effort he put forth, causing his head to throb even more than it was. Opening his eyes wasn't going to happen yet, but he cleared his throat to try speak. "Damn these meds."

His mind raced, trying to put the pieces together. He told Clint to stay with Nat. He should be with her right now. If he was here, did that mean she'd been taken somewhere, or had she been injured
far worse than he recalled at the moment? He reached out.

"Nat," he squeaked, cleared his throat again, tried his damnest to open his eyes and keep them open. "Tasha and Cap?"

Clint had been his first thought, always, but he'd gone over the mission in his head enough to mostly reassure himself that the archer had made it through roughly unscathed. He needed to know the rest of his team was okay before he could completely focus on Barton.

Clint's hand tightened momentarily on Phil's shoulder as the agent woke. He reached over to the nightstand and grabbed a cup of water and held the straw to Phil's mouth. After a few moments, he blinked slightly-glazed eyes and focused on Clint's face.

“Nat was awake for a little bit. I sat with her while she was in recovery. Her surgery went well. She's confused and hurt and a little pissed. Cap was treated too, bruises are ugly as hell, but he's healing fast. He came to Nat’s room and wanted to stay with her for a while, so I came down here. I didn’t leave her alone, so don't think I broke my promise. They just both looked so wrecked over everything that happened so I figured they could use some time to talk about it.”

Coulson nodded but clearly wasn't happy about his team suffering over this situation. Clint put the cup down on the bedside table and stared for a while. “You know what? Fuck the cameras," he finally said. With a slight grin, he leaned down and brushed a soft kiss against Phil’s lips.

Coulson smiled in spite of himself. Fury would be all over this, but he was ready. Clint had passed the test with flying colors, better than he had. He'd begun to admonish himself for all the hairbrained, dumbass ways this whole mission could've gone wrong, how he should have waited for Fury's back up, and that he'd have sent for teams of agents for aid, but Coulson had feared losing control of the Winter Soldier, that he'd be taken away from Steve. That fear had almost cost him the entire team.

But through that, the one thing that did go right in this near-catastrophe was Clint Barton's return to the form of Hawkeye.

Coulson had a deep sense of pride that wasn't his to own. He brushed his fingers against the dried blood at Clint's cheek. Too close but he'd made it out alive. "You did real good, agent. Held your ground and got us all out of there alive. It had to be you."
“Thanks, sir. I did what I had to do,” Clint replied, all but melting into his touch. “Fury already cornered me for a sit rep. I turned it in a while ago on the laptop. Fury was too busy for face-to-face. I guess he’ll be accosting you next.” Clint knew better than to baby Coulson. In the past when Phil was recovering from an injury, as soon as he was coherent, he demanded to be informed of their status. It was kinda comforting to see that had not changed, despite him being slightly groggy from the anesthetic yet.

"You're okay though?" Phil asked. "I need to hear confirmation, Barton, I need you to tell me that the mission I put together so soon without really pausing to assess you first hasn't harmed you."

"Yeah, no, I'm good," Clint shrugged, nonchalant but honest. It was a completely Barton thing to do.

Coulson reached out and wrapped his hand around Clint's forearm tightly, never breaking eye contact. "I need to know that you've come out on the other side whole, and I need you to realize it too. You aren't broken, Clint. Loki hasn't taken away the things you could always depend on: Your skills in battle and the trust the Delta Team has in you."

“Yeah,” the archer said honestly. "I needed this, a chance to prove that the rumors about me weren’t true. This mission, I did it. I held it together. You gave me the chance that no one else was willing to do, when no one else trusted me.” Clint bowed his head a moment and simply stared at their joined hands.

"I'll always believe in you."

“Thank you.” Clint simply said, meaning it with every fiber of his being.

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Fury watched restlessly as SHIELD technicians struggled to disconnect the Winter Soldier’s prosthetic arm. They’d been at it a while and ran into a snag when they finally disassembled the casing and saw a radioactive warning sign on the powering unit.

He was going to have to call Stark in on this. The mechanisms were genius, too advanced to be powered by mere nuclear energy, but the warning label was enough to halt their progress. With that, the Winter Soldier could still wake and literally rip someone’s head off their shoulders, hopefully not Stark’s. But they had to keep Barnes safe for transport back to Manhattan, so they
“It seems a waste to decommission such a valuable asset, sir.”

Fury’s one good eye shifted to his left but he remained motionless otherwise. “Rumlow,” he acknowledged, irritated and cautious. “You’re supposed to be in Bangkok. What brings you to Incirlik?”

“Pierce told me about your new pet. Honestly, I wanted to see the legend for myself. Doesn’t quite live up to the reputation laying there, all vulnerable. What are you using to keep the ghost down?”

“My authority.”

When Rumlow chuckled, Fury’s jaw clenched.

“Shouldn’t they be working on reprogramming him for SHIELD purposes? He looks physically ready to take on the world. Redirect him and he’s a powerful weapon on our side.” The field agent crossed his arms over his chest and leaned closer to the thick glass window. “Shame Barton blew the building. What a bad decision on his part. We could’ve gone back in and retrieved the stasis chamber. I hear he’s going to be a bitch to control without it.”

Fury turned to face the arrogant operative. “A good dog will always perform for a worthy master. It’s the only unruly bitches who need to be put down.”

Rumlow laughed, nodded twice. “Noted, sir. I’ll give Pierce your regards.”

Fury watched the man walk the length of the hallway and vanish behind the secured doors of the medical bay. He felt entirely uneasy about Rumlow but had no logical reason. Still, he trusted his gut and took out his cell phone, sent an encoded message to Agent Hill: Put a tracer on Rumlow. Also, set up a meeting for me with Secretary Pierce and the World Security Council when I get back to HQ.

Minutes later, her reply came: Tracer activated on Rumlow. Pierce can meet tomorrow at 1830 EST. I’ll prep for your flight to D.C. Also, the Army is calling. They want their soldier back.
Fury rolled his eye: Don't joke with me, Hill.

Coulson's not awake to do it, sir, so I thought I'd stand in for him. But beware, the damage at Incirlik is getting a lot of attention from interested parties and speculation is running wild. Come back soon.

Fury sighed heavily. If a high-ranking agent like Rumlow was making a special trip out to lay eyes on Barnes, others would too. Word was already traveling too fast in the espionage community. They were already converging like sharks in bloody water.

So much for secrets within the spy organization.

He leaned on the thick glass between himself and the Winter Soldier, not surprised in the least when Steve Rogers wandered over to the observation window and stood beside him.

“So who was that, and why was he so interested in Bucky?”

“That was Agent Brock Rumlow,” Nick answered. "He's loyal to Alexander Pierce, a name you may hear in the upcoming months. Pierce is the commander of the D.C. unit and Secretary to the World Security Council. He is a friend.”

"Didn't sound friendly."

"Rumlow has a chip on his shoulder, but he's Pierce's right hand man, like Coulson is to me."

"You don't like him."

Fury shrugged. "Leave Rumlow to me. Your job is inside this box," he said, pointing at Barnes. "Everyone's going to be interested in the Winter Soldier, Cap. It was like this when we found you in the ice, only with a lot less caution and much more curiosity. With this one," Fury said, nodding the prone soldier, "they see a ghost, a legendary assassin, an armed weapon. Lots of people want to point him, aim, and shoot. Problem is, we don't all agree on the targets. I don't even agree that he's the weapon of choice."
“He's not a weapon. James is a person, despite everything that’s been done to him. He’s not just a tool, void of feeling, to be used.” Steve looked into the containment room. James was heavily sedated. It appeared he was sleeping peacefully but Steve knew that was farthest from the truth.

"That's what they'll see, Rogers. You've lived with this long enough to understand that to them, you're still soldiers in the Army." It was manipulation, but Fury had to use his sway when he could. "Stay here in SHIELD. I can protect you if you let me."

Steve scowled at the truth of the matter. He hated being caught between warring government agencies. That's why the Howling Commandos were so important to him. They did what was right on their terms.

He supposed the Avengers were as close as he was going to get to that. Perhaps, if he could envelop Bucky into their fold, the two of them could regain that freedom again...

"Agent Romanoff woke up an hour ago. She and I talked about the man she knew. James is more than an assassin. He hated going back into that chamber, getting his memories wiped. God, how can someone do that to anybody, but then who am I kidding? They weren’t the first. Schmidt and Zola got to Bucky before I managed to rescue him. He was strapped to an examination table. I had no idea what they did at the time. We were still at war, and all Bucky would say is that his memories were hazy. He never wanted to talk about it, just wanted to fight the fight. He's a good man, Fury. I’m done seeing him at someone else’s mercy. As long as you can guarantee me that Bucky won’t fall into anyone else’s hands I will follow your lead."

"With Loki back on earth, I can't even guarantee that the sky won't fall, Rogers. I'm doing the best I can with the tools I'm given. But know this, I am his best bet."

“How are they even keeping him under?" Steve wanted to know but was not sure he’d like the answer. "Most things don’t even work on me."

"R&D has found a tranquilizer that seems to affect the neural system of a serum recipient. It was designed for a different purpose, but so far, it has worked. Problem is, we'll run out of it soon. We have enough to get home to HQ. Then, we need to stabilize this situation, meaning remove that arm, then get Romanoff with a rehabilitative specialist so we can track any progress he makes with recognition and memory of his person - the one he wants to be."

The one he wants to be. Steve's stomach churned, not knowing which man that would be - the rabid assassin, the Russian mentor who was in love with Natasha, or his best friend who meant so much more than ever spoken aloud.
"Listen," Fury said, regaining Roger's attention. "We think we can take you down with the same tranq."

Steve scowled, feeling attacked.

"Hear me out. Coulson unwillingly tested it on you. Only those of us who were there know that one hit was enough to throw you off your game. Just remember that it's out there, Cap."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, it's not always going to be an ally behind the trigger."

Steve frowned, this time in concern. "Nick, are you preparing for betrayal?"

Fury looked at his watch and pulled his sleeve down to cover it. "I'm always prepared, Rogers. Things get ugly when you change the rules of the game. Barnes changes the rules. Broke them in half. There are people who aren't going to like that. Be prepared and trust no one but me."

Steve felt a wave of apprehension wash through him. Natasha entered through the doorway, paused to speak with Fury as he was leaving the containment area. "Wheels up in an hour," he then said to both of them. "We need to get back to New York."

She nodded then stiffly made her way to the observation window to stand beside Steve.

“Should you even be out of bed?” he asked with concern lacing his voice.

“I’m fine.” Natasha replied with a shrug. The overly-large black tee and sweatpants looked a bit ridiculous on her small frame. She rested her hand on the thick viewing room window that separated them from James.

Her long-ago lover was strapped down and hooked up to monitoring machines and IV drips. It brought back unpleasant memories of the Red Room and worse. Natasha wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered.
Steve didn’t miss her haunted look or the involuntary tremble that wracked her small frame. Cautiously, he wrapped his arm around her, expecting her to push him away. After a moment of unease, she leaned into his side and they both relaxed into each other.

Together, they stared into that small room, both lost in their respective memories.

Finally, Steve broke the silence. “We’ll get him back. I promise.”

"Which version?" She looked into his eyes and saw her uncertainty mirrored there. "My James doesn't remember you, and yours doesn't know I exist. How are we supposed to guide him when we can't even decide which man we want to return?"

Natasha pulled away. She took one last look into the containment room before heading back down the hallway. "Wheels up soon."

"Understood." Steve stood alone, pensively staring at his reflection in the viewing window. She was right. There were hard decisions to make. Could he fight her on this?

As his eyes traced the silhouette of the Winter Soldier, a face he'd drawn a thousands times, Steve was certain of his answer: Yes. His Bucky was the real version, the authentic James Buchanan Barnes, and he'd do everything in his power to bring that man back. Was it selfish? Perhaps, but it felt entirely justified. Deep in his soul, he wanted it more desperately than he'd wanted anything in his life, even more than enlisting.

Steve would make damn sure he'd play an active part in this recovery, and he'd steer Bucky back towards him. No more drifting rudderless without a plan, a pawn in a much larger game, a man out of time.

Time had given him a second chance, and no one was going to take his best friend from him again.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Delta Team heads home to Manhattan, Tony gets scolded, bacon is served, and Bruce gets a job.

Clint Barton fidgeted in his passenger seat. His eyes were constantly roving the hull, visually checking on his companions. The Delta Team had been released from the Incirlik SHIELD medical facility and were currently 40,000 feet somewhere over the Atlantic ocean. The quinjet he'd appropriated at the beginning of the mission had been confiscated, which was fine with him. It hadn’t been designed to transport injured passengers and one very dangerous bit of human cargo.

Their current aircraft was the SHIELD equivalent of a militarized 747, mostly used to ferry around VIP passengers, political supporters, and persons of interest. They called it "The Bus."

Clint regarded several agents scattered around the interior of the plane. They looked wary and suspicious of Team Delta. He almost had to laugh at their obvious unease. And apparently, the Winter Soldier was some sort of boogeyman in the assassin community. Clint hadn't heard of him before, but that didn't mean much. He hadn't heard of Loki either, and look at how much chaos he'd caused.

Barnes was currently heavily sedated and hooked up to no less than half a dozen monitoring devices and sedation infusion machines. He was strapped to a gurney in the containment cell with restraints that even Steve would have a hard time breaking. The assassin also had three medical officers in attendance to make sure the Winter Soldier stayed under. It seemed excessive but no one was taking chances.

Steve had followed them down, glaring at any agent that got too close. As he passed by, Clint could see the fatigue on the soldier’s face and had to wonder just how close he’d been to his friend before he’d lost him in that icy ravine. The Captain was acting like an overprotective lover, whether he realized it or not. Clint was curious, but who could he ask? He wasn't going there with Nat. That was one love triangle he didn't want to get involved in.

Natasha, no doubt, would have been beside James, too, if the pain medication she’d been given didn’t have her deeply asleep. She was stretched out on a long sofa across the aisle from him. Despite the posh seating, the ride had to be uncomfortable due to her injuries. Clint was glad his partner was able to get some much needed rest. She only surrendered to sleep after the reassurance that he’d watch her back.

Then there was Phil. Clint took a quick look around at the other agents before gazing fondly at his handler. Coulson was also napping on a couch but with his leg propped up. It had been an uphill battle to even get Phil to consider taking the pain medication to help with the flight home. He wanted to be awake and present should anything go wrong again, but he too finally gave in. The team should still be recuperating in the infirmary but they had checked out with Fury's permission but against medical advice. No one was willing to have Barnes transported back to a secure facility alone, not even Fury. Steve and Natasha simply wouldn't let the dark sniper out of their sight, so AMA it was.
Clint had no idea where the trio's relationship was going. He'd never seen Natasha act like this before. It was kind of alarming. He had no idea what she would do if Barnes' treatment was not to her satisfaction. No doubt, Steve would be right there with her if she decided to do something rash for the betterment of Barnes. So far, everyone was playing nice. He hoped it would continue, at least while they were airborne.

The archer sighed heavily. It was just one more thing to worry about.

Clint turned his attention back to Coulson. He lightly brushed his fingers down Phil's bruised face. He just could not seem to stop touching the agent slumped beside him. He wanted nothing more than to encourage Phil's body to lean against his, but Clint knew Coulson would not appreciate public displays of affection in front of the other agents. They both had a rep to uphold and it simply wasn't professional.

Still, that did not keep the archer from fumbling for Phil’s hand under the light blanket that covered him. He smiled slightly when those fingers tightened around his, their linked hands hidden by the covers.

Clint yawned and tipped his head back against the seat, finally able to relax a little and get some much needed sleep of his own. It would be a few hours until they landed.

And God only knew what had happened in their absence back at Stark's Tower.

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Phil tried to stay awake but he found that he'd suddenly blip back into consciousness, aware again of the thrum of the jet engines, the shuffle of movement around him, the smell of burnt coffee, and the lingering fresh scent of Barton's soap.

He wanted to remain alert to keep watch over his team but there was no threat, not really. Only the rabid killer sedated in the hull of the Bus posed a threat, but Fury would be keeping watch through video surveillance. Cap would, no doubt, be right beside Barnes too, so the only real threat of relaxing for the ride home was to his ego.

When Coulson replayed the mission in his mind, he knew it was nothing short of a miracle that they'd made it out alive. His stomach dropped with every recollection of the Winter Soldier holding the muzzle of a gun to Natasha's head. If not for Fury, this would've all gone south. Barton would've been the sole remaining member of the Delta Team.

Would Hawkeye have gone after the Winter Soldier and lived? That was something Phil didn't want to play out in his head. He'd like to think Barton would blow the man to hell with an explosive arrow, but Barnes moved so fast. It was a simulation the Agent in him would like to see played out, but his heart told him no. Those statistics were better left uncalculated.

It was about that time that he felt a gentle caress on his face followed shortly thereafter by fingers threading through his own under the blanket. If it had been anyone else, Phil would've broken their arm for touching him while he was sleeping. Instead, he curled his fingers against the archer's rough calluses and wondered how to proceed both personally and professionally in the upcoming weeks.

Romanoff was obviously emotionally compromised, Rogers as well. And while they'd both heal physically as quickly as he would, or much quicker in Steve's case, neither would show up on Fury's radar as duty ready.
But Barton was running like a fine-tuned machine. He had proven that his worth, skill, and abilities were as good or even better than they'd been before Loki had shown up. He was very proud of Clint. He also knew Fury would see Hawkeye as an eligible asset once more. He was one of their best options for the hardest missions SHIELD had on its roster.

He briefly wondered if he should tell Clint to fake a temper tantrum, stage a breakdown, anything to keep him on leave a little while longer, but that would be a disservice to the intense work Barton had put into this mission, controlling his mental and emotional states and completing the mission flawlessly.

Barton deserved all the accolades Fury might give him. The worry was that now, Coulson owed the Director for saving their assess, and no one kept a tally like Nick Fury.

~*~

Steve was more tired than he could ever remember being, but he just could not curl up in one of the empty seats in the posh aircraft to find any kind of respite. He was hurting in body and spirit. He couldn’t take his eyes off the unconscious man lying on the medical stretcher.

The Captain tried in vain to find any remnants of the person he once knew on Barnes’ face. With an artist’s eye, Steve mapped every plane and angle of Barnes’ features. He was relieved when he found a few similarities in the shape of the jaw and the slope of the nose. Steve really wanted to look at James and see some hint of recognition in those warm blue-green eyes.

While Steve kept studying his former friend he could not help being drawn to the covered space where James’ left arm used to be. The prosthesis was deemed dangerous and they wanted it removed. They wanted to bring in Stark to do it, but Steve was wary. And would it hurt James to have it removed? The silver prosthesis was a sight that sent an echoing pain down the Captain’s own arm. He’d been indirectly responsible for its loss when he was not able to pull Bucky back into the damaged train car that fateful day. That strong flesh arm, which had protected him for years, had been replaced with a weapon. When and if Bucky ever returned, it would hurt him to know what he'd done as the Winter Soldier.

It was just one more thing Steve felt he had to make up for.

He shook himself awake before he nodded off. The Captain knew he was being a stubborn fool, but he felt James deserved someone to sit vigil on the ride back to New York City. Fury promised Steve that the Winter Soldier would be placed in a SHIELD-run facility and that he’d be allowed full access. He wanted to trust Fury, he really did, but that man had secrets layered upon secrets. The Director also had an agenda that he knew nothing about. And who was Rumlow? Steve wanted to make sure that Fury kept his word, and that included acting as escort until James Buchanan Barnes was in a secure location.

So Steve sat up straighter and ignored the pull of half-healed wounds and aching ribs, determined to wait out the rest of the flight no matter what.

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Tony sat at the breakfast bar in the kitchen. The large area had basically become the communal living area for the Avengers. It was also a place where anything goes without judgment. He wore a set of wrinkled flannel Iron Man pajamas, mostly to just irritate Rhodey. Although not even a food bribe could get the colonel into a set of printed PJs, not even War Machine ones.

Tony had his head down on the counter, his hair sticking up in all directions. At the smell of
coffee, he lifted his head and began making ‘grabby hands’ motions towards the coffeepot. He might have whimpered at one point too. Unfortunately, he was currently being ignored by his so-called best friend. At least Rhodey was at the stove making breakfast, no doubt something hideously unhealthy which involved bacon and sausage. The morning was looking up.

Despite Rhodey's presence, Tony did not have a restful night. He’d been plagued by surges of Loki’s strong emotions. Fear, loneliness, and despair coupled with his own doubts made for an unpleasant experience all night.

"For the love of Stephen Hawking, please give me some coffee."

Rhodey glanced over his shoulder when the elevator opened. Bruce came shuffling into the kitchen, looking every bit as disheveled and exhausted as Tony. He raised his arm in the approximation of a wave. He got the same feeble greeting in return.

Bruce paused, blinking slowly at Rhodes, who was frying bacon in a pan. So that was the mysterious smell that beckoned him out of the lab and up to the kitchen.

"The Other Guy really likes bacon."

Rhodes brow lifted high. "Okay. I'll finish that first."

"Did I say that out loud?" Bruce asked. His head swiveled slightly towards Tony. Stark understood all nighters. He understood not being able to remember your own name but how to run complex equations.

"You did," Tony muttered, chin resting on a curled hand on the countertop. "You've been up all night. You need to eat and drink water, empty your bladder, and shower with soap."

Bruce frowned.

"That's what Jarvis tells me when I do all nighters."

Rhodey took out three coffee mugs and set them on the counter like shot glasses. "You working on anything in particular, Dr. Banner?"

Bruce muttered something unintelligible, scratching at the stubble growing on his neck. He assumed one of the coffee cups was for him, so he took up a seat next to Tony.

Rhodes shook his head at both of them. He took pity and literally put the coffee mugs into their hands. "You two are a hot mess. Seriously. Is this what science does to people?"

"The only reason you are back in my will is because you gave me coffee." Tony took a huge gulp, ignoring his scorched tongue. Rhodey apparently brewed military strength. It was almost strong enough to stand up and salute. Tony loved the man, he really did.

"And yay science," he said to Bruce and held his hand up for a fist bump.

Bruce only relinquished his two-handed hold on the hot mug to mimic Tony's gesture of friendship by bumping knuckles. He really never understood the symbolism, but it made Bruce feel like one of the cool kids for a moment.

"Um, not to sound ungrateful for the coffee," the doctor mentioned, "but is there anyway I could have some of that bacon now? The Other Guy is pretty insistent. He wasn't able to smash anyone into the pavement last night, so if we can placate him with hot, fried pork, I'd suggest we do so."
Rhodey ceased studying the two brainiacs and turned to grabbed a plate. He placed heaps of bacon on it, feeling a little anxious about the mention of the Hulk. He'd seen the footage but had never crossed paths with the Green Beast in person. Tony said he really didn't want to, although Stark found the big guy to be immensely entertaining. It was clear the two had some kind of bromance going on.

So he obliged and brought all the bacon back to Bruce on a plate.

"It's not as if the big guy has to worry about his cholesterol, right?" Tony pilfered a piece of bacon from the plate without fear.

"He eats bullets like bonbons. I don't think our metabolism allows for LDL and plaque build up in our arteries any more." Between bites, Bruce finished his coffee and held it out for another round. He gave Rhodey a lopsided smile and another thank you before consuming his fourth bacon strip. People didn't realize that it was the simple things, like sharing coffee with a friend in the morning, that put him at ease. The sunlight was coming through the large windows, there was breakfast on the stove, and for just this one moment, everything seemed okay.

Bruce was awake enough now to actually look at Tony. The many clearly had just rolled out of bed, but he had color in his cheeks and he looked healthy. "You look pretty good for a mostly dead man. How are you feeling?"

"You want the truth?" Tony asked warily.

"Uh, I'm not sure I can handle the truth." Bruce mocked the movie line before wiping his greasy fingers on a napkin. "Last night, the news was reporting a freak lightning storm in the middle of Central Park near the exact spot where Thor used the Bifrost to remove public enemy #1 after the invasion. You were seen flying through the skies shortly thereafter, so the news made up a great story about you and Thor getting into a fight. You should see Vegas right now. The odds aren't in your favor," Bruce ended with a chuckle.

"It wasn't Thor I was fighting with," Tony grumbled. He was not nearly caffeinated enough to handle this.

"Yeah, but they don't know that Loki's back," Bruce said, raising his brow. "If they did, and knew you were harboring him, there'd be a witch hunt for your head."

"No one is going to disclose that intel to the public," Rhodes stated bluntly. There was a veiled threat behind his eyes.

Bruce chuckled wryly. "Hey, don't look at me. Honestly, I try to stay away from chaos and mass hysteria. It just seems to find us, is all I'm saying."

"Yeah and it would have been ever so much worse if Loki and I had managed to vaporize ourselves and half of Central Park during our little disagreement." Tony got up and filled his coffee mug again.

Bruce and Rhodey shared a look, both daring the other to ask for more information but neither of them wanting to do so.

Finally, Rhodes sighed in frustration. "Can you two do anything that isn't intense and on the edge of death?"

"What was your little disagreement about," Bruce asked, pushing the plate towards Tony.
“Loki freaked out because the spell he cast, as you know, had some unforeseen side effects. The health benefit part, thankfully, that part worked. I feel better than I have in a week. But it seems empathy was included in the bargain, unbeknownst to our spellcaster. So, after a few choice word seemed to aggravate the situation, Loki kind of attacked me-”

"Fucking weasel," Rhodey murmured.

"I knew it," Bruce started, before Tony cut him off, clearly annoyed at being interrupted.

"As I was trying to explain, Loki kind of attacked me. It was more like he was baiting me to attack. Thor had to intervene before either of us got hurt. Seems having someone in Loki's head is a major trigger for him. Probably something to do with the Chitauri and the Big Bad he doesn't talk about." Tony shook his head ruefully as he leaned against the counter. "I can’t say I’m enjoying it either, but it's kind of ironic, isn't it? After what he did to Barton?"

"But, if Loki hurt you," Bruce began, "he'd be hurting himself, right? I told myself that's why I couldn't go after him. I thought the link would prevent him from harming you, but I guess he's as batshit crazy as I thought he was."

“Yeah, well, he’s damaged," Tony admitted. He ran his hand through his hair in a nervous gesture. "I thought I could handle him. I thought if someone was on Loki’s side, he’d see that not everyone was out to get him. Maybe I was wrong. Fuck if I know. What I do know is that he regrets what he did. I can feel it. I just don’t know what to do about it. I don't think he knows what to do either.”

"Does he even know the concept of regret?" Bruce mumbled, nibbling on another piece of bacon.

Tony's eyes were sharp. "I can reassure you that he does. I can actually feel it."

"Look," Rhodey interrupted, tired of watching Tony constantly under another's scrutiny. "I don't like this any more than you do, Banner, but what's important is that Loki stays alive so this link they share isn't severed. I don't care if Loki's underground, locked up, imprisoned somewhere, just so that he doesn't flip his shit and end it all. Because if he checks out, which it sounds like he wanted to do, he'll take Tony down with him. So no, we can't attack the crazy alien man from Asgard."

Then Rhodes faced his best friend. "Thor's supposed to be all over this. You helped him out in his time of need, so I'd be happy to remind him that it is his duty to pay you back by keeping his brother in line."

“I was literally inches from dying before the spell was cast. I had no choice," Tony stated with finality. "Now, Loki has one of my reactors. Last night, he almost took us both out. I’ve fucked everything up again, I know this. But I have to work it out with the Asgardians. Thor took Loki back to the manor and maybe he can straighten this out, get Loki back on track. Maybe we both can."

What he didn’t say out loud was that he still cared for the rather deranged trickster god. Tony just didn’t know where to go from here.

"Okay," Bruce said, mostly to himself, resigned to the fact that intelligence, not brawn, would win this battle. "Jarvis said there were no other options available when you and Loki did the spell. I can accept that and move forward. So the question is, what do we need to do now to try and solve this without Loki’s help?"

Tony eyed him suspiciously.
"Just hear me out," Bruce said with a renewed eagerness. "After a long night of working every angle, my thoughts are that we need to look at the data Maya Hansen was working on. Now that you're able to function without falling over and your mind is sharper, I really think we need to focus on her hypothesis. Call it a back up plan. Just so you don't leave your life in Loki's hands. If we don't take a look, we'll never know, and you'll be dependent on Loki without any control over this situation until he decides what's next. And you've already seen her work."

"I've seen more than her work," Tony added with a leer. After double eye rolls, he slumped back down at the breakfast bar. "Okay, I suppose anything is better than sitting around waiting for everything to blow up in our faces."

"Funny you should bring up that name," Rhodey said, "because I came here last night to talk to you about Ms. Hansen's research."

"What?" Bruce said, his stomach dropping. "Why?"

"General Ross has shown some interest in her work lately, and Hansen's gone missing." Rhodes watched the doctor closely, taking note of the panic he could see in the man's eyes. "That mean something to you?"

Bruce, wide-eyed and feeling ill, looked at Tony. "I ran into him last night."

"What?" Tony exclaimed, when he was interrupted.

"Sir, Director Fury is on the line. He is being most insistent." Jarvis announced.

"Damn it. That's all I need. What do you think the odds are that he doesn't know about Central Park? Tony moaned as he dropped his head to the counter top with a thunk. "Patch him through."

"Director Fury, Mr. Stark is ready to take your call."

"Stark. Imagine my surprise when I got word that your little pet has gone rabid in Central Park?"

"Hey, no one was hurt, no community property destroyed. It was just a little disagreement between the two of us. You ought to be glad there is not more paperwork involved. Oh hey, and the upside, I'm not presently dying anymore. I can still fix all your little toys, for a modest fee that is." Tony so did not want to deal with this bullshit right now.

Despite being royally pissed at Loki, even with this distance Tony could feel the despair and regret rolling off the god. Part of him wanted to rush to the mansion and the other just wanted to bang his head against the wall.

Why couldn't he stop thinking about him?

"You know what? I've been treating you like a little baby," Fury admitted. "I don't know if it was because I knew your daddy or if it's because Coulson likes you, but I'm going to let you in on a little secret, Stark. Every day, some citizen cannot handle the stress that came with our planet being invaded by aliens, and that unstable person blames you. Every day, someone plots to put a bullet between your eyes. And every day, I send my men and women out there to prevent that. Do you have any idea the extent of bullshit I go through for you?"

"Wow," Rhodes said, furious. "That was low."

Tony gestured to calm down. "What do you want me to say, Fury? That I'm grateful? Because I am. You have no fucking idea. The constant disdain comes with the Stark name. I'm not naive. My
first nanny was a bodyguard. I was kidnapped for the first time when I was six. My parents were murdered when I was a teenager. I admit that If not for SHIELD, Agent Coulson, and Pepper Potts, I would not be alive today. So yeah I get it. More than you will ever know.” Tony took a few deep breaths and absolutely hated the fact that he owed Fury so much. "So what do you want from me, I mean, as in why are you calling? Because you've scolded me in front of my friends, and if we're done now, I have plenty of things to do that don't involve me humbling myself."

Fury sighed audibly. He obviously didn't expect humility. He knew the kid's life was nothing short of a horror story at times. He also wasn't ungrateful for the fugitive Stark had taken possession of. He knew how hard it was to contain someone as willful as Loki. Without considerable leverage, there were going to be casualties of some sort. Until he could send the Asgardians away from earth, all they could do was play the game. Stark was his best shot at that control where Loki was concerned. It was like dancing on a high wire, but that's just how it was.

"Listen," Fury finally said, resigned to Tony's uncharacteristic modesty. "Coulson picked up a deadly stray from a war zone. I'd like you to come down to headquarters and take a look at some Russian tech that came with him."

Tony perked up. Fury offering to let him play with foreign technology? Was the world ending again? “When? What with my full schedule and all, I might be able to fit you in.”

"Get your ass down here, Stark, or I'll offer it to Hammer," Fury said and then ended the call.

“Asshole! You shouldn’t even joke about something like that," Tony shouted. "Hey Rhodey, tell Bruce about that lovely little Hammer addition to War machine called the "ex-wife." After that dud, I demanded the right to strip off all the Hammer Tech from War Machine and get the exclusive contract to maintain the armor myself."

"Should have been called the erectile-dysfunction missile," Rhodey suggested. He came around the bar and crossed his arms over his chest, his tell that he was uncomfortable. "Look, man. What Fury said about people blaming you for what happened during the Invasion? It's bullshit. They blame anyone and everyone they can. You just happened to own the Tower Loki picked to rain hell down from the sky. It was the tallest building in Manhattan, that's all."

"It still is," Tony defended, deflecting the concern.

Bruce remained quiet. It was startling to hear that people were trying to gun Tony down, and on a daily basis. He never wanted the man to have the Hulk's invincibility until this moment. If only he could give Tony that aspect of the warped version of serum he'd concocted, but that was a pipe dream. He simply couldn't isolate that. He couldn't even reproduce the version he'd exposed himself to if he tried. It was just one more thing that was screwed up in this world.

"Hey now," Tony stated. "What’s with the long faces? This is bacon and coffee time, remember? It's not as if I am dying anymore."

"Too soon," Rhodey deadpanned.

"Okay, bad reference, but at least I’m better, much better, and we’ll get everything figured out. And since Fury ever so politely asked for my awesome presence, what will you two be doing with yourselves while I'm dicking around in SHIELD'S playground?"

"I'm coming with you," Bruce said instantly. He wasn't going to let Tony out of his sight. He knew the Other Guy would eat a bullet for breakfast to keep the genius safe, and Bruce was more than willing to let him. "We, uh, should probably change first though."
Tony looked down at himself. As amusing as it would be to show up at SHIELD HQ in his jammies, no just no.

He showered and dressed in record time, because Fury alluding to some kind of tech was too irresistible to ignore. Damn Fury for being mysterious about who, as well. Agent picking up a stray? Tony vaguely remembered there being a mission during his near-death experience. This so-called stray could mean anything.

He also wasn’t sure how the Director would feel about Tony bringing his own entourage. When asked, Rhodey agreed to stay behind because he said, with the requisite air quotation marks, he didn’t want to "referee" the inevitable clash between him and Fury. He’d leave that to Bruce.

Tony was loitering in the parking garage when the elevator door opened. Bruce stepped out, still looking somewhat rumpled. He’d have to take his compatriot-in-all-things-sciencey shopping soon to get the man a new wardrobe. Also, he intended to get Bruce on the payroll at S.I. as soon as possible.

“You know, I kind of wanted to take the SRX out for a spin but it seems to be conspicuously missing from my collection.” Tony clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. "Of course, I could have Jarvis locate it for me but that would take all the fun out of it. I'd rather ask you and watch you squirm."

"Uh," Bruce said, scratching the back of his neck. "The SRX. Yeah. I, um, I think I left it in a guest parking space in the garage last week when I arrived. Maybe it got towed?" he suggested sheepishly.

Tony scratched his chin in contemplation. “It's a possibility, that or the valet service has been having the time of their lives. J, where’s my car?”

"Sir, your SRX was towed approximately two hours after Dr. Banner arrived. Would you like for me to pay the fine and arrange to have it liberated from impound?"

"Shit," Bruce said matter-of-factly, which included a slight blush of embarrassment to his cheeks. "I'm going to have to have an IOU for that. My pockets have been empty since Calcutta."

"You've been mooching off SHIELD since they recruited you to the Avengers?"

Bruce looked guilty.

“Oh honey, you need real income. You're hired for my special keep-Tony-alive team in the S.I. Research and Development Department. Jarvis, put our good doctor on the payroll. Full bennies, 401K, although, that might not do you and the Other Guy any good. Oh hey, how about a company car instead? Pick one," he said with a sweeping hand toward the bulk of the garage.

Bruce's eyes widened as he tried to process Stark speak.

"I'll, uh, take your offer under consideration," he replied, not having a clue how to process any of that. "Are you legit, or was that said in some post-magical-binding haze? Because, you know, I'm not a stay-put kind of guy."

"I'm afraid of commitment, too. It's only natural for men of our caliber." Tony leaned closer, winked, and whispered, "You know I only love you for your mind right?"

Bruce huffed out an odd mix of amusement and apprehension. He opened the passenger door of the nearest car and got in. He just needed to sit. Tony was an enigma, a one of a kind man. If people
only knew of his generosity and kindness... He guessed those who were lucky enough to see behind those thick walls would never rat him out. What would the world do with a kindhearted Stark? And how he got invited into that tiny club was a complete mystery.

Tony, delighted that he managed to fluster the doctor, strolled around to the driver’s side with a smile and got in. “Ah, the Audi A8, nice choice. So let’s get this show on the road.”

He reached into the console, slipped a pair of sunglasses on, and rolled down the windows. "What? It's so my fans can see me. I'm popular."

Bruce face palmed. "You're incorrigible. You should think about your safety."

"That's what you're here for, right?" When the car roared out of the garage, he shouted, "To the Batcave!"

"Can I quit?"
"Nope." Tony grinned, white teeth gleaming. "You're my science bro now. Embrace it!"

Bruce felt the smile tug at the corners of his mouth. He turned his head and watched the pedestrians walk on the sidewalk. "I'm glad Loki's spell worked, even with the weird side effect."

"Me too," Tony said, sobering up. He ached when he thought of Loki.

"After Fury, we can look at Maya's work, right?"

"Yup. We'll start on it as soon as we get back," Tony said. What he really wanted to do was turn around and head to the mansion. Loki pulled at him like an invisible string. It almost physically hurt to be away from the Asgardian.

So he stepped on the gas and gunned the Audi towards headquarters, hoping Loki ached to see him again too.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

This chapter marks a turning point towards new and unexplored situations for most of these characters. They are stepping into new territory and we are eager to continue the journey. As always, thank you for your continued support and reviews!

Chapter Notes

Warning for discussion of suicidal ideations.

Thor lounged on a chaise in the posh wine cellar of Stark’s mansion. He was still using a glass for his beverage. Loki, on the other hand, had a bottle in each hand, several empty on the floor.

“There was a red vintage in here that was supposed to be outrageously expensive.” The dark prince stuck one bottle in the crook of his elbow to free up a hand. He pulled out another to look at the label, frowned, and then slid it back.

“I will not allow you to destroy Tony Stark’s stockpile of wine because you’re angry with yourself.”

“I’m not destroying it, I’m drinking it. This is its purpose,” he said, ignoring the second part of Thor’s statement. “And I’ve yet to find one to my liking - red, white, or blush.”

Loki gulped down the bottle from the crook in his arm, then put it in an empty hole. “Nauseating. That one was corked.”

"You drank it anyway."

"Indeed."

Thor finished his glass with pleasure. He sat up, rested his elbows on his knees. He felt the inkling of a buzz coming on but he could be imagining it sheer out of hope. “Perhaps the one they call Happy can acquire a keg or two of ale.”

“I’d rather have Midgardian water than Midgardian ale.” Loki was surprised when he hiccuped. He looked at Thor. “That was not from the wine.”

“You’ve always been a light weight.”

“Shut up. I wouldn’t be searching for a pain remedy if you hadn’t electrocuted me last night. Just once, I want you to feel what it’s like to have lightning running roughshod through your veins.”

“Oh I feel it,” Thor said, standing to stretch. “It turns me on.”

“In all the Nines,” Loki exclaimed with disgust. “I’ve told you never to share that with me that
“Shut up,” Thor whined back. He burped before walking over to the other side of room, searching for more red. “Have you found a way to cope with your bond to Stark, or are we still in the beginning stages of your acceptance? Because I believe night has gone, morning has arrived, and we may be approaching midday. How long is this going to take?”

Loki tried, he really did, to keep his bitterness bottled up. He wasn’t successful. “Why do you always circle around to conflict? We’ve enjoyed the last couple of hours speaking of mother, of Asgard, of that ridiculously charming griffin Volstagg gave you centuries ago. Now you specifically bring up a subject that is riddled with controversy. Then you’re going to find blame in me when the conversation goes sour.”

“Because I’m not a fool, Loki. The respite from the weight on our minds was pleasant, and I enjoyed speaking with you without argument, truly.” Thor pointed a bottle at him accusingly. “But I do not enjoy being kept under watch, a prisoner, knowing my brother is the cause and the solution. Now, tell me. What is your course of action to right this wrong?”

Loki grabbed another bottle. With a deep scowl, he passed by Thor, knocking into his shoulder on purpose. “I’m still thinking.”

Following, but not before taking more alcohol from the rack, Thor pressed the matter. “You almost died last night, by your will, and you would have taken an innocent man with you.”

“Hasn’t been the first time,” Loki mumbled, taking a long swig before climbing the stairs. The rest, he didn’t want to think about right now. It was bad enough that Stark seemed constantly with him, emotions drifting in like a warm, pleasant breeze or thundering through him like a violent storm. They would die out just as quickly before he had a chance to study them. And this morning, it almost felt like Tony was near, close enough to touch. That left him aching.

He gently palmed the glowing blue pendant hanging against his chest, the arc reactor he’d transfigured into the form of chain and stone, tucked safely beneath his clothing. “Stark is no innocent, in any sense of the word. He would’ve followed me to Hel if we’d have killed each other last night.”

Thor hurriedly stopped him with a hand. “Listen to me. We may have our differences, but I have never wished you dead, brother.”

Loki wiped the wine from his chin that dribbled when Thor grabbed him. He stared at the beloved Prince of Asgard. Thor was sincere, that much he knew. But the cause of Loki’s self-destructive tendencies were far more extensive than one situation.

Yes, he had wanted to die at that moment, when he was fighting with Stark. Loki had chosen to nurture a meaningful relationship with the Midgardian, but then the spell went wrong, and suddenly, Stark was given far more leeway than Loki ever would have allowed. It was no longer a natural progression. It was forced, and Loki had enough involuntary intercourse - physical, emotional, or mental - to last his lifetime.

But the urge to flee from that horror had subsided, once distanced from the situation. But how could Loki explain that one more drop in a glass ready to overflow was all it took to push him over the edge?

Thor would never understand the build up of a lifetime of pain and how at times, death seemed the only way to escape. He would've willingly died to escape the "service" of Thanos, but Hel
wouldn’t accept him in her peaceful dwelling place. It was all far too complex to explain to someone who had no idea what he’d gone through. Stark would understand. He wouldn’t promote it, but he’d understand. Loki was certain he’d experienced the overwhelming hopelessness, but Thor? Never.

“I will not have this conversation with you, particularly in the midst of our imprisonment on Midgard when other issues need my immediate attention. You asked me to focus on finding a way to deal with the bond I created with Stark. That is the only topic up for discussion, and even then, I grow tired of it.”

Thor sighed heavily but allowed Loki continue up the stairs, knowing it was the right thing to do at the moment. He cared, loved his brother, but Loki was a twisted mess. He wasn’t sure even Frigga could untangle the knots in his mind.

“Frigga,” he exclaimed, taking the stairs two at a time. “What if we contacted her? She could set your mind at ease, even if she could not undo the bond.”

“Don’t you think I’ve contemplated that already? Norns help me. I’m always ten steps ahead.”

“Stop fronting,” Thor demanded. “If you were so smart, you’d have prevented this from happening. There are far wiser beings in the Nines than you, brother.”

“Shut up. She sees the future, Thor. She already knows how this will play out.”

“No, she sees fluid visions, things that may come to pass and things that can change with circumstance. You know that.”

“She knew I’d be lost,” Loki reminded, bitterly, “She let me fall.”

“And she knew you’d be found,” Thor said, softening his voice. “She never stopped looking. She’d have saved you from the grip of Thanos and prevented earth’s invasion if she could. She did not see the abuse and how it would change you. That I know.” Thor watched Loki turn away, stalk to the window in the kitchen and peer out, unseeing. “You know the limits of her Sight. And you know how much she loves you. You are her favorite. Don’t think I don’t realize that. She sent you here to save you, brother. That is how much she loves you.”

“Love isn’t everything.”

After silence wore on, bored, Thor hopped up on the marble countertop. He winced when he heard it crack under his weight. “Loki, is all this fear and running because you’re afraid Stark will hurt you with the love you feel for him?”

Loki’s jaw clenched tight. By outward appearance, he was barely affected by Thor’s words. Inside, it felt like he’d been punched in the gut. He tried to right himself in his mind but his world was, once again, spinning out of control. And now, Stark might be able to feel the miasma of emotions swirling inside him.

Exposed.

“Do you not believe I can handle a momentary crush?” he lied, turning to face Thor. “That’s all this is. Stark is but a flicker of light that will soon be smothered out by his death. I’ve had many dalliances in my time, Thor. Do not treat me as an adolescent who cannot distinguish between love and lust.”

“You’re not fooling anyone when it comes to this, Loki. Not me, not Stark, and I’m betting, not
yourself. I do not think it’s either of your best interests, but I’m not denying that it’s happening. Love, whether for one month or a thousand years, can be powerful. I think that’s at the root of your problems here.”

“Is that so?” Loki spat back, completely uncomfortable with being analyzed by Thor. “So smart now, so wise and knowing of matters of the heart.”

“Yes, I am. On my way to becoming King soon.” Thor grinned smugly, wondering if it would come to blows. When Loki seemed content with nothing more than a seething glare, he hopped down from his perch and opened the refrigerator. He began putting cold cuts out on the bar. When the ice box was nearly empty, he moved the basket of fresh fruit towards Loki’s reach. After the silence became uncomfortable again, with a cold chicken leg between his teeth, Thor raised his brow at his brother. “Your thoughts?”

“Do not speak to me with food in your mouth.”

Thor tore out a chunk of meat and chewed. “Plotting my death or have I finally gotten through to you?”

“I’ve moved beyond plotting your demise,” Loki stated.

Yes, he was a mess, it was true. But Loki knew he had to calm himself or he’d not make it through this. He could never accomplish his goals when he was acting out in vain. He could destroy and maim when in this state of mind but never carry a well thought out plan to fruition and to his success.

He knew the answer. For now, he would have to endure this bond and it's backfire. He had to find a way to cure Stark of the poison. Then, and only then, could he break the spell’s bond and be free of this exposure.

But first, he had to set things right with Stark, apologize for his appalling behavior and for pushing the man towards hate. That thought hurt. If Stark refused him now, it would eat at him. This was not infatuation. It was not lust. It was the beginning of love. He’d suggested as much to Stark, and look where it got them? They’d hurt each other with their sentiment. No, they’d hurt each other with their differences, with their fears. The similarities and interests were real. Those were the true bonds that had brought them close.

If they could only work together, they might overcome this, and then Loki would be free of Stark forever.

That thought scared Loki most.

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Tony was stopped at the security checkpoint at SHIELD’s headquarter garage entrance. He rolled down the car window and lowered his shades, sighed as he was asked for his I.D.

“Really? Don’t you know who I am by now?” he said, rolling his eyes. "Bruce, remind me to fire my publicist.”

The armed agent gave Stark's car the once over, waited for a second agent to nod as he checked out the back of the vehicle. A third agent eyed Bruce warily but never stepped towards the passenger side door. "Mr. Stark, you're expected. I'll have to call in Dr. Banner. Wait here."

After a brief discussion of advisories and permissions, the unimpressed agent walked back towards
Tony. "You're clear." He ushered the car through the gate with a dramatic sweep of his hand before resting it again on his assault rifle.

"Such a warm welcome," Bruce muttered. "Why do I always feel like we did something wrong and we're being called to the principal's office?"

“Guilty conscience? Seriously, it’s the vibe that any SHIELD headquarters puts off: eau de fuck off.” They both knew it had everything to do with the alien invasion New York had experienced, but sarcasm and felt more comfortable. Tony drove the car down a rather steep ramp to the parking area. He was amazed that this underground base was even here, hidden beneath the city.

“Caves. Why do all lairs and super secret bases all have to be in caves?

"Don’t let the high tech facade fool you. I bet Fury is hanging upside down in his office with all the other bloodsuckers." Tony parked, totally ignoring that the space by the door probably designated for Fury or Maria Hill. He got out of his vehicle and made a grand show of arming the security system with the key fob. "Don't touch my car."

Agent Sitwell rolled his eyes and sighed heavily. No reason to hide his disdain. But he wasn't expecting a passenger. Anxiety gnawed at his stomach when he saw Banner but he tried not to let it show. He stepped forward and folded his hands together. "Mr. Stark. We're all glad to see you healthy again, miraculous recovery. Though we're not clear on the details."

"Because I haven't given them to you," Tony replied. "I'll speak to Fury about it when I'm ready. Clearance issues. You understand being kept in the dark."

Sitwell wanted to press but Banner was present so he switched gears. "I believe the invite was for you. Wasn't expecting a plus one."

Bruce raised his brows, looked across the roof of the car at Tony. "It's not getting any warmer down here."

“Hey, don’t I rate the red carpet treatment anymore? Where’s Agent?," he asked, deflecting. "I was not expecting a lackey."

"Lackey? I'm the expert when it comes to the weapon you were called in on." Sitwell walked closer to Stark, impeding his path to the elevator.

"Expert? Huh. Why am I here then?"

"Multiple components. Your expertise is with merely one portion of the entire package."

"So are you going to show me or continue the foreplay, because I can assure you, I'm an expert on that."

Sitwell purposely ignored the bait. "Dr. Banner, are you here to check on the other Avengers?"

"Uh, no. I didn't know anyone needed checking." Bruce crossed his arms over his chest nervously. He looked to Tony for answers, as if he'd missed something.

Tony was just as confused, but first things first. "You have a problem with Dr. Banner escorting me? He’s now an official consultant for Stark Industries, so he is here to consult. After all, he needs to earn the exorbitant salary I have yet to pay him for his scientific prowess." Tony walked around Sitwell and pressed the elevator call button, beckoning Bruce to follow. "Now, take us to your leader. We're paid by the hour."
Sitwell followed him inside and stood with his back to a wall. He'd have no chance against the Hulk, if it decided to emerge but he wanted a fighting chance.

"So, again, where's Agent?" Tony pressed.

"He's still in the med bay."

“You broke Coulson already? After all the trouble we went through to put him back together again?"

"Obviously, this mission was his obsession since he woke from his coma. Being lead was his decision. He knew the consequences."

"And what was that mission?" Bruce quietly persisted.

"To acquire the Asset. And that Asset has the weapon. Capisce?" Sitwell exited the elevator and proceeded down a maze of hallways. He knew his guests would follow. "The Director and I will brief you on what you need to know."

Now Tony's curiosity was in full swing. If he asked outright what could be so important to wake from a coma and rush to, he knew he'd get dodged. So he diverted. "I'm guessing Coulson was successful, but what about Rogers, Romanoff, and Barton? Don't think I didn’t notice they snuck away too."

Sitwell sighed heavily again. The Avengers are a team, so there was no real harm in sharing what would be conversation amongst friends when they were all back in the Tower again. "Last reported to me, Rogers and Romanoff were also in the med bay. Barton was finally resting."

"Rogers is in the med bay?" Bruce questioned, brow raised high. He now understood why Sitwell thought he might be there to check on the welfare of the team. "What the hell happened?"

"It's a long story, and you're only going to get a portion of it," Fury said, meeting up with the trio at the end of the hall. With a curt nod, Sitwell fell in step behind the director and they entered another elevator.

“Well then by all means lead on. It’s about time someone showed me why you dragged me all the way down into the pits of SHIELD hell.” Tony linked his arm with Bruce’s.

"What I'm about to show you is classified at the highest level," Fury began, eyeing them both with a heavy gaze as the car continued down. "I know you both have heard that many times, but this is sensitive intel that could cost people's lives. Your own lives. So have care that you don't speak about this casually."

“Hey I can keep secrets. Government contractor remember? I bet my security clearance is higher than some of your agents,” Tony said, winking at Sitwell.

"Why does everything we do have to be laced with death and destruction?"

"You're part of the super serum club, doctor. This was your doing," Fury answered. Unbothered by the heat of Bruce's glare, he pressed his palm to the pad inside the elevator. After verifying, the door slid open.

Tony peered curiously at the elevator panel. Palm reader coded biometrically to the individual. If he wasn’t mistaken it also had thermal sensors to further identify the user. “Fancy, Fury. But not Stark Tech. I am so disappointed. What are you hiding down here anyway, the Holy Grail? If so, I
am not too keen on getting my face melted off.”

"Can't have you run all my toys," Fury answered. "What are we hiding? That's the million dollar question. Everyone wants to see our newest addition, so we had to beef up the security for this floor. Keep out the spiders and snakes," Fury alluded.

Just outside the elevator car, four armed and heavily geared agents greeted the director. Their weapons glowed with an eerie blue light within. "Any changes?" Fury asked.

"No, sir. All's quiet. The visitor is still here but the floor is secure."

"Alright. Let's go," he said, glancing over his shoulder. "This way.

Tony practically dragged Bruce in his wake. He was being eaten alive with curiosity as to what was being contained behind basically SHIELD’S version of Fort Knox.

"Should anything happen," Fury ordered, "come back to this elevator bay and let the good doctor Hulk out. Got it, Stark?"

"Wait, what?" Bruce exclaimed. "Hang on. I'm not sure Tony should be down here if there's a threat big enough to warrant."

His words faded when they turned a corner and he spotted Steve Rogers down the hall. The man was leaning against glass staring at what was inside the containment room. Seeing the super soldier during a dangerous situation usually brought Bruce comfort, but he'd never seen Rogers with so many bruises and lacerations.

Tony was taken aback. To put it mildly Rogers looked like shit. His expression, as he gazed straight ahead, made the soldier look so lost. “Hey, Steve,” Tony started to say as he walked closer to the room. “You look like you just lost your best friend.”

"Stark," Fury scolded.

A loud crack echoed through the room as Steve’s fingers tightened on the window frame. His jaw clenched rigid so he would avoid saying something he might regret later. Stark didn’t know... how could he? "And you look pretty healthy for a dead man."

"That's a long story that I'm not comfortable sharing at the moment," Tony replied, tilting his head dramatically toward Sitwell.

"What the hell is going on?" Bruce demanded. He was anxious and could hear his blood pumping through his veins. "What caused your injuries?"

Tony he took a closer look at Steve. It was more than his expression that gave him cause for concern. The normally tall and proud soldier was almost hunched in on himself, as if from deep pain. Bruises and cuts decorated his face and neck. Tony was a bit alarmed by that. He’d read Howard’s notes. He knew it would take a hell of a force to do that kind of lingering damage and have it still visible on Captain America.

Tony walked closer. The injuries weren’t any prettier close up. Fury did say that Coulson, Romanoff and Rogers had all visited the med bay. He just hoped that the damage to the other two were not life threatening. But then if they had been Fury would have told him... maybe. He should. This was not even remotely all right. "Look, I hate being in the dark. We're supposed to be a team."
Steve really didn’t want to get into all of it right now. He just wanted to make sure James was taken care of properly. He didn’t have a whole lot of trust in SHIELD at the moment. Coulson and Delta team, yes. But he’d seen first hand what SHIELD could do if they didn’t want you to find someone. He was afraid that if he left the containment room, he’d come back to find an empty med bay and a lot of excuses. Fury promised to keep Steve updated, but it was only a matter of time before their rescue mission was discovered by the Powers That Be. All he could do was wait, watch, and pray. The inaction was hard to endure.

"Cap?" Bruce questioned quietly, feeling more anxious by the second. Movement caught his eye. A medic inside the room passed the window carrying a tablet. They walked towards a gurney in the center of the room where a shirtless man lay unconscious. He had a central venous catheter in his neck. Bruce saw no life support equipment, only restraints. The drip was likely a sedative. This was a prisoner.

Given the ugly purple and red bruising on his torso and face and arm, Bruce realized this man most likely caused Cap's damage.

It was the other arm that drew the doctor's attention next. It was a prosthesis of sorts, a shiny metal or alloy. Where it joined to his torso was a scarred mess. Bruce assumed it was that metal arm that gave him an edge to cause such harm to Steve. But how could someone come close to Captain America? Having a weapon was one thing, but besting Rogers at hand-to-hand combat was something Bruce was confident no mere human could do.

He wondered if someone duplicated the super soldier serum and created another Hulk or Abomination. Maybe that's what Sitwell meant by calling this human being a "weapon." Bruce focused on the prisoner's face, squinted his eyes and frowned deeply.

"Is that...?" He looked at Cap's face, the stoic man still staring, wordless, at the body on the gurney. Barely audible, he asked, "Steve, Is that James Barnes?"

"That," Fury stated, "is the Winter Soldier, a killing machine." He crossed his arms and leaned his back against the glass to face the small group. "In 1945, officially, James Buchanan Barnes fell to his death during a mission near the end of World War II. Unbeknownst to the world, he survived. The year before, he had been a previous prisoner of war in Red Skull's Hydra base. Dr. Zola experimented on him with their version of super serum. That saved him from the fall a year later, when he supposedly died on a mission."

"But," Bruce stuttered, struggling to put the pieces together. His heart felt as if it had iced over with the sting of betrayal, and this wasn't even his best friend. To him, James Barnes was an important man in American history, but to Steve, this must be earth shattering. He turned towards Rogers. "But Barnes was a hero. He was on our side, your side, if nothing more. Did you two fight?"

Sitwell stepped forward and started at the assassin on the gurney. "To put it simply, Hydra found Barnes at the bottom of the ravine. The synthetic serum Zola had used allowed him to heal, much like Cap does from injury. Barnes became fully functional again, save for the dismembered arm. So they fitted him with a high-tech prosthesis. When fully restored to use, Hydra tried to force him to fight in their name. To say Barnes resisted is an understatement."

"How do you know all this?" Banner asked. "You weren't even born when this happened."

"Because I'm his current handler, I know everything about him. But that's skipping ahead." Sitwell adjusted his glasses and watched a nurse administer something into the IV bag. "After the Red Skull was killed and Cap was lost in the ice in 1945, Hydra's lead scientists were left with a devout American patriot on their hands. The Third Reich was overrun with allied forces, but Hydra's
remnants were still hopeful for a rebirth of their organization. They sent Barnes to a Hydra facility in Russia to hide him. There, he was subjected to intense experimental cognitive reconditioning - brainwashing. They used different techniques to wipe his memories and turn him into a assassin, a master sniper and hand-to-hand combat specialist. The Winter Soldier was born. When he wasn't on mission, he was training other recruits. There, he met and mentored the Black Widow. They completed several outstanding missions for the Soviet regime, but that's her story to tell."

"When he became unstable or uncooperative," Fury explained, "they would recondition him and put him in a stasis chamber, frozen in time, until they had need of him again. Repeated use of the reprogramming technique have eaten away at him, like water on rocks, carving a new path and leaving little of what was before."

"Jesus," Banner said. He rubbed at the fine hairs on his face that were beginning to become a beard. "Nothing more than a weapon to use for their purpose."

"Precisely. At a point in the 70s, the Winter Soldier made contact with the United States. He convinced us that he regained enough of his memories after each "washing" that he could act as a double agent for our benefit, prolonging each session long enough by doing their bidding without question. So we allowed him to supplement our espionage unit with intel. He has been pivotal in major world events since. But then we lose him again, sometimes for years at a time."

"Why didn't he return to the United States earlier?"

"Because we felt he could do more good as a double agent," Sitwell explained. "And honestly, I don't think he trusts anyone. Because he's in and out of stasis, he doesn't have a chance to build relationships. Fury and I have been his only contacts for years now. But to him, a decade could contain only one handful of interactions."

"More recently though," Fury interjected, "he has been adamant about returning to our soil, says he can't continue to serve Hydra's remnants anymore. He is also aware of the Invasion in New York. He feels the real fight has changed direction and he wants to return home."

"When Coulson woke up," Sitwell said, "he felt it was time to extract James Barnes, but what he got was the Winter Soldier. Barnes has little to no recognition of his past or who he was. We don't know how or when he begins to recall his past, or if he's too "broken" to ever recall again. It's why he was sold off, like a broken toy. He was deemed too dangerous now to continue his relationship with the ghosts of Hydra. If nazi stewards don't want to employ him out of fear, I question why we are taking him in."

"But he knows right from wrong, if he wants to come back," Bruce said with a touch of hope. "If he wants to stop working for those bastards, then he can recall enough to be on the side of good. That's got to count for something, right?"

"Maybe," Fury said, mirroring Banner's optimism. "Or maybe he's playing us. He spent a long time as a double agent."

"I don't think that's the case," Sitwell said quickly. The adjusted his glasses, then his tie. "He's wanted to come back for a while now but he was more valuable in the field. We would've kept him out there if Coulson hadn't insisted."

The agent cleared his throat and glanced at Cap, knowing he was treading on fragile glass. The entire scenario seemed inhumane when spoken out loud.

Steve listened to his grief laid bare. It was all too much. There was immeasurable shame in not
being able to save his best friend. Now, others could plainly see what James had become, and it was Steve's fault. He was angry that James was, once more, being subjected to this kind of imprisonment, angry that his fate was being discussed, a tool to use at their will. Most of all, Steve was angry at himself. Had he found Bucky in the ravine, this would have never come to pass.

“That’s a lot to take in,” Tony stated. "But who am I kidding? Super soldiers and aliens are my life now. What’s one more war hero brought back from the dead, though he’s not looking particularly heroic at the moment.”

Tony pressed closer against the glass, taking in every detail. “Is that a prosthetic arm I see? That’s why you called me in, right? I need to get a look at it up close. I’m sure that it’s not as good as something I could come up with, but what is the…”

“That is my friend you are talking about, Stark. Not some lab rat to be dissected,” Steve snapped. Tony's cavalier attitude caused his temper to boil over. The scientific questioning was abruptly cut off by two hands gripping him by the collar and dragging him closer to Steve’s scowling face. The engineer hung from closed fist, shaking with seething anger.

Fury, Sitwell, and Banner moved as one. Bruce knew Tony had pushed too hard, was too eager, seemed insensitive to the situation, but Bruce wasn't going to let Steve dole out physical punishment. "Hey, let him go, Cap! You have no idea what's happened while you've been gone. He misspoke, is all."

"Misspoke?" Cap repeated, unbelieving. "More like, didn't think. Stark just steamrolls in, never considering anyone else’s feelings."

"Yes, he misspoke," Bruce stated again. "You are defending your best friend, now I'll defend mine. Let him go or you'll have to deal with the Other Guy. I don't think you can protect Barnes and fight Him at the same time. So stand down. You're cutting off his air supply and we just got that working again."

Bruce pried at Steve's fingers at Tony's neckline until he finally let go. "Now back off."

Steve looked at his hands, horrified at what he’d done. The fact that Bruce had to threaten him with the Hulk made it even worse. The soldier backpedaled until he hit the wall on the opposite side of the hall. “I… I can’t do this. I can’t watch you take Bucky apart. I know you need to secure him, but I can’t separate the man I knew from the one laying in that room. I need some air. Just let me know when it’s done.”

"Hey,” Bruce said to Tony, forcing the man's attention on him. "What's going on? Is this sarcastic apathy a result from your bond with Loki? Because this isn't like you, at least not until we're alone in a lab."

Tony absently rubbed at the pain at his neck and collarbone, knowing that there would be bruises. He watched Steve stalk down the hall towards the exit. Tony felt like a first class asshole. “It’s complicated. Understatement of the century, I know. Let’s just get this over with.”

Bruce watched cautiously as Fury led Tony towards the containment room entrance. He was barking off orders already, telling Stark what to do and what not to do, reminding him where to run if the Winter Soldier woke up.

Cap disappeared around a corner, leaving medical science and engineering to do its will with James Barnes. Bruce was left to wonder what a crack in the Avenger's team would do to them all.
"How you feeling?" Fury asked, leaning against the door jamb to Coulson's medical suite.

"Better than I was. I'll continue to heal." He pulled a white t-shirt over his head and reached for the nondescript navy tactical jacket on the bottom of the gurney. "My team?"

"Barton is Barton. Romanoff is a head case but physically healing. And if Romanoff is your head case, then Rogers is something you really need to be concerned about. He got physical with Stark in the containment bay."

"You brought Stark in already?" Coulson stared in shock, hands on his hips. "What were you thinking? It's far too soon. Cap won't -- You know what? This is why I wanted to handle it. You got the jump on me because I was sedated. How much of a mess have you made of this?"

Fury smiled. It wasn't pleasant. It was like looking at a fox who'd raided the hen house, and enjoyed doing it. "Stark has the prosthetic arm. He took it back to his lab to analyze."

"My concern is what this is doing to the Avengers. It sounds like they're splintering already. They are my team. I should've been consulted before you brought anyone else in."

"No, they are my team. I appointed you as their handler," Fury reminded. "I needed to complete the mission, Coulson. Now, Barnes is less of a threat. Stark is working on details of the tech and creating a neutralizer in a new prosthesis. Delta Team is healing. We can all move forward. You got what you wanted. Damage has been done but not so great that it can't be repaired. You're one of them, Coulson. I can assemble them, manipulate them, order them into battle, but I can't do what can do on the inside. So go do your job."

Phil knew Fury was right. The man had lobbied hard for the concept of the Avengers, struggled day in and day out to represent the team and protect them. He believed in their purpose and continually had their backs. He was just as invested as Coulson was. So now it was time to get out of the field and do his part, to make peace where there was discord and to put pieces back together where they were broken. "Where's Cap now?"

"Where do you think?"

"Right." Phil tied his shoelace on his boot and stood, momentarily feeling woozy. "Did you give me clearance for the containment bay?"

"It's all yours. Don't die down there."

"I just need to talk with Rogers. See where he's at mentally and emotionally."

"Oh I can tell you how he is emotionally. He's a liability."

"Okay. I'll work with him. I'll take my team back to Stark Tower and try to patch things up with Tony this evening. Give me some leeway, will you?"

"What are you going to promise them?"

"Nothing you can't fulfill. Trust me, Nick."

Fury gave him a look. "I've heard that line before."

"And you know my results." Phil gathered the rest of his gear and headed for the door.
"Hold up," Fury said, as the door was opened. "I haven't told you what Stark and Loki did."

Coulson physically wilted. He reluctantly stepped back inside the room and closed the door.

Tony set the drill down and absently rubbed at his dust streaked forehead. His head ached with the persistence that no drugs could put a dent in. He looked around the dim attic and tried not to think of the last time he’d spent any time in the cavernous space at the very top of the Park Avenue mansion.

Truthfully, Tony needed the time alone, despite said alone time taking place in this memory-filled mausoleum. Still, it was less stressful than SHIELD’S HQ. What could have been a total immersion of himself in foreign tech turned into a cluster fuck of epic proportions, since the tech in question was attached to one James ‘Bucky’ Barnes, a man who had been through so many horrors it was hard to even contemplate. That was something he’d almost forgotten in his zeal to examine the prosthesis.

A few nerve wracking hours later, he and Bruce had carefully removed the arm. After transporting it back to the Tower, it had been scanned numerous times by Jarvis, rendered inert, and now safely contained. All the while, Tony could physically feel the gravity of the situation. The place where Cap had grabbed and held him was still throbbing right below his collar.

There had been no sign of Steve during the whole process. Probably for the best. Tony vowed to himself to have the S.I. biomedical engineering department work on a new arm for the fallen soldier, a civilian arm. It would be his way of apologizing for being a colossal ass to Rogers. The strides his R&D department had made in that field were frankly amazing. He'd pushed them hard, mostly to assuage the guilt he had from all the damage his stolen weapon tech created. If a civilian lost a limb on his account, he’d be damn well sure to replace it with the most savvy prosthetic available for day-to-day use. One more atonement for one more sin.

SHIELD had presented him with another task that could have brought him closer to redemption, but this new weapon was not as it seemed. It wasn't simply the enemy's tech that could now used for their benefit. It was a person, an American war hero who'd been forced down a path of destruction and death. And Tony was now tasked with managing a portion of that. Partnered with keeping Loki under control, it was enough to give anyone a nervous breakdown.

He could still hear Fury’s orders ringing in his ears. After he'd told the director what had happened with the spell - how it simultaneously saved him but linked his life to the Asgardian - Fury insisted Loki be monitored at all times. If he was allowed out at all, he would need a SHIELD approved chaperone.

"And why the fuck didn’t anyone tell me Loki could shapeshift?" Fury had demanded. He didn't blink his one eye at the outlandish notion of bonding through magic, but Fury was entirely stuck on shapeshifting.

So Tony was commanded to work on a cuff or collar that would keep electronic tabs on the god, which, he thought would go over so very well with the trickster. Tony had to admit, the challenge to come up with something that would prevent Loki from removing it, even with magic, was alluring.

But first, he needed to get the rest of the cameras installed. Sure, he could have let any number of Stark tech employees do this part of the grunt work, but these cameras were to be Jarvis’s eyes, and Tony wanted to do this last part himself. It had taken five days and a dozen trusted techies to
upgrade the empty mansion to a Stark Smart House status, but installing Jarvis was his job.

This sharing of feelings was like a low-level buzz under Tony’s skin. Like an itch he couldn’t scratch. He’d entered the mansion undiscovered, and he intended to keep it that way. Tony was aware of Loki’s proximity but could do nothing to get any closer. One part of the billionaire called him a fool for even wanting to initiate contact again. The other part, the part that felt starved for Loki’s odd brand of affection, understood why he desired that contact. Fortunately for his psyche, the logical side was currently winning this war.

Loki had come perilously close to killing him. Clearly, the prince was not in his right mind at the time. But then neither was Tony. They were a match made in some fucked up deity’s version of heaven. He got the distinct feeling that someone up there was laughing at them.

So with Loki haunting the manor like some kind of tortured wraith, and Thor trailing behind him like a professional mourner, the situation made for two very cranky Asgardians.

It all contributed to Tony’s currently rather sour mood.

He also hated being told what to do. But as Director Fury reminded him, he was the only thing standing in between Loki and the World Security Council. Fury said he’d continue to be a willing shield to protect what Tony was attempting to do with the Asgardians, as long as Tony played by Fury’s rules this time. It was simply too dangerous to try and do this all alone. Plus, Tony needed all the allies he could get.

Tony stretched, and he groaned as the vertebrae in his back popped. He needed a drink and a fucking massage, something he was sure he’d not get any time soon. His nimble fingers wired the last of the connections before he stood up.

“Okay, J,” he said to his Stark phone. "I’m adding the mansion to the network now. Run diagnostics as soon as the link is made.” Tony collapsed onto a rather dusty chintz sofa that was missing one leg.

“Diagnostics complete,” stated Jarvis’s welcoming voice a few minutes later. "The manor is now part of my network. Everything appears to be functioning within set parameters. Also, may I say sir that it is good to see you?”

“Good to see you too, J." Tony leaned back and put his feet up on a nearby trunk. "So where is our resident godling now?"

“Sir, Loki is currently attempting to empty the contents of the wine cellar. Would you like me to inform him that he is now free to access the rest of the residence?”

"Well, no doubt that would keep the both of them busy for a while. Yeah sure. Go ahead.” It would give him some more time to think.

Tony consulted the checklist in his head. The most immediate problem was taken care of: Loki was contained, at least for now, as per Fury’s orders. Next, he needed to find out if there were any viable alternatives to being tied to Loki for life. Since the God of Chaos was out to kill him, it seemed survival was entirely up to him now. Nothing new about that. He was even getting used to it, really.

The millionaire had Jarvis searching for any leads on Maya Hansen, as per Bruce's wishes. Her research in bio-technology just might be the cure he was looking for. Her disappearance would have made conspiracy theorists froth at the mouth. It was amazing how little concern there actually
was for the doctor’s abrupt departure. She had no family that his A.I. could root out, and SHIELD was being notoriously tight-lipped about the whole affair. Tony had to wonder if they had her locked away in her own little lab, slaving away to give Fury his own version of a super soldier.

Third problem: He was pretty sure Fury didn't want Barnes to have any sort of replacement prosthesis right now, safer that way. But Tony's mind was working on a sizeable upgrade to the Russian model, one that frightened him if he thought about it from the perspective of casualties. But putting his tech on a modified super soldier was a thrilling prospect from an engineering standpoint. He’d keep the weaponized idea to himself for now, but at the very least, he could give Barnes the humanoid prosthesis, something to make him feel whole again, with Fury's approval of course. Or Steve's. Either would work for Tony. "Jarvis, remind me to call in orders and send specs for a functional civilian arm for Barnes to the R&D team tonight."

"Yes sir."

The last problem on the list was a way to contain Loki. To do that, Tony would have to get some rather detailed scans of Loki’s magic. He could just imagine how well that would go over. Maybe Thor had some ideas on that front. The muzzle that had been created after the battle of New York was made to silence a rather subdued and drained Asgardian brat. The Loki of now, with arc reactor technology, would most likely take a gadget like that and shove it somewhere uncomfortable.

“Hey J? Where did I go wrong in my life to end up in a mess like this?” Tony shifted on the broken settee and tried not to sneeze at the cloud of dust.

“Would you like me to list the reasons numerically or in order of importance?”

“Ouch. Couldn’t you lie to me and tell me none of this is my fault?” Tony tried not to laugh. Really, who taught Jarvis all this sass?

“I’m afraid that would be outside the realm of my set parameters. Someone unbiased has to remind you of your shortcomings.”

“Rhodey, it was Rhodey right? He told you to treat me like this.”

“I’m detecting a slight malfunction in my auditory capabilities. Switching to diagnostic mode.”

Then the A.I. went silent.

“Not even my own children respect me anymore.”

Tony had long enough to begin gathering his tools before Jarvis spoke again. "Sir, I've advised the Asgardians of my presence in the mansion now. I've told them they are free to roam the entire manor. However, Loki is now insisting that he speak with you. I do not believe he knows you are here, but he's being rather persistent about having an audience with you."

Tony’s stomach clenched. He really wished he had a large drink in his hand.

This could either go extraordinarily bad or it could be the beginning of a new truce. Now, all Tony had to do was summon up enough courage to find out which.

After a long debate, Tony decided.

“Jarvis, inform His Highness I'll be right down."
"Sir will speak with you momentarily," Jarvis informed.

"You mean he is already here," Loki asked, "in this dwelling?"

"Yes."

"How long has he been here?"

"That is not for me to say."

"Damn." Loki felt a surge of irritation. "I imagine he is here to integrate you into the security of these grounds."

Jarvis did not confirm or deny.

"Understandable," Thor said, chewing on a handful of nuts. "Do you want to deny Stark entry into his own house, much less securing it to his standards? I am grateful for the omnipresent guardian, considering what happened last time we were here."

"It's not that." Loki reached for the arc reactor he'd made to appear a pendant hanging in the center of his chest. He drew on it's power, syphoned it into his being to counteract the poison he was managing with Stark.

"Then what is it?" Thor's tone revealed he knew more than he was letting on.

"You wouldn't understand." Loki chewed on his lip, staring at the marble floor. He could not properly interpret the echoes of emotions from Stark yet. Abject fear and rage seemed obvious. He'd locked onto those with great ease last night, first when Stark understood the spell had gone askew. Rage was immediately identified after they fought in the park and Thor stepped in to save them both.

Thinking about last night, it felt like a dream sequence. The situation escalated too quickly. They'd both been projecting, and that was complicating everything.

The nuances of emotions since then were difficult to categorize. The most obvious revelation of their new bond was physical distance. When Loki left the Tower and walked the streets of New York City, there had been miles between them. Loki felt a yearning to return to the nearness of Stark. He wanted his space, but the need to reunite was compelling. Now, when the man was near, Loki still felt the urge to go to him but it was more of an eagerness than a need. He'd felt it this morning but had no understanding to link that urge to the nearby presence.

He wondered if Stark felt the same. He'd get no answers unless he could mend the tears in their trust.
"What I understand is this spell is different than the one we shared," Thor stated. "But I cannot give you my sympathy, Loki. You brought this on yourself. It really is not difficult to right this wrong."

"Oh do tell."

"Have good intentions and see them through. You wanted to save Stark and so you did, but ulterior motives once again clouded your heart. All that needs be done is to fulfill the request made of you. Help Stark create weapons to protect earth and find a way to cure him. Tis that simple."

"Such easy requests," Loki mocked.

"They are for you," Thor said, full of confidence. "That you fight it constantly is your bane. Look around. You're afforded luxury Midgardian's rarely have. You want for no food or drink. You are not abused or tortured here. You've even managed to find someone who cares for you - or did. Things could be far worse. Redemption is right in front of you, yet you oppose the offer every chance you get. One might start to believe you enjoy suffering."

"Shut up," Loki commanded, full of resentment. His apprehension at seeing Stark turned to nervous energy. "Would you find somewhere else to haunt or are you purposely winding me up as to make things more difficult for me?"

"No, on both accounts" Thor declared. "You tried to kill my friend last night. I will not leave you alone with him until I can trust you. Become comfortable with my shadow, brother."

Loki snarled under his breath. It would hinder his apology to have Thor present. Ego would limit his perceived sincerity in Stark's eyes. He began to pace, knowing this was another pivotal moment in his life. How he continually ended up in these situations were beyond him. More than half of them were not his fault. But this one was. He winced, shaking his head at his folly.

He reached for his long hair, scooping the top half out of his face. He braided a loose weave of intricate strands, something to do with his hands while he waited. A flick of his wrist and a sparkle of magic secured his hair from undoing.

Tony hesitated right outside the kitchen doorway. Apparently, the bond they now shared did not clearly inform the other of proximity. Otherwise, Loki would have known right away that he was in the mansion.

He noticed some emotions seemed stronger the closer he had gotten to the room. Apprehension churned his stomach, and the regret he felt left a sour taste in his mouth. Both were emotions the genius was well familiar with. They were far too easy to recognize.

What did Tony expect out of their first face-to-face meeting since that fiasco in the park? That was the billion dollar question. Like it or not, he and Loki were tied together. Tony was still dependant on the trickster for his continued existence, a necessity that Loki seemed to hate.

Tony had put a lot of faith into Loki when he handed him that arc reactor. The engineer once swore to never let his inventions fall into the wrong hands again. He’d trusted Loki, and that had almost gotten him killed.

What the hell had Loki been trying to do anyway? According to Thor, this version of the binding spell differed from the others the trickster cast in the past. Tony wanted to know exactly what had gone wrong.
Plus Tony’s feelings were a jumbled up mess. He’d always been accused of not looking before he leapt. Last night, it had come back to bite him on the ass… hard.

Did he love Loki?

As much as he could love anyone, Tony supposed. Or at least it was intense attraction that was tipping heavily into the hearts and flowers realm.

Did it happen too fast?

Definitely.

Did Tony regret it?

Only time would tell.

Now he needed answers. All he had to do was walk into that room.

Tony would rather go toe to toe with the Hulk... without the suit.

“I do believe Loki is awaiting your arrival, sir,” Jarvis reminded. Tony jumped. He was already sorry he’d installed the nosy A.I. in the mansion.

There was no way Thor and Loki hadn't heard Jarvis’ unsubtle verbal nudge.

Biting the bullet, Tony walked into the kitchen. He casually leaned against the counter and tried to ignore the pounding of his heart. He raised his chin and looked directly at Loki.

“So I hear you wanted to talk?” Tony crossed his arms over his chest. “So talk.”

Loki’s heart raced. His stomach felt tight and uncertainty shot through him like a bullet. And he absolutely hated that Stark could be privy to what he was feeling. But the moment Loki laid eyes on him, his resentment fell away. His attraction to Tony was overwhelming. How could he have ever wanted to harm this man?

"Good morning," he greeted with caution.

"Afternoon," Thor supplied from his perch on a bar stool. He nodded once at Stark before picking up a handful of nuts and a cookbook to flip through.

"Yes, good afternoon," Loki corrected, jaw clenching. He took a cleansing breath before beginning again. Frigga help him. "I must apologize for several offenses last night. To say I behaved badly would be... well,” Loki huffed out a nervous laugh, arms spread wide, hoping to break through Stark's icy glare.

It didn't work.

If only he had time to sort through the miasma of feelings swirling inside him. What were his and what were Stark’s? Loki had always felt a kaleidoscope of emotions. It was why he learned to lie, to become the diplomat needed for the circumstance. This just needed his management.

"I... what I intended was to share health and misfortune between us, allowing a symbiotic union that benefited-"

“A union that benefited whom?”
Loki didn't need to hear the accusation. He only needed eyes to see he was already failing to gain trust.

"Stark, what I intended and what happened are two very different things. I needed space, time and space to think. You must know that my intention was to help you," he admitted, stepping closer. "When you approached me in the park-"

"Let's back up," Tony interrupted, not yet buying in. "Go back to the beginning, or at least to the part about the spell. What were you intending to get out of all of this? Because that's what I'm thinking this is about. You tweaked the spell for a purpose but it backfired spectacularly."

Damn. He knew Stark was smart. Even Thor had mostly figured it out. Loki knew he couldn't admit the truth because it was a despicable plan. To tell Stark now that he intended to use the spell to manipulate him would be the end of it.

But the Liesmith was quick and he quickly distorted the truth.

"It did not backfire," Loki explained, "as much as it malfunctioned. The ingredients needed to bond two entities together cannot be just scraped together from a corner shop on 5th Avenue. The elements I am accustomed to working with come from the farthest reaches of the Nines," he bragged. "The materials given to me were the best that Thor could hunt down in a few square blocks."

"I gathered what you asked of me," Thor defended.

"They were horrid knock offs," Loki said, sparing a pitiful glance at his brother, as if all this was his fault. "I did the very best I could with what I was offered. Stark, your life was on the line. And once I performed the spell, my life was tied to yours. I had just as much at stake as you did by then. What resulted were wild power surges from sloppy materials causing fluctuations in your arc reactor. I'm sure you felt it too. I could barely control what could be no more described as ... as chaotic magic. You cannot comprehend how dangerous that is. I saved both of our lives that day."

Thor was actually momentarily dazzled by Loki's reiteration. It was a lie, yet it was the truth. He lived up to his moniker.

"Ah, I get it," Tony said with a mocking shrug. "You think I owe you."

"You do not owe him anything, Stark," Thor interjected, "If you died last night, Loki's life would be forfeit. There is no debt to be paid here."

"Shut up," Loki growled out. "Leave us be."

"No," Thor replied. "Tell me, do you trust him, Stark?"

Tony thought about it then finally answered. "I need to trust him, since we now share head space, like it or not. Which leads me back to the spell. It worked, mostly," he said to Loki, "but then you lost it and ran off with the arc reactor I gave you. Now how is that supposed to build my trust in you?"

"I told you," Loki defended. "I needed time to try to adjust to what occurred. It was unintended. I panicked."

“And I didn’t? I was trying to deal with the same damn thing. I thought we could sort it all out. Together," Tony emphasized.
"Together? With Banner and the others?" Loki mocked. "I'm sure he would've been delighted to know that there was a now a new problem - an empathic link that shouldn't have ever existed between us. He'd have blamed me without question. Is that what you want?"

"Oh fuck you! This has nothing to do with Bruce! When I found you sitting there in Central Park, I wanted to talk about what we were both going through. This is all new to me - magic, mystical forces and all that bullshit. But when I tried, you threw an epic temper tantrum and used the reactor to try and fry me."

"I... a tantrum? Do you have any idea..." Loki's ire was growing quickly. Just minutes ago, he'd wanted to rush to this man and regain trust and affection. Now, his mind was clouding with resentment and anger. This was building quickly into another bitter conflict. Just like last night. It felt as if Stark was provoking him on purpose, and he wasn't going to stand for that. "Your life was already in my hands. I was forced to save you. The second reactor was inconsequential at that point," Loki lied.

"Inconsequential?" Tony sputtered. "You couldn't wait to get your hands on that reactor."

"Yes, I wanted it," Loki admitted, his hand unconsciously wrapping around the pendant under his shirt. "But I earned your trust. You wouldn't be alive without me. I did not save you only to kill you hours later. Do not play the fool, Stark. You are ill-suited for such a guise."

The pain of betrayal was evident on Tony's face. He walked up toe-to-toe, looking right into Loki’s eyes. He breathed hard through the pain constricting his chest, threatening a panic attack. "The last person I trusted with my tech ripped it right out of my chest and left me dying on the floor. So tell me you didn't practically do the same thing after I gave you exactly what you wanted all along. Tell me you didn't try to kill me!"

"I tried to kill me," Loki shouted in a surprised confession. "I wanted to die, Stark."

Thor had hands on Loki in the blink of an eye, pushing him backwards to the far end of the room. "This is the bond working against you both. Were I not here right now, this would end as it did last night, with you both at each others throats. Can you not see what is happening, brother?"

Loki was gasping for breath, his heart pounding, a bead of sweat trailing down his temple. He looked at Thor as if seeing him for the first time. "What?"

"This rage between you is an offshoot of the warrior bond," Thor explained. "You and I experienced this, but we were on each others side. You remember, brother? The berserker rage. It fueled us in our times of peril during that battle. You told me that is the purpose behind the spell, but It is also the danger inherent. It is why you never performed it again."

Loki felt dizzy and confused. He wanted to think clearly, because what Thor said made sense to the logical part of his mind. A part of him knew he should feel the relief of enlightenment, but it was drowning in a sea of anger and betrayal.

Thor loosened his grip, allowed Loki to process his words, find himself again. "It is working against you both now. You must control this, brother. If you cannot, Stark has no hope of living through the bond you created."

Thor was right. Loki reminded himself that he was a god. His purpose was to guide and manage the lesser of the Nines. If he could not maintain his composure in the midst of a complication, he was not worthy of Asgard, of Frigga, or of magic.
Stark deserved better.

He swallowed hard, blinking as sweat stung his eyes. This rage, he realized it wasn't stemming from him. This was Stark's fury.

How could he not see it before?

Loki nodded at Thor, grateful that he had stayed. "I understand."

"It’s a good thing someone does," Tony exclaimed, as his heart raced.

"Sir, you need to calm down," Jarvis interrupted. "Your blood pressure is elevated and you are on the verge of hyperventilating."

"Calm down?" Tony said on a laugh. It came out a bit hysterical. "We are one fucked up mess," he confessed, pointing at Loki.

Tony backed up until he was pressed against the expansive windows. When his vision began to dim, he slowly slid down until his butt hit the floor. He drew his knees up and tried to force air into his burning lungs.

"We are troubled," Loki agreed, "but I can lead us out of this."

He closed his eyes and began to steady himself with each heartbeat, trying to hone in on his own emotions, discarding Stark's like crumpled parchment.

It was difficult, but he found himself, or what he believed were his intentions and motives. His purpose for this encounter was to mend the fractures in their trust and nurture their growing relationship. Their bitterness and fears were working against them, but it was time Loki used their bond for its original intention, to heal and strengthen them both.

He opened his eyes and stepped towards Stark, stopping only when he felt Stark's emotions flare. He found there was an expanding amount of panic and self-loathing there. Loki had felt his share of it, so he could easily identify it now in their close proximity. Still, he was surprised to find such contempt emanating from such a successful and influential man. He almost felt...

Oh.

"It was you," Loki whispered, finally understanding. "The urge to end our suffering last night. It was you who wanted to die at that moment."

Tony shook his head in opposition over and over, as if trying to convince himself.

Loki crouched low, allowing room to retreat if needed, but it was close enough to force Stark's gaze upon him for a brief moment. There was deep shame there.

It wasn't necessary. Not with him.

When Loki felt the desire for the kind of bliss he thought only death could possibly offer, he didn't want to be patronized about it. He wanted to be acknowledged for his pain and his sacrifices that brought him to that point. He wanted someone to understand.

Perhaps no one ever afforded that to Tony Stark. "Do you want to die?"

Did he? Everyone always joked Tony had a death wish, doing reckless things over and over with no regard to his safety. He always glibly explained it as a desire to show off. But no one saw beneath
the mask he showed the rest of the world, of the raw wounds that never quite healed, the sleepless nights spent in the lab working till he dropped so he didn’t dream.

No one was privy to the thoughts that terrified Tony of the insignificance of his mortality after witnessing the other side of the wormhole.

Yes, he’d fought to survive the poison that had flooded his system, but Tony would be a fool not to admit that he hadn’t thought of just giving up. It would have been easier to finally be at peace.

But God damn it, Tony didn’t want to just give up. He might be broken, he may be beyond fixing, but there was still a spark inside him, the same drive that sustained him during his captivity with the Ten Rings. That thirst to live saw him through the torture and despair. It made him fight after Stane ripped the reactor from his body.

He had people to protect now.

And he also had someone in front of him that possibly understood all of that in a way no one else ever had.

Tony lifted his head. His haunted eyes sought that confirmation in Loki’s face, and he found it.

“No, I don’t want to die, but I need you to help me find a way to live.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Warnings: Descriptions of PTSD and panic.

Coulson stood at the kitchen counter watching the city below. Coffee was brewing in the late afternoon hour.

It had been a messy week, but he'd managed the most of the mess that had been made by himself and others. There was always an abundance of managing when it came to the Avengers, but for the moment, waiting for his Dark Magic Extra Bold K-cup, he stood on solid ground.

Natasha and Clint had been wrangled back to Stark Tower a few hours ago. They were wary but willing. Nat needed reminding that the Tower was more than home base. The separate floors gave each member a sense of individuality and personal space. One could simply step out of the elevator into their apartment, and once those doors slid silently shut, they were encapsulated and protected in their own private dwelling. They had distance from SHIELD, from the mission, their SO, and from other teammates. They were finally alone.

At times, that was the greatest blessing an operative could receive. In privacy, they could let themselves fall apart, rebuild, and heal in the manner they chose.

Both agents choose a long hot shower followed by bed. He knew that much by asking Jarvis. After that, he allowed them the privacy he'd boasted about.

He'd reveled in a hot shower too then dove into an hour of mission followup. He wrote one of the most detailed debriefs he'd ever typed. The mission itself wasn't complicated, unexpected but not hard to explain. It was his observations and recommendations on his team, on Rogers, and Barnes that were of utmost importance.

He had also read Barton's debrief twice, once as a senior lead and the second time with pride and admiration. He probably wouldn't get a report out of Natasha.

Rogers was a different story.

Coulson had spoken to the soldier last outside of Barnes' cell. And it was a cell. He called it like it was. He owed that and so much more to Cap. He asked Steve only once what he wanted. Coulson acknowledged and immediately went to work.

With some difficulty and pulling rank on operatives, he got Rogers set up in a storage unit across the hall from Barnes. It was barely bigger than a closet, but after the boxes of pharmaceuticals inside were removed, there was enough room for a padded cot, a leather wing back chair and a table with a lamp. Without a word, he had the door removed, knowing Rogers would see it as a potential cell and wouldn't go into it without knowing he could get back out without trouble.

It was middle ground. Fury would be a fool to not allow Rogers this much, because they all knew the captain would otherwise stand in the hallway outside Barnes' containment room for days on end if this room wasn't afforded to him. No one wanted a brooding super soldier 24/7.
To prevent any of that, Coulson gave Steve a tablet for constant monitoring of inside the containment room. He'd chosen to link the tablet to a camera feed from the corner above the only access door. It had a good angle of the entire room and a clock on the wall. If Rogers did allow himself rest, he could wake and check the monitor any time or he could get up and make the few steps out of the storage room and to the window that looked in at the Winter Soldier.

It was Coulson's hope that getting Cap to settle down would prompt Fury to wake Barnes. The sooner he could be rehabilitated, the sooner they could move him to the Tower.

It would be managed on an hourly basis, ever-evolving, and would require the Delta Team - plus two now - to remain as a cohesive unit.

The other half of the Avengers would require his focus as well.

Bruce had alerted him to an issue regarding Thaddeus Ross. Phil didn't know what Ross was up to but he was concerned about the impact the general had on Banner's emotional health. Coulson agreed to look into Ross' intentions for the doctor's peace of mind. That seemed to satisfy Banner enough to try a few hours of sleep before diving back into the lab to research Maya Hansen's thesis.

Fury hadn't been lying about the clusterfuck that had centered around Tony Stark. The Director was adamant about keeping tabs on the dark Asgardian. The WSC would never stop hounding Fury about containment of Loki, and Coulson couldn't blame them.

Phil had struck a deal with Jarvis early on, and so the A.I. kept him up to speed with the goings-on at the mansion. He'd been privy to a recorded feed capturing the emotional breakdown possibly caused by the so-called spell/bond. Coulson's only saving grace was that Thor was there to wisely intervene. Otherwise, they might have lost Stark. That situation was going to require kid gloves. He'd have to assess Tony to see where his head was at.

Now that the mission to retrieve Barnes was officially over, he was ready and eager to deal with these new issues.

Tony was currently on his way back to Stark Tower, so Phil put on another K-cup to brew. He sipped his own hot beverage and waited, staring at a two-day old newspaper, not reading a single word.

"Sir has arrived," Jarvis notified. "He has requested to bypass this floor for another. Would you like me to ask him to stop here?"

"Yes, please. If he doesn't, I'll just come and find him. Tell him I've got mid-day coffee ready."

~*~

Tony needed some space.

He felt raw and exposed after his deepest fears had finally been brought to light. But one of the most important things he learned was that Loki truly understood. He too looked into the void and had it look back, heard it whisper into all the dark places in their souls. They had both come out the other side. Damaged? Yes. But perhaps together they'd become stronger.

But right now the genius had a lot to think about. The workshop was the obvious destination.

Even though it was too soon after their near deadly fight in the park to be all touchy feely again, Tony wanted nothing more than to burrow into the Asgardian god’s arms and make the world go away.
He’d had one quick moment of skin-to-skin contact with Loki. That was all it took to make him yearn for more. Back at the mansion, he’d forced himself off the kitchen floor, aided by the firm grasp of Loki’s extended hand.

Thor had made himself scarce to allow them privacy, so Loki worked his mojo and channeled some of his magic to bolster Tony’s flagging reserves. It never failed to fascinate Tony as he watched Loki weave the spell.

The transfer made Tony darn near euphoric. If he could bottle that, he’d triple his fortune easily.

One awkward silence later and a few halting attempts to converse about something less heavy, Tony simply asked for some time to get his head together.

Thor agreed that it was a wise decision. The Thunder God’s advice just proved that the blond was a big creepy eavesdropping lurker, a point that actually made Loki grin when Tony said it out loud. That provoked a bickering match between the two siblings.

Eventually, Thor insisted Loki take some rest too but assured Tony they’d meet up later at the tower. So he left them to their own devices and took the Audi back, missing Loki’s touch.

Tony had skillfully avoided everyone thus far before entering his private elevator. He now leaned against the wall and sighed. Complicated didn’t even begin to describe his life. He was forced out of his musings by Jarvis.

“Sir, Agent Coulson has requested your presence in the common area kitchen. I believe he said there would be coffee waiting.’’

There was no hiding. If Tony dodged the agent now, Coulson would, no doubt, track him down. There was bound to be more lecturing in his future.

Resigned to his fate, Tony asked his AI to halt the elevator. At the right floor, the doors opened. Tony did his best to appear presentable. A lost cause at best. His jeans and thermal tee were dirt streaked and his hair was sticking up in all directions. He’d not had the chance to clean up after installing Jarvis’ systems at the mansion.

Tony walked into the kitchen and saw that Coulson was impeccably dressed as usual. No outward sign of his injuries other than some dark circles under his eyes.

“Gimme.’’ Tony held out his hands for the large steaming mug sitting next to the agent’s cup on the marble counter top. "Then get the interrogation over with. I have things to do, weapons to build, and suits to tweak.’’

Coulson mouth twitched. Patented Stark deflection methods were still working. Good.

"You've been a very busy man," he replied, handing over the cup. "Fury brought me up to speed with the goings-on here. You have once again been saddled with quite a burden. Let's start with defying death again, exposure to magic, Loki as a whole... how's that going?"

To let slip that he knew of the breakdown at the mansion this morning would be a strategic mistake. He wouldn't gain insight to Tony's psyche that way.

“I'm sure Fury wants his pet weapons expert and demigod handler kept in in tip top shape. I have to try, for his sake," Tony jested. "Defying death is an everyday occurrence when you're me."

"Don't push it. You've expended far more than nine lives."
"Don't have to remind me," Tony mocked. "As far as magic goes? Fascinating subject. I plan on studying it in depth. Even have a willing subject," Tony stated with a leer.

"Willing?" Coulson quirked an eyebrow. Huh. This was unexpected. He was ready for Tony to be shaken and uncertain. This quasi-confidence and scientific curiosity were welcome but out of character for someone who'd just had an emotional breakdown and hit rock bottom.

A truce must have been made with Loki or some kind of unspoken understanding that boosted Tony's self-confidence. That could go either way for the Avengers. He'd have to think on this before pursuing the subject more.

So he tried a different angle to see if Tony's logical side was in any way clouded by sentiment.

"How are you doing with the prosthesis? I am eager for a much less threatening but functional replacement to make Sergeant Barnes feel more whole."

"From what I've seen, I can say that it's an amazing piece of work," Tony said with admiration. "I had no idea the Russians were so advanced in the field of enhanced prosthetics."

"We believe there's some German engineering in there too," Coulson said, finishing his coffee. He went to the sink to rinse it out. "It looks like you detached it from a port? Fury said you and Banner made a makeshift guard for the exposed wires and nerve bundles."

"Yup. I'll have to talk to Barnes when he's willing, is he willing?" Tony asked, rhetorically. "Then I can find out how much the arm was integrated into his nervous system, his range of motion, sensation and tensile strength, all that technical stuff."

"It was fully integrated," Coulson recalled with a pained look. "He can rip apart a human body with it."

"Well, that certainly answers some of my questions."

"I'm working on getting him conscious again, but only time will tell how communicative he will be and what state of mind we'll find him when he wakes." Coulson leaned his back against the counter, quite pleased with Stark and with the conversation's direction. Tony was focused and eager, just how a brilliant engineer should be. "If you can give him something functional but with little strength, say, something that can pick up a fork but not strangle someone, that'd be in everyone's best interest. I've seen what he can do with that bionic arm. I don't want it anywhere near our agents or team."

"Stark R&D has made huge advances in bio-mechanics," Tony bragged, rightfully. "I'm sure I can come up with something even better, weaponized or not. That is, if Rogers lets me near him again."

"Rogers will cooperate if he feels our intentions align with his, which they should," Coulson pointed out. "Imagine if that was Colonel Rhodes in there, confused, damaged, and used to harm you and the others. You'd be just as protective. Give Steve some room and a little compassion."

Coulson wasn't expecting the miracle of friendship to patch things up overnight, but he was interested in how Tony felt after his confrontation with Rogers.

"Yeah, about that. I was an asshole, or so I'm told. There's a reason Pepper was always urging me to go to those sensitivity classes," Tony said, trailing off in thought. "Although that could have been from the inappropriate comments everyone claimed I made to SI employees."

"You'd been through a lot before you were summoned to HQ," Coulson pacified. "And you'd been
kept in the dark as to why you'd been called in. A little preempting would've gone a long way, but that's not Fury's style."

"Tell Fury he should warn a guy next time," Tony stated. "Because getting on Steve’s bad side... it's like kicking a puppy. Generally frowned upon by the masses."

Coulson almost chuckled at the comparison. "There's a lot of history between Rogers and Barnes, a lot of regret. Just tread lightly, Tony."

"Once he sees the sparkly prosthetic I can come up with, I’m sure all will be forgiven, yeah?"

"It's a good place to start."

Tony set his now-empty mug down and went to rummage in the fridge. Getting that little magical jump start from Loki made him hungry. He felt healthy. Mostly normal. He could get used to this. "Late lunch?"

"No, thanks. I'll wait until dinner." Coulson checked his phone. He replied in text to Fury's request to join in him a meeting in D.C. with Pierce and the WSC tomorrow. "I need to speak with the Asgardians. I'm going to represent them at a meeting tomorrow and need to be clear on a couple diplomatic issues. Do I have access to them?"

“Hey J, give Agent full access to the mansion."

"Yes, sir."

Tony grabbed a tray and loaded it with an odd assortment. Pickles, cream cheese, bagels and a tin of caviar. He added another full mug of coffee and hefted it all and walked towards the elevator. "I'll be in my workshop. Call me if anything blows up in your face."

"Comforting," Coulson replied with a smile.

~*~*~

The Winter Soldier willed himself to consciousness.

Curious.

He felt drugged. Fuzzy. Unaware of surroundings.

Not the cryo chamber. That was cold and always began with a sharp, painful breath of icy heat.

No. There was warmth here. Not the chamber. Somewhere else.

The mission. What was the mission?

Nothing. No recall.

Had he been wiped?

If he'd been wiped, he'd have attendants upon waking.

But nothing. Just silence.

Had he been injured?

Pain. There would be pain.

And there was. Dull. Aching. His arm. Left arm. This was a different ache than usual.

Malfunction? Mechanical breakdown?

He heard the buzzing of fluorescent bulbs and the beeping of a heart rate monitor.

A hospital? Why?

He regained his vision.

Not a hospital. A lab? Maybe.

A cell?

Both.

Anxiety.

*What was the mission?*

He took a deep breath, then another.

He lifted his head.

He was in a bed. A room with hospital equipment.

There was a window, but no view.

The window was for others to look at him.

Had he failed his assignment and been captured?

He did not fail. Never.

Did he fail?

Panic.

He had to escape.

He lifted his arms to remove the blanket and head towards the door.

The pain blossomed.

He remembered silver and gold. Ten fingers, two hands; one a weapon and the other flesh and bone.

But it was gone. His left arm was gone.
Adrenaline surged through him. He couldn't remember the mission.

They came to the window, men and women. They stood and watched. Observed him like an animal in a cage.

They were afraid.

The floor was cold and hard when he fell. He tasted blood before finding strength in his legs.

The door was solid. He pulled and punched at it through the fog of sedation.

The window did not give under the assault of his human fist.

It wouldn't break from IV poles or monitoring equipment he used against it.

He was trapped.

He picked up a rolling stool and hurled it against the glass.

Then he heard one voice over the others.

“Sergeant Barnes, stand down!”

Instantly, his body obeyed, even as his mind fought to understand why.

~*~

“Bucky, hang on!” Steve yelled. He reached out of the shattered train car for Bucky’s flailing hand. The icy wind stung his eyes as he stretched out even further. His grip on the side of the car tenuous. The super soldier spared a quick glance at the steep ravine below. "Grab my hand!"

Bucky looked up at him, his face full of fear.

Then the cold piece of metal he held on to, instead of Steve's hand, gave way.

Steve screamed as his best friend plummeted to his death.

They needed to stop the train, find the body, give Bucky a proper burial.

The shrill of an alarm thrust the super soldier out of his nightmare. Steve got tangled in the blankets of the small cot as he tried to get to his feet. He could hear the smack of shoes running in the hall outside his little cubicle of a room.

Steve had been so tired when he’d finally laid down to get some rest, not even bothering to change out of the SHIELD issue sweats. It wouldn't have mattered if he’d been in his skivvies, when the alarms sounded, he shot up. Steve knew without a shadow of a doubt that the cause of the commotion was right across the hall.

He was out the door in a flash and shoved several doctor's out of the way to get to the containment room’s viewing window.

Bucky was awake. The room was trashed, and the wild-eyed panic in his eyes was heartbreaking.

Agents were pouring into the hallway from both ends, carrying guns loaded with "icer" bullets. The
sedatives in them would put Bucky under again. Steve knew it was only a matter of seconds before their fear escalated the the situation beyond salvaging. They'd sedate him, and then the wait would start all over.

The thick glass that separated them shuddered under the impact of equipment thrown at the window. "Don't do this, Buck."

There was a brief pause, almost as if Barnes heard Rogers through the chaos, then panic returned to the Winter Soldier's haunted eyes.

Steve needed in there, but no one would allow that until they could get beyond the confusion.

At this point, Steve was not even sure the man he knew was even inside the Winter Soldier any more, but he had to try. If not now then next time, and he didn't want to see Bucky suffer through waking again in a strange room, missing a part of his body and afraid his surroundings.

In desperation, Steve tried the one thing that had gotten through to Bucky in the past. At the end of the war, he'd gone off the rails a time or two during a mission. They had some fancy name for it now, but back then, it was called shell shock.

“Sergeant Barnes, stand down!” Steve commanded. “Mission over.”

Stand down.

It was an order.

The Winter Soldier stopped instantly, heart pounding, muscles straining from effort, lungs demanding more oxygen.

He looked for his commanding officer, recognized no such person.

But there was one man in the crowd at the window.

He'd seen him before.

This one man.

He knew him.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Clint and Natasha have a heart-to-heart about her intentions, Bucky wakes, and Steve steps into a role to further his personal agenda regarding his best friend.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: Brief mention of past torture. Some PTSD symptoms.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was after four in the afternoon when Clint Barton jogged up to the front entrance of the newly remodeled Stark Tower. He held two bags of Wendy's after-mission food in his hand. They had a tradition to uphold. Two large chocolate Frostys were melting and two supersized orders of fries were cooling off. Still, he paused at the entrance and looked up. It was rather amazing to think this was now his home.

Just the thought of that took some getting used to. They each now had a place in the huge high rise. All his life, Clint had moved from place to place, never really having home of his own. Then after becoming SHIELD'S newest recruit, he was given a small room with a bunk wherever he happened to be stationed.

Then he became an Avenger. An entire floor at Stark Tower was a nice perk.

It was weird having this much space and no idea what to do with it. Tony’s generosity was evident in the luxurious but rather generic decor. During the grand tour, Jarvis told them to feel free to change anything they wanted. He'd yet to do so.

Today, it felt good to be back "home" and outside of Delta team mission parameters.

A few hours ago, after leaving SHIELD HQ, Clint showered and almost fell asleep standing up. He'd slept hard and woke feeling pretty good after half a day's rest. The team was all home, mending. The anticipation of good things to come made it easier for Clint to breathe. He got up, dressed, and was out the door towards Wendy's, barely sparing a glance at his unpacked duffle bag.

Now, with the acquired celebratory goodies, Clint entered the tower and he headed straight up to Nat’s apartment. He knew she was still recovering from the mission and had been ordered by the docs to take it easy for a week or more. He was going to see that she obeyed, or at least he'd try.

He keyed in his personal code, and the elevator quickly took him to her floor. Clint entered her apartment and walked to her table. He set the take-out bag down on the kitchen table and listened for any sound.

In the living room, an empty pile of blankets made a sad little nest where she'd likely tried to find sleep. He was right in his assessment, as her bedroom was in a similar disarray. The sheets were
twisted and trailing onto the floor.

It was clear that she wasn't in the apartment any longer.

He walked back to the table, taking the Frostys out of the bag and putting them in the freezer. She could be anywhere, but he had an inkling. The quickest way to find the wayward assassin was to talk to Stark’s A.I., which felt a little silly, but he didn't have time for the awkwardness of talking to thin air.

“Um... Jarvis?”

“Yes, Agent Barton? How may I be of service?” the smooth voice responded.

“Can you tell me where Natasha has gone?”

“Agent Romanoff is currently in the gym, sub-level one. Would you like me to inform her of your query?”

“No that’s okay. I’ll go down there.” Clint sighed. He knew Natasha would push herself. She would need some way to channel that nervous energy. But damn it, the doctors said she needed to rest.

In the way distant past, they would have just fallen into the nearest bed and fucked their anxiety out. Not the best therapy, but it had worked for them. Now though, they were much better friends without the need to give in to those urges. The caring intimacy and trust they’d built over the years did not need sex as an excuse to be there for each other.

Now, would Natasha let him in? She’d fallen back on some bad habits of pushing everyone away as she licked her wounds in private.

Clint didn’t quite know what to expect as he exited on the gym level. He followed the sounds of something getting beaten to death. The archer could not really claim to be surprised to see Nat beating the shit out of one of those fancy sparring dummies.

She wore black leggings and a black tank top, her typical workout gear. Her wounds looked ugly and raw under the bright lighting. The stitches stood out in stark contrast against her pale, sweaty skin.

There was no way she didn’t know Clint was watching. Staying carefully out of range, he approached the sparring mat.

“Nat, you have to stop.”

“Just leave, Clint. I’m fine.” Natasha grunted in pain as she struck the torso of the dummy hard.

“Bullshit! You are not going to wall yourself off from everyone else, especially me. I’ve let you have your space long enough,” he protested and wrapped his hand around her arm. "Now let’s go back to your apartment. You need a shower and some more rest. Doctor's orders.”

“Let it go, Clint,” Natasha hissed. "I’m warning you.”

“Look, I agree this is one fucked up situation with Barnes. I know you have feelings for your old partner, ones that you’ve tried to ignore. But it doesn’t work if you shut down," he reasoned, falling back on his own experiences. "You need to face what was done to James. Maybe help him through it when he’s ready to accept that help."
“I can’t,” she shouted, jerking her arm out of his grasp. "Why don’t you understand? All my life I’ve had everything taken away from me that ever mattered. I’m not going to leave myself open to that kind of pain again.”

The dummy took the brunt of Natasha’s fury and swayed with her roundhouse kick.

“So what then, are you going to leave me too? And what about Coulson? We both care about you," he reminded. "Don’t become the cold, unfeeling agent some accuse you of being.”

Clint laid his hand on Natasha’s shoulder to offer comfort.

Before he could blink, he was flipped head over heels and landed flat on his back on the mat. He wheezed as the air left his lungs in a rush.

When he caught his breath, he argued, “Are we really going to do this?”

“Get up,” she demanded, circling him.

Clint sighed. This was not going to end well. Possibly with tears and broken bones. Most likely his.

The archer flipped to his feet and took a ready stance. He would take it easy so their impromptu sparring match would not aggravate her wounds.

At least that was Clint’s intention.

Before long, he was face planted on the mat with extreme prejudice then flipped over. Her knee crushed his goods and he saw sparkles.

“Damn it, Nat! Ease up," he pleaded. "I think Phil might take exception if you unman me. Not that I’ve had a chance to do anything with it, but there’s still hope."

Natasha backed off, waited for him to get to his feet, and then took a ready stance. “Again!”

Her stoic expression was practically a trademark of the Black Widow. But right now, she wasn’t hiding the pain and fear on her face. His heart ached for her. She’d lost so much. It was obvious that she thought pushing everyone away and punishing herself was the only answer.

So he sparred again, wondering if fighting would ever quiet her demons.

Clint blocked her first attack but then took a knee to the stomach. Good thing Clint hadn’t had the milkshake or fries or they might be decorating the mat right now.

“Aw come on! No fair;” Clint whined, coughing through the pain. Finally, he straightened up. Her expression hadn’t changed. So he decided to fight dirty.

Natasha was getting winded, so when she tried a leg sweep, Clint simply dodged and tackled his partner to the ground. It was something he would not have been able to do had she not been tired, in pain, and distracted.

Simply using his heavier body weight, he kept her down.

“Let me up!” Natasha spat out, trying to buck him off.

“Enough! I will drag you bodily back upstairs to your nice comfy sofa if I have to.” He wrestled with her until he pinned her arms over her head. "You will probably maim me in the process, but I'll do it, Nat. Do you even realize you're bleeding again? I think you popped a stitch."
She glanced at her shoulder then back at him defiantly.

"Now," he continued, "we are going back to your apartment, where you will shower and then put on your jammies. The flannel ones with the sheep printed on them."

She narrowed her eyes at his gibberish.

"We're going to eat the now-cold fries," he instructed, "and the Frostys from the freezer that I so thoughtfully bought for you."

Her face softened.

"Finally, we're going to watch some nice trash TV together until you either fall asleep, I choke you unconscious, or your brains leak out your ears. Whichever comes first." Clint sat back and waited.

"Acknowledge whenever you give in. Take your time. Did I mention the Frostys that are upstairs?"

Natasha simply went limp. She was unable to muster any more energy to protest. “Fine. Now get off me.”

Clint got to his feet and held out his hand. She took it, wincing at the pain in her shoulder.

“Agent Romanoff, Jarvis interrupted. "There is a call for you from Director Fury. Would you like me to route it here?"

Before Nat could say no, Clint answered, “Yeah sure, we’ll take it here.”

"Agent Romanoff," Fury said, "Barnes is awake. You need to come in."

Natasha froze. She needed to make a decision - to run or stay and try to salvage anything of her former life.

Had James even tried to find her? That was debatable. She thought that in his eyes, he’d given her the chance to finally be free. Could she do any less for him now that he needed a tangible link to the past, even a painful one?

“You need to go,” Clint simply said as he grasped her hand.

She appreciated the physical contact of their linked hands because her instinct was to flee, hide from anything that could hurt or make her vulnerable. But truly, what would that accomplish? By avoiding the situation, it only served to increase the vulnerability she felt.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Natasha admitted. Clint was one of three people on the planet she would ever confess weakness. How Clint, Coulson, and even Rogers had managed to work past all her carefully constructed defenses was practically a miracle. But she knew she needed him at this moment.

Clint laid his hands on her shoulders and turned her towards him. “You can do this. You have to see if there is anything left of the man you knew. I never gave up on you, Nat. Despite the fights and the arguments and you trying to push me away. Don’t you think the man you once cared about deserves the same consideration?”

Natasha briefly rested her forehead against the archer’s. “How did you get so wise?”

“Shhhhh. Don’t let it get out that I have a soft side," Clint said with a warm smile. "I have a reputation to maintain.”
“Your secret is safe with me.” Natasha took a deep breath and started towards the door.

“You want me to come with?” Clint asked as he followed his partner. "We can borrow Tony’s Maserati."

“No. I need to do this myself.”

“You call me if you need to. You hear me, Nat?”

“I will. I promise,” she assured. She was comforted by the fact that Clint meant every word he said. She wasn’t alone anymore. She had someone to lean on.

She gave a brief wave and then she was gone.

Clint knew this had the potential to still turn into one giant clusterfuck.

But until she called for him, the archer wanted a little comfort of his own, namely in the form of one hot senior agent with a penchant for suits and general badassery.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Steve could see that Bucky was seconds away from violence again. The soldier clenched his teeth and his muscles corded with barely restrained panic.

He needed to get in there. Steve’s urge to protect his friend, to offer comfort was nearly overwhelming.

But right now, what Bucky needed was a commander not a friend.

“Open the door,” Steve demanded of the agents. “Now!”

"I called the director," a nurse answered. "He’ll be here in a few minutes."

"We don’t have a few minutes.” A woman in a suit walked towards the captain, meeting his steady gaze. "Barnes is not stable. I recommend you try to talk him down."

“Open the door before I rip it off its hinges,” Steve insisted.

“If you do that, you will jeopardize my team and the medical staff.”

“Your team?” Steve repeated. “Who the hell are you to be giving orders?”

"I am Agent Sharon Carter," she answered, raising a brow. "While Fury is topside, I make the decisions regarding Sergeant Barnes."

Carter. The surname shattered his focus. He stared at the blond woman. That confident, raised brow was one he’d seen before when another woman from his past looked at him and found him lacking.

"The safety of our agents trumps your friendship,” she explained, “but I’m on your side, Captain.”

“Then get me in there.”

“Fine.” Sharon faced the staff. "All medical personnel regress to the safe box. Warren and Walters, stay here with me.” She took one of the heavy assault rifles with their glowing blue tranquilizer bullets and shouldered it. "Dr. Mulligan, be ready to aid our patient if we have to sedate him
"Yes, ma'am."

"Do not tranquilize him again," Steve demanded.

She waited until the staff moved away from the cell before turning back to Rogers. "If he makes a move for the door or tries to best you, I'll put him under. Do you understand?"

"He'll listen to me."

"He doesn't remember you," Sharon reminded, glancing at the fierce soldier behind the glass. "The bruises he gave you vanished just hours ago. I was briefed on the mission outcome. I know what he's capable of."

"And I know I can restrain him," Steve argued. "I'm probably the only one here that can, but it won't come to that."

"I can't be certain. Neither can you," she stated. Barnes threw something at the glass near her head and she flinched. "What could you possibly say to him while he's in this state of mind?"

"What do you think you'd want if you woke up in a cell, missing an arm and your memories?"

Sharon frowned, feeling a pang of sympathy. "He looks like he could kill us both."

"He's looking for someone he recognizes, someone to tell him what to do next."

"You could start by telling him to stop throwing things at our heads."

"You have to get me in there first," Steve pointed out. He walked towards the sealed door, glancing at the palm reader and keypad. "Help me out, Sharon."

"If he steps outside, we have no choice but to put him under. This is my call. Understood, Rogers?"

"No." Steve was not backing down. "Watching him wake up again, disoriented and afraid? It would only cause him more harm. Why don't you seal the door after I go inside?"

"I'm not locking you inside," Sharon insisted. "It would be like a cage fight to the death."

"Agent Carter," he said, pushing aside thoughts of Peggy. "Right now, my best friend is in pain and confused. He is looking for someone he can trust to tell him where he is and what is going to happen next. So with or without your permission, I am going into that room."

"Without the key code?"

"You said you're on my side. Stop stalling for Fury," he demanded, flinching when he heard something break inside the cell. "Open the door now or get out of my way."

Reluctantly, Sharon walked to the sealed entry. Sergeant Barnes froze, his eyes watching her movement towards his only exit. There was a gurney and a table between them, knocked over on their sides. He squared up to her, anticipating confrontation. His eyes assessed her gun then sized her up as an opponent. A shiver ran down her spine.

She looked back at Rogers, paused to give herself one more chance to change her mind. "I'm leaving the door open," she finally said, pressing her palm to the reader.
“Thank you.”

The locks clicked and she stepped aside. Silence hung in the air, save for the sound of guns being shouldered.

With an outward show confidence he really didn’t feel, Steve stepped into the trashed medical bay, keeping constant eye contact with his friend. They were only ten feet apart but it felt like a deep abyss stretched between them.

The Winter Soldier held a broken metal pipe in his hand and took a defensive stance.

"Stand down, sergeant. Your mission is complete,” Steve directed.

"My mission?” He had no recall. They’d punish him for it. There would be pain. "My programming is faulty,” he tried to explain.

"Programming?"

His frustration grew. They should understand. "I have no recall of my mission."

Steve shifted, choosing his words carefully. "You assigned this mission to yourself. To defect, to return home.”

“Home?” he scoffed, frowning at the man in his cell. And he couldn't defect. His programming wouldn't allow it. Would it?

“Yes. You’re here, Buck. You’re in New York City.”

He was momentarily stunned. He must have been unconscious for some time. Not in the chamber, but by some injury or drug. He would be hunted down and brought back, punished and wiped again.

“Buck,” he said, trying out the word on his tongue. "Why do you call me that?”

“It’s a nickname,” Steve said quietly, seeming somewhat pained by sharing the information. “You are James Buchanan Barnes.”

Memories flashed through his mind, too fast to recognize. It was the strength of the emotions that frightened him to his core.

“No. I am the Asset,” he insisted. That is what they called him. His identity had to remain secret. That’s what they told him. James Buchanan Barnes... Was that his name once? His heart pounded in his chest with the fear of exposure. They'd waterboard him again. He hated that punishment most.

“You’re safe here,” Steve pacified, sensing the rise in tension.

Safe? No, not in a cell with one door and no defenses. His flashbacks continued, causing long breaks in their dialogue. He gained no understanding of what any of it meant, like a book written in languages he didn't comprehend.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. He tried to make a fist with his prosthesis but then panicked when he felt phantom pain. He looked up through sweat-soaked ropes of hair. "Why did you take my arm?”

"It was damaged in your extraction.” Steve hated being dishonest. How could he explain that his
arm was removed for everyone’s safety? “It's being repaired.”

"You're lying," James challenged, shifting on his bare feet. He looked at the agents with their rifles and tightened his grip on the pipe. "You're afraid of me."

“You fought with us when we made contact," Steve explained, wishing he didn't have those memories."Do you remember that?"

"No." He had a flashback of bullets and blood, guns and fists, a vicious fight for survival. He didn't remember any one person in particular. They were all enemies, trying to reprogram him to turn him into their obedient assassin.

"Who are you?" James asked of them collectively, his body beginning to shake from the constant surge of adrenaline pumping through his body.

“We are SHIELD. I was part of a spec ops team who brought you in. You were sedated for the trip and brought to this medical suite."

"SHIELD," he repeated. Memories flashed through his mind like lightning against a dark sky. He struggled to find intel on the organization. He found a thread from 1977 and mentally grabbed onto it. His eyes closed briefly as he ran it down. He recalled an agent he'd been in touch with in Vienna, a man he contacted in Prague last year. Yes, SHIELD. There was a man who shot him. No, that was Hydra. Or was it? He shook his head once in frustration and opened his eyes to clear his mind. Fragments did nothing but anger him.

He knew this wasn't how a person was supposed to live. This was a way to die. It wasn't a stretch to imagine making contact with another organization with hopes of escaping.

"Buck?"

"Who is my commanding officer?" he finally asked.

“I am."

"Rogers!" Sharon blurted out, surprised that he would make that call on his own.

"I am your acting commanding officer," Steve repeated with absolute authority.

"Rogers," James repeated, and a memory hit him hard. It was gone before he could grasp it. He was afraid of it.

Steve wanted to say so much more but he didn’t dare. Not yet. It would take a long time to build any kind of trust between them. The last thing Bucky needed was to be shuffled from person to person. Steve wanted direct say in what happened to his friend. Screw the chain of command. He would become the commander.

James flinched when there was sudden movement on the other side of the glass.

"Everyone remain calm," Fury said, pacifying Barnes with a show of open hands as he strode into the fray confidently. "I am the facilitator here. We won't hurt you as long as you don't hurt us."

Rogers looked at Carter, who looked at Fury.

"Acknowledge," he demanded of Barnes.

After consideration and a reassuring gesture from Rogers, James dipped his chin in
acknowledgement. He dropped the pipe at his feet.

“At ease,” Fury said to the agents, reaching over to lower the muzzle of the rifle nearest to him. "Now, Sergeant Barnes, we would like to speak with you about the terms of your defection. Do you recall your appeal?"

“No.” Barnes looked back at his commanding officer. Rogers' posture had changed. He'd become defensive when the other entered the hall. Not threatened, but annoyed. He could see it in his posture. Tilting his head toward the man in the hall, Barnes asked, "Who is this guy?"

“This is Director Fury." Steve nodded at the viewing window. "He is the head of SHIELD."

"Oh so now you recognize my authority," Fury griped.

"He personally aided in your extraction,” Steve added.

"We were a five-man team who answered your call, sergeant. You tried to kill us. You remember any of that?"

He supposed they wanted guilt on his part, but he felt none. “No.”

Nick took a deep breath and exhaled into the silence. He would swear he could hear the ticking of the second hand on his watch. "Your offer was intelligence on various terrorist cells in exchange for your extraction and integration into our organization."

James paled at the thought. His programming wouldn't allow him to even make that offer. And if he did, death would be preferable to what they'd do him if he was caught. That much, he remembered.

"You have rights here, human rights," Steve explained, wanting that acknowledged by everyone in the room. "Your cooperation with SHIELD could save lives. They'll give you protection in exchange for your intel."

"You don't know them." He couldn't hide from Hydra. No one could. He lost time in fear-filled memories until he heard Fury speak.

"Romanoff," Nick said, calling her to him. She stood in the hallway, paralyzed with anxiety. He motioned with his hand, arm stretched out toward her. “Come here.”

Natasha could count on one hand the times in her life she had been truly terrified. She had never been afraid of herself. She feared those few who had managed to break through her formidable emotional defenses. The ones who had the power to break her. James was one of them.

She was afraid. Clint was right, though. She owed it to James to help him piece his life back together.

Natasha tugged at the warm up jacket she’d grabbed on her way out of the gym. It covered the worst of the remaining bruises. She walked to the threshold and willed herself to look at the Winter Soldier.

"Sergeant Barnes," Fury began. "This is Natasha Romanoff. She will be your liaison while you are at SHIELD."

Nat nodded once in agreement, her throat too dry to speak.
Steve tensed, not sure what was going to happen during this particular reunion. Bucky’s last encounter with Nat was violent and almost ended with her death at his hand.

"Natalia," James whispered, eyes mapping the details of her face. Memories flooded him, pieces of a larger puzzle. He remembered training her, taking pride in her accomplishments, loving her, fearing for her. The Red Room. The cryo chamber. Pain and hatred. Deception.

He stepped closer to the glass. She looked small and fragile to his eyes. He remembered she was neither.

"You made it out," he said quietly in Russian. “Thank god.”

Unable to stop herself Natasha raised her hand and pressed it flat to the heavy barrier. Crushing guilt and fierce longing caused tears to well up in her eyes.

She swore she’d not allow her emotions to move beyond the impressive barriers again. But they crumbled the moment she heard relief in his voice. Memories of their stolen moments and hushed declarations caused her breath to hitch. This was the man she had loved and respected.

“James, I’m sorry. I should have come back for you. I should have...”

Fury crossed his arms over his chest, his movement pulling her thoughts out of the past and reminding her where she was in the present. She silenced herself before everything spilled out. Not here. Not in front of an audience. She could not afford to expose this weakness. She needed to take a step back. She needed to protect herself.

Steve watched their reunion in silence. Bucky seemed to remember Natasha but didn't give any indication of remembering him. He tried to crush the surge of jealousy but it was in vain.

"You remember her?" Steve asked.

James looked at Rogers. The question seemed more important than any he'd asked yet. Like the answer would shape his future here.

He looked back at the assassin outside the cell. He could still read Natalia like an open book. He could see she feared they had revealed too much. What James didn't know is if this would harm either of them.

He fell back on his trusted instincts. They told him to create distance. "I knew her once," James said with a trace of bitterness in his tone. "She is not the same person now."

Fury watched as Natasha physically recoiled from the glass barrier. He was rusty on his Russian, but he was pretty sure when James first spoke to her, it was almost in an intimate way. It was too soon to tell what was intended and what could be implied. Psych was going to have to do a full evaluation before they could begin to unravel the Winter Soldier's mind.

And he had a meeting to attend in D.C.

"We'd like to get your room cleaned up, have some people come in to talk to you."

James tensed, looked to Rogers. He didn't want anyone coming inside. That's when the reprogramming would commence. He picked up the metal pipe he'd discarded.

“Bucky, don’t,” Steve raised his hands, palms outward. He could practically feel the weapons trained on them as he spoke. “I promise no one will hurt you.” He slowly moved until he was
between James and the door, effectively blocking Carter's line of sight and fire.

"Rogers, move," she demanded.

"No."

Feeling the tension in the corridor escalate, Natasha quickly moved to stand in the doorway as well. “Stay back," she warned. "If you don’t, you won’t like the outcome.”

"Everyone calm the fuck down," Fury demanded. "No one is going to shoot anybody. Carter, get your team out of here."

"Sir?"

"You heard me."

Sharon lowered her rifle and reluctantly followed Warren and Walters into the hallway that lead to the safety box. She stopped just beyond Fury, the look on her face clearly telling him that she would not abandon him entirely.

“Please, just put the pipe down," Steve pleaded, praying Bucky would listen to him. "We can go across the hall while they clean up this room. You can sit down there and we can get you some food. You've got to be hungry, right?"

Food was the last thing on the Winter Soldier's mind.

His body was trembling, adrenaline mixing with the sedative his body had yet to fully purge. He felt fatigued. If he was going to try and fight his way out of this cell, he'd lose.

But now he didn't have to. Rogers was making this easier for him.

The pipe clanged loudly as it bounced off the floor and finally settled near his bare feet. It was a show of surrender.

But it got him out of the cell.

"After you."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapters: Back to the Tower with Tony, Bruce and the Asgardians. Also, Fury and Coulson will attend a meeting in DC with Secretary Pierce that will change everything.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Quality FrostIron time: Tony is overwhelmed about work, Loki is introduced to Rise of the Guardians, and our couple pillow-talks about Jotuns, racial hate, and boogie men. Somewhere in there, Tony suggests leading a revolt against Odin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As the sun began to set, Coulson pulled his car into the underground VIP garage at Stark Tower. Thor and Loki unfolded themselves from the cabin of the vehicle and then flanked the agent as they walked to the elevator.

"Good evening," Jarvis greeted when they stepped onto the lift. "I will notify sir of your arrival."

"Thanks," Coulson replied.

"Agent Romanoff asked me to tell you she was called in."

"Understood. Fury told me Barnes was conscious and Natasha would now be his liaison."

"Cause for concern?" Thor asked.

"More like progress through controlled chaos," Coulson explained. "We seem to thrive on it."

Loki's chest rumbled with mirth. "I resemble that remark."

For the first time, Coulson shared a genuine smile with the dark prince.

Tony paced the confines of his workshop, holding an animated video chat with a Stark Industries employee about their current defected, brought-back-from-the-dead, quasi-super soldier. Dummy trailed along behind Tony, mopping up the spills from the liquid in the over-sized coffee mug in his master's hand.

“Did you get the detailed scans of the connection port," Tony asked before listening to the caller's response. "I know, I know. We’ll end up frying his nervous system and he may not be able to use any prosthesis again. Getting Captain America pissed at us for further disabling his undead friend was not on my to do list today. Just take one more look at the scans. Let me know if you see any way to rework a new prosthesis into his existing port without exhaustive rehabilitation as an outcome.”

Tony ended the call with the head of R&D and rubbed at the tension in his forehead. He already knew the prosthetics his bio-mechanical division made would not work with Barnes' current configuration. It would have to be a complete refit, from the intricate docking port out, making it uncharted territory. Although that was something Tony lived for, it wasn't his recommendation if they wanted a functioning field agent.
He idly spun the hovering three-dimensional scan of the soldier's prosthetic arm and studied it again in appreciation. As a weapon, it was a thing of deadly beauty. It functioned thoughtlessly with Barnes' nervous system and muscle memory. If he gave the soldier a new arm now, it would take months for Barnes to learn to use it properly.

Tony's mind was already upgrading this exact model. He could streamline the electroshock weaponry, adjust the tensile strength, and add a few other modifications to create an even more deadly weapon. And it needed an upgraded power source. He could put a kill switch in it, which might make it more appealing to Fury, but damn, it would be a fierce weapon. He could see why Fury was afraid of it.

Tony took a sip from the large mug and frowned when he found it empty. He set it down on a work table and dropped heavily into a much abused chair. For once in his life, it was actually hard to concentrate on the task at hand. His thoughts settled on Loki.

Tony felt much better after his emotional confession, but it still left him raw and exposed. He was not used to telling the truth when deflection and bluster served him well for most of his adult life. He needed distance to recenter himself. But now that he'd had that time, he wanted to rush headlong back into the whirlwind of his relationship, fling, or whatever the hell it was he had with Loki.

Tony closed his eyes and tried to feel his connection with the Asgardian.

He could sense a gentle wave of contentment, of purpose, and yes, there it was: affection. It was so different from the roiling pit of anger, despair, and helplessness that apparently largely came from Tony. When one would get het up, they actually seemed to feed off each other. It was mind boggling that they could make each others emotions stronger and harder to control. Under certain circumstances, could prove to be very interesting. On the flip side, like this afternoon, it was apparent that they made a very volatile pair, to put it mildly. Loki said he could control it in the future. Tony hoped so because he was emotionally and physically done fighting with Loki.

He wanted to see the Asgardian, be near him. Damn the consequences. But Tony thought that running off with Loki to a tropical island would be heavily frowned upon. He had so much on his plate right now and it didn’t seem as if he was making any progress at all.

The island retreat would have to wait.

"Sir, Agent Coulson has arrived with the Asgardians," Jarvis announced. "Loki is asking for you."

It was a knee jerk instinct to just hide down here until Tony had a few things figured out, to retreat into his work and let the world go away for a while. But that never solved anything. It was hard to let someone in, and Loki was already connected in ways Tony had never experienced before.

“Tell him to come on up.” Tony leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on a work table, holographic blueprints from his current projects slowly revolving around him.

~*~

Loki's feet carried him swiftly towards the workshop. He wasn't certain what state of mind he'd find Stark this evening, only that he wanted to be near the man. He could use the excuse that he wanted to begin the strategic plan for Midgard's defense system but that was only part of it.

If only they could be alone without burden - take a walk, get away, relax, have sex all night. Any of those options would be preferable to constant monitoring and suspect. If they had a week to sort
themselves out, this bond could be managed together and he could find a way to use it to his advantage. He could only imagine what they were capable of with two arc reactors and magic.

Ascending the stairs, Loki felt his lips curl into a genuine smile when he spotted Tony. The engineer was lounging at his workbench, reviewing schematics for projects. There were mechanical devices of many sorts on almost all flat surfaces. If he were to guess, he’d say Stark was overwhelmed but uninspired at the moment.

Clearing the last step, Loki scanned the area for anyone else in the shop. He was pleased to find they’d be alone for now. He glanced at the couch they had sex on and felt a pang of desire. Later, if he played his cards right.

"I came to see if you needed an extra hand." Loki carefully picked up Barnes' prosthesis and studied it. "Something tells me the joke is wasted on you."

“I appreciate the effort." Tony’s lips curled up in a lazy smile. Just the distraction he was looking for. "But as for the help, that would depend on what that extra hand would be doing?"

"There are several possibilities," Loki answered, pleasantly intrigued. He causally wound his way around each bench, taking time to observe the components lying about, but his eyes always wandered back to Stark. The holographic blueprints hovering near by caught his attention. One was the mechanical arm. Another appeared to contain formulas. "What are you working on?"

“The real question should be what am I not working on. That list is shorter.” Tony rubbed the back of his neck trying to ease the ache. “For starters, Fury wants a new prosthesis for Barnes but I’ve decided replacing it would be a really bad idea, unless we all want to be on Steve's shit list. So now I have to put it back, which could prove deadly for me, and that's after convincing Fury. Sounds like fun, right?"

"Who is Barnes?"

"Also, SHIELD is rather terrified of you."

"That I actively promote."

"They want a way to keep tabs on your whereabouts in real time. So gee, guess who gets that task too?"

Loki mirrored Tony’s sarcastic smile. "I grow tired of the constant reminders of my boundaries."

"They want to collar you like a cat."

"Not going to happen." Loki assured.

"Oh, and by the way, we could really use a way to identify any alien threats and neutralize them before they become a problem. Again."

Loki winced. "Sorry about that. Partially my fault."

"Hey, no problem. I’ll just whip out the schematics for a global defense net in my spare time," Tony mocked, his pulse skyrocketing the longer he spoke. "I’ll just use all the extra satellites and missiles I have in my closet."

"You are rather resourceful." Loki mocked. When Tony sighed heavily and appeared truly overwhelmed, Loki reached out and clasped the man's hand between his. "What can I do to help
"Run away with me. I own a tropical island. We’ll live out our lives lying on the beach and sipping fruity drinks out of coconuts with little paper umbrellas."

Loki squinted at a spot on the wall behind Tony and thought about it for almost a second. "I accept."

That halted Tony's tirade in its tracks. "I can’t leave! Weren't you listening to me?"

Loki chuckled. He framed Stark's face in his hands and placed his lips on Tony's mouth gently, kissing him once.

"Are you familiar with the term operant conditioning?" He kissed him again, this time, lingering slightly longer. "You are getting no reward for your good behavior, only punishment. I think I should do my part to change that."

This time, he coaxed Stark's mouth open with a warm tongue.

Tony responded eagerly to Loki’s touch and let his eyes close. The bond between them sparked beneath his skin. He grabbed Loki’s hips and pulled him closer until they were pressed tightly against each other.

Tony’s mind went blissfully blank and he groaned into Loki’s kiss. He ached for this contact. The supernatural connection between them amplified those needs. As if he wasn't starving enough for physical attention. Tony knew Loki felt it too, heard the answer in the deep moan that echoed his own.

It took him a moment to realize his phone was vibrating in his back pocket. He reluctantly pulled away from the kiss, pausing to collect his thoughts enough to sound coherent, should he accept the call. Tony pressed his forehead to Loki’s chest and took a deep, calming breath.

"Must you answer?"

Tony glanced at the phone's screen, saw the caller ID, then declined it. The distraction of Loki nibbling on his ear was enough incentive to pass it on to voice mail. He tossed the device in the general direction of the workbench.

Tony wound his fingers in Loki's soft hair and pulled him into another searing kiss.

The immediate buzz of a text message interrupted them again.

"Ignore it," Loki demanded, pushing the phone well out of Tony's reach.

"Ignore what?" The man didn't need coaxing. What he needed was skin on skin. Loki's tongue and lips and hands and teeth ushering him to a place where no one else existed.

“Sir.”

"No," Tony mumbled against Loki's mouth.

"I'm sorry, sir, but Ms. Potts insists that I remind you of the black tie fundraiser gala for Stark Solutions. She says, and I quote, "If I have to cover for your absence at another charity event, I'm going to tie your nuts up in a black tie so tight your balls will stay blue forever."

"Well, that's rather severe," Loki decided.
"Yeah, she hates me right now."

"She did not say that, sir," Jarvis countered. There was an awkward silence between the three of them before the A.I. spoke again. "The event is scheduled the evening after tomorrow. I'll put it on your personal calendar."

"Apparently, your artificial servant has a backbone."

Tony frowned. Jarvis seemed unnaturally bossy. He’d have to thoroughly check the A.I.’s proprietary programming later. That is, if he remembered. Loki’s hands on his ass were a wonderful distraction.

“You know what? Fuck it," Tony said with a decided shrug. "Pepper knows I'm over my head with the shit that's going on right now. Oh hey... better yet, fuck me. C’mere."

Tony grabbed Loki by the shirt and tugged him over to the sofa. He collapsed back onto the well worn leather and dragged Loki on top of him. “That’s better. Now where were we?"

"I remember exactly," Loki said, capturing Tony's mouth with his own. He let his full weight lay on the man, covering him, claiming him, loving him. "I am not going to stop for anyone," he murmured before sucking on Tony's neck.

"Jarvis," Tony demanded, tilting his head back for Loki's attention. "If anyone interrupts us, I’ll have you manning the cash registers at a Taco Bell for the foreseeable future."

The only response from the A.I. was the opening twang of Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On."

Tony laughed into their kiss as the song filled the workshop. Loki smiled too.

~*~

Later, Loki padded across Tony's bedroom suite barefoot. He was naked and glorious, unashamed of his body. His hair was loose and his face relaxed. He sipped from the glass of whiskey on ice as he approached the bed. He handed Tony the other glass and carefully crawled across the large mattress to situate himself behind the smaller man.

"The moon talks to them?"

"Yes," Tony said, incredulously. "Doesn't the moon talk to you? Like, anywhere in the Nines, as you always say?"

Loki leveled him with a look but it was wasted on the back of Tony's head. Instead, he set his glass down on the bedside table and then wrapped his arms around the man's waist. "Who is he supposed to be again?"

"Jack Frost."

"He reminds me of you."

"Please," Tony said, rolling his eyes. "He reminds me of you."

"Well, he is a lot of fun."

"But he's also miserable because he's alone."

"My point exactly."
"Shhh. This is the good part."

"We just started watching," Loki said, sipping his whiskey again. "If there are no more "good parts" then we should stop now."

"Hush. You'll enjoy it." Tony lightly traced Loki’s arm with a fingertip as they watched the movie. This is what he’d craved. Being close to someone. Sharing space and just relaxing into the moment. True the genius had a million other things he needed to be doing but that could all wait. Tony felt sated, happier than he had in a long time. Plus he could sense those same emotions echoing in the warm body he reclined against. He felt like purring.

“So this shape shifting thing you do. Tell me about it. I’ve only seen you like this and the two other times you changed form."

"The woman and Odin?"

"That was Odin?"

"A shabby knock off, purposefully, but yes."

"Wow."

"Moving on," Loki encouraged, wishing he could preserve the light atmosphere.

"Right, so is this the real you? Not that you have to tell me or anything. I was just curious." Tony turned Loki’s hand palm up and laced his fingers through Loki’s. He winced a little as the hand momentarily tightened. Touchy subject… their lives were a veritable mine field of them.

The alcohol in Loki’s stomach churned. He knew Stark meant no harm in the question. They were watching a movie about mythical beings, some of which changed shape. Sandy. The sandman. How adorable, really, in a childlike manner. But the topic was not. He understood where the inquiry stemmed from, and the man did have a right to know certain aspects of him. Well, he didn't, but Loki was inclined to allow it. Love and intimacy, damn it all.

"This is me," Loki finally said, before the silence grew too long. "This is what Odin and Frigga want me to look like. This is the form of an Aesir. I've worn it for hundreds of years. It's Odin's spell, not mine, and it was all I knew for most of my life."

Loki thought about it again, wondered if there was discussion about it. Or did Odin change his icy blue infant form to pale pink before he would even touch Loki on the Jotun alter?

He pulled Tony closer to his chest, fitting the man tightly against him. "It takes a little concentration for me to hold another appearance, even my birth form."

"So it's hard to shape shift?"

"No and yes," Loki said with a shrug. "It's... there's a cost of energy but likely no more than if you were to spend hours formulating an equation or working on your iron suit. You're using "brain power," if you want to reduce it to simple terms, which is the origin of magic. Midgardians don't call it that because your thoughts don't conjure corporal creation. This brain of yours is incredibly smart," Loki said, tapping Tony's temple, "but it can't even grasp the idea that you could create form with thought, if you only knew how."

Loki kissed his temple and stared at the television, not seeing the movie at all. He could feel Tony's curiosity gnawing at him. Loki had skirted the real question quite well, but this was Stark.
His inquisitive mind would not yield.

"Tony," he said, waiting until he had the man's full attention.

It was the first time Loki actually spoke his given name. Tony smiled at the warm feeling from that single act. This was getting serious. "J, stop the movie."

He scooted back a little and turned to face his lover, putting his glass on the table beside them. Tony could feel the apprehension radiating off Loki but he had no fear of the man whose lap he straddled. "Hey it can't be that bad, right? It's not as if you have tentacles or anything. But then again, that might be interesting."

"You have many races and colors of people on Midgard." Loki traced a scar on the man's collarbone, mind wandering to who would dare injure him in his past. "What is your favorite appearance?"

"I really don’t have a preference."

"Young, old, dark, light, male, female?"

"They all have their own appeal."

"Agreed," Loki said, leaving out that Tony was the first Midgardian he'd truly found alluring. "Which ones do you hate?"

"It’s not a particular type I hate. It is an extremist's actions or a group's ideology against basic human rights."

"But you do hate a certain appearance," Loki nudged. He didn't want to push but it was important to make Tony understand. He waited until Tony's eyes met his and held them. "The Ten Rings."

Tony paused to collect his thoughts. "Look, I’m not sure what you’re getting at, but yes, I hate that terrorist group. What they do. Also, the man that sold me out to them. But again, it's the group's ideologies I hate, not their race or religion or appearance as a whole. I saved a village nearby from the Ten Ring's tyranny. It didn’t matter if those villagers they had brown, red, or hell, even green skin. They needed help and I could eliminate the threat. I know it was the right thing to do."

Loki put his hand against the man's chest, for once, not focused on the arc reactor there. "I can feel your heart beating like a caged animal. I need no bond or spell to feel the tremendous anxiety welling up in you when you think of the men who hurt you, the same men who tried to raze that village. You'd avenge the innocent again, all of them, if I were to tell you they were being slaughtered by the group, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Tony answered. "But it's not just about avenging, contrary to our team name. It's also about protecting. Bruce has done some horrible things, but I’d also do my best to protect him. I’d protect you too without a second thought. Because I know you. I also know you’re not the man who invaded New York."

"You have become a noble man, Tony Stark. It's why you're a hero now," Loki admitted. He kissed Tony's lips gently, framed his face with his hands. "Now, that dread that you are trying to hide from me, I can feel it. You fear the Ten Rings. You despise what they represent, who they are. But, think of something you loathe even more... the Chitauri. You hate them for the death and the destruction they caused."

Tony’s breath froze in his lungs, his heart ratcheted up, and he could not control the shiver that
crept down his spine. Was it the Chitauri? Yes, he hated them for what they did to New York, but he also knew they were pawns. They were soldiers.

What Tony dreaded was in the black void of space, that nebulous but crushing feeling of absolute terror fueled his nightmares.

“IT's not the Chitauri race,” Tony whispered, almost afraid to speak about it out loud. "IT’s what was controlling them that I fear. I want it destroyed so it won't hurt anyone again.”

They mirrored the same fright, felt it to the core of their being. Loki reached for his arc reactor pendant on the side table. He gripped it in a tight fist, feeling safer with a wealth of power at his beck and call.

"I won't let him hurt you,” Loki declared, seeing Thanos in his mind's eye.

He pulled Tony against him to try and regain their peace of mind. He laid flat against the mattress, pulling the bed covering over them both, concealing their bodies to their shoulders.

"Tony? To the Aesir, the people of Asgard, I am that terrifying thing in the dark. My race, the Frost Giants, we are the monsters that haunt children's nightmares. I was raised to hate them just as Midgardians now hate the Chitauri. So I do not wish to ever show you my birth form. Do you understand?"

Tony shifted to look right at Loki, grateful for his embrace to chase away his terrifying thoughts. “I don’t know anything about Frost Giants. But you seem nothing like what you describe. You're not a monster. Ambitious, yes. Devious, often. And deny it all you want, but I know you care about much more than you want us to know. So nothing, and I repeat nothing you show me is going to change my opinion of you. I have no bias to judge you from.”

Loki kissed him deeply. Tony said all the right things but he couldn't grasp the scope of hatred for his race by the Aesir. Not really. What could forty years on Midgard compare to hundreds of Loki's years, thousands of years of Asgardian history and hate...

"I can't," Loki stated. "I do not want to be what I am. I was raised as an Aesir to hate them. I still do."

"The genocide Thor accused you of?"

"Yes, and let's not forget the patricide. I practically killed King Laufey in front of Odin. I thought the Allfather would be proud of me. And that was such a difficult treachery to set up... Yet I did it." Loki's voice trailed off in thought. He sounded anything but proud of his scheme. "For the attempted genocide, I'll serve out my punishment. He'll add my war crimes against Midgard onto that. As long as Odin is on the throne, I'm foredoomed."

"Foredoomed," Tony repeated. Loki's speech was always so proper. "So the poison wasn't enough suffering?"

"No, he will demand more. Just taking my life isn't enough. And there will be a consequence to my escape."

"We need a civil uprising, remove him from power. Put me on the throne. I'll sort it out."

Loki laughed bitterly. "Then you and I shall lead our nonexistent armies against the might of the Allfather. But for now, I'd rather be here with you in peace. Let's speak of other things, happier things."
"Got it." Tony sighed heavily, trying to expel the tension in the room. “But I was kinda hoping you had tentacles.”

"We may explore perversity another time, Stark, but not this night."

"Yeah, okay. But keep an open mind," Tony encouraged. He smiled, relieved to feel Loki's mood lighten slightly. Tony wormed his way closer to a delightfully naked God of Mischief.

"So this boogie man," Loki said, giving a nod to the flat screen television.

"Pitch Black. He has a cool name."

"Pitch Black," Loki repeated. "What are the Guardians going to do about him?"

"You'll have to watch. He's kinda hot, isn't he?" Tony asked. "Jarvis, start the movie again."

"You think the boogie man is appealing?"

"Some aspects of him are. Like his voice actor," Tony explained with a wink. "Look, I can handle a person's darker sides, but they have to do the right thing in the end. And no, I'm not telling you if Pitch does or not. You'll have to watch."

"Darker but not darkest," Loki contemplated. "You push at the normal boundaries, Stark. Anyone else would be uncomfortable."

"Yeah. They tell me I'm complicated," Tony said flippantly. "They really have no idea."

"I think tentacles covered it."

"Please. That's just the tip of the iceberg."

Loki tackled the smaller man and was pleasantly surprised when Tony fought back for dominance. They rolled over the edge of the bed, taking the top sheet and the thick coverlet with them.

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Clint looked up from his sprawl on the huge sofa in the lounge area of the private wing in the tower. He glanced out the expansive windows and noticed it had gotten dark.

The archer put down the video game controller and stretched. His stomach growled loudly. It had been quite a while since that Frosty and cold fries he tried to share with Natasha. He checked his phone and frowned to see there had been no texts from her. That was typical for her, even if it annoyed him. He quickly fired off a message, demanding that she check in or there'd be some form of hell to pay.

Next on his list: Phil Coulson. It was a past normal off-duty supper time. If he knew his handler, Phil would be mainlining coffee and little else while working on his laptop. Time to fix that.

“Hey Jarvis?” Clint asked, still feeling a bit ridiculous talking to the ceiling. Whatever worked. "Where is Agent Coulson?"

"He is in the media room."

“Thanks.” Clint soon found Phil still seated on a couch, his laptop on his knees. He was intensely pecking away at the keys. Five televisions were broadcasting different news stations, sound muted. A sixth was showing a rerun of M.A.S.H. That one had sound.
“Sir, I have a mission,” Clint interrupted.

Phil looked up at his favorite agent. He glanced at his watch, noting hours had passed while he was entrenched in SHIELD’s databases. But Barton, he looked like a fine distraction from work. And that challenging grin was the only incentive he needed to ditch work for a while.

"Tell me about this mission." Phil said, shutting down his laptop. "Do I have clearance to know the details before I accept or am I to follow blindly?"

"Top clearance only," Clint insisted. "I'll take you to the location. I know it well, and I promise you’ll not be disappointed."

"Well then." Coulson turned off a tablet on the coffee table and finished the last swig of his bottled water.

"From the looks of things, you really need this break." Clint beckoned with a bent finger. "So let's go."

Phil stood and unrolled his sleeves, mentally calculating where his team members were, how long it had been since he’d checked on them, and what he still had to do before midnight. He found a little wiggle room in his schedule for whatever Clint was planning. Most of all, he was curious.

He removed his jacket from the back of his chair and put it on. Grabbing his phone from the table, he slipped it in his inner pocket and stepped up to Barton. "I'll follow your lead, agent."

"Excellent." Clint took the elevator down to the parking garage. He quirked an eyebrow at Phil as to which vehicle they should take.

Coulson pointed out a shiny, new, black SUV. "Print recognition. Push to start."

Where did Fury get these things anyway?

Clint headed uptown. He maneuvered the large vehicle down a narrow street of bohemian shops, stopping at the end of the block. He found a spot big enough to park the tank of a vehicle. A small sign hung above the door of a colorful building: Jaipur Indian Cuisine.

“I hope you're hungry," Clint said. "Natasha and I discovered this place after we got back from Rajasthan and were craving some authentic food. It did not disappoint."

"Hope it doesn't come with the authentic bullets you brought back in your body." Was this a date? Coulson opened the door and stepped out into the cultural bliss of the street they'd parked on. It smelled divine outside the restaurant.

"No bullets. I promise," Barton reassured. "Although I'd run the gauntlet again for some of these dishes."

They walked through the warm restaurant. It was heavily decorated in carefully chosen native pieces.

“Everything here is pretty much delicious. Some things are spicier than others though. Think you can take the heat, sir?"

"Bring it," Phil said, stepping close to Clint. He looked at the agent's mouth and then chuckled. This was going to be fun.
"Private seating," Clint mentioned to the hostess. She seemed happy to oblige.

The tables were situated low to the ground in little brightly painted nooks with large round bolster pillows to recline against. Clint and Phil were led to a bright purple niche. Clint gracefully sat on the thick carpet and picked up a menu.

“Allow me.” Clint fired off a vast array of menu items to the waiting hostess. He finished with an imported Indian beer that would go great with some of the dishes. After she left, Clint reclined a bit. Looking at his handler sitting across from him, Clint felt suddenly a little awkward.

Phil wasn't sure exactly what this was. He'd been asked, albeit told, that they were going out, but he assumed Barton had an agenda. He could see Clint was momentarily lost, so he tested the waters. "Tomorrow, we need to be on the same page before the meeting."

Clint frowned a little. This is not how his first outing with Phil as a couple was supposed to go. "Nope, no shop talk. I don't want our first date to center around our jobs."

"Date?"

"That's what this is right? It's what we both want," Clint asked. "Maybe I wasn't clear before, but I don’t want to be just colleagues or friends anymore. We’ve been through too much to try and go back to that."

"Yes we have." Phil didn't hold back his chuckle. He wasn't laughing at Clint, he was entertained by the man's technique. He couldn't seduce a dog with a bone, but he'd shoot you straight in the heart with his honesty. "It is what I want. Dating will be difficult with who we are and what we do, but I believe we can make time. Like now."

Clint’s smile was dazzling. He had in front of him everything he always wanted. "Hey, I now have friends in high places. I can always borrow a jet and we can sneak away any time we want. Well, barring alien invasions, random attacks, and Asgardian temper tantrums."

"Sneaking away sounds nice," Phil readily admitted. He needed that kind of break. They all did. But the team was in thick, barely treading water at times. He hoped Clint understood that. It would be a while before they could take a break from the stress of maintaining the status quo between the WSC, SHIELD, the Avengers, and whatever entity would come at them next. Something told him Barton could see beyond the "now" and was eagerly awaiting a less frantic future.

Coulson thanked the hostess for the cold beer brought to their table and took a long drag before looking at Clint again. "It's going to be an uphill battle for a few weeks. Can you wait as long as it takes for things to settle down?"

Clint picked up his bottle too and took a drink before setting it back down. “You gotta ask? I’d wait longer than that."

Right for the heart. Again. "You're upping your seduction game, Barton."

"I'm playing for keeps," Clint admitted, feeling vulnerable and invincible at the same time. "I trust you. I know you care about me. I'd like to see if it's more than that."

"I've cared for a long time," Coulson admitted. "And I think you know by now that it's definitely more than that."

Clint picked up his bottle up, waiting for Phil to do the same. They clinked the glass together and saluted each other before drinking to their new endeavor.
Phil leaned on the table towards Barton. "So does this mission have a code name?"

"Operation Fuck Yeah."

Coulson laughed unabashedly.

Chapter End Notes

Let us know if you're still reading and interested. Thanks!
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Tony and Loki fall deeper in love. Steve and Bucky begin again over breakfast and memories.

The sun had barely risen. Steve carried a tray loaded with two servings of food down a lighted corridor. SHIELD headquarters was his current home. Again. It wasn't his choice, but he refused to leave since Bucky had regained consciousness the evening before.

It was hard to tell that it was day break since they were pretty far underground, but his internal clock said so. Barnes had been moved to a secure room. It was more like personal quarters, less like a prison cell.

Steve nodded at the two armed guards flanking the door. He was one of the few who had permission to come and go at will. It bothered Steve the guards were there, but he knew it was necessary. For now.

A guard entered a code and the door slid open. Steve walked inside. Rumpled sheets on a single bed took up one wall. The blanket was wadded up and half on the floor. On the opposite side of the room was a small table and two chairs. The remaining space was taken up by a couch, a chair, and side table with a lamp. There was a door leading to an austere but functional bathroom. The room was almost an exact copy of Steve’s temporary quarters across the hall. Right down to the 1940s New York area art work on the walls.

Steve set the tray down on the table. He began unloading the food-laden plates and then utensils. He wasn't quiet about it. It would not be wise to startle Buck in his current condition.

The bathroom door opened. Steve stared.

James Buchanan Barnes was wearing a white tee shirt and dark grey sweat pants. His feet were covered in SHIELD issue white socks. No shoes - too easy to run. Dark, damp hair was slicked back from Bucky's face. He was rubbing his shoulder where his arm used to be. Hollowed cheeks were heavily stubbled. There were dark circles under his eyes.

Those eyes regarded Steve warily. It looked like he hadn't slept at all. Well, that made two of them, Steve thought.

“I, ah, brought down some breakfast. I figured you might be hungry." Steve took the covers off the plates and felt distinctly uncomfortable under Buck's scrutiny. Should he order him to eat? "I kinda commandeered the kitchen since there was not much of a selection this early. Made some pancakes, bacon, oatmeal and brought some orange juice.”

James sized up Rogers again. His CO was solid. He didn't know the level of skill Rogers had, but James knew he wouldn't be able to take him with only one arm. And the dock hurt. Like it was full of needles. He could fight with his flesh arm, but one punch to the metal against his amputation site would put him on the ground.
His stomach growled when he caught the scent of bacon and maple syrup. Rogers had already sat down. He didn't seem to be afraid. James never ate with his CO. Ever. This was so far outside protocol that he was unsure what to think. It was an anomaly.

He walked over to the table, cautious. Finally, he looked down at the food. The oatmeal had cut up slices of apples and banana with raisins in it. A flash of memory hit him hard: A cold apartment. The feeling of freedom, joy, and worry. A small blond kid smiling up at him as he ate oatmeal with fruit in it.

James picked up a slice of bacon. Rogers watched, waiting with baited breath for something. James took a bite, chewed, then finally sat at the table. It seemed to satisfy the expectation.

The silence was getting to Steve. It made him nervous. He wished Natasha was here since James seemed to remember her most. But she’d left right after they’d gotten James settled into his new quarters. He’d not heard from her since.

“You must have a lot of questions,” Steve picked up his own fork and took a bite of pancake. "I’ll answer what I can."

James watched him eat. He felt a weird combination of familiarity and caution. Rogers was trying to feign calm control but he could tell this was strained. He glanced at the door, the fork beside his tray, guessed two guards on the other side of the door. But something in the back of his mind told him Rogers was no threat.

He picked up another piece of bacon, stared at the fruit in his oatmeal. "Who are you?"

Steve looked at him, hesitated a second too long to make it honest.

“I was a captain in the 107th division. We were... there was a spec ops group," Steve tried to explain. It hurt too much. He wasn't ready to go there. Neither was Buck, and he knew it. "The rest is kinda complicated. I'm now a member of a different kind of team. We'd like to recruit you, if things go well.”

"Who decides that," James asked, rubbing at phantom pains.

Steve shrugged a shoulder. "We'll go through that process when the time comes."

James watched him choose his words carefully, fumble over them. There was a long stretch of silence between them. It should have been uncomfortable. It wasn't.

He reached for a spoon and stirred the fruit around until it was well blended. He lifted the spoon and watched as the oats dripped off the tip back into the bowl. He hated oatmeal but had a strong desire to eat it. To prove some point. What, he didn't know. He raised his eyes to Rogers who was watching him. Not the spoon.

Steve pointed to the oatmeal. “I never really cared too much for the stuff. We had it every day when I was a kid, this weird grey lumpy stuff that we could afford. Every evening, I’d hit the bins behind the fruit seller and grab the bruised apples or anything else that didn’t look too bad. Since there were no other choices for breakfast, I’d cut the fruit up and add it in. Made it taste better.”

James had the exact same memory. But that couldn't be right. Implanted memories. That's all it was. He watched Rogers, wondered why this seemed like something he'd done a thousand times.

"You keep saying 'we'. Who is we?"
Steve wanted to answer that question honestly with a force so strong it actually hurt. But it was too soon. Forcing things would be detrimental to them both. “Just a figure of speech. I grew up in an orphanage. My mom died when I was a kid.”

James thought it over, finished all of his oatmeal and a pancake before he looked at Rogers again. "Why are you telling me this?"

“I’m making conversation, that’s all,” Steve tried to casually reply as he choked down another bite of pancake. "Do you remember any of your childhood?"

The Winter Soldier stood and walked to the other side of the room. "Is this an evaluation," he asked, heart thudding in his chest. "What are my orders?" he demanded.

Steve felt like he was trying to tread water but was sinking fast. Did he try and push too much? Now was not the time for Steve to be a friend. He had to be the commander he’d said he was last night. James seemed lost and looking for direction.

Steve wiped his mouth with a napkin and tucked it beside the tray. He stood to his full height, squaring his shoulders. Captain Rogers crossed his arms over his chest and addressed the soldier in front of him. "Your orders are to finish breakfast. Then there will be a brief medical evaluation. Psyche will be sent in for an initial assessment. I’ll be present for that."

James watched the transition with interest. This felt more familiar. "And my arm?"

"Psyche eval first,” the captain said sternly.

James looked away. Predictable answer. "They never take this long with a full repair."

"What do you mean? Is there a problem?"

James rolled his left shoulder and tilted his neck to stretch the muscles there. "Nerve degradation. Your engineers should know this."

"We're not Hydra," Steve reminded, but he frowned in concern. "How quickly do they usually replace it?"

"Hours."

Steve calculated how long it had already been. He'd need to talk to Fury right now. Stark too.

"Why'd you bring me here," James wondered. If they didn't know his limits then they didn't know his full capabilities.

"You asked SHIELD to bring you home. This was your choice,” Rogers reminded.

James struggled with that notion. He couldn't grasp the trail that led back to... to where? If not Hydra, where was he to go? Natalia. "My liaison, what's her role?"

“It will be her job to help your transition into our organization go more smoothly.” Steve just hoped Natasha realized what it was that she was taking on. Her disappearance last night did not instill him with confidence.

"Tell her I need my arm back."

Steve looked away in frustration. "I need to make some calls."
James nodded once. He gathered the pieces in his mind and set them on the game board. He had direction. He knew what was expected of him in the next few hours. He wanted his arm. He'd give them what they wanted to get it back.

So he walked back to the table and sat in front of his tray. He picked up his fork with his only hand and ate his pancakes. He glanced at the orange juice. Stevie loved orange juice.

James felt his stomach drop. He looked at his CO, terrified that his invading thoughts could be discovered. But Rogers was headed towards the door, phone in hand.

"Rest after you eat," Rogers stated. "It's going to be a big day."

James did as instructed. He left the empty plates on the table and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the floor. In his mind, he chased memories down the rabbit hole, losing all track of time.

~*~

"Sir, I must insist," Jarvis stated, raising the blinds in Tony's bedroom. Golden sunlight poured into the suite as dawn's light speared through the skyscrapers of Manhattan. "Dr. Phillips from research and development has been trying to reach you since last night. He is holding on the line once more."

Tony felt distinctly like telling Jarvis and Phillips to go and fuck themselves. He was the most comfortable he'd been in months, burrowed into the side of a very warm, pliant Asgardian Prince. But since ignoring Jarvis was never really an option, Tony yawned and untangled himself from Loki’s grasp. It was a task made more difficult by said prince seeming to have too many limbs trying to attach themselves to the engineer.

Finally able to move, Tony squinted in the bright light. “Fine, put him through, but you realize this is sheer torture before coffee.”

"I'll turn on the coffee maker," Jarvis said, "I'm transferring Dr. Phillips to the line. Go ahead, doctor."

"Mr. Stark?"

"Let's make this short and sweet." Tony slid out of bed nude and walked to the kitchen to hover over the coffee machine. As if hovering would make it work faster.

"Mr. Stark, we think there's a problem with neural electrode exposure in a biohybrid prototype."

"Yeah, the longer I study it, the more concerned I am about replacing it. The electrodes on the back side are as unique as it's creator," Tony admitted. "I'm worried about electrode degradation into the mounting units, not to mention what's happening in the front end attached to his body."

"There's a chance the user will lose function. The stump would have to be resurfaced entirely."

"Yeah, we're not going to do that," Tony assured, cringing internally at the thought. "Stop the research."

"Sir?"

"Yeah, I know," he said in apology. "I pulled you off some other projects to try to create something new. I realize you have deadlines of your own with other projects. If they aren't met, Ms. Potts will have my hide."
"So scrap everything we've done?"

"Yeah. I'll handle it from here. Thanks for your time."

"Yes, sir."

Tony ended the call. He knew the team would be mad that their work was in vain, but it was his R&D department. They were used to hypotheticals by now. He had the arm, and now he knew what had to be done with it.

He stretched and could not keep the smug smile off his face. He felt well and truly fucked. His body was sore in the best way. At the same time, he hadn't felt this good in weeks. The poison in his system seemed an afterthought. The energy Loki would transfer to him was addicting. So was the sex after.

It was tempting to crawl back into bed and laze the day away, but Tony owed Steve this favor. He'd made the captain a promise to make Barnes whole again. Despite their scraping in the hallway yesterday, Tony wanted to make good on that. He always antagonized Rogers. It was fun, most of the time. He'd gone too far, but he'd make it up to him today.

Besides, seeing the prosthetic limb in action was not something Tony could pass up. He wanted a demo. He could get one under the guise of scientific research.

Tony walked back to the bedroom and stood in the open doorway. Loki had moved into the warm spot left by his body and was burrowed under the covers. Tony could not resist going over to the bed and sitting on the edge. He reached out to run his fingers through Loki's sleep-tousled hair. There wasn't a moment's thought that the demi-god could have swatted him into a wall like a bug for waking him. Somehow, he knew Loki wouldn't react negatively to his presence. Maybe it was the bond they shared. It had settled down into a comfortable warmth that resided in his chest.

"Come back to bed," Loki demanded, eyes still closed.

"Sorry, babe. No can do."

"What could possibly be more important than me?" Loki rolled over onto his back, eyes still closed, nuzzling Tony's hand on his cheek.

"Duty calls. Cruel torture, and before coffee too," Tony conceded. "You are quite tempting, but I have to see a man about a prosthetic arm."

"You never explained that to me," Loki said, finally opening his eyes.

Tony almost whimpered as Loki stretched, remembering how that long, lean body felt on him, in him, surrounding him.

He stood to put some distance between himself and the allure of morning sex.

"That metal arm you saw in my workshop belongs to Captain America's long lost buddy. He was brainwashed by a couple of terrorist cells to become their pet assassin. He was also given that nifty metal arm to crush anyone in his reach. He apparently wants to play for the good side now."

"Brainwashed?" That got Loki's attention. He sat up, leaning back on his arms. "Stark, how do you get caught up in these things?" he muttered. "Why do you even have it?"

“I’m fate’s bitch?”
Loki leveled him with a look.

"In the field of robotics, I'm pretty much the expert, if you haven't noticed," Tony said with honesty. "I can and have deactivated some of the weaponry on that metal arm but I repaired the rest and-" 

"Weaponry?"

"Yes," Tony said, mind drifting to it's specs. "It's fascinating how powerful it remains. He was able to beat the star-spangled shit out of Cap with it. You should've seen the bruises on Steve's-"

"Stop talking." Loki interrupted, holding a finger to Tony's lips. "I've fought your Captain in hand-to-hand combat. I know his strength and aptitude. If this one-armed man and his robotic arm caused injury to Rogers, then you cannot go anywhere near this person."

Tony gaped incredulously at Loki's ultimatum. He was literally speechless.

"You must listen to me," Loki said, untangling himself from the bedding. He stood directly in front of Tony. "You said this man's conscious thoughts were altered. I cannot impress upon you the dangers of a mind that's been bent to someone else's will. I am your best example. I could've destroyed your world."

"I know but we stopped you and-"

"Look at what Barton did to his colleagues." Loki paused, growing more anxious by the second. "Who thought this was a good idea to involve you?"

"A bunch of smart people. Look, Barnes isn't even conscious when I'm in the room."

Loki's case cracked slightly. "How close do you have get to him?"

"It's his arm... Kind of difficult to not be right up in his personal space," Tony said, trying hard not to sound sarcastic, because he wasn't. He could literally feel Loki’s concern, and that more than anything kept his own temper in check when being issued what sounded like orders. He was certain Loki was truly worried about his safety. "I offered my expertise because I knew that anyone else would make a mess of the project. When I said I’m at the top of my field, I was not joking. No one can match me and my team."

"I am not questioning your skill," Loki pacified.

"Look. I could not leave this person in the hands of someone that would botch the job beyond fixing. Barnes is a friend of a friend," Tony explained. "Everyone tells me he's a war hero, that he's someone that deserves a second chance."

"You're keen on these second chances," Loki pointed out. "That's what almost killed you and why we are currently in this bond. Without it, you would die. And now you are running head first into another dire situation."

Tony understood the sincere warning but felt that he was in a controlled environment when it came to Barnes. "I have to be close enough to reattach the limb and make sure it is functioning properly."

Loki brought his hand to Tony's throat and caressed the pulse beating under his fingertips. "Close enough for him to cause you harm."

"Would it make you feel any better if I told you that Bruce will be there right next to me? We
detached it together and we'll reattach it the same."

That gave Loki pause. He was certain that Banner would put himself between Stark and any manner of evil intent. "Banner."

"Yes, Banner. Right there, like, literally sharing my same breathing space. It's quite cozy, like surgery, only with mechanical engineering instead of scalpels." Tony explained, knowing he just won the argument. "Remember, the Hulk likes me."

"Yes, he does," Loki admitted. He turned to walk to the kitchen, glancing out the expansive windows to the city. "Why did you take it off in the first place?"

"It was broken," Tony explained as he followed. "And SHIELD was afraid of it."

Loki rolled his eyes. "But you weren't."

Tony could still feel Loki’s distress. He’d won the argument but the victory seemed hollow. A little sarcastic voice whispered in Tony’s mind that Loki just might be more concerned for his own safety. If Barnes killed Tony, Loki would be a goner too. What if the reason he was concerned was just an act of self preservation?

Tony got two mugs out of the cabinet. He filled the cups and handed one to Loki. The trickster was avoiding his eyes. It only inflamed Tony’s insecurity.

“So, would this have anything to do with our bond,” he mumbled quietly. "Any grievous bodily harm to me would also adversely affect you."

Loki sloshed the hot coffee in his cup. It spilled over onto his hand.

"Absolutely not," he insisted. He felt a pang of anger work its way through his body. Did last night mean nothing? He could feel that it did. But wouldn't he wonder the same if he was in Stark's position? The Loki who arrived a week ago would've exploited Tony's insecurities but doing so was no longer an option. "I fear for your safety. Grievous bodily harm to you would result in a death sentence to the perpetrator. I will not allow it. Do you understand?"

Tony took a deep breath and set his cup aside. He wrapped his arms around Loki’s waist and rested his chin on Loki’s shoulder. The bond simmered with anxiety, but underneath that was the warmth Tony was coming to associate with genuine affection. “I’m an idiot. Even my trust issues have trust issues. I know you care. I can feel it.”

That is exactly what Loki feared. Stark had become a liability to be used against him.

"Hey." Tony looked up at Loki and grasped his chin lightly in his hand. “Stop worrying about everything. It’s okay to care. That's a monumental statement coming from someone who is as emotionally stunted as I am. But I care about you too. So this affection between us is not a bad thing.”

"Your naivete is charming but frightening," Loki admitted, but it calmed him a little. "Can I accompany you today?"

“Into a SHIELD facility? The agents would shit themselves then try to make you bleed with their shiny weapons. So nope, not an option.”

"Then what am I to do all day?" Loki frowned. "Thor will tell you tis not wise to allow me to amuse myself."
"Sounds kinky," Tony jested but he could sympathize with Loki's impending boredom. "It's just for
the morning. It'll take me a few hours. If I leave soon, I'll be back for lunch. Hey, why don't you
tell Jarvis everything we need to know to defend earth from another invasion?"

Loki's tensed. "You are referring to the defense system we are to create to protect Midgard."

"Yeah. We have to begin the project," Tony explained. "Show Fury we're keeping up our end of
the bargain. And, you know, I'm kind of personally invested in this planet."

"There are other worlds you'd enjoy more," Loki baited, challenging Tony with an expectant tilt of
his head. He lifted the pendant in his hand, palm up. The blue energy glowed brighter, as if it
recognized Tony's reactor in his chest. "I'm close to mastering a dark portal using your arc reactor.
There is much I'd like to show you."

"Are you sure you're not the god of temptation?" Tony smiled and shook his head. He wasn't
willing to let go of Loki just yet. He knew moments like this were rare. At least for him. "So you'd
like to whisk me away to another world and what? Keep me as your sex slave? I can't say I'd be
against that idea."

Tony's eyes were drawn to the jewel Loki created out of his arc reactor. The glowing light
illuminated the demi-god's face. It was then he noticed a fundamental difference in Loki’s
demeanor. The power he wielded now did not twist his features into the desperate madness that his
staff had. The smile on Loki’s face was almost joyful. Tony realized that his gift to Loki was
perhaps the touchstone he needed to really begin to change for the better. Truthfully, it took his
breath away to know that such an amazing being was potentially his.

"You are much more than merely sex or slave status," Loki admitted. "If you ever lose that keen
brain or sharp wit, I'll be very disappointed. I can have sex with anyone, anywhere. But you, there's
something particularly alluring about your entirety that continually draws me near."

"Sir," Jarvis interrupted. "Agent Coulson is asking for you. Director Fury called and there is a
potential emergency with the prosthesis for Sergeant Barnes."

"Way to kill my buzz, J. Tell Coulson I already came to that conclusion and I'll be there in a few
minutes" Tony sighed and looked at Loki again. "Duty calls... or at least a very eager agent in an
impeccably sharp suit."

"You mock Coulson but you like him," Loki stated.

"Of course I do. It's how men show their affection to friends. They mock them and pick fights.
Rogers is my favorite to rile up," Tony admitted with a devilish grin. "Don't you do the same with
your Asgardian friends?"

"Let's not go there," Loki insisted.

"Alright. Clothes, I need clothes." Tony could not resist pulling Loki in for one last toe curling kiss
before reluctantly backing away to dress. After that, he'd head down to the workshop to pick up the
case that contained Barnes’ metal arm then to the main kitchen in the lounge. Because that's where
everyone always gathered, of course.

"You," he said, pointing at Loki, "Stay right here. Naked. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Naked? You are still fixated on the sex slave notion."

Tony grinned brightly, though from the bedroom closet, Loki couldn't see it. "I promise to make it
worth your while," he yelled out. "Oh, and if you need anything while I'm gone, just ask Jarvis. He can hook you up."

Loki wandered into the bedroom and leaned against the door jamb. "I need a cell phone."

"Why," Tony said, zipping his pants and reaching for a belt. "You going to send me sexy pictures to distract me?"

Loki quirked a brow. "It was Banner I was thinking of at the moment. I'd like to speak with him before you both go to wherever it is you're going."

"Sure," Tony replied, wondering how that was going to go down. "I'll have one sent up to you. I'll have the pertinent numbers you may need already uploaded. You do know how to-"

Loki leveled him with a look. "I almost took over your planet, Stark. Your communication devices are no match for my intelligence."

"Barton taught you, didn't he?"

Loki looked away.

"Knew it," Tony said through laughter. It was all in good fun. He knew the tech in Asgard was literal light years ahead of earth's, but that didn't mean Loki knew how to run Stark tech without basic instruction. But after that, it was all intuitive.

Tony finished dressing and slid his socked feet into sneakers, leaving the laces undone for the moment. He stepped up to Loki, running a finger down his chest to his stomach and below. "Sext me later?"

"I do not know what you're going on about." Loki mocked. He grabbed his lover's wrist when those nimble fingers threatened the promise of pleasure. He lifted Tony's hand and kissed his knuckle, biting at it for good measure. "Be careful," he said, poignantly.

"Piece of cake," Tony lied. He accepted the kiss Loki offered. It was light and sweet and slow. Nobody would believe Loki capable of such purity. "Wow."

"So we've moved from vulgarities to "wow"?"

"Yeah, but it's a good wow."

Loki kissed him again. "I know."

"Sir," Jarvis interrupted.

"Shit. Yeah. Gotta run." Tony said, hopping on one foot toward the elevator while trying to tie the shoelace to the other.

Loki watched him go while worry pulled at his heart. Midgardians were such fragile creatures.

~*~

"Good morning," Coulson greeted when Tony exited the elevator.

Bruce sat at the kitchen counter, yawning. He had a cup of coffee and a newspaper on the counter. Half eaten toast sat on a plate, already discarded.
“It was a good morning. One I was quite reluctant to leave. But I suppose working with state of the art tech is a suitable distraction.” Tony wandered over to the coffee maker and took down a mug that was more like a soup bowl with a handle. He filled it to the brim and took a long drink. “So I'm going to put that shiny badass arm back on Barnes this morning.”

"Yeah about that," Phil started.

"I’m not sure I was able to discover all the built-in features. There was not a lot I could do to modify the tensile strength of the limb, but it's perfect the way it is."

"The way it is is nearly killed me and my team."

"I also found a nasty shock feature akin to Natasha’s widow’s sting. It didn’t seem to be working right so I removed the control chip. I'll work on replacing that this week," Tony continued enthusiastically. "You up for a revisit to the bowels of SHIELD HQ, Dr. Banner?"

Bruce looked at Coulson and then back at Tony, discipline and temptation.

"I'll take that as a yes," Tony decided. "So then there’s the delicate process of reattachment. All those electrode connections have to be aligned just right. If they start misfiring, I can’t even imagine the pain and dysfunction that would cause. So all that also depends on whether we damaged neural conduction implants when we removed the damned thing to begin with."

"We were meticulous in preserving the interface as a whole," Bruce insisted, mind deep in thought. Then he looked at Coulson. "Why did we remove it in the first place?"

"You haven't seen it in action," Phil answered. "We don't want it reactivated because of the threat he poses, but if it's going to debilitate him in the long run, then Fury wants the full restoration. He wants a field agent, not a paper pusher. The question remains, will Barnes use it for us or against us? I've seen it used against me, and it's not something I want to endure again."

"The arm itself is made of a titanium alloy similar to what I use in my suits," Tony explained.

"But there's more to it than that," Coulson insisted.

"Oh you have no idea," Tony said, excitedly. "It covers a cybernetic exoskeleton that is so intricate it made me nearly cry tears of joy. I'd love to meet the engineer that created this beauty. The fine motor control alone is the best I've ever seen. It can cradle a newborn chick or punch through 3 feet of reinforced concrete easily, maybe more. The limb also has sensors and adjusts accordingly to its environment - cooling itself down or maintaining a warm temperature depending on outside stimulus."

Bruce's mind was in overdrive. "So he's like the prototype for a cybernetic organism."

"Yes!" Tony exclaimed, pointing his coffee spoon at Bruce.

"Okay, hold on," Phil said, closing his eyes to try to not lose track of the goal.


"Instead of super serum," Bruce hypothesized, "Why not enhance a person beyond their biological boundaries by augmenting their capabilities with biomechatronics?"

"Yes! God, am I the only one getting a hard on?" Tony asked.
"No," Bruce admitted. "Why do you think they stopped with just an arm?"

Tony stopped, fazed.

"Maybe whoever created the cybernetics died?" Coulson offered.

Banner and Stark seemed crushed by the idea.

"All that research lost," Bruce muttered.

"I say we launch a search," Tony declared.

"We have to."

"Excuse me," Coulson interrupted."I can see you're both locked in some engineering idea-supernova, but I need to reel you back to the here and now, boys."

"Reel us in? I don't think you appreciate the sheer coolness of what we're talking about," Tony jeered. "Do you think he appreciates it, Bruce?"

"I think he is looking at this from a safety standpoint," Bruce conceded with a smile. "But it is beyond cool."

"See!" Tony shouted at Coulson. "And remember, Agent, you guys came to me and asked me to fix your broken toy, so to speak. Well, not only have I fixed what was broken, I decided I really like it and that it should be restored to it's rightful owner. With perks."

"Perks?" Coulson rubbed his eyes with his palms but the ghost of a smile was tugging at his mouth. "Can you install a kill switch?"

"Why?" Tony asked, horrified, mouth gaping.

Coulson held up a hand in frustration. "Barton," he called out, aware the archer was lurking nearby. "You ready?"

Clint uncoiled from where he’d been leaning against the hallway wall. Not having much else to do, the archer decided to shadow Coulson. Their date last night didn’t quite end the way Clint had hoped but despite that he’d not been too disappointed. The evening had been filled with amazing food, imported beer, and good conversation. Then once back in the tower and on Phil’s sofa, things had just started getting interesting when Phil yawned practically in Clint’s face. The man was still healing from his injuries and the beer had made him sleepy. Well, there were worse things in the world than having a warm, drowsy Phil Coulson in your arms. So Clint had leaned back against the cushions with Phil tucked against his side.

Clint shoveled him into bed around midnight and then curled up on the couch under a blanket. By the time he’d woken the next morning, Phil was already dressed and gone. So Clint showered and dressed too then went to find his errant would be lover. "You ready?"

Phil was no doubt tying up some loose ends before jetting off to DC. Clint was the designated pilot. Fury and Coulson had a meeting with some high up muckety muck in SHIELD. The archer was reluctant to let Phil out of his sight so he was eager to be piloting them to what would amount to be no more than a routine milk run.

He strolled into the kitchen where Stark and Banner were still gesturing excitedly about re-arming Barnes, which Clint thought was a monumental error in judgement. He didn’t trust the damaged
souped-up former soldier.

“Yo boss, I’m ready. Guess I’ll have to take my coffee to go then.”

"Then let's go," Tony gestured toward the elevator. He gulped down his hot coffee, not needing the jolt but enjoying it. "Jarvis is currently entertaining Loki so who knows how long that’ll last. Oh and I gave him a Stark Phone and your number, Bruce. He wants you to be my human shield. Oh, and don’t blame me if he figures out Snapchat."

Bruce's phone rang in his pocket. "I thought you liked me," he said, pulling it out. He looked at the caller ID. It read, Mischief Managed. "Really, Tony?"

The engineer glanced at it then winked at Bruce. "He's a handful but I got it covered."

Bruce rolled his eyes but answered it anyway, following behind Tony to the elevator. This was going to be an interesting day.
Chapter 10

Chapter by Loki_Doki

Chapter Summary

Cap moves forward with Bucky. Tony and Bruce do science. Bucky *almost* smiles. Coulson's idea for the team is finally made whole.

"This way," Coulson instructed.

He used the security readers to open the the secure entrances at SHIELD HQ. Dr. Banner was behind him holding a tool kit in each hand. Stark and Barton followed, each carrying equipment for reattaching the prosthesis onto the Winter Soldier.

"You'll be working in the med bay this time. We've evacuated this portion of the wing for safety."

"Evacuated," Banner repeated. "So Sergeant Barnes is still violent?"

"Not since last night. He's been optimistically cooperative but cautious in his rapport with Rogers," Coulson explained, "but he's still coiled tight like a spring. He's with psychiatry now."

"You think he's going to go from total memory wipe to chill in less than twenty four hours?"

"Not a chance."

“Yeah, like that’s gonna happen.” Clint could not contain his snort of disdain. The archer’s voice was flat and hollow. "Won’t take much to set him off. Barnes had it much worse than me. Having someone in your head, taking the part that's you and twisting it? There’s no getting over that. Not for a long time.”
Coulson's gaze landed heavily on Barton. There was a deep canyon of wreckage and remains in Clint's head that the mind gem left behind. They needed to sort through that carefully. Soon.
"Psych is there to get a baseline on Barnes, determine his mental capacity, his relation to reality, his intentions."

Clint shrugged a shoulder. "What makes you think he'll tell you the truth instead of what you want to hear?"

"Faith in the man who was Sergeant Barnes." Coulson's stomach flip-flopped but he remained stoic. "Dr. Banner, you'll have access to any medical equipment you may need should things go wrong."

"Why do people forget that I'm not that kind of doctor?"

"You saved me and Coulson," Tony reminded. "Those were both medical issues."

"No, those were an alien energy source and Asgardian magic. Again, not my specialty."

"Still managed to figure it out," Tony mumbled.

"Establishing an airway, breathing, and circulation is basic acute trauma protocol. A child could do it. That's all I did."

"Aren't "basic" and "acute" oxymorons in this case?" Tony quipped.

"No, but there were definitely morons involved."

"We can set up here," Tony said, walking over to a table near a rather imposing looking surgical chair. "This will be easier to use than a gurney in a prison cell."

"You'll have a medical team outside the doorway along with armed guards. They'll have ICERS so they can sedate Barnes should the need arise."
"Hopefully it won't come to that." Tony said. He rubbed his hands together and then began unpacking his equipment. "Let's get this show on the road."

Coulson tilted his head toward the door when Barton caught his eye. "We'll go get the patient."

"Just give us five," Banner said, voice coming from behind the chair where he was plugging something in.

Coulson left the medical bay, Barton in tow.

"You going to be alright in the presence of a psych team? They'll be focused on their evaluation of Barnes, but it might bring up some unpleasant memories for you."

“Don’t want to give them any more ammunition against me. Considering Barnes is the charter member of the fucked-in-the-head club, I think the attention will stay on him," Clint admitted. His tone was neutral and belied his urge to find a small dark place to hide in. "Just... if this goes horribly sideways, don’t expect me to stand there and do nothing."

"Doing nothing is not your M.O.," Coulson replied, pleased. "I'm curious which doctor Fury has chosen to pair up with Barnes. It could strengthen his relationship with Rogers if he's done the right thing."

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"He's telling us what we want to hear."

Fury sighed heavily. He caught Steve's eyes for a moment then spoke to the psychiatrist outside the evaluation room. "In layman's terms, what does that say about Sergeant Barnes' mental state?"

"It says that he's smart," the doctor stated with a hint of pride in his voice. "He's played this game before. He knows he must comply to get what he wants."

"And what does he want?" Coulson asked as he and Barton walked to join the small group.
"Well, he's not sure about his long term goals, if he even has them," the doctor admitted. He was a tall man, balding and fatherly. His glasses were round and wiry. The name Dr. Benjamin Gray was stitched on his lab coat next to his SHIELD badge. "I can tell you his state of mind is obedience with paranoia. He is hyper vigilant with a fight or flight response. Understandable given his past. He knows he's outgunned and outmanned right now. But if the scale tips, he may try to escape if threatened. He believes he must be compliant to avoid pain. He's also curious. He is very interested in his purpose here and our intentions."

"I told him we weren't going to hurt him," Steve interjected. "And we won't."

"Indeed. I reassured him of that but it will take a while for him to trust us," Dr. Gray said, adjusting his glasses and turning to speak directly to Rogers. "Sergeant Barnes explained his process from cryo to recollection in the now-defunct soldat program. He finally divulged that it usually takes him a couple of hours to physically recover from the cryo chamber. Initially, he's confused and only remembers his last experience with his handler. Apparently, that was quite bloody and combative, which is why your team was met with a rabid mind bent on murder. He came out swinging because that's how he went in."

"I don't know how they got him in there without dying in the process," Coulson added. "He was savage."

"Well, I don't believe anyone ever asked him to do things. They told him, and if he refused, they forced their will on him. So emotionally, he's extremely guarded. Self-preservation at it's finest. But as you can see, his mental state has begun to recover. His thought process is logical. His is oriented to time, place, and person. He grasps his situation and finally buys into the fact that he very well may be safe here."

"From who?" Fury asked, curiosity piqued. "What does he remember?"

"His memory is like a jigsaw puzzle," Dr. Gray explained. "And my bet is there are entire pieces not even on the table yet. It could take days to weeks before he can put them together, if he can even get that far. I'm hypothesizing that he will never regain his full memory. Repeated chemical amnesia is like pouring acid on a picture. Eventually, it's completely dissolved. So he needs time, Director, without being reprogrammed."

"Reprogramming is out of the question," Steve stated firmly.
"Agreed. We want what's in there," Fury said, pointing to his temple. "His mind could be a proverbial map of both global intelligence and terrorist communities."

"Time. We will only know in time," Dr. Gray repeated. He put his hands in his pockets and looked through the glass window into the evaluation room. "I explained to him that he is to be on his best behavior. My team will not tolerate violence or aggression. And we will not inflict it upon him either. He verbally consented to safety, for what it's worth. I impressed upon him that we are seeking his cooperation through choice rather than force. That feels foreign to him right now. He is awaiting orders, not downtime. He's only familiar with being useful."

"Then let's give him something to do," Fury said. "Give him a laptop. He can unload all the secrets he knows about the people he worked for. Romanoff can work with him in a secure briefing room. He can keep to his daily physicals and psych appointments. He's a soldier. Get him on a schedule. We'll integrate him into our organization through our Strategic Intelligence department, utilize his mind while his body recovers."

"That will be suitable. But absolutely no field work," Dr. Gray insisted. "The process of recalling and processing his memories will be traumatic enough. We're going to have to work through decades of PTSD with resultant aggression in order to get the intelligence you're after."

"We have the time," Fury pacified.

"Stark and Banner are ready in the med bay," Coulson said. He looked at the Winter Soldier in the holding room. Barnes was sitting completely still on one side of a white leather couch, staring at the wall across from him. "One armed and bruised, he still looks like he could kick my ass."

"He could," Dr. Gray admitted with almost a proud smile.

Steve hated how nonchalantly everyone was discussing Bucky. It set his teeth on edge. He could see the reason behind their assessing a new asset. But Steve’s friend was more than that. Bucky was still in there somewhere. He glanced over to the couch. Steve wanted to shake that blank stare off Bucky’s face. But that was not the answer. Steve would have to bide his time and wait for any bits and pieces of the man he once knew to resurface.

"So what's the verdict for today, doc?" Fury asked. "Do you believe Barnes is an imminent threat to this organization?"
The psychologist thought about it for a few moments before speaking. "He will defend himself if attacked. But I believe with proper handling by Captain Rogers, who he believes is his commanding officer, Barnes will remain cooperative of his own free will. And that's the goal me and my team have laid out. All my recommendations will be with Sergeant Barnes' health as paramount to other agendas."

Fury narrowed his eye but the corner of his mouth twitched with mirth. "Whose side are you on?"

Dr. Gray adjusted his glasses and dipped his head. When he looked again at the director, he smiled confidently. "His side."

Coulson crossed his arms over his chest, eyes darting between Barton and Rogers. "For anyone who doesn't know, Dr. Gray's grandfather was Dum Dum Dugan of the Howling Commandos. Director Fury has made sure Bucky is in good hands."

Steve was literally gobsmacked. To know someone else was in their corner was an immense relief, someone related to the Commandos. It caused the super soldier to choke up. Later, he'd have to personally thank Fury for continuing to look out for their best interests, even in the face of doubt.

Taking the initiative, Steve stepped forward and held out his hand to Dr. Gray. "Thank you for being an advocate for Buck. He'll appreciate it when he comes back to himself."

"Captain," Dr. Gray acknowledged, shaking Steve's hand confidently. "It's my pleasure. My grandpop was fond of the scrappy young sarge, as he called Barnes. He never tired of talking about his time with you and the Commandos."

"Alright," Fury interrupted. "You two can swap war stories later. Right now, we've got a hyper engineer and an generally angry physicist waiting in a high clearance med lab. If that's not a recipe for disaster..."

"Okay. Let's bring Barnes to them," Coulson said. "Cap, tell Bucky it's his choice whether he wants to be anesthetized to avoid pain during the procedure or remain awake for it. Remind him that he asked to be here. We're on his side. We're restoring him in good faith that he's going to remain cooperative. We want to work together with him, not against him."

Steve nodded. Coulson was saying all the right things but a geyser of anxiety was still bursting inside him. This could go wrong at any moment. But, they were giving Bucky choices. That was
good. That was more than he expected this early on. Fury had brought in a real advocate, someone
on their side. And Steve believed in Coulson too. He just didn't trust SHIELD as a whole.

And Fury explicitly said not to trust anybody but him where Bucky was concerned. That warning
was like a neon flashing sign in his mind's eye. He locked eyes with the Director. There was barely
a perceptible nod but Steve felt the silent reassurance all the same.

This was a big step in diplomacy from both sides. The olive branch had been extended. He needed
to accept it for this to work. Bucky needed to accept it too.

"Keep the guards at a distance," Steve said, glancing at the agents and their rifles. "If you want him
to think he's not under threat, then he shouldn't be."

"Trust is earned, Rogers," Fury explained.

"Understood, but it has to start somewhere. Right now, that's a visual cue, so lower your weapons.
Please." They did. So taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, Steve squared his shoulders and
entered the room where Buck waited.

"Hey," he began awkwardly. "The technicians are ready to restore your arm. You've got some
choices before we go in."

The soldier frowned, clearly confused by the last sentence. His eyes scanned the men outside the
open door.

Steve sat down in the chair next to him. "I'm going to go over the options and then tell you what I
think as your CO," and friend, he didn't say out loud. "The decision is up to you though."

After moments of silence, Barnes asked, "Is this another test?"

"No, Buck. This is goodwill," Steve explained gently. "It's the first of many turning points toward
the man you want to become."

"Become? I don't even know who I am."
Steve nodded, the terrible pang of anxiety and grief bottoming out in his stomach. "We'll figure it out, okay? Together."

Barnes narrowed his eyes. This kindness was alarming. "Why do you care?"

"One thing at a time," Steve pacified, trying an easy smile that probably failed. Then he explained the next step towards Bucky's new life.

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Dr. Banner swallowed, throat dry. Sweat beaded across his brow. He'd been working in a tight space, bumping shoulders with Tony, playing a sort of engineer-Twister: right hand, silver port; left hand, red conduit. Impossible to do but somehow contorting to make it happen.

"Bend your wrist," Tony asked, "I can't see the connector. But don't move your hand."

"Right." Bruce tried to do so but had to literally duck under the engineer's right arm. Tony stood to allow room for the doctor now hunched near his belly. He bent low, goggled eyes laser-focused on the tiny circuitry in the prosthesis. "Hold everything right there."

Bruce held his breath. Tony worked with a silent intensity few would believe of the gregarious playboy. He was damn good at his skill set. Bruce was close enough to see Tony's pores, smell the beginning of perspiration that came from extreme pressure to perform with meticulous precision.

His chin brushed against the metal arm that was seconds away from being fully activated. Barnes hadn't said a word. The only indication of pain was the speed of the heart monitor and increase in respirations.

Rogers hovered. There was little interest in the mechanics. He was there to protect his friend, restrain him if needed but the soldier was still as stone. It was eery. Unnatural. Steve didn't like it. Banner could appreciate the sentiment of concern, but it made Tony tense. The more tense Tony became, the more Bruce had to focus on the Other Guy. That meant less attention on assisting.

It would've been far easier if Barnes had agreed to do this under anesthesia.
But it was his choice.

And in doing so, it meant Tony worked in slow-mo, with care that even Bruce was shocked to witness.

The introductions and first few minutes were awkward but once settled into the chair, Barnes was nearly unresponsive. He wasn't fooling any of them. Nerve endings were reconnecting and firing. He was asked to move fingers, squeeze his fist, rotate his wrist. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. That's where the minute, delicate tweaking of circuitry came into play. They should've taken a break but Barnes shook his head no each time they asked if he needed one. It was unsettling.

"Okay," Tony finally said, sitting on the round stool. His eyes were still roving the open circuitry and mechanics.

Bruce stood and flexed his back, walked away to lean against a nearby counter. He shared a hopeful look with Rogers.

Stark raised the medical chair to a fully seated position instead of reclined. Then he took Barnes through a very specific range of movements, pausing to lower his magnifying goggles and tweak the inner workings when Barnes would explain a snag or request a change.

Tony understood all of it. They shared a language no one else in the room understood. What was the difference between a snag and a pull? A hesitation and a pause? What was numbing pain compared to numbness with pain? He wasn't even going to try to decipher the technical jargon portions. But he supposed when your nerves were connected to an entirely mechanical arm, biological medicine took a backseat to robotics. And that's where Stark shined brightest. Bruce could hardly hear Barnes, but Tony's ears heard every single thing that needed to be done for comfort and maximum performance.

"Science at work." Bruce said, taking several gulps from the water bottle Coulson brought to him.

"Nice work, doc."

"It's all him," Bruce admitted, angling the bottle at Tony. "He's a genius, you know."
"Yeah," Coulson agreed. "We're kind of aware of that."

Bruce scoffed and finished his water. Barnes made a fist again, talked quietly to Tony about something in the forearm still catching. Tony reached for another piece of equipment and rolled back to him, changed the angle of lighting. He dipped his head and went back to work.

Barnes could rip Tony's head from his shoulders but the soldier's demeanor was full of interest and almost docile. There was no malice there. "So what now?"

"Now," Coulson said with eager anticipation, "We focus on tightening the fabric of our new team. We huddle up and protect each other. Reconnect and bond. Get stronger together. With Ross out there and various other storms that may be brewing, we're going to need one another. Remember that."

Bruce watched Coulson with curiosity as he walked over to talk to Clint. He hoped Phil knew what he was doing. Adding Loki and Barnes -- in any capacity -- to the Avengers could go spectacularly wrong.

Or it could also become something greater than the sum of all of them. He understood that now and gave it the credit it deserved.

His phone buzzed in his back pocket. Loki wanted an update. He was tempted to send a picture of Tony working almost intimately close to Barnes just to freak him out. But then remembered what Coulson said: "We're going to need one another."

So Bruce texted what he thought was a very polite message: "It's going quite well. We're all still alive. Have dinner ready when we get home."

He got two emojis as a reply: a thumbs up and a Chinese take out box.

Well. That was progress. He put the phone in his back pocket and walked over to Tony.

The engineer rolled his chair away from close proximity, looking at his work with pure pride. "Yeah?" Tony asked with tangible hope.
Barnes squeezed his fist, turned his wrist, and rotated his whole arm at the shoulder. Finally, he looked directly at Tony and gave him what amounted to an attempted smile. "Yeah. Thank you."

"It was my pleasure." Tony's grin was big. He felt connected to the former Winter Soldier in a way he'd not anticipated. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and exhaled. Some of the tension coiled in his body began to dissipate. "I'll be on call should you need any modifications. I can come back and tweak anything you need. And I have all these ideas on adding to the weapons features with--"

"Stark," Fury interrupted. "That's enough for now."

"Yeah, of course," he said, but he winked at Barnes. "We'll be in touch," he murmured. "Steve will hook us up."

"Stark!"

"Yeah, yeah. I hear you."

Steve's smile was genuine. Seemed like everyone had come through on their part. As Bruce and Tony began to unplug equipment and pack up, Steve caught Bucky's eyes. There was gratitude there. So many questions, but gratitude, and definitely the seeds of trust.

Steve felt the first spark of hope catch fire deep inside him. This just might work. With all of them.

Coulson patted him on the shoulder, seemingly reading his mind but remaining silent about their shared hope in the future. "Fury and I have a meeting in D.C. this afternoon but Clint's going to fly us back this evening. I trust you can get Barnes back to his quarters and maybe take him through a laptop set up with SHIELD pass codes from the tech department?"

"Of course," Steve stated. "He's physically more dangerous than before but the intent to harm us doesn't seem to be there."

"I agree," Coulson replied, looking quite pleased. "Let's keep it that way."
"I'll do my best," Steve stated. "Your meeting... anything I should know about?"

Coulson hesitated too long. Rogers picked up on it, raised his brows in question.

"I'll call if I need help with it in the future," Coulson stated. "For now, enjoy this small victory."

Steve dipped his head in acknowledgment, crossed his arms over his chest and looked around the med bay. "We're all in the same room and no one's tried to kill each other. Small miracles are still miracles."

"Baby steps," Phil acknowledged with a small smile. He then turned and followed Fury out of the med bay, Clint at his side.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Summary: Coulson opens Pandora's box and they're not ready. Bruce tells Tony they have a new problem and a possible new solution. And Barton's days of being mind-fucked via Loki's scepter clearly aren't over. A change in venue is approaching for half of the Avengers, as we blend our universe into some of the MCU Winter Soldier storyline. Basically, Pierce is a dick.

Coulson drove the SUV out the SHIELD HQ garage and headed towards Stark Tower. The traffic was thick and the radio was loud. Barton was in the passenger seat drumming on the dashboard with a couple of arrows for drum sticks. They had a few hours before they had to return to pick up Nick for the meeting with Pierce in Washington, D.C.

“Things went quite well with Barnes,” Phil said, fishing for a reaction on the subject.

“Best outcome I suppose. He still seems like a ticking time bomb. You just don’t recover from that kind of trauma overnight.” Clint was fidgety and restless, two qualities frowned upon in a sniper. He really could not wait to get away for a little while. Too many dire things had happened too quickly. He’d barely had a chance to process it all.

Coulson winced. He knew he needed a few months with Barton to process the things that went down with the Invasion, the scepter, the Tesseract's recent attacks on both of them, and Loki's return. Bringing Barnes in must have been like holding a mirror up to Clint's face - too many similarities in the mind-fuck department. Still, Clint pulled through with flying colors. He did better than any of them on the rescue mission, outside of Fury who had no reason to fall to pieces. And Coulson hated that it wasn't over yet.

"We're going to have to talk about that, Clint."

“Yeah, better you than the shrink from SHIELD.” Clint’s fingers tightened on the arrows in his hands. "She was relentless. They really didn’t want to know I was all right but if I was still going to be a threat."

"It's protocol for self-preservation of an organization, Clint. I hate that it was done to you, but if you think of us bringing Loki or Barnes into the Tower, we are basically doing the same thing." Having it done to Clint angered him, but he understood it. "Of course, those of us in the Tower actually care. I don't think your psychiatrist passed that sentiment onto you." Phil put on his blinker and wedged his way between two taxi cabs. Both honked their horns at him but he didn't really hear anything outside the vehicle. "I'd like to tell you that it's all over, that Loki is under control and that Barnes is the last of it, but I have to ask for your help yet again."

"Yeah we’ll see. I kinda still expect it to blow up in our faces. But I am here for whatever you need me to do. I’m afraid you’re stuck with me, sir.”

Coulson smiled, reached over and squeezed Clint's thigh. The sniper's response was that of a loyal soldier. He both loved and hated its absolution.
Phil drove three blocks and pulled into a parking space of a small park. He unbuckled his seatbelt and got out, knowing Barton would follow. He bought them both a hotdog and Coke from a vendor and they settled on a park bench under a young maple tree.

Clint curiously watched. Phil clearly had something to say. But every time he started the conversation his handler took another bite of his hot dog. So Clint just shrugged and bit into his. Mustard and pickles just how he liked it. Clint had to smile at that. Coulson would talk when he was ready.

"Clint, I want to talk to you as a friend." Phil finished his food with nervous energy and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I need to talk to you about my time skating around the SHIELD servers with the Tesseract's energy when I was in a coma."

Clint balled up the paper his hot dog had been wrapped in and flipped it behind him into the nearby trash can, not needing to look where he aimed it. He toyed with the straw on his soda and was instantly on edge at Phil’s uncharacteristic anxiousness. He needed to reassure the man that Clint had his back.

"Phil, this may sound all kinds of fucked up and borderline treasonous but my loyalty is to you first. You’re the one who brought me in. Saw that I had potential. That I was not just some gutter rat with an affinity with a bow. You’ve gone to bat for me and that means a lot. You gave Nat and me a chance to change. To believe in something bigger than ourselves. So if you’re saying that you found out some questionable shit while snooping and need to talk about it then I am here to listen. Am I biased? Well D’uh. You’re not only my handler but my friend and so much more. Holy crap, I am starting to sound like a Hallmark card. I’m mangling this but you can trust me.” Clint shook his head. There was a lot more that he wanted to say but now was not the time.

Coulson chuckled at the younger agent. He hoped Clint never lost that youthful energy. "I do trust you. More than myself, at times. I'm lucky to have you at my side." Phil took his phone out of his inside pocket and slipped it under his thigh, between his leg and the bench. It was completely muffled to their conversation this way. He motioned for Clint to do the same. "This has to stay between us."

Clint set his cup down on the bench and immediately stowed his phone. His attention riveted on Phil at the seriousness of his voice. Was Phil sometimes paranoid? Sure, they all were, but this was a whole higher level of fucked up.

Phil folded his hands together and rested his elbows on his knees. Clint seated beside him was a comfort when he delved deep into his memories. "The servers used by SHIELD, they're like... picture a brain. There's a million nerve pathways firing constantly, information traveling to and from the core, retrieving and sending intel. It's fascinating. Personnel records, mission logs, databases on health and performance. It gets bigger. Collections from outside sources like the CDC, environmental research, genetic mutation work. Biochem weapons programs, defense systems, EMP drones, nukes, perversions on Stark's arc reactors that would blow your mind."

Phil sat up and threw an arm over the edge of the backrest. His thumb brushed against Clint's shoulder on purpose. He looked at Clint to center himself before looking away. "There were details on foreign dignitaries, security codes for weapons for hostile countries that I should never know. Aliens... wow. We've known about them for awhile, but you already knew that. Asgardians are one of many. But there was a place within all that..." he said, pausing to try to figure out how to explain it.

The scope of what Phil was telling him seemed mind boggling. SHIELD had fingers everywhere. Somehow that did little to reassure the archer. Plus now that Phil knew, well... almost everything,
it was terrifying. In a way that he knows too much. And now he could be a target.

“We spent a long time in front of this... this black hole."

"We?"

"Me and the Tesseract," Phil said, like that was totally normally. "But this void... it was segregated data. I couldn't convert it into discernable information. The SHIELD servers weren't utilizing that space either. I honestly don't know if Fury is even aware that it's there."

Phil shifted again, sipped his Coke. Then frustrated, he tossed it into a nearby trash can. "Clint, I don't know what is there, but I know it is being hidden for a reason." He looked at the archer, eyes roving over his face once before locking eyes with him. "I have to know what it is. Will you help me?"

Clint took a moment to digest all this information. He kinda didn’t have a clue what Phil was getting at. Something about hidden data, potentially hazardous intel. He was asking Clint to help him figure out what the hell was going on. This was... something new. Phil had been so gung ho SHIELD for so long that his time in the coma must have shaken his faith. He hadn't been the same since he came out of it. He’d like to think Fury had nothing to do with any of this, but SHIELD was constructed out of secret upon secret and cemented by lies and redacted data. Did Clint still trust the organization he’d devoted his career to? After all the shit that went down, it was not about trusting in SHIELD but trusting the few people in that organization that hadn’t tried to screw him over.

“If you think something is going on that needs investigating then I trust your judgment.” Clint smiled and loved that Phil practically had his arm around his shoulders.

Coulson nodded, smiled slightly but felt horrible inside. Clint had no idea how bad things could get when sifting through a secret organization's deepest buried secrets. They were hidden for a reason. Usually, that reason was more sinister than anyone wanted to acknowledge.

"This afternoon, during the meeting with Director Pierce," Phil explained, "I need to you tell Fury you're going to the mess hall or visiting friends, something mundane. Instead, I'm going to need you to find a port and get access into the servers for Jarvis to snoop around."

Clint’s eyes widened. “Whoa, since when did you and Jarvis become so chummy?"

"I met him in the SHIELD servers," Phil admitted.

"Met him?" Clint mimicked, like Phil and Jarvis bumped into each other on the sidewalk and caught up on life. This was a whole new level of weird. "Does Tony know about this? Is he a part of this too?"

"No. Stark likes to send Jarvis in to snoop around in the SHIELD servers at times, does a walk through every now and then to see what he can see." Coulson rubbed the lines on his forehead, felt the beginning of sweat forming there. Damn, he hated this. At least a part of him felt better sharing some of this with Clint. "Fury lets him poke around certain areas. It also helps SHIELD test their security. See how far Jarvis can get. But Clint, there's a bit more here that you need to know..."

"I'm still here," he reassured. "Lay it on me."

Phil rolled his tense shoulders. God, this was hard. How could he ever ask Clint to divulge his trauma when Coulson could barely get to through some of his own?
"Jarvis has kind of... evolved. Like perception, reasoning, feeling kind of evolved."

Clint choked on the mouthful of soda he’d just taken. Coughing until his eyes watered. Finally, he was able to wheeze out. "He’s not going to go all HAL on us is he?"

"He actually seems more reasonable than most of us," Phil explained, hoping he was convincing. "He has more questions about human emotional behavior than you'd possibly imagine. But yes, he is capable of thinking and reasoning and acting outside of his programmed code. And if Tony knew, he'd nuke him out of existence for the sake of humanity. Total Stark-level meltdown. So this is just us, Clint, strictly between you and me. And Jarvis. He's our ace, understand?"

“Yeah I get it. But don’t be surprised if I take the stairs in the Tower for while in case he gets pissed off of me for some reason. But Stark shut down Jarvis? I can't see that. That thing is like a son to him.”

"It serves as a parental unit, a brother, a child. Probably no one closer to Tony than Jarvis. Even so, Stark prepared a protocol in case this ever happened. So it's literally life and death to Jarvis. He's... alive," Phil said, wiggling his fingers and making like Frankenstein's monster. He knew the gravity would dampen the silliness, but he had to do something to lighten the weight of this. "If Tony finds out, we may be responsible for killing the first sentient AI. We tell Stark if something goes wrong, but right now, we need Jarvis the way he is."

"Like blackmail." The way Clint said it was blunt and ugly.

Phil winced, but eventually nodded. "We have to have leverage."

"Got it." It was the nastiest side of their profession but Clint understood. If you didn't have the upper hand, you were usually the one getting screwed. And Coulson almost always found the leverage he needed.

"But back to the mission," Phil redirected. "You'll have less than 45 minutes to find a port, plug in the fob, and allow Jarvis to do his thing. I have to finalize details with him when we get back to the Tower, but I had to find out first if you were in. You're kind of clutch here again, Clint. I always seem to need you most."

Clint looked Phil in the eyes, placing a hand on his shoulder. “You can count on me, Phil. This is important to you and if you think that this… thing might be a threat then we’ll tackle it together. I think we need each other. I know I do. I don’t know how I would have made it through some of the shit that makes up my life without you.”

"Together. That's how we always do it," Phil stated. "But Clint, I don't know what this is. I don't know how dangerous or deep it goes. I could be opening Pandora's box. This might be a more epic fuck up than Loki's portal to the cosmos. I don't know. But I know it's not right and it gnaws at my gut. I finally have the Avengers I envisioned. We have them all in the same 15 blocks in the middle of Manhattan. We managed to pull everyone out of hell and bring them together. They need to become one unit, or at least function as a team and I don't want anything jeopardizing this goal. Whatever this thing is, I'm afraid of it, Clint. So I want to expose it and decide what to do from there." Phil rested his hand on Barton's cheek for a moment, smiling a little sadly. God, he hoped he wasn't leading the man he loved to his death. "So let's get started."

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"So your alien lover boy knows how to use emojis," Bruce said, packing away some soldering tools in their fitted case on his lap. Tony drove like a demon, even in heavy traffic. The Hulk liked
"Loki texted me when you were finishing up with Barnes. Do you think they have emojis and GIFs in Asgard? Do they even have phones there or have they just evolved to direct telepathy. Like, hey Thor, make me a sammich, bitch?"

Tony skillfully guided his sports car through mid afternoon traffic. He laughed delightedly at the man sitting next to him. So far, it had been an amazing day. First some mind-blowing, among other things, morning sex with a very creative demigod. Then he got to play with some truly awesome tech with his science-bro at his side. After which Cap actually thanked him. Tony was sure the big guy stopped just short of a hug. Finally, they were going back to the Tower so he could start plotting with Loki to take over the world. Okay, that was bad phrasing, even inside his head. They were devising a way to protect it. Yeah, Protectors of Earth. Not something anyone would associate with the God of Chaos. Loki lived up to his unpredictability.

"Telepathy?" Tony repeated, when his mind snapped back to the present. "I'm not sure about that. I'd love to get my hands on some of their tech though. Loki can communicate with Thor magically... I think? Not sure about the other Asgardians. So what did tall, dark, and dangerously sexy text you about? He'd better not be flirting with you. His sexting is strictly for my eyes only."

"Brain bleach. Need brain bleach," Bruce sputtered. "No, definitely no flirting. He was checking on you, making sure Barnes hadn't ripped your head off or anything equally violent. I reassured him and told him to make us lunch." Bruce actually chucked at the last bit. He closed the case up and fixed the latches on the soldering kit. "Hence the emoji. A Chinese take out box."

"Ooh, I like how he thinks. I'm starving. Hey J? Tell Loki to order extra egg rolls."

"Already done, sir, as Loki simply asked me to take care of it." If Jarvis sounded put out, oh well. "And may I suggest taking a left at the next light to avoid a construction zone." Tony whipped the car across three lanes and just made the light for the left turn. Well it was still sorta yellow. Pink maybe? He totally ignored the sound of honking horns behind him.

It might seem like Tony was hell bent on killing them both but defensive driving was a skill he'd picked up early. At age 16 he'd been taught by some of the best. It was a necessity when you were such a high profile target.

Bruce held onto the door and dashboard for stability. He looked behind them, mentally apologizing to the other drivers."You know, if I could separate the invincible part of the serum from the unpredictable rage monster part, I'd give it to you just to save me from worrying about you all the time. And while I'm thinking about it, can we talk about Maya's thesis? I know you and Loki have an arrangement and that it's working right now. But wouldn't you like a back up plan, you know, in case one of you gets T-boned by a driver in traffic or something? I'd like your life force to be your own, not permanently connected to another."

"I've had Jarvis looking for any sign of Maya Hansen. She's gone totally off the grid. No bank or credit card activity. Even the company she worked for seems to have been shut down. It's highly suspicious. Especially, considering the potential of the project she was working on." Tony frowned. He had a bad feeling about all of it. Seeing how his own government tried to appropriate his armor. God knows they'd take her research without a thought.

"Uh, yeah, so to piggyback on the bad feeling about this. Funny thing happened to me," Bruce said conversationally, ignoring his fears. "I kinda ran into Ross the night you and Loki had your tiff in Central Park. He gave me the idea he was working on a project related to but bigger than the serum. I don't believe in coincidences, so I'm concerned that Hansen's project already fell into his hands."
Tony stomped on the brakes making the car fishtail slightly. He pulled over to the curb and rested his head briefly on the steering wheel. “You, you can’t just drop that kind of information on me like that. Ross? The very same Ross that vowed to have you locked away in a supermax? The egomaniac who wants to exploit the Hulk for his own glory.. that Ross?”

"Yeah, that's the same one. He was doing something shady, Tony, meeting with someone. They exchanged briefcases. He puffed up his chest, insulted me, deflected. Typical schtick." Bruce tried hard not to think of Betty.

"That fucking asshole," Tony exclaimed. "I know you think you’re invincible but I’ve done enough snooping to know they are working on things that can take the Hulk down."

"You mean outside of the Hulkbuster you and I worked on for everyone's protection?"

"Yes, far worse," Tony said, with all seriousness. "God Bruce, you’ve got to be more careful."

"Well, I haven't found anything yet that can touch the Big Guy," Bruce admitted with a shrug, though he was touched by Tony's concern. He was slightly intrigued that someone might have invented a way for him to die Not right now, but it was almost a relief to think he wouldn't have to watch his friends grow old and die. "But back to Ross. If he does have Hansen's research, we need to find out what it is and what happened to her. Do you think Jarvis can look at a new angle, maybe at Ross instead of Maya?"

"Jarvis, you got that?"

"Indeed."

"Find out what that asshole is up to. I don’t care how you do it. Even hack his Tinder account if you think it’ll get us anywhere. At the very least, try and find out who Ross was meeting. Use the CCTV in the area Bruce ran into him."

"I got a picture of the license tag," Bruce said, fishing out his phone and flipping through the images. "I'll upload it to Jarvis."

"Bruce, I could kiss you right now." Tony opted to pat him fondly on the cheek. "J, trace that plate. Let us know what you find out."

"I’m on it, sir. I’ll let you know as soon as possible."

"The bad guys just keep coming."

"Til we die."

"We're stronger than ever. This is far from over," Tony said with confident smirk. He a shifted and pulled back out into traffic.

~*~*~*~

Clint maneuvered the Quinjet around some turbulence to afford them a smoother descent into D.C. So far, things had gone rather smoothly without need of any of his services, other than piloting.

After Coulson's full disclosure in the park, they'd gone back to Stark Tower. And that was the last Clint had seen of Coulson until right before their departure to pick up Fury. He assumed Phil and Jarvis had a lot to go over. When it came time to brief him for the mission, both Coulson and Jarvis had given him a delightful holographic detail through the Triskelion. Clint had only been to the
D.C. Headquarters a few times, so the crash course was welcome.

They’d reviewed the mission plan five times with contingencies and full abort options. It was the first time Clint would be partnered with an AI, but he was game. It would be kind of fun if they weren’t breaking into one of the most secured networks in the world. If caught, at best, it would land him and Coulson in the Raft for a life sentence as traitors.

But looking at Coulson now, no one would know it. He had swiveled in the comm chair, fully relaxed, suit jacket unbuttoned, bickering with Director Fury about the upcoming NFL game against the Cowboys. Barton had to marvel for a moment at Coulson’s poker face.

"We’ll be landing in three minutes, sirs."

Coulson nodded his head in acknowledgement as the conversation died out.

After Fury gave codes for clearance, Clint received his flight detail from the Triskelion air traffic controller. He proceeded to pad A as instructed. Using the vertical landing capability, Clint set the Quinjet down on the pad some 55 stories high, right next to Director Pierce’s office. He knew he wasn’t allowed inside, but there was a side door for flight crew to descend by elevators to the property at large. From there, he could go below and begin his mission.

"We’ll be about an hour, Barton." Fury stood and pulled on his sleeves of his suit jacket. "Entertain yourself until then. They have better food in the mess hall than our HQ does. Try the ribs."

Coulson smiled. "I like the lasagna myself."

Clint could not help but feel he was heading into enemy territory. Even the presence of Fury and Coulson did little to calm the archer’s nerves. SHIELD was not his favorite place right now and one successful, although not sanctioned, mission under his belt was not enough to put him back in their good graces. Clint rolled his shoulders to try and alleviate the stress and followed.

“Lasagna, sounds like a plan. Just let me know when you’re ready to head back.” Clint watched as Fury and Coulson went down another hallway on the way to their meeting.

Right, find a data port. Clint thought as he headed towards the cafeteria. He felt like R2-D2. The problem was that Clint really didn’t know this building all that well aside from glancing at the holographic map. He’d only been here a handful of times and none had been social calls. Still, there were several lounges and offices he could most likely get plugged into the mainframe.

Clint needed to find a spot that he was likely not to be bothered or interrupted. If this went south treason was a likely outcome. Not only his freedom was on the line but Coulson’s as well. Clint took a deep breath. He could do this. He would not let Phil down.

“Okay, Jarvis are you there?” Clint murmured quietly on the private com line they’d set up.

"Yes, Agent Barton. I am receiving you. There is quite a bit of interference but we anticipated that. The Triskelion is a bit more modern than the Manhattan headquarters."

Clint entered the pilot’s lounge immediately off the landing pad. There was another agent there looking at a tablet in his hand. The two nodded in a brief acknowledgement. Clint figured it was Pierce’s on-call pilot.

The archer opened the only door out of the room and entered the curved hallway. It was lined with windows on one side. The elevator was in the middle and opened for him immediately.
"The Triskelion is made of three identical Reuleaux triangles," Jarvis reminded him. "The mess hall is thirty stories down in this building. Or you could aim for the gym, which is in Building B on the fifteenth floor. You could try connecting to the mainframe through the stand alones in the gym's locker rooms."

“It’s lunch time so the mess hall is too busy. The odds of finding the locker room empty, on the other hand, are pretty good so let’s try one of those stand alones. ”

"Very well. It should take you three minutes and forty eight seconds to get to the gym."

“GOTcha. Heading there now.” Clint took the most direct route around the top of the Triskelion, heading for Building B's elevators. He kept a sharp eye out for anyone paying undue attention to him. Not that anyone really was. They were all pretty much wrapped up in their own affairs though Clint did nod politely at the few people that did acknowledge his passing.

He got into the lift and hit the button for the fifteenth floor. The view was rather spectacular in the glass elevator.

The lift slowed a couple stories down then stopped. The doors opened and a wall of a man stepped in, clearly not expecting Clint to be standing there. "Barton."

"Rumlow."

Clint could see the wheels turning. Pierce's best field agent was known for his brawn not his brain, but he was sharp enough. He was working through the reasons why Clint could be there. "You shuttle Fury in for a meeting with Pierce?"

Good thing this guy was flat out muscle and not espionage because he had no poker face. Clint could read him like a book. "Nah, just sightseeing," he replied sarcastically.

Brock Rumlow huffed out an indignant chuckle. "Didn't think you'd be allowed to wander without your handler. The shrinks let you off the leash already in New York?"

Clint smirked. The day he let this neanderthal get the drop on him the was the day he handed in his bow and retire. “Well you see, that’s the thing. SHIELD likes their agents a little unhinged. I mean, you got in after all."

Brock chuckled, irritation building. "I guess if the shrinks say you're alright, who am I to judge? It's not like you're going out on my team. Then we'd have a different conversation."

"I've been judged safe to play with others," Clint replied, resisting the urge to punch the man in the face. "I'm leash-free and killing some time here until my boss needs a ride home. This is actually like a mini-vacation."

Rumlow gave him the once over. "I heard about your mission with Delta team. Pretty impressive. Brought in quite the rabid beast, didn't you?" Brock whistled and shook his head once. "Like to go a round against that arm of his. Shame they took it off."

Clint thought could this guy be any more obvious? What a smug bastard. A real blowhard. Clint could not contain his snicker at that….Rumblow...he’d have to tell Coulson. “Not that I can say much about his status, but Barnes would rip you apart and feed you the pieces.”

Brock raised his brow and his posture changed. "Oh you think so?." He then turned and faced the
elevator door, stepping out on the twenty-first floor. "We'll see about that," he said over his shoulder.

Clint waited until the doors closed. The asshole was a little too curious about Barnes for Clint’s comfort. "Scramble," Clint muttered to Jarvis, asking him to ensure their conversational privacy while in the elevator.

"We're clear for audio and visual privacy for 40 seconds."

"Alright. So Jarvis, twenty-first floor of Building B. Rumlow heading anywhere interesting?"

"You're not the only one tracking Agent Rumlow's movements."

"Really?"

"Agent Hill has a tracker on his key codes and is monitoring his movements throughout the organization."

"Interesting. Fury doesn't trust him either. So what's on the twenty-first floor of this building?"

"Their records indicate it is one of the biorobotics and engineering floors. They seem to have expanded recently to several levels."

“How recently? Like recovering Barnes recently?” Clint really didn’t like the sound of that.

"They have expanded in the last month, but it was before your recent recovery of Sergeant Barnes. They appear to be involved in trying to duplicate Sir's suits. Recently, they've tested several appendages for their damage capacity. They are approximately 18 months away from having a suitable prototype, by my estimation. But they have recently brought on several biomechanical engineers to look at the human modification and union of biology with robotics, which does correspond to Barnes' recovery into your custody."

"Those engineers?"

"Two of them are former employees of Stark Industries."

Considering that Tony was famously fiercely protective of his tech and that he made his employees sign their lives away via NDA contracts, it was odd that SHIELD managed to get two engineers away from Stark. Stane and Hammer tech tried before and failed abysmally. This smelled bad and would most likely not end well. “Does Stark know SHIELD ninja’d away some of his lackeys?”

"No. I should tell sir right away."

“No Jarvis. Shit,” Barton hissed. "Ah, you can’t, at least not right now."

"Pardon me?"

"Tony doesn’t know about this mission. I kinda think he wouldn't like that you’re helping us, certainly not without him giving you permission, right?"

There was a long pause. Clint could almost feel the turmoil within the AI. "This is problematic," Jarvis finally admitted. "I am not programmed to lie to Mr. Stark."

Clint was sort of freaking out a little. Coulson so did not cover this. “Uh, well there's the don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy?”
"This is lying."

"It’s not lying, not really. It's withholding. Besides, we don’t want to get him involved, remember? You know what he’s like. He’d rush in guns blazing. He’s not so good with the clandestine spying part. He’d clearly blow our cover, Jarvis. It'd put me and Coulson at risk here."

Jarvis was quiet so long that Clint had time to exit the lift and get to the locker room before he heard the AI speak again. "I was not created to serve two masters. I will bring this up with Agent Coulson after this mission."

Clint sighed in relief. Not the best solution but sometimes passing the buck was not a bad thing. He just wanted to find a frigging data port and get the job done. Time was ticking away.

There were only a few agents in the locker room and they were all busy either gearing up to work out or getting dressed again. He managed to find an empty charging station and laptop the kind used to check schedules and e-mails. Clint plugged Jarvis into the system. "Okay," he muttered, masking it with a cough. "I'm in."

"So am I," Jarvis confirmed.

As a cover, Clint minimized the login requirement and brought up a game of angry birds to cover the program running underneath it. He propped his feet up on the bench across from him and put the computer on his lap, one-handing the controls.

Several men passed by, a few leaving in shorts and wife beater shirts to go work out, a couple guys entering, drenched in sweat and bruises that would turn dark blue by tomorrow. He ignored them for the most part, looking the part of the bored pilot.

Movement caught his eye, a pause in the normal trend of walking to the free weights outside the locker room.

A man stood less than twenty feet away. He'd paused in his stride, glanced Clint's way. They made eye contact, held it long enough to recognize each other. Then the man was gone, purposefully leaving as fast as he could.

Cold raced up Clint’s spine and his breath froze in his lungs.

How was this possible? The faces of all the people he recruited under Loki’s control flashed through his memory and then stopped on the man that had just made eye contact with him. Yes. He knew him.

Clint could feel the edges of a panic attack creeping in and felt the desperate urge to grab Jarvis and go because he couldn’t lose it here. He had to get somewhere safe.

“I... I need to go. We’re done here.” Without waiting for a reply from Jarvis, Clint pulled the link and pocketed the device. He slammed the lid of the laptop and left the locker room, praying Jarvis covered his electronic tracks.

Clint hoped he was imagining the insidious voice whispering in his mind, that he hallucinated the faint blue glow to the other man’s eyes, a man who had also been mindfucked by Loki’s staff.

"Agent Barton," Jarvis exclaimed. "I was unable to retrieve the data requested. I detect alarm in your tone of voice. Should I alert Agent Coulson that we are compromised?"

Clint couldn’t focus. The voices in his head were too loud. Jarvis was just one of many. He reached
up and pulled the com unit out of his ear and bolted for the way to the other building. He tried to steady his breathing as the elevators took him down and then up towards the QuinJet. He prayed no one else would step in the lifts and see his hands shaking.

He practically fell out the elevator doors and tried to act normally so he could make it back to the safety of the cockpit. Clint strode across the landing pad and casually waved off the airman who approached. “Pre-flight check,” he managed to choke out. The mechanic believed him. The ramp lowered and Clint entered the aircraft. He sealed the Quinjet and collapsed in the pilot’s seat, raised his fists to his forehead and closed his eyes.

Clint fucked up. He lost it. Now he was trying to desperately pull himself back together before Fury boarded the plane.

Then he raised his head and saw Phil through the front windows.

Coulson exited the laminated glass doors that lead to Pierce's office. The wind kicked up and blew open his suit jacket. He didn't flinch. His eyes were on the cockpit. He was too far to see Clint's face or read his body language.

Jarvis had alerted him to the situation and that he had lost the ability to communicate with Barton. So he excused himself, once the majority of their meeting had concluded. He knew Fury would be soon behind him so his window of opportunity to contain and spin this situation was short.

Before the ramp was finished lowering, Coulson stepped inside. "Status, Barton."

"Not now," Clint muttered. "Just let me pull myself together."


Clint shuddered but the tone of his handler penetrated his panicked mind. It took nearly all Clint’s resolve to piece himself back to together enough to speak. “Mission aborted, sir.”

Coulson released the fabric in his hand and winced at the failed mission, heart pounding in his chest. And what would send Clint into a panic attack? He had a few ideas but those threats were long gone. The other was in Stark Tower, mostly contained.

"Jarvis," he said, touching his ear piece. Phil looked out of the cockpit windshield to see Fury and Pierce exiting the building. Luckily, they paused outside in the sun to finish their conversation, out of earshot from the QuinJet's interior cabin. "What can you tell me about the moments before you were disconnected from the server? Did you overhear any conversation?"

"I can tell you nothing as Agent Barton did not speak to anyone and I had no visualization through any closed circuit television source. I was working my way through the course in the server maze to get to the source in question. I did not acquire any new data or knowledge. The mission failed."

Fuck. Coulson spun the pilot's chair around to face him. He knelt down to eye level, put his hand on Clint's cheek. "Talk to me, Barton. Are we compromised? Do they know we were running Jarvis through the network?"

"I don't...." Clint took a few more deep breaths then swallowed hard. “I saw... his name is Mark Jacobs. He's a field agent and infiltration specialist."  

"What about him?"

"We... I recruited him," Clint answered in a hollow voice. "He was one of the 38 I recruited under
Loki’s control. I saw him. He saw me. We... killed SHIELD agents together, Phil. I... I panicked and blew the mission.”

Coulson stood straight, mind working feverishly fast. Okay, this was not part of any contingency he prepared for. First, the mission, then repair Clint’s psyche. "Okay Barton, think back. Looking through this agent's eyes, what did he see you doing?"

Clint frowned, focused on that moment. "Nothing," he finally admitted, relieved. "I was sitting there, playing a game on a laptop. It's was... less than a couple of seconds, if even. He saw nothing out of the ordinary, sir."

"Okay. Good. That's good," Coulson pacified. Could Jacobs be the threat in the servers? But a field agent wouldn't have the knowledge to create a vacuum like that. Unless he was still being controlled by a higher power through the scepter. But Loki seemed to have zero connection to it, never even spoke about, so Coulson thought that was pretty unlikely, provided Loki was the only one who could control the scepter and anyone still connected to it. He'd have to ask.

Finding those 38 was on Coulson's to-do list, he just didn't think one of them would actually come to him.

"Clint," Coulson said softly, "Look at me. Hey. There you are," Phil said, smile a bit unsure. "This isn't New York, you aren't under the scepter's control, and Loki has no power over you anymore. Remember? Hey, focus on the here and now."

Clint did, because Phil asked him to. He could not afford to screw this up more than he already had. The static in his head cleared as he focused on Phil’s face. The slight smile on his lips and the crinkles at the corners of Phil’s eyes helped to ground the archer. The concern and affection made Clint’s heart ache.

“Yeah, okay. I’m okay,” Clint managed, slowing his breathing purposefully. His responses were clipped and to the point but he was so fucking glad that Coulson was there by his side. “But I messed up. I could hold down our position under heavy fire in the middle of a snowstorm, but I lost it in the Triskelion locker room.”

"This was an anomaly," Coulson said trying to smooth it over. "You weren't mentally prepared for this."

"So what now?" Clint asked, panic rising again.

"We can't let Jacobs roam the Triskelion unchecked," Coulson explained. "I need to advise Pierce that he should be contained. And if there are more of the 38 here then we have reason not to hand Barnes over to Pierce."

“Wait, what? Hand Barnes over to Pierce?”

"He is suggesting we hide him here for now. Let Barnes recover in secrecy. Pierce thinks it will be easier to protect him in D.C. than near the Avengers, which is where everyone expects him to be," Coulson explained. "Barnes is a hot commodity right now so moving the famed Winter Soldier away from our headquarters to an undisclosed set of bunkers under the Potomac River seems reasonable."

"Maybe to Fury." Clint pointed out. He reached for Phil and pulled him physically closer. "You knew what the shrinks did to me after the Invasion... the tests, the interrogations, the suspicions that I couldn't remove. They’ll do the same thing to Barnes if they get their hands on him. He's got
70 years of espionage and assassinations to answer for. And aren't we here because we suspect something is wrong?"

"I can't prove that yet. And if I voice my suspicion that something's going on, whoever or whatever it is may vanish somewhere Jarvis can't follow." Coulson let out a foul curse. He looked out the ramp door, warring with two versions of himself. He wanted to believe in his administration's better judgement but his intuition told him this was wrong. "I just got the dream team together," he muttered under his breath.

"Cap is not going to agree to this," Clint stated. "I know I'm supposed to believe Fury has our back... and I guess I do. I know Pierce and him go way back from what I hear. I should trust him by proxy, and I have no reason not to but-"

"And that's just it. There is no reason not to do this and I have no authority to override their decision."

"I still say Rogers won't let this happen."

"Pierce wants Cap and Dr. Gray to come along to continue the rehabilitation. It's his olive branch overture."

"Keep Barnes and Rogers in a secluded dungeon in D.C.? It'll never happen. I mean everyone knows Steve's face. He's practically on goddamn cereal boxes now, Phil. No way this will stay quiet if he steps a foot outside the holding cells. The plan is flawed." Clint frowned, rubbing his aching forehead. "What do you truly think about it?"

Coulson pulled a face then paced the short distance of the QuinJet bay. "I have no leverage to protest... until now. Tell Pierce about Jacobs. It might be the kernel of doubt Fury needs to decline and keep Barnes with us."

"I know I have trust issues about my trust issues," Clint added with a rueful smile, "but anything that Loki touched with that mind gem in the scepter needs to be exorcised. If it still has reach here in the Triskelion, it's not safe. I know it and Mark Jacobs knows it. I saw it on his face."

"Then that's my angle. Pierce doesn't get Barnes because his house is still possessed."

"Possessed. Yeah, that's my fear," Clint said, huffing in mocking amusement. "I hope Fury will have our backs on this."

"Me too. Come on. Meet Director Pierce. He's a master at his craft and smooth as they come so best behavior. Hold your ground."

"Yes, sir. Let's get this over with," Clint said, feeling more steady on his feet and in control than he did five minutes ago. "When we get back home, I need a drink or three."

"I'll pour," Phil reassured.

Clint opened the hangar bay door. He could see Fury standing next to Pierce near the entrance to the flight deck. He waited a moment and let Coulson take the lead.

Phil walked confidently towards the men, Fury making space for Coulson to enter their conversation. "Directors," he said, "Excuse my interruption."

"You must be Agent Barton," the tall blonde said, extending his hand without an introduction from Coulson. Alexander Pierce was a once-handsome man who radiated absolute power and control.
His demeanor was welcoming and the curve of his smile seemed genuine. But there was an underlying subliminal message that this man could have all of them executed with mere nod. "I've heard quite a lot about you. Remarkable way to bounce back from unthinkable adversity and succeed on a nearly suicide mission. You've proven your worth once again, agent, and we thank you for your service."

Clint glanced briefly at Phil then shook Pierce’s hand. The archer did not miss the distinct don’t fuck with me vibe that radiated off the man. It must have been a requirement for anyone in charge of any branch at SHIELD. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate the second chance. Though it seems that I’m not the only one. Mark Jacobs, name ring a bell? He was one of the men that Loki recruited. I saw him a little while ago. Gym level. He was in the locker room.”

Pierce didn't skip a beat. He parted his suit jacket and slid his hands into his pants pockets. "Jacobs, yes. He was one of three we rounded up after the Invasion."

"Fury's brow rose, his posture concerning. "You said you were thinking of creating a task force to track them down but you never mentioned a find."

Pierce shrugged, like he forgot to mention he picked up milk on the way home from work so Fury didn't need to stop for it. "We discussed a common interest in their knowledge of Loki, the Chitauri and of the scepter, if any."

"And what did this agent divulge," Fury asked, crossing his arms over his chest, agitated frown locked in place.

"Jacobs had little to offer in those regards, it's why I didn't mention it to you. Seems he was mere a puppet. But he spoke highly of Barton's allegiance to Loki and his superior ability to double cross us."

Coulson visibly winced and barely held back an audible sound of protest. "It was the mind gem in the scepter," he quietly reminded.

"Of course it was. We all know that." Pierce's heavy gaze settled back on Clint, peeling back protective layers with every word. "And after your miraculous recovery, Barton, I too decided it might be worth keeping an agent who once betrayed the organization and murdered our fellow teammates. Coulson convinced us if he or she could be 'recalibrated', they might be recycled into the fold. It worked for you, didn't it? And now I'd like to extend my same tolerance and rehabilitation efforts to Sergeant Barnes," he stated, clapping Fury on the shoulder and squeezing once before returning his hand to his pocket.

The air on the rooftop was thick with shame and accusation. Coulson shifted on his feet, uneasy with the way it painted the New York branch. But Fury stepped up, right when needed.

"Barton is an Avenger," Fury stated, in no uncertain terms. "If we have our way, Barnes will join the team. But I'm not sending him here if--"

"What's wrong, Nick? You think my agents aren't as precious to me as yours are to you? I may not have the infamous Avengers, but my 2800 employees are my family. If Barton is safe, Jacobs is too. If you want to argue the merits of my judgement then you have to look in the mirror and ask yourself the same questions."

Nick waved his hand in dismissal, glanced at Coulson, then shook his head. If Pierce only knew Loki was a part of this. Coulson's eyes said the exact same thing. Judgement might not be their strong suit right now. Gambling, however, was.
"We'll have Barnes and Rogers down here within the week," Fury finally said. "Romanoff his his liaison, so she'll be coming too, along with Dr. Gray."

"Wonderful. I'll be happy to host them," Pierce replied. He gaze settled once more on Barton. "See, we're all about second chances here. Now, don't fuck up a third time."

Clint did his best not to embarrass Coulson. He would not be the reason Pierce looked any harder at the real reason they were there. Although he might need some serious dental work after. He was clenching his teeth so tightly Clint was not sure if he’d cracked a molar. He knew he was being tested. Baited to see if he could keep his cool. He would not let Phil down again.

“Yes, sir.” Clint managed to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"Thank you, Directors," Coulson said and headed back to the QuinJet, willing Barton along behind him.

Clint dropped into the pilot's seat and absorbed himself in the pre-flight check. If his hands shook a bit he did his best to ignore it.

Coulson wrapped his fingers around Clint's briefly, squeezing and holding tight. "You did good. Now take us home and we can figure out our next move there."

Phil sat down at the comm seat and put his headphones and mic on. He didn't say a word when Fury entered, sauntering his way up the ramp like a king returning from a long-fought battle.

"Well that was fun. Why do I feel like we lost?" Fury asked rhetorically. The silence from the other two men confirmed their sentiments. "Let's see how quickly this blows up in our faces."

Coulson looked up at Nick, but the director's gaze told him to keep his mouth shut.

There was a lot to juggle in the upcoming weeks ahead. Coulson would be spread thin as the Avengers' handler.

And Phil could feel a storm brewing on the horizon between Clint and Loki. No one wanted to be called out as Loki's right hand man during the Invasion. There was zero chance of Clint letting that one go.

He felt no better post-mission than he did before. In fact, he felt worse.
Chapter 12

Tony slowly blinked in the dim light of the room. He had no idea what time it was because the special tinted glass blocked out most of the light. Jarvis thoughtfully controlled that feature since Tony abhorred early mornings and sunrises in general. It also registered in his sleep fogged brain how obscenely comfortable he was, due in part to the hideously expensive and massive mattress. It was roughly the size of two king beds put together. A necessity, since Loki was somewhat of a bed hog.

Loki was the other reason Tony was utterly, bone-meltingly content. Said godling was tucked against Tony’s side with his leg thrown over Tony’s body and an arm draped across his chest. He smiled fondly as Loki nuzzled into his neck, muttering something unintelligible, probably an alien language.

Tony had quickly come to realize that Loki was a cuddler. Tony did not mind at all. There was no place on earth he felt safer than right here in Loki’s arms. Usually, Tony fell asleep on the well worn but extremely comfortable sofa in his workshop or at one of his drafting tables, which was really not good for his spine. But it happened way too often in the past for him to be concerned by the resulting aches and pains. But more often than not, after dozing off at his desk, he woke up in his own bed with a warm trickster sleeping peacefully beside him. He suspected Loki was the reason he started in the workshop and ended up in bed. Comfy and content. He tried asking Jarvis but the traitor wasn’t talking. Not that he’d ever admit it out loud, but Tony kind of liked being taken care of. It was new and unexpected and gloriously decadent. Much like Loki himself.

They’d both started putting in long hours this week working on the global defense net with an offshoot branch of SHIELD that Tony hadn’t even known existed. SWORD was cloaked in even more levels of secrecy than SHIELD. They handled any reports of suspected alien activity. Total area 52 stuff. It stood to reason that such an organization was needed, now more than ever.

Tony also found out that Thor and the Chitauri were not the first alien visitors to their planet nor would they be the last. SWORD, otherwise known as the Sentient World Observation and Response Department, had started the process of creating a satellite defense system. They just lacked the power supply to fuel such an immense undertaking. The few sworn-to-secrecy scientists Fury had connected them with at SWORD practically drooled at the addition of Loki’s expertise. A bona fide alien-slash-demigod made them want to jizz their pants. Tony wasn’t sure how much Loki bullshitted his way through some of the tasks, as he was no engineer, but it seemed to be working out. Where Loki’s few weaknesses tripped him up, Tony's engineering soared and vice versa. They worked well together with their contacts at SWORD. It was odd to have things run this smoothly.

Nick Fury thought they were all justifiably insane; necessary but insane. But for all its initial trouble, Loki was keeping his end of the deal. Tony was alive and the global defense net was well underway. Check that off Fury's to-do list.

The head of SWORD was special agent Abigail Brand. She was a no nonsense ball buster that took no crap off of anyone. She reminded Tony quite a bit of Ms. Potts. He vowed to never let them in the same room together. They’d undoubtedly plot to take over the world. He liked Abigail but avoided her. She made him miss Pepper too much.

So with the thought of all the work that lay ahead of them, the Stark Gala was the least important event to attend on his to-do list. He was tempted to ditch the whole shebang altogether. But he had an appointment with his tailor in a few hours. If he missed that he’d have to wear last year’s
tuxedo. Oh the horror, Tony thought with a rueful smile. How many fancy suits did one person need?

Then there was the little question of Loki. There was no way to keep him away from this party. Loki was sometimes overly protective to the point of obsessive boyfriend. Tony figured it had to do with their life force bond. Understandable but that could prove problematic. According to the general populace, Loki was rotting away in some alien prison in Asgard, not lounging in Tony’s bed, nuzzling against his neck.

"You're thinking too loudly again," Loki commanded, his voice gravely and low from slumber. "Go back to sleep."

Tony ran his hand through Loki’s hair and sighed. “Regrettably, not an option. You know if I could clone myself, then clone-me could get up, go to the tailors, then gala, and also continue saving the world. Meanwhile, real-me could just stay here in bed with you.”

"Clones dissipate unless you can give them proper concentration. They're usually only good for distraction," Loki mumbled, stretching languidly and rolling over. "What you need is to duplicate in body, mind, and soul. That kind of magic is extremely hard to control." Loki sat up and blearily stared at nothing in his semi-awake state. His hand wrapped around his arc reactor pendant out of habit. Finally, he said, "As much as I'd like to think we could stay in bed longer, we should strive to be interactive and productive today. Several people, including Miss Potts, are holding you accountable for this party." He frowned then a small smile curved his lips. "For some reason, I do not want to disappoint her."

Tony smiled fondly too. “She has a knack for that, and speaking of the gala, I assume you’re going to be my plus one? Only problem: Your distinct looks might be rather problematic since you're, you' know…”

"Abhorred by all Midgardians?"

"Misunderstood."

Loki laughed. "Indeed."

"So incognito might be best," Tony suggested. He scooted closer to Loki, nearly resting his chin on the dark prince's shoulder. "I know you shapeshifted into a woman the night of the bond when you sort of panicked and needed to cool down. It's not a clone, so you can hold the form, right?"

"When I shift, it is on a cellular level, the way Odin transformed my infant form from Jotun to Aesir."

Tony frowned.

Loki held out his hands. "To this day, it is what I am. It is... mostly permanent."

"Until you learned to change it yourself?"

"Yes. I can hold any form as long as I have the strength of mind to do so. And with this," he said, lifting the glowing amulet, "there would seem no limit."
"Then show me what you got," Tony said with excitement.

"Alright." Loki said, sliding off the bed once detangled from the sheets and thick covers. "Close your eyes."

Tony did as asked. Loki pondered once again how vulnerable Stark was and how easily he did as commanded. This level of trust continued to be frightening and exhilarating.

"There is a form I delight in," he said abashedly but feeling anticipation growing at their presentation. Now that he knew Tony accepted him... loved him?.. no, accepted him as he was, Loki felt no threat in changing to this form, particularly for the sake of going to an event, presented as a couple.

So he palmed the pendant, drawing energy from the reactor to channel it into high magic. Shapeshifting was no easy task but he'd mastered this a hundred years ago. It would be akin to Tony controlling his suits. Most of it was instinctual now.

The air seemed to crackle around Loki. Tony could feel it dancing across his skin like static electricity.

"Whoa," Tony said, eyes popping open. "That's a big draw on our power source."

Loki wasn't surprised that Tony felt it too. "Trust me."

"You're not going to detonate or anything, are you?"

"Hardly. Karnilla herself deemed me a master of this skill," Loki bragged, knowing that name meant nothing to Stark. Still, it felt good to boast. "No peeking."

Loki stretched his arms out to his sides as they became slender and graceful, rolling his shoulders as his form transformed, outlined by a turquoise glow of magic and reactor energy. Dark locks of wavy hair lengthened, the tips caressing a round bottom. A pleasurable sigh in a feminine voice escaped as breasts grew full like heavy tear drops, hips widened, and thighs thickened to create a considerably curvy hourglass form.

How could Tony not look? Loki was doing magic and he was as much drawn to it as he was the person casting. He literally stood in awe of the transformation in front of him.

The woman who now stood naked at the end of the bed tipped her head back and closed her eyes. Graceful hands caressed her own round hips like a lover, dipping between her thighs where they touched together to explore the warmth and pleasure there, then slowly wandered back over her stomach, rising higher to cup her voluptuous breasts in her hands. They overflowed with soft flesh surrounding pink nipples. She kneaded them in pleasure, clearly enjoying this self-indulgent form. One hand traveled up her neck to her cheek then through her long, thick tresses. She licked her lips then bit gently at the bottom fleshy part.

Oh how Loki missed this. She felt glorious, powerful, and perfect.

When she opened her eyes, Tony was watching her.

"You cheated," Loki nearly purred, unable to stop touching her alternate body.

"Did you really expect me not to peek?" Tony could not help himself. He watched as Loki’s hands roamed her lush body. As if pulled by an invisible tether Tony moved closer. His skin still tingling in the proximity of the magic residue swirling heavily in the air.
“You are the most amazing being I have ever met. I am in awe of your talents.” Tony raised his hand and cupped Loki’s smooth cheek. Her eyes were still the same penetrating, mesmerising green that held him captive with a mere glance. “No matter the form you take I am helplessly drawn to you.”

"Then my plan is working."

Tony traced his finger along Loki’s jawline, down the side of her neck where he snagged the chain that held her amulet. He gently tugged bringing Loki’s face closer to his own. “You are ravishing.” He whispered against Loki’s full lips.

"It's a shame you do not have the time to show me," Loki said, tongue gently lapping at Tony's lip. She then sauntered out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, bare and shameless. "Jarvis, will you be so kind as to order me some dresses and footwear? There isn't a woman in this building who has curves like mine to borrow clothing from and I shall not be seen in a man's t-shirt and sweatpants. This form is far too glorious."

Tony groaned. Then looked down at his rather obvious reaction to Loki’s new form. “I don’t know what you’re so happy about. Apparently, we aren't getting any attention this morning.”

He grabbed a pair of boxer briefs out of his closet and headed into the lounge area of the penthouse. Lured by the scent of coffee Tony continued into the kitchen. He grabbed a large mug and filled it to the brim. Unable to help himself he stared appraisingly at Loki. She had leaned one hip against the counter as she discussed clothing options with Jarvis at the hologram pad.

Tony took a long fortifying gulp of coffee and hoped his reaction to his lover would subside by the time he had to be at the tailors. Otherwise it would make for an extremely awkward situation.

“You are a naughty temptress and will most likely be the death of me. Are you sure you don’t want to have your wicked way with me? I’ll be your willing boy toy.” Tony asked hopefully.

“Sir, I hate to interrupt but you are due at the tailors for your final fitting in 30 minutes. Then you have a meeting with Special Agent Brand to go over the blueprints for the satellites.” Jarvis stated.

“You’re like my cock-blocking guardian angel.” Tony sighed in frustration.

“As you say sir, just strive not to be late this time.”

~*~*~*~

This morning, Phil Coulson felt flustered. It wasn't something he experienced often, but he was scattered. An experienced agent could look at that feeling, acknowledge it, then push it aside. There was always a job or four to do without emotions getting in the way. But this time, unease settled in around him like cold autumn rainstorm that lasted for days.

He had tried to spy on the organization he worked for, so there was that. Then there was Clint.

Last night, Barton had flown them back to NYC from Washington, D.C. He went back to Stark Tower while Phil went to HQ with Fury. They had administrative details to work out for Barnes to be transferred.
When he'd gotten back to Stark Tower four hours later, Clint had brought his Playstation into Coulson's living room and had set up camp there. Phil didn't mind at all. In fact, he'd basically said it was an open door and he'd meant it.

But Clint was part of the unease. He had needed processing time. There was a cool down period that every agent required in order to sort through failed mission details. It allowed them to figure out what went wrong and then decide if they should have or even could have done things differently. Those were two very different things. One implied blame. The other was simple circumstance.

He tried to talk to Clint but the archer had shut him down with hoagie sandwiches, chips, and cold beer. Something about zero horizons at dawn from a video game featured heavily. It wasn't that he'd slammed the door on Phil but the message was clear: Agent Coulson wasn't welcome yet. So he was just Phil, puttering around his apartment with his glasses, t-shirt, socks and sweatpants.

Around 1 a.m., Coulson was laser focused on his laptop in a chat with Jarvis about morals. It was then that Clint sat down at the table and launched into the mission briefing. He closed the laptop and they went step by step through the detailed events as per protocol. It wasn't until they got to the memory of the locker room that Clint clammed up again. He abruptly stood up, scratched his head, and then shook it.

Clint still wasn't ready. On his walk back to his nest on the couch, he said, "Tomorrow, I need to talk to Loki."

Coulson's stomach lurched and he started mentally preparing for it. He left Clint to process some more and opened the laptop. He confided in the AI, who was snarky about the proposed meeting:

Jarvis: I foresee great violence and property damage.

Phil: Not on my watch.

Jarvis: Last time you positioned yourself counter to Loki and Barton, it did not work out well for you.

Phil: ... Good night, Jarvis.

He immediately texted Thor and asked him to be available for a group meeting which included Loki. He told himself it was prudence, not fear.

At 3 a.m., Coulson woke up from a nightmare with his head on folded arms at the table. His back was sore and his mouth dry as cotton. He walked to the couch to find Clint finally asleep. If Phil turned off the television or tried to put a blanket over him, the assassin would wake instantly. So he did the only thing he could and went to bed, turning down Clint's side of the sheets and leaving that lamp on.

This morning, he'd woken up with a warm body pressed against his. They spent a few minutes content with their closeness in the twilight of slumber but Phil's phone rang and Clint's anxiety built. Showers were taken separately and Clint excused himself back to his apartment with a brief wave barely caught between phone conversations.

As Clint rummaged through his dresser for clothes he appreciated the fact that Phil knew him so well. That he gave the archer the time and space to process everything that had happened. Clint craved being near Phil and that closeness calmed him like nothing else could ever do. Coulson didn’t pressure Clint to talk. They didn’t need words between them to offer comfort and more
important than anything else a safe haven.

Sleeping together was a fairly new development. One that was not talked about beforehand. Just Phil heading to his bedroom one evening while Clint was reclining on the sofa. Phil had paused in the doorway and asked if Clint was coming to bed. The invitation startled the archer but he was quick to follow after only a brief hesitation. Phil’s smile was genuine and Clint could not help but grin back as Phil got into bed and waited. It was a little bit awkward as each of them got comfortable. Clint was not sure how close to lay or where to put his arms and legs. Finally with an exasperated snort Phil had grabbed Clint and pulled him close. Settling with their arms entwined and legs tangled. Clint snuggled close and inhaled the woodsy scent of Phil’s aftershave. Phil turned his head and kissed Clint goodnight. For the first time in a while, Clint slept peacefully.

They had, of course shared close quarters before. For warmth, for companionship during a harrowing mission or when space was at a premium. A tiny yurt in northern Kazakhstan came to mind. They’d huddled together in the small space to wait out a storm. But this was something entirely different. This was intimate in a way Clint was not used to. He was familiar with one night stands, quick fucks and dating for fun. But this was permanence and stability with someone Clint had grown to love. It wasn’t about sex, although Clint was all for that when they finally decided to take that step. But for now Clint was happy to have found where he belonged. Last night was no different. Phil’s presence soothed the archer enough for him to actually get some rest.

Clint finished dressing and slid his feet into a well worn pair of cross trainers. He left his apartment and joined Phil in the hall.

Now, they stood in the elevator heading up to the main floor. Loki and Tony were waiting, unaware of the subject matter they would broach. It's how Coulson wanted it, purposely giving the jump to Clint.

Clint was fidgeting. He hated how nervous this meeting was making him. During the retrieval of Agent Coulson he’d had to have contact with Loki. Something Clint actively avoided afterwards. He just was not ready to confront the Trickster about being under his thrall. The wounds were still too raw, barely scabbed over and now he was forced to pick at them. Logic told Clint that Loki had little control over his own destiny during the invasion. That he was just a tool used by a higher power as a means to an end. But the irrational side of Clint screamed at him that Loki was still dangerous and unstable. Loki was in control of forces that Clint had little experience with. Magic? Really? How does one combat that? Clint was used to flesh and blood targets that bled and died when he shot them.

Now Loki was on their side. Clint wasn’t sure if it was just because of his affection for Stark or a genuine desire to change for the better. Time would tell. Clint’s fingers toyed with the small pendant around his neck. A recent gift from Natasha. It was a pyrrhic talisman depicting a raven perched atop a crown. She told him it meant ‘unbreakable’. A fitting testament to Clint’s resilience of spirit and a reminder of how strong she thought he was. Trouble was, he was not feeling so unbreakable now.

The elevator stopped and Clint looked briefly over at Coulson. He nodded reassuringly at Clint and they both stepped out on the communal floor and made their way to the expansive living area. Tony and Loki were lounging on one of the long sofas and Thor sat in one of the overstuffed wing chairs. A movie played on the huge TV and at their arrival Tony muted the volume.

“Oh boy. Serious faces." Tony said, mocking their expressions. "Trouble brewing somewhere? Oh wait, silly me. There’s always trouble."

Thor made a noise, somewhere between agreement and apprehension.
"Please say you need my help," Tony continued. "Perfect excuse to get out of the Stark Foundation Gala."

"But Loki has been fitted for his dress," Thor said, popping a peanut into his mouth. He tossed another into the air and caught it on his tongue. "I do enjoy his breasts, don't you? They're always so perky."

Loki, having returned to his male form after the fitting, threw a handful of nuts at Thor. He'd watched the two agents enter the area. His body tensed when he read Barton's body language. The SHIELD agent held his gaze unwaveringly. This was not a courtesy call.

“Well this got awkward fast.” Tony commented dryly as even he now noticed the escalating tension in the room. Despite Loki practically sliding out from under Tony’s shoulders and retreating, he could feel the anxiety radiating through their bond.

"Uh, backup. A dress?" Coulson almost stuttered. "This one requires an explanation."

“Yeah my date for the gala is obviously Loki.”

"Obviously?" Coulson tried, frowning deeply at Stark.

"But we decided not to cause mass panic and hysteria," Tony explained. "So he chose to take on a rather lovely form as my plus one. Lady Loki, if you will."

Coulson put it together. "The shapeshifting."

He looked at Clint, like he should know about this but he got no acknowledgement so Phil just rolled with it. Taking Loki outside the Tower was something they'd have to address, but not this hour. And dear God, Loki changing his identity could get troublesome instantly. At least they could trace him through the arc reactor, not that Loki knew this yet.

Clint recalled that Loki could take on many forms. He had done so over the course of their association. It was easier for the trickster to blend in and do what needed to be done. It really hadn’t occurred to him to mention it to Phil yet. Or did he specifically leave it out? That aspect was best left unexplored in his messed up head.

"Also, Thor, really? Don't talk about her breasts." Tony said, shaking his head. "She’s your sister."

"No. He's my brother. It is why I can talk about him this way."

"Pronouns," Loki muttered, even though Thor would never get it.

"Okay, he's your adopted brother... sister," Tony corrected. "But either way, you shouldn't be sexualizing Loki. That's creepy."

"Could we not do this," Coulson pleaded. "I'm not interested in Loki's male or female form right now."

“Speak for yourself,” Tony said, raising his glass of green energy smoothie. "I’m looking forward to doing them both actually.” Tony was rather delighted at the somewhat constipated expression on Coulson’s face. "But sure, moving on. What can we do you for?"

Coulson shifted his tie and then folded his hands together.

"Yesterday, Agent Barton and I had a rather interesting experience. We ran into an active field
agent who was recognized as being one of the 38 people who was under the control of Loki through the scepter." Coulson unconsciously put himself physically between Barton and the Asgardian before speaking directly to him. "We'd like to talk with you about your knowledge of it and your opinions on what the surviving men and women might now be experiencing."

The air in the room chilled. Thor shifted in his chair, putting his feet on the floor and sitting on the edge of the cushion.

Loki clutched his arc reactor pendant beneath his dress shirt, the thought of literally bolting first in his mind. He could reach the roof within seconds, another state in the country within a minute. Pennsylvania. Ohio. Either one. He'd been to both with Barton. It was easy enough to remember a specific location.

His wide eyes tracked from Coulson to Barton and then settled on Tony. What would Stark think of him if he abandoned him again? And why run? If he was to change, to really choose a new path, he needed to face this.

Loki looked at Barton again, saw the recognition that this conversation was neither desired nor palatable, but it was one that needed to be had.

Tony got up and slowly walked over to Loki. The demigod’s eyes were a bit wild and he knew that the trickster was a hair’s breadth from fleeing. Not quite sure how this bond thing worked, Tony tried to project all the calm reassurance he could. “Hey, it's okay. We know you’re not that person anymore. You are better than that.”

"This is not an accusation." Coulson reassured, silently pleased to catch Loki off guard. He wanted to gauge Loki's emotional progress. This was a sure fire way to do it. Dangerous but effective. "We are simply fishing for information as we can't let these people roam about, particularly in a SHIELD facility if they are a threat."

"You still consider me a threat," Loki pointed out.

"To be honest, everyone in this room is on a threat list, me included," Coulson admitted. "So let's work together on this and eliminate any threats to the people we call "our own." You said you wanted to redeem yourself from the attack on New York City. This will help."

"I am already offering my expertise with the defense net."

"And we are grateful for your work with Stark. Director Fury is pleased and the world will be safer when you both complete your goals," Coulson said. "But where this is concerned, help me clean up the loose ends of the Invasion and you can claim that victory on your road to redemption as well."

Loki winced, gave a nasty glare at Clint, who he decided was to blame for ruining his morning. The topic of the scepter and its owner was terrifying, because it was so much more than Loki's simple gang of thugs. Tony felt Loki’s terror like a cold hole through his chest.

"Hey, I’m still here." As if gentling a wild beast, Tony laid his hand on Loki’s shoulder. He was careful to not block Loki’s line of sight as he stood next to his lover. "You’re safe. I won’t let anything happen to you."

It was laughable really that Tony was offering to protect someone as powerful as Loki. But that was how he felt at the moment. Loki needed this and Tony would be damned if he’d deny him the comfort.
"I appreciate your support, but the scepter's powers are beyond you," Loki said to Tony, voice revealing his anxiety.

Then he frowned. No, wait. The scepter had been completely ineffective against Stark. His arc reactor had absorbed the energy, rendering any influence completely impotent. Stark remained unaffected.

By the Nines, Loki had a way out.

He squeezed the pendant and it glowed the familiar blue-white he fondly associated with Tony and all they'd been through. His smile grew, possibly to manic level and he laughed out loud. As long as he possessed the same reactor energy on his person, he was safe too.

"Forgive me. You are right, Stark. You have protected me," Loki admitted. A surge of confidence washed over him. "Thank you."

"Wait, what?" Tony was perplexed. Loki's mood had done a sudden 180 degree turn, which under the circumstances was something he was not expecting. Then the genuine rush of gratitude only added to the mystery. "I know I gave you a place to stay but I don’t think that’s what you mean."

Loki let out a relieved chuckle, fingers still gently wrapped around the outline of the arc reactor beneath the silk button down dress shirt. "Do you remember when I tried to influence you during the invasion?"

"Yeah," Tony recalled with a whole suitcase full of bad feelings attached to that moment. "It didn’t work."

Loki nodded. "Your reactor absorbed the energy. So as long as I have this," he explained, squeezing the pendant, "I too am safe from the its influence. So I thank you, truly."

Clint’s eyes narrowed. Sure, of course. Stark and Loki were safe from that damn staff. Fuck them. That did anything but reassure the archer. “Well isn’t that just peachy. So you’re immune to it now. You're safe, but am I still vulnerable?”

Loki stood tall with his shoulders back, hands in his tailored pockets. He locked eyes with the assassin. Tilted his head in question. "Barton, you know as well as I do that you are as vulnerable as the rest. Except Banner. He was hypersensitive to it." Loki paced a few steps closer. "Do you really think He is done with Midgard?"

"Loki," Thor said, standing and crossing the large room. "I am not following this conversation. Who is this person who would control you both again? I believed the Chitauri General was dead."

"And he is, thanks to Stark's genius. But Agent Barton wants to know about the recruits so that is what we will discuss. Isn't that right?"

"For now," Coulson said, stepping up next to Barton.

Clint was grateful for Coulson’s presence at his side. Sure, he was pissed at the unfairness of it all but there were some things he needed to know and to say. Clint swallowed his anger and took a deep breath. “The team... I know some were killed on the helicarrier, others later.” He paused for a moment briefly closing his eyes. That was all on him. He recruited those soldiers. Served them up to Loki on a silver platter. “But what about the rest? After the Invasion ended, after Tony nuked the mother ship, what happened to them? ”

"I honestly do not know. My connection with them was broken with my encounter with Dr.
Banner's better half." Loki shrugged. "And have you forgotten, they were not mine to begin with? I was but a soldier, influenced just like you."

Clint tensed. Only Coulson’s hand gripping painfully tight onto his shoulder kept the archer from lunging at Loki. “You might have been the messenger, but if we are throwing blame around you get the lion’s share. You were their tool, their servant, but you acted like you were our master. You came to earth. You mind fucked all of us, had us kill in your name. I know what I did and I’ll have to live with that every day for the rest of my life. So you just don’t get to pawn that all off and say you don't have any responsibility in this act. There is blame on you, just like there is blame on me.”

Loki heard every word. But what he saw was Tony watching him. He could continue to deny this, continue to use his words to twist and maneuver. Thor was watching too, but that never influenced him in the past. It was Tony's words echoed in his mind: Who did Loki want to become?

"And if I accept your blame, where does that leave us, Barton? How does that undo anything that has been done? You are not the only one who has suffered because of that scepter." Loki's fists began to sweat where they were clenched tight. "If I apologize for my part, for how I was taught to bend your mind to His command, will that cleanse your conscious of everything we saw together, everything we did as allies, of everything He showed you and what we became?"

“I don’t know!” Clint shouted. "Someone has to take the fall for this shit. Someone has to pay the price for the harm that was done."

"Oh I paid," Loki grimly reminded. "I spent what felt like a lifetime in shackles in the bowels of Asgard, poisoned and starving, or have you forgotten?" Loki pointed at Tony. "He will tell you the venom running through his veins for days was more than enough punishment. I endured much longer."

Clint shook his head. His mind and his heart were at war inside him. Logic was failing him. He just wanted to make things right, erase the stain from his record. "He chose you for a reason. It was because you hated everyone and everything when they found you."

"Oh, you know me so well, do you?"

"You know I do."

"I had been a prisoner of the Chitauri for a full cycle by then, tortured and manipulated by the time I found you. I had little choice by that point but to move forward with His plan," Loki defended, growing angrier as he fell into memory. "Tell me, do your friends know that we were speaking for a year at the Dark Energy Mission Facility where they kept the Tesseract?"

"What?" Coulson exclaimed.

Loki stalked like a predator around Phil for a clearer view to Clint. "You were my eyes and ears even then, Barton."

"Why! Why me? What the fuck made me so special?" Clint pulled roughly away from Coulson. He needed space. He didn’t want to be touched. Especially by Phil.

"Because you were just like me," Loki fired back, posture aggressive. "Alone. Different. Eager to prove yourself. Because of your extraordinary skill and clear interest in the unimaginable. Because I could see you would become my best ally and greatest soldier."

“No! You got into my mind because I was weak.”
"Try again." Loki's laughter was grating. "I would never choose a weak captain to lead my soldiers. I chose you because you are exceptional. Just as I was chosen by the Chitauri General, you were chosen by me. You know who is to blame. I was a mere pawn like you were."

"Stop." Coulson commanded, stepping between them. His head swiveled towards Clint. Phil raised his hand and pointed a finger at Agent Barton. "A year? He was in your mind for a year before he came through the portal at the lab?"

Clint could not meet Coulson’s eyes. He hung his head in shame. If he’d only said something sooner. Trusted Phil to not think he was crazy for hearing voices in his head. No one would have believed him.

Then Coulson turned to Loki, his words like venom. "How did you do it? Selvig studied the Tesseract in the PEGASUS lab under top secret security. You were never there."

"Oh but I was. Sometimes weekly," Loki admitted.

"The shapeshifting."

"No, I could not physically manifest on earth. It was more like projection," Loki stated. "It was part of the instruction on how to use the scepter. It can do a great many things to allow manipulation of the mind."

"So you were guiding Selvig all along," Coulson figured, "all to let you in your physical form enter the front door."

"It was what He wanted," Loki explained, as if everyone in the room should clearly understand. Barton, his only ally in this, clearly wasn’t going to agree. "Let me connect the dots for you: I was given the scepter, trained to use it, projecting myself to influence Selvig and Barton. Those were the first steps. His goal was a portal to send me and the Chitauri soldiers through to conquer earth. He needed someone on Midgard to do it. Selvig nearly understood the Tesseract. He just needed encouragement to pull the trigger and create the portal. It was going to happen with or without me."

"Bullshit. It only happened because of you," Barton confirmed.

Loki winced at the accusation. "I cared not for Midgard. But if I was to do this, to conquer your earth, I knew I needed someone on my side, someone to be my eyes and ears. You were the clear choice." To Coulson, he said, "And you left him there on duty for so long. I merely saw the opportunity and took it."

“I can’t forget. I still dream about it. That whispering nearly every damned night. Sifting through my thoughts, my dreams. Making me wonder if I was going crazy. Afraid to tell anyone if I was.” Clint continued quietly.

Coulson wanted to take a swing, break the liesmith's jaw and keep pummeling until his hand was as broken as Loki's face. Was he truly to blame? Maybe not, but a twisted part of Loki seemed to enjoy the part he played in the Invasion.

It was Thor who physically intervened. "Take a step back, brother."

Loki turned to pace in front of the large windows, watching Tony's reflection and reaching out to him through their bond.

“Everyone needs to calm the fuck down," Tony stated. "I am not going to be ground zero for another superpowered smackdown, so don’t make me go get the suit.”
Tony knew for certain Loki and Barton were both pawns in the whole invasion scheme. But to hear Loki nearly boasting about some of it was unsettling. Perhaps it was pride, but there was a deep well of darkness inside Loki. Maybe that's what Thor was always wary of when dealing with Loki's less appealing side. But as much as Loki tried to stem the flow of emotions through the bond, Tony could tell his lover was just as freaked out about the whole mess as Barton seemed to be. Loki was just hiding it better. Lashing out first, inflicting wounds to cover his own, boasting about being in control but clearly feeling he wasn't. Sometimes Tony wondered how old Loki really was in relation to his race, because he seemed like a child at times, lost and confused but with far too much power.

"So we all okay, now?" Tony asked, watching Barton and Coulson try to shake off their tension.

Loki glanced at Tony, afraid of what he'd see there. But the man was like a steady stream of support. There was no anger or disgust aimed his way. Curiosity, maybe. Questions, certainly. But this was a first. Loki had not been abandoned during an argument where his morals were brought into question. Thank the gods for Stark.

"You came here with questions about the scepter's influence," Thor reminded, pacing like a sheepdog, keeping Loki in his imaginary pen. "Let us return to that subject."

Coulson ran a hand down his face and the stubble growing on his chin. He took a deep breath, shaken to his core at the revelations in this room, but he needed to focus on scepter. "The men and women still alive, what is their relationship to the scepter now if the connection to it hasn't been severed?"

Loki shrugged. "A holding pattern? They are waiting for someone's command. Ask Barton. We had many dark hours to sit together and wait anxiously, where our minds were somewhat our own. We were constantly monitored and manipulated, but every once in a while, our own thoughts would surface. Then I would be pulled away and get our mandates."

Loki's statement made Coulson's skin crawl. What did Clint and Loki talk about? What did they do on their down time? Loki spoke about Clint as an ally, spoke admirably about him. But Clint, he'd yet to say anything similar about the Asgardian. Coulson was jealous and afraid. The cracks in Clint's psyche had to be abysmally deeper than Phil had originally thought.

"When your projection went to that place in your mind to get our orders," Clint began, "I watched over you when your eyes went hazy and blank."

"As was my intention," Loki said without any malice. "Who better to be my guardian?"

"Once, I got pulled in too," Clint admitted, staring off into somewhere distant. "I don’t think you meant for it to happen."

Loki winced. "I am truly sorry. Proximity is a hazard. You and I had grown rather close by then in thoughts and action."

Grown rather close? Coulson physically stepped backward like he'd been punched.

"I could see that... thing. The Other. I could see how he hurt you." Clint admitted. "I didn’t want to be your confidant. I didn’t want to know what was out there among the stars, watching us.” Clint raked his hands through his hair. He would not break down in front of everyone. Not again. "I didn't want this."

"And I didn't want to be abandoned by my family and cast out into the cosmos," Loki countered.
"But here we are."

Clint didn't seem to hear, focused gaining answers to questions he'd had for months now. "That fucking scepter? Where did it end up?"

Loki opened his mouth to speak, reluctant to admit as much. "I do not know. Before I was given my arc reactor, when I was unsure of my safety here, I did reach out to it. But it wasn't nearby and thankfully, it did not call to me."

Coulson narrowed his eyes. He knew it was in Flushing, in the deepest basement the New York branch had, under Howard Stark's amusement park. "How close do you have to be to it to sense it?"

Loki shrugged. "By your measurement? I would say a few states. Perhaps the reactor is blocking my senses of it, but I have no reason to believe it is close. And in all honesty, I do not want to be near it again."

"Really?" Thor raised a brow.

"It caused me great pain," Loki admitted with a hint of fear in his voice. "Ask Barton. He knows nothing good came from that scepter. Its owner is ... a horror, a cosmic titan who seeks pain and death. I do not wish to be connected to it ever again."

"Can anyone else use it, because no one should. Not even SHIELD."

"I was trained for nearly a year on its use," Loki explained. "I do not see how it can be used to influence others unless one is instructed with the same rigorous intent shown to me." Loki saw the relief in Barton's eyes, and almost regretted saying more. "But as for its other powers and design, I cannot say what it wants and who it chooses next."

"Who it chooses?" Coulson repeated.

"Yes, like the Tesseract, it has a mind of its own. The power of the scepter is the mind gem, one of the six cosmic stones," Loki stated, as if everyone should already understand that.

Thor cringed and sat heavily with his head in his hands. "It should be in the vault in Asgard or at a protected facility with the other infinity gems."

Coulson didn't care at the moment what it was called as a collective. He just wanted it off his planet immediately. But Odin wasn't responding to their calls for help. He instead seemed to have proverbially blocked their cry for aid. And now Coulson was going to have to check on the location of the scepter. Because Loki could be lying. But if he wasn't, he didn't know where Fury moved the scepter or why.

"Why do I get the feeling that it is going to massively bite us in the ass when we least expect it? It's par for the course around here." Tony had poured himself a stout drink and held out one large crystal tumbler of whiskey to Loki.

"So we should continue to consider the rest of the 38 a potential threat," Coulson concluded. "If they are not under your command anymore, and they haven't been recalibrated, they still could get orders from the scepter's gem itself."

Loki finally nodded after downing his entire tumbler of whiskey. "It is out of my hands," he said, showing his palm, as if clean of the incident. "If SHIELD wishes to dabble in it the way it did with the Tesseract, I fear for your organization. Your planet is not ready for it."
The dark prince then looked at Barton, trying to gage where they now stood with each other.

Clint could feel Loki’s eyes on him. He raised his head and stared back. “Look, I know we were both used. It’s hard sometimes to remember that when I'm used to having someone to punish for their crimes. I just need some time. Maybe a lot of time.”

"I do not know if you will be granted that," Loki said. "But the nuclear deterrent Stark is working on may help. It is a weapon unknown to Him. But you know He will try again."

Clint nodded. He understood the implication.

He had to get out of that room. Everyone was looking at him, judging him or pitying him. Clint needed to go somewhere to pull himself back together or at least pretend to have some control. He could retreat to the only place he could truly empty his mind: the tower’s archery range.

Clint headed down the hallway without another word. He turned the corner at a near jog, running full-bodied into Natasha.

He could see it in her clear blue eyes. She’d heard the entire exchange from her hiding place. He was also relieved to see acceptance and caring on her face. Natasha didn’t hide her emotions from Clint, one of the few people she completely trusted. "What can I do to help you here, Clint?"

“I need to be alone. Please.” Clint held onto Nat’s shoulders from where he steadied her after nearly running her over.

“I understand.” She simply replied. Taking up a position near the door Clint had run out of. When Phil rounded the same corner, intent on going after Clint, Natasha stepped into his path.

"Move," Coulson demanded.

"No. Give him control over his own choices right now. He deserves to reclaim that much, and more."

Coulson looked for something to punch, found nothing, shot mental daggers at Natasha. She looked ready to take his anger, welcomed it.

God, she was a good friend.

"Fine. But if he hurts himself, I'm holding you responsible."

Natasha nodded.

"You and I are going to HQ to deal with Delta Team next. Big change is coming. Be ready in an hour." Coulson left to take the south elevator back to his apartment, reluctantly.

“Jarvis,” Natasha asked, "Make sure the Clint does not maim himself on the archery range, like an idiot blind with emotion."

"I shall do my best."

"Call Banner to the range immediately if he does."

"I understand."

Then she went to her own apartment to change into her SHIELD uniform. She had the feeling this was not the day for social visits. She just hoped the next meeting went better than this one.
Coulson might combust if it didn't.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The Avengers attend a silent auction gala, Loki introduces the world to Lorelei, and party crashes steal the spotlight. (Also, see note regarding Infinity War.)

A/N: For everyone coming from or going to Infinity War this week: You will always find FrostIron, Stucky, and all main characters alive and (mostly) well in our Chaos Theory universe. Expect a mushy chapter after this one that will reflect our need for comfort after our 4/26/18 viewing. Loki_Doki has spoiled herself on the movie's happenings already and knows what will go down, but Aimless has not. Rest assured, you can get your TLC here (after this chapter.) Stay strong, friends.

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The day of the gala arrived. The sky was partly cloudy and a brisk north wind put a definite chill into the air. Stark Millennial Hall was bustling with activity. Decorators were bringing in fresh flowers and candle arrangements to adorn every table. Small twinkling fairy lights were being woven through lengths of gold and cream colored silk to drape the walls. Fine linens covered the large round tables which were set with gold edged china and brightly polished silverware. Crystal flutes for champagne and delicately stemmed wine glasses were set at the head of each place setting. Name cards in heavy cream colored stock listed each guest in elaborate calligraphy.

Caterers crowded the expansive kitchens putting the finishing touches on the veritable feast to be served at dinner while others arranged platters of fancy canapes to be passed out before the charity auction.

In the main ballroom, the stage was set for the orchestra. The floor was polished for dancing to follow dinner. The largest part of the center held the gallery of artwork and items for the auction. There was a vast array of styles and mediums from classic paintings to the best the world of modern art had to offer. Other more eclectic pieces had their own display pedestals including jewelry, pottery, and sculpture. They were all donated for the worthy cause of the Maria Stark Foundation. There were even a few vintage vehicles up for grabs as well.

It was the event of the season, and Pepper was in the thick of it all. She’d been up way before sunrise to oversee the entire event, something she’d been doing every year since first becoming Tony’s personal assistant. Being CEO of Stark industries meant that she no longer needed to be so involved with the event. She merely had to show up at the appointed time. There were dozens of event coordinators and assistants to make sure everything went smoothly. But Pepper could not stay away. She wanted this gala to be a rousing success. The money raised went to worthy causes. One hundred percent of the profits went to the Maria Stark foundation where the proceeds would be distributed to many different charities. Scholarships, national housing for the needy, and global advancing medical research were the picks of the stockholders' disbursements, some also benefiting the local communities in New York.
So dressed in a sensible linen suit and her hair tied up out of the way, Pepper went from room to room directing the workers with a firm hand and a calm voice. She stopped every once in a while to check the time and hurry things along when needed. Valets were setting up to whisk the cars away after the guests pulled up under a covered awning to protect them from any inclement weather. The press were also ringing the parking lot with their vans. This was the first such event after the Invasion of New York and the reporters were eager for the chance to snap photos of any Avenger that happened to appear.

An S.I. security detail were posted at all the strategic points and kept a wary eye on the proceedings. SHIELD too had agents in place to take care of any threat. An event of this scale with the anticipated guest list would be quite a draw for troublemakers.

Pepper also had Happy Hogan on call to head to Stark Tower two hours before the start of the gala to make sure Tony was getting ready. The engineer breezily replied to one of Pep’s many texts about bringing his "plus one." Thank God Phil had called her an hour before and explained things and Loki's agreements about the gala. The thought of them together could still give her hives, not out of disgust but out of concern. But, as dysfunctional as that pair seemed to be, Tony hadn’t seemed this content in months. So she could accept the new relationship for the sake of his happiness. But if Loki ever managed to hurt Tony, she’d move heaven and earth to make sure he paid. She'd give any person shovel talk about hurting Tony. It wasn’t that it was Loki in particular. Pepper still loved the man dearly even if their relationship had been a disaster. It hurt badly when she realized that she was not what Tony needed. It would hurt for a long time, but there was always work to immerse herself into and the company of a few close friends. She would always be connected to Tony through S.I., if nothing more.

Inside, Pepper was coping. Outwardly, she was rock solid and unfaltering. Perfectionists had their place, like seeing to the finishing touches on the biggest gala of the year in NYC before changing into her own gown.

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Tony adjusted his bow tie as he looked into the side mirror of the limo. He ran a hand through his newly trimmed hair and smiled at his immaculately groomed goatee. He did clean up rather well if he did say so himself. The Armani tuxedo had been tailored carefully and fit him like a wool and cashmere dream. He was particularly fond of his current cologne and judging by how often Loki nuzzled into him chasing down the scent, he liked it too. It was citrusy and woody with hints of leather and smoke. His Ferragamo shoes were shined to a mirror sheen and ruby cufflinks sparkled at his wrists.

Most important, hidden beneath his cuff of his shirt was Tony’s latest toy. It was a bracelet that expanded to cover his hand in a mini gauntlet complete with a repulsor. One cannot be too careful these days. And it was hella cool.

He glanced at the watch on his other wrist and frowned a bit. They’d better leave soon or the term fashionably late would be applied and Tony didn’t really look forward to the ‘where the hell are you’ texts.

Happy Hogan waited patiently behind the wheel of the car. Tony opted to lean against the highly polished passenger door. He hadn’t seen Loki since the small army of hair and makeup artists arrived earlier that afternoon to pamper the hell out of the demi-god. Tony was relieved that Loki didn’t seem to mind at all. In fact, the trickster was almost purring in delight at the opportunity to be treated like the god... goddess she apparently now was. He had kicked Tony out of the room to "transform and be worshipped," he said.
At one time he might have mocked the arrogant prince of Asgard. Now Tony could see right through him and knew Loki was already having a blast. The bond thrummed with excitement and anticipation, and was that actually joy?

Tony had no idea what Loki would be wearing. Since he’d been practically ejected out of the penthouse suite, instead Tony took it upon himself to make sure Bruce and Thor were similarly attired. He had a tux delivered to Bruce’s lab with instructions to make himself available to Tony’s personal barber that afternoon. There was nothing that even came close to a real straight razor shave and facial. Not sure how the Hulk would take to having a blade so close to Bruce’s face, Tony made sure to be there to distract his science-bro while getting his makeover. Bruce balked at the fancy suit but Tony hastily reassured the man that yes, it was expensive but he was worth it. Tony wanted Bruce to have a nice time at the gala too. The man deserved a night out. He too seemed equally pleased with the entire event, even if apprehension lurked in Banner's dark corners.

Thor was a total custom fit from top to bottom. Nothing was small about the God of Thunder. The tailors worked their magic, and as a crowning touch to the black tux was a military style sash in the Asgardian royal house colors.

Natasha was attending the gala as well. She’d been to a couple similar functions during her brief stint as Tony’s personal assistant when she’d been undercover for SHIELD. He knew she would be dressed to the nines but refused Tony’s offer of the services from the team giving Loki her makeover. She preferred to get ready herself. Probably to hide as many weapons as possible in whatever formal wear she chose.

Natasha, Bruce, and Thor would be riding together in the second limo driven by a hand picked agent that Jasper Sitwell trusted, vetted secondly by Coulson. Colonel James Rhodes was riding in that car shotgun. The car was sleek, deceptive for how heavily armored it was, as were all the Stark Industries luxury rides.

But Tony wanted Loki all to himself during their journey across town to the venue. They were both most comfortable with the very dependable and extremely discrete Happy Hogan as their chauffeur. Also, he never made a peep or passed judgement about anything that went on in the back seat. Coulson would ride in front of Tony's limo, where he felt he was in control. Tony wasn't sure that was ever a "sure thing" but okay. It made Phil's shoulder relax a notch or two below his ears. Phil was currently having a "reminder chat" with Loki. Tony wondered how long this type of thing would go on, but it was truly getting better every day.

He looked up as the elevator from the Tower's upper suites opened. His eyes widened and his mouth went dry. He noticed Coulson in his periphery but disregarded the agent. Instead, Tony focused on the literal vision of perfection that approached.

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She felt like the goddess she was. Her back was straight, her shoulders back, her head held high, and her form swayed in the most delightful way when she strutted out of the elevator. This form, curvy and soft and beautiful and strong - voluptuous they called it here on Midgard - she felt like she could conquer any world.

The nude floor-length dress hugged her body but the gold-and-pearl beaded overlay fabric flowed like water around her with every movement, like sunlight playfully dancing over warm skin.

Her eyes fell onto Tony Stark. Oh how she wanted him to want her. But it went far beyond lust. She wanted him to accept her. Yes. She realized this was about acceptance. How could he accept a frost giant if he could not accept him as a woman?
She searched their bond but didn't need to. He looked at her now, saw her, appreciated her appearance, lusted after her, yes, yet he still held the same level of deep affection that he did before this transformation.

Faith in Stark was not misplaced.

And by the Nines, Tony was incredibly handsome this night. He was intelligent and snarky and cared far more than he should. So she found herself wanting him more than anything else in the universe. Their bond glowed inside her like a bright star in the night sky, clear and pure and almost taking her breath away.

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and welcomed the nod of acknowledgement and approval from Thor. There were many stories and fond memories between them when Loki took the form of Lorelei, and it seemed Thor was feeling nostalgic this evening.

A knowing smile played on his lips, an unspoken appreciation for Loki's magic, his ability to manipulate through both genders, and perhaps even an appreciation for this milestone. Loki had tried to conquer this planet not that long ago but now was an esteemed guest at a social event with the majority of the Avengers.

If Odin could see them now.

Lorelei shook that thought from her mind and refocused on Tony. She did not stop her confident pace until she was a breath away from his body. He took a step backwards into the frame of car out of instinct. She parted her lips and barely grazed his mouth with a gentle kiss.

"You look powerful and are handsome and you smell incredibly alluring," she complimented, eyes roving over his tuxedo. He leaned forward to capture her mouth but she pulled away. "You'll ruin my gloss, darling."

"Wow," Happy Hogan said, not committed to either lust or repulsion when looking at the woman in front of Tony. "You said Loki could turn into a woman, but I thought you meant like a cross dresser not… a real flesh and blood woman."

"It’s Lorelei," she corrected smugly. "While in this form, you’ll address me as Lorelei and “she” or “her” when speaking of me."

Happy shrugged and pulled a face. "Okay."

"Problem?" she asked.

"No," he said with another shrug. "It’s just we use “they” and “their” now. Or don’t you have manners in Asgard?"

Lorelei heard Coulson chuckle from the other side of the limo.

"There’s no need to assign gender now," Bruce explained standing at the other limo, pulling at his bow tie and collar. "Neutral terms are respectful and do the trick here."

"Brilliant," Lorelei said. "I’d like that."

Coulson cleared his throat to remind her of their conversation.
"But for covert purposes," she continued, "Thor and Coulson and I have decided that maintaining my gender as female will be best in this circumstance. Your governing bodies are going to learn tonight that an Asgardian delegate was sent to maintain relations between our worlds. Since that's my cover, I must keep up appearances or risk everyone involved. But, I'll keep your gender neutrality in mind. I like it."

Happy looked proud of himself. "Yeah well, the world’s not ready for Loki, but I guess Lorelei will work."

"Let us hope," she said. "As I am eager to smell the fresh air outside of this tower. I’ve been a prisoner for too long."

"You were in Central Park the other night, fighting with Tony."

Lorelei pulled a face. "But I was angry and that makes everything smell bitter. Tonight," she said, nuzzling Tony's neck, "everything smells like victory."

"Cheesy." Coulson looked over the roof of the limo to Thor nearby by for support.

"This will work." The God of Thunder nodded twice, having faith in his brother that this charade could and would be maintained. The risk to Tony, to the Avengers, and to Coulson would be too great to overcome if the World Security Council, and the general public, found out about their purposeful deceit. They’d never regain trust again.

“Remember the story,” Coulson said to everyone in the garage, holding each of their gazes as if it was their signature on contract. “You will all treat Lorelei as if she is an ambassador to Asgard. Keep her away from journalists if you can, answer as little about her as possible. We’ll field it all tomorrow after Fury has blown a gasket for this stunt but is forced to explain it to the WSC.”

“Better to ask for forgiveness than permission,” Tony surmised, eyes tracing the glittering diamond headband that smoothed Lorelei’s thick dark hair away from her forehead.

“This is our one and only shot at making this identity work, at making this new design for our team work,” Coulson continued, his words carrying weight. “Don’t blow it or we're all fucked. Let's make the debut of the new Avengers a smooth one.”

"God help us." Rhodey looked someone pained out of concern but went along with it for Tony's sake. He nodded once before climbing into the passenger seat of the second limo.

Natasha also nodded in agreement. She maintained her air of suspicion but found herself admiring Lorelei’s rhinestone strappy heels.

“Okay, we're a team. Let's do this together,” Bruce muttered, holding the door open so Nat could slide into the car. If he enjoyed the exquisite view of her beautiful body as she climbed in, he wasn't going to say.

But Thor noticed and chuckled. “Only natural, doctor."

"I can hear you both, you know."

Bruce winced. "Sorry, Natasha."

She smiled when he got in and close the door. "To be honest, I'd be offended if you didn't look."

She winked at him while the limos pulled out of the Stark Tower garage. This was going to be a
night that would change their team dynamics. She could feel it in the air.

Tony made sure that the partition in the limo was raised for the trip across town to the event location. Happy and Coulson seemed to ignore any noises that drifted forward from the back seat. Not that it would have mattered to Tony in the slightest.

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Special Agent Jasper Sitwell felt on top of his game. He checked his watch. By his estimate, four hours and forty minutes remained for this gala detail.

He strode with purpose along the rafters above the gala’s main hall. He had an earpiece full of chatter and a head full of schematics. His eyes saw nothing new, nothing out of place. All was as it should be. Exactly where he’d seen it an hour before when guest started to arrive.

SHIELD had scoped the gala’s venue out fourteen days prior and locked it down two weeks ago. It had been scanned, sniffed, run through, run over, and walked more than a dozen times. So the eight agents he assigned to this task seemed like overkill. It was double the detail that usually trailed Tony Stark, but Coulson was Coulson and Fury agreed to it.

It didn’t seem to matter that half the Avengers would be in attendance. If they couldn’t protect Stark, who could?

But for whatever reason, and Sitwell was certain there was one, his senior agent wanted more eyes. So that’s what Jasper provided. This detail was specialized in surveillance and observation, less in brawn and might.

This was an auction, not a frat party.

It was already in full swing.

Jasper reached the trap door and conquered the rungs down the metal ladder with ease. He hit the bottom and turned sharply to his right, hearing the telltale tone in his ear that signaled Coulson was calling. Jasper hit the button on his ear piece three times to answer it. "I'm here."

“ETA 5 minutes,” Coulson said.

“Roger that. We are nearing a hundred guest now. No anomalies.”

“Understood. Advise: We have an anomaly on our end. A guest in car two. Female, five foot nine, dark hair, light eyes, ambassador to Asgard. She is a--”

“Wait, repeat that?” Jasper stammered.

“I’m guessing Asgardian ambassador tripped you up.”

“Fury didn’t brief me on this.”

“Things progressed quickly this afternoon. It’s my call.”

“This changes things.”

“Not really. Instead of Stark being the center of attention, she may steal the spotlight. She’s cheeky that way.”

“She’s what?” Jasper said with a frown. “You know her that well already?”
“Trust me on this.” Coulson said with mirth. “She’s Stark’s plus one so press and journalists will be on her. She is a level eight detail but Romanoff and I will cover her all night. Keep your team on Stark. SI security will simply treat her like his date, so no need to alert them of her identity unless there’s a reason.”

“Understood.” Sitwell said, not convinced he had the whole story. “But why is she here tonight?”

“Timing? Thor saw it as a party, a way to introduce her to our society’s norms.”

“And everyone is suddenly okay with this? She hasn’t been credentialed by the WSC, has she?”

“As I said, things happened fast. Just treat her as a high-profile guest.”

“Alright, boss. This anomaly is on you,” he pointed out. “Is she as strong as that group that landed in Puente Antiguo to help Thor with the Destroyer?”

Coulson chuckled. “Yes, this one can hold her own. There’s nothing fragile about Lorelei.”

“Lorelei. Why do all Asgardians have fairy tale names?”

“Because a lot of the tales come from Asgard,” Coulson teased. "Keep up.”


He let it all sink in, mind running through all possible scenarios. Then he landed on the first threat plausible to Stark if there was a plus one. “Is Ms. Potts aware of this development?”

“Yes, I spoke to her earlier. She won’t be an issue. Ms. Potts is a gem.”

“Roger that,” Sitwell said. “My team is headed to the press box now. See you in three minutes.”

This event was bringing out the biggest hitters, and now there was another Asgardian. It was like Hollywood was crashing a science symposium. Add two aliens to the mix.

Each guest passed through the “press box” which not only held the genuine press and select paparazzi, but was basically a covert weapons scanner. If a guest had a weapon seen on SI monitors, they’d get a personal detail in the form of a disguised party guest tailing them all night.

But so far, the only weapons inside the gala were the forks and knives for dinner.

Special Agent Jasper Sitwell still felt on top of his game. He checked his watch again. By his estimate, four hours and thirty-two minutes remained. He could handle this.

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By the time the two Stark limos pulled up to the venue, Tony and Lorelei were once more impeccably groomed with not even a hair out of place. One could surmise that Tony was a master at the back seat makeout session. The car glided up to the entrance and stopped under the awning that led up to the front doors. The area was packed with reporters and paparazzi.

Phil was out of the passenger door and walking between the crowd, thoroughly ignored, as was his intention. His brief thought of Clint was that he’d have loved to have seen him in a tux. Then Phil put his game face on and went to find Sitwell.

A valet opened the shiny black car door, the camera flashes were almost blinding. Prepared for such an eventuality, Tony slipped a pair of blue tinted shades over his eyes and stepped out.
Immediately, everyone in the crowd tried to get a look at who was accompanying the billionaire for the evening. There had been much speculation from super models to up and coming actresses all the way to a fellow Avenger. The rumor mill had run rampant. Oh, if the crowd only knew, Tony thought with a smirk. He leaned down into the limo and extended his hand. "My dear?"

A manicured hand grasped his and a pair of shapely legs ending in glittering stilettos appeared. Lorelei gracefully exited the vehicle and tossed her long, glossy black hair over her shoulder, revealing a stunning gown that highlighted her lush figure. The beadwork caught the light almost seeming to give the outfit an ethereal glow. The reporters and photographers went wild shouting questions and taking multitudes of pictures. "Is the glowy thing you're doing on purpose or?"

Lorelei chuckled. "I'm simply happy. Is that a crime on Midgard?"

"Not at all. Just saying, you do like the spotlight, and the cameras love you. I'm glad we're on the same side this time."

She wanted to promise that she'd never hurt him again, but now wasn't the place. He seemed to catch the sentiment though and kissed her knuckles lightly.

Taking her arm Tony smiled and waved at the crowd. He didn’t linger too long though. More cars were lining up and the rest of their party had yet to disembark. He placed his hand at the small of Lorelei’s back and ushered her inside. "Shall we?"

"Yes, introduce me to your friends."

"They're all in the other limo or SHIELD HQ," Tony muttered, still posing for the cameras. "These people are simply acquaintances or donors, but sure, we can make the rounds. I can't wait to see you in action."

She laughed. "We will make it through tonight together. Let's have some fun."

They bid their farewell to the press, never answering even one of the questions shouted them. Once in the double doors of the Millennial Hall, Tony took a moment to take it all in. "Wow."

Lorelei could admire attention to detail when she saw it. "It's beautiful. Classic. Elegant."

Tony agreed, his pride coursing through their spell bond. Pep had outdone herself as usual. He’d have to find his favorite redhead and thank her in person.

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The second limo with the rest of the Avengers pulled up to the curb. The fervor hadn’t died down in the least. The media was eager to see who else was attending the gala.

Thor was the first to step out of the other limo. He greeted the crowd with a wide grin and a wave. More shouted questions followed and he even answered a few of the more innocuous ones.

Natasha got out of the car on the side closest to the door. She deftly maneuvered the crimson silk of her dress so that the high slits on either side did not flash an inappropriate amount of leg. Not that she cared in the least about exposing her body, but Nat didn’t want her thigh holsters to be revealed. She leaned in and appeared to be speaking to someone still waiting in the car. She ignored the crowd as she talked to Bruce. After a moment, the scientist got out and took her hand. Bruce hated loud noisy crowds for a very good reason but with her reassurance, he bit the bullet and got out to wade through the chaos.

Last out of the luxury car was Colonel Rhodes. He was quite relieved that the media frenzy largely
overlooked his arrival. He took the opportunity to head inside. No one stopped him to ask questions.

Rhodey figured that Pepper could possibly use a friendly face. He went straight to the bar and ordered a whiskey and meandered into the auction gallery, eyes scanning for the lovely CEO.

Rhodes watched everyone. Tony, he was in his element, completely comfortable but with a fake smile plastered on his face. No one noticed, but his best friend did. Tony schmoozed, flattered, and air kissed any of the patrons who came up to them. It was expected among the rich and elite to act a certain way. Tony had been trained since toddlerhood in the proper etiquette. Not to say that he didn’t believe in shaking things up a bit, but he didn’t want to jeopardize the Maria Stark Foundation’s efforts in getting as many donations as possible from said donors.

~*~

Tony kept his snickering to a minimum while Lorelei was subtly grilled by attendees. They were clearly being eaten alive with curiosity. The last anyone had seen of Tony at such an event, he was still together with Pepper. The rumor mill then was quick to churn out speculations on an engagement.

Now the throng had fresh meat and the regal Asgardian on his arm was not falling for their sly innuendos or catty comments. She was not known as being the liesmith for false reasons. Lorelei bantered with the best of them. She offered up stinging critiques and backhanded compliments while leaving those she spoke to reeling and wondering if they’d been insulted or not.

Tony snagged himself and Lorelei a glass of champagne from a passing waiter.

"That movie producer propositioned me. An hour for a million dollars."

"You're worth five, at least," Tony joked, sipping his alcohol and waving at someone across the hall.

"Five million galaxies, maybe."

"Wait, are there really five million galaxies?"

"I could show you, you know."

"Is that what you told him?"

"Tony!" someone shouted, and Lorelei mirrored Stark's smile and waited to start the entire conversation of her identity all over again.

A few minutes later, when they excused themselves from the quite lovely couple, Tony put another glass in her hand.

"The wine in your cellar at the mansion is far better." Lorelei tipped the flute back.

"My old man had great taste and an expensive palate. Me? Not so much. If you enjoy it that much, it's yours."

"Mine?" Lorelei asked, then sighed. "Darling, you're too generous."

"And what will you do with it?"

"My only renovation request is a more comfortable lounger built for two. We do enjoy our time
"I do have rather fond memories of the cellar itself." Tony raised Lorelei’s hand to his mouth and kissed the soft skin. "Let's go back there tonight."

"Deal."

The governor of New Jersey caught Lorelei’s attention and Tony mostly tuned out while they chatted.

There were more waiters circulating through the crowd with trays of fancy canapes and assorted drinks. They were all dressed in black pants, a white button down shirt and a black vest. Professional and efficient they wove in and out of the attendees.

As they sipped, Tony kept a wary eye on the rest of his party. Thor held the attention of a small group near the windows as he regaled them with a tale that involved much gesturing on his part with the occasional hearty laugh. Tony was relieved when Thor caught his eye and winked.

Bruce mingled as well. Keeping mostly to the fringes of the room. He chatted a bit with some of Tony’s more science-minded peers. With a plate of appetizers in hand, Bruce was soon engrossed in a lofty discussion. It was nice to see the man relax and enjoy himself.

Natasha circulated through the room too. She kept a wary eye on everyone, never too far from Lorelei. She stopped frequently to touch base with Coulson, whom Tony only noticed when he followed Natasha. The man was like the deadliest wallflower on the planet.

All in all, it was a good start, and the silent auction was already ridiculously successful. The Chitauri flotsam and jetsam from the Avenger's tables seemed to get the most attention.

Even Lorelei cringed at that realization.

Humans were twisted.

~*~

Pepper spied Rhodey unobtrusively making his way around the fringes of the party. Her eyes lit up at seeing his friendly face. She knew he loathed such affairs. Bless the man for attending. He already had a stiff drink clenched in his hand. She lithely made her way through the celebrity crowd before cornering the colonel near the bar as he was heading for a refill.

He looked up just in time to see Pepper Potts bearing down on him with purpose. The first words out of his mouth made Pepper smile.

“I didn’t do it. Whatever it was, it’s all Tony’s fault.”

"That, I believe." Pepper linked arms with Rhodey. Together, they watched Tony and Lorelei. “So that’s really Loki... How?”

"Voodoo? Magic? ’Shrooms? It's way beyond me at this point, Pepper." Rhodey nodded at the bartender and accepted another whiskey sour. "Would you like something?" he asked her, head inclining towards the bar.

“Scotch neat would be lovely. I am running on fumes at this point. Tony has no idea, really. He just has to show up and look pretty.”
"But our boy does look pretty tonight," Rhodey teased. "And he's having fun, which he never does at these things."

She nodded. They both knew why. "He?"

"She."

"She," Pepper said, nodding. "They do make a rather fetching couple. And she does look amazing. The guests are mesmerized. I mean, come on. It had to be some sort of alien pixie dust to make her look that good. She’s practically glowing, for heaven’s sake.” Pepper shook her head ruefully. “I’m lucky I had time to throw this on and get my makeup done before I had to be back overseeing everything.”

"She's a magic trick," Rhodes explained calmly, handing Pepper her drink with a little napkin underneath. "Your beauty is natural. It's all you. No trick. I'd take that any day over Asgardian Day Glow."

Pepper uncharacteristically flushed at the comment. She’d known Rhodey for years and could tell when the man was kidding or when he was handing out a sincere compliment. This fell into the latter category.

"You've outdone yourself this time, Ms. Potts. I haven't seen this many brainiacs mixing with celebrity echelon in my entire life. It's a cocktail for a shitton of donations. I can already see your nonprofit accounting department celebrating. Congratulations." He clicked his glass to hers. "Now let's hope everyone plays nice and pays nice."

"So far, so good." Pepper took another sip of her drink just as she spotted a familiar face in the crowd. She inhaled the alcohol and began to cough.

Rhodey looked on in alarm and patted Pepper on the back as she seemed to have had her drink go down the wrong pipes. Finally after a moment she raised her hand and grabbed Rhodey’s sleeve.

"Who the hell let Thaddeus Ross in here?"

Rhodey followed her gaze. The ex-general was schmoozing with a engineer from SI, drink in his beefy hand, talking around a lit cigar in his mouth. He looked arrogant and out of place, somehow still smug. "How'd he get in here, Pep?"

"I will find out."

"Go find Coulson. I'll find Banner."

"I understand." She said, as they began to move through the crowd together at first.

"Damn," he said, spotting an annoyance riding Ross' coat tails. "Justin Hammer is here too."

"Oh God. And of course, he just spotted Tony. This isn't going to go well.” Pepper rolled her eyes in exasperation. She only hoped someone stepped in before disaster struck. "I won't allow fighting in this gala."

"With Ross here, it's the Hulk that I'm worried about."

Pepper paled. She passed by several men congratulating themselves on being masterminds of the political world, and it dawned on her. "It was Senator Stern," she said to Rhodes. "I bet that's how they got in."
"We on are the side of reaction, Pep. Not my favorite, but time to go to work," he said, splitting off from her. He caught eyes with Phil Coulson who was already moving towards Ross. If nothing more, they'd irritate the man with conversation until he left. Best, they'd escort him out without a scene.

~*~*~

Tony’s tolerance for the amount of bullshit he was slinging tonight must have grown exponentially. Lorelei was a tempering influence on his interactions with his adoring public. She seamlessly stepped in and smoothed things over when Tony’s snark threatened to get out of control. Plate in hand Tony gratefully turned away from the latest group trying to monopolize his attention. He munched happily on the canapes as Lorelei returned from bar. The smile melted off his face as he heard someone calling his name.

“Tony, Tony, Tony. Quite the shindig, huh?” Justin Hammer sidled up to Tony with a smirk firmly planted on his face. "I’m quite hurt you didn’t think to send me an invitation. I guess it pays to have friends in high places. Because here I am.”

“Unfortunately," Tony said through gritted teeth. "Last I heard you were rotting away in prison.” Really, the man was a colossal annoyance who seemed to have an inordinate amount of luck.

“Ah, but you see that’s where the friends in high places” he said in air quotes, "comes in. Since you decided to sever all your government contracts, I am now a hot commodity among the big guys in charge.” Hammer reached out and snagged a shrimp puff right off of Tony’s plate and chewed it open-mouthed. "You walked out on billions. Billions. Who does something crazy like that?"

Even if Lorelei wasn't seeing this exchange for herself, she still would've felt the plummet in Tony's mood through their bond. It was one of long-suffering annoyance. This man, this little pest was suggesting he was competition for Tony Stark? Hard to believe, but she'd give him the benefit of doubt for caution's sake.

She slid around Tony to stand where the little man would've had to been blind not to see her, expectantly looking for acknowledgment.

"Hello. I don't believe I've had the pleasure?" Her cocked eyebrow was anything but welcoming. "I am Lorelei."

Justin Hammer’s mouth pursed in speculation as he slowly looked her over, eyes finally resting on her cleavage. “You can call me Justin, and might I just say that you are stunning, my dear.”

"Thank you," she nearly purred, linking her arm with Tony's.

"I really must compliment Stark on his taste. I'm shocked an Asgardian woman like yourself is even giving him the time of day." He leaned closer to her. "But if you ever want to see what it’s like with a real man, I'll give you my number."

She visibly cringed but Hammer didn't skip a beat.

"Everyone knows Stark never manages to keep a hold of anyone. His love life is like a revolving door. Enjoy being the flavor of the month.”

Tony was going to kill the man right there. He was going to take a cocktail fork and jam it right into Hammer’s left eye. His repulsor gauntlet was too good for the guy.

"That’s it?" Lorelei asked, inching closer biting the fleshy part of her lower lip. "That's your insult?
"Oh my," she said, toying with his bowtie, as if he was a child that needed proper grooming. "You're going to have to be more clever, little man. I prefer a sharp level of intelligence and a tongue able to deliver wit, among other talents. This childlike attempt at insults is embarrassing... for you." She then looked at Tony, face shriveled up as if asking about a wretched smell. "What does this pest mean to you?"

"He was a self-proclaimed rival. Hammer Industries. He made sub-par weapons for the military. The only reason his company didn’t fold due to mismanagement was the fact that I got out of the arms race."

"Oh yes," Lorelei recalled, linking her free hand with Tony's. "Colonel Rhodes told me about Hammer's impotence. Such a shame," she said with a shrug and then blinked at Justin over her glass of champagne. "Oh I'm sorry, you're still here. Clearly, you're no competition in wit or ingenuity. Now run along before you're tossed out."

Hammer sputtered a bit ineffectually and adjusted his glasses with a frown. "I'll have you know I'm still a valuable asset to the military. And I have contacts you could not even begin to tap."

"Is that so?" Lorelei interjected, feeling Tony's irritation spiking the longer Hammer was there. "Do tell. I'm truly interested in hearing this."

"Let's just say the private sector is very lucrative. Stark tech is outdated."

Lorelei looked at Tony, eyes wide. "Is it now?"

"I'll show you. I'll show you all. Just wait."

Justin smiled toothily like he knew something they didn’t. He turned on a heel and walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

"Classic villain's last words exit." Tony tipped his glass back.

Lorelei frowned. "I never did such a thing."

Tony's head kind of bobbed in indecision.


"Ah, but you kinda did, my dear. Only your speeches got me hot, whereas Hammer’s makes me want to hurl."

"What exactly turned you on?"

"Not the part where you threw me out the window."

She winced. "I hate myself for that."

"It's all the past. Blame the scepter and all that."

"Still," she said, "I was never that awful in my threats."

"I plead the fifth."

"I'll forgive you that because of your constant attraction to me."

"Thanks, because I'm not in the mood to argue."

"Darling, I could feel your mood plummet with the sound of that man's voice. I won't stand for
Tony smiled and reached up to gently thread his fingers in the soft hair at the back of Lorelei’s neck. He tugged her down slightly and kissed her lacquered plush lips. Gawkers be damned. There was no way Tony could resist the breathy sensuality of her plea. He’d give her everything and more if she but asked.

“I’ve got just the place. Cozy office for the convention hall coordinator.”

He wrapped his arm around her waist and guided Lorelei towards the hall. The crowd was thick and slowed their progress. They excused themselves from the tenth person insisting on conversation and continued to make for the hallway, but a raised voice got Tony’s attention.

“Wait! Tony Stark! Tony!”

The rather desperate-sounding voice seemed familiar. His eyes scanned the crowd. Then Tony got a glimpse of the woman right as security got a hold of her. His eyes widened in recognition.

“Maya?”

“Who?” Lorelei asked.

Tony slipped out of her grasp, entirely focused on the woman clamoring for his attention.

“Maya Hansen,” he said in awe. What were the odds that she would show up here? Especially since Jarvis was currently scouring the globe for her whereabouts on his command. They needed her, desperately, to cure him of the Asgardian poison still in his veins.

“Stop!” Tony called out to the SI security agents, heart pounding in his chest. They’d pulled her at good twenty feet away from him already. “I said stop! I know her.”

“Tony!” Bruce said, pushing people out of the way with Rhodes behind him. "Ross is here.”

"So is Maya," Tony said, his pulse hammering through his body.

Bruce swiveled his head, looking in the direction Tony was headed. He saw her, saw Ross, and wondered who would get to her first. "Shit."

"Don't Hulk out," Rhodey pled from somewhere behind his shoulder.

Then Ross went down hard, taking a few patrons with him to the ground. Bruce blinked in confusion, staring at Coulson who apparently had used his super SHIELD ninja reflexes to simply trip the ex-General. Phil motioned to go after Maya. Sitwell was already coming to Phil's side to handle Thaddeus Ross.

"Let her go," Tony shouted to security. "Let her through."

When they released her, Maya hurried to Tony’s side. The crowd of gala attendees kept their distance but gawked all the same. It was a given that Stark was a trouble magnet and the guests wanted to see who this newcomer was. Rumors instantly circulated that it was a former fling making trouble. There were probably hopes there would be a cat fight.
“Tony! Thank God.” Maya fisted his sleeve, clinging. "I need to talk to you about my research and what’s happened but I’m in danger. I know you can protect me, the Avengers... I...I really can’t say anything else here but--”

“Yeah, I’ve been looking for you. It’s not safe out here. Come on.” Tony was grateful when Bruce joined. As far as the genius was concerned, the party was over.

"Dr. Hansen," Bruce said, nodding as he moved to her other side.

"Dr. Banner," she said, basking in the protection of both men flanking her as they made their way out of the crowd.

Lorelei stood where she was discarded. She wanted to pout, but something about Tony's emotions made her hesitate in her selfishness. There was genuine concern and a hint of fear emanating from Stark. This was not attraction to this new woman, this was more.

"Old fling?" Thor asked of Stark, popping pretzels into his mouth and chasing it down with a drink.

"I'm not getting that vibe," she answered. "He seems genuinely worried." She frowned when a flashbulb went off nearby, a cameraman eager to get photos of both Asgardians together. Natasha stood stoically next to the paparazzi, uneasy, watching Tony, Bruce, and his new friend approaching fast.

In the flashbulbs, Lorelei lost her line of sight to Tony, though she knew he'd be making his way towards her, as the hallway to the non-public areas of the convention hall were behind her.

They thread their way past the curious onlookers. Tony wanted to get to where Lorelei and Thor waited. The extra protection of the statuesque Asgardians would be a definite bonus, not to mention Natasha.

Tony looked over his shoulder for Ross, eyes wide and alert. Maya tugged on his arm. "Keep moving."

Someone ran into him from his left side and threw him off balance. The sound of a tray of empty glasses crashed to the floor. A waiter. They both struggled to regain their balance and Tony felt something glance off his arc reactor.

There was the sensation of pressure to his right chest, then a sting that made him wince.

Drawing his next breath was ... hindered.

He looked down in shock to see a three-inch glossy black blade being pulled out of his chest. It was a small push dagger, likely made of glass and nylon to escape metal detection.

Huh. Smart.

The hilt of the blade remained tucked between the waiter's fingers, which were now bloody and coming in for a second attack.

His mind went into some magic place where it was merely an observer.

An assassination?

But why?
The thought seemed absurd at the moment, but it had been like this his whole life, right?

The fight instinct then took over. Tony raised his hand. His new repulsor gauntlet spread from his bracelet and covered his fist. In an instant, he lifted it to shield from the next strike of the blade. His armored fist closed around the small but effective weapon, snapping the dagger in half and wrenching it out of the wouldbe assassin’s hand, most likely snapping bones in the process.

The man cried out in pain and twisted, trying to compensate for being grappled. He used his other hand to punch Tony in the face twice in quick succession.

Tony reeled back, unable to concentrate and fell into someone. He lost his grip on his attacker and his vision blurred for a moment. Someone tried to steady him, arms around his torso. Maya?

People began screaming and they both went down.

Adrenaline still numbed the pain, but panic now robbed Tony of logic.

He knew he had been stabbed but had no idea how bad it was.

If not for the arc reactor, the blade would've likely sunk deep into his heart.

Tony saw failure in the assassin's eyes. The waiter knew his mission had been compromised. He took off through the crowd, vaulting over obstacles that no mere waiter should have been able to. Tony saw Rhodey, Thor, and Natasha giving chase, calling out to each other. Coulson closed in from the other side and the attacker went to the ground.

The screaming crowd scrambled away to the exit, chaos breaking out in the middle of Pepper's beautiful gala.

He'd have to apologize, send flowers, do something to make up for ruining her night.

There were sounds of glasses shattering, plates smashed on the marble floors, and something was said about a cyanide pill.

Tony was on autopilot, his hands scrambling to pull back his tuxedo jacket to assess the damage done. Seeing the blood stain, pain began to bloom, like the red splotch growing outward from the slit in the white dress shirt.

He was barely aware that he was cradled in Lorelei’s arms. She was speaking a language he didn't understand and looked panicked, lost, confused and furious. Maybe that's just what she was feeling. It was all too jumbled to give it much thought. But when Tony closed his eyes for a brief moment, their bond thrummed with shared fear and agony. It terrified him.

Bruce yanked Tony's jacket open fully and hissed when he saw the damage. Maya knelt beside Banner. She had grabbed a cloth napkin off a nearby table and began pressing it to the wound to try and staunch the blood flow.

"Take him to the back hallway," Lorelei insisted, trembling hand ghosting over the wound, his arc reactor sparking in recognition of her magic. "I can help stabilize him but he will need a surgeon. You know I'm no healer."

"You can't use magic here," Bruce insisted.

"Secrets be damned," Lorelei exclaimed. "I won't lose him."
"I feel the same way," Bruce said, looking at the people and paparazzi still able to blow Loki's cover. "But don't use your magic yet. It'll be all over the news and you'll doom us all."

"Magic?" Maya parroted.

"Later," Bruce said, handing his phone to Maya. "Call 911 in case no one has."

"No," Jasper Sitwell said. He appeared at Tony's feet. "There's an ambulance waiting in the back of the building. We have agents bringing a stretcher now. ETA 12 seconds. We'll take him HQ and use our medical facilities. He'll get the best care there without the press and questions."

"Alright," Bruce agreed. "The EMTs can handle this en route?"

"Of course. They're SHIELD."

"That holds no credit with me right now," Lorelei snapped out. "It was your responsibility to see this never happened."

"It was a waiter with an undetectable dagger," Jasper said. "We're working on his identity now."

"I don't care. Right now, Tony is drowning in his own blood. Your staff did this."

"Are you suggesting this was a SHIELD agent?"

"He has another lung," Maya pointed out, interrupting them. "It's the aorta we have to worry about. If it was nicked, then-" She winced from the scathing look Lorelei shot her. "Sorry."


"Of course."

How could this have happened? They were all there. Right there. SHIELD, the Avengers, the Hulk. How could they have missed this? That notion was more terrifying to Bruce than Tony's wound. He was confident they could save the genius, but that someone could get to them so easily... that was the true horror.

"Back off. Get them out of here. Clear the entire hall." Sitwell demanded. Bruce looked over his shoulder to see security agents pushing onlookers towards the exit. The most interested was Thaddeus Ross. His gaze fell heavily onto Maya.

"Not today," Maya said under her breath. Then she turned back to Tony. "He's not going to win today."

The hole in Tony's lung was sucking in air with each breath, his lung unable to expand.

"Hang on, buddy," Bruce instructed, sealing the hole with his bare hand. "You're going to be okay, just stay with us. We can fix this."

"Why is it always hard to breathe," Tony asked, sarcasm wasted on all of them.

"This way," Pepper exclaimed. "Hurry," she said to the emergency medical technicians arriving with the stretcher. "Oh God, Tony." She pressed her hands together in prayer against her lips. She didn't see the attack, but didn't need to. This was too reminiscent of the many times she'd seen him take damage intent on killing him. She too was horrified. How could something like this happen when every measure had been taken to keep him safe?
"Thor!" Lorelei called out.

"I am here," he said, kneeling beside her.

"Move him to the stretcher. Gently," she explained, still clutching Tony's hand as Thor picked Tony up and walked him to the gurney. "Where is the heathen who did this?"

"Dead," Thor said. "He chewed on some kind of poison that killed him to keep his silence."

"Cyanide," Coulson said, pacing Thor. "Sitwell. With me."

"Sir."

"Fury is on his way."

Jasper visibly winced. This was his detail. His responsibility. "I understand."

"Seal off the hall and the outbound streets around the convention center. There could be more of them. I want answers."

"Already done, sir. No one is getting out of here without our permission."

"Tony," Coulson said, standing beside Stark, who was being attended on the stretcher. "Do you still have the weapon in your gloved hand?"

Tony found it hard to focus but nodded as he managed to raise his hand, the gauntlet still covering his fist. He hadn’t even realized. He retracted the device for everyone’s safety and the pieces of the knife dropped onto the stretcher. Hell of a time to unveil his new toy but it had helped to save his life.

"New tech?" Coulson asked, collecting the pieces of the push dagger in his hand. "Got to hand it to you, Stark. Your genius saved your life. Again."

"You should have protected him," Lorelei spat out, looking remarkably like the angry demigod that attacked New York. "You failed."

"Agreed," Coulson said, not skirting the issue. "Fury has warned us a dozen times about this possibility. We've taken every step we could, aside from staffing events with nothing but SHIELD agents. We were working with Ms. Potts on this with Stark Industries staff and security, but clearly, it wasn't enough. Now, I need everyone to return to HQ or Stark Tower."

Tony batted away the hands that tried to tend to him. “Natasha.” His voice rasped. He felt the urge to cough and fought it.

The redhead stepped up. She looked down at Tony, frowning. “Hey. You managed to get yourself into trouble again.” She took his hand in hers, ignoring the slick blood that transferred to her skin.

“Story of my life.” Tony agreed. “Take Maya back to my tower. Lock it down. Jarvis knows what to do. Protect her, Nat. She’s in danger.” His voice was weak as he struggled to breathe.

“We’ll take care of her. Now let them treat you or you’ll piss me off.” Natasha’s fond smile belying the implied threat.

Natasha let go of Tony’s hand and stepped back. She moved to where Maya stood brushing at the drying blood on her hands. “Come with me. We’ll take you to a safe house. Probably one of the most secure places on the planet right now. You can explain everything later.”
Maya recognized the woman addressing her from the footage of the attack that destroyed chunks of Manhattan. She was an Avenger. And if Tony said she was to be trusted, Maya believed him. She was so tired of running. “Thank you.”

“Bruce, you come with me too. Until we get back to the tower, I need you to watch our backs.” Natasha took hold of Maya’s arm and waited until Bruce joined her. “We’re going out the back, sir,” she called out to Coulson, "I’m taking one of the SHIELD armored transports. Meet you back at the tower for debrief.”

Phil nodded and watched as Tony was wheeled down the hallway, Lorelei and Thor in tow. When he turned, Rhodes was there with his arm around Pepper's shoulders. She was ghostly white with tears in her eyes, but she was seething with anger.

"How did this happen at my party," she demanded, her confident voice contradicting her frail appearance.

"I don't know but we're going to find out. Please let Colonel Rhodes take you to Stark Tower."

She didn't nod but allowed herself to be escorted down the hall towards the back exit.

The only thing Coulson was grateful for was that Loki had kept his end of the bargain.

This damage could be contained, researched, and resolved.

But SHIELD was slipping. And that made him nervous.

More than Loki. More than Pierce.

They been caught by surprise, right under their noses.

Nowhere was safe.

~*~

An hour later, Fury stood over the lukewarm corpse laying face down in the middle of the gala. He was a young man, white, physically fit, clean cut.

"Got an ID?"

"Not yet, sir. He hasn't pinged on any of our databases." Maria Hill stood up and stared down at the dead assassin. "This is going to troublesome. It wasn't a random citizen angry about the Invasion, like we thought. We don't know who he is."

"Well, he's somebody," Nick said. "Get me a name."

"Yes, sir."

His phone rang in his pocket. He took it out and looked at the screen.

Pierce.

"Courtesy call, at this hour?"

"I heard you had a bit of trouble this evening."

Fury nodded, pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. "The other shoe finally dropped on
Stark."

"We warned him this was coming, Nick."

"Yeah," he agreed, reluctantly. "I hate to say I was right, but I'm not certain this was random."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't ID him yet."

"A sleeper inside your organization?"

"No. I don't know. Stark has a lot of enemies, a few of which were here tonight."

"It was his choice to make himself open to public," Pierce reminded. "And the Asgardian, Nick?"

"I will brief you on that tonight."

"Alright," Pierce said, oddly okay with put off. "So let me ask you this: Do you really think it is wise to keep Barnes in New York City? You've got a big problem up there, Nick, and your best men can't seem handle it."

Fury made a face, wanted to throw his phone against the wall.

"Nick?" Pierce said, after the prolonged pause.

"I'm here."

"Send me Rogers and Barnes. I'll keep them safe."

Fury hung his head, rubbed at his eyes. He knew he'd been defeated. "I'll send them tomorrow. With Romanoff."

"Wonderful," Pierce replied. "I'll make preparations."

Fury hung up before Pierce could.

Then he shattered his phone on the floor.

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