A History of Falling

by Virgo827

Summary

Loki falls. When he finally lands, he finds himself on Midgard. S.H.I.E.L.D. beckons with the promise of adventure and intrigue, but he's not sure his mortal identity can withstand the pressure. The Avengers Initiative has only been delayed, not disbanded, and Fury gathers his team as the realm is threatened by a mysterious player from beyond Earth's borders that claims to want the Tesseract...
Part One: The Precipice

In which Loki balances on a knife’s edge between who he was and who he will become. Or, hiding in plain sight.

I

Five thousand four hundred and thirty seventh cycle of Odin Borsson’s reign

Sút Enda in the Final Descent

Sannligr Stiarna in the Ninth House

At dinner, Father told us we are to journey to Midgard in a fortnight. It is most exciting. He says as princes of the Realm Eternal, we must have knowledge of each of our protectorates.

I am glad, for I have already tired of Vanaheim, where we travel more than any other realm. Mother always spends hours inside, drinking ǫl and talking to old women, and not telling sagas, either. It is most dull.

Alfheim is tolerable. I like their seidr, though I wish they would not spend so much time and effort...
coaxing flowers to bloom. What is the point? They will bloom given enough time. I think it is considerably more impressive to cause a flower to burst into emerald flames.

But everyone was very cross when I did so. They are sticks in the mud, Thor says. Thor doesn’t want to go to Midgard. He wants to travel to Muspelheim and see a fire giant, but Father has forbidden it. I told Thor that I heard Midgard has giants of all kinds, only they hide from the sight of any Æsir for fear they will be killed. I cannot tell if he believes me but I dearly hope he makes a fool of himself demanding to see Midgardian giants while we visit. Most amusing!

I suspect there is another reason Father wishes to visit. I would very much like to know why. I believe it has something or other to do with the Tesseract. I overheard him mention its safekeeping to Mother when they thought I was busy eating my custard. After Mother dragged Thor to the private bath house, I asked Father what the Tesseract was. He frowned for a very long time but finally told me it is the most valuable jewel of the Treasury, given its great power, forged from the heart of an ancient, distant star before even the Singularity occurred.

Master Alfarr told me all about the Singularity in our lessons last week. Thor doesn’t know anything of the Tesseract or the Singularity. Master Alfarr says Thor is impatient and easily distracted by bright lights. Then he told me not to tell Mother he said that. I wasn’t going to anyway because I can keep secrets. It’s fine that I am better with lessons, since Thor always bests me in the training yard.

Nurse is telling me to put out the mage-light and retire to bed. She is insufferable. But I suppose I must be well-behaved and courteous if I am to be sure to accompany Father to Midgard.

Loki Odinsson, Prince of Asgard. Mother says I must sign my name thus to all documents. I think I would prefer to use my seal because the melting wax can be molded into all sorts of shapes – now Nurse is frowning at me, I wonder how much longer I can pretend to write out tomorrow’s lessons before she takes the –
Agent Roberts glances at the quaint painted sign and double-checks the name with the information she’d been emailed. Museum of Scandinavian History and Folklore, reads the curling blue script. The building itself is an old white clapboard house that has been repurposed to contain the exhibits. Just the sort of small-town, folksy place she’d been expecting.

She suppresses a sigh of irritation. Of course she’d landed this assignment, as the only probationary agent in her unit. Even though she had three unfinished reports to work through and Brock had been sitting at his desk, twirling a pen and grinning smugly at her this morning when she’d left.

The two-hour drive did nothing to improve her mood. And this far out in the boonies there isn’t even a decent cup of coffee. She’d been forced to stop off at a gas station and grab a refill. Taking another sip, she frowns. The swill tastes suspiciously like they’d hooked up the industrial coffee pot to the gasoline pump instead of the water line. She dumps it in a trash container framed by painted iron scrollwork that looks far too charming to be used for its intended purpose.

Nothing for it but to go inside and get the interview over with so she can make it back to the city in time for dinner with Hank. Some S.H.I.E.L.D. agents had personal lives, contrary to what her supervisory agent believed.

Pushing through the door, a bell tinkles above to signal her arrival. The ground floor is deserted, dotted throughout with glass-topped cases displaying the curios. The tiny reception desk is empty as well. Roberts looks around for a minute before calling out, “Hello? Anyone there?”

A blue-haired elderly woman totters out of a side corridor. “Hello, sweetheart!” Roberts tries not to grind her teeth at the term of endearment. She usually doesn’t mind, especially coming from an old lady, but being a female agent in the mostly male-dominated S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters has made her a bit sensitive to pet names.

“Are you here for a visit?”

“Ah, no, actually. I’m here to see Mr. Lukas Eld? We had an appointment. I’m afraid that I’m a bit late. Underestimated how long it took to get here from the city.”

She bobs her head sagely. “The highways round these parts take you on a lot of twists and turns,
“Lukas, sweetheart? Your guest is here.” At least it isn’t only her that’s stuck with the endearments.

“Thank you, Roseanne.” Eld’s voice is smooth and cultured. The British accent is surprising to hear in the backwoods of Virginia.

Her first impression of the man she’d come to meet is of height. He stands up from behind a desk cluttered with haphazard stacks of papers and gestures for her to have a seat in the spindly wooden chair opposite him. Neat black hair curls atop his head, and his clean-shaven face is angular and pale. Much better looking than the greying old professor type she’d been expecting.

They shake hands and she sinks down into the proffered chair. Roseanne hovers in the doorway. “Can I get you a coffee? Tea? Water?” she asks.

Roberts starts to decline, then remembers the half-finished cup she’d dumped on the way inside. “Coffee would be great, thank you, ma’am.”

Eld smiles gently at Roseanne and she putters off to fetch it. He folds his hands on the surface of his desk, reclining back slightly while somehow maintaining perfect posture. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Agent Roberts, was it?”

She flushes. “Yes, yes, Agent Brenna Roberts. Nice to meet you as well.”

“May I ask what brings you to our humble museum this afternoon?” His refined, polite tone makes Brenna uncomfortably aware of her own inelegance.

“I’d like to talk about your research. The last one - paper, I mean, the last paper you published. If that’s alright?”
“Certainly,” he agrees. “Is there anything in particular you wished to discuss?”

“In your conclusion, you mentioned your research provided some evidence for a theory that’s been debated about for a long time. About the Tesseract. Being real.” She leaves off there and waits to see if he takes her prompt.

He tilts his head and studies her. “There is no definitive proof the Tesseract is an actual physical object, nor that it possesses the kind of unearthly powers that tend to be repeated in legend.”

“Well - no, I understand. But could you tell me about your theory anyway?”

Eld’s green eyes are sharp and curious. “S.H.I.E.L.D. sent an agent all the way out here to listen to an obscure historian posit his theories about the potential existence of a mythical object?”

“I wouldn’t say you’re obscure.” In fact, Eld’s papers had gotten quite a lot of acclaim in academic circles. His field was necessarily small, but any mention of the Tesseract, even a few offhand sentences in a conclusion, were automatically brought to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s attention. There was an algorithm to keep track of certain key words floating around the Internet, or so Brock had droned on about in the break room last month. She’d read the abstracts of most of his published work in her briefing folder, and read the latest in detail before she drove down. It was a treatise on the intricacies of Old Norse religion, specifically reviewing the archaeological and textual evidence for veneration of physical objects in a ritual context.

Roberts hadn’t understood much of the jargon but she likes to think she’d gotten the gist of his point. The historian raises an eyebrow at her.

“Look, I know this is a little unorthodox. But think about it this way- if there’s even a miniscule chance of this thing being real, S.H.I.E.L.D.’s got a duty to investigate it. Can you imagine how much power it would have if all the legends are true?” She hopes he buys her explanation. He doesn’t need to know about anything recovered from the ocean during the search for Captain America. S.H.I.E.L.D. was keeping that on the down low, obviously. “Just covering all our bases, here.”

Eld’s brow momentarily furrows. At the colloquialism? Maybe it’s a British thing. Finally, he nods. Before she can ask another question, Roseanne brings in two coffees.

“Black with two sugars, dear,” she says as she hands a mug branded with the museum’s logo to
Eld. An identical one is handed to Roberts. “Did you want cream or sugar?” she asks.

“No, thanks. I’ll take it black.” That was one of the first aspects of her job at S.H.I.E.L.D. that she’d learned. Take your coffee where you can get it, and don’t bother wasting time trying to make it taste better when you don’t know how long you have until everyone is running off to the next emergency.

Eld sips at his mug. Roberts decides to jump right in. “Let’s work on the assumption the Tesseract is real. What do you know about it?”

“Most of the accounts are oral,” he begins. “They speak of the star-bright jewel of Asgard’s vault. Legend holds that the Wanderer came down the Bifröst and entrusted it into the care of his most loyal acolyte.”

“The Wanderer?”


Roberts has a sudden urge to refer to Director Fury as the One-Eyed when she gets back to headquarters. She bites her lip to fight a smile. “Okay, how about the Bifröst? What’s that?”

She thinks this time his tone holds an edge of irritation, like he’d expected her to know background and terminology before she’d arrived. She did, of course. Her research had been fairly thorough, but she finds the easiest way to put most academics at ease is to allow them to chatter on about their subject.

“The Rainbow Bridge, connecting Asgard to the Nine Realms. A portal capable of transport.”

Roberts remembers the mission brief from the New Mexico Incident. It was a portal all right, a damn portal to space that brought nothing but hunky aliens and trouble. She’d be fine with the former if it weren’t for the latter.

But as she understands it, the Bifröst is described as an actual bridge in Norse mythology. It’s curious that Eld would use the word portal specifically.
“So, are there any theories about where it was hidden? Who this acolyte person was?” she redirects.

“It was said that the Tesseract slept beneath the Tree, awaiting the Wanderer’s return before the beginning of Ragnarök. It is unclear whether the Tree is a physical entity or a metaphor. The geographical location of the temple in which it was supposedly hidden has been widely debated but never conclusively proved,” Eld notes.

She hums acknowledgment. “But your research suggests the Tesseract was an actual physical object.”

“My research suggests the Nordic peoples of one thousand years ago believed they possessed an object of mystical power they referred to as the Tesseract,” he clarifies carefully. “There are several accounts that describe a sacred artifact matching the Tesseract’s description enshrined in a place of honor within a certain temple. Replicas have been discovered at numerous archaeological sites. It is my assertion these replicas served as surrogates, and were used in religious rituals by cults venerating Odin throughout the region.”

Roberts meets his gaze. “What do you think the Tesseract could do? If it was real?”

Eld laces his hands together, bringing them to his chin and resting lightly on his fingertips. “Well now, that’s very interesting. Given the cube’s purported origins, one would imagine it contained an impressive source of power. Divine, even.” He gives her a teasing half-smile.

“What, like performing miracles or something?”

“Your Christianization is showing, Agent Roberts. I mean to say the Tesseract most likely contains an actual power source, if its rumored qualities are true.” He leans forward. “A glowing, unearthly light. A shiver in the air when one is near, a buzzing of energy prickling along the skin. A sense of barely contained power. A fallen star, trapped on Earth.”

Roberts finds herself wide-eyed and staring. Eld makes it sound so, so… enthralling. She’d seen the Cube, of course. Twice. Everything he describes is pinpoint accurate.

A frisson runs down her spine. It sounds as if he’s encountered it before, or at least spoken to someone who had. Either way, it adds up to a potential security breach.
Eld leans back in his chair. “That is, if you believe the rumors. We humans do tend to embellish.” He smirks.

“Right,” she says absently. Her thoughts chase each other around her head like a dog chasing its tail. She manages to come up with a few more basic questions regarding where he thinks the Tesseract was hidden. Luckily, he doesn’t say “In a S.H.I.E.L.D. base in the desert, of course.”

She clears her throat. “I think that’s all I needed. Could I contact you if I have another question? Do you have a card?”

He retrieves an embossed business card from his desk drawer and passes it over to her. Roberts drains the last of her coffee and stands. “Thank you very much for taking the time to speak to me, Mr. Eld. It was enlightening.”

“I am glad you found it so. Do not hesitate to call, Agent Roberts.” They shake hands again, and she straightens her blazer as she walks to the door. Just before she crosses the threshold, a question picks at her brain and urges her to stop.

“Mr. Eld?”

He glances back up. “Yes?”

“Do you think it’s real? The Tesseract?”

It takes him a moment to reply. “The boundary between the possible and impossible is ever shifting, Agent Roberts.”

That isn’t quite an answer, but she nods and leaves. Waving a hasty goodbye to Roseanne at the reception desk, she pulls out her phone and heads to her car. Her supervisor answers after the second ring.

“Coulson here.”
“It’s Roberts. Just wrapped up the interview with that researcher.”

“And?” Always straight to the point with Coulson.

“Not sure. But I get the feeling he knows more than he’s saying. Definitely worth the drive. We should keep him on our radar. I’ll write up a more detailed report when I get back.”

“You do that. The Tesseract project is top priority right now. We’re bringing in some specialists to help Dr. Selvig.”

“Understood.”

They hang up without a goodbye. Roberts has a long drive back to the city to ponder all Eld said. And the man himself. If they bring him in, for questioning or consulting, she needs to get a handle on him.

His rich voice plays on repeat in her head the entire drive. A fallen star.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys. This is my first fanfic for the Avengers/Thor. Hope you enjoy - I’m still working on the story so updates might not be as quick as I’d like but I’ll do my best. This is definitely AU, but you’ll see most characters, and this is not just a rehashing of the Avengers movie. This takes place after Thor and before the events of season one of Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., though the main parts are all mostly in play and the same people have been gathered.
He was born in the Void.

In some moments, he was convinced of that. The Void had always been there, surrounding him, inescapable and impenetrable. How could anything exist outside of its leaching blackness?

But a flicker of memory would come – the feel of a silk dress under his fingers, the smell of a ripe apple. Often, the flash of blond hair in the sunlight. And he would think, would realize, that such delicate sensations could never have been borne out of the abyss. The existence of Elsewhere would crystallize as a certainty in his fractured thoughts.

He clung to the idea with a frantic strength, but it would inevitably slide away as the blackness obscured his sight again. And he began to question. Memories or hallucinations? If he dreamed these visions up, what could he make of the phantom warmth they conjured deep in his chest?

Not all the visions were pleasant. The recollection of an icy touch set his guts to twisting round themselves. A face with one eye had sweat coating his palms. But he embraced even these nightmares as proof of a separate reality.

And then there were others. These did not spark any recognition, not even the faintest sense of familiarity.

He saw a shattered asteroid, the remnant of some ancient cataclysm. A well, with deep black water, surrounded by silver trees. A star shining blindingly bright with blue fire. The shadow of
some leviathan moving through the emptiness of space, blotting out distant points of light.

A massive, mottled purple hand, reaching, reaching for him – he twisted away and kept falling.

He cried and he laughed and he screamed until his throat was raw. He knew he was still falling, yet felt as if nothing changed around him. No current of air or blur of movement. The fall could have been years and centuries or only seconds stretched out by endless despair.

Sometime amidst the meaningless eternity, he felt a tug on his arm. The first tangible sensation he’d felt in the Void that he wasn’t half-sure he’d invented to keep the tatters of his consciousness together.

He let the unknown force tug at him, and then without warning he was whipped and pulled and thrown through what felt like a narrow passage. And he was falling again, but this time buffeted by a chill gust of air. The wind raised prickled flesh, set him to shivering uncontrollably. It wasn’t particularly cold, but the abrupt return of feeling was overwhelming and unpleasant.

Pain spread like a web of lightning over his body. He must have known how electricity felt coursing through muscle and tissue, for his mind immediately supplied the comparison. It seared him, exquisitely burning.

He had no more thoughts until the agony ebbed the slightest bit. Time must have passed, but it was an abstract concept. Slowly, he became aware of a hard surface under him, the rasp of grit uncomfortable against his exposed skin. A new sensation, infinitely preferable to the pain, but just as impossible to tear his mind away from. And the wind still whispered through his hair, brushing strands against his nose in a distracting manner.

He liked that he could feel his hair. He liked that he was aware of his body again, that he knew his limbs hadn’t been devoured by the hungry black depths. Gently, stiffly, he tried to move his legs. The muscles twitched and spasmed. He tested every appendage on his body and found they responded, even if he couldn’t yet control them. He lay there, trembling and convulsing and deliriously relieved.

The blackness around him began to resolve into murky shapes, and he realized that his eyes were open. Perhaps they had always been open. The silhouette of a tree materialized in front of him.

He was watching the tree fondly when a distant metal rumble cut through the enveloping silence.
Jolting in surprise, sharp shooting pains lanced along the length of his spine. A searing white light burned his eyes. He shut them tightly and waited for the ache to diminish. Behind his lids, the glare of light grew in intensity. The metal rumble crescendoed into a roar. They receded together.

When next he opened his eyes, the surrounding world was bathed in a muted grey light and the sky heralded a fresh dawn. He stared at the undulating line of the horizon and wondered how he could know with certainty the riot of colors the sun would bring in its wake.

Stumbling towards the sunrise, he abandoned the crater of his landing. He crossed fields and a uniformly blackened stone path and clambered ungracefully over a drooping wooden fence. The brilliant orange disc was just crowning the edge of the world when he saw a rickety white house, shaded by meandering bushes and a great tree.

The incongruity shocked him out of his dazed wandering. Pain returned with a gasping intensity, and he collapsed to his knees. He knocked over a pile of stacked wood as he fell, sending a cascade of it colliding with a green metal box. The hollow, banging sound frightened several birds from their nearby perch.

He had just enough time to see a light flick on in an upstairs window before he blacked out. As his eyes closed, he had one thought to spare – please, please, I don’t want to return to the Void. Please be real.

IV

He leans back in his chair and watches Agent Roberts depart with a thoughtful frown.

Lukas has only been on Midgard for two stellar orbits. But even a relative newcomer such as he would be foolish to not be suspicious. A visit from a clandestine government agency is not as
innocuous as the female agent would have had him believe.

He wonders at the title. As best as he’s been able to determine, it refers to a particular class of Midgardian warriors tasked with maintaining law and order on behalf of the country’s leader. He and Roseanne watch a television show on Wednesday nights that dramatizes the exploits of one such team of agents. Lukas privately thinks their fixation on sexual relationships with each other should be discouraged with a firm hand. It is horrendously unproductive and hazardous to be so preoccupied when in the midst of battle. He’d said as much to Roseanne, but she’d only hushed him and jabbed him in the side with her elbow.

And to be asking after the Tesseract –

Roseanne pokes her head in and interrupts the reverie he had slipped into. “That didn’t take long.”

He shakes his head slightly. “Someone from the grant committee, asking about my research.”

Lukas isn’t certain why he lies. Habit, he supposes. Roseanne has nothing to do with S.H.I.E.L.D. Shouldn’t, in fact. Roseanne is a simple elderly lady with a fuzzy beast of a canine who lives in a little white farmhouse and has three grandchildren. She makes very strong coffee and she included meals with his room and board when she realized he was eating mostly bread and butter. The clutter of curious machines in the kitchen had proven confounding: they seemed to serve very specific yet inscrutable purposes. He had since discovered how the mortals harnessed electricity as a power source instead of seidr, but still hadn’t divined the function of the machine Roseanne referred to as a kay-sah-dill-ah maker.

She glances at the corridor through which Agent Roberts departed, then tosses him a speculative look. His eyes narrow without conscious command. “Something you wished to say?”

“Nothing, nothing. Don’t mind this old lady.” Roseanne pats the carefully curated nest of curls atop her head. “She was a little peach, now, wasn’t she? Very sweet. Cute as a button, too. Just thinking aloud.”

Lukas resists the urge to roll his eyes. Roseanne persists in trying to coax him into social engagements with women even though she has not yet won a single victory. He supposes he should be thankful her own granddaughter is yet twelve years of age.

“I prefer zippers to buttons,” he says blandly. Roseanne huffs and waves him away. That is true.
Midgardian clothing seems particularly concerned with ease of use and comfort. All of his casual clothing has zippers. Much more amusing than Asgardian attire, with all the fastenings of armor and—

Lukas amputates the thought before it can fully form. He does not think of that place anymore. Midgard is the home he claims now, the first home he has claimed by choice.

*Choice?* A dark corner of his mind whispers to him. *You made the choice to let go without the slightest notion you would end up—*

“No need to be ornery, Lukas. You never know, you might have fun!” Roseanne is lamentably enthusiastic. He can hardly be irritated that she wishes him happiness. It would be uncharitable.

That knowledge does not prevent him from feeling irritated. Lukas has never claimed to be virtuous.

“All I’m sayin’ is it would be a darned shame to waste that charm and those good looks on a ole blue hair like me. I can just picture you all gussied up.” She emits a little squeal of delight, leans across the desk and affectionately chuffs his cheek. “Look at them eyes. Pretty as all get out. Anyway, I’m fixin’ to head on home. You taggin’ along?”

Sometimes, Lukas can hardly parse out Roseanne’s expressions, even with the aid of Allspeak.

“No, I shall not *tag,*” he says with a mimic of her accent. She smiles at him and Lukas feels absurdly pleased. “I have a manuscript to polish up a bit.”

“Dinner’s at six thirty on the dot, mister. Take care you’re not late,” Roseanne warns him.

“Nothing short of Ragnarök will stop me, I swear it,” he intones solemnly.

She gives him an amused chuckle and fond glance before tottering out.

Lukas absentmindedly taps his fingers on the fake wood grain of his desk. Had he tipped his hand with the Agent? The fact that S.H.I.E.L.D. is asking after the Tesseract has piqued his interest. And
his suspicious nature.

When he had received the cryptic request for an interview, a thousand thoughts had flitted through his suddenly buzzing mind, a storm of potential the likes of which he had not experienced since he had arrived in this quiet corner of this peculiar realm. It was as if he’d been half-asleep, wandering about in a daze, as if he’d slipped so deeply into this mortal skin he’d begun to forget there had ever been anything else. The other life, his past life, returned with a hungry vengeance, preying on stray, unwary moments of idleness.

The Tesseract. It had been easier to focus on that shining beacon, with its heady pulse of magic.

If they had found the Tesseract, or a lead to it, he had to be kept informed. He had considered slipping into a facility, unseen. But which facility and where? Perhaps it was more prudent to remain passive. Let the information deposit itself in his lap.

The simplest approach would have been to ensure the agency considered him an expert on the subject, of which there are demonstrably few, someone to call on when they invariably found themselves out of their depth. He has already been contacted once, ostensibly to gauge his knowledge. When they failed to unravel the cube’s intricacies… that scenario was rather unlikely, however. Lukas suspected S.H.I.E.L.D. was keen to keep their counsel within their own ranks unless absolutely necessary.

But if he let on that he knew more than he was saying, perhaps Agent Roberts would recommend to her superiors that an interrogation be in order. The questions asked during such a confrontation were often more revealing than any straightforward exchange of information. That could be the best way to judge just where the agency is at in terms of understanding the fundamental nature of the Tesseract and where it hails from.

And where he can find it.

He hopes he’s played the part well, hinting without rousing too powerful of suspicions.

The notion of finding the Tesseract teases at his mind for the remainder of the evening. He can’t refrain from dissecting every legend he’s ever heard of its power, from scouring his memories for mentions in the numerous magical texts he’s read over the course of his studies. But his thoughts are awkwardly fractured and disjointed, as he tries to remember pertinent details without dredging up the specters haunting the past.
That person is dead, he reminds himself viciously. He died alone and unmourned in the Void. You are Lukas now.

His mind strays to a journey undertaken to Midgard centuries past, and that’s enough. Lukas jerks out of his chair and gathers his personal effects, shoving them haphazardly in the bag Roseanne insists on referring to as a satchel.

Typically, Lukas relishes the mile and a half walk home through the quiet countryside. In his agitated state, however, he knows he’ll not be able to enjoy the spring sunset. He parts the fabric of reality like a curtain and steps into the ether. Another step brings him to the winding gravel drive leading up to his lodgings. The drive is dotted with cottonwood trees, already shedding their seeds like so much soft snow.

Lukas breathes in the air, rich with the scent of soil and forest musk. The rolling hills and wide, lazy branches drifting in the humid breeze are refreshingly unique. Nothing like the tall, dark pine forests of the mountains and the rocky oceanfront of his youth. The people here are not rigid or formal, nor boastful or quick to draw a blade.

The image of plump, elderly Roseanne clad in golden armor and wielding a short sword is enough to startle a laugh out of Lukas’s throat. He closes his eyes and holds onto that feeling of lightness until the tension eases from his neck.

In moments like these, when Lukas feels like nothing more than a collection of sharp, brittle edges, he tries to immerse himself in the present. He notes every sensation and revels in them. Even in the darkest night on Midgard, there is no blackness, no absence. He can still see the stars and hear the cicadas and their whirring, clicking song.

Lukas opens his eyes when he hears a deep bark and the clatter of paws on gravel. A large, fuzzy, grey and white beast comes bounding up to him. Lukas pats him gingerly on the head when the beast sits attentively at his side, tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

“Good evening, Pickles.”

When he first arrived, Roseanne had informed Lukas that Pickles was a sheepdog. Lukas had privately thought the woman was senile, or possibly that humans had become quite ambitious with their breeding programs in the intervening centuries since his last visit. But she had happily shown him several tomes on canine breeds and he at last conceded the beast was in fact a variety of dog.
He was of course familiar with the human penchant for keeping the strange animals around, feeding them scraps and relying on their keen sense of smell to alert them to any predators or miscreants. Mortals had a curious way with the beasts, he had noticed. No Æsir had ever thought to tame the wolves of Niflheim or their smaller cousins that loped through the forests bordering the golden city.

Pickles is perhaps the farthest from a wolf it is possible to be while still identifying as a canine. Much too friendly and with a startling tendency to rear up and lick a person right on the face. The first time Pickles had dared such a maneuver, Lukas had believed the beast intended to maul him and had almost embedded a dagger in his neck. But he had simply licked his nose and cheek and sat back on his haunches, tail brushing against the floor as it waved back and forth.

Lukas looks the dog in his dim black eyes. For all that he is not a handsome beast, nor intelligent, Pickles does have a curious ability to perceive emotion. Whenever Lukas is teetering on the edge of an abyss inside his own mind, Pickles seems to materialize at his side and distract him. He’s grateful to the dog for that, at least.

With an imperious hand gesture he had previously used to command palace servants, Lukas beckons the dog and strides up the gravel drive. “Come, Pickles. We must not dawdle. The flowerbeds are in need of watering.”

The sheepdog obediently trots at his heels, though Lukas feels sure he will not be much of an assistant whilst tending to the daffodils or tulips. Roseanne’s white farmhouse appears as they crest a gentle slope. Lukas is currently situated in the guesthouse set just to the east of the main building, though he takes his meals with Roseanne in her warm yellow kitchen. He and Pickles skirt the wraparound porch and enter the garden. Neat plots in straight lines are bursting with the first blooms of spring. Roseanne has planted unfamiliar Midgardian vegetables and herbs as well, though they are not ready for harvest.

His own plot is set apart on the far left. Roseanne had provided him with a choice of seeds in little colorful packets, and he had chosen mostly at random. Sunny yellow daffodils cluster together in one corner, next to pink and orange tulips and purple crocuses. Lukas studies the array with a satisfied eye. The stems are studded with green buds, thick with the promise of further blossoms.

Out here amidst the fragrant earth, his mind is quiet. The associations this place stirs in his memory are not fearful or tinged with bitterness and resentment. He lets his thoughts lightly brush an image of a gentle woman with long honey blonde tresses before tugging them away.

His seidr is active in the garden as well. The sense of growing things tingles and hums pleasantly, strong with its captured stellar energy. Lukas weaves among the plants and shrubs, tending and watering until Roseanne whistles at him from the open kitchen window.
“Lukas! Come on in now and getcha somethin’ to eat! You too, Pickles!”

The Tesseract and its current whereabouts are a mystery to be considered at a later date. For now, Lukas is expected for dinner.

Chapter End Notes

Btw this is how I'm picturing Pickles - that nose!
http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-8faI_e5pgBo/UakPuk6hAI/AAAAAAAAGI8/MhJKs6tIrrI/s1600/OldEnglishSheepdog2.jpg

Plus idk why I have a weird headcanon that there are no dogs on Asgard but I think its just because canines evolved so closely with humans and I can't see that happening in a place like Asgard. Too clean. Forgive my mental quirks.
Howdy, fellow concerned citizens! Randy Houser, here again with your monthly installment of transparency that you aren’t getting anywhere else in the corporate-driven propaganda machine that is the “mainstream” media.

This month, I’d like to ask if anyone heard about the New Mexico Incident. No? No one? I’m not surprised. S.H.I.E.L.D. and its government lapdogs have been zealously keeping this one out of the independent news cycle. But I’ve got a source that was close to the action, with an understandable grudge against the backhanded ways S.H.I.E.L.D. blackmails anyone with knowledge of the truth from coming out with their stories. And they’re talking, folks.

By the way, the chatter corroborates their story: both over local law enforcement frequencies and the frequencies several government agencies don’t know we’ve been able to tune into (not naming them here, in case they’re monitoring this correspondence – looking at you, NSA). Not to mention the eyewitness accounts of citizens of the town of Puente Antiguo and the surrounding area.

Through a combination of these sources and through exercising our right to a reasonable amount of transparency in the public records, we here at The Concerned Citizen have tentatively confirmed the presence of an unidentified object that fell from the sky and landed in a crater in the New Mexico desert. Yes, you read that right – an unidentified object falling to earth. In S.H.I.E.L.D.
speak, an 0-8-4. Anything to avoid the truth, even in their terminology.

Despite the secrecy and typical obfuscation, we’re pretty sure this is the real deal, ladies and gents. We can’t print everything – not because you don’t deserve it, but to protect our sources’ safety. Who knows where S.H.I.E.L.D. would disappear them to.

We can say that our source revealed that not only did an object fall to earth, but that an extraterrestrial biological entity came after it. Our source describes the extraterrestrial as “humanoid in shape, and boy, was he in shape.” It is unclear whether the male gender pronoun can be properly ascribed to this EBE.

S.H.I.E.L.D. had of course immediately taken action to confine this unidentified object, and our source alleges that they came into conflict with the EBE as it/they/he attempted to recover it. How the following sequence of events precisely unfolded is unclear, but here are the facts we can tell you with relative certainty:

- 0-8-4 falls to earth on the evening of June 23rd
- EBE arrives on Earth, time unknown, but no more than 24 hours after
- S.H.I.E.L.D. engages EBE as a hostile, despite likelihood that the 0-8-4 belongs to the EBE’s civilization/species/home-world/hive
- Reports of disaster in Puente Antiguo, buildings leveled and several people injured - most witnesses describe a ‘metal monster’ with a ‘laser-mouth’ decimating the downtown streets
- S.H.I.E.L.D. hastily forces down initial media reports and bullies citizens into NDAs, then releases a carefully constructed statement alleging the damage caused to the town was the result of a ‘gas main explosion’

None of the above facts can be satisfactorily explained by the story S.H.I.E.L.D.’s PR people cooked up. The collective witnesses could have been having a mass hallucination – but let’s face it, if a hallucinogen was released into the water supply or as an airborne substance, that very same agency would be the likeliest suspect.

S.H.I.E.L.D. can’t explain away the witnesses’ statements given previous to the NDAs on their social media or to friends and family over the phone. Nor can they dismiss the photographic
evidence of the square-shaped, apparently metal 0-8-4 (though admittedly, the quality of the picture is poor given it originated from a cheap flip phone and was taken from a distance). Nor the very real evidence of destruction that now litters the streets of the tiny New Mexico town.

This is the question I’d like to have answered, and I’m sure our readers will as well. What right does S.H.I.E.L.D. have to conceal evidence of intelligent extraterrestrial life visiting our planet? The obvious argument is that the secrecy is for our own protection. What protection is that, I ask? Engaging EBEs as hostiles in a town populated almost exclusively by civilians is not protecting the common good. S.H.I.E.L.D. is not known for their diplomatic approach. Are they who we want as ambassadors for humankind?

Is this ‘metal monster’ some new prototype weapon that S.H.I.E.L.D. has developed under the thin justification of ‘protection’? Is the EBE deceased and now being dissected by the agency’s exobiology experts?

Log into our website and comment on the forum to tell us what you think about the answers to these questions and to get in on the discussion of the particulars of the ‘New Mexico Incident’ and to see the pictures and evidence log.

And one final question, some food for thought: What’s going to happen when the next extraterrestrial event is too big for even S.H.I.E.L.D. to hide?

Stay skeptical, concerned citizens.
Steve tugs at his uniform and wishes he’d been given a black S.H.I.E.L.D. issue standard like Barton’s or the rest of the team. The suit itself was nice – nicer than his old one, which had apparently been relegated to a museum. And wasn’t that a surreal thought. He’d sweated and bled and crawled through the mud in that uniform. Had they washed it before they put it on display?

Whoever had been in charge of designing this one had spared no expense. It had all the bells and whistles, more than Steve ever would have thought possible. A material called Kevlar that Steve was told is bulletproof, some sort of G-P-S embedded that would enable S.H.I.E.L.D. to track Steve’s location in the midst of a firefight. They’d even given him a sort of radio, impossibly tiny, to fit into his ear that allowed crystal-clear communication with the rest of his team. And he didn’t even need to tune it, just tap it twice to activate.

The future was proving awe-inspiring despite the lack of flying cars that Howard Stark had promised. Yet Steve can’t help the wistfulness with which he thinks of the ole beaten up transmitter Jim Morita would lug around, of his cursing as he tuned to the secure frequency. The feel of a paper map in his hands. Or the self-consciousness and embarrassment that he feels wearing his conspicuous uniform amidst all the professionally dressed S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. He still suspects he's being handled, that the missions they've been sending him on are only to break him in easy. The thought irks him.

Barton must have noticed him fidgeting and tugging at the thick blue fabric of his sleeves. He comes over and claps a hand on his shoulder. “You look good, Cap,” he says with a half-smile.

Steve had met Barton a few times around S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters, when he was being evaluated for field readiness. They’d made him go through a litany of physical fitness tests that barely quickened Steve’s heart rate, and then some psychological evaluations that definitely did. Barton had been in the firing range when they tested Steve’s marksmanship. He’d never been a sniper, not like Bucky, but he was a good shot. He had an eye for trajectories. Otherwise he’d’ve lost his shield a long time ago.

Barton had watched quietly during the test and afterward came up and introduced himself. “You’re pretty handy with a gun, for a guy who fights with a shield,” he’d said.

Steve’s reply had been sharper than he’d meant it to be. But he was tired of being underestimated. He’d thought that was over when he stepped out of the Vita-Ray in his new body. “I was a soldier during wartime. Did you think we went in unarmed?”

Barton had simply shrugged. “Wanna spar?”
They’d met up in the training facility a few times a month after that. Steve was careful to hold back despite Barton’s protests. His partner Natasha had come round the last few times and watched silently with an amused look. There was a reassuring stillness to Clint that put Steve at ease, reminding him of Bucky after he’d gone through his sniper training.

Agent Coulson calls them all to the table for the briefing. He drops into the chair next to Clint. Coulson gestures, flicks with his hand, and brings up a transparent, three-dimensional image that is suspended in the air over the table. Steve studies it with fascination. He doesn’t recognize it – some kind of animal, frozen in a pounce. It has a diamond shaped head like a rattlesnake, with a thick forehead and squashed snout that nonetheless contains razor-sharp fangs. There are four legs, bunching with muscle yet lithe and lean, lending the elongated body of the creature a distinctly feline grace.

Coulson glances around. “This… creature, for lack of a more descriptive term, appeared in the Mexican state of Jalisco roughly three hours ago. Given the rural nature of the area, S.H.I.E.L.D. was not notified of its arrival until the creature reached the town of San Miguel el Alto. It’s on a rampage, slaughtering civilians and destroying homes and businesses. We’re going to put it down.” Coulson’s tone is steel.

This isn’t precisely what Steve had expected when he’d agreed to work with S.H.I.E.L.D. But there was no more Great War, no need to send Steve in to blow up Hydra bases. He’d take what he could get. Better than loitering in the gym, destroying bags and questioning if he was really dead and this bewildering future was no more than a fevered hallucination, taking place in the seconds before his heart finally guttered out.

Another agent asks Coulson a question, but Steve tunes him out. He’s still staring at the ghostly image of the creature, wondering how they projected it.

“That’s Stark’s tech. Some hologram shit. Pretty cool, right?” Clint says at his side. “Didn’t have nothing like this back in the forties, huh, Cap?” he quips. Steve pushes down the surge of annoyance. The patronizing edge is both familiar and unwelcome.

“Nope,” he says. “I’m still wrapping my head around a lot of the stuff you’ve got here in the future.” He huffs a rueful chuckle. “At least there’s no moon colonies or alien visitors.”

The gleeful grin that spreads across Clint’s normally stoic face gives Steve a foreboding feeling. “Right?” he asks nervously.

“Man, remind me to show you my after action report on the New Mexico Incident. I can’t wait to
Steve frowns at him. “Is it something I need to know?”

Clint laughs. “Oh yeah, Cap. I think it is. I dunno why Fury or Coulson didn’t tell you. Probably didn’t wanna freak you out. But you have the clearance for it.” His eyes glint mischievously. “Unless you’re not interested.”

Curiosity is a flare in his chest. “I’m interested,” he replies quickly. Is S.H.I.E.L.D. preparing a moon colony in New Mexico? He pushes the thought away. It can wait until after the mission.

The quinjet lands in an open field under a half-moon, as close as possible to the last known location of the creature. Steve files out with the rest, hefting his shield as he surveys the terrain. Scrubland, from what he can make out. A wide, arid plain. He thinks he can see a green blanket of forest far to the west. The night air is cool on his skin.

Floodlights crackle to life and bathe the area in a fluorescent glow. Coulson’s agents scurry around, dragging out extension cords from the generator to set up a lighted perimeter around the jet. Coulson thinks the light and sound and smell of a group of people will tempt the creature in their direction.

Steve isn’t sure. They know practically nothing about it save for a physical description given by a bunch of frightened locals. Where did it even come from? He supposes they’ll get to that in the debriefing. Still, he doesn’t like going in with less than solid information.

They pace around, scuffing their feet in the dirt for nearly an hour. Clint’s moaning and sighing, carefully out of earshot of Coulson. Steve rubs his eyes. They’re scratchy and dry. He hasn’t gotten enough sleep lately. Too many dreams.

One of the agents at the edge of the perimeter turns to get Coulson’s attention. “Hey, boss, I think there’s—”

He cuts off with a shriek as something big and dark and fast pounces on his back. Steve’s up and running before his mind realizes what his legs are doing. The creature slashes long, curved talons at the agent’s back, and sinks its teeth into his shoulder. The shield crashes into the side of its head and when the creature glances up to snarl, he gets his first real look at it.
Panther, is his immediate thought. But the shape of the skull is too broad and triangular, and it’s not covered in fur, rather a dark coat of something Steve can’t discern. Wide, eerie blue eyes are set on either side of its head instead of looking forward. The projection certainly didn't capture the high-pitched, grating whine emitting from its throat. He notes all of this in a corner of his mind, but he’s most arrested by the sight of wicked, sharp black fangs dripping with either red saliva or the agent’s blood.

He catches the shield’s rebound and charges at the beast. Using the vibranium as a battering ram with his body’s weight behind it, he knocks it away from the downed man. They go tumbling across the sandy ground. Steve leaps to his feet and barely dodges another pounce in time. Claws whip through the air next to his ear. His comm blares to life.

“Keep it distracted, Captain – we’re prepping the big gun. Regular rounds don’t seem pierce the skin,” Coulson says.

“Got it,” he huffs. Steve waits for the beast to lunge at him again, and at the last second, twists around and launches himself into the air, landing on its back. His hands scrabble for purchase, winding around its neck. The creature bucks him like he's in some freakshow rodeo, still snarling that awful, high-pitched whining noise, but it doesn’t think to flip on its back and crush him. The skin is slick and unexpectedly ridged under his fingers and Steve realizes they’re scales. He tries not to shudder. He’s never liked snakes, not one bit. Rats and mice and bugs he was used to, living in New York City’s tenements, but snakes were not part of the deal.

The creature finally jerks with too much force for Steve to counter and he flies off, tucking into a roll before he hits the ground. He’d abandoned the shield when he’d leaped on its back. When the claws come slashing down towards his head, he rolls out of the way. The edge of one catches him on the upper arm, drawing a stripe of blood. The creature seems to perk up at the scent, angling its head so the left eye can lock on Steve.

He tenses, ready to flip back to his feet the moment he sees the muscles coiling to pounce. Before it makes its move, a blinding burst of blue light collides with the beast’s torso. It screeches, high and piercing as a banshee. Steve crouches a safe distance away. Coulson’s strange laser weapon emits another blast, catching it in the head this time. After a few more, it doesn’t get back up.

Steve lifts his cowl and wipes the sweat from his forehead. He and Coulson stand over the body. “What was that? Weapon?” Steve asks breathlessly. The blue light had been an unsettlingly familiar color.

Coulson eyes him. “Not quite sure.”
Steve frowns. “But you used it anyway?”

“Brought it just in case regular ammunition wasn’t enough. It’s an 0-8-4, recovered from Peru. Packed a punch, from what my agents said. Thought it might come in handy.” Coulson shrugs.

“0-8-4?” Steve repeats, unfamiliar with the term.

“Object of unknown origin.”

Steve thinks back to Clint’s impish promise of an explanation. “You mean alien, don’t you.”

Coulson freezes, barely distinguishable from his usual stillness. Steve sighs. “You don’t have to keep hiding things from me. I’m not gonna collapse if I hear one more crazy detail about the future. At this point, I’ll just add it to the list.”

The downturn of Coulson’s mouth is sympathetic. “I’m sorry, Captain. I was only trying to make this a little easier.” He glances back to the carcass. “Yes. 0-8-4s are usually alien. We think. Our lab techs haven’t finished analyzing it yet. This was an unofficial test.”

“Steve,” he blurts. Coulson raises an eyebrow at him. “You can call me Steve. You don’t have to keep saying Captain.”

Coulson’s cheeks turn faintly pink and a smile tugs at his lips. “Steve,” he reiterates dutifully.

They’re silent for a few minutes, watching as the agents load the creature into the cargo hold. Steve hopes it doesn’t start to smell while they’re in flight. He trails in after Coulson.

“Barton,” the man suddenly says. “It was Barton, wasn’t it.”

Steve bites his lip against a smile and nods. Coulson shoots Clint a sour look. Hawkeye doesn’t even blink, just slouches over and claims the seat next to Steve when they strap in for takeoff. When they get in the air, Clint hands him a tablet displaying a document titled “AAR 352708. New Mexico Incident. Barton CL-7.”
Afterwards, Steve wonders if he’s been pranked and Coulson’s poker face is just that good.
VII & VIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

VII

Five thousand four hundred and thirty seventh cycle of Odin Borsson’s reign

Midgard’s single moon begins its ascent in the village the mortals call East-of- Ragnar’s-Fjord

It is most curious. The mortals cut the throat of a goat last evening, before the feast, and did not even consume the meat. Instead, they presented the carcass to Father. I do not know what they were expecting he needed a dead goat for, if not to eat it.

I pointed this out to Thor, but he was too busy stuffing his cheeks. I swear, he ate nearly ten drumsticks. The sight was utterly revolting. But the mortals cheered and coaxed him to consume even more. They do not possess much in the way of gracious table manners themselves, so I suppose Thor fits right in. They successfully chivvied him into drinking copious amounts of their ale as well, but seemed disappointed when he was not falling over by the close of the feast. If they’d asked, I could have told them their ale is weak enough to nurse babes with back in Asgard.

The mortal caretaker – priest, they call him. A new word I have learned. He lights the fires in the temple and keeps it tidy. He was the one to present the goat to Father. A sacrifice. Another new word, or at least a new context. Apparently, the mortals use it to refer to dead goats. I have not determined why the mortals dislike the little animals so fiercely, though I asked several washerwomen this morn. They only laughed.

It does not seem quite fair. If it were my decision, I would not kill them at all - they do produce a rather tasty cheese.
I shall endeavor to unravel this mystery. Perhaps I may save at least one goat from the needless slaughter.

Loki Odinsson, Prince of Asgard

VIII

Lukas stares up at the temple’s brick edifice and wonders why Roseanne insisted he accompany her. When she had first realized he knew nothing of her religious rituals or the pantheon of gods she worshiped, Roseanne had muttered something about secular government and ‘how passing strange them foreigners are.’ But she had never pressed him to attend her weekly rites. The most he’d learned about her gods had been their names, which she often cursed by and then asked for forgiveness from in the next moment.

He surmises the period of seasonal renewal represented by spring must be a time of spiritual importance. Roseanne had refused to serve him any animal flesh today and then dragged him to this event, along with her three grandchildren.

A large white banner is draped over three tables, proclaiming ‘The Thirty-Fifth Annual Mother of Mercy Fish Fry!’ Roseanne ushers them forward to the two middle-aged women sitting behind the banner, handling sums of Midgardian currency.

“Hello, Barb! Hello, Phyllis!” she trills.
“Hello, Roseanne!” the women return.

“Hello, Roseanne!” Caroline mimics in a falsely high, nasally tone. The twelve-year-old girl has her arms crossed over her chest, face set in a scowl. She had protested attending this event on the grounds that she is ‘still exploring my options and am not sure I want to belong to a church that is essentially a patriarchy.’

Her two younger brothers are a whirlwind around Lukas’s feet, tussling and shoving. “Clayton! Connor!” Roseanne snaps. “On your feet and mind your manners! Say hello to Barb and Phyllis.”

The boys drag themselves to their feet. Roseanne brushes dirt from their shirts and wipes a smudge from Clayton’s broad nose. “Hello, Barb-and-Phyllis,” they chorus.

“Aren’t y’all just the cutest lil’ things?” Barb-and-Phyllis squeal. Connor digs a finger into his nostril and Caroline snorts.

“Do you offer a discount on exorcisms if the subjects are under the age of eighteen?” she asks.

Roseanne clucks her tongue in disapproval. “Caroline, we talked about this.”

The girl rolls her brown eyes. “Yeah, yeah, politeness is its own reward. We also talked about how I’m going by Lina now, but I don’t hear you remembering that.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Clayton complains. “Your name isn’t Caro-lina.”

“Whatever, snotbucket.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Why not? That’s your name, isn’t it?”

Lukas watches with a grin. Barb-and-Phyllis exchange glances and raise their respective eyebrows. Roseanne hurriedly drops a few green papers on the table and picks up several red strips that she
fastens on the children’s wrists.

“Have a nice day, now,” Roseanne says.

“Make sure to say hi to Father John.” Barb-and-Phyllis reply. “God bless y’all.” Roseanne sees Lukas hovering and motions to him, coaxing him to step up to the table.

“I’m covering his entry fee too. Go on and grab a wrist band, Lukas.” He obliges, picking up one of the red strips, but fumbles with it, not knowing how Roseanne fastened it.

“This is your renter, now, isn’t it, Roseanne?” the rather more rotund woman asks. She stands up from her chair and relieves Lukas of the strip, quickly attaching it to his right wrist. He frowns at the band, still not managing to catch how she had fashioned it into a bracelet.

“Yes, ma’am! Lukas here is a real gentleman. Helps me in the garden and round the house, and at the museum. Pickles just adores him.” Roseanne beams in his direction.

Lukas feels this is the appropriate moment to be generous. “Would that I could do more,” he demurs. “If not for Roseanne’s mastery of the art of cooking, I would be reduced once more to a diet of bread and water.”

The second woman flutters her hand as if wafting a breeze to her face. “Oh, my! You are a perfect gentleman. And isn’t that just the most charmin’ accent!”

“Isn’t it just, Phyllis?” Roseanne agrees. Truthfully, Lukas is not sure why his accent differs from the local populace. But he has noticed the tendency of the women of this realm to be flustered by it. Not a wholly unpleasant occurrence.

The other woman, who must be Barb, by the process of elimination, winks at him. And there’s the disadvantage to the allure of his accent in all her paunchy, overly made-up glory.

“If only all the young fellas round here talked like you,” Barb says with a sigh. “Why, I’d spend so much longer in confession.”
“Barbara Johnson!” Roseanne gasps with a laugh. The jest passes Lukas by, but he’s grasped her intentions.

He takes Barb’s hand and bends over, lightly touching his lips to her knuckles. “I’m afraid you’ll have to settle for me, dear lady,” he returns smoothly. The trio of women giggles and Caroline groans.

Roseanne’s granddaughter tugs at their sleeves. Lukas releases Barb’s hand and gives the women a smile. “Take care now, Lukas,” Phyllis says.

He lets Caroline pull him away to another table laden with roasted, battered fish. Roseanne introduces him to nearly every person in line. At the end is a man in a buttoned shirt, the Midgardian version of court attire, Lukas has found. Not quite formal dress, but more appropriate than his zip-up ‘hoodie’, as Caroline refers to it.

“Roseanne,” he greets warmly.

“Father John! We got lucky with such lovely weather today, didn’t we?”

“Ain’t that a fact.” Father-John extends a hand to Lukas. “Hello there, young man.”

“Lukas,” Roseanne supplies. He shakes the proffered appendage. He had made a careful study of Midgardian greeting customs before venturing into society. Mostly through the television, though he was beginning to suspect Roseanne’s ‘soaps’ were not quite realistic as she claimed. For one, there seemed altogether too many illegitimate children running about for a fictional town of such trifling size.

“Don’t forget the bake sale the fourth graders are puttin’ on over near the sweet tea,” Father-John reminds them. “God bless, Roseanne. God bless, Lukas.”

Lukas tilts his head in puzzlement. “I have done nothing worthy of obtaining your god’s personal favor.”

“Huh?”
“Excuse him. He’s foreign.” Roseanne prods him in the side until he moves to a flimsy looking feasting table where Caroline has planted herself with a book. He turns to Roseanne.

“How do you gain this god’s favor? Is there a quest to which his devotees must pledge themselves? I know not what would impress the god of the land of Virginia.”

Caroline speaks without taking her eyes from the pages. “It wouldn’t take much. Bake a good pecan pie. Catch a catfish that weighs more than forty pounds. Bring down a ten-point buck.”

“Have some respect, missy –” Roseanne begins with a frown.

Her granddaughter sighs with an excess of drama. “It’s true.” She glances at Lukas. “These are people with simple tastes.”

Lukas grins at her irreverence. It reminds him much of his own youth and his disdain for Asgardian tradition and courtly ceremonies. No one had ever been able to explain to his satisfaction why those particular traditions must be followed. He could never accept the answer because it has always been this way.

“I shall endeavor to accomplish all three.” A smile tugs at Caroline’s lips. He wonders if fish are sacred creatures in this mortal religion, or if it is simply the process of capturing them and the consumption of their flesh that are imbued with mystical meaning. The sickly white lump he pokes with his fork does not look particularly sacrosanct.

“Lukas, are we still going to get you a cell phone today?” Caroline asks.

He glances at Roseanne, who nods. “Yes, I do require a phone. There is a chance I will be aiding some colleagues in their research and I would like a method of contacting them.”

“I still can’t believe you don’t already have one.” Caroline shakes her head. Lukas had concluded from previous conversations with the twelve-year-old girl that it was very conspicuous not to be outfitted with such a device.

“Can we go now?” Connor whines. “I don’t like fish.”
“Eat your strawberries and then we’ll go,” Roseanne compromises.

The next hour and a half finds Lukas having yet another novel experience. He and the three children huddle around a display of cell phones. “I like this one,” Caroline points.

“That’s pink. Lukas doesn’t want a girl phone,” Clayton protests.

“Pink isn’t just for girls. Don’t let the misogynistic propaganda of the majority influence your choices, Clay. They’re all old white men who are so out of touch with our generation.”

“What’s mih-sojah-nissik mean?”

Lukas intervenes before Caroline is able to turn this into a thirty-minute lecture. “It refers to prejudice and hatred against women. It is a philosophy I personally cannot fathom, as I have seen for myself female warriors capable of wielding a glaive or sword as well as a man, if not better, who can easily cut down foes twice their size.” He thinks of dark hair, snapping like a silky flag in the wind, a fierce grin that’s all teeth, and flashing hazel eyes. Lukas blinks several times and returns his attention to the array of cell phones.

Connor and Clayton’s brown eyes are wide. “Whoa.”

“Can you teach me how to use a sword?” Caroline asks with slightly disturbing fervor.

“Er… so you want the pink model?” The store’s attendant glances between them all with a faintly alarmed expression.

He darts a look at the boys from the corner of his eye. “Yes, please.” Caroline grins brightly at him.

“Gramma, I want a pink phone!” Clayton demands, turning to shout over his shoulder.

Roseanne appears bewildered. “You’re too young for a cell phone. Ask your mother.”
The attendant returns quickly with a small cardboard box. Lukas settles the sum he owes with money he has gained from helping Roseanne manage the museum. Caroline instructs him in the nuances of cell phone usage on the drive back to Roseanne’s estate. She promptly saves a string of digits into his contacts under the title ‘Lina’ with three pink and yellow hearts following her name.

“Here, I’ll text you now. Watch how it comes up on your screen.” She whips out her own phone and her fingers fly across the illusory board of Midgardian characters. Lukas thanks the Norns he had made it a priority to learn the modern American script when he first arrived.

Allspeak is a brilliant magical intervention, but is only sufficient for the spoken word. He could cast an interpretation enchantment, but he would have to renew the working with every separate document or book. Most Æsir did not bother to listen closely enough to distinguish separate languages from each other; they simply relied on the bland word-for-word translation. Lukas has always had a special talent for picking out meaning and context that is often reliant on the specific choice of vocabulary, even if the terms themselves are unfamiliar. Once he had mastered the basic Midgardian characters and syntax, he could easily compare the written word to the unique cadence and tones he heard when the Allspeak translated speech for him. From there, it was not terribly difficult to become proficient in written American.

His new phone chimes. The flat screen lights up, displaying a message – lol its me Lina sup.

Lukas blinks at her. She rolls her eyes again and points at the first part of her message. “That means ‘laugh out loud’. I had to explain it to Gramma too. Basically, you say it when you want the other person to know you think something they said is funny. Or sometimes it’s just easier to type that, even if it’s not that funny. They won’t know you didn’t really laugh out loud.”

The phone clicks when he slides his finger across the screen. He calls up the board of characters and laboriously taps out a reply.

Caroline holds up her purple phone. The message materializes - hello caroline lol. She giggles and proceeds to introduce him to the intricacies of eh-moh-jees.

He is able to put his new phone to use the very next day. When he arrives to his office in the museum, there is a message waiting from Agent Roberts. Excitement kindles in his chest when he recognizes her voice.

“You must not be in the office yet, Mr. Eld. Sorry to call so early. I thought you might be willing to take a drive up to Washington D.C. this weekend. Your insights on the Tesseract were very helpful, so I thought of you when we received some strange information. We could use your expertise in
deciphering it, if you’re interested. You’d be compensated for your time, of course. Give me a call back at this number.”

Lukas programs the number she gave into his contacts. He now has Caroline’s number, the number for the phone that is peculiarly tethered to the wall of Roseanne’s kitchen, and the number for the museum all lined up on his screen next to Agent Roberts. Something about the sight brings a warm flush to his cheeks.

He returns her call. “Good morning, Agent Roberts. I’m very intrigued by the message you left…”

Chapter End Notes

This is meant to be amusing, not offensive to anyone who's religious! I love the idea of a guy who was hailed as a god of old clashing with modern Christianity. What would he think about it?
The creatures that prowl the dim plains and murky valleys of Niflheim are many and varied. To obtain an accurate description of such fell beasts would require a sojourn into that dark realm longer than any sane man would wish.

Nonetheless, there have been a few Æsir warriors who have braved the terrors and lived to tell the tale of their foul nature. Sigurd, first hero of Asgard, slayed an enormous pale worm, which he claimed fed upon the souls of the dead and the rotting carrion of their vessels.

The elite forces of the Fifth Regiment of the Golden Spear documented several clashes with man-eating wolves as large as their horses, with slavering jaws and claws sharp as steel. Fálki son of Oleig reportedly hunted down a shadow beast of fang and claw with the black scales of a serpent that had slaughtered ten of his men while on a quest to retrieve the soul of his mother from the clutches of a wretched seiðkona—a quest which ultimately failed when he was devoured by a Níðhöggr.

Cul Borsson and his brothers are yet the only warriors who have felled a Níðhöggr and brought back its needle-like fangs. It is said the venom from these fangs could kill a man at arm’s-length if he but breathed the vapors, but distilled, can restore a man from the curse of impotence.
“Sir, this is just a preliminary report.”

Coulson nods, but Jemma isn’t convinced. No one outside the science and tech departments ever seems to take those words seriously. And if it turns out some initial deduction she’d made or fact she’d assumed was wrong, it’d all come back on her. No matter how much she stressed that it was a preliminary report and they shouldn’t act on the information until she’d had time to check her conclusions, her data, and generate a complete and final report.

She purses her lips but continues. “The specimen is definitely alien.” Coulson always likes to hear her conclusions first and her explanations second. “I tried isolating the DNA from a blood sample, but I couldn’t get any results.”

“Why not?”

Jemma debates how much technical detail to include in her response. “Well, sir, the standard markers - the sequences in the DNA that we use to design matching primers - are specific to human DNA. But I didn’t expect those to work, so I also ran the blood with primers to match the markers for a variety of other species. Including but not limited to mammals, invertebrates, angiosperms, fungi - even bacterial and viral markers. Nothing worked.”

“So you’re saying the creature has completely foreign DNA.”

“That’s assuming it even has genetic material in the form of DNA or RNA. We don’t even know if there’s even a sugar-phosphate backbone, for goodness’ sake.”

Coulson’s face is blank. Jemma doesn’t know if that’s a sign of incomprehension or just his typical super spy default. She sighs. “I’m going to need some more time. I’ll run some assays, try to see if there’s at least some common proteins, on the off chance there’s a really, really far distant evolutionary relationship, but I doubt it. I don’t know that there was any biological interaction between Earth and wherever this creature originated from in the whole of terrestrial life history.”
Fitz had offered to help, but this sort of puzzle isn’t his specialty. To be precise, it isn’t even Jemma’s specialty. She needs an exobiologist, someone more familiar with the current theories regarding the chemical basis of life on other planets. As much as she hates to admit it, she’s feeling out of her depth.

She can tell Coulson isn’t best pleased by the report. “We’re going to go back to the basics,” she offers. “X-ray crystallography, gas chromatography. I’ve got some samples running in the mass spectrometer right now. If something turns up, I’ll let you know.”

Coulson relents. “It’s more than we knew before.” He stands and pats her shoulder. “Now get back to work,” he says in a mockingly stern tone. She smiles back, but can’t help feeling the failure keenly.

She pauses just as she’s about to step out. “Oh, sir – any news about Agent Morris?”

His expression darkens. “Nothing’s clear yet.”

Her mood sours further. Still in detention, then. Jemma knows they’re mistaken, but doesn’t know how to prove it.

Fitz seems to sense her frustration when she reenters their shared lab space. “Don’t go giving up just yet, Simmons. This alien beastie can’t stand up to our combined brainpower.”

Her smile turns more genuine. “I’d say it couldn’t stand up to the power of the 0-8-4 either.”

A gleeful look crosses his face. “I know! Do you see the extent of these tissue burns? The laser cut right through the armored hide!”

“I still can’t believe Coulson brought an untested weapon out into the field,” she replies.

“You think he was going to risk Captain America getting mauled by the alien version of the big bad wolf? Not a chance.” Fitz leans closer. “I heard that the Captain rugby tackled the thing. Can you imagine?” He pokes at a fang Jemma had excised from the jaw for further study. She slaps his hand away.
“No touching the alien specimen,” she scolds.

Fitz scuttles around the table to whisper at her. “Speaking of the Captain – I’m taking a survey. I’ve already got the results in from Labs B & C. Who do you think would win in a fight? Captain America or Agent Ward?”

“Captain America,” Jemma replies automatically. She pauses and thinks of Ward’s glower and pragmatic attitude. “Hmm. Actually… I’m not sure. Agent Ward seems like the type to fight dirty. Pulling hair and all that.”

“But the serum!”

Jemma hums in acknowledgment. “You know, I might change my answer to Agent May.”

“She’s not an included option!”

“Yes, well, I’m putting my money on her.”

“I think she’d just pull an icer on the Captain. That’s cheating.”

“Ward would probably pull a real handgun.”

Fitz concedes the point with a nod. Jemma heads over to her section of the bench and sorts through the pile of papers to stick the preliminary report back in with its related documents. Her eyes catch on a printout from the gas chromatograph.

“Have the chrome results already come back?” she asks in surprise.

“Yup. I put them in the right pile, I swear!”

“Yes, Fitz, thank you for remembering, this once. I’m looking at them right now. Did you see these
peaks on the far right?"

Her lab partner wanders over and inspects the graph. “Hmm.”

“This retention time doesn’t match any of our usual suspects.” She studies the troughs and valleys outlined in black and white. A unique compound? Is this the first step in quantifying alien biochemistry? A thrill of excitement shoots down her spine. She tries to tell herself not to get ahead of the analysis.

Fitz and Jemma exchange glances. They squeal in unison. Jemma catches her breath after a few minutes of jumping and twirling giddily with Fitz around the lab bench. “Okay, okay!” she laughs. “We’ll run another sample to make sure this isn’t a fluke and work on this further before we tell anyone.”

Jemma’s too wired to type up the conclusions for last week’s soil samples. She drags Fitz into the break room on the second floor. This S.H.I.E.L.D. facility is only twenty minutes from downtown Washington D.C., so there’s always agents coming and going and she’s usually guaranteed a fresh pot of coffee any hour of the day.

This time is no exception, and Jemma makes a beeline for the machine. Fitz is still trying to convince her to support Captain America in his unofficial survey when Coulson walks in with a pretty dark-haired girl by his side. She’s wearing a denim shirt and those skinny jeans with the zippers on the sides that Jemma always wishes she could pull off without looking like a complete poseur.

She waves her coffee cup in greeting. Coulson changes direction and heads for their table. “Fitzsimmons, this is our newest recruit, Skye.”

“Believe it or not, we’re actually separate people. Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz.” She extends her hand. Skye shakes it with a smirk.

“Sup.”

“I’ll leave you guys to get to know each other. Have them give you a quick tour of the labs, then come by my office when you’re done and we’ll get your intake papers signed.” Coulson slips away, orders given.
Skye leans casually on the table. “So… how ya like working for S.H.I.E.L.D.? Gotta say I’m feeling like a total sellout.”

“It’s not so bad,” Jemma says quickly.

“Yeah, the upper management kind of has a thing for red tape and an obsessive fixation on paperwork, but it’s worth it to get to play with all the toys,” Fitz adds. “And if you can ignore the arrogant jocks who do the field work, the people are great.”

Skye smiles. “I’ll be sure to remember that when I’m out in the field.”

Fitz sputters and Jemma’s cheeks flame. “He didn’t mean—”

“Relax, it’s okay.” She sprawls on a chair across from them. Jemma abruptly feels like the nerd that the cool girl is slumming with in some melodramatic American high school movie.

“So… what’s the good gossip round the water cooler?”

Fitz shrugs, still sheepish. Jemma takes a quick sip of her coffee and chokes when she burns her tongue. “WELL,” she stammers. “Fitz is taking a survey about whether or not Captain America could beat up Agent Ward.”

At the next table, Ward turns and glares at them. “I almost picked you!” she insists. Skye laughs and Ward’s eyes turn to her, lingering.

“You’re that hacker,” the dark-eyed agent says.

Skye raises her brows. “So I guess I’m the water cooler gossip.”

Fitz glances between the two. “What? You’re a hacker?”

“Not a hacker. An internet activist.”
Ward snorts. “That’s a euphemism if I ever heard one. You headed down to the Cheese Cupboard with the other mice?”

Jemma jumps in. “He means the Intelligence Analysis Department. I don’t know why they even call them that.”

“Cuz they hole up in their little underground nest, eating our scraps. You know, the scraps of information we risk our necks for in the field?”

Fitz rolls his eyes. Skye leans forward, tilting her chin up. “I’m training to be a field agent.”

“You went to the Academy?” Ward asks with narrowed eyes.

“Well, no,” she admits.

“You have combat experience?”

“No,” she repeats sourly.

“Do you even know how to throw a punch?”

“Of course! I’ve won my fair share of bar fights.”

Ward chuckles and Jemma tries not to gape at him. The stern agent never laughs. She had imagined the only time he ever smiled was when he was covered in the blood of his enemies, or something equally morbid.

“Then I’m throwing in my own two cents for this survey. Skye beats Captain America in a knockdown, drag-out bar brawl.” Ward’s grin is handsome, and it lightens his air of grim seriousness. Jemma internally sighs. She has a feeling this is going to become somewhat of a common occurrence around Skye.
Ward winks and hops up from his chair with his water bottle, tipping it at Skye as he leaves. The new recruit turns back to Fitz. Jemma watches him from the corner of her eye, but he’s just about as awkward as he ever is.

“You really haven’t heard about me?” Fitz shakes his head and she huffs a breath of relief. “Cool. I hate to feel like the new kid at school who’s just come back from juvie.”

Jemma privately wonders how she knows what that’s like but doesn’t ask. “Most people are still talking about Brock getting caught with Mariana in the supply closet. Personally, I don’t see the appeal of doing that with a loaded weapon.”

“And Agent Martinez is still AWOL. Brenna thinks he’s ditched his wife but couldn’t be bothered to go as far as faking his death and just disappeared to Venezuela instead,” Fitz supplies.

Skye rests her chin on her hand and leans closer, eyes sparkling. “I think we’re gonna get along just fine. Tell me more.”
As evident in Fig. 3 & 4, the wooden cubes were carefully crafted to the exact same specifications. Even the cube recovered some three hundred miles from the cluster on the Jutland Peninsula appears to share the same specific artistic embellishments in the carvings on the cube faces. The tree motif is constant as well, in all its exquisite detail.

The question becomes – why was it so important that these ancient craftsmen maintain such a strict standard in their construction? My conjecture is that each cube is a replica, meant to symbolize a single sacred artifact. This artifact was most likely vital to the religious rituals and magical rites conducted by the cults venerating Odin near the turn of the millennium. An object of such importance would not have been ferried around from temple to sacred grove and back. Rather, specific replicas would have been fashioned to represent the artifact, to symbolize its divine power, and serve as surrogates during the various rituals observed by cults without access to the original artifact. Such symbolic representation is a common theme among many religious practices – as in the body of Christ, if the reader will excuse the timeworn example.

The obvious speculative leap to be made - that this conclusion supports the oft-derided theory of the Tesseract’s existence – is not precisely the point of this paper. The intriguing yet sparse oral history and folklore surrounding the Tesseract’s origins and existence are a tempting subject all on their own. For our purposes, we may consider the Tesseract as simply an inspiration in whose image these replicas were cast. The actual fact of the Tesseract’s existence is less important than the belief of the local population and members of the religious cults that the Tesseract was imbued with divine power.
Lukas has not been summoned to the metaphorical throne room. His online research indicates that the Triskelion is the public face and physical representation of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s power, a grandiose architectural statement of dominance.

This compound of buildings is nowhere near as impressive, situated quietly among shady streets and large houses instead of the compact glass towers of downtown. The Triskelion is nearer to the President of America’s white palace and the seat of his oft-maligned Council of the Hill. This structure is no more than an outpost, though the brick façade is nondescript and pleasant enough. The landscape is dotted with circular shrubs just beginning to flower.

A neat young man waits behind a gleaming black countertop when Lukas enters. He gives a perfunctory smile. “Good morning. Did you have an appointment?”

“Yes. With Agent Brenna Roberts.”

“I’m afraid this building is restricted access, so you’ll have to just wait right over there while I call her down to escort you.” The young man taps at a device attached to his ear.

Before Lukas can do more than step away, a voice hails him. “Mr. Eld! You made it. I hope the drive wasn’t too bad.”

Agent Roberts strides briskly from the elevator. The receptionist gives him an unnecessary wave in her direction. Lukas inclines his head and goes to greet her.

Roseanne had offered him the use of her car, which he had driven approximately ten minutes before abandoning in a parking lot. He had instead materialized down the street from the address
he’d memorized for this complex, in an area he’d studied from images found on the Inter-Net.

The mechanical motions necessary to operate Midgardian vehicles are not difficult to master in and of themselves, yet Lukas finds himself immensely mistrustful of other drivers and their unpredictability. He does not know if Roseanne’s dented metal vehicle will explode in a towering burst of flame if he collides with another, but he has seen too many instances of such fiery conflagrations on the television to be anything but wary.

“It took no time at all,” he assures.

“Great. Why don’t you follow me to the security station, and we’ll get you a visitor’s badge before we head up to the conference room.”

Lukas is soon outfitted with a little card of white plastic that clips to the lapel of his suit. He adjusts it so it does not cover the maroon striped tie Roseanne had selected for him this morning. She had fussed entirely too much, as if this was his first official presentation to the court instead of an introductory meeting among potential colleagues.

Though of course this isn’t simply an innocuous consultation. This is a test of sorts. Agent Roberts’s superiors aim to determine his capabilities, the extent of his knowledge, his potential loyalty. Lukas would bet a golden apple that they’re probing for what he knows of the Tesseract and how he gleaned this information.

And Lukas is here to take their measure in return.

Also, he can’t deny a certain curiosity. His sojourn on Midgard thus far has been restful and quiet. Both qualities he had needed when he’d arrived in a haze of pain and grief and rage, unable to stand any sound louder than a whisper or touch heavier than silk.

Yet he has grown a bit impatient and bored without a riddle or enigma to whet the sharpness of his intellect. Devouring the entirety of Midgardian history had provided a useful distraction, but he craves something altogether more exhilarating.

Agent Roberts ushers him into a wood-paneled room with a sturdy table dominating the center. A flat black screen covers the north wall. Squarish white numerals representing the current time float across its surface, bouncing off edges and corners before spinning in the opposite direction.
A trim middle-aged man stands from his seat at the head of the table next to the screen. His expression is placid and his appearance is generic. If not for the economical precision of his movements, which intimate a warrior’s awareness of the position of his limbs, and the focused attentiveness of his blue eyes, Lukas might have overlooked him.

Until he’d seen the deference given him by the other agents in the room, as they angle their bodies towards him and wait for him to move first before they stand themselves.

“The man in charge, I presume.” Lukas extends his hand.

The man takes it, firmly but not aggressively. “Until someone higher up comes along. Agent Phil Coulson.”

“Pleasure.”

Agent Coulson gestures to the two other women. One is pale and brunette, smiling timidly. The other is black-haired, with a smooth tan complexion and flinty dark eyes. This one holds herself like a warrior as well, but makes no effort to hide it, rather challenging one to comment.

“These are Agents Simmons and May.”

He shakes the younger woman’s hand first, letting his smile turn from polite to warm. His ploy works, and a faint rosy blush spreads along her cheeks. “Lukas Eld.” His smile has no apparent effect on Agent May, who continues to regard him stonily.

Lukas takes a seat opposite the two and Roberts sits at his side. Her dark hair is pulled into a sleek tail today, brown skin contrasting strikingly with her white blouse. She matches Agent May for composure, without the edge of menace.

Agent Coulson returns to his seat. “Before we begin, Mr. Eld, I want to make sure you understand that anything discussed in this room is classified. You signed an agreement when you received that badge, that you won’t divulge any information mentioned here to outside sources, not even your family or friends.”

He nods solemnly and rearranges his face into its most trustworthy expression. Who would he tell? Roseanne? Not likely. Besides, Lukas has always been a skilled secret keeper. He has no intention
of divulging, though the agreement he signed didn’t even have an appropriate line upon which to smear his blood to seal the oath.

Mortals leave too much to chance and to capricious sentiments like loyalty and honor.

The man scrutinizes him for a minute before he nods. He clasps his hands together on the table in front of him. “S.H.I.E.L.D. specializes in handling unusual events,” Coulson begins. “Or people and objects for which traditional law enforcement and the military are not equipped or prepared to deal with.”

Making it more than likely it is S.H.I.E.L.D., of any government agency, that has possession of the Tesseract.

“When we come into contact with strange items of unknown origin, we refer to them as 0-8-4s. You follow me so far?” Lukas gives a wordless noise of agreement. “Right now, we’re in the middle of a delicate situation. There are two possibilities that are equally distressing, though I’m holding out for one outcome over the other. Either this situation is the result of a traitor within our organization, or…”

“Oh this situation is the result of an 0-8-4,” Lukas finishes.

“Exactly. I’m hoping you can help us figure out which is the case.” Coulson activates the screen with the press of a button. The clock disappears and a man’s image fills the space, along with a smaller array of various others.

The agent points to the man. His blond, stringy hair is receding from his scalp, and his cheeks and neck are thick with extra weight that gives his skin the unfortunate appearance of puffy dough. But his smile is bright and his pale eyes are kind. “Agent Henry Morris. Longtime desk jockey in the Intel Analysis department, served as a sort of liaison between our lab people and our field agents. No history of disciplinary actions, no complaints from Human Resources. Regarded by his coworkers as cheerful and friendly, a good listener.”

Agent Simmons puts a hand to her mouth briefly before nodding. Her brown eyes shine in the blue light reflecting from the screen. “Definitely. Henry always comes round to ask how we are and what we’re working on. He’s a sweetheart. Last time he came by, he showed me a picture from his daughter’s high school prom.”
Coulson’s lips are a grim line. “Two weeks ago, he didn’t show up for work. The day after, the identities of eight of our undercover agents were compromised. We had to pull all of them out of the field. Several were injured and one was killed.” He indicates the images surrounding Morris.

“Agent Morris turned himself in that night. He’s been in detention ever since. He confessed to divulging the names of the agents involved in the operations he’d helped design.” Coulson leans forward, bracing himself on the table. “The man’s confused, guilt-ridden and upset. He claims he doesn’t know why he revealed the information or remember much about who he gave it to.”

Lukas sees Coulson and May exchange glances. “What does he remember?” he prompts.

“A woman’s voice. Asking him the questions. He remembers feeling something warm and metal touch his skin. He claims… that whatever this object was, it’s the source of his burns.”

“Burns?” Lukas repeats with what might be regarded as an unsavory degree of interest. He presses his lips together.

Coulson calls up another image, of pale skin scorched black, ringed by irritated red. They look to be across Morris’s chest, painful maledictions that Lukas instantly recognizes.

Surprise tinges his tone. “I know these.”

Morris’s burns are runes, ancient runes. Not simply Old Norse, these are Asgardian runes - though they bear a great similarity, given that the Æsir taught the mortals the symbols for casting magic and divining the future centuries ago.

Asgardian runes had been incorporated into the mortal’s existing language easily. The runes hold their own power, but only if the one carving or writing knows what they represent. Simply transcribing the runes does not exert a tangible effect.

These symbols, seared in flesh, were not simply transcribed. Lukas can feel the subtle hum of their power even though the image is but a shade captured by Midgardian technology.

They are ugly, hateful aberrations in the pale skin of the agent’s chest. Oathbreaker. Lie-spinner. False witness.
Lukas’s throat closes. It is as if the Norns themselves have intervened, and laid their charges against him plainly, writ in another’s pain and blood.

Coulson disrupts the claws of panicked shock that have burrowed themselves deep in his chest with a question. “What are they?”

He clears his throat, then approaches the screen. “Runes. Elder Futhark, by the look of them. They brand Agent Morris here as a liar.” He points to the center runes, their shape altogether too close to Liesmith for comfort. He names each of their meanings for the assembled agents.

Roberts speaks up. “So who did he lie to?” She glances around. “Us, or them?”

Lukas is too caught up in examining the runes to reply. He hears the others discussing possibilities behind him. This combination is familiar. He gropes through his memory.

Brands of a liar, embedded into not just the skin, but the man’s very life-flame, with powerful magic. Harmful truths uncovered. The betrayal of a previously loyal servant. A warm metal object of mysterious origin.

The conclusion hits him like a lightning bolt and he is intensely grateful he accepted Agent Roberts’s offer of consultation. By the Nine, how is it on Midgard? And what foolish mortal has claimed it despite its curse?

He turns sharply to face the agents. “The Ring of Andvari.”

Coulson, who had been in the middle of a sentence, closes his mouth with a flicker of irritation. “The what now?”

Lukas stalks back to the table. “If we put aside the fact that it is entirely mythical, your object of unknown origin could well be the Ring of Andvari.” He has their complete attention now. Time to demonstrate exactly how useful he can be when he has a mind for it.

“The story goes that Andvari possessed an enormous hoard of gold, which he guarded jealously. He was deprived of his cache through a clever trick, and in the throes of death, he cursed the gold
with a powerful truth spell to enact his revenge. The gold traded hands several times, each instance ending violently, leaving the hoard with a legacy of destruction and bloodshed. Eventually, part of the hoard was fashioned into a gleaming sword, and another part… into a golden ring.”

Lukas had fallen easily into the cadence of a storyteller. Now he crosses his arms over his chest and straightens up. “It is said one who bears the Ring can distinguish between a truth and a falsehood. If we take this admittedly incredible legend to its logical conclusion, and set aside the absurd notion of its actual existence – if the bearer is clever or skilled enough, the Ring’s magic could be bent to compel the one who wears it to speak only the truth.”

Agent May is not openly incredulous, but there’s a disbelieving crease in her brow. “You mean to say Morris was compelled to reveal our undercover agents’ identities by a magic ring.”

Lukas shrugs. “I mean to say it is a slim possibility that nevertheless fits the facts of your case. And you did make it quite clear you were looking for an unusual object of extraordinary provenance. I just supplied the most likely option from mythology.”

Simmons’s gaze is fixed on the burns when she speaks. “Let’s say this Ring is the 0-8-4 we’re looking for. How would whoever has it even know how to manipulate the Ring’s… magic?”

She can’t say the term magic without a pained grimace. Lukas suppresses the urge to demonstrate just what a skilled mage can do. “The Ring is already inextricably woven with truth magic. In theory, the owner could carve further runes into the gold to direct the magic to compel, instead of only revealing. This would, of course, require that whoever possesses this Ring has a working knowledge of the Old Norse runic alphabets.”

“Like you,” Coulson says evenly.

“Indeed.” Lukas licks his lips and lets the implication pass. “The pool of suspects is rather small. That should only aid in your search for the culprit.”

“Assuming we are in fact looking for this Ring of Atari,” Roberts interjects.

“Andvari.”

“Yeah, yeah. Andvari.”
“I’m afraid that is the only artifact that comes to mind with the mythical properties necessary to result in this… damage. Agent Morris could have been burned when he attempted to resist the Ring’s compulsion and lie regarding the identity of your agents.”

“So Agent Morris could have been framed. This might not be his fault.” Simmons is evidently hopeful.

Coulson makes a noncommittal noise. “If I was permitted to speak with Agent Morris, perhaps I could offer more in the way of confirmation,” Lukas offers.

“That would take some time to arrange.” Coulson and May have another silent conversation. “And approval from my superiors,” he adds. The agent in command taps his chin thoughtfully. “Are you staying in town, Mr. Eld?”

“I certainly could. I have never visited this city and would not mind the opportunity to do so.”

Coulson nods decisively. “Okay. Then we’ll contact you tomorrow about a potential interview with Agent Morris. Or we might just have you come in and give more details about this Ring to some of our other specialists. Is that agreeable?”

Lukas accepts magnanimously. “Agent Roberts has my cell number.” The woman herself offers to escort him back to the lobby. He bids farewell to Agent Simmons, who returns his smile with enthusiasm he suspects is related to his theory, which brings newfound hope to the cause of Morris’s eventual redemption. Agents May and Coulson are inscrutable as ever, though he thinks he detects a bit of relief in their faces as well.

Agent Roberts leaves him with the promise to call the following day and the name of her favorite coffee shop and its location. Lukas traverses half the distance, a mere five blocks, before he becomes aware of a shadow. He pretends ignorance, entering the small establishment and ordering a latte and a scone. It took him several weeks to grow accustomed to the ingenious mortal brew, but now he is partial to coffee in all its forms.

The woman doesn’t approach until the scone has been reduced to crumbs. She sidles up and smoothly deposits herself in the chair across the tiny table.

“How was the scone?” she asks.
“Delightful. I recommend the raspberry.”

She seems amused by his nonchalance. “I’ll keep that in mind for the next time we meet.”

He raises a mild eyebrow. “Next time?”

She smiles sweetly. “I’m here to offer you the chance of a lifetime. An opportunity you couldn’t possibly bear to miss.”

Well, well. Two offers in one day. He’s never been in such high demand. Lukas studies the woman. Her heart-shaped face is pleasant, with soft features and striking dark eyes. Both her posture and her voice are demure and polite. Lukas has oft used such a manner and his own admittedly appealing features to similar effect, though he had hated the perception of his prettiness as compared to – other’s - brawn and broad handsomeness.

The glitter of intelligence in her eyes warns Lukas she has had extensive practice at this ploy as well and can likely use it to great effect. He proceeds cautiously, letting his reluctance show. “Pardon me, but how could you offer grand opportunities without any knowledge of my desires?”

“I feel confident that I can guess.” She smiles again, just a gentle upturn of her lips this time. “My name is Raina, Mr. Eld.”

He feigns a surprised blink. Her smile grows more genuine. Raina seems to enjoy having the advantage. “Yes, I know you. I’ve followed your work for sometime now. You’re a very accomplished academic.”

Lukas folds his arms across his chest and leans back in his wooden chair. His scrutiny is obvious. “Thank you. Are you a member of a particularly aggressive university history department?”

Raina laughs lightly. “Not quite. I work for an organization dedicated to the expansion of human knowledge. An organization that wants to advance civilization, not hold it back, unlike some others.”

“You mean S.H.I.E.L.D.,” he surmises.
She inclines her head. “I know they approached you. Here’s some free advice – don’t trust anything S.H.I.E.L.D. says. Their mission is one of secrecy and forced silence. If they cannot control objects of great power, or talented individuals, they treat them as a liability. Imprison them. Or remove them. Permanently.”

Raina lets the silence hold for several seconds. “My employers mean to expose S.H.I.E.L.D.’s hypocrisy, their dark secrets. We mean to encourage every person to be a part of something greater. To create a new age for humanity.” Her voice contains the fervor of a true disciple. Whatever else she is, Raina believes in her vision.

“I think an academic of your caliber would appreciate the opportunity to contribute to a cause that will remake the world. To be a beacon of enlightenment and progress. And I think you’re in a unique position to help us achieve our goals. For which you would be compensated most handsomely.”

Raina wants him to consult for her mysterious and quite obviously illegal organization. Lukas isn’t particularly surprised, given the roundabout method by which she approached and her careful way of speaking. What he can’t fathom is why her employers would need to hire an unremarkable historian as a consultant. Is this simply a case of wanting to prevent S.H.I.E.L.D. from obtaining something they made an effort to acquire, like a child stealing a toy only for the sake of depriving another? He’d no doubt the clandestine government agency is adept at making enemies, yet this seems rather a waste of time for so petty a goal as that.

His suspicions lay in rather more intriguing directions. Perhaps Raina and her conspirators want an expert on Norse mythology and history for the same reason as S.H.I.E.L.D. The artifact that is the source of Agent Morris’s burns is not in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s possession, yet they have circumstantial evidence of its use and its effects.

Lukas has an inkling he’s just met one of the keepers of Andvari’s Ring. And if that is the case… he knows his answer to Raina’s inquiry.

“You present an interesting proposal,” he muses. “I would like to hear what you have to offer.”

Raina favors him with another smile.
MEMO

TO: Director Fury

FROM: Agent Michael Rodalfi, North Atlantic Field Office

CC: S.H.I.E.L.D. Operations, Supervisory Agents Maria Hill, Philip Coulson, Jasper Sitwell, Victoria Hand

DATE: February 20th, 2011

RE: Urgent Information Regarding the Unidentified Craft in International Waters

A Russian oil team reported an unidentified craft at a crash site 19:43 yesterday evening. Initial reports indicated the craft was most likely a weather balloon downed in the storm. The reconnaissance team requested additional resources once they arrived on site. Further investigation was undertaken and what was discovered merits immediate retrieval.

The remains are encased in ice, making a positive identification very difficult until they can be removed to a laboratory for defrosting. But they are buried with what appears to be a distinctive red white and blue patterned shield. It is my belief we have recovered the body of Captain America.

The craft matches the description of Johann Schmidt’s Valkyrie, and the crash site is along a direct flight path from Schmidt’s stronghold in the Alps to New York City, both facts that lend credence to...
the theory this is in fact Captain Steven Rogers.

I am requesting immediate ground support, with a team and equipment capable of extracting the Captain’s remains from the aircraft for transport. The condition of the remains is unknown, but the ice may have preserved enough soft tissue for DNA extraction. The site will need to be secured for a more intensive examination. No other bodies were recovered in the initial search, though it is highly likely the remains of Johann Schmidt are also on board.

I must request support with all haste – Captain America has waited long enough. It’s time for a war hero to be returned to his country.

XIV

Director Fury’s face is stone. “You’re telling me we’ve got a potential 0-8-4 with the capability of reducing even our most skilled agents to babbling fools?”

“Yessir.”

“For the record, Coulson, next time you’re calling me with news like this, I want it to be followed by the phrase ‘April Fools’.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for next year.”

“You do that.” Fury sighs. “And how exactly did we figure this out? Why have I never heard of it?”
If Fury had heard of the ring before, Coulson has no doubt it’d be locked up in his secret arsenal next to the tactical plans for a large-scale alien invasion and the zombie apocalypse. The Director likes to be prepared for any eventuality.

“A new consultant. A historian, an expert in the pre-Christian period of Scandinavia,” he replies.

“I thought we already had one of those.”

“Dr. Pfeifer is more of a linguist, sir. And he’s still working on that journal translation. But I did send him the photographs of the burns on Agent Morris’s chest, sir, and he translated those for us, confirmed they were Old Norse, but had no information about what could be responsible for them. So I brought in Mr. Eld, and he translated the runes for us as well.”

“Checking his work, I see.”

Coulson nods. “He knows his stuff. Their translations were very similar, but his work centers more on the cultural remains of Norse peoples, so he was able to give us a potential artifact that could be our 0-8-4. He’s familiar with the lore surrounding many legendary artifacts, like this ring… and the Tesseract.” He pauses and knows Fury must pick up on the underlying meaning.

“That’s awfully convenient. I didn’t realize we had recruited such an expert.”

Coulson winces, because he doesn’t want to be that guy, but it seems he always is – “Actually, sir, I mentioned him in the last weekly memo about Project P.E.G.A.S.U.S. Third paragraph down after the summary of Selvig’s electromagnetic readings.”

“Do you memorize every memo, Coulson?” Fury grumbles.

“Well, no. Only the important ones.”

“Or anything relating to Captain America.” Coulson does not dare fidget under Fury’s baleful stare. “Fine. This consultant – who is he?”
“Lukas Eld. British national that immigrated to America two years ago, been living in Culpeper, Virginia ever since. Got a history degree from Cambridge, publishes regularly in several archaeological and historical academic journals. We’ve been tracking him for a few months, since he mentioned the Tesseract in one of his papers. Dr. Selvig says the project is stagnating. I thought bringing in another expert, without a scientific perspective, could help. I had one of my team go talk to him a week ago, scope him out. The situation with Agent Morris is proving to be ideal in terms of a test run.”

“And what’s your opinion so far?”

Coulson takes a moment to marshal his thoughts. Eld is a tough cookie. Intelligent, that much is obvious. Perceptive. But there’s something… something in the way he spoke during the meeting, his easy acceptance of 0-8-4s and how quickly he supplied this ring as a possibility…

“Hard to get a read on, sir. I’ve got a nagging feeling he knows more than he’s saying.”

Fury frowns. “Is there a security leak?”

“I’ve double-checked the team working with Dr. Selvig on Project P.E.G.A.S.U.S. They’re clean. It’s possible, but… I need more time with Eld.” The more he interacts with the new consultant, the better assessment he can make of him.

The Director nods. “See, this is why I don’t bother to read the memos you send. I can just have you regurgitate them word for word whenever I want.”

Neither of them crack a smile. They’re too professional for that. But Coulson sees the gleam of amusement in Fury’s eyes. “Of course, sir. I’m bringing Eld in to interview Agent Morris, see if we can’t get him to confirm Eld’s theories. I’ll update you this evening – verbally.”

“I want that ring out of hostile hands. Whatever it takes, Coulson. Even if you have to melt it down to a puddle.”

“Yessir.”

The video call ends abruptly. Coulson buzzes Roberts’ phone to confirm she’s picked up Eld and heads to the detention facility.
The interior is all ruthless, efficient lines and uncomfortable furniture. His team is waiting in the entrance lobby. Roberts and Eld are a given. She was his initial contact. Simmons has a personal stake in this, and Coulson is letting the fact of her attendance slide. But she’s been ordered strictly to observe, to not enter the room during Morris’s interrogation. May is his second, and the notion is so familiar he doesn’t bother to justify her presence. She gives him a quick nod.

Eld straightens from where he was leaning casually against the wall. His suit is tailored and neatly pressed. Not a raven hair out of place among his short and styled curls. He appears entirely too well-dressed for such an uninviting place. Coulson marks that down in his personal estimation of the man. Undoubtedly vain, fastidious in his appearance.

“Agent Coulson. You arranged this quite swiftly. I had expected to be detained several more days.”

“This is a priority for the Director now,” Coulson replies. “This ring poses a clear and present threat to all of our agents.”

“Simmons, Roberts, May. You’ll watch from the observation room. Eld and I will go in to speak with Agent Morris.” Roberts looks a bit disappointed, but the agents all agree silently. They break off into two groups outside a pair of reinforced metal doors. Coulson had called ahead to have Morris prepped and brought to the main interrogation room before they arrived.

He darts a glance at Eld as he rests his grip on the handle. “Don’t lead him too much. We want to confirm your theory, ideally, but don’t mention the ring before he does. I don’t want him just repeating what he thinks we want to hear.”

“Roger that, boss. Ten-four.”

Coulson turns to face him fully. “Really?”

Eld gives him a sheepish smile. “Is that not correct? I saw that in a movie.”

“If you’re picking things up from action movies, I suppose it could be worse.”

Eld repeats himself, but this time, the British accent is gone, replaced with a thick Virginian drawl.
“Roger that, boss.” He reverts to his normal voice. “Better?”

“Marginally.” Coulson hides a smile, impressed despite himself with the skill of his mimicry. Interesting talent for a small-time historian. Coulson’s got another data point in his estimation of Eld, though he’s not quite sure what picture it’s forming just yet.

Eld simply smirks and trails after Coulson into the interrogation room. Agent Morris is seated at the spare metal table, hands cuffed to a chain bolted in its center. His large frame is hunched in on itself, head down nearly to his chest. When he hears them enter, he jerks up and stares with big, wet blue eyes. His face is pale and wan, his expression a strange combination of apprehensive and hopeful.

“Agent Coulson! Sir,” he blurts out, spine straightening automatically as he realizes exactly who is visiting him.

“Agent Morris.” Coulson includes the job title consciously, wanting to set Morris at ease that he’s not being shipped off to one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s notoriously secretive prisons, like the Raft or the Fridge. That they haven’t written him off completely.

Morris slumps a bit in relief at his careful, respectful tone. Coulson waves Eld to the only chair on their side of the table, electing to stand. “We have some more questions for you, Agent Morris.”

The handcuffed agent wilts a bit, but nods. Coulson knows he must be weary of being asked the same questions and forced to give the same unhelpful answers every time. Eld sits gracefully in the uncomfortable metal chair, not betraying a hint of tension or nervousness. Coulson expects interrogations are not often practiced in his profession, except perhaps on cheating undergrads or unscrupulous teaching assistants. So his composure is remarkable – and noted.

“Agent Morris. My name is Lukas Eld. I’m here to help.”

“You’re – You’re with S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

“Yes. I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“I didn’t mean to—”
Eld leans forward. His tone is even and calm, expression earnest. “I want you to know, before we begin, that I don’t think you have betrayed your colleagues.”

Morris’s pale, watery eyes widen. “You don’t?”

Coulson can see his desperate hope. Eld smiles softly. “No, Agent Morris. It is plain you feel pronounced guilt and remorse. These are not the reactions of a hardened spy.”

His face crumples. “Those agents—”

Before Morris can fall apart again, Eld cuts in. His voice is precise and delicate when he speaks, like a surgeon’s scalpel. “Agent Morris, when you were brought in, you spoke of a woman.”

Morris shudders. Eld continues quickly. “Did she touch you at all?”

The pale agent blinks, shocked from his guilt-ridden reminiscence. “Um. I don’t know.”

“Perhaps your face? Your arm, or your hand?”

Morris peers at Eld intently. “Yeah – now that you mention it – how did you know that?”

Eld only nods. “Educated guess. Where exactly did she touch you?”

Morris frowns uneasily. “She… she held my hand.” Coulson’s heart pounds in his ears. *Come on,* he silently urges. *Be more specific.*

“Do you have any idea why she held your hand?” Eld asks carefully.

The agent studies his swollen knuckles, his wrists hooked together by the metal links of the handcuffs. “She put something on them. I didn’t like how it felt. It was too warm. And – felt like it was squeezing my chest. It was like – like a ring. On my finger.”
He doesn’t release an audible breath, but the relief is immediate and tangible. Eld hums at the answer, resting back in the chair. “And once the woman placed the ring on your finger, she began to ask you questions.”

“She made me tell her about the operations I worked on. The—the names of our operatives.”

“Do you remember the first question she asked you?”

“It was just little stuff. I didn’t think it was that important, but I still tried to – she knew I wasn’t telling the truth. And then, then it burned. I felt it, here.” Morris gestures to his chest, an echo of pain creasing his features.

Testing him, Coulson thinks. Establishing a baseline. If he lies about irrelevant details, he'll know the consequences before they get to the important ones.

“What sort of little things, exactly? Perhaps it will be easiest to start there.”

“My name, at first. My name and where I worked. Who I worked for.” Morris takes a deep breath and the tension eases. Eld’s decision to start with the less important details has paid off.

“What I liked to eat, where S.H.I.E.L.D. agents like to go for lunch when they leave campus. I always get a sub from this place on the corner of Delancey. She asked me what sort of toppings I got.” He laughs a little breathlessly. “Stupid, really. I told her I liked peppers.”

“And then?”

“She asked who my boss was. Where I go to the dentist, if S.H.I.E.L.D. has a medical team on staff. We only go to internal S.H.I.E.L.D. doctors, so I figured telling her wasn’t a big deal. They’re agents too. And maybe -- maybe then she’d stop asking questions.”

Eld tilts his head ever so slightly. “She asked you where you go for medical treatment? Or who you go to?”
Morris frowns. “Who I go to, I guess. Their names.” Coulson sees Eld take the information in with a twitch of his lips.

“When did she ask about the undercover agents?”

“She kind of – interspersed those questions with the others. To try to catch me off guard, I spose.” His eyes dart to Coulson. “I swear, I tried not to tell her! But – but it was burning, and I couldn’t stop the words from coming out!”

Eld’s soothing tone cuts through his rising hysteria. “Peace, Agent Morris. We are not here to persecute you.” He changes tack suddenly. “What did the woman look like?”

“I couldn’t really see her face, it was mostly in shadow. But… pretty, I think. She sounded pretty.”

“What was she wearing?”

Morris blinks at Eld, surprised yet again by the direction of questioning. Apparently no one had thought to ask. “Well… she was wearing a dress, I think. A floral dress.”

Ice slides down his spine. *Raina.* It has to be. Coulson doesn’t believe in coincidences. Centipede is making a move. He’d suspected them, but it’s becoming more likely by the minute. What did they want with undercover S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives?

“And once this woman finished asking her questions, she released you?” Eld prompts.

“Yeah. She said that – that her cause wouldn’t be advanced by killing simple foot soldiers. That the war would not be won by slaughtering the ignorant but by freeing them.” Morris crinkles his nose in disgust. “I remember that clearly, because she was… touching my burns as she said it. Feeling around the edges.” He shudders again.

Coulson approaches his agent where he hunches in his chair. Not really *his*, per se, but he still feels responsible for him as a supervisory agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. And he couldn’t deny the utter satisfaction at finally having a workable theory about this incident that didn’t center on the betrayal of one of their own. As dangerous as this ring is, Coulson is queerly glad of its existence.
A S.H.I.E.L.D. agent compromised so thoroughly by an enemy… it didn’t bear thinking about.

“You did good, Agent Morris. You turned yourself in, even knowing the consequences if we didn’t believe you. If you hadn’t, we’d never have known about this 0-8-4,” he reassures the man.

“So it was an 0-8-4?” Morris clarifies.

Eld leans forward. “A ring, to be precise. Laid with a compulsion to force the truth.”

Morris tries to comprehend, Coulson gives him that. “Like… sodium pentathol? Was it injecting me?”

Coulson quickly agrees. “Something like that.” He gestures to Eld, whose green eyes are cloudy and thoughtful. It takes a solid prod to the upper arm to get his attention. Coulson inclines his head to the door and the consultant takes his leave.

“I’m recommending you be transferred to the infirmary. We’ll see what we can do about the scarring. And you’ll have to go through the standard trauma sessions with the assigned therapist.”

Morris looks disappointed, but nods. Coulson lays a hand on his shoulder. “I’m not saying you’re permanently suspended. We just need to make sure you’re fighting fit before you get back to your station. You know I rely on you to keep those kids down in the Cupboard in line.”

The agent gives him a true smile for the first time since he was remanded to the detention facility. “Yessir. Don’t wanna even imagine what they’ve got up to while I’ve been gone.”

“From the memos I’ve seen, you’ve got your work cut out for you. So focus on your recovery. Got it?” Coulson releases him and trails after Eld. He finds the consultant and the rest of his team in the observation room.

Simmons is nearly bouncing in her seat. “I knew it. I knew Henry wasn’t a traitor!” she bursts out before Coulson’s even crossed the threshold.

“You know I couldn’t just rely on your say-so, Jemma,” he sighs.
“Yes, of course. I’m just quite pleased to be vindicated.” Her smile is brilliant. Coulson can’t begrudge her anything while she’s wearing that expression.

“So this truth-telling ring has gotta be real, then? And it’s in the hands of Raina,” Roberts points out with a grimace. “Coulson, can I be excused for saying ‘Oh, shit’?”

“Only because you beat me to it.”

“She could get classified intel out of anyone. If she manages to nab someone high enough in the pecking order…” Roberts trails off. She tugs urgently on her sleek black ponytail. “All our operations could be compromised.”

Jemma raises her hand tentatively. Coulson has often felt like an elementary school principal when wrangling his team, but never more than now. He wearily gestures for her to speak.

“Are we allowed to know which operations the compromised agents were working on? It might help us construct a clearer picture of what Raina is intending to do with the information she extracts from her victims.”

Coulson pauses to consider. Three of the operations couldn’t recover from the loss of their undercover agent. Those could be declassified. As far as he knew, Black Widow had been able to salvage hers; the loss of one of her support team hadn’t ruined the groundwork she’d already laid, though it had accelerated her timetable for completion.

Eld had been quiet, but now he speaks up, interrupting Coulson’s inner monologue. “Agent Coulson. S.H.I.E.L.D. has a private medical service, if I understood Agent Morris correctly?”

“Yes?” he says slowly.

“And these physicians, they possess privileged information?”

Coulson grows wary at Eld’s careful tone. “Yes. Medical histories of our agents, access to medical records. Nothing relevant to current operations, though.”
“I’m beginning to suspect this woman is not concerned with your undercover operatives. I think her goal was something else entirely.” The historian’s gaze is distant and pensive. Coulson can’t fathom why Eld would jump to this conclusion over the more obvious one, but it’s intriguing enough to consider.

“Then why ask about the agents?” Roberts breaks in.

“A ruse,” Eld suggests. “To disguise her true intent. Did the operations have aught in common other than their secrecy?”

Coulson reviews them again. No. As a matter of fact, they didn’t. Not located in the same countries, not investigating the same organizations, not much of an overlap in the way of suspects. Seemingly chosen at random, with Agent Morris’ input in their design as the only link.

He shakes his head. Eld splays his hand, tipping it to Coulson in a *there-you-go* sort of gesture. “What did they gain by those questions but S.H.I.E.L.D.’s paranoia and increased scrutiny and alertness? They released Agent Morris. They must have known you would question him. I can’t rightly think why an illegal organization would wish for such an outcome. But S.H.I.E.L.D.’s understandable preoccupation with the safety of their agents, distracting focus from the other information Morris provided… that could be useful.”

“Why would she care about Morris’ annual health checkups? It’s not exactly tactical info,” Roberts presses.

“Not Morris. He is not their only patient, I am sure.”

“You think she wants S.H.I.E.L.D. doctors.” His mind races. Why on earth would Raina care about them?

The pieces come together with awful clarity. “Mike Peterson.”

Simmons jolts. “Mike? What about Mike?”

“Who is Mike Peterson?” Eld inquires.
“We ran into him a few months back – he’d been exposed to a device containing a serum prepared by Centipede. A serum designed to enhance humans. It was unstable and dangerous, though,” Roberts informs him.

“A serum based on Dr. Erskine’s work. Based on the formula that augmented Captain America,” he supplies grimly. “If they could get their hands on Steve Rogers’s medical files – results of blood work, his DNA sequence, tissue samples…”

Simmons’ face pales. “My God – they could potentially recreate it. They could stabilize their formula, succeed in making their own super soldiers!”

“And they’d need a S.H.I.E.L.D. scientist to do it. Someone familiar with the work, with medical experience, and access to S.H.I.E.L.D. files.” He bolts from his seat. “I’m calling Director Fury. May, get the Hub on the line. Tell them we need GPS coordinates and personal check-ins for every doctor employed by S.H.I.E.L.D. right now. Once we find them, get them all to a safe location.”
By the way... thank y'all so much for the comments and kudos. This is my first fanfiction on this site (and second one ever) so it seriously inspires me. Love to hear what you're thinking. Gives me a fresh perspective, which is sometimes lost when rereading my own work again and again.

She asked him his name but he cannot recall. If he did not press too hard, the shape began to form in his mouth – L – L – but it was lost.

He hated when she spoke. The sound grated on him, too loud, like screaming in his ear. The shock and pain made him flinch when she opened her mouth. The woman – for it was a woman who lived in the boxy white shack – was elderly and frail. Her deeply lined face crinkled further when she looked at him, lips pursed in a moue of concern.

The sheet she placed over him was infuriatingly scratchy. He continually shoved it off, shuddering at the feeling of the fabric on his bare skin. The woman quickly learned to keep the lights dimmed. His eyes watered incessantly even at the meager rays edging in through the thick drapes covering the window.

When she brought him a meal, no more than fragrant broth, he’d retched at the smell. Its cloying scent coated his tongue and throat, the insides of his nose. After he’d finished coughing up bile, he’d glanced up at her sympathetic expression and abruptly felt the urge to crush her skull under his fingers. Slash at her throat with his nails. Rip her hair from her scalp. The furious, towering rage caught him completely by surprise, and dissipated as swiftly as it came.
But it lurked, simmering beneath his skin for days. He couldn’t determine the source. It swelled and receded like a poisonous tide. The periods of recession found him weak and shaking, a nebulous sense of despair blooming in his chest, tears clogging his throat. His strength returned with each wave of fury, as did the black urge to destroy, to hurt someone, or if there was no target for his ire, to hurt himself.

The woman caught him clawing at his arms and face one night when he’d woken from a tormented sleep. He’d dreamt of a man raging at him, pummeling him with a great silver hammer. He’d begged for mercy, pleaded with him, stared into blue eyes – but the hammer had come down in a graceful arc and collided with his stomach, sending splintering pain through his very bones.

She restrained his arms and he was weak enough to comply. Murmuring softly, she’d stroked his hair back from his forehead. The gesture struck some chord within him, and he’d begun to sob.

“Please – forgive me—” The breath rattled in his lungs, searing and agonizing. “Please – brother – ”

“Shh, sweetheart. S’all gonna be alright now. Don’t you worry. Shh…”

For once, her touch did not rub him raw. He’d fallen back into an uneasy sleep. The faintest light of morning a few hours later roused him. He blinked up at the yellowed, peeling ceiling and pictured the visage of the man from his dream. Even twisted with rage, his features had been broad and handsome, his blond hair a storm-tangled mane crowning his head. Eyes crackling with electric blue fire.

Thor. The name came from nowhere. Somehow, it seemed fitting that he remembered this man before even his own name. A surge of familiar bitterness clawed up his throat.

He lay there for the rest of the day, the hidden sun dwindling to evening in his lethargy. The woman came in and coaxed him to drink some water, though she did not attempt broth again just yet.

When night had fallen in truth, he levered himself up from the bed. He crossed the several steps to the window aching slowly, his legs shaking under his weight. The curtain parted under his fingers and he stared at the unfamiliar starry firmament.

The certainty had been coalescing within his mind in the interminable hours since his dream. The
reality of his identity bowed his shoulders, the remembrance like putting on a heavy cloak woven of resentment, hatred, and suffocating misery.


Monster.

XVI

Lukas watches the two scientists flit around the room, chirping to each other like little sparrows. No one had seen fit to escort him out of the building yet, so he takes the opportunity to observe his surroundings and the august personnel in the employ of S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Fitz, will you stop touching the jaw!”

“Why? It helps me think. Look, Jemma, I’m like Hamlet!” The curly-headed young man holds a long black jawbone, complete with slender sharp teeth, out in one palm, thrusting it up to the ceiling. “Wherefore art thou, Romeo!”

“That’s not Hamlet,” Agent Simmons replies.

“Well, no. But I don’t recall any lines from Hamlet.”
“To be or not to be?”

“That’s Hamlet? I thought that was King Lear.”

“Are you having me on? That line is perhaps one of the most famous—”

His phone chimes, interrupting their spat. They both spin towards him with sheepish expressions. Simmons blushes. “I forgot you were here.”

“Don’t mind me,” he says with a smirk. “I’ll take this over here and you can continue your… discussion.” He steps away and answers.

“Lukas Eld speaking.” He manfully resists the urge to greet the caller with ‘Sup’, as Caroline had tried to convince him was appropriate cell phone etiquette.

“Hello, Lukas.”

Raina’s appealingly smooth voice sounds in his ear. He had been wondering when she would contact him again. He drifts away from the two bickering S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“I was hoping we could continue our chat. I believe you’ll be most satisfied with my counter-proposal,” Raina says.

“Indeed?” he asks mildly. “Your employer agreed to my conditions?”

“With a few minor changes.”

“Minor from your perspective or mine? I shall be offended if you think I cannot tell a genuine Rolex from the replications sold by that most obliging man under the bridge next to my hotel.”

There is a hint of suppressed laughter in Raina’s tone. “I don’t doubt your keen eye for quality. The only changes proposed concern your hourly consulting rate.”
“Hmm. And you anticipate I will agree to these changes?”

“Of course. They are minor, as I said. And a small compromise compared to the exclusive chance to study an artifact your fellow academics would salivate over.”

The renewed interest in his voice is audible. “Oh?” Raina is finally coming to the true reason for contracting his expertise.

“Something truly ancient. An object straight from the pages of your mythology,” Raina confirms softly, persuasively.

*The Ring – there is no doubt.* “When might I see this legendary object with my own eyes?”

“How about we meet tonight to finalize our partnership?” She doesn’t wait for him to answer. “Nine pm. 409 Jacqueline Street. I’ll open up a 1961 merlot and you can study the artifact at your leisure.”

Lukas calculates for a moment – there is not much he can do for S.H.I.E.L.D. at this juncture, other than wait for news. He is not a member of the ranks of their warriors – their agents. Likely he can excuse himself without undue attention.

There is not much to be said but yes. “Splendid. It’s a date.”

“Then I look forward to seeing you again, Lukas,” Raina purrs, her voice warm and low.

Lukas disconnects the call and drifts back to the laboratory bench, still pondering Raina’s words. She seems quite serious about retaining him as a consultant. If he can wheedle his way into her confidence, convince her to allow him to study the Ring directly, under his own supervision… then what? Steal the Ring? Relinquish it to S.H.I.E.L.D.? He doesn’t trust the mortals with such a powerful magic artifact. Take it for himself? What use has a liar for a truth-telling Ring?

Simmons interrupts his indecisive internal monologue. “I love your phone!”
He glances down and sees the sleek touch-screen cell and its rosy outer skin, still in his hand. Fitz raises an eyebrow as Simmons gushes. “I just think it’s absolutely wonderful that you don’t subscribe to that stereotypical gendered nonsense.”

Lukas shrugs. “The color is pleasing.”

Fitz blinks. “It’s pink.”

Simmons shoots him a disapproving look. “The notion that only one biological gender can appreciate a color is rubbish.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “I find that most men who are so bothered by associating with pink are not secure in their masculine identity,” she continues pointedly.

Fitz scrambles to his feet. “Are too!” Simmons just makes a disbelieving noise in the back of her throat and Lukas feels a surge of amusement from observing the antics of the pair.

The curly-headed scientist sets the black jawbone on the laboratory bench to better argue his case. Lukas doesn’t hear any more of their exchange, for he notices the rest of the skull once attached to the lower jaw, set up nearby under a lighted surface and magnifying glass. Something about the shape of it nags at him, vaguely familiar. He reaches out and lightly traces the eye sockets, set deep in either side of the face and ridged with bone. Now that he sees either half of the jaw together, he thinks perhaps whatever beast unwillingly donated this skeleton must have been able to spread its mouth unimaginably wide, like a serpent. The lower jaw is in two parts, unconnected at the front.

The serrated edge of one black fang catches the tip of his finger, drawing a dot of blood. Lukas stares. To cut his skin… the edge must be incredibly sharp. He peers more closely at the fang. There is a groove running down the center, the barbs of the serrated edge run only along the side of the fang facing the interior of the beast’s throat.

The sense of familiarity resurges. Simmons and Fitz reappear at his side before he can pinpoint what exactly is causing it.

“Cool, isn’t it?” Fitz says reverently.

“I performed the necropsy myself,” Simmons adds. “Couldn’t tell you much about its biology… but I decided to deflesh and keep the skeletal remains along with the tissue samples.” She shrugs. “It could tell us more.”
“What is it?” Lukas asks.

Fitz and Simmons exchange a glance. The woman bites her lip. “I’m not sure how much I can say about when or where S.H.I.E.L.D. encountered it,” she confesses. “But I think I can admit I have no clue what it is.”

“Alien,” Fitz whispers. “All scaled and ferocious. So creepy, right?”

Lukas resists the urge to jerk back. Alien. How? What manner of beast… he glances back at the fang and abruptly realizes where he has seen it’s like.

A lifetime ago, in a famous dagger fashioned from the fang of a shadow beast from Niflheim, brought back as a trophy by Fálki. Th- someone vowing to undertake the same quest when he came of age, and promising to return with the whole skull to provide daggers for all his friends and his brother.

By Hela’s freezing teats, how did a shadow beast travel to Midgard from Niflheim?

The smooth feel of bone under his fingertips unsettles him, provoking some enigmatic instinct. This creature does not belong in this realm – its presence is deeply unnatural.

This conundrum threatens to put both the Ring of Andvari and the Tesseract far from his mind. He knows with sudden certainty this obscure beast is of utmost importance.

But Coulson pops his head through the open door and summons them with a few words – “One of the doctors is missing. Get up to the situation room.”

Fitz and Simmons scatter, quickly gathering folders and tablets, before ushering him out, leaving the mysterious skull behind. Lukas forces himself to refocus on the Ring, the more immediate difficulty.

Coulson is grim and serious when they arrive. He stands near a screen similar to the one Lukas observed in the conference room during his first meeting, but larger. This room is not wood-paneled and comfortable; it is efficient and clean, with a sizable black table surrounded by many
chairs. Before each chair, embedded in the gleaming surface, is a miniature screen for its occupant to manipulate separately from the larger one on the wall. As he takes his seat next to Simmons, she logs in to hers, pulling up several documents and scanning the words rapidly.

Agent May paces across from him in front of a bank of windows displaying the buttery yellow, late afternoon light. There are two new agents seated on the other side of the table. The dark-haired man reclines with a confident poise, his gaze sharp and assessing. The young woman beside him fidgets, looking unsure of her welcome. She is comely in a relaxed, approachable sort of way.

She notices his scrutiny and gives him an awkward wave. “Uh, hey. I’m Skye. New girl. You mighta heard about me.”

“Lukas Eld,” he responds genially. “And no. I’m new as well. Recently hired on as a consultant.”

“Cool. Glad I’m not the only one,” she says with a friendly smile. The man at her side flicks a glance at Lukas but doesn’t introduce himself.

Roberts hurries in and closes the door behind her. Coulson clicks the screen on, displaying another picture, this one a far cry from the balding and pudgy Agent Morris.

A middle-aged woman, with sleek dark hair and eyes and a narrow, tanned face only lightly lined. Unsmiling, serious, but beautiful. Coulson gestures to her. “Dr. Maria Flagretti was last seen leaving the private S.H.I.E.L.D. medical clinic she manages in Miami last night at nine-forty-five p.m. She never arrived home to her husband and teenage son. They were just about to report her missing when we contacted them regarding her whereabouts. The husband swears she hasn’t taken off, that this isn’t typical behavior for her.”

“A team has been dispatched in a quinjet to examine the scene and see if they can’t locate Dr. Flagretti in Miami, but we’ve got to assume that if this is Centipede, they moved her as quickly as they could to one of their bases of operations.” His lips press together tightly. “Unfortunately, we don’t know where all of these bases are. We’ve only got solid intel on two of them, one in California and one in New York City.”

“But if Raina snatched Agent Morris, that must mean she’s got a base close, near Washington D.C.” Roberts points out. “She took him, questioned him, and released him here in less than 24 hours. Morris said it was closer to 12, and he admitted he was unconscious for several of those and the questioning took a few more hours.”
“New York’s only four hours away by car,” May argues. “It’s possible Dr. Flagretti’s at the base there.”

“Possible,” Coulson agrees. “But just as likely she’s here in D.C. at an unknown location.”

Simmons raises her hand at her side and holds it aloft and Lukas blinks at the odd gesture. Coulson nods at her and she speaks. “Not to interrupt, but can I ask why Raina would want Dr. Flagretti? If she works in Miami, how can Raina be sure she’ll know anything about the serum or Captain America?”

Roberts fusses with her miniature screen, flicking her fingers across towards Simmons. Lukas sees a new document appear on Simmons’s screen. “I just sent you Dr. Flagretti’s file,” Roberts says. “She only recently relocated to Miami to accept a position managing the clinic down there. Before, she worked in New York City, at the main S.H.I.E.L.D. medical research clinic. She’s an oncologist by training, and she did treat several patients during her tenure there – including Agent Morris. But she also did research on telomeres and cellular repair mechanisms. She was part of the team trying to recreate the serum from Captain America’s tissue samples and blood work.”

“Trying to recreate the serum?” Simmons repeats hesitantly. Lukas sees a frown flicker over her lips and wonders at the source of her disquiet.

Coulson redirects the conversation and Lukas reminds himself to look into this serum more at a later date. “Dr. Flagretti is almost definitely in Centipede’s custody. The problem is less why they chose her, and more where have they taken her.”

“It’s about sixteen hours by car,” May says. “Unless they flew, they’re still an hour or two away – or if they chanced the possibility of being pulled over, they only just arrived in the city.”

“They wouldn’t fly,” Roberts pipes up. “I don’t think Centipede’s got a bunch of private jets on their payroll. They’re a smaller organization than that. It’d be easier to transport a person discreetly by car.”

Coulson taps his chin thoughtfully. “Still, we should check out any flight plans registered by private jets flying from Miami with a final destination in D.C.” Roberts nods, clutching her tablet to her chest and tensing like she’s going to leap from her seat to do just that when Coulson gives her leave. “As for the base in D.C.—”
Lukas considers the address Raina gave him. Is it her base of operations, or just a convenient meeting place? If he should tell S.H.I.E.L.D. and it turns out to be useless, he’s just lost his advantage over Raina and Coulson both for nothing. Best not to risk it without strong confirmation Raina has the Ring.

“I’m having Intel Analysis track down any places that fit the parameters Agent Morris provided during his debrief, or rented by any company or individuals even marginally associated with Centipede and its known employees. We’ve got them working on everything we have for Raina – last known locations, phone numbers, contacts. They’ll dig something up.”

“Meanwhile… I think we need to bring in the big guns.”

Fitz timidly raises his hand. “I’m sorry, but what’s that exactly?”

Coulson eyes them all. “I’m calling Captain America.”

Simmons squeaks. Fitz spit out the sip of water he’d just taken from his bottle. Across the table, Lukas sees Skye’s jaw drop. “Our big guns are - are Captain America? He’s more like… like a really patriotic anti-aircraft missile,” she says.

“I think Steve will be willing to help us.” Coulson shrugs, though he looks oddly smug. This is the first time Lukas has heard anyone refer to the Captain with his first name, and suspects Coulson is inordinately pleased he is familiar enough to do so.

“What can Captain Rogers do that we can’t?” May questions with a frown. “This isn’t some operation where we need him to muscle in and destroy a base. He’s not familiar with Centipede like he is Hydra.”

“You’re not giving him enough credit, May,” Coulson argues. “Captain Rogers is smart, with a mind for tactics and personal experience with a few of the many attempts to recreate the serum. Plus… well, they are his medical records and history Centipede’s trying to steal. Wouldn’t you want to know?”

May concedes the point with only the subtlest change in expression. Coulson nods curtly and pulls out his phone, stepping into the hall.
Oh – he meant like, *now.* Okay. Wow. Captain America is coming here,” Skye babbles, a cross between nervous and excited.

Lukas is possessed of excellent hearing. So he catches the dark-haired man's whisper to Agent May. “Calling him in will be just a waste of time. We need to focus on finding that base. Coulson’s indulging his hero worship again.”

May narrows her eyes. “That’s not the reason he’s bringing the Captain in and you know it, Ward. He thinks it’ll help.”

Ward’s eyes flash but he doesn’t argue again. Coulson steps back in the room. He pauses and holds a hand to his ear. Lukas can just see a little plastic device. His expression is intent, as if he is listening to something. A miniature cell phone? Why does he need two?

“It’s Intel Analysis,” he tells Agent May. “They say they’ve got –”

Coulson freezes. His face goes blank and still. Finally, he makes a noise of assent and taps the device in his ear twice.

“What is it?” May demands.

“They traced one of Raina’s phone calls. The number we got for her in the last sting. Apparently, she must not know we tracked it to her. She’s still using it.” Coulson crosses to the table and leans on it heavily. “She made a call, about twenty minutes ago.”

His gaze settles on Lukas, blue eyes cold as a glacier. And Lukas would know. He swallows very discreetly.

“A call to a phone registered to one Lukas Eld.”

All eyes swivel to him.

Ah.
“The subject has been selected. The results are as I hoped. Agent Carter agreed with my assessment.”

[rustle of cloth, sound of papers shifting]

“Some of my research assistants have expressed concern that the subject is not strong enough to survive the metamorphosis, given his medical history and weakened immune system, low weight, and evidence of past malnutrition.”

“I disagree. The transformation is not entirely dependent on physical strength. If it were so, another subject would have been selected. Strength of will is the more important quality. The subject possesses this determination and mental fortitude in spades.”

[pauses, continues in a quieter voice]

“He will do well. The boy is kind.”

[throat clears]

“The serum is almost ready. The General asks for updates daily, and is still irritated that I will not
commit the chemical formula or synthesis protocol to paper. He does not understand – the implications of such a manual, if it were stolen by an enemy... It is safer in my mind. I fled one regime that would misuse my scientific breakthroughs for the purposes of death and destruction. This American military has not yet shown an inclination for such measures... but I fear that is only a matter of time.

I have learned mistrust. The colors of a flag may change, but the humans who serve under it are everywhere the same.”

[footsteps echo off a hard surface, male voice speaks]

“Doc, your lab rats are tweaking my dials again. How many times do I gotta threaten to detonate their Oldsmobiles before they keep their mitts off?”

[audible sigh]

“Howard, I am busy. Could you not wait a moment?”

“This ain’t no joke! They’re in cahoots with the General. He’s tryin’ to get rid of me. I’ll show them – if anyone’s gonna bail outta sheer annoyance, it ain’t gonna be me.”

“Alright, alright. I will go speak with them.”

[chair screeches along the floor]

“Loosen up a bit, Doc. You could stand ta take a break anyhow. The Chrysalis is nearly ready. We’re gonna put on a real show next week. You’ll see.”

“I dearly hope you are right, Howard.”

[click of a button, silence]
Steve looks from the bowl, to Clint, to Natasha, and back to the bowl. “But... there’s a salad in here. There’s a salad in my soup.”

Clint waves an oversized spoon at him. “It’s not a salad. It’s just some greens. They’re supposed to be there. It’s – it’s – what is this, Nat?”

“Vietnamese,” she answers, tossing the last of a spring roll in her mouth. Clint shoots her a look and she adds, “You wouldn’t be able to pronounce the name of it anyway.”

Her partner waves vaguely. “Yeah, yeah. Sure. It’s Vietnamese. Eat it, Cap. I swear it’s good. I always go to this place right before I leave on a mission.”

Natasha raises a brow. “Aren’t you going to Southeast Asia?”

“This is better. What? I never said it was completely authentic. Just better. Americanized ethnic food is the best. There, I said it. I’m from the Midwest, give me a break. We put ranch on everything.”

Steve gives the broth swimming with leaves another dubious look, but relents. After chewing for an inordinately long time, just to make Clint huff and growl, he cocks his head in mock thoughtfulness. “Hmm. Pretty tasty, I guess.”

“Told ya.” Clint breaks out in a winning smile.
Natasha snorts. “Yeah, I bet. This coming from the guy who's probably used to military rations. What they'd give you to eat during the war? Cans of SPAM?”

Clint shoots him a quick glance from the corner of his eye. Most likely to check if he’s offended, or upset, if the mention of the war ruffled all his feathers.

On the contrary, Steve’s almost relieved. Since he woke up, everything’s been about the war. S.H.I.E.L.D. recruits clumsily salute him, thanking him for his service with a handshake. The few people who either recognize him on sight, or have been introduced, all government employees or soldiers of some sort, stare and whisper and make pitying noises about what a trauma he must have had. He’s been lauded for heroism and patriotism and goddamned martyrdom.

And the whole time, he wanted to scream at them all – “That’s not why I did it! That’s not what it was like! I’m not who you think I am!”

He didn’t try so hard to enlist to become a hero or a martyr. It wasn’t some holy higher calling to defend the principles of democracy. He just wanted to do the right thing. No one should be forced to live under a dictator. And yes, he felt he had a duty to his country - but also to the men fighting for it. Men he knew. Men he’d grown up with, men who weren’t quite men, but hadn’t been boys since they were issued their uniforms. And to the women, to the nurses on the front and the workers and engineers in the factories at home.

It’d hit him hard, being declared unfit, over and over. Especially after Bucky had gotten shipped off the first time. Everyone else was doing their part and he just – hated – being useless. It burned in his gut, that helplessness, thinking of Bucky somewhere on the front lines while he reclined on the threadbare couch in their apartment. He’d jumped at the chance Dr. Erskine offered him. He was tired; he was bone-weary, of being a 4F, as he’d been for all his life, letting others pick up the slack for him. He’d tried to explain to Bucky once, during a quiet moment in the French countryside. Bucky’d only looked at him, brow furrowed with disappointment or confusion, and he hadn’t had the heart to go on.

Here and now, they all wanted talk about the war and his part in the glorious victory. It’s distant for them, a dusty history; his service and sacrifice has an odd sheen of hallowed reverence, like a well-preserved relic in a silent museum. But no one stops to listen to what he actually has to say about it. His words don’t fit in their narrative.

Natasha’s the only one who’ll bring up the war and actually wanna know what he was thinking, what he was eating, for Pete’s sake. She’s asked about his team. What they did in the downtime between Commando missions. Never pressuring, just light and curious.
And it hurts, course it does, to think about ‘em. But he’s found he likes telling their stories. It’s when he realizes he still remembers the mischievous tilt of Dernier’s lips, Dum Dum’s donkey laugh, Gabe’s earnest voice. The precise shade of slate blue that colored Bucky’s eyes. Peggy’s brilliant smile. The ghost of their voices rings in his head, and even with the ache they drive deep into his chest, they’re the most welcome sounds he’s ever heard.

He meets her greenish eyes, then Clint’s brown. And he sees people that wanna know him, not Captain America. They’re eating strange Vietnamese food with Steve Rogers, not the dancing monkey.

His smile forms unbidden. “Hell, no, we didn’t eat SPAM from a can. Worse than that. We were lucky to get K rations. I swear one time, in this ole bombed out apartment building in Austria, we were reduced to trapping rats with our hands just to get a scrap of meat.”

Clint hoots and hollers his amusement. They while away the rest of the surprisingly filling meal with increasingly disgusting tales of things they’ve ingested. The waitress refills their water once and then gives them a wide berth. Steve chokes on his last slurp of broth.

“But they’re all white and squirmy –”

“Maggots are a protein source, man,” Clint says with a shrug.

His phone rings shrill and Steve fumbles with the sensitive screen in an attempt to answer it. The corner of the glass had cracked the other day when he’d forgotten his strength and the insubstantial weight of the device and tossed it, aiming for the couch cushions but overthrowing by a large margin and giving it a good smack on the corner of his coffee table.

“Steve Rogers speaking,” he finally manages. He listens to Agent Coulson’s blunt, to-the-point summary with a mounting horror. Natasha and Clint grow still across the table.

“I’ll – I’ll catch the next train down. Oh. Or… yes, sure, that’s fine. I’ll head there. Give me an hour.” He hangs up and feels the urge to toss the phone again, preferably this time through a plate glass window.

“Steve? What is it?” Clint asks urgently.
“Agent Coulson,” he answers slowly. “Calling with some bad news. One of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s doctors has been kidnapped.” He forestalls Clint’s open mouth by continuing. “One of the doctors who’s familiar with the serum. My serum. They think someone’s trying to recreate it.”

“Who?” Natasha asks, her face settling into a composed, professional mask.

“Don’t know. Never heard of them. Called Centipede. But I got the impression they ain’t the type to publish their findings in a medical journal.”

More people are going to die for the secret he carries in his blood. Dr. Erskine died for it. This doctor was kidnapped. Countless other people throughout the years chased the serum and were hurt for it, of that he has no doubt. Some days, it just doesn’t seem worth it. He doesn’t seem worth it.

“I’m sorry – I have to go. I have to get to D.C.”

Clint shakes his head. “Naw, don’t worry ‘bout it. Go down there and bash some skulls. Find this doctor.” Steve stands and Clint sticks out a hand in a most uncharacteristic farewell. He blinks and takes it.

“You got this, Cap. See ya when I get back.” That’s all he says, and oddly enough, Steve feels warmer for it. Simple, but he can tell Clint means it.

“I’ll call in, talk to Coulson. See if there’s anything we can do to help,” Natasha offers. Steve gives her a grateful smile.

“And don’t worry! This place is my good luck charm before a mission!” Clint calls after him.

After stopping by his apartment and stuffing his uniform and clothes into a duffel, he jogs to the S.H.I.E.L.D. administrative building in Midtown. The high-rise has a helipad on the roof, and Agent Coulson has arranged a helo to come ferry him to D.C. The shield is slung over his back, sheathed in canvas, slapping at him with every stride. The agency keeps a few of his uniforms around their operation staging areas, but he always has one stashed in his closet just in case he needs it in a fix.
And he refuses to part with his shield. Most of the agency seems to think it needs to be placed on a marble pedestal surrounded by spotlights and a thick glass case. It’s one of a kind, sure, but it’s a tool. Meant to be used, not spit-shined. It’d stayed with him under the ice for seventy-five years, the shield could hack it underneath his bed gathering dust bunnies.

They might as well stuff him in a glass case too if they’re gonna fuss about the shield.

Steve swings in through the front door, and hangs a left as he makes a beeline for the reception desk. He’s not sure of the protocol – can he just walk up to the helipad? But he’s in a big enough hurry that he just steps up and says, bold as brass, “Hello. I’m Captain America. Can I go up to your roof?”

The older woman behind the desk gives him a bland stare behind narrow bifocals. “Sure, hon. Go right ahead.”

Steve nearly goes to thank her and step away before it dawns on him she’s being sarcastic. The receptionist returns to her paperback, muttering, “Cause we just let any ole Tom Dick and Harry off the street who claim they’re Captain America into our secure building. Yeah.” She snorts and shakes her head.

“Um. But – I’m supposed to catch a rotor- I mean, a helicopter. They’re sending one for me. I have to get to D.C.” He knows he’s not explaining this clearly, but he’s not used to having to convince someone he’s Captain America. It’s thrown him off, and he’s still buzzing with the urgency of Coulson’s call and the thought of another enemy, of them hurting this doctor to get to him.

The woman doesn’t look up. “There’s a bus station down the street.”

“No, really, I’m Captain America. Steve Rogers.” He’s fumbling. “Steven Grant Rogers.”

She peers up at him. An idea dawns on him and he wants to give himself a good smack upside the head. He unstraps the canvas sheath from his back and pulls open the flap to reveal the characteristic colored bands of vibranium.

“I really do need to get up to your roof. Agent Coulson’s sending a helo for me,” Steve says politely.
The woman is suddenly flustered. “Oh – I – Captain, I’m sorry, we weren’t told you were coming —”

“It’s alright,” he replies, because she’s just doing her job. “It’s all very last minute.”

The receptionist dials someone up on her telephone – or at least, Steve assumes that’s what she’s doing when she starts speaking into a slim black headset. She waves him over to an elevator, but points out a nondescript grey door when he says he’d rather take the stairs. He needs to work off some energy before climbing in the transport.

He wonders if she’s really seen Captain America impersonators before. Not many people know he’d been recovered from the ice. S.H.I.E.L.D. plays their cards close to the chest.

Besides, his heyday was seven decades ago. He’d heard the comics had gone on, after he’d been declared KIA, but surely he’d slipped from the public consciousness already. The thought of the fame and attention and scrutiny returning makes him nauseous. Likely, he’s overthinking this. No one outside of the military cares much about his service record.

He resolves to ask Coulson about it. With any luck, the agent will set him straight, and tell him it’s all in his head.
Not quite to the action - I know this is a slow buildup, hope you bear with me. There's lots of setup for this to make sense. Promise there's some excitement to come. Xoxo, y'all.

Five thousand four hundred and thirty seventh cycle of Odin Borsson's reign

Still in East-of-Ragnar’s-Fjord – there is no moon this night, the sky is full black, but judging by Thor’s snoring it must be very late

I do not wish to stay in this backwater village much longer.

It is not... the trip has been diverting, to be sure. I have learned much of Midgard that I could not have read in the library. But I –

It is not that I am averse to the attention of the mortals.

I only –
It is only that they stare like they are waiting for me to do something. They look at me like they are expecting to see the tricks of a well-trained dog, or the snap and bite of a rabid one. They do not stare at Thor with such strange expressions. I thought they wanted to see a display of seidr, but when I conjured an emerald flame in my palm, they scurried away. I do not know what to make of them.

I am afraid they do not like me. I shouldn’t care for their opinion – they are only mortals. I am a prince. But it is frustrating. I do not understand what I have done wrong.

Thor – never mind.

Sometimes, I eavesdrop on the mortals. It is the most effective method to find out what they’re thinking, after all. They call me Sly One. Fire Bringer. Seidmadr. Not Odinsson, nor Prince.

Perhaps they call me such because - well. Mortals have a curious tendency to avoid using true names. They show greater sense than some Æsir in that, at least. Names have power, Mother told me so. She frowns when she hears any in the palace call me Trickster. She repeats my full name like a prayer afterwards. Loki Odinsson, Loki Odinsson.

Oftentimes, she does not make any sense. But it is alright. I love her because she is sweet and kind and my mother. She doesn’t always choose Thor over me like everyone else.

Loki Odinsson, Prince of Asgard.

Also – Thor keeps calling me Goat-Lover. Simply because I am advocating on behalf of beasts that cannot speak up in their own defense! He’s a simpleton and could not come up with a better insult. Regardless, I do not think I shall take that name as one of my kennings.
“Mr. Eld, would you care to explain the phone call you received from a certain known Centipede employee?” Coulson’s tone is menacing in its blandness.

Eld’s shrug is unaffected. “Well, I am in the business of consulting.”

“Consulting?” May repeats tersely.

“Why yes, did I not mention?” Lukas grins sharply. “The lady offered me a position. The benefits are quite lucrative. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s consultant pay is a pittance in comparison.” He waves an elegant, long-fingered hand in a gesture encompassing the room. “Someone should probably send a memo about that.”

Fitz sucks in a sharp breath, and hears Jemma at his side do the same. He can’t believe it. Eld had been in their lab, teasing and joking with them, and the whole time he was planning on selling them out to Centipede? What kind of person could even do that? Could keep not only a straight face, but a friendly attitude with them? That kind of cognitive dissonance made Fitz’s head spin.

Maybe as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent he shouldn’t have been caught off guard. Maybe he should be paranoid, or constantly vigilant or whatever. But for all S.H.I.E.L.D. is a spy agency, Fitz doesn’t think about himself that way. Most of his work – at least on the surface – has nothing to do with actual infiltration or espionage.

“You’re working for Centipede,” Agent Coulson says flatly. He is tensed; hand in a position to grab his gun. Fitz sees May ready her stance, subtly shifting her weight. Ward’s body is straining forward in his seat, every line tense.

“Of course not,” Lukas waves him off. “I did say offered, didn’t I? S.H.I.E.L.D. approached me first – and here we are.”

“What, that’s your employment strategy? First come, first serve? And what if the first happens to
be a criminal organization with allowances in their budget for kidnapping and interrogation?”
Roberts snaps. The woman looks personally offended. She did bring him in, Fitz concedes. She has
the right to feel a little betrayed.

Eld’s green eyes glint. “Illegal activity did not come up in our initial conversation, believe it or not.
Her sales pitch was infinitely more subtle.” He laces his long fingers together. “But during that
very same conversation… I may have led her to the conclusion I was considering her offer.” His
teeth are blindingly white when he smiles. “The communication you intercepted was a
renegotiation of my demands.”

“I see. And what demands were those?” Coulson inquires, deceptively mild.

“Hmm… let’s see.” Lukas starts ticking off items on his fingers. “A flat rate of one thousand
dollars for every consultation, in addition to my hourly rate of three hundred and fifty. A diamond
Rolex engraved with the words To my dearest Roseanne. A case of the most exquisite brand of
Russian vodka I tried once on a sojourn to Eastern Europe.” He frowns in contemplation before
snapping his fingers. “Oh, yes, and a Starbucks Gold Card.”

Fitz stares at him. The guy hadn’t seemed barmy when they brought him in. But he’s completely
nonchalant and unbothered by discussing his – his fraternization with the enemy, or whatever. He’s
not sure what to call this.

Skye’s brown eyes are wide. “Damn! What kind of consulting do you do, exactly? I thought you
were some kinda stuffy historian.”

“I have many talents, my lady Skye,” Lukas demurs. “Beyond my expertise in my chosen academic
field, I am rather skilled in oration. A silver tongue, you could say.” Fitz rolls his eyes at the silky
tone of voice he uses to deliver innuendo. The guy gets ousted as a spy once and thinks he’s the
next Double-Oh-Seven.

Skye can’t suppress a snort, and wait, are her eyes actually twinkling? Coulson shoots her a stern
glare. Fitz is almost impressed with the guy’s nerve to try and butter up their agents while
explaining how he double-crossed them. He notices Simmons blushing, though Roberts and May
are stony and unimpressed.

“Well, how fantastic for you, getting two paychecks. If we hadn’t caught this communication,
would you have ever clued us in?” Roberts demands. “Or would you have let us walk right into a
Centipede trap?”
“I had thought you’d be pleased. After all, I believe I’ve just confirmed the location of your ring for you.”

“You’re sure Centipede has the ring?”

“Yes. I suspected as much when she first approached me, and thought it prudent to allow her to believe I was interested in her offer. Once I could confirm she was in possession of the ring, I could inform S.H.I.E.L.D. and arrange for it to be confiscated.”

The explanation is logical enough, Fitz thinks. But that’s definitely not the way S.H.I.E.L.D. likes to operate. Coulson’s hard exterior doesn’t so much as flicker. “That’s a convenient way to spin the story,” he says.

“When did Raina approach you?” Roberts asks, clipped and serious.

“Yesterday, after I left this office. I did not know who she was, nor did I have any inclination who she worked for.” Eld spreads his hands wide. “I knew not of Centipede. Obviously I was suspicious, to be approached by two organizations in as many weeks. My academic expertise is quite narrow. I concluded she was after much the same information as you – regarding the ring.”

“Why didn’t you tell us right away?” Roberts demands.

“She did not ask me to do anything illegal, nor to report on S.H.I.E.L.D. She simply warned me away from working with you and presented a counteroffer. And she then cautioned me of your agency’s history of deceit.” Eld purses his lips. “To be perfectly honest, I needed time to ruminate over my choice. I do not know you, any of you, very well. I know not your methods, your organization’s goals or desires.”

“Put in the simplest terms, I was given two opportunities to consult on much the same subject, yet one paid much higher than the other. Can you blame me for giving the choice due consideration?” Eld implores.

Fitz does have to admit S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t exactly have a time-and-a-half policy or anything. He could kind of see Eld’s reasoning. Suddenly curious, he blurts, “What made you change your mind? I mean, why did you choose us over Raina? That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”
Eld’s gaze darts to him. His eyes are creased at the corners, lips turned down a fraction, almost troubled. When he speaks, his voice is soft. “I interviewed your Agent Morris. I saw what she and her ilk did to him. Seeing pictures of the burns wasn’t… wasn’t anything like meeting him in person.” Eld looks away, to the windows. “I knew I couldn’t work with someone who would reduce a good man to a guilt-ridden, gibbering mess. No matter the rhetoric she spouted about the dangers of working with S.H.I.E.L.D.”

Coulson is studying Eld keenly; seemingly content to let him continue his explanation. “I resolved to speak to you, Agent Coulson, after we’d left the facility where Agent Morris is being held. His description of the woman fit the one I had met much too closely to be coincidence. But what with the search for the doctors, I didn’t want to interrupt… and I do not have any information on the missing woman’s whereabouts or a potential base camp in this city,” he finishes. “If it became relevant, I would have informed you. As it was, I didn’t want to give you cause to mistrust me or shun my assistance when you most need it.”

“That didn’t quite work out the way you planned,” Roberts deadpans.

The consultant gives her a wry smile. “The circumstances do cast my hesitance in a terribly suspicious light.” He shakes his head. “I regret letting her words influence my opinion of your agency. She is… most convincing.”

“That is her specialty,” Fitz points out. “Raina can twist anything to her advantage.”

Eld tilts his chin and his gaze downwards. “Like my inexperience. And my reservations about working for a foreign government agency.”

Coulson glances between the two of them. Fitz knows he understands Raina best out of all of them, and he can see the agreement in his expression. The supervisory agent folds his arms across his chest and sighs. “I don’t blame you for not trusting us right off the bat.”

“Sir –”

He waves Agent Roberts down. She subsides with a grumble. “You’re not an agent, and you’re barely a consultant. Usually, we ease our consultants in, get them used to working with S.H.I.E.L.D. I didn’t expect this to turn into a top priority situation. But we’re the good guys here. Raina doesn’t care if she hurts people in pursuit of her goals. We care about protecting them. That’s the distinction you need to remember.”
Eld is no longer disaffected or nonchalant. He nods, and his expression is clear and earnest when
he meets Coulson’s searching gaze unblinkingly. “What did Raina say in her call? What did she say
exactly?” Coulson asks.

“She wanted to meet to finalize our agreement,” Eld answers immediately. “She said she would
contact me later with an address and a time.” The consultant frowns, looking suddenly uncertain.
“You don’t think… that she’ll have Dr. Flagretti there?”

Coulson and May exchange meaningful looks. As always, Fitz gets the feeling they’re
communicating telepathically. “I don’t know,” Coulson admits. “It’s possible. Or she’ll want to
meet in a public place instead of their base.”

Eld adjusts in his chair, spine ramrod straight. Fitz had forgotten how tall the man is. “I want to go
to the meeting,” he announces. “I want to go and see if I can convince her to let slip some
information on the doctor’s location.”

“You’re not a field agent,” Ward reiterates. “You’ve barely clocked twenty-four hours as a
consultant. We can’t just send you out undercover.”

Eld appeals to Coulson. “She wants my expertise. I can convince her to show me the ring so I may
examine it. I could confirm beyond a doubt its authenticity and that it is in her possession at the
very least, even if I cannot glean any knowledge of Dr. Flagretti’s whereabouts.”

Fitz can tell Coulson is wavering. Such an opportunity comes about very rarely. The agency hasn’t
had any luck infiltrating Centipede so far, not that they’d tried very hard. At first, Centipede hadn’t
warranted the manpower or focus. Other threats were dominating S.H.I.E.L.D.’s time. Now that
they posed a real danger, the agency didn’t have much to go on.

“It is only a quick meeting to renegotiate my contract. I will not be in any undue danger. She is
confident I mean to accept – her terms, after all, are infinitely more appealing than S.H.I.E.L.D.’s.
From a solely rational perspective, at least,” Eld presses.

“You’d have to be outfitted with a camera and mic,” Coulson says slowly.

Fitz perks up. “I’ve got just the little beauty down in the lab! I’ve been fiddling around with the
standard button camera. Instead of just linking up with a processor and monitor back here at the
base and transmitting video, I’ve created a program to help analyze the visual data it receives in real-time. It’s got facial recognition, an infrared filter, a lip-reading function for conversations too far away to hear –”

“Does it have a mic?” May interrupts.

Fitz is almost offended. “Of course. Do I look like I was born yesterday?”

Ward opens his mouth and Coulson waves him off. “Don’t answer that.” Fitz dares a quick glare in the grim field agent’s direction. The program would be effective, integrated with the video and sound functions of the button cam as it was. It hadn’t taken long to compile the code. Really, it had been a side project he’d fiddled with to help him think about larger and more important ones. The end result was useful, so he’d kept it.

Coulson leans across the table. “And how do we know you’re not going to just turn around and tell Raina all you heard here? Divulge everything S.H.I.E.L.D. told you?”

Eld doesn’t flinch. “What would be the point? You know that her organization approached me. There is no veil of secrecy to protect me now if I chose to accept her offer. And I have no wish to spend the rest of my life hiding from your scrutiny. “

He shrugs. “And even if I did momentarily lose my wits and decide to tell-all, what do I know that she does not already? That she most likely has the ring, yes. I’m sure that won’t be a revelation to her. I have theories regarding its abilities, which she has obviously puzzled out already. I know that she has used it on at least one member of S.H.I.E.L.D., an agent which she deemed unimportant enough to release instead of kill. I know these details, and I know you are aware of them as well – that is all. We also have suspicions of her future plans. If the woman has any measure of intellect, she will operate under the assumption S.H.I.E.L.D. already has some inkling. You approached me first, after all.”

Even though Coulson pulls May, Ward, and Roberts into a whispered discussion in the corner, Fitz knows he’ll end up agreeing. Time is too short, and the risks are too great to let this chance slide by.

He turns from their impromptu conference. None of the other agents look pleased, but that might be just the default expression drilled into every field agent in the Academy. “Fine,” Coulson says shortly. “We’ll send you in.”
Eld inclines his head. “Thank you.”

“But don’t think for one second that’s the end of this conversation. You can’t just go around the chain of command and not expect consequences. That’s not how S.H.I.E.L.D. works, and we hold our consultants to the same standards as our agents.”

Fitz thinks of Tony Stark and then wisely decides not to comment. Coulson shoos them all out of the conference room, on the phone again barking out orders to prepare the roof helipad. Fitz leads Eld back down to the lab, where his little pet project is waiting, discarded and partially dismantled in a corner of the bench that runs along the far wall.

Roberts trails after, powerfully irritated and not afraid of showing it. Fitz has never seen the typically laidback agent so ill-tempered, not even when Brock ate all the yogurts she’d brought for lunch to last her the week, despite the label done up in thick black permanent marker – ‘this is Brenna’s DO NOT EAT or i will eviscerate you- and i mean YOU BROCK.’ It had taken six yogurt lids across to fit the message in its entirety. Brenna had seen him eating them, stared for a minute, then shrugged and left. The next week, pictures of Brock dressed up as Director Fury with a beer bong in his mouth at an unsanctioned Halloween party had circulated throughout S.H.I.E.L.D.’s email directory. A pale, stricken Brock had been summoned to the Triskelion, then been sent on an ‘official’ mission to the middle of the desert to monitor the sky every night for signs of swirling lights.

An obvious load of rubbish, but Fitz finds it hard to summon any sympathy. The man is absolutely boorish. Fitz suppresses a giggle as he remembers he still has that photo assigned to Brock's contact info in his email account. Roberts is laidback, sure - but she's no pushover.

He works quickly to reassemble the cam. The silence is thick and awkward until Eld breaks it. “I hope you know… it was not my intention to deceive you.”

“No? Well you did a damn good job of it,” Roberts snaps.

“My reticence was perhaps ill-advised but surely you can understand that I needed time with which to consider—”

“You know,” Fitz breaks in. “I do understand it.” Maybe not the ill-advised reticence or whichever euphemism he uses to describe it. But last time he checked, being self-interested isn’t a crime. Fitz is aware enough of the allure of money – damned if it wouldn’t be nice to pay off the loans he’s accrued due to the absurd cost of American university – and it’s not like Eld’s an agent; he hasn’t sworn an oath. Other than the NDA, if that counts. And he hadn’t actually done anything yet, only
thought about it. Jemma has always been the more levelheaded of their lab-slash-friend-slash-life partnership – he has a hard time defining what’s between them – but even Fitz thinks the field agents are overreacting. It might have something to do with being caught flat-footed by Intel Analysis digging up dirt on their own consultant.

“And that’s not what I’m upset about,” he says. Eld looks at him, wary and puzzled. “Come on,” Fitz prompts with irritation. “You haven’t even apologized. In all that explaining you did, there wasn’t a single apology.”

Eld pauses, mouth open to retort. He shuts it again. Fitz watches him stop and start two more times before he observes dryly, “You’re not used to apologies, are you?”

He clears his throat. “I – don’t make a habit of giving them.”

“Hm.” Fitz turns back to the button cam and waits. A few minutes pass before Eld speaks up again.

“I am – not sorry for meeting with her. Or considering her offer.” Fitz turns to shoot him an incredulous glance. Eld twists his fingers together. “But – for what it’s worth… I regret you were affected by my well-intentioned omission.”

Fitz sighs. “I have a feeling that’s the best I’m gonna get. Okay. Fine. I forgive you.”

Eld stares at him. “I did not ask for your forgiveness.”

“Well, you’ve explained yourself and apologized. So you’ve got it.”

His expression turns from blankly surprised to something akin to condescending pity. “Don’t look at me like that,” Fitz snips. “I’m a reasonable guy. You didn’t hurt any of us, and like I said, you explained yourself and apologized. Sort of,” he snorts. “And you’re going in undercover, risking your own safety to help us find Dr. Flagretti. So, between you and me, things are clear. We’re good.”

Eld frowns suspiciously at him but does not reject Fitz’s statement. Roberts studies him with thoughtful consideration. She crosses her arms over her chest. “Well, I won’t be as quick to forgive, but I do see his point. You’re working to make up for it, at least.”
From Eld’s expression, it’s plain he thinks the two of them are bizarre. “I thought you were supposed to be covert agents. You must know it is not wise to extend such premature forgiveness before I have even completed this task.”

“Are you trying to convince us to hold a grudge?” Fitz asks in bewilderment. Lukas Eld is undoubtedly a contrary character.

“Well – no. I suppose not.” Eld clears his throat and looks away. “Simply a bit of friendly advice.” Fitz hides a smile and bends over to finish reassembling his button cam. He isn’t about to take a leap of faith for the slippery bloke anytime soon, but depending on how this meeting goes, they might have a lead on Dr. Flagretti’s location. That’s enough for now.
Excerpt from Skáldskaparmal of the Prose Edda by Snorri Sturlson, c. early 13th century

For what reason is gold called Otter's Wergild? It is related that when certain of the Æsir, Odin and Loki and Hœnir, went forth to explore the earth, they came to a certain river, and proceeded along the river to a waterfall. And beside the fall was an otter, which had taken a salmon from the fall and was eating, blinking his eyes the while.

Then Loki took up a stone and cast it at the otter, and struck its head. And Loki boasted in his catch, that he had got otter and salmon with one blow. Then they took up the salmon and the otter and bore them along with them, and coming to the buildings of a certain farm, they went in.

Now the husbandman who dwelt there was named Hreidmarr: he was a man of much substance, and very skilled in black magic. The Æsir asked him for a night's lodging, saying that they had sufficient food with them, and showed him their catch. But when Hreidmarr saw the otter, straight way he called to him his sons, Fáfnir and Reginn, and told them that the otter their brother was slain, and who had done that deed.

Now father and sons went up to the Æsir, seized them, bound them, and told them about the otter, how he was Hreidmarr's son. The Æsir offered a ransom for their lives, as much wealth as Hreidmarr himself desired to appoint; and a covenant was made between them on those terms, and
confirmed with oaths. Then the otter was flayed, and Hreidmarr, taking the otter-skin, bade them fill the skin with red gold and also cover it altogether; and that should be the condition of the covenant between them.

Thereupon Odin sent Loki into the Land of the Black Elves, and he came to the dwarf who is called Andvari, who was as a fish in the water. Loki caught him in his hands and required of him in ransom of his life all the gold that he had in his rock; and when they came within the rock, the dwarf brought forth all the gold he had, and it was very much wealth.

Then the dwarf quickly swept under his hand one little gold ring, but Loki saw it and commanded him to give over the ring. The dwarf prayed him not to take the ring from him, saying that from this ring he could multiply wealth for himself if he might keep it. Loki answered that he should not have one penny left, and took the ring from him and went out; but the dwarf declared that that ring should be the ruin of every one who should come into possession of it. Loki replied that this seemed well enough to him, and that this condition should hold good provided that he himself brought it to the ears of them that should receive the ring and the curse.

He went his way and came to Hreidmarr's dwelling, and showed the gold to Odin; but when Odin saw the ring, it seemed fair to him, and he took it away from the treasure, and paid the gold to Hreidmarr. Then Hreidmarr filled the otter-skin as much as he could, and set it up when it was full. Next Odin went up, having the skin to cover with gold, and he bade Hreidmarr look whether the skin were yet altogether hidden. But Hreidmarr looked at it searchingly, and saw one of the hairs of the snout, and commanded that this be covered, else their covenant should be at an end. Then Odin drew out the ring, and covered the hair, saying that they were now delivered from their debt for the slaying of the otter.

But when Odin had taken his spear, and Loki his shoes, and they had no longer any need to be afraid, then Loki declared that the curse which Andvari had uttered should be fulfilled: that this ring and this gold should be the destruction of him who received it; and that was fulfilled afterward. Now it has been told wherefore gold is called Otter's Wergild, or Forced Payment of the Æsir, or Metal of Strife.
Lukas resists the urge to fiddle with the minuscule device that had been installed in one of his buttons and hastily replaced on his suit jacket. The technology is astonishingly compact. He really should cease being surprised by mortal ingenuity. Underestimating them is not wise, if S.H.I.E.L.D.’s untimely discovery of his association with Raina has taught him anything. His cell phone is not as innocuous as he was led to believe. Coulson’s organization is somehow able to trace the threads of his previous communications. To be caught out in such a manner… needlessly sloppy.

Given the treacherousness of his cell, Lukas must remain cautious while bearing this scrying device on his jacket. He has much practice with subterfuge, but the thought of remote observers unsettles him. He prefers to judge the success of his ruse from facial expression and demeanor, and adjust the layers of his deception accordingly.

Nevertheless, Lukas can weave a compelling story. S.H.I.E.L.D. is the audience, he is the protagonist, and he’s conveniently cast Raina into the role of villain.

He knocks on the door and allows it to begin.

The echo thrown by the metal reverberates through the tidy alley. 409 Jacqueline Street happens to be in an industrial section of town, surrounded by brick factories and cavernous warehouses. Roberts had called up several images of the area once he pretended to receive a message with the location and time of their meeting. She’d muttered something about gentrification and told him the neighborhood would likely be quiet before the bars closed.

The agent still wouldn’t look him in the eye. Lukas brushes off the tiny prick of guilt he feels at that. Thinking of Roberts only reminds him of that presumptuous Midgardian mage – scientist, the scientist. Deigning to hand out his forgiveness, as if Lukas has any need of a mortal’s pardon. And if it is truly given out so easily, like a worthless trinket, then why would Lukas want it? He has never understood the inclination. The trusting fool.

Forgiving him. The mortal has no inkling whom he so carelessly absolves.

The door cracks open and a bar of light falls across Lukas’s features. The man in front of him is cast in shadow, but he grunts what appears to be a wordless question.
“I am here to see Raina,” Lukas offers. “We had an appointment.”

The door shuts in his face. He fights down a rush of irritation at the petty tactic, and waits to be admitted. Idly, he wonders about Raina’s employer. Has he provided the men and these premises, or has Raina arranged all of this? He resolves to glean some insight during their meeting – such information could reveal much about the influence Raina wields and the nature of their relationship.

Raina’s subordinate returns. “She’s down the hall. Waitin’ for you,” he says shortly, holding the door to allow Lukas to enter.

“Splendid,” Lukas replies, as the man ushers him down the hall, standing a few inches too close for comfort. “My thanks for the personal escort. I certainly would have trouble finding her myself.”

The man doesn’t appear to detect any sarcasm. Sarcasm – what a wonderful mortal term. He’d practiced such subtle verbal mockery for centuries, elevated it to an art form, in his opinion, yet had never had a proper name for it. Modern humans are apparently enamored of the concept. He’d love to see the reactions of – of some of the Æsir – to their use of sarcasm in casual conversation.

The man eyes him sidelong, then snorts. “I can see why she likes you. You talk all elegant and shit.”

“Keen of you to pick up on that. In fact, my résumé lists ‘elegant and shit’ as one of my special skills.” This rather more overt sarcasm garners a glare from the man. At least he isn’t completely dim-witted.

Lukas is shown into a parlor that is considerably more comfortable than the blank stone hall it opens off of. Raina reclines in a stiff ebony chair with a pale blue brocade cushion, embroidered with silver thread. There is an identical chair across from her.

She stands at his entrance and slinks forward, her graceful form encased in a high-collared, black silk dress. “Mr. Eld. I’m very pleased you could make it this evening.”

Lukas extends his hand and she grasps it firmly. “Likewise.” He nearly refers to her with the formal Asgardian greeting of my lady, but cuts himself off, unsure how she would receive the gesture or if she would remark upon his use of it. “Ms. Raina.” She has declined to provide a patronymic, so he must leave it at that.
“Have a seat.” She waves a hand to the uncommonly luxurious seating – uncommon by Midgardian standards, at least, from what he’s seen thus far.

He lowers himself onto the cushion. Raina pours from a decanter of bloodred wine into a crystal glass. “I’ve been saving this one,” she says in a conspiratorial undertone. “Waiting for the right person to share it with. Someone with an appreciation for the patience and care needed to age a fine wine, and the capacity to grasp the subtleties of the flavors.”

Lukas accepts the glass with a nod and gives her the response she’s looking for. “Each bottle is irreplaceable, is it not, as the conditions that gave rise to the bottle are irreproducible. The composition can never be exactly identical, even in the same batch. That knowledge lends something beautiful and bittersweet to the taste, don’t you agree?”

Raina’s smile unfurls slowly and sincerely. “That is my belief too, and said much more eloquently than I could have.”

They both sip from their glasses. The wine has a pleasing, full-bodied taste. He catches an errant drop with his tongue and notices her follow the movement with her eyes. Lukas cannot decide if she allowed herself to be caught watching for his benefit, or if it was truly a slip. It could serve Raina’s purposes if she convinces him that she’s swayed by allure or admiration, potentially buoying him with false confidence into making a misstep.

Or perhaps he’s overthinking this. Nevertheless, it is better to spend too much effort picking and planning each step than to clomp all over this conversation with the delicacy of a heavily armored Æsir war-horse.

“I do not make a habit of spoiling such magnificent wine with a discussion of business matters, but I hope you will allow me this exception. I am most curious to hear of this ancient treasure you mentioned,” he prompts.

Raina savors a swallow of wine in her mouth before speaking. “Only natural,” she agrees. “I have it with me now, if you’d like to see it.”

Lukas tries not to sound too eager. “I would, if you are willing.” Raina sets down her wine. He finds another question falling from his lips. “May I ask where you acquired such an object? I would’ve thought to hear news of a significant discovery or the sale of an important artifact.”
“I assure you, it is authentic.” Lukas tries to think of another way to frame the question and determine her source. Raina speaks again before he can.

“And we will get to that, and more. But there’s something we need to take care of first. Just a formality, you understand.” Raina pulls out a flat black velvet case and opens the lid.

The Ring winks deceptively at him in the lamplight. His breath catches in his chest. *I am a fool for not expecting her to make use of her advantage.* Perhaps – if he hadn’t been so preoccupied by the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents discovering his omission –

Raina picks it up, fingers protected from its magic, now sheathed in slim black gloves. “I see that despite my secrecy, you know what this is.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. has been all aflutter over it,” he responds evenly, disguising the sudden tension he feels. Lukas is tempted to short out the tiny camera and its built-in listening device with a burst of magic. But that would be quite the tip-off to his twitchy allies back in their clandestine base. Perhaps he can play this out.

If anyone can lie with the truth, it is he.

“If you wouldn’t mind?” Raina stretches out a hand. Lukas does not let himself hesitate before resting his fingers in hers. She slides the band over his knuckles and he can’t help but stiffen as the deeply woven magic of the Ring twines itself around his chest like a strangler vine around a great oak.

“I’ve heard the sensation is rather unpleasant,” Raina offers with what is clearly meant to be a sympathetic smile, but is a shade too insincere. She pats his hand gently before releasing him. “This is no reflection on you, Mr. Eld. In fact, you’ve been refreshingly polite and well-spoken. Many of my associates in this venture are… distressingly crass.”

“I can only imagine.” Working amidst the seething underbelly of society tends not to highlight one’s more virtuous qualities.

Raina leans back in her chair and crosses one shapely leg over the other. “Now, then, Mr. Eld. Are you working with S.H.I.E.L.D.?”
He tilts his head and lets a tiny crease form between his brows as if he’s wondering if she is being deliberately obtuse. “Yes. Of course. That is how you discovered me, is it not? And part of the reason you sought to acquire my services. An inside source and all that.”

“Let me rephrase. Does Coulson know where you are now?”

“I did not tell him where I was going.” That much is quite true. He’d refused to divulge the precise location of the meet on the grounds it was irrelevant. He hadn’t liked the idea of S.H.I.E.L.D. trailing him. Better to keep his options open if he had to make use of certain talents.

“Does he suspect you’re working with us?”

“No.” *He does not suspect. He knows.* It is all in the intent. The Ring’s magic can only interpret that he means to tell the truth. He has to believe it fully, even as he sorts out the tricky justifications in his mind, he cannot let himself dwell on them. Luckily, he has extensive practice with such deceptive wordplay. A lifetime of it.

Raina’s eyes narrow. She does not seem satisfied with his response. “Did he send you to investigate me or my organization?”

This particular line of inquiry is trickier. “I am no S.H.I.E.L.D. agent,” he deflects. *A consultant only. And barely that.* Coulson had been clear on his mission before he left – confirm if Raina has the Ring, and see if he can find information on Dr. Flagretti. Lukas already knew she was in possession of the Ring, he had no need to confirm that, no matter what he said to Coulson. Dr. Flagretti, for her part, is not a member of Centipede, and thus his digging into her whereabouts does not constitute investigation of her organization itself, only their actions of late.

“I did not come here for your organization, but to learn of the Ring and other treasures you might be keeping hidden away.” *Meaning Dr. Flagretti.* The delicate scaffolding of rationalization threatens to collapse on him if he thinks on it any further. Lukas refocuses on projecting his intention to be honest in the absolute *technical* sense.

“Hmm.” Raina studies him closely. His mask is perfectly constructed. Unruffled, with the confidence of an honest man, yet with the lingering undertone of anxiety to be expected from anyone under a compulsion that could unearth their deepest secrets and concealed truths.
“Will you tell Coulson of our partnership?”

*Will, not have.* “Not unless he holds a knife to my throat.” Raina’s frame relaxes the slightest bit at his candor. Trying to convince her he is willing to die rather than betray her organization when he’s known her a scant few days would be a stretch even for as silver a tongue as his.

“Did you tell Coulson anything about me or my organization?”

"I told him of the Ring. I spoke of the legends regarding its origin and power, and I made an educated guess as to the consequences it imposes upon its bearer. I explained the meaning of the runes burned in Agent Morris’s chest. I did not speak your name, nor the name of your organization.”

Coulson already knew it was Raina who contacted him, he only confirmed it. Her identity never passed his lips. And he truly did not know of Centipede, and thus did not speak of it. S.H.I.E.L.D. already had that information as well.

“Does Coulson trust you?” she asks softly.

That, at least, Lukas can respond to without a hint of hesitance. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Our dear Agent Coulson hardly trusts even his own employees fully. A consultant, only recently acquired? He would never be so senseless as to trust me.” He lets a smirk cross his face. “Yet.”

She mirrors his expression for a moment before slipping back into her meticulously cultivated air of composure. “Do you believe you can help us decipher the Ring’s mysteries? Its potential?”

“Certainly. I have the utmost confidence my skills would be useful to you.” Raina seems gratified by his conviction.

“Of that, I have little doubt,” she replies. “One last thing.”
She leans forward, suddenly intent. Lukas feels a shiver of foreboding.

“Is Lukas Eld your real name?”

He freezes for a few heartbeats. The camera and the knowledge of a distant audience burn like a brand in his awareness. He spares a moment to wonder whether their tenuous alliance can withstand the strain of any more untruths.

Nothing for it. The Ring claws at his throat, forcing words up. He must speak if only for a chance to shape his answer to be marginally less harmful.

“I think you are not credited enough for your cleverness, my lady.” Raina’s teeth glint in a smile. “My name is Lukas Eld – in a manner of speaking.” The Ring twinges the skin of his chest, the ghost of a consequence. He continues quickly. “But I suspect the intent of your question – no, it is not the name I was given at birth. It is the name I claimed for myself when I first arrived here. I am rather fond of it, so I suppose I have adopted it as one more of my many monikers.”

Raina raises a brow, a triumphant quirk to the gesture. “Oh, you have monikers, do you?”

His own returned smile is sharp. “Yes. Several. But I am Lukas Eld now. I have left the others behind.”

“Why?” she inquires curiously.

Lukas is intensely glad the question is unspecific. “To escape my past. You strike me as one who would understand the impulse.”

Her dark eyes flicker away for a fleeting moment and he knows he has judged her correctly. Before she can pose any more questions, or pry any further into his secrets, a knock sounds at the door. Lukas doesn’t breath a sigh of relief, but he does roll his shoulders to relax the tension in his neck and upper back when Raina stands to answer the summons.

She opens the door and speaks quietly, but Lukas has hearing much sharper than any human. “What is it? I’m in the middle of something.”
“Our guest has arrived,” a man’s voice says.

“Ah.” Raina pauses. “Bring her to the basement. Prepare the chair.”

_The doctor_. Lukas is convinced. They are about to extract all she knows regarding Captain America’s gifts. He does not quite understand what Raina and her organization can glean from a healer, but he knows well the power held in blood. Any number of dark rites could be performed through such a direct conduit. He had not met the Captain before he departed S.H.I.E.L.D. to return to his hotel and prepare for this meeting, but the thought of subjecting an unknowing mortal, even one with his purported strength, to such blood magic fills him with disquiet. He could be twisted, torn apart, warped into a shade serving solely Raina’s desires.

When Raina departs to question the doctor, Lukas must tell Coulson and his team his location, and instruct them to arrive with all haste.

Raina shuts the door and saunters over to his chair. She uses one black glove to slide the Ring off his finger, and Lukas lets out a breath as the iron pressure releases his lungs, unwraps from his chest. She holds the Ring in the palm of her hand, resting on the dark fabric.

“If you will excuse me, Mr. Eld. I have other business to attend to at the moment. I’ll be back in a few hours. We can finalize our contract when I’m done. Would you like to remain here, or will you return to your hotel?” she asks solicitously.

“I’ll remain here. Surely it will be a convenience for us both to settle the matter sooner rather than later. And I do have this excellent wine to finish,” Lukas says swiftly. Nothing short of a charging bilgesnipe is getting him away from the Ring now.

“Eager, are we?” Raina lifts the palm with its golden prize.

“Such an artifact does not come round but every century,” he returns easily. _Though a century means more to you than it does me._

Raina’s lips quirk, though Lukas is not privy to the source of her levity. Perhaps it is only that her endeavors are coming together smoothly.
“You’re right, of course,” she agrees. Her gaze fastens on the Ring, then flicks to Lukas with an inquisitive expression that raises the hair on the back of his neck. “It is a marvelous artifact. So much potential.”

Lukas doesn’t respond but with a nod of his head. Where is she going with this charade? He needs to contact Coulson. He doesn’t think the device Fitz gave him was able to detect the conversation between Raina and her man at the door.

She begins to work the glove off, one finger at a time. “You know, the original purpose of this Ring was not to compel the truth, but to reveal it.” Raina bites her lip, and her eyes gleam with something like hunger. “If you know the right way to manipulate its nature…” she trails off and taps a pattern in the runes encircling the band. “You can access that initial power.”

She leans in close. “I wonder… what would it reveal about you?”

Lukas jolts upright from his chair, hand rising though he knows not what he means to do. Raina slips the Ring on her own finger in a flash of gold. She stares at him, eyes round and shocked, her lips parted wide.

“Oh,” she breathes.

His heart stutters before quickening into a gallop. Not now, he’s not ready, she can’t tell anyone his true identity, it’s not fair, she’ll ruin everything –

He’s Lukas now, he’s Lukas!

Raina steps towards him, hand outstretched to his chest. With a burst of magic, he shorts out the device hidden in the button of his jacket. Coulson and his team will not hear nor see this.

“You - what are you?” Raina whispers. Her fingertips brush the thick fabric of his suit. She prods at him like she thinks he’s an illusion.

“There’s – there’s ice in your heart.”
Lukas jerks backward, away from her touch. What does she mean? That he lacks compassion, or that – can she see the blue beneath his pale Æsir covering –

Another knock sounds at the door. “Miz Raina, our guest is ready for you.”

Raina doesn’t take her eyes off him for a drawn-out moment. Finally, she tears her gaze away, yanking the Ring off her finger in the same motion. She staggers backward, catching herself on the chair across from his.

“This – this isn’t over,” she gasps out. “I’ll be back – and I want to know everything about you. *Everything.*”

She stumbles out the door. The lock clicks. He hears her give orders to her men to guard the hall and prevent him from leaving.

He falls into the chair and rests his head in his hands.
XXIII & XXIV

XXIII

Excerpt from “Dr. Erskine’s Legacy: a summary of attempts to recreate the serum and an analysis of the threat presented if acquired by hostile individuals and/or groups” compiled by Agent Henry Morris for S.H.I.E.L.D.’s interdepartmental briefing on Captain America’s retrieval, March 9th, 2011

Johann Schmidt was not only obsessed with occult artifacts of purported ‘magical’ properties. The man was preoccupied with Dr. Abraham Erskine’s biological serum. Schmidt was in fact the first subject to receive the serum, although the dose he received was unrefined and unpredictable in its effects. After news of Captain America’s remarkable transformation, Schmidt became more determined to synthesize his own version of the serum, presumably for his burgeoning para-military force that was only just breaking away from Hitler’s regime and becoming what we now know as Hydra.

His direct subordinate, Dr. Arnim Zola, was heavily involved with Schmidt’s efforts. Zola outlined Schmidt’s plans and his involvement after arriving in America during the 1950s (see Operation Paperclip’s historical archives after EO-497 for specific details). Zola attested that Schmidt had already proceeded to human experimentation by 1943. He claimed that despite the advanced state of his research, Schmidt was unsuccessful in his attempts to recreate the serum, and when Schmidt went down in his Valkyrie along with Captain America, Hydra ceased all projects related to the serum or derivatives thereof.

Though there have been many rumors of supersoldiers over the intervening decades, inflamed by the fear-mongering of the Cold War and almost certainly embellished and entirely false (see file Codename: Winter Soldier), there is no conclusive proof Zola was incorrect in regards to Hydra’s possession of a workable serum.

Whether Schmidt succeeded or not is irrelevant – if he did, no samples of the serum survived, or all of the subjects are deceased. Hydra itself deconstructed in the wake of World War Two. Any threat posed by their attempt to recreate the serum can be considered resolved.
It is not only enemies or hostile forces that have attempted to formulate their own serum. Three years ago, a specialist in gamma radiation, Dr. Bruce Banner, conducted his own experiment into the serum’s properties...

XXIV

When Captain America ducks into the situation room, Brenna is surprised to note how young he is. It might have something to do with the innocuous blue plaid shirt and khaki pants he’s wearing.

He bears the round of slightly breathless greetings with good humor. “It’s such, such an honor to meet you,” Jemma declares as she shakes his hand. Fitz squeaks something unintelligible when it’s his turn. The Captain nods politely back at him like he understood.

The field agents as a rule are more collected, but she feels her heart start to race despite herself when Captain Rogers goes to shake her hand. “Agent Brenna Roberts,” she says, and hopes fervently her palms aren’t too sweaty. He shoots her a courteous smile. Roberts glances at May and tries to adopt her inscrutable expression.

The Captain looks a bit relieved when the introductions are through and they can get down to business. “I’d like a quick briefing, if you don’t mind. You didn’t give many details over the phone, Agent Coulson.”

Coulson calls up the images on the wallscreen and gives a brief summary of Dr. Flaggetti’s career at S.H.I.E.L.D., the circumstances of her disappearance, and the prime suspects in her kidnapping. At the Captain’s bemused expression, he decides to go back and explain Agent Morris, the compromised operations – and the magic ring, of course.
Roberts still isn’t completely convinced the ring is genuine. Listening to Coulson explain, he sounds crazier than the whackjobs who insist the moon landing was faked. Which is funny, because when Eld himself expounded on his theory, it had all seemed eminently reasonable. Even knowing Morris tentatively confirmed their speculation, Roberts finds herself growing more doubtful by the minute. Coulson has a sour look on his face when he finishes that suggests he’s fallen into the same boat.

After a beat of silence, Captain Rogers nods. “Ah… I see.” Brenna goes to facepalm but aborts the movement when she catches Coulson’s narrowed eyes.

Raina certainly believes this ring is the real – or mythological? – deal. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have bothered trying to contract Eld’s services. Not that she considers the woman much of a benchmark for rational decision-making.

She pushes down a flare of anger. It’s been stewing in her gut all afternoon, leaping to the forefront with every errant thought of the shifty consultant or the upcoming infiltration.

The thing is, Roberts isn’t actually the vengeful type. The biggest criticism her supervising officer had during her probationary period was that she’s too easygoing. Which, you know – most people would consider a positive quality. Going with the flow, rolling with the punches. All those hippy-dippy clichés her mother likes to spout. Come to think of it, Janine Roberts never did get over her Flower Child phase. Could be heritable.

But then most people aren’t hardened field agents with a concentrated glower and a knife scar slashing across their throat. Agent Sadik was about as relaxed as a Victorian schoolmarm wearing an iron corset. Honestly, she’d been shocked that Sadik recommended her for Level 1 status as a full agent. She’d thought he hated her. After finally working up the courage to ask him why, Sadik had only looked at her and said, “A team needs balance. They can’t all have egos.” He’d grunted something else about her skills being marginally adequate and she’d taken it as the extremely rare sign of approval that she hoped it was and gone on to work her way up to a Level Six clearance and status as a probationary agent in Coulson’s newly-established team, responsible for investigating claims of alien artifacts and activity.

So the depth of the anger she feels at Eld’s over-before-it-started career as a double agent surprises her. The whole situation reflects on her, of course. Maybe that’s it. She stuck her neck out for him. The first asset she brings in from the civilian side and he turns out to be – well, Lukas Eld. The man’s obviously sly and self-interested, just as much as he’s capable and intelligent. He doesn’t strike her as harmless, not anymore, now that she can kind of see past the unfailingly polite and gracious façade and the impeccable appearance. She should have known – a man who looks so obnoxiously well-groomed all the time clearly isn’t just an eccentric academic.
Eld’s practically the textbook definition of “potential security risk.” Coulson might never again respect her judgment of character.

Unless… Eld really turns it around. If he gets information from Raina on Dr. Flagretti’s whereabouts, Coulson might turn a blind eye to Eld’s regrettably imprecise moral compass.

Because Eld isn’t Threat Level One – in fact, he’s barely squeaking in the top fifty at the moment. Raina and her organization are at the forefront, just above OsCorp and their shady black-market arms deals. A dubious consultant with esoteric knowledge of ancient jewelry is just not as menacing.

Brenna kind of hopes the ring is out there. If not, they’re gonna be scrambling for a new theory to fit the facts of this case. And she’ll feel like a total sucker. At least she won’t be the only one. Either this ring is real, or they’ve all been drinking the same cracked Kool-Aid.

“How solid is this intel?” Captain Rogers breaks the silence. “How sure are we this Centipede group really has the doctor and this 0-8-4?”

“There’s an eyewitness account of the 0-8-4 in action, as well as corresponding physical evidence. And the group’s leader has indirectly confirmed they are in possession of an artifact that matches the description of our potential 0-8-4,” Coulson replies. “According to our consultant, who’s been in contact with her.”

The Captain’s All-American brow furrows. “The consultant who identified this 0-8-4 in the first place.”

“Yes.”

“Has been in contact with the leader of a terrorist organization.”

“To classify them as terrorist is premature—”

Captain Rogers ignores Coulson’s aside. “What are they, pen pals? How does he know this Raina woman?”
“Well… Raina attempted to recruit him,” Coulson admits.

The Captain frowns. “And he came to you for help?”

“Not exactly.”

Roberts grows weary of beating around the bush. “We traced a call placed from one of the numbers registered to Raina to Eld’s phone. He admitted she approached him and claims he was misleading her into believing he was serious about her offer to consult.”

“So… did he?” Rogers glances around. “Consult with her, I mean.”

“That’s another thing we’ll find out tonight when he goes to meet her,” Coulson says firmly.

“Wait – the guy who’s going in is this same consultant?” The Captain’s mouth puckers.

Coulson tries to head off any complaints. “He’s the one who has an established cover with this group.”

“But – he’s a civilian.”

“He’s also the one who lied to us all about being involved with Raina in the first place,” Roberts points out tightly. “Now he has the chance to make up for his mistakes.”

The Captain shakes his head. “He could get hurt. Or killed.”

“Raina’s not the type to leave a trail of bodies,” Coulson argues. “She had Agent Morris and she released him.”

“So now we’re trusting Raina to do the right thing? Just like Eld?” Ward huffs an irritated breath. “This is ridiculous.”
Coulson silences him with a look. Roberts shifts her weight. It isn’t that she’s feeling guilty – okay, maybe a little. The usual jitters she gets before an operation are making her second guess herself.

He turns back to the Captain. “The reward is greater than the risks, here. Dr. Flagretti is in more danger, and Eld is in a position to get them both out of this unharmed and with minimal leak of classified info.” Coulson’s voice is steady, and he continues when Rogers still appears uncertain. “You know how dangerous it could be if Centipede gets its hands on a workable serum.”

The Captain’s expression hardens. “Yeah. I’d say I’m very familiar with the risks.” He sighs and rubs his forehead. “I just don’t like getting civilians involved with this – with my mess. Even if – especially if he’s had previous contact with this woman.”

“He’s equipped with a camera and wire,” May puts in. “We’ll be able to hear everything. If it looks like the operation’s going south, we’ll go in. If he decides to sell us out… We’ll go in hot. With extreme prejudice.” Brenna swallows discreetly.

“But he didn’t tell us where he was going,” Skye says.

Coulson scoffs. “You think I’d let him leave here without planting a tracker on him?”

“Isn’t that, like, illegal use of government –” Skye cuts herself off once she realizes she’s on the receiving end of a round of stares. “Right. Not the problem at hand.”

“Priority for this operation is information gathering,” the Captain says sternly. “This consultant isn’t a distraction or diversion, correct?”

“No. Eld is going in with his consultant cover intact. He’s to confirm the identity of the 0-8-4 and glean what information he can on Raina’s operation, her base, her organization’s capabilities and manpower, and Dr. Flagretti, if possible.”

Captain Rogers lets out a subdued breath. “Alright. Are you monitoring onsite or in operation staging?”

“Onsite,” Coulson replies. “Of course, we’re delaying our arrival so Eld is already on premises. If Eld does flip… well, it’s better if he doesn’t know he’s been lojacked.”
“I’d like to be with the onsite team in case of emergency.”

Her supervisory agent nods quickly. “Of course.”

The Captain opens his mouth, then shuts it again. “To be clear – is this 0-8-4 from, uh, around here?”

Coulson’s mouth twitches with amusement. “No one really knows. If it is extraterrestrial, it’s been around Earth for a hell of a long time. Long enough to enter into the local mythology, at least.”

Captain Rogers tilts his head as he squints at Coulson. “Which local mythology?”

“Scandinavian.”

Inexplicably, his expression darkens. “Wonderful.”

“Captain?” Brenna asks tentatively. She doesn’t want to pry, but damned if she isn’t curious about him.

He meets her eyes briefly. “I just… don’t have a good track record with these kinds of things.”

“Oh? Pagan things?” Ward prompts sardonically. Coulson glares, looking more put out by the insinuation than Captain America is.

“No,” he says shortly. “The last time an ancient Scandinavian artifact fell into the hands of an organization dedicated to creating a master race, we had a hell of a time stopping them.”

Skye frowns. “When was that? Before I joined S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

The Captain gives a rueful smile. “World War Two.” He stands from his chair to have a private word with Coulson.
Skye is flushed. Roberts pats her shoulder. “I knew that,” she protests. “It just – came out wrong.”

With a hand signal from Coulson, they move to Staging Room C to prep for departure at Eld’s call. The area is small and cluttered, with changing stalls and lockers as well as the ubiquitous wallscreens, this time with a Stark Tech upgrade for holographic capabilities like in the newest class of quinjets.

There’s just something anticlimactic, Brenna reflects, about seeing Captain America in full, glorious uniform, if you’ve just heard the struggle to don the close-fitting fabric for a full five minutes in a cramped S.H.I.E.L.D. changing stall that only gives the illusion of privacy. It takes all the romance out of it. When he emerges, he rubs sheepishly at his elbow.

The wallscreen clicks on silently, and suddenly Fitz’s face is looming over them all. Coulson fits in his earpiece and Roberts follows suit.

“Eld just called in. He’s on his way to the meet,” the scientist informs them.

“Camera is operational?” Coulson asks.

“Yup. Got the feed right here. I’ll send it to your tablets so you can monitor from the mobile transport.”

“You mean the van, Fitz,” Ward drawls. “The creepy white van that makes me feel like I should be hauling around a sack of lollipops and a roll of ducktape instead of a Glock.” He pats his holster and Roberts rolls her eyes. “You know, I once had a kid kick me in the shin after I got out of the back of that van and tried to ask him for directions. Then he flicked a rock at my head. Stranger danger has gone too far.”

Skye smirks from where she’s loading her laptop and a tangle of wires and drives into a messenger bag. As a probationary agent, she’s been assigned to ride along but hang back and monitor comms in the event of a direct confrontation. Coulson also wants her to see if she can’t get a fix on the building Raina’s using as a meeting place.

“I think that might be less about the van and more about the guy coming out of it,” she quips.
“Oh, yeah?” Ward shoots back.

“I’m sorry, is that all-black heavy tactical gear supposed to look all warm and cuddly?”

May plants her combat boot on the bench with a solid thunk and glares around at them all. “From now on, there is a moratorium on the witty banter. The comms are for mission-relevant communication only.” She jerks her head at Coulson and he grins.

“You heard her. Load up.”

They cram into the S.H.I.E.L.D.-issue white van. May graciously lets Captain Rogers claim the front seat, and glares Ward into submission when he tries to enter the middle row, forcing him into the far back next to Jemma and Skye.

Roberts boots up her tablet from her roomy spot as Coulson pulls out of the loading dock of the S.H.I.E.L.D. base. Eld arrives at the meet while they’re on the freeway.

May curses colorfully when Raina pulls out the ring. “Well, I guess we just got some serious confirmation,” Skye offers weakly. Brenna holds her breath throughout the entire interrogation. The whole team is glued to their tablets – except for Coulson, who’s driving, and getting a verbal rundown from Fitz.

And then it gets even worse, because of course it does. Raina puts on the ring. Roberts watches, stricken, as Raina reaches out a hand. Right towards – towards Eld’s chest and the –

_Oh, Christ. The camera!_

The video feed goes dark and Roberts gasps in a breath. “He – Coulson – Raina must know he’s wired –”

This hadn’t been in any of their contingency plans. Raina using the ring on herself – she’d been careful not to touch it while interrogating Agent Morris; he’d remembered very clearly that she wore gloves. And she’d followed the same pattern with Eld up until he confessed that wasn’t his real name – and god, her head’s still spinning from everything she heard during his interrogation under the ring’s spell.
Every word he’d spoken was the truth. It had to be. But he’d misled Raina so masterfully, Roberts was left gaping at the camera feed. Back when she’d first met Eld, she’d suspected he knew more than he was letting on, that he was more. Her instincts appeared to be right. She wants so badly to dig into his past, find out who he is, where he came from, why he has these unexpected skills – is he a spy? A fugitive? Or just someone running from his past, like he’d claimed to Raina?

But that’s not the priority. Raina has him now, and she knows he’s a S.H.I.E.L.D. plant. It’s time to move on the facility.

“Step on it,” Captain America says grimly.
Hey, y'all. It's been awhile. That's because my laptop crashed spectacularly and I lost everything because I am an utter moron who always forgets to back her stuff up. Luckily I had an older copy of some of my writing, including this story, on a flash drive. So I've been rewriting the stuff I lost, trying to remember as best I can. As you can imagine, this was pretty demoralizing. But - I am trying. I also don't have a laptop anymore, and won't until I can save up enough money, so hopefully in the next few months. In the meantime, I'm bumming off a couple people. So updates will be slower, obviously. Thanks for sticking around and hope you like this one. I'm not totally happy with it, but I wanted to update real bad.

The woman was abominably patient. Her forbearance infuriated him. In the mornings, she entered his room with all the trappings of a meal to break his fast, the contents at once familiar and just the slightest bit wrong, enough to remind him once again where he was. The texture of the bread was too light, the color too pale, the crust too soft. The juice was sourer than it should be, and the warm herbal mixture she prepared was too spicy. The worst of it was the hot brown drink, bitter and strong.

He could not fool himself for a moment that he remained on Asgard.

She always set the meal on the wooden stand next to his bed and parted the curtains the slightest bit, to allow the dawn to creep over the floorboards. He still could not stand the full light of day.

And she asked him questions, quiet and gentle. "How're you feelin' this morning, sweetheart? Are you hungry? Are you hurting?"
“What’s your name?”

The first time she’d asked his name, he’d simply turned over and stared at the wall until she left. But she’d kept returning, kept feeding him and caring for him, kept asking her questions.

“What’s your name? Do you remember anything?” She’d clucked her tongue when he didn’t respond, and said softer, “What happened to you, dear?”

He had lied and told her he didn’t remember anything. Asgard and his old life – his false family – it had all the reality of a dream. He shut those thoughts away, purposefully, forcefully, yet they came round to plague him again once the woman went to sleep.

After a particularly restless night, having woken with a cry in his throat and tears on his cheeks, he had wanted the woman to linger while he ate his meal, hoping the novelty of her presence would be enough to drive off the ghosts. He’d asked her name and she had smiled at him.

“I’m Roseanne, sweetheart. My name is Roseanne. Do you remember your name?”

“I don’t have a name,” he said hoarsely, his throat cracked and dry. “I came from nowhere and am nothing.”

The woman – Roseanne – shook her head. "Now don’t say that. You’re someone, I can see that plain as day."

He hadn’t responded. The next morn, she bustled into the room again, this time carrying something tucked under her arm in addition to his meal. A spark of curiosity caught him off guard.

“What is that?” he asked.

She arranged his tray with his plates and cups, then handed him three books. He glanced at the covers before directing a puzzled frown at her. "Are you… having a child?” He immediately discarded the thought. The woman was too old, though he could admit he did not know much about the intricacies of mortal reproduction.
She laughed. "No, silly. The baby name books are for you." Roseanne perched on the foot of his bed. "I thought we could go through them together. Pick out a name for you. I can’t keep callin’ you sweetheart."

He clenched his hands tightly, wrinkling the books’ covers. Could he simply choose a new name? Discard his old title, his old life like a snake shedding a skin?

The notion struck him dumb. He was on Midgard. He’d ascertained that much in the weeks since his landing. No one knew him. He could choose any name from one of these books and Roseanne would not know the difference.

He could free himself from Loki forever.

The spines of the books were stiff and he wondered if she purchased them specifically for him. He let that thought lie to consider later, an ember of warmth burrowing itself deep.

The page he opened to listed a collection of Midgardian names beginning with the letter E. Roseanne pointed one out. "How about Edward?"

He let the shape of the name roll around on his tongue. "No."

Together, they perused the pages. He stumbled upon one and considered it. Close enough that he would respond automatically to the sound, distinct enough to not be confused for the name of a dead man.

Roseanne murmured approvingly. "It suits you." She studied his face. "Yes, it definitely does. Lukas."

"Lukas," he whispered. "My name is Lukas."
He is known.

After the effort he put into his mortal artifice, he never truly thought it could happen. He never believed a simple, narrow-minded human could uncover the secret of his nature. His arrogance has once again overshadowed his intellect.

Does Raina know his true name? Does it matter? The Ring reveals much deeper truths. Its magic strips away elaborate glamours and careful deceptions to reveal the very core of a being. He does not even know precisely what she saw.


Perhaps he should leave this place, before Raina lets slip any detail to S.H.I.E.L.D. or her employer. He could shift his face; mold his features into one of his few meticulously crafted skins. Leave the country and assume yet another identity far from every trace of Lukas Eld.

Or perhaps the realm. He could cross between and disappear on any number of worlds, places that have never even heard of humans or jötunn.

*Or into the Void. Tear open a hole in the fabric of Yggdrasil and throw yourself back into its black depths. You will know no pain or strife, only rest eternal.*

The errant impulse shudders through him. He redirects his thoughts.

There is a stubborn part of him that rejects the idea of leaving. He has laid claim to this life, constructed it from nothing, from the ashes of a dead prince whose name he hasn’t spoken aloud in two years. A name he refuses to even think.
What would Roseanne say, if he never returned? If he left with nary a farewell, casually denying every effort she has made to care for him? She had been so patient, so relentlessly concerned, despite his contrary nature and sharp tongue and the wreck the Void had left of his mind. Her assistance deserves some measure of gratitude, of deference to her wishes. And she would not wish him to leave without a word, no matter that she would be better for his absence.

He resolves to stay until circumstances absolutely force him to leave. Further plans can wait. He needs to take action now, to recover the Ring from Raina. Such an artifact should not be in her possession, it is a risk he cannot take. And he does not have the leisure to wait for the curse to take its inevitable slow revenge.

No. If Raina escapes with the Ring, and the knowledge of his cursed nature… that will be the blow to sever the neck. S.H.I.E.L.D. will never accept him, he’ll be ostracized for the misfortune of his birth. Or hunted, at worst.

No. He refuses. His name is Lukas Eld, and he will not be cowed by a mortal such as Raina and the Ring she has no hope of comprehending.

Lukas stands from the ebony chair. He twists the handle of the door, breaking the meager lock easily with his strength. Raina’s men turn at the disturbance, gun barrels rising.

His fingers close on smooth metal and he sights his target among the men arrayed against him, still surprised and off-balance at his sudden appearance. The first goes down with a silver dagger in his throat and a choked-off cry.

Another dagger, twin to the first, sprouts from the next man’s shoulder. Not the fleshy part of the neck, but it will do. Lukas has grown lax while on Midgard, given the distinct lack of cause for tossing knives around, though he’s felt the urge a time or two. His aim has suffered – but not enough to matter for these unfortunate soldiers.

The punctured man screams and his arm drops, weapon clattering to the ground, the severed muscles not strong enough to hold it. Despite his loss, he charges at Lukas. He grabs the man in a parody of a hug, letting the bullets from his fellows thud into his thick, black cloth armor as well as the soft flesh underneath. One lucky bullet strikes Lukas in the temple, then plinks to the ground, a flattened metal disc.

Well. That bullet is a valuable proof of concept. He had rather hoped for that outcome, but had
never tested the resilience of his Æsir skin against modern human weapons.

Lukas glances at it, then at the gunman. The soldier gapes at his target, and blanches when Lukas smiles. Tossing the body he has hold of, he sends it careening into the gathered group, tumbling them all to the floor. Lukas ends the last three quickly, methodically, slashes to their unprotected throats.

He does not draw on the well of his seidr. It is not that he lusts for the fury and blood of battle – and hasn’t that always been a failing of his, in the eyes of the Æsir. But neither does he shy away. And it has been years since he felt his body stir with such fierce heat.

When he stands over their unmoving forms, it occurs to him that this might be a tad difficult to explain to his compatriots. Humans are zealous enough in their killing, but restrict it to their warriors, with customs most convoluted and foreign. This would not endear him to S.H.I.E.L.D. They would not praise his prowess or his skill with the blade.

If anything, it would engender fear and lead to greater mistrust.

Lukas thinks for a moment – then incinerates the bodies with a flick of his fingers. A useful working, though not adaptable to any living organism. He should know. He’d tried a time or two.

Better to say he was unguarded, however unlikely, and escaped, than that he decimated a force five-strong, armed and armored.

Now, to find Raina and liberate her prize.

Lukas closes his eyes. And listens. Asgardian seidr rings vibrant and high, like the notes of a bell. Sweet and beautiful but unsubtle and impossible to ignore. Easy to sense, and thus hard to disguise. The Ring’s magic is not Æsir; it is older than that, and unfamiliar. It is very faint, curling around the edges of his mind, creeping over his skin. The sensation feels warm as a hearth fire, hums clear and pure as the truth, but just as shrill and painful when he narrows in on it.

He follows its path, a fish to a distant lure. Lukas is so intently focused he nearly runs headlong into the two agents.

Quick reflexes allow him to whip back around the corner and draw a veil of shadow across
himself. The fluorescent lights that lined the earlier corridors are dark and silent here, which is a relief, as this working does not hold up under direct illumination. He must have wandered away from the occupied portion of the building.

Agent Roberts’s voice carries down the long, narrow hall. “We’ve gone too far. This part of the base doesn’t even look active.”

A bright white light skitters through the darkness. Another woman answers. “These tunnels must extend beyond the perimeter of the warehouse. There’s no sign of an end anytime soon, and we’ve gone too far to still be within the walls.”

“Exactly. I don’t think Raina would have him down here. We should go back to that last junction upstairs and take the left.”

He recognizes Agent May this time, purely through her sardonic tone. “Or maybe they escaped together.”

Lukas holds his breath and doesn’t know why. Roberts takes a long moment to respond. “I don’t think so.”

That’s all she says. He exhales, and his chest feels oddly light.

“Wait – repeat that.” Roberts sounds suddenly tense. May hadn’t spoken. She must be in contact with others. “A what? Jesus – does he need backup? No – okay. Okay. Mmhmm.” She sighs. “I know he’s a supersoldier, I was only –”

May cuts in. “Okay. Roger. Will report when we find Eld.” There’s a shuffling sound. “Let’s get a move on. We have no idea how much more ground we have to cover and not much time. I’d kill for some blueprints right now.”

Their boots clatter along the cement as they sprint back in the direction they came from. The agents’ urgency spurs Lukas on and he detaches from his corner and hurries away.

S.H.I.E.L.D. has somehow learnt of the situation. Lukas feels mildly uncomfortable. His plan to alert Coulson and his band to Dr. Flagretti’s location had been pushed aside in favor of his own panicked musings. He shoves the thought away. They are here now – and how exactly they
discovered his location is yet another mystery for a later time. The two agents are searching for him. Lukas needs to recover the Ring and orchestrate his own rescue without appearing to do anything. It should be an interesting endeavor, if nothing else.

He finds the prize he seeks and its bearer in an unadorned cement passage, deep under the warehouse. Raina must be fleeing, giving up this particular operation as a casualty of war now that S.H.I.E.L.D. has infiltrated. No doubt she has other locations to fall back to.

The Ring is her priority and must therefore be in her possession.

She narrows her dark eyes at him. The harsh white glare of the thin rectangular lights washes her skin out. Raina no longer appears soft and flattering; a sneer twists her lips and her eyes are alight with malice. It is a strange kind of honesty.

“You must not have been as intelligent as I gave you credit for,” Raina says coldly. “Did you let something slip to your S.H.I.E.L.D. masters? Did they sniff you out as a double agent?”

“I told them from the start,” Lukas lies. “I played you for a fool.”

She laughs. “Oh, no. I don’t believe that. I’ve seen the truth of you, Lukas.” Raina stalks closer, her heels clicking along the floor. “You think you’re a grand architect. A puppetmaster. You think you’re in control. When really, you’re just as much a slave to your own impulses as the rest of us are. You couldn’t have told them the truth even if you wanted to. It’s not in your nature. Everything about you is a lie – just like your name is.”

The woman speaks with authority and Lukas feels something shrivel up in his chest. He pushes away her poison truths and wraps denial about himself like a cloak. “You know nothing of me. I am Lukas Eld.”

The ghost of a brand twinges the skin of his chest again. Liar, liar.

Her smile is crooked and spiteful. “I expected you would attempt to double-cross me eventually. Didn’t you wonder about the public meeting, the calls to your personal phone? I have pictures and documentation of our agreement. I was going to use them against you if you began to entertain any treacherous thoughts… but I suppose the effort was wasted. You were found out too early to be of use to me. But it’s some small consolation you won’t be of use to S.H.I.E.L.D. anymore either.”
He doesn’t respond, but Raina must see something in his expression, a flicker of doubt or confusion. Her smile grows. “You don’t really think they’re going to trust you after this? You think they’re going to let you play their little spy games? Think of you as an asset, as a friend? You’re deluding yourself. You have no one, now. You’ve burned all your bridges.”

The words dig at him like a needle pushed under the skin. Wildly, he thinks, *Bridge-Breaker. An apt kenning. I seem to have some talent for that.*

“They know the truth of you, and they didn’t even need my Ring,” Raina continues smugly.

Despite the doubts swirling in his mind, Lukas fails to suppress a smile at her assertion. Raina bristles. The mortals barely have a frame of reference to comprehend the truth of him, Ring or not.

He latches onto this novel train of thought. S.H.I.E.L.D. is functionally ignorant of his past beyond vague suspicions. Even this woman, with her vaunted Ring, does not know where he has been or how long he has lived. She has made no mention, no hint of knowing any definitive information. She knows he is not as he appears. She might have seen his inner turmoil or his lowly origins.

But the only name she knows for certain is Lukas, and that gives him hope that not all is lost.

“I know what it is to live with mistrust and hatred, my dear Raina,” he drawls, edging forward just as she had. “I have supped on such emotions longer than you could imagine. As a babe, they were mother's milk, and they are my sustenance even now. I have learned the taste of them well. You cannot fear what you know.”

Lukas leans close, barely a handspan from her face. The petite woman has to crane her head up to meet his eyes. “I am not simply a liar. I am the best liar you will ever know. I won’t just gain S.H.I.E.L.D.’s pardon and forgiveness. I will have S.H.I.E.L.D. begging me for my expertise on bended knee.”

He can hear the hum of the Ring, tucked away in the inner pocket of her jacket. Stronger, now that he is back in its presence. He wonders that he had not noticed it before, when he was first escorted to Raina. Perhaps too subtle for him to notice in his preoccupation with S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Consider that while you run and hide, hunted like a rat in a kitchen, fleeing to your most pathetic nests and hovels,” Lukas taunts. Raina goes rigid with anger.
He smirks at her. “I don’t need a Ring to see the truth of you.”

Raina opens her mouth to retort, but Lukas snaps his hand forward and grips her arm, twisting it up and around. She yelps in surprise, and her jacket flaps open. His hand is in the hidden pocket and snatching up the innocuous black case containing the Ring before she can react. Lukas twists her arm up farther when she begins to struggle, eliciting a shriek of pain. The woman is no fighter. She has men for that, though they are nowhere to be seen. Her employer’s men, most likely, if they are not here covering her escape. She does not lay claim to their loyalty.

Releasing her, he shoves her hard, and she stumbles a few steps down the hall. Lukas slips the Ring’s case into his own pocket. He goes to turn, when Raina flips around, raising a gun.

Lukas stops and considers. He does not want to display any magic, give this woman anymore reason to be suspicious or interested in him than she already is. But as proven earlier, unless those bullets are pure uru, or engraven with runes and embedded with various workings, they will not penetrate his skin.

“Return my Ring,” Raina demands. “Give it back and then come with me. Even if you are a traitor, I’m sure we could learn a few things from you. Under anesthesia, of course,” she adds sweetly.

He raises his hands to show he is unarmed and steps forward. “Take the Ring out of your pocket and throw it over here,” Raina says sharply. He does neither and instead steps forward again. “Stop where you are,” she commands with an edge of tension.

Lukas keeps inching forward. Raina cocks the gun. “Stop or I’ll shoot,” she promises.

He tuts mockingly at her. “I can see from your stance and your grip you are not well-practiced with such an instrument. I don’t think you’ll hit your mark,” Lukas says.

Raina scoffs. “It’s point blank range. You really are a fool.”

On his next step, the gun fires. The bullets plink, one by one, to the stone floor.

The woman gapes at him. He gives her a half-smile and snatches the gun from her grip. “I’ll just take this. It wouldn’t do to have you embarrass yourself again.”
She flees. Lukas considers going after her and detaining her for S.H.I.E.L.D. to take into custody, but he would rather not field any queries on how he accomplished such a feat. And he most certainly doesn’t want Raina asking inconvenient questions in earshot of Agent Coulson or Agent Roberts.

He could kill her. But now that she has been relieved of the Ring, she is no true threat to him. Let her flee, and spread tales of his power. Her words will likely not reach any of the wrong ears.

In another life, if he was another man, he might have killed her anyway, simply for expediency. But Lukas Eld is gracious in victory. He has people that would expect this of him.

Lukas considers the Ring in his coat pocket. There are a multitude of paths open to him. A crossroads of sorts. A noble path, or a cunning one. There’s one path marked with trimmings of gold and power. Another that descends into the Void. And there’s something that could be a path, though it is overgrown with weeds, choked with doubt and uncertainty – a fearful, mysterious trail that leads to parts unknown.

Which path would Lukas Eld choose?
Chapter Notes

Hey - not sure if I need a warning for this, but just a heads up, there is some nasty language and nasty violence/gore type things in this chapter. Not too much, but I didn't wanna catch anyone off guard. I probably should have put a little warning before the last chapter... I might go back and add that later.
Anyway, hope you like this part. Only one more chapter after this until the end of Part One. :p

XXVII


[A tank rolls along, flanked by a row of palm trees. It comes to a stop, and Captain America ducks out from behind the bulky metal body of the tank, followed by four men dressed in the uniform of the United States Army.]

“The encampment’s to the east, about three miles out. Ready your weapons, boys.”

[Captain America cocks his rifle and shoots them a roguish smile.]

“We’re about to show the Axis that the Allies pack a helluva punch.”

[Sunlight gleams off his perfectly white teeth.]
“But Cap! There’s a hundred of ’em between us and the camp!”

“I know. And we’re gonna lose some good men today. Some true American heroes.”

“But see here, Private. We’re part of the U.S. Army. And we don’t leave a man behind. Not now. Not ever.”

“And we’ve got the support of the folks back home. The bonds they’re buying are paying for every bullet we use to protect our country.”

“And if they’re doin’ their part, we’ve gotta do ours.”

“For victory!”

[Captain America raises his fist as the others join the cheer.]
He knocks, three sharp raps. Footsteps echo from beyond. Walking, not running. Not alert to potential intruders.

The door swings open. "What d'ya – Jesus!"

Steve slams the shield into the man's face, sending him into the concrete wall at a punishing velocity.

"Housekeeping!" Agent Ward chirps at his side.

They push into the building as one unit. The corridor ends in a T-junction. Eld had taken the right, he knew that much from the video feed. Steve strains his ears.

Down the left fork – voices? Dr. Flagretti? Or Raina.

"Roberts, May, take the right. Clear as you go, but your priority is to locate and recover Eld."

May grimaces, but to her credit, she only nods, and the two agents split off.

The others look to him for further direction. It's strange, to have a senior agent like Coulson letting him take the lead. Steve's position in S.H.I.E.L.D.'s chain of command has never been made explicitly clear. In some ways, he's the most experienced with these types of operations. And he's often given deference because of his persona. Most don't feel comfortable telling Captain America what to do - with Fury as a glaring, eye-patch wearing exception.

Either he's treated like the font of all that's moral and just in the world, or he's coddled and protected from the big scary technology of the 21st century. Which is ridiculous – Steve'd take an
'advanced' cell phone any day over being lambasted by 'primitive' German artillery. Technology's as good as what you use it for.

Unlike some senior officers he'd had command of in the war, a few twice his age, Coulson doesn't appear resentful or disgruntled.

"Stick with me for now," Steve says as they take the left fork. "We're going to find Dr. Flagretti. I'm betting Raina and that 0-8-4 won't be far from her, but our priority is the doctor – taking down the rest of Centipede is secondary, clear?" The agents nod.

The left hall is as nondescript as the first. Opening doors, they do a visual check of the interior as they go.

Janitorial closet, a square room with a couple of bunks installed – and then a door with a keypad blinking at him. Steve doesn't bother with whatever device Coulson is pulling out of his pocket. Sure, technology can be an incredible asset - but there's something to be said for the traditional approach when time is of the essence.

He bashes the edge of the shield into the pad. Sparks fly as it beeps angrily at him. Two more hits, and the door gives a strangled whine and clicks open.


"That could have been booby-trapped to destroy everything inside," Coulson observes mildly.

"Oh, I hate when that happens. It's just not practical," Simmons says. "What if a lab tech botches her code and accidentally sets off the anti-intruder detonation sequence?"

"Raina must not have hired Supervillain Security Incorporated," Ward quips.

Steve shoulders through. The lights switch on with a faint buzz. The sterile white blinds him.

There are rows of gleaming benches, piled high with chrome equipment. Steve might not know what all the machinery does, but he recognizes a lab when he sees one. He'd raided half a hundred
during the war, Hydra or Nazi or otherwise, and he'd spent his fair share of time in SSR labs as well, as their prize and sole supersoldier. They were mostly indistinguishable. Not much call for decorative flare when utility is the only style that really matters.

Though the Hydra labs often had the bonus of horrifyingly small cells in which to keep their human experiments, and morgues full of mutilated, dissected remains. Steve surveys the lab space and shivers despite himself, though it's tidy and relatively innocuous.

Simmons mutters to Fitz over her earpiece as she fiddles with the equipment on the bench.

"Let's move on. We can examine this later," Steve says.

Reluctantly closing a drawer full of pipettes, Simmons follows them out. "I think we found their main lab space. Or they definitely worked on the serum here," she says in a low voice. "They've got the ideal setup for it. We need to get Skye into their network before they destroy their own servers. The data could be invaluable in determining how far they've gotten."

"The lab techs must have been using laptops. Keep an eye out for any terminals," Coulson says, pausing at the corner for Steve to clear the next hall.

He crouches and peers around. At this height, he won't get caught by a headshot from a lucky guard.

There's no one.

"What, are they all out on a goddamn smoke break?" Ward mutters.

"If Raina found out Eld was wired, maybe she expected us and cleared out," Coulson offers.

Steve frowns. He wants to take them by surprise, not get caught up in an ambush orchestrated by a team that knows the layout of the building better than them.

Another turn reveals a break in the monotonous cement halls. A corrugated metal sheet, ten or twelve feet high, dominates the wall. It looks like it can be rolled up, opening the space, ideal for
loading or unloading supplies. Opposite this is a cavernous space with rows of shelving, piled high with wooden crates. Through the metal gate must be a loading dock.

As Steve hangs back, considering the best approach to clear a storage area with abundant cover for just the ambush he feared, there's a wrenching sound of metal on metal and the gate rolls up.

They duck around the corner. Five men enter, wearing brown coveralls and complaining loudly.

"I'm just sayin', at least I got hazard pay, at my last job." A shorter man, stocky, with a head of fiery red hair, wipes his sweaty forehead with a rag. He stuffs it in his pocket. "This place is a joke. If I wanted to do manual labor, I could be loading trucks at any warehouse. I gave up a contract in East Africa for this shit!"

"Crissakes, give it a rest, Mulaney. You sayin' you wanna get shot at?"

"I'm sayin' I was led to believe this was a security detail, not a fuckin' moving company!" Mulaney snaps.

The loading dock behind the group remains deserted as they start stacking crates onto two dollies.

He glances back at his team. "Let's get the man his hazard pay."

Steve and Coulson slip around the corner, Simmons trailing Ward on their left. They're halfway into the storage area before one of Raina's employees turns.

Steve launches his shield at the closest dolly. Crates topple, crushing the foot of the man who'd spotted them. A litany of ragged curses ejects from his mouth before he crumples under Coulson's shot. Another gets an icer to the back of the neck courtesy of his second. He never even sees their faces.

Mulaney pulls a handgun from a thigh holster. He's quick on the draw, but Steve's already caught the rebound, and his shield is solid vibranium. The pistol is hopelessly outclassed.

Three, four shots thunk against the metal. In the fraction of a second it takes Mulaney to reassess
his aim, Steve lunges and clocks him above the ear. The guy goes down like a sack of bricks. His gun discharges, ricocheting off the dolly and drumming into the concrete floor. It's not as deafening as it might have been, given the cavernous size of the storage area, but it's loud enough. The covert stage of this operation is over.

Steve kicks the weapon from Mulaney's grasp. The other two men sprawl on the floor, unconscious. Ward lowers his own icer, eyes resting on Mulaney. "Last man standing."

The redhead groans and covers his face with his hands. "I changed my mind. Not enough hazard pay in the goddamn world."

Steve crouches next to his head. "Where is Dr. Flagretti?"

"Who? Jeez, man, I think you gave me a concussion. I'm gonna have to go to the hospital!"

"I'll be sure to send flowers," Steve says dryly. "Where is the doctor?"

"I dunno! I'm just the hired help." Mulaney's eyes dart away from Steve, over his shoulder, presumably resting on the three armed agents behind him. "I swear -" He glances back and does a double-take. "What the – the hell are you wearin', man?"

He sighs. "Coulson, shoot him. He doesn't know anything."

"Wait!" Mulaney shrieks. As Steve hoped, he doesn't realize their guns are loaded with dendrotoxin instead of bullets. "I don't know what doctor you're talkin' about, but that Raina lady took the rest of our shift with her into the basement. Two levels down, go right at the bottom of the stairs." He points out a recessed door in the corner. "The interrogation rooms are down there."

Interrogation. Steve doesn't like the sound of that. He stands. "Coulson, shoot him."

"Hey –!" Mulaney slumps to the floor.

They move quickly. Steve is hyper-aware of each second ticking by. Does Dr. Flagretti know how dangerous her knowledge of the serum is? Is she resisting questioning? Can she even resist that
As they pass the first of the two deeper levels, Simmons takes a sudden breath. "I – through there, I think I see a terminal!"

Coulson tosses her a little black stick. "Get Skye in there. I want everything you can on their progress."

"Yessir!" Simmons slips away.

The stairs terminate one level down. There's no window set in the entrance. No visual of the hallway beyond.

"Smoke? Gas canister?" Steve whispers, wishing he'd thought to check if they had some before departing the S.H.I.E.L.D. base.

He needn't have worried. "Yes and yes. Pick your poison." Ward opens his tac vest to display a stash of canisters. Coulson chooses for him, informs him it's a flashbang.

The delivery system doesn't appear to have changed much. There's a pin to pull. He readies the canister and pauses, hand hovering above the door handle. "Unknown number of hostiles. Stay low, and verify that your targets are combatants. We don't want to take down Dr. Flagretti in the middle of this."

He meets their eyes and sees steadiness, resolve. Steve cracks the door, tosses in the canister, and shuts it. Bright light flares, illuminating every gap in the frame.

As it fades, he wrenches the door open. He plows past three separate guards that can't even straighten up and look at him through the tears streaming from their eyes. Icers discharge behind him, the solid thud of ammunition meeting flesh.

One man stands in the center of the corridor, blinking but upright. Steve watches as an icer nails him in the forehead. Then another, in the upper right chest. He goes to pass him, making for the room he can just see up ahead. The outline of a door is clear, despite the tendrils of white smoke drifting lazily through the air.
The man doesn't go down. He looks about as surprised as they are. Metal gleams in the fluorescent light. Steve's gaze darts to the incongruous shine, on his forearm.

And suddenly, he gets the name. A silver appendage is grafted onto the skin, looking like nothing so much as an enormous centipede poised to skitter up his arm and onto his shoulder. The segments of its body are filled with a phosphorescent amber liquid. Steve watches it stir and slosh as the man flexes his hand.

His heart drops into his stomach. *The serum. They've already got it.* For a second, he wants to rip the framework out, toss it to the floor, and stomp it under his boot.

But the fury, the sense of violation, passes. If this man has been given a version of the supersoldier serum, then – then Steve's not the only one in the world. And he has a kind of responsibility to a fellow lab rat, who might not have known what he was signing up for.

Steve tilts the shield so that it's no longer in a position to crush his throat if thrown. He doesn't go as far as to raise his hands, but he hopes to convey as much in his tone. "That – on your arm. Did you ask for it?"

The guard frowns. "Well – yeah. They wanted volunteers. I was compatible."

Coulson and Ward appear at his side. The man tenses, rooting himself in a more solid stance. Most likely trained in hand-to-hand combat, unlike the majority of Raina's guards. Steve gestures minutely at the room just down the hall, and hopes Coulson understands where he wants him to move on his mark.

"Do you know what they did to you?"

"It was to make me stronger. Faster. They said it was a miracle." The man's gaze flicks to his forearm.

"And it feels good, doesn't it?" Steve says, recapturing his attention. "To be better. To feel like you're capable of so much more than you were before. Like your body's no longer holding you back."
He cocks his head and narrows dark eyes at Steve. "How'd you get one? I know everyone else in the project. Well – knew everyone."

Steve's jaw clenches. Probably dead, or malformed. What else was to be expected, working from theories and stolen information? Using trial and error?

The potential danger of this situation abruptly thumps Steve over the head. He's here, with Raina and her scientists, in her secret base, below her lab – if this had been a trap, or ambush, they could have made off with his biological samples. Easily. Maybe even without his knowledge.

If Eld had told them Captain America came in on this operation…

Well. They would've brought more than fifteen guards and one brand-new supersoldier. The consultant must have kept mum, even with that truth-telling ring. He owes him a handshake for that, if nothing else.

"I wasn't. I was part of a different project."

"There's more projects?" The man sounds uncertain. Maybe even a little hopeful.

Steve lets out a slow breath. "No. That project's over. I was – the only one. Me – and you, now."

Looking around the hall, at the slumped bodies of his coworkers, the man shakes his head. "If it's just us, then why are you here, doing this? Raina's working on it. She's gonna make us better. She's gonna make more of us."

The idea can seem appealing, in the dead of night, alone in his apartment. Someone else who would just – understand.

But there's that nagging sense of responsibility again. As the first supersoldier. As Captain America.

It might not be fair. He's not the government, he's not the president. He's not a lawmaker, a judge, or philosopher. He can't decide if making more supersoldiers – for anyone – is right, or desirable.
What he can do is make sure the technology stays out of unscrupulous hands. And Centipede is unquestionably willing to break the law to get ahead. And so he squares his jaw and answers honestly.

"I can't let her develop the serum further. I can't let her experiment on any more people. I'm here because she kidnapped a doctor – this can't go on. The project has to be stopped." Steve can see he wants to argue and bulls on. "I'm sorry. But you could come back with us. To S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters. They can help you. Make sure Raina's serum isn't poisoning you."

"It's not poison! She helped me! Centipede helped me – they made me better!" he says, strident and angry. "Just stay out of it."

Steve hefts the shield, disappointment heavy in his gut. "Coulson. Ward. Get to the doctor."

The agents edge down the hall, giving the enhanced guard a wide berth.

He feints towards Ward, and Steve barrels into him, drilling him into the floor. The breath whooshes out of the man's chest, but he still gets a fist up to slam into the side of Steve's head.

Sparks shoot through his vision. The augmented power behind his blows is staggering. The man grips Steve's arm and flings him off. He rolls with the motion, coming back up in a crouch.

The guard snaps his leg out in a kick aimed at Steve's chest. He throws himself to the right, laying out flat on the ground before springing into a standing position, with a quick pincer-like motion of his core and his legs.

They jab at each other, a flurry of blocks and strikes. The guard has to be trained in hand-to-hand. But Steve can tell he is constantly misjudging his strength, throwing more momentum behind his movements than necessary. Unconsciously exerting maximum effort, when in his enhanced body he could pull his blows and still deliver bruising force.

And he doesn't seem to know what to do with Steve's shield. Everywhere he goes to strike, it's there. The guard growls with frustration. Steve brings the shield to bear in a tight, low arc, driving it into the backs of his knees. Losing his footing, the guard crashes headfirst into the concrete floor.
Steve goes in to finish it. Raises the shield above his head, drives it down – the man blocks at the last second. With his left forearm, palm turned outward in an automatic reflex to protect his head. The edge splinters the glass of the implant. The segmented body spills out its amber liquid.

They stare at the damage. The man chokes. "You – you!" His face twists. "I don't wanna go back to –"

He chokes again, but this time, it's wet and gurgling. Blood dribbles from the corner of his lips. Steve drops the shield and reaches for his neck, trying to find his pulse. Internal bleeding? He didn't think he'd hit him that hard.

His fingers rest on the side of the man's neck. A drop of blood splatters on his hand, and Steve jerks back. His skin burns. Not like a fire – like acid. He rubs it off on his uniform and watches the stain eat through the first layer of fabric.

"No –"

The blood sizzles on his neck and face, smoking gently in the dry basement air. The guard scrabbles at his arm, trying to rip the implant out.

Poison. He'd said it, and hadn't known how true it would be.

Steve kneels at his side, hands fluttering uselessly, trying to find a place to touch that won't burn.

It's too late. He closes his eyes. Lets himself stay there, for a minute, maybe two.

Then he stands, the last supersoldier again.

The sight of Dr. Flagretti, draped in Coulson's jacket, pale but unharmed, lightens Steve's spirits the slightest bit. With the senior agent's arm around her, she blinks up at him standing in the doorway.

"Oh – you're Captain America. I, um, have your genetic profile saved on my computer." Tears spring to her eyes. "Oh my god, I have your genetic profile on my computer. I didn't get your
permission – I'm so sorry, we thought you were dead, and now – now this –"

Her shoulders shake. Steve kneels in front of her and gives her a small smile. "It's alright. Most people still think I'm dead."

Dr. Flagretti grips his hand tightly. "I'm glad you're not, you know."

A flush fights to creep up his neck. Steve forces it down and squeezes her hand in return.

Coulson puts a hand to his earpiece. "What? You haven't?"

His voice isn't loud, given the doctor's shaken state, but Steve can hear the sharp undertone. He taps his own earpiece twice to tune back in to their secure team channel.

"– not in the first sublevel, either. We can't find him anywhere." May's voice, terse and annoyed.

Steve nods to the exit. "Let's get you out of here, Dr. Flagretti. We'll take you to a facility and have you checked out."

The guard is still lying in the corridor. Steve doesn't want to frighten the doctor more than she already is, but there's not much he can do. She gasps. "What happened?"

Steve shakes his head, mouth a grim line. "I don't know. The serum – the implant broke and the serum did something. Burned him up. From the inside."

Dr. Flagretti stares a moment longer, then looks to Coulson. Her eyes are wide but her voice is serious. "You need to bring him back. The medical center in New York – my old medical center. His body needs to be examined immediately. Raina –" Her voice breaks slightly. She clears her throat. "Raina left just before you got there. If she tries to recreate this serum again, we need to know as much as possible."

Coulson is already nodding. "It'll be taken care of."
"And I want – I want to consult. I don't have to examine the body. But I need to be kept in the loop."

"Of course, doctor."

Agent Roberts is waiting for them near the T-junction where they first entered, Simmons and Skye at her side. Her face is troubled. "May's checking the hall one last time, but -"

She cuts off at an angry exclamation. "Eld!"

The agents exchange glances. "Take Dr. Flagretti to the van," Coulson orders Ward and Skye. The rest of them follow the hall to the right, where they find Agent May, arms crossed and glowering.

They duck in through the door, and Agent Roberts splutters. "E-Eld?"

The consultant is sprawled on a fancy chair, legs crossed at the ankle, managing to look at once casual and elegant. He has a sleek – pink? – cell phone in hand, typing something out on the screen. He holds up a finger, finishes his message, then glances up. "Oh. Hello."

Steve eyes him dubiously.

"What are you doing here?" Roberts demands.

Eld raises an eyebrow. "Hiding. Obviously."

"But - we cleared this corridor!" Roberts turns to Coulson. "I swear, sir, we did."

"Well, I could hardly know if it were friend or foe tromping about. Hence the hiding," the man points out airily.

"Tromping - we didn't tromp!"
"I did not particularly want to be found by Raina, and in the event it was a S.H.I.E.L.D. stampede, I simply thought it best to remain out of the way." Eld stands in a smooth motion, tucking his phone in his pocket. "Have you found Dr. Flagretti?"

"She's safe," Steve says.

Eld focuses on him. His green eyes are intent, but he doesn't do the typical double-take. Steve's shoulders lose some of their tension.

"I don't believe we've had the pleasure."

"Steve Rogers."

"Lukas Eld." He grips Steve's hand firmly, but releases it quickly.

"We've got Dr. Flagretti, but we just missed Raina," Coulson informs him. "And the ring."

Eld taps his lower lip idly. "Hmm. She used it to interrogate the good doctor, did she not?"

"Yes, we think so," Steve replies, curious at his speculative tone.

"May I see where Dr. Flagretti was being held?"

To Steve's surprise, Coulson agrees. Without another word, the team backtracks to the basement.

If Coulson's humoring the consultant, it must be for a good reason. The guy's sharp as a tack, Steve could tell that much from his – interview – while wearing the ring. And he's familiar with Raina. A little too familiar for Steve's comfort.

Eld peers into the drab interrogation room. It's functional, barely furnished. Still, the consultant traces the perimeter, examining the metal table and single chair, bolted to the floor. Severed plastic zip ties dangle from its arms.
"If I were her," Eld muses, "and I thought there was a chance I could be captured if I fled, I would not want the ring in my possession. Given its capabilities, it is a veritable certainty it would be used against her. Perhaps even worth the risk of destroying it, rather than see it in her enemies' grasp." He shakes his head marginally. "But no, I do not think she is so desperate as that, to willfully destroy a historical artifact. She prizes unique pieces." Eld's gaze darts away, and he inspects the room.

Steve looks around with clear eyes. "You think she hid it here?"

Eld shrugs. "Better to hide and retrieve later than chance delivering it directly into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s hands. She knows this place. I do not think it would be overly difficult for her to slip in and out unbeknownst to you."

"But – where would she hide it?" Simmons asks with a frown. "There's nothing in here."

"She could've hidden it anywhere in the base," May suggests. "If she really didn't take it with her and hope for the best."

"What gave away your presence?" Eld questions as he walks over to the corner and nudges a drain set in the floor with a toe of his shoe. "How much time did she have with which to flee?"

Steve can imagine only too well a few reasons for a drain to be here in an interrogation room. He grimaces, grateful the doctor is in S.H.I.E.L.D. custody. "I'm guessing from the time we took the loading dock until we got down here. Maybe a few minutes."

"So not much time at all, to hide something," Simmons says.

"We're having a full forensic team come out in the morning. If she left anything, we'll find it," Coulson says.

Eld crouches down. "I don't think that will be necessary," he murmurs. Pulling out a slim silver knife, from his sleeve, it looks like, he begins to pry at the drain cover. Steve and the agents watch in puzzled silence.
A knife is more subtle than a gun. In case he was patted down when he came in, Steve guesses. He wonders if Eld knows how to use it.

The consultant flips the drain cover off and slides his fingers into the drainpipe, feeling around. He stills, and a smirk crosses his face. "I believe this is what you're looking for, Agent Coulson."

Eld flicks something towards the senior agent, who catches it nimbly. He glances down and freezes. A small, innocuous gold ring sits in the center of his palm.

"How?"

"False bottom on the drain. She does like to believe she is clever. At least, more clever than you." He comes and joins the huddle of agents peering at the 0-8-4.

"I would be very careful with that," Eld says lightly. "That's worth quite a bit of money. Priceless, one might say." He smiles. "The only one of its kind on this planet."
This one's got a real source! It's an illustrated encyclopedia of mythology - if you're at all interested in world mythology, this has everything in it, from West to East. Not super descriptive, it doesn't include primary texts or anything, but it's a concise and complete summary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes


*Loki the Trickster*

*There is no stranger figure in world mythology than Loki. Half divine and half demonic, Odin’s foster-brother, the begetter of horrors – he is an intricate web of contradictions. He has been compared to the Greek hero Prometheus and in some modern eyes has been given a spurious grandeur as the enemy of constituted authority. Even his sex is in doubt. Perhaps for this reason, he (or she) finds it hard to strike up any normal relationship with gods or with men.*

[continued…]

*In Loki normal values are turned upside down and normal relationships confused. Is it too far-fetched, or too ‘modern’, to see him playing a role in the cosmic drama similar to that of the skull at the banquet or the jester at the wedding? He personifies the paradoxical, he acts out the inversion of values. A paradox cannot be explained, but it can be acted out. In this case the*
paradox is that of the god who hates the other gods, and is hated by them in turn. Loki was not a magician, but he knew some of the magician’s arts – those of changing shape and flying. Magical powers could hurt or heal, just as the fire can burn but also give warmth. It is significant that a variant of the god’s name is Logi, ‘wildfire’, which again recalls the myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and gave it to men.

In the end Loki is seized by the gods, who could not forgive his part in Balder’s death, and bound with bonds of iron (like Prometheus). A snake, with venom dripping from its fangs, is fixed above his head. His wife, Sigyn, holds a bowl to catch the drops, but when she has to go to empty it, the venom drips onto his face. At the end of the world he will be released and he will fight against the gods in the last battle. He will struggle with Heimdall, the watchman of Asgard, and each will kill the other.

XXX

A trail of dust heralds the arrival of the sleek black vehicle. Lukas can hear the gravel crunching beneath the tires. Pickles bounds up beside him and barks at the newcomers.

He has been wondering when S.H.I.E.L.D. would send an envoy. Enough time has passed since the assault on Raina’s warehouse that the men apprehended should have been interrogated, and as much information as possible gathered from the material left behind.

Time now to deal with potentially duplicitous consultants.

Lukas had hoped his gifting of the Ring would render this visit unnecessary. Giving up such a valuable artifact to mortals had felt like pulling off his own fingernails, one by one.

But – as he continues to remind himself – the gesture served his purposes better than hoarding it
for himself would have. A demonstration of his usefulness. An excuse to overlook certain eccentricities. There is no information he needs so desperately at the moment that cannot be obtained through charm or guile.

If he is truly Lukas Eld… he must be everything that name entails. Lukas Eld is a consultant for S.H.I.E.L.D. If he had taken the Ring, absconded with it, or stolen it for himself – no, that was the echo of an old instinct, his past life’s inclination. He has chosen Lukas.

Of course, he had taken the liberty of rendering the Ring impotent against himself before handing it over. Or rather, he had instructed the Ring to ignore those with both jötunn blood and the magic signature of the Æsir. Effectively him, as he cannot fathom another situation that would result in such an abomination, a creature formed of two worlds and disavowed by both.

A precaution, on the small chance S.H.I.E.L.D. proved more ambitious than predicted, and conspired to make use of magic to wring the truth of his identity from his lips. That folly with Raina – that will not happen again. If he is to reveal his name to these mortals, it shall be on his terms, and no others.

The Ring’s runic inscriptions are fairly straightforward. The base working from which the Ring operates, engraved upon the metal eons past, had only needed to be adjusted, not rewritten. A matter of parameters, no more. Instead of breaking what had to be an immensely powerful enchantment, one bound at the deepest level, joined by fundamental forces to the metal’s starheart, to its twining, dancing charge sparks – he only refined the field upon which the enchantment would act.

Raina must have been uncommonly clever to manipulate the Ring as she did. He can scarcely believe a mortal could possess such ingenuity when working with a foreign magic.

But it is not out of the realm of possibility. Most mages in Asgard held a similar disbelief when it came to his experimental workings. He had fiddled with them endlessly as a young man, brash and confident in his skill, straining against the boundaries set upon him. The mages had alternately derided his attempts as foolish, condemned them as perversions of nature, or stewed in their own jealousy. They conceived of magic in a certain way – a staid, rigid conception of what was truly a changeable, unpredictable force. He hadn’t subscribed to the same beliefs. He saw seidr for what it was, rather than what he had been taught.

That this happened to ruffle some very important feathers… well, that was simply an unexpected treat.
And Mother had always smiled as he demonstrated some success, or even failure. That secret, pleased smile that he treasured, a smile that was his and his alone.

Lukas blinks rapidly and gives his head a sharp shake. He knows better than to think overlong of his youth, of that realm with its golden, hollow façade. He watches the S.H.I.E.L.D. vehicle approach.

Roseanne is absent, visiting with her daughter in the next town over. He is glad. Lukas does not fancy explaining why his research colleagues are concealing holsters beneath their jackets.

To his surprise and bemusement, it is not Agent Roberts, nor even Agent Coulson who steps out of the vehicle when it screeches to a stop at the head of Roseanne’s gravel drive. It takes Lukas a beat to recognize him without the garishly colored, indecently tight armor. Pickles runs to greet him, his entire body shaking with the force of his wagging tail. Perhaps the sheepdog is an excellent judge of character, or perhaps he’s just the poorest excuse for a guard dog that Lukas has ever seen.

Agent, or Captain? The etiquette in this instance escapes him. He opts for his name in lieu of a title and hopes this is not perceived as a slight.

“Steven Rogers, yes?”

The man scratches behind Pickles’s ears. He looks up when Lukas speaks, and rubs a hand through his short blond hair, then tugs at the cuffs of his sleeves. The brown trousers and dark blue button-down shirt are indeed quite sedate, from what he’s seen of Captain America’s wardrobe.

“Yes. Please, call me Steve.”

“Steve,” he says, somewhat stilted. “I suppose you should call me Lukas.” It is only gracious to reciprocate, but the informality jars him. He has not grown accustomed to the overly familiar manners of most Midgardians.

Steve Rogers smiles. Despite his best efforts, Lukas can detect neither mocking nor disdain in the expression. No smugness, no contempt. Only sincerity.

He returns the smile hesitantly. “To what do I owe the pleasure of a personal visit? This must be rather far removed from your usual routine.”
The Captain jolts, and begins patting his sides, his hips. Feeling for something in his pockets. “Oh! I, uh, brought you this. From Agent Coulson. He said you’d understand if they didn’t include the vodka.” He proffers something, laid out on his right palm.

Lukas takes it – and begins to chuckle. “Ah. Agent Coulson does possess an odd sort of humor.” The Rolex sparkles in the sun. The shadows cast by late afternoon lend enough contrast to discern the engraving on the back of the watch face. To my dearest Roseanne.

The Captain appears to be restraining his curiosity for the sake of politeness. Lukas relents. “A previous, ah, negotiation of my contract included this as one of its stipulations.” He doesn’t mention Raina, but he privately wonders what Coulson intended with such a gift. To remind Lukas he has not forgotten that ill-fated agreement he made with the woman? A token of gratitude for delivering the Ring into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s custody? A bribe, that he might consider continuing his career as a consultant?

Lukas taps one of the diamonds encrusting the watch face, and breathes out another laugh. A fake, but a brilliantly constructed fake. Perhaps Coulson’s way of thanking Lukas while reminding him of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s displeasure.

Tucking the watch into his pocket, he glances up at the Captain. “Surely you are not S.H.I.E.L.D.’s errand boy?”

The man scuffs his shoes in the gravel. “Uh, no. They were going to mail it, but I asked if I could hand-deliver it instead.”

Lukas tilts his head in consideration. “The countryside is in full bloom, I grant you. A picturesque landscape. Are you so taken by the scenery?”

“Well, it is beautiful,” the Captain murmurs. He crouches down next to a stand of daffodils and traces the edges of a petal. Lukas eyes him keenly. For a warrior of such great renown, the Captain is more quiet and pensive than he expected. “Seeing these hills out your window… It must be nice.” He shakes his head with a wry smile. “But no, you’re right. I wanted to ask something, and you seemed to be the man with the answers.”

“I am at your disposal.”

“This – Ring. You said it can tell a truth from a lie.”
Lukas gives him a searching look. He had resigned himself to thorny questions about his past, or his omissions regarding his involvement with Raina. Not questions of myth and magic. “Yes…”

The Captain frowns. “S.H.I.E.L.D. is going to use this Ring. I don’t know how, or on who. But I’d be crazy to think they wouldn’t press such an advantage if they’ve got it. And I think it could save a lot of lives, if they use it right. But –” He breaks off and chews on his lower lip. “You know this Ring the best of anyone, except maybe Raina or whoever made it. I just want to know what the cost will be.”

Lukas can feel his brow furrow. “The cost?”

“It’s – in my experience, power like this comes with a cost. You might know it from the outset, you might agree to it, thinking you know what it entails. Or it might blindside you later.” The Captain’s lips press together, and he looks away from Lukas, out to the garden and its nascent blossoms.

What has your power cost you, I wonder?

The Captain speaks to the flowers. “I’d like to know what this Ring is going to cost us before we use it, so we can prepare, or at least mitigate the damage.”

Had the agents not told him? “When I was first contacted by S.H.I.E.L.D. and spoke to them of the Ring, I warned them of its curse. A curse which is eventually levied against all owners if it remains in their possession long enough.”

He shrugs. “I kind of don’t think Director Fury takes cursed objects very seriously.”

Lukas blinks. What fool would ignore such malignant rumors, especially when handling an ancient artifact, steeped in powerful magic? “The more it is utilized, the greater the consequences,” Lukas says, voice taut. “Do S.H.I.E.L.D. scientists even have the proper knowledge to examine the Ring’s base workings?”

“Workings?”

“Specialists in runic transcriptions? Advanced –” Lukas scrambles for a word that isn’t mage or
“Philosophers? Scholars of metaphysics or of the theory of dark energy transformation?”

“I think that curly-headed guy has some flying robots,” Steve offers.

Lukas sighs. “I advise against the use of the Ring until such time as someone capable of handling it is acquired.”

Steve looks at him. Lukas starts. It’s quite obvious once he’s said it. “Oh. I suppose I do already have a badge.” The weight of the watch in his pocket takes on a new meaning. A promise, or an expectation.

“Yeah. But I think Coulson did say something about an extremely in-depth, bug-under-a-microscope level of a background check before he lets you back into a S.H.I.E.L.D. facility.”

The expression on his face holds a question, but Lukas brushes it off. S.H.I.E.L.D. can wonder, speculate, or suspect all they want. In fact, he’d prefer it. There is a plan germinating in his mind, a plan that could see him in front of the Tesseract before long.

The plan ends there, abruptly, a cliff over the edge of an abyss. Lukas does not look too deeply. His goals remain short-sighted, temporary by design. The present is enough for him. Anything beyond that – and the Void echoes in his head, presenting a slew of possible futures, from the visions that arose out of that horrid blackness to prey upon his weakened mind.

None of those shall come to pass. He won’t let them.

He breaks from his reverie, but notices the Captain has fallen into his own. His gaze is back on the young summer blooms, but it is distant, a veneer of interest.

“Are you well, Captain?”

The blond man turns, trying to paste a smile on his face. “I’m fine.”

Lukas raises a brow. “Really.”
“Yep.”

“You’re an atrocious liar.”

The Captain laughs. “Yeah. Yeah, so I’ve been told.”

“Something plagues your thoughts,” Lukas observes.

“A lot of stuff.”

He hazards a guess. “The attempt by Centipede to gain the hidden powers locked in your blood and bone?”

The Captain pales and Lukas knows he has touched upon the point of contention. “It would not sit easy with any man, I am sure. To be the object of such an obsessive crusade.”

Frustration creases his brow. Lukas can read something else too, something like despair, in the lines around his eyes. “This wasn’t a one-time deal. As long as I’m here, there’s always gonna be someone around who wants to take me apart and use what they learn to create soldiers like me. And people are always gonna be hurt in the effort. And for what – power? Control? More weapons?”

The Captain’s turmoil runs deeper than Lukas supposed. The notion of a philosophical soldier strikes him with a certain whimsy. The man continues to intrigue him. A warrior with the soul of an artist, thriving in battle yet seeking desperately for peace. Quite a compelling set of contradictions. He lets the silence extend, soundlessly imploring him to continue.

“I just feel like – like maybe it wasn’t worth it. I shouldn’t be here. I don’t belong here. Maybe I was supposed to die when that plane hit the water.”

Lukas feels a visceral stab of pain in his chest. It takes him several bewildering moments to identify it as empathy. He does not often succumb to the emotion. The impulse doesn’t come naturally. But he unexpectedly identifies with the Captain’s words, and it drives him to speak where normally he would remain silent.
“It would have been easier, would it not? Better for it to end when you meant it to. The fact that you survived cheapens the attempt, yes?” he says softly. The Captain looks at him sharply, wounded anger in those achingly blue eyes. Lukas can’t meet his gaze for too long without dredging up memories better buried.

“Those were my thoughts,” he adds quietly. The Captain jerks but tries to hide it. “I did not mean to arrive here, much like you, Captain. But I awoke in this bizarre land and knew not what to do except carry on.”

It is easier to speak while studying the line of the horizon, shaded black with the coming sunfall. “I know what it is to be an outsider. To feel with certainty you do not belong. To entertain the thought, just as sleep claims your awareness, that your continued existence is a cosmic mistake on the part of the universe.”

He risks a glance and sees blue eyes filled with moisture. Hesitantly, carefully, he rests a hand on the Captain’s shoulder; afraid he’ll shake it off and reject the touch. He doesn’t.

“Yet when I open my eyes with the following dawn, I see more than I ever dreamed I could. A whole world laid out before me like a tapestry, full of beauty in its own strange way.” He huffs a soft laugh. “Do you know, in my last life, I had never been licked by a dog?” Lukas pets Pickles’s head and the dog gives a pleased bark.

The Captain chuckles. He releases the man’s broad shoulder, unsure of how welcome the touch is and where the odd impulse to do so came from.

“Nor had I seen this land of Virginia. Or had a cell phone, or known Roseanne and her grandchildren.” He pauses, then continues in a quieter voice. “It does not banish such thoughts, but it does distract me from them. Perhaps you should find your own distractions, Captain.”

“Steve,” the man says abruptly. Lukas looks at him. His fair cheeks tint pink. “Call me Steve, remember? And yeah – I… I think you’re right. And I think I might have found a couple.”

The Captain – Steve – holds out his arm. Just this once, Lukas forgoes the traditional Midgardian custom and clasps his forearm in a warrior’s style. Steve grips back without question.

“Thanks, Mr. Eld – Lukas,” he amends. “It was nice talking to you. I hope to see you around
S.H.I.E.L.D. one of these days.”

Lukas feels lightheaded, a tingle of something unfamiliar in his limbs. Could it be – contentment? He considers it and shakes his head. Sentimental nonsense.

“I look forward to it. Steve.”

He gives a wave and retreats to the vehicle. Lukas watches them go. Pickles presses a cold, wet nose to his side, sneaking up under the tunic he wears. Glancing down, he sees his tongue lolling out of the side of his snout. The sheepdog barks at him.

“Yes, quite. A walk would be pleasant,” Lukas says absently. “I agree, Pickles. I agree.” The pair of them stroll down the gravel drive under the shade of cottonwood trees, and Lukas breathes freely.

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**End of Part One.**

**Chapter End Notes**

I'm working on Part Two now, I'll try to get it out as quick as I can. But lemme tell ya, keeping up with a bunch of different plot points is exhausting. If you ever think I've missed or overlooked something, tell me!!

PS, if you're interested, yes, a starheart is the made-up Asgardian word for a nucleus and charge sparks are the made-up word for electrons and various neutrinos. :P (bc an atom's kind of like a mini solar system, y'know?)
XXXI & XXXII

Chapter Notes

Another real source - easily searchable on the internet in a bunch of literary collections for free. It's a really long, epic poem, but it has some beautiful language.
PS - Thanks so much for sticking with this story, I love all your comments, they make me wanna do a jig. Hope y'all like Part Two!!

Part Two: The Descent

In which Loki falls prey to gravity and suspects the inevitability of it all. Or, Thor arrives.

XXXI

Excerpt from The Ballad of the White Horse by G. K. Chesterton, published in 1911

The Northmen came about our land
A Christless chivalry:
Who knew not of the arch or pen,
Great, beautiful half-witted men
From the sunrise and the sea.

Misshapen ships stood on the deep
Full of strange gold and fire,
And hairy men, as huge as sin
With horned heads, came wading in
Through the long, low sea-mire.

Our towns were shaken of tall kings
With scarlet beards like blood:
The world turned empty where they trod,
They took the kindly cross of God
And cut it up for wood.

Their souls were drifting as the sea,
And all good towns and lands
They only saw with heavy eyes,
And broke with heavy hands,

Their gods were sadder than the sea,
Gods of a wandering will,
Who cried for blood like beasts at night,
Sadly, from hill to hill.

They seemed as trees walking the earth,
As witless and as tall,
Yet they took hold upon the heavens
And no help came at all.
The water sluices off the edge, a shimmering cascade. Thor watches, and all he can think is, \textit{where does it go? What lies beneath, in the abyss?}

Such flights of fancy had never occupied his thoughts before. He was not a pensive child, and as a young man, the inside of his head was a place he did not linger overlong. Why would he, when it was the outside world which held daily wonders? The call of a hunt, a new, gleaming sword, entreaties from friends and comrades, always clamoring for his attention.

It had been a joyous, blissful time. And now it is past, and all he has left is inside his head. Happy moments like so many gossamer threads, easily torn asunder. He has to hold onto them, fiercely, lest they slip away. But the fear eats at him – that perhaps he’s already forgotten too much, that he’ll never recall precisely the grass green shade of Loki’s eyes, the carefree lightness of his mother’s laugh. The mornings they spent under the tree at the center of the Sun Garden, its boughs heavy with golden-skinned fruit, chasing each other round the massive trunk.

Sif finds him after awhile. She speaks, and Thor has to shake his head, to quiet the memory of childish laughter echoing through the branches.

“Apologies, Sif. What did you say?”

The warrior maid purses her lips. “I asked if you were coming to the sparring yard today.”

His limbs feel heavy and listless. “No. I don’t believe so.”

Sif glances to the waterfall that forms the southeastern border of the realm. The sun hides behind the city in the west, casting a premature twilight over this grey landscape of stone and sea.

Thor cannot see the falls from his chambers, and so he descended to the courtyard, made his way through the Hall of the Slain and the gallery that holds effigies of Asgard’s fallen nobility. He had avoided the Royal Gallery altogether.
There is a path, little traveled, which winds around the brink of the world, set high among the granite cliffs. The gleaming palace of Gladsheim looms behind. It is here Thor likes to stop and watch the silver sea dissipate among the stars. No one comes to this lonely spot. He doesn’t have to pretend here, to put on a regal face as he must in the throne room, or to smile and share jests as he does in the feasting hall.

No one except Sif, once she discovered where he has been disappearing to. Thor thinks she must have followed him. He would be annoyed at the presumption, but he can’t help admiring her skill at stealth. She has always been the better hunter. If Loki had but applied himself to the endeavor instead of complaining, Sif could have had a real rival. The thought makes him smile, but his mirth melts away quickly, like snow in the warm spring rain.

“It is as if you never came back from the funeral,” Sif says suddenly.

Thor turns, frowning. Sif gestures at the waterfall. “We sent Loki to his second life over that edge. It might have been an empty boat, but it was supposed to settle his spirit. It was supposed to be a farewell – and yet, here you are, week after week, still staring like you’re waiting for the ashes to rise on the breeze and reform the boat and Loki both.”

His ire surges like it hasn’t in months. “You would have me forget him? Toss away his memory like so much refuse?”

Sif stomps her foot and hisses out a breath. “No, you idiot, listen to me! I ask you not to forget your brother, but to remember yourself!” She narrows her eyes at him. “It has been months. You might be able to fool the court, to fool Fandral and Volstagg, but you cannot fool me. Nor Hogun, I might add. You have hidden yourself away, Thor, and you won’t let anyone find you.”

Abruptly as it came, his ire disappears. “How? How do I find myself if I do not know who I am without him? Do you know, I cannot remember a time before he was there?”

Thor’s fingers dig into the flesh of his palm. “He was a constant in my life, constant as the stars and the moon. And, it’s –” He struggles to articulate the depth of his feelings. This had never come easily to him. “I just keep expecting he’ll be around the next corner I turn. That he’ll appear one night, slipping from a shadow, returned from some long journey. It’s - the moon may hide its face for a time, but you know it will always return, if you only wait. I keep thinking Loki will return to us – and every time he doesn’t, I have to remind myself that he’s gone.”
Sif grips his shoulder tightly. He looks into her wide, hazel eyes, and sees a portion of his grief reflected there. “I know, Thor. I know.”

They are silent a moment, encased in sorrow. Thor feels it constrict his lungs and chest, wind around his heart.

“That is why I believe you have the right of this. Descending to Midgard, I mean,” Sif continues.

Thor is taken aback. “I thought—”

“You thought I would disagree?” She smiles softly. “It is good to know I can still surprise you after all these centuries.”

“But why?”

“It is as I said, Thor. You have hidden yourself away. Perhaps you needed to. To manage the court, the envoys from Jötunheim. To be there for your mother.”

“And my father,” Thor points out.

Sif looks at him and hums noncommittally. Before Thor can ask, she goes on. “But now it is time for you to heal yourself. And you cannot do it here in Asgard. There are too many eyes on you, expecting you to be a prince when you should be a brother.”

Thor’s throat is thick. He has not the words to express his gratitude. He hugs her instead. Sif pats his back when he releases her. “I must say, your last visit to Midgard did improve your temperament immensely.”

He laughs, a small, rusty sound. “Yes, I suppose it did. It is a curious realm, with curious creatures.”

“The humans certainly did capture your interest.”
“They did,” Thor muses, thinking of a woman who studies the stars.

“Will you return to the palace with me?” Sif asks.

With one last, lingering glance at the black edge of space, Thor agrees. “I must attend Mother anyway. I would like to thank her. I believe she is the one who finally convinced Father to grant me leave to travel to Midgard.”

They meander along the path in companionable silence. Despite his shieldsister’s presence, his thoughts drag and weigh at him too much to allow for idle conversation. She leaves him at the foot of the grand, sweeping staircase that leads up to the royal apartments.

“I will see you in the feasting hall tonight.” It sounds more like a threat than a promise, but he acquiesces. Thor plods up the steps slowly. Frigga will likely be at her wheel, or reading, or sitting in perfect stillness, her eyes far away.

His mother often lingers in her chambers, of late. Thor has found her on many occasions gazing up at the skyscape from her balcony, at the twining colors of the nebulae and brilliant pinpricks of stars. She holds her peace, but Thor can see that her thoughts lie with her second son.

Her second son, lost to the Void.

No. Thor pauses on the threshold, swallowing harshly. He will not taint his visit with his mother by dredging up such sorrow.

Entering without knocking, Thor sweeps into the room and is brought to a halt at the sight of the Queen with an audience. “Oh, er – my apologies, Mother. I did not know you were entertaining guests,” he says quickly.

One of the company, a weedy young man in apprentice’s robes, had dropped his teacup upon Thor’s sudden arrival and the loud thud of the door slamming into the wall. He winces, thinking of his mother’s constant reminders to mind his strength. A quick glance at least reveals none of the mosaic is damaged. The motif of delicate pale blue and purple willow-fly blossoms faintly glimmers with magic, petals waving in a nonexistent breeze.

Frigga gives him an even look. “Perhaps if you had announced your presence, my son.”
“Of course. I do apologize – I was distracted,” he repeats sheepishly.

An elderly woman, also a mage by the look of her enameled silver cuffs, rises from the chaise gracefully. “It is no matter, my prince. Our audience was near its end.”

The rest of the guests stand as well. Thor realizes they are all mages, dressed in the livery of the Academy. He cannot recall his mother meeting with more than one or two fellow seiðkona at a time.

Frigga joins them. “Please, come to me when you have discovered more. I will spend the night at my loom. Perhaps the weave will reveal an answer.”

The elderly woman nods. Thor feels that he should remember her name, but it escapes him at the moment. “Of course, my queen. May your Sight stretch a thousand leagues.” She and Frigga wear identical grim expressions. “I fear we may have great need of it.”

Thor frowns. “What answers do you seek, Mother?”

There is a moment of quiet and a round of exchanged glances. The assembled mages all appear reluctant to speak. He is unpleasantly reminded of being an ignorant child, ushered away from the talk of his elders.

He asks again, with an edge of irritation. “It must be important enough to warrant such a gathering. What is it?”

The young seiðkonur, the only male amongst the group, pipes up, his voice high and uncertain. “It is – we sensed an unnatural shift high in the atmosphere, over the southern fields. Such an anomaly would have required a great deal of power to –”

The woman cuts him off with a stern look. “There is no need to trouble yourself, Prince Thor. We only thought to bring it to the Queen’s attention for the sake of thoroughness. I am sure we will resolve the matter.”

Her tone is perfectly polite and deferential. Thor tries to push down a petulant response, but does
not succeed. “I am not troubling myself. But if this matter is worth bringing to the Queen’s attention, I would like to know of it.”

Before his banishment, Thor would have shrugged and not given it a second thought. But now, he has no desire to be coddled. He wonders just how long the court has been stepping carefully around him, with condescending reassurances and platitudes, while they approach his Mother or Father to discuss their true concerns.

Did – did they come to Loki, as well? He had never noticed, but he had also never paid very close attention.

Was Thor only brought in for war councils, for sessions relating to military strategy? Did they all just see him as a weapon, to be wielded as he wields Mjölnir, simply directed at a battlefield and loosed?

*I cannot be a king who speaks only the language of war. My lust for battle drove me to Jötunheim, cost me my father’s trust and my mother’s peace. Cost me my younger brother.*

Frigga’s brow creases ever so slightly. “Thor,” she says softly. He tries not to bristle at her conciliatory tone. “I would have asked you to attend this meeting had I known you were concerned with matters of *seidr*. I simply thought you would be occupied with preparations for your sojourn on Midgard.”

Thor is chastened with her words. He has never shown much interest in the Academy of Mysteries, nor the study of magic. Outside of admiring the more useful of Loki’s tricks while on a quest or campaign, he cannot remember the last time he’d mentioned it.

“I have not given you cause to think differently, Mother,” he admits. “But if you would – the next matter that arises concerning such subjects, I would like to be included. If I am returned from Midgard.”

His proposal raises eyebrows amongst the mages, but none speak. Frigga studies him for an unnerving moment, before nodding. “Very well, my son.”

The head mage glances between the two members of the royal family. She inclines her head to Frigga, then Thor, and the rest of them follow her example. “We shall take our leave, my queen. My prince.”
“Thank you, Isli.”

They file out. Thor is left alone with his mother, and suddenly struggles to meet her gaze. She ushers him to a cushioned seat. A curtain of warm yellow light falls across the room, casting long shadows. His mother sits beside him and sips from a delicate silvered cup. Thor can feel her regard and tries not to squirm.

“Why the sudden interest in the Mage’s Council?” Frigga asks lightly.

“I—” Thor pauses, and sighs. He had told himself he would not speak of Loki, but he is helpless to stop his thoughts from circling back to him. “I never realized how little I knew of magic. I always just… relied on Loki to explain or cast workings. Perhaps if I had…”

“Thor,” his mother says gently. “Loki’s fall cannot be reduced to portions of guilt, to be doled out amongst us like so many horns of mead. We may never know what might have been. But you cannot burden yourself with the weight of words unsaid.”

“But – I was his brother—”

“And I his mother.”

At the sight of his mother’s shadowed face, Thor’s grief over his brother turns swiftly to rage. How could Loki – how could he do this to their family? He had to have known exactly how much pain he was inflicting. The selfishness of such an act takes his breath away.

Frigga smooths a hand through his hair. “I think some time on Midgard would do you well.”

“Sif said the same.”

“I knew I liked her.”

“You always did say she was the wisest of my shieldmates.”
She smiles at him. “Will you see Jane?”

A flush rises in his cheeks. “I thought perhaps I might seek her out.”

“A visit should be in order. You deserve any share of happiness you can find, my son. And I have never heard you speak anything but praise for her.”

“I think you would like her. She is kind.” Jane had taken him in when he had nothing, banished and shamed, and sought no reward, demanded no recompense. He had promised to return, but failed in that as well. Thor hopes to see her, to thank her. He does not think past that. He does not dare to. Jane might well be angry and hurt at his absence. He will not force his presence on her if she does not wish it.

“True kindness is as rare as a dewdrop in winter, and should be treasured where it is found,” Frigga says. “If you see that in her, I know I will like her.”

Thor glances down at his lap. “How did you convince Father to let me go?”

“In many years of marriage, Odin has learned to heed my counsel. Drawing the wrath of the Queen of Asgard is no trifling thing,” Frigga teases.

“As I well know. Thank you, Mother.”

“Will you attend the feast tonight?”

“I promised Sif. I should probably go to my chambers and bathe if I am to be ready in time.” Thor stands, and presses a kiss to his mother’s cheek. “I will see you there.”

“Until then, Thor.”

He crosses the room, but hesitates at the door. “What do you seek at the loom?”
Frigga sighs. “Something stirs. Something hidden in the darkness. I seek the shadow it does not cast.”

Thor’s brow creases with worry. “Shadow?”

“I will know when I see it. Have no fear, Thor. Summer is nearly upon us, and the days are long. Shadows have no power here in Asgard.”

It is comfort given to a child, succor for that untroubled lad he once was. He smiles at his mother, but privately disagrees.

*There are shadows at the heart of Asgard. It is only that this place shines so golden and bright, they are all but impossible to see.*
We are continuing the saga of Virgo's laptop woes! The one I was borrowing after my last comp bit the dust has now also bit the dust. I'm beginning to think it's me, not them. Anyway, hopefully I can get a new one in the next few months, and that will make writing/updating way easier. Fingers crossed. (Writing long-hand is slow.) For now, I want y'all to know I am still most definitely working on this story, don't let any chapter waits make ya think different!
(Also, I'm astonished that so many people are reading this and commenting. Just wanna say thanks - seriously, don't think I would of ever had the motivation to work on completing this story without the support.)
Hope you enjoy.

From the margins of A Green and Splendid Majesty by Head Mage Tlykiri Kynse yn a Felyse, located in Asgard’s library, on loan from the prestigious Ljósálfar Institute for Magickal Philosophy (L.I.M.P.) of Alfheim

For any future readers of this text - THIS AUTHOR IS A BUFFOON.

Seidr has nothing to do with the sanctity of plant life. Such a supposition is ridiculous. It is not some mystical spirit that has a care about whether or not you’ve sprinkled every leaf with your joyously happy tears in thanks for their sacrifice in allowing you to eat them.

It is a force that pervades all Nine Realms, borne from the shifting currents of energy, the ebb and flow of heat and light and vibration that pulses through our universe. It exists independently of our myths and misconceptions of it. It is intimately connected with the motion of celestial bodies, their spins and circuits, their push and pull. It radiates from the intensely hot centers of stars just as it does from the infinitesimal star-hearts that form the tapestry of life.
So - no. Seidr does not come from the petals of a pretty flower. Seidr is the flower, seidr is the ground the flower sprouts from, and seidr is the decomposing mass it becomes once it has been cut and carried off by some little sprite in the name of preserving beauty.

Why am I wasting time writing in the margins of this book? No one will read this but me.

I should spend my time composing my own text.

Loki’s Guide to Seidr

Unconventional Seidr for the Enlightened Mage

Not Your Allfather’s Seidr: A Book of Extraordinarily Destructive Spells

The Unconventional Mage’s Reference Library

I rather like that last one.

XXXIV

The realm echoes through his mind. Lukas follows the currents of power, teasing them out, one by one. It is surprisingly difficult - like peering into the water of a murky, muddy delta, with freshwater meeting saltwater, dredging up silt and sand and rock until it is all a great churning mix,
its component parts indivisible.

Midgard’s *seidr* is constantly changing. Lukas tastes a tang of salt, looks deeper, and finds a thread of ocean water amidst the tumult. He traces it, feeling his way almost to its source, only to find it contaminated with river mud.

The alluvial metaphor helps him to visualize the influx of sensory information. The *seidr* he perceives in the earth is the river mud; the *seidr* emanating from stellar energy captured by the great Midgardian oceans is conceptualized as saltwater. The artificial divisions are helpful - to a point. Until he loses sight of where the thread of power began and where it leads, and is forced to concede defeat and release it back into the whole.

Lukas breathes in deeply. Discarding the image of a delta, he simply lets the ambient *seidr* fill his mind.

The scent of freshly overturned soil fills his nose. Each flower is laid out before him, even with his eyes firmly closed. Gentle sparks of energy, glowing against the dark, vibrating as they soak up the light of Midgard’s sun, mark the location of each sprout. The tangle of plant life spreads like a star map across the backs of his eyelids.

His meditation is most rewarding in the garden. It always has been. Once, he closed his eyes beneath the shade of an expansive apple tree, leaning up against the silver-white bark, with pale green leaves crowning the branches overhead, dappling the ground with delicate shadows.

Such trees cannot be found on Midgard. Lukas must make do.

He dives back in. Conjuring the delta in his mind’s eye, Lukas examines the energy signature of the human realm as a whole, rather than picking out the parts. Chaotic and tumbling and colorful though it might be, there has to be an overlying structure. Some kind of organization. If he is to detect any fluctuations, Lukas must know how the realm feels at its base level.

There is something… dark, hidden, lurking beneath the water. An almost familiar echo, like a shout reverberating through an enormous cavern. It feels - large, and empty. Like Lukas could fall right through. Strangely devoid of the pulse of life, for such a thriving realm as this. He concentrates fiercely, but the sensation slips away.

The need to construct this sort of magical atlas has been niggling at him ever since he touched the
The shadow beast’s skull, in the laboratory of the pair of S.H.I.E.L.D. scientists. Actually, even before that, when he learned Raina had used the Ring. He should have sensed such powerful magic being enacted. But this need grew more urgent when he discovered the skeleton of the beast. If there are portals large and stable enough to allow such a creature to cross the boundaries of the realms, he must know of them. Lukas will not be caught off his guard.

Knowing the location of both openings is vital, that he might know what to expect to emerge, and if needed, that he might know where he can escape to at a moment’s notice.

Besides, he supposes the humans could be in danger if such portals remain opened and unknown. Any protection he can offer on that score would surely be valuable in a trade.

This partnership with S.H.I.E.L.D. is looking more and more advantageous. He has Coulson’s attention. And his suspicion. The agent is convinced Lukas knows more than he is saying. Now, he must ease the agent into the truth. The partial truth, of course. It wouldn’t do to give him a fatal shock all at once. Better to lay a trail, slow and tantalizing, and draw Coulson along, allow him to think he has come to the conclusion Lukas wishes him to reach by the strength of his own intellect.

Once he has convinced Coulson, and Coulson his superiors, of his usefulness and potential - once he has hinted that his power and expertise extend farther than a human could dare to imagine - then he will be able to make any request and be virtually assured it will be granted. What wouldn’t S.H.I.E.L.D. give him in exchange for his full cooperation? To be able to leverage the seidr of a master, with eons of accumulated knowledge, a prince of the golden realm -

A thick, furry body barrels into him, knocking him flat on his back only by virtue of his surprise.

“Pickles!” A young, high-pitched giggle grates on his ear, a few paltry feet away.

Lukas opens his eyes. Three children peer at him. Connor giggles again. “Why are you sleeping in the backyard?” Clayton asks, wiping at his nose and rubbing his hand on his shirt.

“I was not sleeping,” Lukas says. “I was meditating.”

Clayton stares at him blankly. “Oh. Let’s play swords!”

“Yeah!” Connor pipes up.
“Maybe Lukas doesn’t wanna be bothered by two little snotbuckets,” their older sister interjects.

“Who you callin’ a snotbucket? I saw you pick your nose at breakfast yesterday.”

“Did not!”

“Yuh-huh!”

Caroline shoves her brother to the ground and kneels on his chest. “Take it back!”

Lukas despairs of ever having the precious silence and solitude needed to focus. “Fine. Go and get your training equipment. And may I remind you - we do not play swords,” he adds, with palpable disgust.

All three of Roseanne’s grandchildren leap to their feet, tussle forgotten. They return with four long wooden poles. Caroline tosses one to Lukas, who snatches it from the air without looking, so that he might hear their exclamations of awe.

“Remember your stance,” he instructs. Pickles watches curiously, big black eyes fixed on Lukas. The children mirror him, side-face, with their feet planted shoulder-width apart and wooden poles raised in their dominant hand. Lukas himself can switch, but prefers his right for swordwork and his left for writing. Being able to alternate his grip in the midst of a bout has proven gratifyingly successful in unbalancing his opponents. Any unpredictability is an asset.

He corrects the placement of their feet, and adjusts Connor’s hand upon his weapon, feeling a certain sympathy for his own swordmaster as he does so. Lukas had not been an enthusiastic pupil in this subject. Diligent enough, yes, lest he be summarily embarrassed by the younger cohort in the training yard. That happened enough in duels with his own peers. He would not let himself be shamed by some stripling guardsman.

Lukas is a fair hand with a sword, these centuries later, yet he still prefers a pair of daggers, surely to the horror of his old weathered swordmaster Ylfi. But he is more than skilled enough to instruct this motley band.
The impromptu lesson mostly consists of letting Clayton and Connor throw themselves at Lukas, waving their pikes wildly, and demonstrating exactly why that will not be effective in a true fight. Caroline is more cautious, observing Lukas with a keen eye, then attempting to mimic his movements. She shows infinitely more promise than her brothers.

Whacking Clayton sharply on the backs of his legs, he observes, “That would surely be crippling if I did not wield this poor wooden imitation of a sword. You must watch my movements, not simply concentrate on coordinating your own.”

Clayton scrunches his nose up and stomps his feet. “S’not fair! You’re better than me!”

“Of course my swordsmanship is superior. I have been training since I was a child.”

Caroline hefts her wooden pole over her shoulder, looking at him with interest. “Really? How old were you when you started?”

“Your brother’s age, perhaps,” Lukas says thoughtfully.

“My age?” Clayton asks.

“No. Your younger brother.”

“But I’m only eight!” Connor squeaks.

Lukas is not certain how their lifespans compare. The boy looks the right size. “Yes, well, I had received my first dagger that year, and was insistent on learning to use it.”

Insistent on not being left behind.

Clayton’s brown eyes light up. “Do you think Mom will -”

“No,” Caroline interrupts. “Mom’s not giving you a dagger for your birthday. She doesn’t even know we’re doing this. Neither does Gramma.”
Lukas pauses. “Your grandmother… would not approve?”

Caroline snorts. “Course not. She says fighting’s never the solution.”

“But - your brother is nearly a man. Surely he has begun his training.”

She gives him an odd look. “Clay’s only turning twelve this year.”

Lukas bites his tongue. Midgard is a different realm, necessarily with different customs. Perhaps the Midgardians do not provide their children with weapons. Putting the absurd notion aside to consider later, he nods. He should not display his ignorance in this matter. “I… suppose your grandmother would not approve of weapons training at this young age,” he says slowly, gauging his words by Caroline’s expression.

Laughing, she shakes her head. “No way. Your mom musta been pretty cool.”

Lukas swallows. I don’t have a mother, he wants to say. Yes, she was lenient with me, he wants to say as well. I tried to make her proud of me. I didn’t know. I didn’t know she wasn’t mine.

He says nothing.

Connor drags the end of his pike in the dirt, carving a circle around his feet. “Was it real dangerous where you grew up?” he asks. “Is that why you hadda have a dagger?”

Clayton jumps in eagerly. “Didja have to beat a lotta people up? Didja have sword fights?”

“People in England don’t carry around swords anymore. Uh - do they?” Caroline tilts her head in question.

Lukas looks between the three of them. Best to go with this explanation rather than fabricate more and be caught in a lie. “Yes… England is a very dangerous place. Children are not safe in the street without a dagger in their sheath.” For all he knows, it could be true.
“Wow.”

“I guess British people are always gettin’ in duels,” Clayton points out. “Mrs. Swanson said so in Social Studies. They all wear red coats, ya know.”

“You’re so dumb -”

Thankfully, Caroline is cut off by Roseanne. “Kids! Your momma will be here soon, so come on in and get your bags ready!”

His phone buzzes after the children have gone inside.

*Any word on that report?*

Agent Roberts. She had conveyed Coulson’s request a week ago. The senior agent wants him to compile a threat assessment, he thinks she called it, on the Ring and its abilities. Captain Rogers must have taken Lukas’s warning to heart.

*v soon!!1*

He adds one of the little yellow faces Caroline showed him. The one that sticks out its tongue. They seem to put the agent off.

The sigh is inherent in her return message. *Okay… I’ll keep an eye out for it.*

Going to put the phone away, he’s startled by another buzz. *By the way - we’ve got a lead on Raina.*

Lukas immediately dials her number.

“Hello?” she says.
“You have found Raina?”

“No, not yet. But we did figure out where she went after DC.”

“Well?”

“The Big Apple.”

“She went - where?” Lukas asks in bewilderment.

“You know. New York City,” Roberts explains. “We tracked her there. Seems like she was off-loading a shipment of whatever was in those crates at the warehouse. Quick way to make some cash. Being a fugitive must be expensive.”

“And what exactly is she peddling?” Lukas waits for the evasion.

“Just - some equipment. Lab stuff.”

None of the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents will tell Lukas what was recovered from the crates, abandoned by Centipede during the invasion of their base of operations. Which naturally makes him all the more determined to find out. He already knows of the Ring - what could be more important?

I can think of one thing.

“Are we about to have a rash of villainous microscopes making their way into children’s classrooms?”

“It’s not schoolteachers we’re worried about, unfortunately.” Roberts’s sigh crackles over the connection. “Look. I’m gonna talk to Coulson. See if I can’t convince him to bring you in on this.”

Curiosity pricks at his skin. “And why would you need a lowly historian?”
“You know Raina. You’ve seen her operation, and you’re up to date with most of what we know regarding her plans. Besides, you have good instincts. I think you could be an asset. I mean, that is your job, isn’t it? To consult on things?”

“Coulson hasn’t taken the badge back just yet.”

“Right. But there’s some things I have to clear with him before I can tell you any more.”

“I await with bated breath.”

“Ha-ha. This would probably involve a trip to New York. You up for that?”

Another screaming match breaks out in the kitchen. The children’s shrill voices float through the opened windows.

“Yes. Most definitely.”

He can hear the smile in Agent Roberts’s voice. “Okay. Talk to you soon.”

“Goodbye.”

Lukas settles back into his spot. The earth holds onto the warmth of the day, and the grass is soft. Closing his eyes, he throws his focus back into meditation.

He has little doubt that he will soon be too occupied to familiarize himself completely with this realm’s seidar. S.H.I.E.L.D. keeps nudging his plans into position. Their goals have been beautifully aligned thus far.

And I will keep it that way, as long as I deem prudent. Then, who knows? He might have the entirety of the Nine Realms open to him. Courtesy of a little blue key.
Sorry for the long hiatus. The holiday season is nuts at my work, and it really does drain me. I kinda lost sight of where I wanted to go for a bit, but I'm back at it, I think. Writer's block is a tricky lil thing. Next chapter should be up much faster though. Also - I got a new laptop! So that should help too. Hope you enjoy - lemme know if something don't make sense. I've read this so many times I'm kinda blind to it now, ya know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From the Daily Bugle, page 6a

Cashier Dead in Armed Robbery at Paulson’s Spirits

One man is dead this morning as the result of an armed robbery at Paulson’s Spirits, a liquor store in Queens that has been a staple of the local neighborhood for three decades. Terry Sivens, 37 years old, was pronounced dead at the scene.

Mr. Sivens had worked for John Paulson, the owner of the liquor store, for twelve years. “Terry was a good guy,” Paulson said this morning, on the sidewalk outside his business, while he watched the local police and agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation string up crime tape and secure the scene. “Just a real hard worker. Opened up the store every morning for me. I never had a problem with him. He was trustworthy.”

The two alleged assailants are now in custody, says a spokesperson from the FBI. It is not yet clear why the FBI has become involved in the investigation, and they have refused to release any further
Paulson says he hopes to be allowed access to his business soon. “I want to clean up and get back to business as usual. Terry would have wanted that. He never wanted a fuss.” When asked about plans to reopen, Paulson says, “I don’t know. I only saw through the window, but it looked a real mess in there. I think the guys trashed the place when they tried to rob Terry. Maybe tried to burn it down.”

Neighbors are shaken at the incidence of violence. Adrienne Rodriguez, a local grandmother who lives in the building adjacent to Paulson’s Spirits, tells the Daily Bugle that the area has never been prone to gang activity. “We’re all just families living here,” she says. “I don’t know how such a terrible thing could happen right next door.”

The identities of the two men who were arrested have not been released.

Tessa Jacobsen, reporting from the Crime Desk

Coulson eyes the destruction. Shattered glass sprinkles the linoleum, in and around puddles of variously colored liquids. The stench of alcohol burns the inside of his nose. This is the last place I would have ever thought to find them.

Fitzsimmons approach, both of the scientists tugging awkwardly on their black FBI windbreakers. They exchange glances before looking to Coulson. “It’s most assuredly the same weapon that caused all this mayhem that also killed the cashier,” Simmons tells him. “Me and Fitz agree.”
Coulson nods. It’s not exactly news. He’d taken a look at the body himself, posing as the special agent in charge of the scene. Half of his stomach had been disintegrated, a gaping hole carved out of his abdomen. The cashier must have tried to dodge the blast.

The body should have been completely disintegrated, though. If the weapons are what he thinks they are. Unless... what ever happened to the first gen versions? Those hadn’t been as powerful. Not like Phase II. He needs to check with Fury, after they wrap up at the crime scene.

He winces, thinking about that inevitable phone call. This is the last thing they need, after Clint’s debriefing. Since Barton’s jaunt to Southeast Asia, and his subsequent report, the upper echelon of S.H.I.E.L.D. has been running around chasing their own tails. No one knew what to do with the information, or the ship itself. Their only solution, so far, had been to post a team out there, to keep people out, and keep an eye on it. Fury is so annoyed at the lack of answers from his subordinates that he’s considering bringing Stark in on it. That’s how Coulson knows he’s rattled.

And now he’s in a dingy New York City liquor store, robbed by two assailants with top-secret S.H.I.E.L.D. prototype weapons developed from the ultra top-secret Tesseract project. Yeah. Fury’s gonna blow a gasket.

“I think you’re right,” he tells Leo and Jemma. “The damage is unmistakable.”

They exchange another glance, and Coulson feels a prickle of irritation. Jemma steps forward tentatively. “Um, sir, excuse me, but unmistakable as what? What is it that caused this damage?”

She looks toward the thin black cases, locked against everyone who didn’t match his, Fury’s, Hill’s, or three other top level S.H.I.E.L.D. agent’s biometric signatures. That had been his first priority when he secured the scene. Coulson had arrived before the others - the report had come through early, nearly five in the morning, passed up along the ranks because it had pinged some keyword algorithm the techs in the Cupboard had implemented.

He gives them a regretful smile. “Sorry, guys. That’s need-to-know.”

Fitz grumbles. Jemma frowns. “I’m going to collect some more samples,” she says firmly. Coulson knows she won’t bother arguing. She’ll just try to figure it out on her own. Fitz will help, of course.

*If I have my way, it won’t be need-to-know for long.*
Fury is finally coming around. With so many developing situations to juggle, all potentially disastrous in their own way, they need a multidisciplinary team capable of dealing with and adapting to threats in real time. STRIKE teams won’t cut it. They’re a blunt weapon. His own small task force investigating abnormal phenomena is closer - but he wants to expand his talent pool, outside of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents and consultants with higher level clearance.

In his bid to convince Fury, Coulson had hinted about a certain Initiative, one that’s been kept on the backburner for several years. Fury has grand plans where that’s concerned, and Coulson is fervent in his belief that he’ll somehow pull it off. So he’d mentioned assembling certain individuals in this special task force, to see how they work with each other, to test their skills as a team, to determine their compatibility for any future, official endeavors… and Fury’d known exactly what he meant.

S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t have jurisdiction everywhere. Which, of course, doesn’t always stop them, but it does make things more difficult. Having a well-known, semi-public team that can be called upon by many governments and organizations that might otherwise be leery of American authority figures could open up a world of different opportunities. And having this hypothetical team still broadly supported by and tied to S.H.I.E.L.D., while being a step removed from its command structure, could be a hell of a coup for Fury. Being an agent of a shadowy black ops organization has its perks, don’t get him wrong. Coulson has no problem with compartmentalization - that’s just a fact of the job. But not when it gets in the way of accomplishing important goals. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s real work is to protect people. And excessive secrecy is often limiting, in the new age of globalization and communication at the press of a button.

This group could be a dry run. Because things are changing, and S.H.I.E.L.D. might need all the help they can get in the next few years. It won’t always be mysterious lights on the horizon and mythical hammers. A real threat could fall from the sky at any moment.

“Agent Coulson. You called?”

He turns. Lukas Eld stands before him, frowning up at the grey sky as drizzle settles in his sleek black hair.

“You read the brief?”

“Yes, on my way here. A burglary and murder, correct?”

“Yep.”
“Agent Roberts said this is connected to Raina’s current whereabouts. Was she mistaken? Or was this liquor merchant a secret S.H.I.E.L.D. agent?” He flicks a lock of wet hair off his forehead, aiming another faint expression of distaste up at the iron grey clouds. “Perhaps you’re simply partial to the vodka they serve in this… establishment.” Lukas eyes the bars over the windows of the storefront.

Coulson waves toward the door. “Why don’t you go and take a look around. Talk to Simmons and Fitz. See what you think.”

He scrutinizes the agent for a moment. “Very well.” Lukas strides through cracked glass door with a sweep of his long grey trench coat.

*Time to show me if you’re worth all this trouble, Eld.*

Coulson ducks under the tarp of their impromptu command center. The mobile base is disguised as an FBI crime lab van, but the equipment inside is decades ahead of anything the Feds possess. Fitz has packed all his little toys, of course, and he’d insisted on bringing anything with Stark Industries emblazoned on the side. Kid’s a fanboy. Naturally. Coulson’s going to do everything in his power to make sure that Stark never finds out.

The command tent is set up in the alley on the side of the liquor store, tucked away as far from the street as possible. Coulson sneaks a peek through a window that’s not covered in advertisements for cheap beer. Fitz is talking at Eld, gesturing wildly, pointing to a portion of the wall that had been disintegrated. The consultant looks thoughtful.

Eld is just one of the potential members of this multidisciplinary team. Coulson’s decided to step up his timetable for recruitment. He would prefer to keep him as a consultant for a few years, build up his loyalty slow, feel out his trustworthiness. But things are moving quickly. And he’d helped them recover Raina’s ring. Coulson had seen the temptation there, when Eld had handed it over. And he still handed it over. That meant something, though Coulson hasn’t precisely figured out what.

With that thought lingering, Coulson answers an incoming video call. The SI rollout super-thin plasma screen lights up with an annoying little animation, a cartoon rotary phone, which couldn’t look sillier given the superior communications tech it’s displayed on. He’s been waiting for Agent Aguda to get back to him, to confirm some suspicions he has about Eld. Before he recommends him to Fury for this pseudo-team.
He accepts the call. A man flickers into view, the crown of his head bald, his dark brown skin gleaming in the fluorescent light behind him. Thick glasses rest on the tip of his long nose. He smiles at Coulson, who returns the expression warmly.

“How’s the new posting?”

Darrell Aguda rolls his eyes. Coulson can see the movement with crystal clarity over the connection, and it rankles him that this is courtesy of the recent influx of Stark Industries money and technology into every facet of S.H.I.E.L.D. life. Omnipresent, like the god Tony Stark thinks he is.

The connection transmits the annoyance in his voice just as clearly as his features. “It’s like a goddamn soap opera here. A bunch of hyper-caffeinated assholes bickering about electromagnetic fluctuations and the merits of various platinum alloys.”

“They giving you a hard time?” Coulson’s surprised. Darrell is largely unflappable.

“Well, not intentionally. I don’t think.” He sighs. “I’ve just somehow become the one appointed to break up all the squabbles. Probably because I’m the same age as most of their dads. I mean, really, Coulson, are these techs fresh out the Academy? It’s like running a daycare full of overgrown children. Who’ve all been issued handguns.”

Truth be told, Darrell is looking a bit ragged round the edges, with tired lines creasing near the corner of his eyes. “Believe me, I know how you feel,” Coulson commiserates. “If I could, I’d have you back here at the Hub in a heartbeat. But Director Fury is in charge of Project Pegasus personnel. Sorry. Though you could complain to Dr. Selvig - he hand-picked a few of them.”

Darrell snorts. “Yeah, no. I don’t think so. Guy’s a nut.”

“He’s eccentric. It’s supposed to be a good thing for scientists.”

“Eccentric’s a euphemism. But enough bitching - I took a look at that report you sent me.”

“And?”
“Guy’s clean.”

Coulson stifles a groan. He knew that. He’s known that. More information, new information, is what he needs now.

“Too clean,” Darrell continues.

“Too clean,” he repeats. “How?”

“Tell me something. Is he straight-laced? I mean, like so straight-laced he could be mistaken for a self-flagellating monk?”

Coulson balks. “No. No. I mean - straight-laced? God, no.” After he says it, he’s not quite sure what prompted the immediate denial.

Darrell laughs. “That’s what I thought. ‘Cause from his file and online footprint, I woulda said that Lukas Eld is either a real repressed, antisocial shut-in, or he’s hiding something.”

Coulson leans forward, nose nearly touching the video screen. “Go on.”

“Nothing in the report your little mice assembled strikes me as false or feels fabricated. That’s what’s so amazing about this guy. It’s all legit. He’s in the registry at the university he attended, his papers are published in online journals, he comments on his peers’ papers. He has birth records, hospital records, death records for his parents. He attended high school, excelled at his A-Levels, was even a junior member of a local historical society, for crissakes. The classical nerd, you might say.”

Coulson snorts, imagining Lukas Eld as a skinny little kid wearing a pair of taped-up glasses and a pocket protector, straight out of a comedy set in a suburban high school in the 1980s. Even in the little flight of fancy, he can’t picture Eld sniveling and meek. More like convincing the jocks to stuff themselves into lockers.

“But it’s the little details that are missing, y’know? I mean - he doesn’t have a personal email. No social media. There aren’t any casual, candid pictures of him online. Not with friends, not drinking a beer or even just sitting next to another person.” Darrell shakes his head. “If I was just judging by his online presence, I’d say he’s got no friends and no life.”
“He lives with someone,” Coulson notes. “An old woman.”

“Well, that might explain it. I doubt they go out clubbing on Fridays.” Darrell rubs a hand over his forehead. “I dunno, Coulson. I don’t think it’s his real name. There’s nothing in his electronic history I can point to and say, this is a lie - but it just feels off.”

And doesn’t that just sum up Lukas Eld. He nods ruefully. “Thanks for taking a look, Darrell. I didn’t want to take you away from your work with Pegasus, but honestly, I’m considering bringing Eld in as a consultant and I wanted your opinion.” Or a confirmation. That there’s more to him than he wants us to think.

“Even if Lukas Eld is a fake identity?”

“We could use his expertise now. And figuring out what he’s hiding is just ammo against him, if he decides to misuse his position as a consultant. And if I keep digging until I uncover his real name, I’ll have even more insurance. He doesn’t want us to know - so he must have a reason to hide it. I can use that.”

Darrell whistles. “You play a dangerous game, Coulson, but I’ll be damned if you aren’t good at it.” A frown creases his brow. “But I thought he was just a historian? How’s he gonna help us with - well, you know.”

“He’s an expert in Norse history and mythology.”

“Ah. Okay, I see your point. Thinking outside of the box, as it were,” Darrell says. “Well, Selvig might disagree, but at this point, I don’t think it could hurt to bring in someone with an unusual perspective.”

The weariness in his voice gives Coulson pause. “Not making much progress?”

Darrell shakes his head. “I don’t know, Phil. It’s like… it’s like it’s fighting us.”

Coulson tries to mask his alarm. The Tesseract is most definitely alien, but they’ve never seen any indication of sentience, no more than an intelligent supercomputer. Hell, Stark’s AI cracks jokes,
which is leagues beyond what the cube’s ever done. And Darrell is not the sort of agent to give credence to wild theories or fanciful speculation.

The agent covers his face with his broad, brown hands. “Christ, Phil, don’t listen to me!” He gives a rusty laugh. “God, I know that doesn’t make sense. I don’t know. Maybe I’ve been here for too long. The base is so isolated, and I work the night shift. My wife’s back home. It’s not exactly a recipe for mental stability.”

“If I get final approval from the Director, we could have a new, interdisciplinary team put together, and be out there in a few months. Then you could rotate home for a bit, recalibrate, as it were,” Coulson suggests.

“Yeah. Yeah, maybe you’re right.” Darrell gives him a half-smile. “Always glad to help you, Agent Coulson. Good luck with that guy.”

“I’ll need it. Thanks, Agent Aguda.”

The video screen winks off, and Coulson is left looking pensively at his own reflection.

No aspect of Darrell’s report is out of line with the man Coulson knows as Lukas Eld. Intelligent and well-spoken, but reserved and formal. Maybe he is a shut-in, or maybe that little town he lives in just doesn’t have much in the way of an internet connection yet. It’s plausible. But he still gets the feeling something is off, like Darrell said.

He thinks of his instinctual reaction to the question about Eld being straight-laced - why had he balked? On paper, Eld does sound like a ‘classic nerd,’ as Darrell said.

Sure, the guy had been conspiring to play both sides… but it wasn’t just that. There is something about Eld… he can’t put his finger on it. Coulson trusts his own judgment of character. It’s rarely failed him, even when questioned by his superiors and friends. Romanoff is a stellar example. Fury wanted her put down, after all. His recruitment of Clint Barton had been suspect as well. And now they were two of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s best agents. At least in terms of mission completion and skill level. Their methodology might be a bit destructive to physical property, but they get the job done.

Eld is different than Barton and Romanoff. Distinct skill-set, distinct personality. But Coulson’ll be damned if he doesn’t get that same sense of impending doom when considering what they’d do with free rein on a mission. Recklessness is the best word he can think to describe it - all three are
impulsive in their own way.

And Eld could be an asset, just like the other two. He’s sure of it. If he can convince Eld - and if his price isn’t too high.

But he’d be an idiot not to find out everything he can about Eld before letting him near the Tesseract. Having leverage over most of your coworkers is another part of the job. Not a lot of people are cut out for this line of work. But Coulson’s been at it for years, now. He’s a spy. It’s what he does, and it’s who he is.

S.H.I.E.L.D.’s not the CIA, though. He’s not just working for the American government, for one political leader or party. He came to S.H.I.E.L.D. - and he stays - because he believes at the end of the day, their main job is to protect the planet.

Call him crazy, but he thinks Lukas Eld can help.

*Speak of the devil and he shall appear.* The consultant himself slips into the makeshift command center, Fitz and Simmons trailing after him. “So? What do you think?” Coulson prompts.

Lukas peeks at him for a long moment, like he’s deciding what Coulson wants to hear most. Finally, he says, “The weapon that brought the liquor merchant low. The weapon that caused the destruction within his shop. I have never seen its like before.”

“And so here we stand, under a tarp next to two overflowing dumpsters.” Coulson spreads his arms out wide. “What does that tell you?”

“That S.H.I.E.L.D. has never seen weapons of this caliber before either,” Lukas posits. Then he narrows his eyes at Coulson, despite his purposefully blank countenance. “Or…” he says slowly, “That you have. And that is what worries you.”

Those green eyes, clear eyes, meet his, and damn, they’re perceptive. He wants Eld to make the connection between the Tesseract and the weapons, but he doesn’t want Eld coming to any conclusions about their manufacturers.

Fitz flicks his eyes between the two. “So how is this connected to Raina?”
“We have intelligence that indicates these weapons came from Centipede,” Coulson reveals.

“Raina evades you, but she is still able to sell her wares to petty criminals?” Lukas shoots him a skeptical look.

“Through a third party,” Coulson says. “We traced these weapons back to a warehouse near the pier. A local syndicate moves product through the area. I think Raina contracts out to them when she needs fast cash - and she’d need some now, if she’s gonna recoup the losses she took when we raided her base. From what the analyses indicated, that was her main setup. Now she’s lost major infrastructure, supplies, and manpower. She’s running, and she needs money to do that. I think she’s selling off her reserves.”

“And these weapons were part of those reserves?” Simmons asks. She slides open her phone, flicks through the pictures she took of the damage in the liquor store. “But where did she get them? If she had such powerful weapons as what took down that cashier - why didn’t she use them during our raid?”

“Maybe she knew they’d catch our eye,” Coulson says darkly. Like they’d done now. She’d been foolish, to sell off the weapons to some thugs, thugs that would use them recklessly and attract attention. Or maybe it wasn’t Raina who approved the sale. The local gang she contracted to do business for her might have let a couple fall off the back of the truck, gain some profit on the side. Then these two yahoos decided to knock off a liquor store and S.H.I.E.L.D. finds out.

That doesn’t answer the important question. The one Coulson keeps circling back around to. How did Raina get her hands on S.H.I.E.L.D. prototypes?

Well - when they get a hold of Raina, he plans on putting that damn ring on her finger and asking. And that day might be closer than he thinks, if a certain operative comes through.

He nods at the store. “Get anything else you need. A cleanup crew is scheduled to come out and take care of the evidence we don’t want lying around.”

“What else do we need, though?” Simmons protests. “The two men who committed the crime are in custody. We have the murder weapons right here. And you say you know where they came from. Why are we even here?”
“I imagine Agent Coulson wanted to see the extent of the damage these weapons are capable of,” Eld says. “Unless he is already familiar,” he adds, more softly.

Coulson ignores Simmons’s laser point gaze. “We couldn’t let the local LEOs handle this one. The Feds, either. This is one of our cases. And we’re still not sure how Raina ended up with weapons like these. Anything we find here could help us out.”

Fitz lugs out a black duffel bag from the back of the van. “In that case, I’ll be heading back inside. There’s a few new programs I want to try running to test the sensitivity of my mobile mass spec. C’mon, Jemma.” She follows him, tapping at her lower lip, by all appearances deep in some intense thought.

Lukas waits until Fitz and Simmons have left. He approaches the cases with the illicit weapons, and though Coulson hadn’t told him what was inside, runs a fingertip along the smooth black metal. “These are… curious objects.”

“Curious?” Coulson had been hoping for a bit more than that.

“I am not surprised Raina would have possession of such intriguing weapons. I _am_ surprised she parted with them.”

“Why is that?”

He raises a polished black brow. “Raina likes to believe she is elevated above her station, beyond common humanity, deserving of more. And these weapons are anything but common. There is something _otherworldly_ about them. Don’t you think, Agent Coulson?” There is a strange emphasis in his voice, an intent lurking under the words. A smile plays around his lips, a faint light of amusement in those green eyes.

_He does know they’re related to the Tesseract_, Coulson thinks. _He must. Or he’s just playing with me, to see what I reveal. Either one is likely._

“They’re weapons. Nothing otherworldly about that.”

“Yes. I suppose you are correct, in a way. The urge to harm our enemies is universal.”
“Do you often succumb to such an urge?” Coulson asks lightly.

Eld smirks. “I prefer to arrange for my enemies to harm themselves.”

That’s not precisely an answer, but he lets it go.

Eld folds his arms across his chest and looks at him. “Well. If I’m not here to speculate on these fascinating weapons, why am I here? I confess I do not see where my expertise could be useful in this particular case, other than in its tenuous link to Raina.”

“It’s not at this crime scene that I think you’ll come in handy,” Coulson admits. “But I thought it was important to bring you to New York, get you up to speed.” He glances at the analog watch on his wrist. “Because in thirty-six hours, I’m launching an operation that will end with Raina in our custody.”

“How?” Lukas asks, eyes narrowing. “If she has evaded S.H.I.E.L.D. until now, she is undoubtedly clever, adept at slipping from shadow to shadow. What makes you so confident you will catch her this time?”

“I have trustworthy intel on her location. At least, her location two nights from now.”

“This warehouse where she stores her weapons?”

“No. I don’t wanna risk going there just yet, and spooking either Raina’s people or the gang that sells her contraband. There’s too many elements involved, and if even one of these weapons is lost to the general population again, it could be a disaster.” Coulson gestures to the liquor store. “A man died here. A grisly, horrible death. But it could have been so much worse. These weapons have terrible potential in the hands of our enemies. We have to recover all of them, in one fell swoop.”

Lukas looks over his shoulder and pins Coulson with a stare. “And once you have her? What will you do with Raina?”

“I’m gonna put a ring on it.” He laughs at Eld’s puzzled expression. *Maybe he really does live*
under a rock. I guess we’ll find out. One way or another.

Chapter End Notes

I've been waiting to make a Beyonce joke since the beginning. Also, I got a tumblr recently. Idk what I'm doing really, so if y'all wanna ask me any questions or give me suggestions on who to follow and whatnot, feel free to do it there.

http://virgo-827.tumblr.com/
XXXVII & XXXVIII

Chapter Notes

So sorry this took so long. I got stuck on this part a while. But it's pretty damn long, so I hope that makes up for it a bit.
Also, thank you so much for the comments. Reading them gives me motivation that I am otherwise lacking due to some pesky mental issues.
Hugs and kisses, y'all

XXXVII

The mid-afternoon light poured in through the tall glass windows. Loki avoided the glare and the brightness, sitting in the shadow to its left, staring dully at the outside world. Midgard, in all its provincial glory.

That the sun had risen was a small mercy. Come nightfall, his dreams unsettled him. Dreams of the dark, of crawling things. He could not hear, he could not move, he could not see.

Last night, it had been different. He stood upon an icy plain and faced a monster. It had towered over him, blue-skinned and dripping with ichor. Repulsed, and with a wild anger, he had struck at it. Drove his blade into its chest, over and over, until the beast collapsed to its knees at his feet. At his feet, where it belonged.

Loki had paused. His blade hovered in the air. The beast looked up at him. No longer blue-skinned, but blue-eyed. Blond hair matted with blood. With its last breath, lips forming the word, brother -

He had shivered awake into a cold predawn light. It’s you. You’re the monster.
That he had momentarily forgotten was a travesty - he should have been swallowed by the Void, irrevocably swallowed, vanished into eternity, he should go back, fling himself -

Roseanne had come before his howling thoughts devoured him. Fetched him to the sitting room, where he now cloaked himself in shadow.

She returned, bearing a cup of mild tea. Setting it down on a table, she clucked her tongue at Loki - Lukas. Her hands grasped the arms of his chair. Without a word, and despite his sound of protest, she dragged the chair into the bar of sunlight that illuminated the wooden floor.

“Some sun oughta be good for you, Lukas,” she said.

It had been so long. He thought it would burn, that he would collapse into a cursed puddle. Instead, it felt warm, just barely discernible on his skin, like a whisper of a kiss. Something sparked in his mind, tingled down his spine. He blinked, wondering. Seidr?

His seidr was still alive. It hadn’t abandoned him completely in the Void.

He managed to smile faintly at the old woman. “There we are,” she replied, with a smile of her own. “Maybe you’d like to help me out in the garden today. If we plant the pansies now, they’ll be the first to bloom.”

A verbal response seemed too much effort. As did a denial. It was Lukas, not Loki, who nodded. She beamed at him, her blue eyes shining. He looked away, suddenly uneasy.

Roseanne pattered around, gathering equipment and seeds. He followed aimlessly. She directed him to a plot, half-shaded by the long, wandering branches of an enormous tree. They swayed, a curtain of greenery in a sweet breeze.

“Here we go.” Roseanne pulled on a pair of bright pink gloves and a spade. Rooting around in the dirt, she dug a series of shallow holes. “You next.”

She tried to hand him the spade. “Your turn,” she repeated. Her eyes were so blue, blue as the sky, blue as a man in a dream.
“It’s my turn, Loki, Mother says it’s my…”

_He shook his head fiercely, hoping the errant voice would rattle out of his ears. Roseanne pulled the spade away. “You don’t have to use it,” she told him._

_Loki stared at the bulb in his palm. The shell was covered in a tangle of old roots and dirt. Roseanne waited patiently, kneeling next to the tilled patch of earth._

_He knew what she meant him to do. He wasn’t thick-witted. But the motions stirred memories of other gardens, all perfectly manicured and flowering compared to this heap of overturned dirt. Other gentle looks from other women. Another Loki, who was blissfully ignorant of the thorny net of lies woven around him._

_Clawing at the earth with sudden fury and nothing but his own fingers, Loki carved a hole in the soil. He threw the bulb in._

_Roseanne blinked. “Well. That’ll work as good as anything.” His strangled breath came a bit easier when she didn’t comment._

_She seemed to know to let him alone that night, and the next. He had trouble determining just how much time was passing. It didn’t seem important. The flowers in the garden grew, he knew that. He helped Roseanne water the shy green sprouts, then the strong stems and leaves. The buds would bloom soon._

_He still found it difficult to look into her eyes. But she tried to make a point of it every time they spoke, which was too damnably often in Loki’s - Lukas’s opinion. She confronted him at dinner one evening._

_“I know you don’t wanna talk about where you came from,” Roseanne said softly. “But - is there anyone you want me to call? Anyone you wanna talk to? Surely there must be someone out there missing you.”_

_His hand clenched on the fork. The metal warped under his grip. “No.”_
“You sure? Really, Lukas, your family must be worried -”

The familiar black fury surged in his chest. “No!”

The elderly mortal blinked up at him. Her eyes were so blue that he wanted to scream. He couldn’t get away from them. Always looking.

He must have stood - must have made some violent motion, for he upset the table. The meal she made splattered across the floor. The fork crushed beyond repair in his fist. Loki dropped it and took an uncertain step away. The useless metal utensil clinked upon the tile.

“Lukas -”

He whirled around and rushed out of the room. The back door crashed into the wall, but he only heard his heart pounding. Stumbling down the creaking wooden stairs, he lost his footing and crashed onto his knees, his palms smacking into the dirt.

A helpless sob caught in his chest, he was reduced to crawling away, until he could no longer do even that. Head bowed, Loki trembled.

I have no family.

Lukas had no family. Loki did not either, that miserable wretch. His family was a lie. His entire life was a lie, some great jape of the Allfather’s. A passing amusement. How they must have laughed, when the little monster clutched at their hands and named them Mother and Father.

Seidr sparked around his fingers, wisps of emerald flame that threatened to devour the entire garden. Loki fought it down, though the urge lingered in his mind. To destroy. To run, and leave behind only ashes.

His vision was blurry with furious tears. When he glanced down, it took him a moment to recognize the cheery purple pansies. They poked up from the tentative spring grass, all alone in the corner of the yard Roseanne had marked off for him in case he wanted to expand.
The sight of the tiny blooms quieted something that howled in his chest. He had coaxed these life-forms into existence. He might not have done anything else worthwhile. He might not ever again. But this was something he had done with his hands, one thing that hadn’t been tainted by his touch.

They needed the kind warmth of the sun, not the heat of flames. He owed them that, these helpless little flowers.

Lukas owed them that.

XXXVIII

"You will not allow me to come?"

Lukas stares at Coulson. The agent smiles, mild and pleasant. "Nope. I told you. Your role will be to assist in the interrogation when we bring Raina in."

He taps his fingers on the table, thinking for a moment. "I have already travelled from Virginia at your behest. I am here and I am willing. It seems a simple waste of resources to bar me from your investigation."

"I'm not barring you. Your willingness is appreciated, but I don't need you for this operation. You're here on the subject of Raina, once we've got her in custody." Coulson shrugs. "You're a consultant. You're here to consult, not to engage."

He does not trust you. Of course he doesn't. And this time you cannot blame his reluctance on an
Coulson had seemed to believe Lukas’s account of escaping from the room Raina “held” him in, taking advantage of the disturbance caused by S.H.I.E.L.D.’s entry. And Roberts had neatly provided him an explanation for the destruction of the scrying device attached to his jacket. They believed the Ring had revealed him as a spy, and he’d crushed the device to prevent any S.H.I.E.L.D. technology from being discovered on his person. He hadn’t seen fit to correct them.

All the dangling threads tied up. Perfectly reasonable. Or so he had thought.

An echo of Raina’s words, from that dank warehouse basement, ring in his head. *You have no one, now. You’ve burned all your bridges.*

He holds a curse in, pressing his tongue hard against his teeth. Accepting Raina’s deal had been an ill-fated charade, worthy of his past life. But if it had worked… they might have both Raina and the Ring even now.

S.H.I.E.L.D. is not trustworthy. He had gleaned that from the first - they have their own agenda, and they will do what is necessary to guide it forward, despite what the pieces they are moving about think of that particular direction. Raina had seemed a fair alternative to get near the Cube.

Now, given his exposure, he understands that while the agency might not be esteemed for its honor, there are individuals within it that are committed to such principles. For a human value of honor, in any case.

Lukas has not earned Coulson's trust. He knows this, but he is having difficulty determining just how to go about gaining it. The agent is a man of action, not words. He knows well the shifting tides of speech, with that nebulous quality which can be truth and lie all at once.

He must prove to Coulson that he acts in the interests of the mortals with respect to Raina and her machinations.

"Very well. I shall remain here."
Coulson lets out a tiny breath of relief. "Good. That's good. Maybe you can get that report on the Ring done."

Lukas sighs and flicks a finger in acknowledgement. Coulson eyes him. “Raina still has a pretty solid motivation to want to put you out of commission - since you're one of the reasons she's on the run in the first place. I don't want her seeing you and getting any ideas. Especially now that I've got word she might be bringing several metahumans along."

“Metahumans?” Lukas asks, tasting the curious word.

“Someone with abnormal abilities, beyond the standard human baseline,” Coulson explains. “One of her guys, Chan, can conjure fire.”

Lukas sits forward in his chair. “A sorcerer?”

“No. Just a pyrokinetic.” He frowns, not quite understanding the distinction but not wishing to ask. Humans have little knowledge of the variation in seidr, Lukas has found.

Coulson stands up, sorting several papers into his beige folder. “S.H.I.E.L.D. tries to keep track of them. Get to them before Raina can.”

“To recruit them?” Lukas wonders at the agents he has met. If there is no visual indication of this meta blood, perhaps they can hide in plain sight.

Hide under a false skin, hide under a veneer of dull mortality, never letting on that there is a monster beneath...

Lukas shakes his head sharply. Coulson gives him an odd look, but answers. “Better that we recruit them than Centipede. I've been trying to get some on my team for a while now, but it's tough."

Now that has possibilities.

Lukas asks one more question, his voice soft, almost searching. "Can you blame them? They must be - frightened. Of themselves. The anomaly of their existence. After all, they must have once
believed they were no different than their peers. To find out otherwise..." He swallows, suddenly wishing he hadn't started speaking. "Must have been jarring," he finishes quickly.

Coulson peers at him with clear blue eyes, silent and thoughtful. He nods. "Yeah, I suppose it must have been," he says slowly. "I can't blame them. Most of them are scared, mistrustful. They've been exploited before - sometimes by our own government. So they don't trust S.H.I.E.L.D. I can't blame them, but it's frustrating."

The agent dips his head a little to meet Lukas's eyes. "But I hope, in time, they realize I want to help. And I think Fury's got metahuman recruitment as a serious objective for the future. I think they can have a place here in S.H.I.E.L.D."

Lukas nods mutely, and lets Coulson study him for a beat longer. He can nearly hear his mind calculating, tracing theories and reevaluating memories.

_That should provide a wealth of material for your speculation, Agent Coulson. Enjoy the diversion._

A knock sounds on the door. "Coulson?" Agent Roberts peeks her head in. "Can I talk to you for a sec?"

Coulson rests his briefcase on the now unoccupied chair. "Sure." He nods to Lukas. "Be right back." He steps into the hall with Roberts.

Lukas looks from the briefcase to the closed door. In the blink of an eye he has the case laid upon the desk. The locked latch pops with a touch and a whispered word. He flicks through the assembled papers, turning his mind to the American - no, English, he knows that - script, trying to recall the shapes that denote Raina’s name.

With half an ear to the conversation taking place between Roberts and Coulson in the hall, indiscernible to mortals, it takes him longer than he hopes to locate the information he wants. It’s a map, he realizes, staring at the paper in his hand, a thrill of triumph singing along his spine. _Raina’s hidden stash. The warehouse S.H.I.E.L.D. must plan to raid, after they capture her._

The Midgardian map markings are familiar to him, and it is the work of a moment to memorize it. He slips the papers back into their folders, replaces them in the briefcase. The lock tumbles into position with another tap of his finger.
“- at the actual site. We need to send a team,” Roberts says. Lukas blinks at the strain in her voice. He begins to listen closely, but the conversation is nearing its end.

“Even in a quinjet, Southeast Asia is too far. We need to bring Raina in first. The ship will hold until we’re done.”

“But Coulson -”

“I’m sure Fitz and Simmons are chomping at the bit to see an unsinkable ship, but they’re gonna have to wait. Clear?”

“Clear,” Roberts mumbles.

When Coulson opens the door, Eld is idly playing a game on his cell. The little colored bubbles pop quite satisfyingly when he lines them up in sequence. He has achieved a higher score than Caroline, a fact which infuriates her, given that Lukas doesn’t even know what an app is, oh my god, ugh.

“Hard at work, I see.” Coulson fetches his briefcase and his coffee. He doesn’t even flick a suspicious glance between Lukas and his personal effects. He suspects that is likely due to the presence of a lock rather than any faith in Lukas’s moral compass.

Lukas already knows Coulson does not trust him. Should not, given what Lukas plans to do next. But that is a passing thought, with all the weight of an easily swatted gnat. It is only an ill-fated charade if you are caught.

“With any luck,” Coulson says, “I’ll be able to give you a call by tomorrow morning. To ask you to come in and prepare for Raina’s interrogation.”

He lets some irritation prickle through his voice. “With any luck. I’ll be waiting.”

Sweeping out of his chair, he leaves Coulson and marches out of the S.H.I.E.L.D. outpost, into the grey grid of streets that line the isle of Manhattan in the city of New York. Between one block and the next, in the midst of a crowd of thousands, Lukas disappears.
The warehouse waits for him, a looming shape across a pier and an expanse of murky river water. Lukas is careful to remain unnoticed, casting magicks of concealment, of silence. Now that he is aware of electronic eyes, he can compensate for those as well. He studies the warehouse, wondering how Coulson uncovered such valuable information as Raina’s location.

He does not trust the sudden windfall of intelligence, nor Coulson’s newfound confidence in Raina’s capture. The tip could have been from a loyal servant of Raina’s, a trap, meant to deceive or confuse her opposition - even to ambush them during their assault. It could be from a lackey, dissatisfied with his position, looking to gather a monetary prize and not caring a whit for loyalty or honor. Or it could simply be wrong, and Raina will once again slip through their fingers.

Previously, he would have hoped for just that outcome. But those weapons, the ones from the liquor vendor’s murder... they hum with a subtle *seidr*, and the core of their power echoes, vast and cold and endless, mesmerizing in its very infinity. The weapons could only have come from one source.

The Tesseract.

Raina knows too much, from her cursed Ring and her own cunning, to be allowed near any form of the Tesseract’s power. And he is not convinced Coulson will be able to corner the woman successfully, not if she is in the company of these *metahumans*. Not to mention the thorny fact of the Tesseract being in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s possession. By simple logic, the one who has access to the Tesseract must also be the one to have created the weapons themselves. If Raina can get at their well-hidden secrets, if she knows their strategies and their goals… what hope do they have of predicting her actions, of apprehending her?

No matter. Lukas will simply have to investigate on his own. Verify this suspicious information. Level the playing field, as the mortals would say. Raina knows some of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s secrets, but not all of them. Not even Coulson knew what he was getting when he added Lukas Eld to the payroll.

The instinct is familiar. It has always fallen to him to balance others’ more reckless tendencies. Coulson is too eager to capture Raina, after his team’s last failure, and the pressure from his commander.

Lukas is not certain if the man took on the title Fury as a kenning, to communicate his lust for battle and to warn off potential enemies that might otherwise seek to cross him, or if the Fates intervened on the occasion of his birth - but Nicholas Fury is suited to his name. Though Lukas has only glimpsed him once, the man seems formidable. For a human.
He studies the outside of the building. Yet another warehouse. Are all of these constructions dens of human immorality? Their bland grey façades are becoming an unwelcome sight.

There is a spot, shaded by an overhang, tucked away around the side of a smaller outbuilding. Lukas focuses intently on it, fixes the location in his mind, and slips through the ether.

In a blink, he is across the river. A metal door is affixed to the south side of the building. Lukas, concealment magicks still intact, simply walks up and leans next to it. He has only to wait for someone to open the door and he can follow them in.

An hour passes. So inconsiderate of the criminal element not to be in place when he needs them. He begins reciting epic sagas in his head to stave off the boredom. Tapping his fingers on his arms, he hums, “In Niflheim, his mother’s soul, forevermore shall be. And wherefore Fálki e’er roamed, none shall know but he. Lost to shadows, that great land, the birds and beasts and trees. What dark intents seiðkona has, none but her shades can see.”

The bard had performed that song at a feast, at his request, after he had discovered the old blade in the archives. The shadow beast’s fang had been filed to a sharp point, attached to a gilt handle. Hung, nameless, on some wall until his curiosity had rekindled interest in the story. And now, there is another set of black fangs, this time on Midgard, tucked away in some heavily guarded laboratory, its keepers ignorant of just where the remarkable skeleton hails from.

That is the only reason the memory comes to him now, of course. A useful bit of knowledge. He shall never attend a feast in Asgard again, and he does not care to relive the splendor and excess and the endless epics of other’s glory.

The door creaks open. Lukas abruptly straightens from his slouch. A young man babbles on his cell phone, heading away from the pier, back to the city streets. He does not notice that the door takes a moment too long to slam shut behind him.

He wanders the first floor of the warehouse. Ideally, he should like to run directly into Raina. Follow her until S.H.I.E.L.D.’s attempt to apprehend her, and perhaps lend an unseen hand. She is in custody, Coulson considers himself a success, and Lukas benefits from the goodwill and gratitude.

But it seems no one is here, save for two men he passes in the hall. Both carry guns at the small of their backs. Lukas turns the corner and hears the distinct blare of a television. There is a partially open door to his right.
Briefly, he considers his options. He could skulk about, and hope for Raina to appear. Or he could persuade one of her compatriots to divulge her location. Sidling through the door jamb, he sees only one person in the room. *Here is your chance.*

Lukas watches the man as he watches the television. A program blares at full volume, two older women screaming at each other about seating arrangements and flowers. His skin is brown and smooth, his features handsome enough, a strong brow and a generous mouth. Long legs sprawl before him, draped across the sofa. His hands stretch behind, supporting his head on a thin pillow. Young, lanky, and obviously untested. He has not glanced up from the screen once, though he must be charged with keeping guard. An easy target, if Lukas were so inclined.

He is not. The young man’s death will do nothing for him - no, Lukas is interested in something else.

Pushing the door closed, his fingers form a sigil. *Shield.* The television flickers to black. The sound cuts off abruptly. The fluorescent lights die.

“What the -” Lukas hears the man spring to his feet. “Goddammit. That fucking breaker.” His face appears, washed in the blue light from a cell phone in his grip. He jabs at the device and holds it to his ear, foot tapping nervously on the concrete.

“Danny? Hello?” He pulls back and raises his cell high in the air. “I just had service. This is bullshit,” he mutters. “I’m ‘sposed to have coverage everywhere.”

Lukas’s footfalls are silent as he approaches the young man from behind. A sense of dramatic timing has never served him ill. Well - perhaps once or twice. He thinks of a guardian on a bridge, a glorious statue of ice, frozen a moment before the killing blow. His mouth twitches. There’d barely been a noticeable difference between the guardian awake and aware and the one in a cold sleep.

But isn’t he allowed a brief moment of levity now and then?

“They do not hear you calling.” Lukas says softly.

The young man utters a scream, hands flying up to his face, inadvertently flinging his cell away. Lukas watches him drop to his hands and knees, scrabbling for it underneath the ratty sofa.
He lights his hand afire, emerald green blazing painfully bright against the dark. “As I said, they cannot hear you. Your superior network coverage has failed you. I have shielded this room from the outside.”

As long as the young man doesn’t open the door and disrupt the temporary wards. But he doesn’t know that, and he appears to be too terrified to even twitch a muscle in that direction.

“Wh-What d’you want, man?” He looks up at Lukas, on his knees like a supplicant.

*This is how you speak to a king.* The flames in his palm grow brighter, sparking wildly. The young man cowers.

*But you’re not a king, are you?* He counters that errant thought with harsh logic. *No one will ever kneel for you. A son of none, without a realm of your own to claim.*

He clenches his fist, digging his nails into his palms, wanting the pain to clear his head. *That is all you will ever be. Rootless and wandering, putting on false names like cloaks to hide the truth of your hideous figure.*

The flames douse themselves.

“Uh… dude? Are you real? Did Terence spike my Monster?”

Oh. Yes.

Lukas summons a magelight instead, lets it float next to him. “No monster can help you now. You are in my power. And there is something I want from you.”

He gapes up at Lukas, features bathed in the now soft golden light. “I don’t got any money.”

Lukas crosses his arms over his chest. “That doesn’t even - why would I go through the trouble of detaining you in such a manner just to liberate whatever meager coin you possess? I could easily
have walked into your human treasure vaults if I so desired. Use your powers of reasoning, boy.”

“Did... Danny send you? I swear, dude, I didn’t know those were his leftovers in the fridge.”

“By all the Norns… I see I will have to spell this out for you, preferably in monosyllables. I - want - information.”

The young man slumps down from his kneeling position to sit cross-legged on the floor.
“Information? Do I look like a goddamned librarian?”

“I must say, I am shocked to discover you are familiar with the concept of the written word,” Lukas says acidly.

“Ay, man, that was harsh. Anyone ever told ya you’re kind of an asshole?”

“Never in such colorful terms. Perhaps I underestimated your vocabulary.” Lukas takes the young man’s measure, and decides on a manner of casual menace. Too frightened, and he will make up whatever he thinks Lukas wants to hear. But he does need some rather pointed incentive to speak at all.

Lukas reclines on the sofa, summons a razor sharp bone-handle dagger, and begins to clean his nails with it. “You work for Raina, yes?”

The young man tracks the dagger with dark brown eyes. “Uh - Raina? No. Never heard of her. Sorry.”

Lukas flicks him a glance. He tosses the knife in the air, lets it complete two and a half revolutions, and catches it with his other hand and begins cleaning the rest of his nails. “I find that difficult to believe, as she is the one supplying the inventory for this very warehouse that you sit in and guard so ineffectually.”

He continues to watch the blade as it flashes in the glow of the magelight, mesmerized. “They don’t tell us what’s in the boxes. I dunno. Mr. Bell has some kinda deal goin’ on. They give us product, we set up a buy.” The young man shrugs.
Merchants, of a sort. Contracted by Centipede to store and sell their wares, and no doubt collect a tidy sum of the profit for the convenience of their service. No wonder S.H.I.E.L.D. could not confiscate the entirety of Raina’s contraband, if she has stashed it among associates, like a squirrel hiding its cache of acorns for a cold winter.

“This Mr. Bell is your leader?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

“And who does he make his deals with?”

The young man’s eyes dart away. “I dunno, really. Some lady.”

“Can you describe the lady for me?” His tone is polite, but stern enough not to be misinterpreted.

“I wasn’t even ‘sposed to be here,” he mutters sullenly. “She was - she was real pretty, actually. Terence kept staring at her an’ I had to tell him to cut it the fuck out before Mr. Bell got mad. Dark hair, curly. Kinda light-skinned. She wore this tight dress with flowers all over it.”

Raina’s enthusiasm for the delights of the garden is quite reliable. Lukas would fault her for it if he did not appreciate her devotion to maintaining a certain aesthetic. “Do you know when she will return?” Lukas asks.

“We got another buy set up for tonight, across the river. She’s ‘sposed to come. The business dude won’t deal with anyone but her.”

He had been sure Coulson’s information was incorrect. That she would disappear into the night, off to finish her unsavory work elsewhere, away from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s penetrating gaze. Either he overestimated her caution, or she knows something he does not. Why has she remained so stubbornly close? Perhaps he shouldn’t have left her alive during S.H.I.E.L.D.’s raid of her base.

“And what of the metahumans?” Lukas prods.

“The who now?”
Not common knowledge, apparently. “Humans with particular abilities.” Lukas is not sure what these entail, but he has wagered quite a bit on them being indistinguishable from magic, to mortal eyes. “Conjuring fire. Flying. Cloaking oneself in shadows.”

“Flying? You mean - like Iron Man? Tony Stark?”

Lukas knows he has heard that name from the lips of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. He files it away for later. Tony Stark will not be one of Raina’s metahumans, that is certain. “You do not know any others?”

“I told you all I know. I swear.” The young man raises his hands, palms out.

“You have been an invaluable help - what was your name?”

He gives Lukas a wary look. “Uh… Jeremiah. Why?”

“Well, Jeremiah, I want to give you a gift. For being so eminently helpful.” And to ensure you hold your silence. Lukas does not want some errant sense of loyalty to his commander to interfere with his plans. There is a time for veiled threats, and a time for outright bribes.

“What d’you mean?” Jeremiah asks slowly.

Lukas stands, and reaches out a hand. After a beat, Jeremiah accepts, and he pulls the young man to his feet.

“That depends entirely upon you, my friend.” Lukas smiles. “Tell me what you desire, and I shall grant it.”

Jeremiah goggles at him. “You - you wanna grant me a wish?”

“I suppose that is one way of putting it. I will grant your wish. Within reason. No killing. Too messy, and likely to draw attention. A little light maiming is acceptable. No love spells. I refuse to
get tangled in such a mess again. I can summon someone if you are stubbornly inclined upon the romantic, but I do not recommend it.” Lorelei would likely scratch my eyes out with her nails were I to prevail upon her for assistance.

“I - man, what are you? Some kinda fucked up fairy godmother?”

“Pardon me?”

“Uh - nevermind.” Jeremiah shakes his head dazedly, then narrows dark eyes at him. “And what do I gotta do for you?”

“You have already done it.”

Jeremiah does not relent. Lukas sighs. “Only one more small task. I want you to call me, when Raina arrives at this meeting. That is all. Simply a phone call.” He points at the young man’s cell phone, and motions for it. Reluctantly, Jeremiah holds it out. Lukas taps on the screen. “There. My number is programmed in.”

“Under what?”

“You may choose whatever you wish.”

“Okay, Fairy Godmother. You said it.” Lukas is tempted to ask, but brushes off the reference he does not understand. The ignorance is as familiar as it is annoying.

Jeremiah bites his lip. “I guess… I guess there’s one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“My mom - she’s at Metro General. She’s still in chemo, and the docs say it’s working, but… could you help? Help her get better?” He looks at Lukas, eyes wide and hopeful.

This is tricky. He has never been particularly adept at healing magic. He has no healing stones in
his possession, no spellbooks or tools. He hadn’t exactly packed a bag before free-falling through the dark abyss outside of time and space - he aborts his thoughts.

“What is her name?”

“Lillian. Lillian Adams.”

“I cannot promise she will be cured overnight. The human body is a complicated system.” Jeremiah nods, casting his eyes down. “But I will do my best to heal your mother.”

“R-Really? Jesus, I can’t believe this is happening,” the young man mutters. “I’m gonna wake up in an hour on that damn couch, I jus’ know it.”

Lukas removes the shield he had cast around the dingy room. The metal fixtures hum and blast a sudden white light. The television blares its screaming program again. Jeremiah’s cell phone emits a three-toned melody in his grip.

The young man whirls, looking around wildly. “Jesus Christ,” he whispers.

“If this conversation remains between us, your mother will be grateful,” Lukas says pointedly. “You will not speak of me to anyone. I will know if you do.” He taps his temple and Jeremiah swallows hard.

“Alright, man. I pinky promise.”

“Pinky -” Lukas rolls his eyes. *Do not even bother.* “I will have completed my side of the bargain by the time you contact me. Farewell.” He parts the fabric of the realm and steps again into the ether.
XXXIX & XL

Chapter Notes

If you're a fellow American, Happy 4th - here's a chapter with some Steve Rogers in it to celebrate. If you're not, happy Tuesday, and here's a chapter with some Steve Rogers in it to celebrate. And Clint. Clint likes Steve Rogers. He may or may not be wearing Captain America boxers during the events of this chapter.

(also, there is some bad language/potentially disturbing images in this chapter, if that doesn't sound good, skip it and leave a comment, i will happily give you a summary of what you missed. it's not graphic at all but i just wanna be safe.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXXIX

Excerpt from Distortions in Spacetime: Theory and Relevance to S.H.I.E.L.D. Operations in the Future, a report compiled by Agent Leo Fitz for Supervisory Agent Philip Coulson with additional commentary by Agent Jemma Simmons

The analysis of the genetic composition, undertaken by Agent Simmons and detailed in Report YL-280, provides compelling evidence to support the theory of extraterrestrial origin for the specimen recovered from Mexico. Given this report and the far-reaching consequences of such a theory, it is prudent to review several hypotheses of interdimensional travel and the fabric of spacetime. Such subjects are no longer in the realm of thought experiments - they hold unforeseen relevance to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s current and future operations, and must be examined to assist in the compilation of a thorough threat assessment.

Much of the current work in the field of theoretical physics seeks to link the theory of general relativity to that of quantum mechanics. From the macroscopic point of view, the curvature of spacetime in the presence of mass is well-documented. Quantum mechanics generally considers particles and matter from a much, much more microscopic perspective - the subatomic realm.
Models of quantum entanglement in four-dimensional space have posited that two receding particles can be connected by an instantaneous wormhole - flickering into and out of existence in picoseconds, if not less. If quantum entanglement links two particles and their electromagnetic states to one another, perhaps two temporary points of spacetime can be similarly linked - the precise configuration of their spacetime geometry aligned. If so, an exchange of mass between these very far distant worlds has a non-zero probability.

This conjecture could potentially explain the arrival of an unidentified extraterrestrial biological specimen to Earth without the corresponding astronomical phenomena observed, as in New Mexico (reference AAR 352708, New Mexico Incident, Hawkeye CL-7 for details).

If we accept the assumption that this is a workable explanation of this most recent contact, many salient questions regarding the nature of these entanglements are raised. Can they be induced in a laboratory setting? Can the endpoint be fixed? Will this phenomena be observed on Earth again, and if so, is safe travel possible for humans to the other side? Or will more extraterrestrial life forms survive the trip?

Clint leans on the doorjamb and tries not to smile. He’d decided to swing past the main caf to grab a bag of chips and a sandwich before he heads out to Jersey. His plane from Southeast Asia had only rolled in last night, and already Coulson’s sending him on a mini road trip, out to some little-used facility on a county road east of Toms River, out in the boonies. Apparently, he’s too busy with some other operation. Bug-catching, he’d called it.

When he’d drawn closer to the propped-open double doors, he noticed gaggles of S.H.I.E.L.D.
recruits whispering, craning their necks to peer into the cafeteria area.

For a second, he’d thought Nat was in there, carving an apple with a hunting knife and a menacing smile again. But no, she’s on assignment in Manhattan. The new agents had scattered out of his way when they caught sight of his bow, slung casually over his shoulder. He hadn’t worn his tactical suit. Not to go out to Jersey and peek around in some glorified storage closet.

It feels pretty good to be recognized - and feared, maybe. Just a little bit. God knows it’s hard to strike fear into the hearts any of the people he usually hangs around with. Captain America could pop his skull like an egg. And Natasha? Forget it. He’d have more luck scaring off a rabid, hundred-and-fifty pound guard dog.

It’s with this thought in his head that Clint arrived at the entrance. So he can’t help but grin at the sight of Steve Rogers, trapped in the corner of the main caf, an extremely uncomfortable expression on his face. Captain America’s not scared of Nazis, or aliens, and most definitely not Clint Barton, but apparently he’s frightened of the giggling scrutiny of lower level probies.

Steve has to be able to feel the hundred-odd sideways glances. He’s hunched over a half-eaten burger and fries, shoulders up around his ears, fair cheeks tinted pink. There’s at least three agents hovering nearby his table, obviously egging each other on to go and sit down with him.

For one of the most famous soldiers of the century, he’s pretty shy.

A young, buff, level one probie starts edging toward the seat opposite Steve. Clint decides to quit enjoying this and go help him out.

“Hey, Cap, there you are!” he calls. Half of the cafeteria turns to look at him. Clint struts over. He’s used to putting on a show. Winking at the disappointed probie, he flops down across from Steve. “Been looking for you.”

“You have?” Steve asks, a touch too eager.

“I’m about to head out on a little road trip, an’ I could use some company. Wanted to see if you’d tag along.”

“Sure, of course. I’m in.” Steve swallows a couple hefty bites of his burger. “Uh - where are we
“New Jersey.”

“Uh… really?” He winces slightly. “Okay. Why?”

“I’ll explain on the way. We’ve gotta go grab a car from the garage,” Clint says.

“We could take my bike, if you wanted,” Steve offers.

Clint perks up. “Really?” He’s been itching to take that baby for a spin since he saw Steve pull up to a restaurant astride the low-slung frame, engine idling at a bass roar. It’s vintage, Steve had said, rebuilt by a guy in Queens, who had let Steve help with the assembly. Clint could tell he loved the thing. “You’d wanna take it out there? We’d be on some country roads.”

“Don’t get much of a chance to ride it outside the city.” Steve shrugs. “I’m told you’ve got highways everywhere now.”

“Alright,” Clint says. Now he’s the eager one. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

“Popsicle stand?”

“Joint,” Clint amends. “Let’s blow this joint.”

Steve cracks a smile. “After you.”

Clint follows him to a wayward corner of the dank underground garage. “You don’t get a premium parking spot?”

“I don’t mind the walk.”
He rolls his eyes. “If I were you, I’d be milking this war hero thing. But I ‘spose that’s why you’re Captain America and I’m just a guy with a bow.”

Steve’s mouth twists. “I’m not anything special. The guys I knew in the war would do the same as me any day. It’s just the serum.” He tosses Clint a helmet from his bike’s storage.

Clint bumps his shoulder. “It’s not, you know. Just the serum.” Steve looks at him, but Clint puts on his helmet and leaves it at that. “Rev’ her up, Cap.”

They cross the river, head south on 95, hit the Garden State Parkway. It’s early afternoon, so traffic isn’t too congested. Clint watches the asphalt disappear beneath his feet, and once they get out of the city, the green of the trees that whip by.

He signals for Steve to take the next exit, follows the instructions Coulson gave him, until they turn off on a bumpy, neglected county road. They coast to a halt in front of a rundown concrete installment, at the foot of a fallow field.

Steve hops off the bike, stows his helmet and looks around. “Nice place,” he comments, nudging a broken-off slab of the tiny parking lot with his toe.


“Did you piss off Coulson?” Steve asks.

Clint chuckles. “Nah. Wasn’t me who pissed him off.” He answers Steve’s unspoken question. “One of the guys I used to do wetwork with. Had a messy, public divorce with another agent. Started slacking off, fucking around on the job. Bein’ a general asshole. Got demoted a few times. Eventually, Coulson had him down to doing building security, visiting a bunch of out-of-the-way facilities to do checks every few months. This is one of the places.”

“So where is this guy now?”

”Dunno.” Clint meets his eyes. “Mike Martinez went AWOL a few weeks ago. Everyone just kinda figured he’d turn back up eventually. No one really missed him. Coupla people said he run off to South America with a new girlfriend, but I don’t buy it. Guy’s an asshole, but he did his job, you
“Yeah, okay,” Steve nods. “I get the picture. But what’s brought us out here now?”

“Maintenance crew comes round once a month. Last night, the custodian found Martinez’s jacket, with his wallet in it. Couldn’t’ve got far without that.”

Steve frowns, studying the squat building. “No. No, he couldn’t. Unless - fake ID?”

Clint considers, but shakes his head. “Most of that got confiscated when he got demoted. He mighta had a spare. Most of us do, but… I dunno. He never really liked travelling abroad.”

“You knew him well?”

“Kinda. I knew him for a while, just working buddies, you know. Shot the shit on downtime and all that. I was around when Coulson got word, so he figured he’d send me to take a look around. He’s busy. An op in New York City. Some dumb suit who thought he’d get into weapons dealing.” Clint strides up to the door. Even for an outpost of its age, a rusted old keypad sits next to it. He punches in the code, and the door pops open with a strangled beep.

The first few rooms contain file cabinets. Spider webs are strung haphazardly from all surfaces, forcing Clint to duck and weave. He finds another set of rooms behind the south wall and sighs. Tossing an extra comm to Steve, he says, “Let’s split up and cover ground faster.” He doesn’t have to put his own in - his hearing aids are special S.H.I.E.L.D. issue, commissioned for him personally. Everything’s built in.

Steve takes the top floor. Clint heads to the basement, the entrance part of a closet concealed behind the wall. His boots clang on the metal grates of the stairs. Down here is more storage - more valuable storage. Lab equipment, outdated, but what must have been expensive in its day. Clint finds yellowed accounting records from the seventies and eighties, flight manifests and receipts and personnel files. Mostly peripheral staff, the paper pushers and technical experts and caf cooks. Nothing about agents or handlers or assets.

Clint pokes his head out into the hallway, trying to decide which way to go next. A few of the lights are burnt out on his left, leaving the end of the hall in darkness. To his right, he can see three more grey metal doors.
There’s a flicker of static in his ear. “Cap?” he asks.

“What?”

Just feedback, then. “Anything interesting up there?”

“Mostly office supplies and cabinets. You?”

“Pretty much the same. There’s a little server room down here. Coulson said that’s where the custodian found the jacket. I’ll go check it out.”

Clint heads to the right. The server rack blinks at him, blue LEDS flickering like lightning bugs in the gloom. Nothing in here.

His comm buzzes again. Clint waits, but Steve doesn’t say anything. He backs out of the room and glances down the left leg of the corridor.

Static hisses, longer and louder. “Is that you?”

“Is what me?” Steve asks, after a pause.

“I’m getting some white noise in my comm down here. You copy me?”

“Yeah. Loud and clear.”

“Okay.” Clint decides to abandon this end, and pulls a flashlight out of his back pocket. He always carries a pocket knife, a flashlight and a length of rope. And a lockpicking set, depending on his plans for the night. Be prepared for the unexpected, or however that motto goes. He’d never been a goddamned Boy Scout, he doesn’t know.

As he draws closer to the left hall, he notices a sliver of a crack in the cement surface of the basement foundation. Clint traces it with his Maglite. It continues along, branching out into a fine web.
“Do you --” His comm crackles. “-- read -- base?”

“You havin’ trouble up there too?” Clint says.

“Uh, no. Everything’s coming in fine.” Steve’s voice is loud and crystal clear on the channel. Not staticky at all.

Clint’s stomach drops. “That wasn’t you?”

“What wasn’t me?”

“There was - I just heard a voice.”

Steve is silent for a moment. “I’m coming down.”

Clint hangs back at first, but it feels kind of stupid, to wait for Captain America to come rescue him from a disembodied voice. He inches forward. Touching a hand to his ear, he says, “Is anyone else on this frequency? This is Hawkeye.” No response. “This is Agent Clint Barton, with the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. Do you read me?”

He bites his tongue and waits.

“-- some kind of -- need to get -- maintenance --”

Clint can hear the voice better this time. Male. Not Steve. But he can’t hear an echo of anyone speaking in the basement with him. How far away are they?

The beam of his flashlight falls on the ground as he stops to think. Clint glances and sees another crack just before the tip of his boot. “What the hell…”

He bends down and surveys as much of the hall as he can with the small light. His stomach starts to
churn in earnest. It’s just like the ship. Only smaller.

Steve bursts through the stairway. “Clint?”

“Here.”

“What is it? What have you found?”

“You should probably come see this for yourself.” Before Steve can do more than start toward him, his comm lights up with activity again. The hearing aids are supposed to alter the decibel level to help him distinguish individual sounds, and in this case they work too well, sending a piercing pain through his head. “Ow!”

“-- on this line? Supp-- to be monitoring--”

Steve claps a hand to his left ear. “What on earth? Who is that?”

Clint shakes his head. “I thought it was feedback… but what’s down here to interfere? It’s not like these things pick up the local radio stations.”

Crouching next to him in the dimness, Steve studies the crack by Clint’s foot. Wordlessly, he hands over the flashlight. Steve arcs the light above their head and curses softly. “Is this - how is this still standing?”

There are hairline fractures bisecting the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Meeting each other, forming wider cracks, crumbling crevasses deep in the stone. The entire hallway looks as if it’s about to collapse in on itself. Steve trains the light on something farther down, a few feet off the ground.

“Is that -”

“A hole,” Clint replies flatly.

Steve shoots him a sharp glance. “You don’t seem surprised to find a gaping hole in a loadbearing
structure that’s inexplicably still standing.”

“I’ve seen this once before.” Steve opens his mouth and Clint decides to tell him as much as he knows. He’ll get the info one way or another. “That mission I went on. A week ago, to Southeast Asia. I just got back. Formally, the mission objective was to go investigate an anomaly in the South China Sea. A ship, stalled in the middle of the ocean, not responding to hails.”

“Why send S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

“Fuzzy international border round those parts. Lotsa different agencies with different agendas.” Clint sighs. “Plus… the ship had disappeared from radar. Sonar. You name it, it wasn’t showing up. Except on satellite pictures taken of the area. And on a special S.H.I.E.L.D. device. One that’s finely tuned to detect fluctuations of some kinda radiation in the lower atmosphere.”

Clint holds up hand. “Don’t ask me. I dunno the details. The long and short of it is, the vessel’s invisible to most ways people got of finding it. S.H.I.E.L.D. figures this is the kinda thing they wanna know more about - some cloaking tech or big secret project by a foreign government? So, they send me in with a recon team.”

His thighs are starting to ache, so he stands up and leans against the wall. Steve remains crouched, splitting his attention between Clint’s story and what should be the rubble left of the hallway, instead of what looks like a jigsaw puzzle that’s been glued back together with a few pieces missing.

“We drop into the ocean, right, and hop in our inflatable. Motor out to the site where the ship’s supposed to be. And she’s there, all right. Big ole transport. This is all after dark, mind you, so we weren’t spotted. But it ends up there’s no point. No one’s there when we get on the deck.”

“No one at all?” Steve asks softly.

“Nope. We head lower, trying to figure out what happened, and that’s when we see it.”

“What?” He’s nearly whispering now.

“A hole. And I’m not talking the size of this one. This one’s a crack in a sidewalk compared to the thing we found. It covered three of the lower decks, like it just sucked them all in. And at the
edges, it looked like the metal hull of the ship was shattered. But it was all holding together. The
damned boat’s floating on the ocean, easy as can be, bottom of it still intact, but there’s a giant
sinkhole in the interior.” His head thuds into the wall behind him. “I dunno how else to explain it,
Steve. It just felt… weird.”

“But - there couldn’t be a sinkhole in a boat that’s still floating. I mean, sinkholes open up in the
ground. You know, there’s water under the surface or something…”

“How could it be floating if there’s a hole in it? It should be sunk, right?”

“Exactly.”

Clint meets his eyes. “I know. It shoulda been. But it wasn’t.”

Steve slumps against the far wall himself. “And there was no one there.”

“No one. I guess they all fell in or something. I couldn’t see the bottom of it. I dunno if there was a
bottom to it.”

Clint’s never been afraid of heights. Give him a perch on a high rise, a cliffside, hell, even a trapeze
bar. But he remembers looking down, far down, into the endless dark, and shivering. He’d stepped
back. There was no way he’d wanted to fall down there. It was wrong. His instincts told him that,
and Clint hadn’t survived so long in life without paying attention to his gut.

They stew over Clint’s testimony in silence. He wouldn’t blame Steve if he didn’t believe him - he
wouldn’t believe it if someone tried to feed him such obvious bullshit. But that’s what he saw, and
he doesn’t know how else to explain.

When Steve speaks again, it’s not to question Clint, and a knot he didn’t know was in his chest
loosens. “So, you think this is related?”

“Well, I kinda hope it is. I don’t wanna think there’s two separate explanations for shit like this.”

Steve pulls himself to his feet. “Let’s -”
“-- to be here,” the voice from the comm blares again. “-- so goddamn ridiculous.”

Clint has a sudden suspicion. He creeps closer to the crack in the wall. The earpiece whines. “-- get stuck out here in the first place.”

He’s right. The sound is getting clearer, the closer he gets to it. Steve glances between the crack and himself, and Clint can see when the lightbulb goes off for him too. They come as close as they dare. A chill air seeps from it, raising goosebumps on Clint’s uncovered forearms.

“C’mon, you assholes. Do you copy?”

They exchange glances. “Uh, copy,” Clint says.

Steve repeats him, louder. “Copy. Who is this?”

Dead air. Then, “-- fine. I’ll get you all fired when I come back to HQ. Lazy motherfuckers.”

The cadence of the voice - the turn of phrase - Clint knows who’s speaking. “That’s Martinez,” he hisses at Steve. “I know it.”


“-- iculous. This shit place needs a contractor, not a security check.”

They turn toward the crack in the wall, synchronized and slow. “He must have seen it,” Steve whispers. He goes to step closer, and Clint grabs his sleeve.

“Don’t. I just - don’t get too close to it.”

Steve peers at him, but to his relief, nods. As he goes to turn, to come back toward Clint,
something catches his eye around the corner, in the deep shadows of the farthest end of the hall. Clint hears his soft exhalation.

“What?” he demands. Clint crowds in close, near Steve, craning his neck. He sees the dim but recognizable shape in the gloom.

A shoe. Attached to a leg, and the rest of a body.

“Who is that?” Clint says urgently. Steve directs the light, illuminating the body’s face. It has short, buzzed black hair, a crooked nose. Olive skin that looks leached and pale, with an unhealthy, almost greenish tinge. His eyes are closed, lips sealed shut.

Clint staggers back a step. “But - that can’t be -”

“What?” Steve demands. “Who is it?”

“That’s Martinez,” he says slowly. “But if that’s Martinez - who’s talking to us over the comms?”

Steve has no answer. They hesitate there, in the enveloping silence of the hall, until their ear buds screech again. “-- all fired when I come back to HQ. Lazy --”

“He’s repeating himself. Maybe it’s a recording,” Steve points out. He tiptoes over to Martinez’s body.

“But why would he record himself saying that? And how is it playing over the comms -”

Steve cuts him off with a shout. “He’s alive! Clint, he’s breathing! Look!”

Rushing over, he skids to a stop on his knees. Steve’s right. His chest is barely moving, but he’s taking breaths. Shallow, so shallow, but they’re breaths alright.

Clint taps out a pattern on his comm. *Emergency. Send medical attention to my location.* Thirty seconds later, there’s another click on the line.
“Barton? What’s your status?” Coulson’s voice is clipped and urgent.

“Found Martinez, boss. We need a med team. I dunno how long he’s been out here.”

“You’re clear?”

“Yep. Cap’s okay too.”

“Captain Rogers is there?” Coulson says quickly.

“Oh, yeah, we took his bike.” Clint nearly smiles at the quiet jealous fuming that somehow comes just fine over the connection. He clears his throat. Not the time.

“And Coulson? You’re gonna want to get your X-Files team out here too, when you’ve wrapped it up in New York. We’ve got another one of ‘em. Just like in the South China Sea.”

Chapter End Notes

[It's the Vashta Nerada!! jk but i did take some inspiration from DW, obviously. spoiler - it's not really the Vashta Nerada tho, as much as i would love to see Ten and Loki snark at each other.]

[ps there is no eyeball through this crack.]

[[am i leaving too many notes?? is this weird?]]

[[[nvm ur all just gonna have to suffer through it]]]
hey y'all it has been awhile! august was an insanely busy month irl. tbh i'm not completely happy with this chapter but i really wanted to post something after such a delay. if you see any errors lemme know, i did not spend a whole lot of time revising, whoops.

[also thanks for all the support on here, everyone who reads this fic is great and wonderful]

XLI

Five thousand four hundred and thirty seventh cycle of Odin Borsson’s reign - soon to be thirty eighth, if we remain on Midgard much longer

It is night, the days do not last long anymore, but the windows have been boarded shut, so I know not the precise time

The village is being attacked. A raiding party. Jötunns, Thor said. He and I were not allowed to join in combat. We were locked in the human’s temple, of all the indignities, with Father’s ugly statue looking down on us.

Worst of all, the Tesseract is here with us. Hidden under the base of Father’s statue, but I can still feel it. Like - like a buzzing noise in the back of my head. It feels enormous, even though it is but a tiny cube. It’s strong with seidr. And Father plans to just - leave it here! It’s unthinkable and foolish. It should remain in the Vault with the other treasures. Not stuffed away in a box on Midgard.
Father has given the Tesseract to the humans.

I don’t understand. Master Alfarr told me it contains the song of the Void, the empty dark spaces between the stars, between the realms. That it can be a doorway, open to all forms of influence, connecting that which should not be connected. Why would he give up such a powerful artifact to some humans living in wooden huts?

Father says the humans can’t sense the boundaries the way we do. He says they wouldn’t dare to even try, and that he will be sealing the last route that the rogue jötunns used to enter Midgard as soon as they are defeated.

Thor says I worry too much. I say he worries too little! If someone had given me such an artifact, I wouldn’t rest until I understood its power.

The jötunns must want it. Why else would they have come? They know they cannot kill Father, he is too powerful. They must want the Tesseract. Or to kill the humans who defied them with the help of the Third Division and the Company of the Raven.

The war is over. Coming here was a mistake on their part. Father is a mighty warrior. He’s killed hundreds of jötunns, and he’ll kill them all too.

I think I can hear shouting outside the temple. It sounds like cheering. The raiders have surely been dispatched. I must wake Thor!

Loki Odinsson, Prince of Asgard
Lukas hovers outside the healing room. The amulet is a solid weight in his palm, a chunk of ljósváldr, humming in tune with the frequency of seidr that pulses through it. Even Midgard has deposits of ljósváldr, that stone which makes up the Bridge, though that particular construct has been threaded through with urú to give it the strength it needs to withstand the power of the Bifröst. The striated crystal he holds alternates bands of lavender, pale blue, rose red and more, refracting a galaxy’s worth of colors when touched by a ray of light, even as the perfection of the surface is marred by runic etchings.

It has been many years since Lukas has had to rely on runes to direct his magic. They are useful conduits. Able to steer energy along familiar pathways, enabling a working to remain consistent and reliable with time and repeated use.

Runes are also a crutch. A concession to the fact that the mage is not able to ensure the flawless operation of their working in their absence, without them to direct the currents of energy. Nearly an admission of incompetence.

He frowns down at the ljósváldr crystal, strung on an unbreakable silver chain. Healing magic has always been the province of others. Not one of his own prodigious gifts. It had taken him hours to plan the pattern, choose the appropriate runes, and to painstakingly etch them. There is no backchannel to avoid completing the labor by hand. With seidr, it is the intent that matters, not the arbitrary lines and strokes that form the symbols. Those are only given power by focusing intently on the meaning while imbuing the crystal with energy - a process that had eaten up most of the day since his conversation with Jeremiah and put him in a particularly foul mood.

“This had better be worth it,” he mutters, dodging the door to sidle into the room. If this does not end with Raina in custody, her Tesseract weapons confiscated and their magic out of her grasp… well, he could think of a few choice curses to be levied against his human spy. Boils never fell out of fashion. Or perhaps he should recycle one of his old favorites. Fandral hadn’t spoken to him for weeks after that banquet. Lukas had given a charm to one of his paramours, enchanted it to turn her into a facsimile of the warrior’s mother mid-coitus. The fond memory eases his tetchiness just slightly.

Upon a white cot in the center of the room, Lillian Adams sleeps. He considers the bedside table, and leaving the amulet there, with a note. But if he is to hold up his end of the bargain, the crystal must be in contact with her at all times. He cannot ensure that with a note.
Stepping forward, unsure what exactly he will do, Lillian solves his dilemma for him. The old woman opens her eyes a sliver. “Is that you? Jer?”


Her smile crinkles the corners of her eyes. The well-worn laugh lines around her mouth stretch into place. It seems a natural expression for Jeremiah’s mother.

“Of course he did. My boy. He’s kind. I always told him so. He acts tough, but he’s gotta heart too big for his chest.” Lillian Adams reaches out a hand to him. Lukas turns just slightly to avoid it, fumbling with the box in which the amulet rests.

Lillian settles her hands on the bedcovers without comment. “He’s been here near every night, you know, when he can get off work.” She nods to the vase of shoddy, wilting pink carnations. “He knows I love the smell.”

Lukas doesn’t look up at her. He still fiddles with the clasp of the amulet. Damn thing is stubborn.

Lillian is insistent. “That’s kind, isn’t it? He’s such a sweet boy. Don’t you think?” She peers up at him with soft dark eyes. “You brought your mother flowers now, didn’t you?”

His hands slip on the chain. He nearly drops the amulet. “I - yes,” he says shortly.

“I thought so. You seem sweet, like Jer.”

_Some poisons taste sweet when first ingested_, he wants to say. Bloodbane flowers taste like honey. It’s after they’re swallowed, when the bleeding begins, slow and silent from the inside, that the victim realizes they have been betrayed by their pleasant appearance.

He’d even heard tales of poor ignorant Ljósálfar, bringing the blooms into their homes, fawning over their pure white petals, their sweet smell, the warm flavor they imparted to the tea. Come morn, the whole family would be dead, bled out upon the floor. And the flowers would sit, innocuous and deadly, waiting for the next fool to pick them up and take them.
Every bouquet I handed my mother might as well have been bloodbane, for all the good it did her.

Lukas realizes he’s staring at Lillian when she laughs. “Take a compliment, dear. It’s not the end of the world.”

That much, he knows. His world had already ended, with a sharp answer and a sudden drop. And in this new one, you are Lukas. Lukas does not have a mother.

But he does have responsibilities. He hands over the amulet. Lillian gasps softly, fingering the brilliant crystal. She picks up the delicate chain, suspending it in the air. Light winks off every facet. “It’s beautiful,” she whispers. “Where’d he get it?”

“Your son did me a favor,” Lukas says. “I asked him what he desired as payment. His only thought was of you.”

She puts the back of her hand to her mouth. Tears sparkle on her lashes. “He’s a good boy,” Lillian breathes. “My boy.”

Lukas swallows and nods shortly. “Jeremiah is very proud of it,” he adds. “Insistent that you might never remove the necklace.”

“Not even to -”

“He said it was a symbol of his love,” Lukas invents. “That he hoped it would help you recover more quickly.”

Lillian Adams smiles. “Of course,” she says softly. “I will.” Her body is frail and thin under the bedsheets, but her eyes are bright as she studies the amulet, brings it around her neck.

“I shall tell him his gift was delivered.” Lukas turns to go.

“Thank you,” she calls after him. “Thank you, young man - what was your name?”
But Lukas is already gone. This task is done. No more than a stepping stone to his true goal. There is no more time to waste on mothers and their sentiment.

Metro General Hospital looms behind him as Lukas steps onto the sidewalk. Pulling out his phone, he taps a quick message, intending to inform Jeremiah of the completion of their bargain.

wut up?

Lukas considers, then adds the peace sign pictogram that Caroline uses as part of her standard greeting in this form of communication. He goes to slip his phone in his pocket, but it lights up immediately. Jeremiah has already responded.

where tf have u been man?? i been trying to call

He frowns at the screen. The ringing tone the device emitted had annoyed him to no end whilst carving the most delicate of the runes into the amulet, so he’d banished the sound in a fit of pique. The working must have lingered longer than he realized. Lukas carefully peels back the layer of silence surrounding the cell. It buzzes in his hand.

your girls here

Bell changed the meet to the warehouse

remember the one u ambushed me in dickhead

if ur gonna come do it now!!

also not my damn fault ur phone was on silent dont even think about goin back on our deal im pretty sure theres laws n shit against that

???

i could take u to court
wait

dude are u even human man

can i still sue a fairy godmother

don't teach this shit to kids!! our public school system fkn useless

Lukas snarls at the phone as it buzzes incessantly. He snaps out a response. just shut up! im on my way come outside when i get there

Jeremiah sends a slew of text messages, increasingly alarmed, but Lukas doesn’t reply. The boy will meet him outside if he wants their deal to stand.

He has to go. Coulson’s intel is now incorrect, with Bell changing the meeting place at the last minute. How can he reveal this information without revealing his source? And the somewhat underhanded method he used to gain the location of the warehouse and access to Jeremiah. If he had more time, Lukas could devise a plan that would not see him under further scrutiny.

But Raina is there now. About to sell more of these Tesseract weapons. If they are sold, there may be no way to track them down without access to the Tesseract itself.

Left with little choice, Lukas decides to leverage his alternate plan. The one he’d nudged into motion just this morning, with a few comments about metahumans in the right ear. Much can be forgiven if there is enough to be gained - and Coulson would not pass up the chance of such an attractive recruit as an expert historian-turned-metahuman. It should be an easy way to sell his uncanny knowledge. And a secret to be shared. Nothing builds trust between comrades like confiding in one another.

He pulls himself to Raina’s warehouse, slides into the world - and immediately stumbles sideways. Catching himself with a quick step to the left, Lukas blinks through the sudden bout of dizziness. The feeling that there is no up or down, no right or left, only directionless darkness.

The sensation fades, but Lukas peers around suspiciously. There is a cold, thick taste on the back
of his tongue, like rock frost gone to seed, like a chill damp fog. Like the Void.

The boundaries of the realm are thin here. He can typically slip through easily, especially on Midgard, with its lack of crystal-generated shields and the constantly shifting quality of its seidr. But this was an uncharacteristically smooth transition. A natural rift, perhaps. A weak spot not unlike the line upon which a boulder will fracture under pressure.

Or... the Tesseract weapons. He was right to be wary of them being in Raina’s possession. How many are stored here? Feeding off each other, gulping energy from Midgardian life forms and their ubiquitous devices, those devices that hum with a symphony’s worth of notes, emitted all over what the humans call their electromagnetic spectrum.

He pauses where he arrived, unwilling to take a step further while the idea germinates in his mind, a blooming dread. Interactions of seidr are complex and varied. He’s never studied them in any meaningful depth, but it does not seem impossible that a storehouse of such extremely powerful objects could weaken the very boundary of the realm in the localized field around them.

Especially with the source of their power, the Tesseract, so damnably close.

All the more reason to detain Raina, lock away her objects of power, and explain his methods with a vague allusion to extranormal abilities. Beyond the human baseline, that’s how Coulson had referred to it. At this point, Lukas would rather be mistaken for a metahuman than one of the garden variety, those utter imbeciles who thought it was a good idea to trifle with an artifact created before they’d begun crawling in the dirt.

If it wasn’t for its often inexplicable charm, Lukas wouldn’t even bother lingering on Midgard. And for the coffee. A life-form could coax many favors from a mage of his caliber with such a drink. And - and Lukas supposes he’s curious.

He’s spent two stellar rotations trying to figure out how the humans had managed to spread across an entire realm, and even prosper, with their ingenuity hampered by a ridiculous lack of self-preservation. Oh, yes, he’d heard of what Steve Rogers got up to. Jumping out of planes and throwing himself at the very monsters trying so handily to murder him. It was no wonder this was the man they held up as the ideal example of modern humanity.

Lukas could tell them the Tesseract is not meant to be meddled with by mortal hands, but he can say, with the sure weight of experience, they would not listen.
Jeremiah, true to his species’ form, is standing in the open, glancing around with a clearly anxious air. He does a double-take when he notices Lukas standing there. “What - the hell d’you come from? Ugh, nevermind.”

“Raina is here?”

“Yeah. And Mr. Bell is too. They’re waiting for our buyer.” Jeremiah fidgets. “How’s my mom? Did you see her?”

“I delivered a gift. A healing amulet.”

He shoots Lukas a skeptical look. “An amulet. And that’s gonna work? She’s gonna get better?”

“Of course,” Lukas says sharply. “There is no mage equal to my power in this realm.”

“Okay, dude, okay. So - now we’re done, right?”

“You must lead me to Raina and your Mr. Bell. It will be most expedient.”

“I can’t just walk in with you! They got cameras in the all the hallways!”

“I can take care of that.” Lukas grasps Jeremiah’s arm. His quickest illusion requires that they maintain physical contact. “Let’s go.”

“Oh man,” he moans. “I am so gonna get wasted for this.”

Lukas waits for him to enter a code into the panel set next to the warehouse door. They walk briskly through the halls. No one confronts them. Jeremiah points down to another entrance. “She’s in there, with Mr. Bell.”

Footsteps echo on the concrete. Lukas draws them out of the way, motions for silence. A group rounds the corner, led by a man in an expensively cut navy blue suit. The buyer, Lukas presumes. A small blonde woman in equally professional attire follows closely behind, busily typing away on
“The account is ready?” the man asks her.

“Yes, Mr. Cavanaugh. We can complete the transaction the moment she confirms the quality of the shipment,” she responds.

“Good.”

They enter. Now is the time to contact Agent Coulson. His agents should be prepared to raid the other location S.H.I.E.L.D. had been provided. He need only redirect them, while Raina is sequestered with her associates.

Jeremiah looks at him, wide-eyed. “They didn’t even see us!” He breaks away from Lukas’s grip without warning, stepping out to look down the hallway. Their protective shadow blinks away, the boundary he’d drawn around them shattered.

“Wait!” he hisses, lunging for Jeremiah’s arm.

Too late. Metal slides on metal, behind them, the sound of a gun cocking.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” a voice calls out. “Mr. Cavanaugh doesn’t like uninvited guests.”

They turn slowly, as one. Jeremiah raises his hands. “Uh…”

Lukas sighs through his nose. It seems their illustrious buyer is either cautious or paranoid. A secondary security force, left to guard the hall while Cavanaugh is in his meeting.

He thinks of Lillian Adams, waiting alone in her hospital room, for a son that never arrives. Wilting, like her carnations. No, he won’t allow it. Not after the effort he put into keeping her alive.
I shall have to keep her fool son alive as well. None shall be permitted to say that he doesn’t honor his end of a bargain - he always has, even if he’s been creative about the interpretation of terms before.

“Would you believe me if I said we were lost?” A gun barrel points in his direction. “That’s a no, then,” Lukas mutters.

Cavanaugh’s guards prod them forward. One of them knocks on the door, and they are ushered through.

The entirety of the group inside turns to look at them. The blue-suited man leaps to his feet. “What’s the meaning of this? Reyes?” His blonde assistant raises a brow, finally looking up from the screen of her cell.

Raina stands as well, her gaze fixed unerringly on Lukas. “If it were anyone else, I’d think I had an admirer. Back again so soon?”

Lukas folds his arms over his chest. “Oh, can you blame me? I suppose I’m just curious exactly what kind of feeble-minded twit doesn’t even bother to use a disguise while being actively hunted by a federal organization.”

“Feds?” A tall, broad man joins Cavanaugh on his feet, glaring daggers at Raina. Mr. Bell, Lukas thinks. “You never told me this shipment was hot.” He rounds on Jeremiah. “The fuck you bringing Feds here for, Jeremiah?”

“I find most people are convinced to act against their interest by a little persuasion of the lethal variety,” Lukas drawls, a deliberately menacing edge in his tone. Jeremiah nods jerkily.

“Dude’s batshit,” he says. “I didn’t have a choice!”

“We’re out.” Bell flicks a gesture at the crates stacked to the side of a metal table. Several of his men step forward and grasp the handles. One black case is laid out on the surface, open, filled with slim silver rods. Lukas can feel the cold, distant hum of seidr contained in their bases.

Cavanaugh is eyeing Lukas and Jeremiah. “Wait. Since you didn’t see fit to inform me that the Feds were tracking this product, I believe I’m entitled to a discount.” He smirks at Raina.
“Not a chance,” she snaps. “You have no idea what these weapons are capable of. They’re priceless, to the right buyer.”

“Going to be difficult to offload them when I let everyone in New York City know you’re under surveillance,” Cavanaugh observes.

“He’s not a Fed,” Raina argues. “Lukas Eld is nothing more than a liar and a two-bit conman. The weapons are clean.”

Lukas interjects. “I’m certain you believe that. And you’ll go on believing so up until S.H.I.E.L.D. bursts into your operation, just like they did last time.” He tilts his head at Bell with a smug lift to his eyebrows.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t trust you,” Raina spits at him. “Which is the one and only thing Coulson has seen clearly about this whole situation.”

“Are you very well acquainted with the Supervisory Special Agent that commands S.H.I.E.L.D. operations?” Lukas asks pointedly.

Cavanaugh turns a wary eye on her. Bell scoots back, like the attention of S.H.I.E.L.D. is contagious. Raina grits her teeth, before she smoothes her expression. “Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps he knows me better than his self-professed consultant. Wouldn’t that be odd?”

The implication hits him like a splash of ice water. No one has ever known you. They’ve always known the deception - first the Allfather’s, then your own.

“I’ve certainly lied to him less. He knows the truth of me.”

Lukas’s gut clenches. “And what a pathetic truth it is,” he hisses. “A selfish, cruel woman, greedy for power she does not deserve and cannot hope to comprehend. Truly the lowest of humans, destined only to grasp for the greatness of others and always, always miss.”

Raina sneers. “I understand more than you think! I know the power within these weapons is greater than any other on this realm, I have seen it, I have been shown it!” A thrill of satisfaction curls up
his spine, to have provoked her into such a display of emotion, only to be halted in its tracks as Bell speaks.

“Another step closer and you’re a pile of meat.”

He realizes he’s stalked forward, intent on one enemy, and thus ignorant of the next. The barrel of the Tesseract weapon prods into his chest. Will it harm him? Dissolve him like the liquor merchant? Banish him to another realm? He doesn’t know.

He feels Raina’s intense gaze, hears Jeremiah’s frantic heartbeat, sees the myriad humans arrayed behind their leader’s back. Cool metal slips into his palms. The reassuring weight of his blades steadies him, centers him, reminds him that behind this frail façade he has the pulsing green core of seidr, coiled around his heart. The truth of Lukas falters, cracks, as words of power rise on his tongue.

And then Bell jerks, his right eyeball popping grotesquely, spewing blood and tissue. He gags, wordless, and dies in the span of a moment.

Lukas blinks at his body as it collapses and keels over on its side, knife protruding from the back of his skull. Cavanaugh’s assistant stands behind him. She wipes a spot of blood off her pale cheek. He and Jeremiah are frozen with surprise. Lukas recovers quickly, while the rest of the room gapes. The daggers are now firmly in his palm.

In a fluid movement, the assistant pulls out a gun and shoots Cavanaugh between the eyes. Blue residue trickles down his forehead. She’s stunned him, Lukas realizes.

The lackeys scramble for their own weapons, but the woman is quick as she is deadly. She pulls an arm behind one man’s back and twists sharply. A crack splinters the air, as does the man’s screech of pain. The assistant drops him, unceremoniously. His head bounces off the concrete.

She goes after the other two, her limbs cutting and slicing through the air with an economy of motion that leaves Lukas stunned. Her style is the antithesis of an Æsir. More like - more like his own.

A flash of movement from the corner of his eye has Lukas spinning. Raina bolts to the door. Evidently, she finds the amusement has soured. Releasing the daggers, he lets them fade back into their state of perpetual half-existence between this realm and the next. Lukas lunges, catching her
shoulders, twisting so that her body is underneath his as they fall. He pins her with hands and knees. She blinks dark eyes up at him, dazed.

Did you truly believe you might evade me? If she thinks herself a slippery fox, he is a wolf. He could kill her now. A wolf has claws, and he has daggers. He can feel the shadow of their sharp presence still, hovering between reality as his magic calls them and his mind refuses them.

With effort, Lukas represses a hateful snarl. This is no battlefield. Nor the Void. And he is no mindless beast, never mind the traitorous blood in his veins. Gripping his human identity close, he breathes, and reminds himself. Consultant. You are Lukas Eld, consultant for S.H.I.E.L.D.

The thought is a summons. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, in their thick black uniforms, with their peculiar sleep-inducing guns, just like the assistant's, bust through the wooden door.

The tiny blonde assistant rises to her feet, straightening an errant cuff of her tailored blue suit. Red spatters her collar and the bridge of her nose. Three dead men lie at her feet. The others moan from their positions, slumped on the floor. Jeremiah huddles in a corner, hands still up in a show of submission.

She picks her way around the bodies, stepping purposefully on Cavanaugh’s hand. “Grabby asshole,” she mutters.

Phillip Coulson marches to the forefront and takes the room in with a shrewd eye. He flicks a glance over Lukas and Raina, and raises an eyebrow, though his mouth is a hard line. “Turning up like a bad penny, once again,” he comments.

Lukas smiles genially. “A misunderstanding,” he says.

The S.H.I.E.L.D. supervisor rubs a hand across his brow. The blonde assistant gives Coulson a red smile. “Phil.”

He’s not entirely shocked to see Coulson returns it. “Agent Romanova. Good work.”
XLIII & XLIV

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving!

XLIII

THE CONCERNED CITIZEN: SKEPTIC NEWSLETTER

Dedicated to providing you with the unvarnished, unscripted truth that our government and its cloak-and-dagger agencies are determined to conceal.

April 2013

Howdy, folks! Randy Houser, here again, to shine a light on all the things the current administration doesn’t want you to know about.

Let’s talk about metahumans. They’ve been all over the news, recently. The man in LA, saving the child from the burning building. The woman in Bolivia that glows in the presence of a certain wavelength of light.

They seem to be popping out of the woodworks, these days. But here’s a thought: maybe they’ve been here for a while. Maybe they’re here by design.

Think about it. The government is in the business of weapons development. And what better
weapon than the unsuspecting civilian?

The Cold War never really ended, folks. It only changed. These metahumans would be the perfect spies. Super strength, super stealth. Exploding things at will.

It might be in the drinking water. Or the food supply. Antibiotics - hello! They’re already drugging our cattle and our children, wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to throw an experimental serum in there with the pharmaceutical company’s expired overstock.

But my personal theory - those suspicious “Clinical” trials where they test “Medicine” in the name of “Science.” They make you sign all sorts of waivers. You’d never know what the papers you’re signing are really for. Doctors get paid by Big Pharma to enroll their patients in dubious experiments. And of course they won’t even tell you if you’re getting the treatment they’re going through all the trouble to test! Who’s really the double blind one here, Doc?

Mark my words - these metahumans aren’t going away anytime soon. And I guarantee we’ll find out that the Soviets were up to their usual tricks, developing their own metahuman programs. World War Three could very well be fought using powered people as proxies for their governments, fighting it out in the streets! Only time will tell - until then, we must be vigilant. We must demand transparency in our government, both federal and local. We must demand the passage of legislation that protects the average citizen from the tyranny of those with uncanny abilities. Write your Senator and your Congressperson today and let them hear your voice! Let them hear all our voices, united!

Stay safe, concerned citizens, and stay skeptical!
Steve stands at the foot of the hospital bed, arms crossed over his chest, watching Dr. Flagretti frown at the screen. She whacks the top of the machine, sudden and hard. Under Steve’s gaze, she flushes. “It was worth a shot.”

“It’s giving you trouble?” he asks.

“Well, it’s either my EEG or my patient. It might sound arrogant, but I’m pretty sure it’s not user error.” She leans down, lifts an eyelid, and peers into Agent Martinez’s brown irises. “The pupillary reflex is still active in both eyes,” she mutters. “Respiration is normal. I’m guessing brain stem function is still intact.”

“That’s good?”

“It’s a positive sign,” Dr. Flagretti says. Steve relaxes a bit. He’d come back late last night, after the medics had taken Martinez away, after a team had come out to document the scene in New Jersey. The first thing he did this morning was seek out the doctor and her newest patient. Dr. Flagretti’s temporary office is in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s main facility in Manhattan, so he didn’t have to go very far out of his way. Coulson’s meeting is scheduled in the same building. He flicks a glance at his watch. Less than an hour from now, actually.

Dr. Flagretti tucks a strand of long brown hair behind her ear. “But my EEG isn’t showing much in the way of electrical activity. And without knowing the cause of his coma… it’s difficult to make any kind of diagnosis.”

Martinez lies between them, unmoving. His skin is waxy and thin, adhering to the bone beneath too tightly. He looks gaunt, starved. Like one of the bodies the Commandos had stumbled upon, in those eponymous Hydra labs in Central Europe.

Steve grits his teeth together. “I don’t think there’s gonna be an easy explanation for this one.” He remembers the chill he’d felt, when he had crouched down in the hall of that S.H.I.E.L.D. storage place. Clint had explained what he’d seen to Steve, the hole in the floating ship, the echoing darkness. Eerily similar to what they’d found in that basement hallway. The two incidents have to be related - too much of a coincidence if they aren’t.

Clint thinks they are. Steve trusts the S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. He’s sharp, observant. A true sniper. And Steve would be a fool not to trust a sniper’s instincts. Bucky’s keen eye was sometimes all that stood between his skull and a bullet, during the war.
“They need to bring in a neurologist,” Dr. Flagretti says. She rubs her knuckles on the furrow between her brows. “I’m not qualified for this. I’m a geneticist by trade.”

“I think Coulson’s tapped you for his little taskforce.” Steve smiles at her. “You’ve already been exposed to some pretty unbelievable stuff, and you haven’t run away screaming yet.”

She gives a rueful sigh. “Unbelievable. You’re not wrong. Kidnapping attempts and magic rings - and oh, wait - meeting the resurrected Captain America while he’s in the middle of rescuing you.”

Steve shuffles on his feet. “I wasn’t dead.” Resurrected is too grand of a word for what happened to him. For the crash, the long fall. The slow creep of ice. The sudden, rude awakening, into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s idea of a comforting lie.


He swallows, throat tight with some unnamed emotion. “Yeah.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m grateful you were there.” She comes around the bed and rests her palm gently on his forearm. “My son is grateful. My husband is too. You saved my life.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. would have gotten you out,” Steve protests. It’s one thing to be handed a medal, or to be lauded in the paper. This is too personal, too close. Her eyes are warm and brown and Steve looks away.

“Maybe.” Dr. Flagretti steps back. “Regardless, I had to say it. It wouldn’t have felt right otherwise. I keep thinking about what that woman could have made me do. Made me say. I could have betrayed my entire life’s work. I was frightened at the time, but the more I think about it, the more terrifying that ring becomes.”

His smile turns more genuine. Her frank openness is refreshingly unusual. Steve likes working for S.H.I.E.L.D., he likes to feel useful, but sometimes he looks around at all the agents and handlers and wonders what the hell he’s doing here. Everything is clearance codes and need-to-know and shadow ops. Steve understands the necessity, even if Fury and Coulson privately think he doesn’t. It’s just exhausting, to be on guard constantly, even among your colleagues. He’s always been more of a soldier than a spy.
Steve follows the doctor as she gathers up some paperwork into a folder and heads across the hall into a cramped office. “Do you think we found him in time?” He can’t help but ask.

“I don’t know, Captain. It’s too early to tell. But I do think you and Agent Barton have given him a chance that he didn’t have before.” Dr. Flagretti dumps the file on her desk, nearly knocking over a half-full cup of coffee. “I really wish they’d given me a bigger office, if I’m going to be in New York for a while,” she grumbles.

“I’ll put in a word with Coulson, see what he can do,” he offers. “Also - it’s Steve. You can call me Steve.”

She leans on her palms and looks up at him. “You really are too good to be true. I thought all the propaganda posters were exaggerating.”

He glances to the floor. “They definitely were.”

A voice comes from the open doorway. “Such becoming modesty, Captain Rogers. The lady speaks truly.”

Lukas Eld rests against the wooden frame, hands tucked into the pockets of his trousers. Steve gives him a half-smile. “You haven’t seen the posters, have you?”

“No, but now I think I shall have to seek them out,” Eld replies.

“Make sure you find the one where I’m warning about the dangers of syphilis,” he tells them, dry as dust. “My unit always got a kick out of that.”

Dr. Flagretti chuckles. “That sounds like the perfect decoration for a doctor’s office, don’t you think?”

“I’ll get you a signed copy,” Steve says. He turns to Lukas Eld. “I didn’t know you were in New York.”

“Coulson brought me along. Raina was spotted in Manhattan.”
“Spotted?”

Lukas grins. “Not just spotted. Captured.”

“Nice work.” Steve nods at him. “Are you headed back home now?”

Lukas’s gaze darts to Dr. Flagretti. “Not yet. They want me to compile my knowledge of the ring that was recovered.”

That doesn’t sit right in his gut. Steve and Dr. Flagretti exchange glances. “The ring? They’re gonna use it on her?” she asks.

Lukas lifts one shoulder. “You know S.H.I.E.L.D.’s motives better than I.”

“They would use it if they felt it necessary,” he says, certain. He knew this was coming. It’s obvious. The clearest route to getting workable intelligence from an enemy operative.

The doctor shivers at his side. She touches her finger, just barely, where Raina must have slipped the ring on, before she clasps her hands behind her back.

He frowns at the desk, piled high with folders and scattered papers, the detritus of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s medical experiments. Someone must have compiled knowledge of the serum, after the Valkyrie went down. All the pain and suffocating fear of the Vita Ray distilled into a single tidy report. Raina wouldn’t have wanted the files otherwise. Is it a good idea to gather information about this ring in the same way?

I keep thinking about what that woman could have made me do. Made me say.

Lukas Eld interrupts his thoughts. “Don’t you have a meeting to get to, Captain Rogers?”

He shakes his head. “Steve. It’s Steve, remember?” Waving at the doctor, he ducks into the hall. “Be seeing ya, Dr. Flagretti.”
“Goodbye - Steve.” Her answering smile is warm.

Eld slips into the space at his left, matching strides. “Are you coming to the meeting?” Steve asks.

“I wasn’t invited.” He stares ahead, the corners of his mouth slightly upturned. “But I will be most curious to hear the outcome.”

“Sure you won’t be able to find a way to eavesdrop?” he jokes.

Lukas’s expression tightens. Steve feels like he’s crossed an invisible line, but isn’t sure where he misstepped.

“I suppose you have heard about Raina’s capture. About my role in it,” Lukas says.

Steve shakes his head. “No, not really. I just figured, if you were that curious, you’d find a way. Was I wrong?”

“You haven’t heard?” Lukas bites the inside of his cheek and eyes Steve speculatively. “I must confess, you surprise me.”

“I do?” It’s just - he’s not the one with the mysterious past and the slick suit, the one with a penchant for sly, knowing smirks.

“Yes. You ask many questions, but I do not know what you seek in answer. It is… aggravating,” Lukas admits with a twist of his lips.

He chuckles. “I don’t know. I’m sorry if I offended you, I don’t mean anything by them. I just… can’t seem to pin you down. How your mind works.” Steve shrugs. “I guess I’m curious too.”

“About me?” Lukas seems genuinely surprised.
“Yeah. Why shouldn’t I be?”

“I’m afraid I’m an enigma, Captain.”

Steve smiles. “I’m sure you’d like to think so. If you’re such an enigma, then why do you tolerate my poking and my questions?”

The tilt of his lips almost disguises the sardonic timbre of his voice. “Perhaps I’m amused at the attempt. That distinctly human drive to know the unknowable.” Lukas’s green eyes grow distant. “Or perhaps you remind me of someone I used to know.”

Steve studies the pensive line on his forehead, the sharp planes of his face. “Someone you lost,” he says, not a question but a statement.

The edges of his expression grow brittle. “That is a rather broad category, Captain. So broad as to be meaningless.”

“I don’t think anyone can ever be truly lost. Not when – not when you remember them. They live in your head.” He breathes softly and thinks of a war, long past.

Lukas gazes at him. “You are unbearably naïve, Captain.”

“I prefer the term optimist.”

“There is no great distinction.”

“It’s a choice you make,” Steve tries to explain. “To be optimistic – or naïve, if you prefer. Cause if you’ve got to fall one way, it’s better to land on that side of the scale. I’ve never met a happy pessimist.”

Lukas is silent for a moment before giving him a crooked smile. “Alas, pessimism is in my nature.”
“But it doesn’t have to be. Your nature doesn’t define you. It’s what you do that matters,” Steve argues.

“This is to be a philosophical discussion, then?” Lukas clucks his tongue, like a schoolteacher chiding a student. Steve frowns at him. “There is no escape from one’s true self. We think we have choices - but we are limited by our own minds. Choice is but an illusion. When we are presented with only a few options out of the limitless universe, can we truly be said to exercise free will?”

“Well, yeah, I think so. Even if you only have a bad option, and a worse one, you’re still doing the choosing.”

“Then if there are no good options, and you choose one of the bad, if every option you are presented with will hurt someone - are you evil?”

Steve stutters over his response. This is becoming a lot more serious than he bargained for. “I don’t know. I don’t think it’s worth much, to label a person as good or evil.”

“How else are we to understand our morality?”

“Good people can do bad things, and bad people can do good things. It’s not easy to define, and it shouldn’t be. Labeling something doesn’t mean you understand it.”

“But if your base instinct is to do something immoral - would it not help to know yourself as evil, to better guard against the choices you might make? Is self-knowledge not a virtue that all must possess? Does it not have value?”

Steve stops walking. The intensity in Lukas’s voice is unsettling. “Do you think you’re evil?” he asks, point-blank.

Lukas waves a dismissal. “Come, Captain. Have you never had the urge to do something that you know is bad, simply because it is? To see what happens?”

Lukas’s green eyes gleam under the harsh fluorescent light. Steve fidgets. “Um, no. Not really.” He’s pulled plenty of dangerous stunts. Stunts that could be considered bad, on the face of them. Destroyed equipment, burned down factories, hell, signed himself up for the damned serum in the first place. Bucky had classified that as very, very bad. He’d been quietly furious over it.
But he’d never done any of that just to see what would happen. They’d called it the war effort and given him medals that he never pinned on.

“Truly?” Lukas seems amused. “Well, I suppose it’s an innate defect.”

Steve finds a whole lot wrong with that statement. “Saying it’s innate, saying it’s in your nature, that just shifts the blame. You have to take responsibility for your actions. That’s impossible to do if you believe you can’t change.”

“And you believe a person can change?”

“Of course. No one’s born evil, and no one’s born perfect, either. We all make a choice. And we can always make a different one.”

Lukas stops outside a conference room. Where they’re meeting, he assumes, and wonders how Lukas knew. “I do enjoy a good intellectual argument,” the consultant says. “I shall take the lesson you offered in the spirit it was intended, but do not mistake that for agreement.”

Steve huffs a breath of laughter. “I wouldn’t dare.”

He ducks into the room to find most of the attendees already there. Fury looms at the head of the conference table, Coulson on his left and Natasha on his right. Clint leans back dangerously far in his own chair, a crooked grin sliding on his face when he notices Steve. The agent Steve had meet a few weeks ago, Roberts, sits across from him, her thick black hair pulled into a braid. Next to her, the two scientists are perched close together, whispering.

“Captain Rogers.” Fury gestures at the unoccupied spot between Natasha and Clint. “I do believe we are ready to begin.” He tilts his chin at the redheaded agent.

“Let’s keep this short and sweet,” Natasha says, flicking on a Powerpoint with a little remote. “I don’t think Lukas Eld is a human.”

Steve feels his mouth fall open of its own accord. He almost says, absurdly, but I was just with him. Nat clicks to the next slide. “At least, not completely. I think he’s meta.”
Clint goggles at her. “You made a Powerpoint for this?”

She glances up at the projection. The title is bolded. *Homo Sapiens: Long-Lasting Biological Trend or Just a Fad?*

“It’s called organizing your thoughts, Clint. Not all of us wake up constantly hungover, face-first in a pizza box.”

“That was like, twice!” Clint sets his jaw mulishly. “And you said you wouldn’t tell anyone,” he mutters.

“I lied,” Natasha says.

Steve raises his hand. Nat gives him a look, and he lowers it. “I was just wondering - I mean, how did you come to this conclusion?”

“Observation and intuition.” She skips ahead in her presentation and presses play on a grainy black-and-white video.

It’s the recording from their first raid on a Centipede warehouse. The interview, when Raina made Eld wear the ring. Steve tries to follow Natasha’s train of thought. “He’s a smooth talker. But does that mean he isn’t fully human?”

“It’s not his evasions that interest me. Well - not for the purposes of this discussion.” The black-clad agent lets the video play a few frames. “Really, I’m surprised this hasn’t come up.” She leans forward and pins Coulson with a look. “How does he know about this ring?”

“He’s some kinda expert. Right?” Clint shrugs.

“A historian,” Natasha corrects. “A historian who happens to know all about an 0-8-4 that S.H.I.E.L.D. has never encountered before.” She points at the screen. “You don’t just talk around an artifact with this kind of influence if you don’t understand it. You can’t bluff your way through an interview like this if you don’t know what you’re doing. Eld does.”
“Maybe he’s come across the ring before,” Coulson says.

“Didn’t seem like he’d ever seen it,” Clint points out. “Earlier in the video, when she showed it to him.”

“We did just establish that he’s a good liar,” Coulson retorts.

“Even if he lied about never having seen it, he knows the ring,” Natasha repeats. “He knows how it works. That on its own is suspicious.”

“Okay. He knows more about this ring than he should. And we know he has a shady past. Lukas Eld isn’t his real name, he admitted that. But why do you insist he’s a metahuman?” Steve says.

“I suppose no one has shown you the video from last night, Cap.”

He looks around. It seems he’s the only one who hasn’t seen it. Is he always going to be kept out of the loop?

Nat skips a few slides and another video begins playback. An empty hallway in shades of grey. And then, suddenly, empty no more.

Eld appears in the frame, in the middle of the hall, from thin air. A man pulls away from him, peers in the opposite direction. The consultant lunges for him but stops short. Both men turn around, hands rising into the air.

Steve watches as they’re ushered into a room under gunpoint. He chews on his lip as the video reaches its end and clicks off. “Okay. I’m starting to see your point.”

Fury grunts. “And you agree with Agent Romanova, Coulson?”

“Yes.” The balding man stands. “I do. I think Eld’s a metahuman, and I think he knows a lot more than he lets on. About Raina’s ring. And maybe other things we’re investigating.”
“The cracks,” Steve realizes. “The one that Clint and I found in New Jersey. And the one in Southeast Asia. You think he could help us?”

Coulson pauses, glances to Fury. After a beat, he nods. “That’s why I want to bring him on to my team.”

“Is that a good idea?” Clint asks. “He’s hasn’t exactly proven himself trustworthy.”

“I think the rewards outweigh the risks.” Coulson turns to Fury. “We should approach him. Straightforward. Lay it all out. Tell him what we know and make it clear that we could help him, if he helps us.”

“How could we help him?” Roberts says. “What does he need from us?”

“It must be hard to hide his abilities. Keep under the radar, maintain a false identity. He wouldn’t have to hide with S.H.I.E.L.D. We could provide a better, deeper cover for him. And I think he likes to feel useful. Not to mention he’s a bit of a show-off. He wants us to see what he can do.”

“He could be dangerous,” Clint insists. “We don’t know what he can do. Hell, we don’t know much of anything about metahumans.”

“We could ask him,” The young male scientist points out. Fitz - that’s his name.

“Who knows if he’d tell the truth?”

“Having a metahuman on the team could be a risk,” Coulson acknowledges.

“You already have one,” Steve says slowly. The supervisory special agent tilts his head at him, a silent question. “Someone with extranormal abilities, right? With capabilities beyond the standard human baseline. I wasn’t born with it, but I do think the serum makes me qualify.”

“Yeah, but we know you, Cap. Steve Rogers isn’t a fake. Eld lied to us.” Clint lets his chair fall
“Maybe he didn’t want to be constantly watched and stared at,” Steve suggests. “Maybe he didn’t want to be the odd one out.” He knows what it’s like, to grow up knowing you were different. Thinking there was something wrong with you, for not being like everyone else. Steve can see how that would mess with someone’s head.

Steve had gotten angry. With his weakness, with himself, with other people for constantly reminding him of it. So angry that he fought tooth and nail to prove his own worth.

Someone else could get bitter. Secretive. Different could become wrong, wrong could become evil.

“This team,” Fury says slowly. “It’s an interesting… initiative.”

A half-smile lingers on Coulson’s lips. “Yes. It is. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Metahumans. And maybe even a billionaire or two.”

Natasha narrows her eyes. “You aren’t serious.”

“I said multidisciplinary.”

“Coulson, I told you he’s not cut out for that.”

“We’ll see,” the supervisory agent says. “We’ve got problems bigger than S.H.I.E.L.D. can handle. Bigger than our standard operating procedure covers. We need help. The source of this help may be unconventional, but I think in the long run it’ll work itself out.”

“Let’s say I approve this,” Fury cuts in. “What would you have Eld do?”

“First, I’d have him assist in Raina’s interrogation. He knows this ring, he can help us use it. If that works, I’d take him out to see these cracks for himself. See if he has any useful information.”
“If he does?”

“We’d work with him. Make him feel part of the team. Like he has a place here. Let him see what S.H.I.E.L.D. does, and how we can benefit each other.”

“What if he doesn’t want to work with a team?” Natasha says sharply. “What if he’s unsuited to the job?”

“Either we recruit him now, learn about his abilities, use them to help us, or we let him go.” Coulson crosses his arms over his chest. “Then he goes who knows where, and works with god knows who. And we’re left in the dark about what he’s capable of, and he’s another metahuman running around the country. A metahuman that could easily escape any surveillance we place on him.” He gestures to the incriminating video, still projected on the wall.

Natasha hums. She flicks a glance his way. “Steve? You’ve been quiet.”

He gnaws on his lip for a moment. “There’s a lot to think about.”

“Then let’s start with Lukas Eld. Do you think he should be recruited?”

Steve thinks of Lukas’s careful probing, the way he’d asked Steve if he thought a person could be born with something that made them bad - without really asking. *Innate defects.* The warning about the ring. The understanding on his face when Steve had mentioned the war, mentioned losing everything he’d ever loved. Understanding and scorn, at Steve’s optimistic beliefs.

“I do,” he says simply. “I think we should bring him on and then give him access to the ring.”

“Wait - what?” Clint asks. “You want to give him the creepy woo-woo magic ring?”

“Just stick with ring,” Natasha says, flicking a strand of red hair away from her eyes with one painted fingernail. “It’s shorter and makes you sound less like a five year old.”

Clint sticks his tongue out at her.
Steve can’t suppress a smile. “Yeah, that one. He’s already working on a threat assessment. Why don’t we give him full access to complete his report? Before this ring is used on anybody in S.H.I.E.L.D. custody.”

“You don’t think we should use it at all, do you?” Coulson sighs.

*Like you used my blood to try to recreate the serum? Like you used my genetic material when you were sure I couldn’t protest?* How is it any different, forcing someone to incriminate themselves? It’s a violation. S.H.I.E.L.D. wants what they want, without caring what lines they cross to get it.

“No,” he says stubbornly. “I don’t. I understand where you’re coming from, but I don’t think the advantages are significant enough to warrant the use of... “

“Of what amounts to forceful coercion and mental torture?” Natasha finishes the thought for him, picking at her thumbnail and throwing a glance at Coulson. “What?” she says when he purses his lips. “If we’re discussing whether or not to use this approach, we should be clear on what exactly it entails. There’s no need for sugarcoating.”

Steve appreciates the sentiment. “I agree. We’ve got Raina and her weapons in custody. There’s time enough to give this the consideration it deserves. Let Lukas have access to the ring, and he can brief us when he’s done. We can make a better informed decision then.” He’d rather have Eld preparing this report than a S.H.I.E.L.D. scientist. Eld won’t be tempted to alter his findings to support the use of the ring.

Coulson laces his fingers together, rests his hands on the table. “You trust him enough to let him have access to such a powerful artifact?” He asks as if he wasn’t just advocating that very same thing.

“Yes,” Steve says without hesitation. “Look, I don’t know Lukas Eld very well. Not yet. But from what I’ve seen, he respects the power of this ring, and he knows the most about it. He’s cautioned us against using it already. He was instrumental in delivering it to us in the first place. I think he’s got S.H.I.E.L.D.’s - or at least our best interests at heart when it comes to Raina and her ring.” He shrugs. “I say we give him a chance.”
Chapter Notes

I started actually writing this fic two years ago - I still can't believe y'all are reading this!! xoxo

XLV

Nexlan Kazaaro’s In-Depth Guide to Your Next Best Interstellar Vacation!

....

And next, gentlepeople and gentlebeasts, we come to the Nine Realms!

Yes, that’s right, the home of the famed warriors of the Æsir, once upon a time the scourge of the civilized galaxy. A fierce, bloodthirsty culture that makes their home on Asgard, First of the Nine. The Æsir were often hailed as gods by those they colonized - or rather, installed themselves as gods once their imperialist agenda erased the native religions of the land.

Let’s see what Asgard’s got to offer besides a legacy of suffering and destruction!

Though the privileged of the Æsir travel by a colorful multidimensional wormhole, there are several pleasure barges that stop in Asgard’s bustling spaceports. Even private cruisers may request to dock, but be prepared for a thorough search by the King’s customs officers.

In Asgard you will be treated to stunningly wide-open vistas of the Ziffurrani Nebula and its famed
clouds of purple potassium and pink hydrogen gases. And every three hundred solar cycles, a
great emerald burst explodes from a nearby sun, lighting up the local star clusters for a month or
more. The best part is that the planetary disc itself sits on the edge of uninhabited wild space - no
orbiting colonies or fueling stations to block your view!

If you manage to tear yourself away from the celestial brilliance of Asgard’s sky, there is plenty to
see on solid ground. The royal palace of Gladsheim is a golden majesty of fluted towers. You might
even catch a glimpse of the ruling family strolling through the bountiful public gardens!

There are several art galleries to visit, though for the parents among our readers, be warned -
most of the subject matter may not be appropriate for children, unless they identify as apex
predators or are accustomed to gratuitous violence. The most magnificent of them feature kings
and warriors in the act of impaling a victim or several, and if you can look past all the entrails, are
breathtaking in their capture of movement and form.

If art displays aren’t your thing, or if the nausea becomes too much to bear, you might be
interested in taking a dip at the beach. Swimmers can marvel at the awe-inspiring waterfall that
crests the edge of existence - just watch out for the current, or it’ll sweep you into a vast, senseless
void beyond space and time!

If you’re a connoisseur of all that is edible, Asgard is a fantastic place to sample a hunk of roast
boar - so recently slaughtered the legs are still twitching. Make sure you get a taste of the gravy
they serve on the side - the rich iron content of the blood really enhances the flavor profile!

As you can see, Asgard is full of fun activities for the whole family. Visit the First of the Nine if you
want a glimpse into a simpler past - the Æsir remain isolated and very traditional, with quaint
customs like ale-brewing, rug-weaving, and an absolute monarchy.

Here’s some tips and tricks for making the most out of your visit to Asgard:

No one wants to stick out like a tourist - so be sure to remain armed at all times, visibly if possible.
Every citizen of Asgard bears arms, regardless of their age, gender, or mental stability.

Do not make prolonged eye contact with an Asgardian. They are prone to attack at the smallest
provocation. If one of them does attack, do NOT retaliate or make yourself seem bigger. Curl up
into the smallest ball possible and whimper, if you can. The Æsir do not like prey that doesn’t fight
back, and prefer not to be reminded that their victim has a mother that they can beg to for
deliverance.
If an Asgardian offers you a pint of ale, you must drink it all down at once. They will become quite offended if you do not, and perhaps even sit on your chest and force the liquid down your throat. Better to play along!

If you are jötunn, or otherwise blue-skinned, best not make an appearance in this realm. Another antiquated tradition they practice is prejudice against species!

Do not start a drinking song with many verses or a particularly long chorus. The Æsir will take up the chant. They have nearly unlimited stamina, with large barrel-chests capable of holding an enormous capacity of air. The song will go on for hours, and the Æsir are famously poor singers in any case.

And remember: Have fun! Don some armor and a sword, practice your ale-quaffing, and step back in time to witness the barbarity of an ancient age firsthand!

The Second of the Nine Realms is Midgard, but as it doesn’t possess a spaceport and the majority of the species on its surface are alternately venomous, poisonous, or predatory, we will not be covering it in this guide.

“To traverse the Void between the realms is a great undertaking.” His father stands near the sharp crystal edge, gazing from the bridge into the vast wilderness of space.

Thor doesn’t know how he can stand it. He refuses to look down into that black, depthless void. That hungry, leaching absence which swallows light and life, hope and love. Valhalla does not
exist down there. Nor does Fólkvangr, that wooden hall where the peaceful shades rest. Not even Hela’s servants dare encroach upon such all-consuming darkness.

Thor stares determinedly back at Odin. “I know.”

“You must remain cautious,” he warns.

“Yes, Father,” comes his reply, with a touch of exasperation. “I know.”

Odin’s eyes are steel grey beneath lowered brows. “You know, do you? You know the currents of dark energy, how to listen to the inhale and exhale of the realms, the might of Yggdrasil’s heaving branches?”

Chastisement has never encouraged Thor to hold his tongue. “I know that I know not of these matters, and that I must trust others to guide my safe passage.” He smiles broadly at the assembled mages. “And I know my trust is securely placed, for they are the most knowledgeable in all of Asgard.”

The young mage’s apprentice at the front of the group grins back, bouncing in place on spindly legs. The women remain more dignified, inclining their heads. His mother’s friend Isli winks at him.

Father turns to them. “I shall begin to summon the energy. Prepare yourselves to redirect.”

They form a rough circle, dropping their chins toward their chests. The nape of his neck tingles, a frisson relayed through the air, the sleeping seidr of the realm’s most powerful mages awakened. Like the heartbeat before lightning curls a tongue of white fire around Mjölnir’s head.

His father is the focal point. Breathing deeply, eyes closed, his fine golden armor shimmers with a haze of power. Mother watches silently.

Thor waits with the councillors and the attendants and those others that feel more at home in the sparring circle than the mage’s circle. The only exception is the apprentice that has retreated off to one side. Thor wanders over, his footsteps aimless. The proceedings are quite a bit more dull than he imagined. There are no colorful sparks shooting into the air, no chanting or singing. No puffs of smoke or rings of flame. Just unwavering, quiet concentration. It’s awfully boring.
The apprentice glances over his shoulder as Thor approaches - and then looks left, and right, before staring up at him. Thor rocks back and forth on his heels, waiting to be acknowledged, but the young man doesn’t speak. He tries to put the apprentice at ease with a friendly question. “Are you not participating?”

“M-Me, my prince?” The young man shakes his head. “Um - Master Kveiki is the mage. I am just her apprentice. I’ll join the circle when it’s ready, to lend my seidr, but I am not yet skilled enough to design the reflector runes. I mean - I am skilled with the runes, of course, my master is a very competent teacher - not that I am boasting - the masters certainly surpass me in the craft, but I meant - ”

Thor mercifully cuts him off. “And your name?”

The apprentice seems relieved, swallowing audibly. “Leifr.” He bows a head full of tight dark curls.

“How long have you been a mage’s apprentice?”

“Only - only a few decades, my prince.” Leifr’s voice shakes. He fusses with his engraved silver cuffs. Thor tries not to smile.

“And do you find the Academy to your liking?”

Leifr blinks big brown eyes at him. “Of course! To study at the Academy is an honor.” The mage seems to find his stride. “The wisest scholars in the Nine Realms frequent the halls. The secretkeepers of Alfheim’s cloud forests, the Vaniri sunsingers, Asgard’s own master healers. And - well, the Sky Spire holds the largest library I have seen in all my years.”

“Surely it cannot be larger than that of Vanaheim’s White Palace,” Thor says.

“The White Palace?” Leifr shrugs one shoulder. “I’ve never been to Vanaheim.”

“Truly?”
“We were going to go and visit the star maps in the Hall of Prophecy. Before - um - the Allfather ordered the Bifröst to be closed.”

Thor cannot help but glance to the jagged edge of the bridge. The ljósvæðr is cloudy and colorless, no longer reflecting the light of Asgard’s single moon.

Leifr hurries on. “You know, in the Hall of Prophecy, they have a separate room for each galaxy, with the exact location of celestial bodies projected upon the wall. All it takes is a touch of seidr to manipulate, and you can sit and watch the spin of foreign constellations.”

“I know,” Thor says softly. “My brother once kept me in Niflheim’s star atlas for an entire afternoon.”

He can see Leifr swallow, uncertain. Then his lips purse together and determination flickers across delicate features. “I - I was grieved to hear of Prince Loki’s passing.”

“You were?” Thor prods. He has heard this tune before, and found it shallow and insincere, a mockery in the guise of sympathy.

“Yes. His treatise on celestial geometry and fluctuation in ambient seidr was one of my favorite texts when I was younger. I have kept it in my bedchambers for many years.”

“I did not know of such a treatise,” Thor admits. “No doubt I would be unable to grasp the finer points of his conclusions.”

“I don’t see why,” Leifr says. “He uses you as an example.”

Now Thor is truly astonished. “Me?”

“He said you summon your lightning from ambient seidr. And ambient seidr fluctuates with the revolutions of the realms, so…”
“So...?”

Leifr rubs at the tip of his upturned nose and his expression turns sheepish. “To be honest, the subsequent paragraph eluded me.”

A laugh bubbles up from Thor’s chest. “Take heart, my friend. I still maintain that Loki’s arguments were more convoluted than strictly necessary, for the perverse pleasure of confounding his audience. I was often the victim of such a ploy.”

Leifr ducks his head but cannot hide his smile. They are quiet for a stretch, watching the tableau laid out before them on the splintered remnant of the destroyed bridge.

“Prince Thor?”

Leifr looks up at him, long-lashed eyes set wide in his dark-skinned face. Thor leans down a bit to match his height. “Yes?”

“Why are you going to Midgard?”

He blinks, and turns away. “I - I wish to make peace with the humans. To repay my debt to them, and pay penance for the destruction I caused when I last visited their realm.”

“Oh.” Leifr thinks for a moment, wriggling his nose. “That is very noble, Prince Thor.”

Thor fiddles with the vambrace upon his right arm. He traces the engraving his mother pressed into the metal. An outline of a pair of horns, curving upwards sharply. “Noble. I once thought myself quite noble,” he murmurs.

“I should like to visit Midgard, someday.” Leifr chatters on without appearing to hear him. “Once the Bifröst is reconstructed. I would visit Midgard and Vanheim and even Nidavellir, though I heard their mages are quite unwilling to share their ancient knowledge of metalworking.”

His master approaches and calls for Leifr with an irritated edge to her tone. Kveiki, Thor remembers. Head Mage Isli’s trusted lieutenant. “We shall begin soon, apprentice. Join the circle.”
Leifr scampers off with a nervous grin and a small wave. Kveiki glides over to him. She sweeps gleaming white hair over one shoulder. “Apologies, Prince Thor. My apprentice proves his lack of restraint daily. I hope he did not try your patience.”

Thor shakes his head quickly, biting back a frown. “Not at all, honored mage. He is simply eager.”

Her tawny eyes flick over to Leifr. “Quite eager. He has much to learn.”

“Then he is fortunate to have the attention of a wise and competent teacher.” Thor bows his head slightly. “I must admit I was never as eager for a lesson at his age.”

“Except perhaps from the swordmaster.”

Thor concedes with a quirk of his lips. “Is that so terrible?”

Kveiki only tilts her head. Golden paint graces the line of her sculpted cheekbones, a tiny pattern of angular, precise runes standing bright against the warm bronze of her skin. “Eagerness is dangerous in a mage. An eager student of seidr goes too far, too fast. They cultivate more power than they can control. They court darker mysteries than they should seek. Magic is not forgiving. It does not tolerate mistakes.”

“The mages of the Academy said the very same of my brother,” Thor says, his voice low with a note of warning. “Yet he succeeded at every turn when they said he was doomed to fail.”

“Then I suppose your brother was no common mage,” Kveiki replies, in a tone that suggests she’s humoring him. She turns with a swish of pale fabric, her gown whipping at Thor’s legs. “To touch the well of power and not be sucked into its depths. I know of several who did not succeed.”

Kveiki walks to rejoin the mage’s circle. Thor stares after her, put off by her abruptness.

A soft voice at his shoulder startles him. “Lend her some sympathy.”
He whirls, nearly tripping over his cloak. His mother raises an eyebrow. “Kveiki understands more than most the precarious path the student of magic must tread.”

“You are seiðkona,” Thor protests. “And you advocate against your own art?”

“When a warrior loses himself in the bloodlust, revels in it so deeply that he turns his blade against kin and countrymen, we would name him berserkr and cast him from our halls and hearths,” Mother tells him. “When a mage loses themselves in the pulse of seidr, basks in the fire of their power, uses their magic to destroy, we should name them wretched as well.”

Thor tries to puzzle out what she means. “I have never seen a berserkr who wields magic as his blade.”

“The subtlety of seidr surprises all but the most watchful. A blade need not be shining steel to deal out death. It can be small and silent too,” his mother says. “As for Kveiki, she has been… preoccupied of late.”

He thinks of Frigga at her loom, these past nights, seeking shadows. Unease grips him by the short hairs. “Perhaps I should remain here. In case I am needed.”

She reaches up and cups his cheek. “Perhaps they have greater need of your presence on Midgard. Perhaps you need Midgard,” Mother says softly.

Thor studies her fine profile, her expression serene and unreadable. “Have you… Seen this?”

“My dreams fade upon waking,” she murmurs. “But I feel that you are called away. I feel that this journey must take place.”

There is no time to continue the conversation. Father raises his head. “Thor,” he booms, “come near that we may send you on your way.”

He kisses Frigga’s cheek. “I shall return.”

“When you are ready,” she whispers. “And not before.”
Thor strides forward and inserts himself into the center of the circle. Odin observes him, head to toe. Thor refuses to quail beneath that familiar penetrating gaze.

“You are set on this course,” Father says, almost a question.

“Yes,” he replies firmly.

Odin inclines his head in the barest acquiescence. “Call Heimdall when you wish to return. But be warned, Thor - it shall take several days for us to gather the required energy for the translocation. You will be on your own until then.”

“I understand.” Thor kneels, one fist over his heart. A gesture of respect, and farewell. A prince to a king, not a man to his father. Just as he was taught.

Odin breathes out a sigh. “May you find what you seek on Midgard. My son.”

He raises his arms, and the mages follow, shadowing his movements. The warm buzz of energy turns hot, from embers of power to a sudden blaze. Thor feels something shift, clicking out of place, and then the bridge is gone, and the royal court, Odin’s grey eyes the last lingering sight before he too is consumed with blackness.

It is not the roar of the Bifröst with which he falls. More like - he’s been pushed, propelled. Thor descends, faster than he anticipated.

Too fast. The acceleration is unprecedented. A spike of worry pierces his gut. Something’s wrong.

He gains more speed. The dark rushes past him, buffeting him this way and that. And then there are stars, streaks of light. A web of brightness in the distance. A galaxy - or a Midgardian city, he realizes.

And then the ground, closer every second. Thor yanks on his hammer and summons the wind. Instead of smashing into the earth in a crater, he is dragged across the rocky surface, skidding to a halt after many leagues.
He knows instantly he is not at the site the mages intended for his arrival. This is not Puente Antiguo. The air is heavy and cold, and he can taste moisture on his tongue. He has gone too far, been thrown out of his way. Perhaps the mage’s circle summoned more dark energy than was needed for this journey.

Thor stands, shaking off the rough landing. He unhooks his satchel and dresses quickly. This time, he’d come prepared. The palace seamstresses had fashioned Midgardian garments, from his description. He hopes that mortal attire has not changed greatly from his last visit. The coarse material of the blue trousers itches on his legs.

The short quilted jacket he pulls over his shoulders is sturdy brown leather. The sleeves are tight. Thor fears the seams might rip, but they hold fast, for now. Mother had insisted on attaching the lining of armor plating herself, sewn on the underside, hidden with white fur.

The Midgardian town he had glimpsed from the sky is not far, now. Thor walks, the breeze pleasantly brisk, a tapestry of distant worlds laid out above him, white against deep blue. Asgard is up there somewhere, a glittering promise. He is no exile this time. He will return.

Thor passes small dwellings, and then larger, rectangular ones with brick facades. The buildings slope gently upward as he walks on, reaching farther up into the thin, streaming clouds. Humans are everywhere, on purposeful paths and leisurely strolls, darting and running, yelling into their handheld communication devices. No one casts a second glance at Thor. No one bows or salutes. By Helheim, they barely even move out of his way!

The man who just knocked into him looks up at Thor and snarls. “Watch it, asshole!”

Thor waves jauntily back. The human shakes his head and storms away.

A giggle from nearby has Thor turning. A girl stands at a door, holding it open for a couple to pass through and out onto the street. A rush of air wafts from the interior, smelling of roasted meat and spices. Thor’s stomach rumbles.

He waves at the girl too. It is a common human greeting, he remembers. “How much for a roast and a glass of mead?”

She giggles again, as if he’s made a jest, and points to a sheet of paper hung up on the clear
window. “There’s a menu here. The prime rib’s on special tonight.”

“I shall trust the worth of your word, my lady. Lead on.” Thor follows the girl in, where several other attendants wait.

An older, silver-bearded man steps up promptly. “May I take your coat?”

Thor nods gratefully. He strips off the leather and hands it to the mortal attendant.

“Oof!” The man stumbles under the weight. Thor goes to help him, but he waves off the gesture. “No, it’s okay, I got it. Just - heavier than I expected.”

“It is well-made,” Thor says. “My mother is an excellent seamstress.”

“Er - right. Here’s your coat ticket.”

Thor takes the slip of paper, though he is not sure what to do with it. Opting for graciousness, he bows his head. “I accept this gift and your hospitality.”

“Uh… sure.” The attendant glances at his belt. “Would you like me to take your… hammer as well?”

“I applaud your boldness,” Thor tells him. He pats the handle. “I have not yet seen any other capable of wielding it. Though you may try if you wish.”

The mortal glances from Mjölnir to Thor. “I guess it’s okay. Enjoy your dinner, sir.”

The prime rib is spectacular. Thor devours four helpings of it - he cannot understand why they insist on bringing out one small child’s portion at a time, but supposes he must make an effort to master Midgardian etiquette, no matter how asinine it seems.

After the table is strewn with emptied plates, Thor leans back in his chair and flips his cup of water upside down. The table servant is as attentive as the fellow who gifted him the coat ticket. He
appears at Thor’s side. “Are you - um - finished? Would you like the check?”

Thor nods. He will pay for his food and depart. If he is to locate Jane and tender his apologies in person, he must begin his search.

Preparation again serves him well. He does not possess their plastic bartering cards, like the one Jane had paid for his breakfast with in Puente Antiguo, but he does have some of their green currency. He hands over a stack of it to the table servant. “Will this suffice?”

“Sir, I can’t accept this.”


“This is American money.” The man pauses, but must see the blankness of Thor’s expression. “We’re in Canada.”

“Canada. I am in Canada?”

The servant looks at him, mouth slightly open. “Well - yeah.”

“Alas, this is all of the money I possess. Unless you would prefer gold?”

Thor reaches for the papers, but the table servant jerks his arm back and casts a quick glance around. “Uh, never mind. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it. You’re good.” He slips the money into his pocket and busies himself cleaning up Thor’s dishes.

As he is leaving, Thor notices a commotion in the receiving hall of the establishment. The other patrons cluster around the television set.

Darcy had gone to great lengths to explain television to Thor, when he was last here. “It’s mankind’s greatest achievement, as well as its greatest curse,” she’d said, while Thor nodded, eager to learn of Midgardian culture. “It’s brought us both Snooki and the moon landing. Infomercials and Shark Week. It’s a double-edged sword, you know?”
“All swords should be double-edged, the better to cleave through a limb cleanly,” he’d attempted to argue, at least until Darcy pretended to gag into Jane’s colorful bag.

Thor gestures at the crowd of humans. “An invention worthy of worship,” he tells the girl whose only task appears to be holding the door open.

Deception has never been a skill he sought to cultivate, but this human disguise he wears has fooled everyone he has thus far met, and he is feeling confident enough to attempt to speak as a Midgardian as well as look like one.

She smiles at him. “You’re funny,” she says. Thor beams at her. “Something’s going on in New York, I guess.”

“New York,” Thor repeats. “I have heard of this city.”

“Always wanted to visit,” she tells him a bit absently. “Seems like they’ve got everything going on. The most exciting thing to happen in this town was the grand opening of this chain.”

“Perhaps I should visit myself,” Thor muses. He must begin his search somewhere. Thor eases his way through the people around the screen, eliciting a few annoyed grunts. A woman is in the picture, surrounded by tall, lit buildings, spearing upward into a black sky. Like this city he stands in now, but on a bigger scale.

“Behind me, you can see what is left of the apartment complex - ”

But her words don’t catch in Thor’s awareness. The person walking by in the background does. It’s only for a second. It’s enough. Thor has a good memory for faces. It’s the son of Coul - the one who watched over his hammer.

“I must go to New York,” he announces.

One of the humans looks at him. “You’re crazy, buddy.” He shakes his head. “But good luck.”
XLVII & XLVIII

Chapter Notes

I agonized over this one. It's later than I wanted, but I hope you enjoy.

XLVII

Excerpt from the poem “The Lady of Shalott” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, from the version published in 1842

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
   To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
   The Lady of Shalott.

And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
   Winding down to Camelot:
There the river eddy whirls,
And there the surly village-churls,
And the red cloaks of market girls,
   Pass onward from Shalott.

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-haired page in crimson clad,
   Goes by to towered Camelot;
And sometimes through the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
   The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror’s magic sights,
For often through the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
   And music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
“I am half sick of shadows,” said
   The Lady of Shalott.

XLVIII

The reckoning. Lukas thinks, and smother a wild urge to smile. Anticipation tickles at the base of his spine. Perhaps he should be worried - perhaps Lukas Eld would be worried. But there is a gleeful little shadow underneath his mortal veneer, restless and whispering in his ear.

Spin a story, knot the thread. With warp and weft, we weave a web.

He can nearly hear a woman’s voice, faint and musical, humming the tune as he repeats the familiar rhyme… a rhyme she taught him. There goes the needle, with steps retread. Don’t look now, but you’ve been misled.
Biting his lip, Lukas pulls on a cloak of calm.

He wonders at the larger crowd that has been brought together. The Captain, and the Widow. Coulson. Director Fury. Another agent, clad in black, the skin of his biceps bare and a bow slung over his shoulder. Agent Roberts, and the pair of scientists. A briefing, Coulson had called it. Lukas knows better. Suspiciously late in the evening, for one, and the attendees have been chosen with care.

All fighters. Capable, armed and armored. Excepting the scientists, and those with knowledge are never without a weapon. Lukas considers them. If they meant this show to intimidate him... well, he’d have to see about turning the tables, lest S.H.I.E.L.D.’s agents grow complacent. Lukas would hate to have reassured them to the point of relaxing security standards for outside consultants.

Fear could be a useful motivator, after all. Sometimes it served as a judicious reminder of why exactly you should exert yourself to keep a powerful ally at your side, rather than at your enemy’s. Lukas could use that. Especially considering Coulson had never really delivered on that diamond-encrusted Rolex.

Time to prod the bilgesnipe with the electrified spear, as they say.

“Well. This ought to be interesting.” Lukas picks at his nails. “I suppose you want me to explain myself.”

“That would be a nice change of pace.” Fury presses his lips tight together.

“So, where shall I start?” Lukas makes a show of thinking, gazing up at the oppressively low tiled ceiling and poking his tongue into his cheek. He glances back at them. “Let’s see... I consider myself a very private person.”

Coulson sighs. “There’s no such thing as privacy in this line of work.”

His mind flickers through a dozen scenarios. Do they expect me to lie? Or to confess? To cry, or to flee?

Coulson knows that Eld is not as forthright as he probably should be. Coulson expects an explanation, and would think himself clever for sniffing out a lie. The man is not vain, but he is not
without ego either. Coulson, like all men, tells himself a story, every day, about who he is and what he is good at. Lukas shall simply have to fit into the narrative, and the details will come into focus.

“I must say, I’m curious to hear your own suppositions.”

The redheaded woman meets his gaze. Red now, no longer blonde, but the same Agent Romanova that Coulson had addressed back in the warehouse. “We know you’ve lied to us from the beginning. We know your name isn’t Lukas Eld. We know you’re not just a historian.” She leans forward. “We know you’re something more.”

Lukas raises a brow. “If you consider an omission a lie…”

“Yes.” The agent he’d seen with the bow speaks flatly.

“That’s a very narrow perspective,” Lukas observes. “How... charmingly provincial. And from a man bearing an equally adorable weapon.”

The archer scowls at him, opening his mouth, and Lukas thinks he will snap out an irritated retort. The man surprises him, however.

“Will you tell us your real name?” The archer’s words are targeted, straight to the heart of the one subject Lukas does not want to touch.

“The only name I answer to now is Lukas Eld,” he says sharply. “It is no less real than any others I might have carried throughout my life.”

Agent Romanova’s gaze sharpens. Lukas holds it for a fraction of a second before looking away. *Something there*, his mind catalogues automatically. *A pressure point.*

“Alright. Fine.” The archer runs a finger along the spine of his bow, something of an anxious habit, Lukas suspects. “How about telling us what you did in that warehouse, and how you did it?”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not.” Lukas smiles blandly. “I’ve got a reputation to uphold,
you understand. I find the air of mystery I am trying to cultivate is most successful when my deeds are spoken of in awed whispers and hushed rumors.”

The Captain tries to stifle a snort and doesn’t quite succeed. The archer blinks, seeming nonplussed, thrown off his gambit.

“That isn’t a request. It’s a demand.” Fury glowers at him, arms crossed over his chest.

Coulson tries to soften that. “If you want to continue working with us, we need more information about your capabilities. S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t like working with wildcards.”

"And what is it, precisely, that you want, Agent Coulson?” He can’t help but needle him, just a little. "Or have you fallen so deeply into your role as S.H.I.E.L.D.’s stalwart general that you cannot tell the difference between your thoughts and their agenda?"

“I want you to stop trying to distract us.” The agent pins him with a steady look. "I want you to stop holding back."

“Hmm. Noted.” Lukas holds his expression carefully blank. "And what is it you offer?" He wants to be clear on this point. He wants to know what he stands to gain.

"A chance to stop hiding."

The words reverberate in his chest, quiver along the tendons, echo in the empty places. He is a creature of shadow, made for the half-light, perpetually shrouded. To be out in the open - to be seen - that is for those without shame. Unburdened by secrets. For those who do not fear to show their true faces. Weave a web. The rhyme fades to a murmur.

He thought he had made his peace with anonymity. The longing that sweeps through him now is nothing but a remnant of a different time, the last vestiges of a prince who hoped such a day would dawn when he would be known to all. That the light would be cast upon him and reveal his worth, like a gem uncovered from within the deepest crevice.

Lukas knows better. There is nothing to sift from the ashes of his soul. The lie all along, the one he’d believed - that there was a gem to be found.
But to be known, in some small way, even if it is by these unremarkable humans instead of those few he'd once dreamed would come to understand...

The impulse takes him, and he speaks. “I cannot tell you what I am.” He forestalls any argument by continuing a bare moment later. “That would require years we do not have and a masochistic philosopher or two. But as for what I can do,” Lukas says slowly. “I can show you.”

He pauses. Meets Fury’s gaze, and then Coulson.


He gives the man a half-smile, solely for the naked curiosity in his voice. “Why yes, of course.” Lukas lifts one pale, long-fingered hand. Seidr flares in his mind, prickles down his nerves, washes over the skin of his palm. A lick of emerald flame curls from the base of his thumb, twines around the knuckles, leaps playfully from one fingertip to the next.

“You’re - that’s - fire!” Fitz nearly jumps from his seat.

“That’s not what you did in the warehouse,” Steve Rogers murmurs. He cocks his head, studying the flicker of heatless flame.

“On the contrary,” Lukas tells him. “At its most essential, it is exactly the same.”

The female scientist leans forward, eyes wide. “Do you mean - are you manipulating the visible spectrum? Is that how you disappeared before? Can you bend light around you? Reflect it?”

“I’m sure I don’t know the precise mechanism,” Lukas demurs. “I only know that I can do this. And more.” He levels his stare directly at Coulson this time.

Fitz reaches out to touch, and Lukas snaps his fingers. The emerald glow vanishes. “Tell me,” he cajoles, “Do I meet your high expectations?”
“A pretty lightshow.” Coulson’s expression is even. “I’d have to see you in action to be sure.”

“And what would that entail?”

“You would continue your work with the Ring. But - the Ring isn’t our only unique artifact that would benefit from the full extent of your capabilities.”

Lukas hums, a sliver of warm amusement at the man’s persistence surfacing from deep in his chest. “The full extent of my capabilities…” Lukas taps his fingers on his lower lip. “Will cost you significantly more.” He grins without showing any teeth.

“You’re asking for a raise right now?” The archer laughs. “Jesus, the guy’s got balls, I’ll give him that.”

“You’ve heard what we can offer you.” Fury’s one-eyed glare is not the most intimidating Lukas has ever seen, but it is a quality effort. “But what are you offering? A trick of the light. A street magician can do that, and for a hell of a lot less cash.”

Tricks. The human is goading him. And it is working. A flush of annoyance creeps up his neck. Some do battle, others just do tricks. A sentiment commonly spoken by the ignorant. Lukas has no patience for ignorance.

“I am well versed in tricks, as you say. But conjuring light is not so simple as you might believe. For what is light but energy? And energy seems to be a currency worth much in this realm,” Lukas points out deftly. “Harnessed for many tasks. A force to power your vehicles, your cell phones. Your weapons. It can be used to travel, and communicate.” A shallow breath, before the claws come unsheathed. “Even disintegrate something completely, if the power is concentrated enough, as I’m sure a few unlucky humans could attest.”

He feels their attention, honed to a fine point. Lukas’s voice grows soft. “It can be used to destroy something, utterly. A flash of blue light, and then nothing but dust.”

To his surprise, it is Captain Rogers that blinks rapidly, his mouth twisting in harsh remembrance. It seems these Tesseract weapons have been around longer than he believed. Coulson shifts the slightest bit, the muscles of his neck flexing as if he wants to turn his head and look again at one of his subordinates.
“An altogether underwhelming way to exit this life, in my opinion. But if light is manipulatable, and light is energy… well. I think you would find my expertise on the subject very useful.” Lukas cocks his head, waiting for their next play.

Fury only grunts. Lukas feels a frisson race up his spine, heady as the *seidr* that had surged from his fingertips. The lull is thick, heavy with a coming decision, with potential, the first spark that will light the conflagration.

The archer speaks, his tone low and sardonic. “What’s the going rate for metahumans these days, anyway?”

“Wait - he’s a metahuman?”

The voice buzzes loudly, from everywhere and nowhere all at once. It brings the room to a stuttering halt. None of the assembled humans have spoken.

Lukas jerks, looking around. “And who, pray tell, is that?” he demands.

Fury snarls. “Stark!”

“Oh, shit. Did I say that out loud? Jarvis, do we have audio input *and* output?”

Another voice, smooth and flat, replies. “Yes, sir.”

“Dammit, J, did you do that on purpose? I was only kidding when I said I’d dump your memory backup into the trash compactor -”

“STARK!”

“You activated the audio link, sir. You were going to give Director Fury a message. I believe you were - distracted.”

Fury glowers up at the ceiling. “Stark, I swear on all that is holy -”
Coulson closes his eyes. “How did you get through?”

The disembodied voice answers jauntily. “I designed your cyber security, remember? And what was I supposed to do? None of you were answering your cells!”

Agent Romanova tilts her head back to stare at the ceiling. “Here we go,” she mutters.

“Cat’s out of the bag, I guess.” The voice - Stark’s - crackles and hisses, as if speaking from a great distance. “But it seems like you guys have bigger problems, so don’t let me stop you. You were in the middle of a delicate negotiation, I believe. Carry on.”

“What do you want?” Coulson says, every word clipped and brusque.

“Oh, nothing too important. Just, you know, a giant sinkhole opening up in the Bronx out of nowhere, nothing special, nope. Only doing S.H.I.E.L.D.’s job, once again. But if you’d, I dunno, like to come and help evacuate the civilians, I wouldn’t say no.”

Coulson leaps into action. “Romanova, Rogers, Barton, get to the helipad. Commandeer the quinjet if you have to. Go!”

The archer, the Captain, and the redheaded woman barely spare a moment to hear his instruction. The door gapes open, slamming back against the wall.

“Stark, get me coordinates. Now. Roberts, I’ll forward them to you. Assemble a crisis management team and get them to the site ASAP.” The curious term tries to burrow through the filter of Allspeak and fails, leaving only a sense of urgency. Lukas shakes his head. Not relevant.

Agent Coulson points a finger at the scientists. “Fitz, Simmons, pack up your equipment and hop on Roberts’s transport.”

“You think - ” the boy swallows. “You think this is like the ship? Like the basement?”
The look on Coulson’s face answers for him. Lukas’s curiosity is roused, and as always, this new interest takes precedence over nearly everything else happening around him. “Now, would you say this incident requires the full extent of my capabilities?” he asks.

Fury and Coulson hold an entirely silent conversation. Lukas fancies he can see the unspoken words volley back and forth in a series of muscle twitches and eyelid flicks. Fury finally turns, planting his feet solidly apart, arms still crossed over his chest like iron bars, glaring. “Fine. Go.”

Not exactly a hero’s welcome, but then, he’d long ago learned that the Norns had barred that shining path from him. Lukas, feeling unexpectedly generous, galvanized as he is by these new developments, only nods and flits out the door after the scientists.

The transport is cramped and crowded. Fitz is a nervous, quivering ball at his left side, often shooting him furtive and curious glances. Lukas only breathes deeply once he exits the vehicle, after the engines have rumbled to a stop. And immediately chokes on that breath, when he eyes the scene before him.

Bumping Lukas’s shoulder, Fitz rushes past, dragging several crates with him. He lugs a black bag over the scuffed sidewalk. Right up to the edge of the - the - Lukas can barely focus on it, nausea curling in his stomach.

It is distorted. That is the best way he can rationalize it in his own mind. The familiar boundaries of Yggdrasil, warped out of place, like a celestial child has taken up the fabric of the realm in one hand and twisted it harshly in his fist.

Lukas has always had a keen sense of the boundaries - the better to find his way around them. This, however, is a crude mockery of the delicate seidr needed to traverse those slippery tunnels that spontaneously form and dissipate within the ether.

The building that had the misfortune to be in this particular place when the distortion formed is now crumbling around the sucking black of the gap. The brittle stone walls are cracked, shattered, barely holding together. Humans rush back and forth, skirting the dark edge, digging through the rubble. Lukas can hear muffled screams and cries from within.

He can do nothing but watch. The full extent of my capabilities, Lukas thinks, the inside of his mouth awash with a bitter tang. Running into a collapsing building would be the height of foolishness. He will only get in the way of others better equipped for such a task, and with the training to complete it.
No, they will need his focus right here. The humans have no idea how much they need it. He closes his eyes and listens. There is no meditative peace to be found in this garden of concrete and steel, but Lukas tries.

A cold emptiness seeps out from the distortion. An echo of distance, of space. This is a portal, of sorts. Warped, misshapen, as like to drop one off in the vastness between the stars as a habitable realm, but still capable of transport. He can sense no fixed endpoint. What purpose could such a desultory portal serve? Other than destruction. And if that is its purpose, it is serving admirably.

He opens his eyes, unsure how much time has passed. The screams have stopped. Lukas tries to spin that as a positive. There are fewer personnel scrambling around, more staring upward, studying the parts of the building that are still, inexplicably, standing.

Fitz comes to his side, huffing out a breath. “Just mental, isn’t it?”

“The ship. And the basement,” Lukas realizes.

“Like this.” The scientist nods, a rueful tilt to his head. “What do you think, then?”

Before Lukas’s pause grows too long, Coulson interrupts. A man walks with him - a man encased in crimson metal, only his face bared to the glare of electric lights from the buildings around them. Stark, surely. The Man of Iron, Lukas has heard tell of him and his mechanized suit of armor with which he does battle. He is speaking, loudly and with incredible rapidity.

“You think I have nothing better to do than to listen in on S.H.I.E.L.D.? Does the giant multinational corporation with my name on it ring any bells?” Stark slaps a hand to his hip, metal clanging against metal, and makes a rude noise with his mouth. “I’m a busy guy. Most of your top secret meetings bore me to tears. Newsflash, Coulson - the only one interested in comparing the efficiency of Form A7C10 versus Form JB039 is you.”

Lukas thinks he hears Coulson mutter. “That form is integral to interdepartmental communication.”

Fitz turns bright red, squeaks something like a greeting, and darts back to the van. Lukas surveys Stark, toe to tip, and tries not to let his lip curl in disdain. Spying on S.H.I.E.L.D., trying to ferret out their secrets, and Lukas’s, as a consequence. He will not let that pass lightly.
Stark’s eyes flit to him, one side of his mouth quirking up. “S.H.I.E.L.D.’s really stepped up the agent dress code,” he says, appraising Lukas’s suit. “Going for the men in black vibe?”

Coulson digs the tips of his fingers into furrow between his brows. “Mr. Lukas Eld, outside consultant. Meet Tony Stark.”


Stark mimes locking them and tossing away a key. Somehow, the gesture does not inspire confidence in his ability to keep such sensitive information to himself. “You’d better,” Coulson says. “Or I’ll tell Pepper.”

“No need to get so prickly, Agent Agent.” Stark walks up to the distortion, dangerously close to portal’s shadowed horizon. “So, you gonna tell me what the hell we’re dealing with?”

Lukas and Coulson follow. Fitz must feel it is safe enough to approach, and so he does, dragging Simmons in his wake. All of them line up at the edge.

The chill wind from the ragged gap tears at his jacket. Lukas stares into it - the pure, depthless darkness of the abyss, and feels a shiver of remembered horror.

_You are no longer falling. This is not the Void._

Stark steps to his side and gives him a knowing look. “Nasty, huh?”

“This is not right,” he replies. Lukas had not sensed this distortion, and it puzzles him, bafflement fading into irritation.

“No shit,” Stark says glibly. “What tipped you off? The fact that there’s a gaping hole in the middle of what used to be an apartment complex?”
Lukas shakes his head. “This isn’t a hole.” Coulson and his scientists turn simultaneously to peer at him.

Stark kicks a clod of dirt over the edge. Those assembled watch it fall. “Looks like a hole to me.”

“This is a… a distortion. Well - a distorted portal. A hole can only be so deep, by its very nature. Whereas a portal… there is no end. Only a destination.” Lukas can see his explanation has not illuminated much for the humans. He tries to think of a way to phrase it for a species that cannot sense the boundaries as he does.

“Portals in and of themselves are not unnatural. The boundaries of realms shift and change, like autumn fades to winter and winter then to spring. In such liminal spaces, portals form and dissipate. And gates can be opened. Not terribly difficult, for one well-versed in the transfer of energy.”

“Wait… so someone opened this? Like a door?”

“No.”

Stark huffs. “So is it a portal or not?”

“This was not opened. This was… torn. The very fabric of the realm torn asunder. Like I said, distorted.” Lukas says gravely. “The amount of power this would require is staggering.”

“Where’s the power source?” Stark asks.

Lukas bites at a corner of his lips. He thinks he knows, and he doesn’t think S.H.I.E.L.D. wants him telling. Flicking a glance at Coulson, he sees the man’s minute grimace. Yes, their thoughts must be aligned.

“I do not know,” Lukas says, the words tasting sour. “It is possible that…”

Something tugs at his mind, a flicker, quick and bright as a falling star. He turns back to the gap. An errant flare of energy, from the workings of this chaotic realm, perhaps. A spark of ambient
He digs deeper. Reaches out with his mind, peering through the shadows. Lukas brushes something, more solid than the abyss around it. There is the ghost of a response, trailing across the surface of his *seidr*, light as the caress of butterfly wings. He yanks himself away, unsure what could be peering back at him on the other end.

Lukas doesn’t even realize he’s trailed off vaguely until Stark prompts him. “Uh, are you gonna leave us hanging there, pal?” He whispers to Fitz, who flushes a deep scarlet yet again. “Is he, ya know, all there?” Waggling his fingers around his temple, Stark looks the fool.

Lukas sends him a glare poisonous enough to wilt an apple blossom in the height of summer. Disappointingly, it seems to have little effect. “This needs further study.” He relaxes his jaw, trying not to grit his teeth.

“Sure, okay.” Stark flips a few metal-gloved fingers at him and wanders off. Lukas’s teeth do grind together this time.

He cuts a sharp look at Agent Coulson. “Anthony Stark.”

“Yeah, that’s Tony Stark. Self-aggrandizing billionaire asshole.” He sounds as weary as a parent chasing after a young child who has gotten hold of his brother’s dagger again. Well - if Lukas had to guess what such a tone would sound like. Complete speculation, of course.

“And you told him what I could do,” Lukas observes.

“I - We - ” He watches Coulson’s throat bob as the man swallows. The agent mutters something that sounds like *dear lord almighty.* “He won’t tell anyone. He plays up the loose cannon thing, but at the end of the day I think he knows what’s at stake.”

”It’s no wonder you have contracted my services, if he’s your only other outside consultant.” Lukas sniffs. “One of us has to set a high standard for competence and dignity, and surely it won’t be Anthony Stark.”

Coulson laughs outright. “You might be right, but Stark’s not the one asking for a raise. We don’t even pay him. He just likes to stick his nose into S.H.I.E.L.D. business, so we made it official.”
He doesn’t know precisely how to respond to that, but he knows it wouldn’t be an apology. Coffee costs money on this realm, after all.

Coulson turns to him, comes a step closer. “Lukas.”

Leaning his head back, he weighs the agent with his gaze. Coulson has never addressed him as anything more than Mr. Eld. The skin is pulled tight around the planes of his face, lines of strain creasing his brow. The pale eyes are intent when he speaks. “Can you help us?”

There is no hidden meaning in the words, no subtle game. Nothing to parse out and ponder over. Just a question. Lukas presses his fingers into his palms, nearly a fist. To say yes will be a pledge of sorts. Another thread tying him down, to this realm, holding him tighter to this mortal skin.

He silences that misplaced echo of a mother’s song. You are Lukas Eld. “Yes,” he tells Coulson.

The man nods, his shoulders curving forward, his spine softening. “What do you need?”

Lukas takes a shallow breath. “To see the Tesseract.”

Those penetrating eyes rake through him. “Why?”

“It is the source of this distortion’s power.” Coulson doesn’t argue this point, just as Lukas knew he wouldn’t. “If I - examine it, I can find out if there are any other daughter portals opening.”

“So we could know right away if this happens again?”

“Yes,” Lukas says.

“It’s a start.” Coulson blows out a breath of air. “I’ll get your clearance updated.” He glances to his scientists. “Simmons and Fitz will take you out to the site. It’s not a quick jaunt, either.”
Coulson rests a hand on Lukas’s shoulder, a brief second of contact before he releases him. “Full extent,” he reminds Lukas. “I look forward to seeing what you’ve got.”
Sorry for the long wait. Typical writer stuff, I guess. It never seems as good as you want it to be, but as some point you gotta let it go and post. Fly free - test your wings, my little birds!

Tweets in Your Area

[see more…]

Hadar N @hezzi2049  •  13h

yo, if anyone headed to brooklyn don’t get on the 4 the delays are shit

Tim @NOTthefather  •  12h

Replying to @hezzi2049

whats up

Hadar N @hezzi2049  •  12h

Replying to @NOTthefather

idk man some kinda building collapse or something
Taleen Minhas @TonyStarkISmySexuality  ·  12h
Replying to @hezzi2049 @NOTthefather

shit im gonna be late for work

Miss Mack @missymackclapsback  ·  11h

theres feds on my block?? wtf

[attached: a blurry picture of emergency vehicles and a street blocked off by police tape]

Kae Johnson @Kaelynn__C  ·  7h

Um we just evacuated so they can check structural damage? Not paying this much rent for my shitty apartment to collapse on me

Mikey Mike @hveemike  ·  2h

fuck @WNBCLocalNews weatherman said no rain today mf. i put my canvas outside to dry and now all the colors ran together #boycottWNBC

Rina Koval @yeshiiivagirl  ·  2h

@WNBCLocalNews why do you refuse to send news crews farther north than inwood we wanna know whats happening in our neighborhood #boycottWNBC

jimmy @jimmelaya  ·  1h

@pushmedontu hey pick me up some cheeto puffs cant go to the bodega cuz theres cops everywhere and u kno i smell dank #boycottWNBC
that flash of lightning literally woke me from dead sleep and lit up my whole room jesus christ thought i was ascending to the astral plane

You saw it too!!!! my bf thought i was fucking with him but i couldnt see for like 30 seconds

uhh did anyone else just see that guy with the flying hammer? #boycottWNBC

The transport rumbles to life. Lukas Eld stands just outside the vehicle, one foot in the door and one on the sidewalk. Brenna Roberts studies his back, the slim cut of his black suit and the rigid line of his spine. “Good luck,” she calls out.

He glances away from the distortion, over his shoulder. “Luck is for the ill-prepared.”

She smiles down at the ground. “Just say thanks, alright?”

Lukas doesn’t respond immediately. His gaze is drawn once again to the looming skeleton of the building, which has looked moments away from becoming a ruin for hours now. “This is unsteady
ground,” he finally says. “Tread softly.”

Sliding into the car, Lukas clicks the door shut behind him. The window is down. Roberts can’t resist. She leans in. “Where are you really from? What’s your real name?”

Lukas taps his nose and gives her a cheeky smile. “A backwater place of no importance. And a name has only the meaning one bestows upon it. No more than a collection of convenient sounds. I have given myself a name, is that not enough?” He begins to roll up the window, nose tilted high in the air. She shakes her head.

Wheels crunch over the cracked asphalt of the parking lot. “Not even a hint?” Roberts hollers after him. He gives a jaunty wave and she sighs. Coulson’ll get it out of him, sooner or later. She hopes sooner.

But she’s not too worried about it. Everything makes sense, now that she knows he’s a metahuman. She finally understands why he’d entertained the notion of joining Raina, why he was skulking around her operations. Raina’s whole gig is preaching about securing the freedom and future of metahumans. Brenna had never tried to analyze her philosophy, figuring her criminal activities were more important. But she can see how it would be attractive for someone like Lukas to hook up with a person who thinks his kind are superior. Who doesn’t like to feel wanted, valued?

She still doesn’t know Lukas’s real name, but it feels good to know something concrete, something real about him. The resentment she’d been holding onto has dried up. Brenna’s instincts were right - from the first time she’d met him in that quaint museum, she’d known there was more to him than met the eye. To finally figure it out... well, it makes the sleepless night and the gnawing uneasiness she feels in the presence of these strange distortions easier to bear.

Agents are milling around the cordoned-off street. She joins them. Hauling away rubble and helping Fitz lug around his machines serves to distract her. She feels like she’s contributing. That’s better than worrying over everything they don’t know.

Roberts hefts a portable mass spec into the back of a van. She heaves a breath, wiping away the film of sweat gathered on her forehead. At her side, Coulson rubs his knuckles across his brow.

Squinting up at the sky, she sees the moon is half-hidden by a fast-moving surge of grey clouds. “Didn’t think it was gonna rain,” she says. “Maybe we should get the rest of the equipment put away.”
Coulson pauses. “It’s not supposed to.” He shoots a glance upward. “We’re almost done. I’m leaving some of the probationary agents here to keep an eye on things, keep the public away.”

“And where are we going? Back to the Manhattan base, or are we heading for DC?”

“Neither, I think.”

Roberts wipes away an errant drop of water. The clouds are thickening. “What do you mean?”

“If Eld is right about the energy source for these portals, then we could have more forming at any time, and who knows where. I don’t want to be scrambling to dispatch agents all over the globe. It’d be better if we were mobile.”

“Really!?” Coulson purses his lips and she regulates her tone, trying not to sound so eager. “Yessir, of course. I agree.” If he’s serious… the Helicarrier might be going on its maiden voyage. Excitement quivers down to her toes.

Coulson mutters something about getting ahold of Romanova before disappearing into the command tent, one last look at the sky as he goes.

She needs to find Fitz. Spying his curly head near the partially loaded van, she rushes over. “You’re never gonna guess where our next stop is.”

He hardly pays her any attention, fussing over his equipment. “This spec was half our budget for the year and the field agents treat it like they’re moving a moldy old sofa,” he says. “Stupid. Just bloody ignorant, if you ask me.”

“You do remember I’m a field agent, right?”

“You’re not as bad as the rest of them.”

“Gee, thanks.” Roberts does not want to hear another rant on how the increase in fieldwork
applications is a symptom of the rise of anti-intellectualism in the country. As it is, she could probably give a lecture from what she’s heard from Fitz in passing. She’s never been inclined to get involved in the rivalry between the field agents and the analysts. “You still haven’t guessed!”

Fitz cocks his head. “What?”

“She’s an anti-intellectualist, right, Fitz?”

“Helicarrier,” she sing-songs. “Does that ring a bell? We’re all going for a ride on the He-li-carr-i-er!”

That gets his attention. “What? You mean they’re deploying - yes!” He whoops and Brenna laughs.

“So we better finish up, we’ve gotta clear the area here first,” Brenna tells him. “Looks like a storm’s coming.” The rising wind brings goosebumps to the surface of her skin, plays with the ends of her hair. It smells clean and damp.

“That’s amazing, but…” The young agent wrings his hands. “What will happen to the building? With the distortion?” he worries. “I’m not sure if the rain will - ” His voice peters out.

A gust of wind, more forceful now, flings her blazer open. She tugs it closed, tries to fasten the loose button. “Fitz?”

He looks past her. His mouth falls open and he stammers. “It’s - I - ”

For a second, Roberts thinks she’ll turn around and see Tony Stark showing off. Sending up fireworks from some hidden crevice of his suit, or juggling repulsor bolts. Fitz is never very coherent when the billionaire genius is around. Starstruck, really. It annoys the hell out of Coulson.

But as she cranes her neck over her shoulder, she feels the bottom drop out of her stomach.

A man descends from the sky, trailing clouds of mist. Descends. From the air. A stiff wind blows her hair off her forehead, yanks her blazer open again. She and Fitz stagger back a step, both rendered speechless.

The man lands on the pavement, boots hard on the cement. The impact shivers through the earth,
reverberates in the soles of her feet. Her sidearm is in her grip instantly. She finds the trigger and her voice. “Stay right where you are, buddy!”

He’s dressed innocuously, just another passerby in New York City, but Roberts can see the muscle cored beneath the fabric of his jacket and his jeans. The whirling breeze halts when he grasps the blunt handle of a giant hammer, lowering it. Sparks flicker around the silver head. The hair on her arms stands on end, her skin prickling. Thunder rumbles from the depths of the grey clouds above them, low and quiet, sensed more than heard.

He steps forward and she firms her grip on the trigger. “I - I said stay where you are!”

Her mind spins from one thought to another, like a car skidding on ice, wheels out of control. *Hammer - flying - thunder? This can’t be - he can’t be -*

“Well met, Midgardians. I come as emissary and friend,” the man says. His voice is deep and powerful, cutting across the gathered buzz of activity effortlessly. If everyone hadn’t already turned to stare, they were now. Several of the agents react like Brenna, and raise their sidearms. The man appears perfectly calm staring down no less than thirteen barrels. “I shall not raise my weapon against you,” he says with a meaningful glance.

“You,” Roberts squeaks. “You’re - ”

“I am Thor, my lady, and I must speak with the esteemed mortal who guarded my hammer upon my last visit to this realm.” He twirls the handle before latching it onto a strap of his belt. The archaic weapon looks ridiculous resting against his blue jeans, but she eyes it warily all the same. “The son of Coul,” Thor says.

“Um.” Roberts and Fitz look at each other. Her fingers feel slippery against the plastic casing of her sedative-loaded gun. *Sedative? What the hell’s a sedative gonna do against a goddamned alien? Especially one so - so massive,* she thinks, as he steps forward, a moving mountain.

She lowers her gun, taking him at his word that he won’t raise his own weapon. Her boss had liked Thor, that had been clear from the amused glint in his eyes when he spoke of the New Mexico Incident. Against his better judgment, Roberts had thought.

“Uh.” Clearing her throat, Brenna raises her voice, so that her supervisory agent will hear her from the command tent. “Uh - Coulson! Coulson, you better come out here! You’ve got a - a visitor.”
Thor smiles at her, and the clouds seem to break over his head, letting the starlight through. Or maybe that’s just her relief, as she hears her boss’s footsteps approaching.

The steps come to an unsteady halt. “Thor?”

She could have thrown a bucket of ice water over Coulson’s head and he’d look less bewildered then he does now. Brenna understands. She’s tempted to ask Fitz to slap her, just so she can be one-hundred percent positive that this isn’t some kind of lucid dream. If it ends up that she’s tangled in her bedsheets right now and this is all playing out on the backs of her eyelids, it could be worse. Hell, it’s about damn time she starts dreaming of glorious golden princes and less about shooting giant twenty-foot centipede monsters with Raina’s face at both ends.

S.H.I.E.L.D. has really screwed her head.

“My friend!” Thor crows, barging forward. Her hand twitches on her sleeper gun. Mostly reflex. He’s fast for such a big guy. The force of his hug nearly lifts Coulson from the ground. “You look well!”

Coulson coughs as soon as his lungs are able to expand. “I, ah - thanks, Thor. You look pretty good yourself.”

“The Asgardian constitution is much more robust than a mortal’s.” There is a slight pause, where it slowly seems to dawn on Thor that he has said something that could be construed as offensive. “I mean to say - I have not been myself, though I may look hale and whole. Truly, sorrow has been my closest companion of late.”

The baldness of the statement takes them all off guard. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents aren’t exactly the poster group for healthy processing of emotions through open communication. As a rule, they prefer come to terms with the complexity of the human experience using a truly cathartic amount of ammunition. And explosives, they’re not too picky. The last therapist S.H.I.E.L.D. had on staff retired after her stress ulcer burst.

Coulson has a fixed expression on his face that he only wears when he’s uncomfortable. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that.” Roberts looks anywhere that isn’t Thor’s face, so she’s the first person to see the white glow that speeds toward them. From the sky - again! A split second passes, while she gapes, thinking, is there another alien prince I don’t know about?
The white glow resolves itself into two separate circles, each on the palm of a suit she recognizes. Iron Man plummets toward the ground, a streak of crimson. The hand held repulsors glow brighter, gathering power, the double-strike aimed directly at Thor.

She shouts, lunging forward, just as Coulson at her side does the same. They’re too slow. The bolt of power fires outward in a deadly stream. And then stops.

Thor holds his hammer in front of his body. The weapon catches the repulsor beam, the metal glowing with energy. Pointing the hammer up, Thor shouts, wordless. A bolt of lightning shoots down from the sky - or up from the hammer. Roberts can’t tell. It slices apart the darkness. Like a flashbang, brighter than a magnesium flare. Her eyes are blind for a moment. The thunder rattles after, like it’s shaking apart her ribs from the inside.


He goes to raise his hand again. Coulson leaps forward to bat him away. “Stop! Friendly! He’s a friendly!”

“He’s a friendly?” Iron Man’s voice modulator squeaks. He shrugs, best he can in the suit. “Well then, my bad. Party foul.” Thor inclines his head, putting his hammer back on his belt, but Roberts notices his hand hovering near it. Oh god, that could have been so much worse. They’re lucky Thor doesn’t seem to have much of a temper.

“Yes!” Coulson snaps. “A friendly. You can’t just go around attacking everyone who - ”

“Who suddenly materializes next to a distortion in time and space? How was I supposed to know! I think that’s arguably suspicious!”

“He didn’t just materialize,” Roberts feels it necessary to point out. “He flew down from the sky.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s much better.” The face plate pops open in time to catch the tail end of an extremely overblown eye roll. “Nothing bad ever came down out of the sky. Did you even see X-Files, or is that too old for you? Are you even out of college yet?”
Stung, Roberts opens her mouth to fire back, but he’s already turned away from her. “Coulson, do you even pay these interns?”

Her supervisory special agent looks down the tip of his nose. “They aren’t interns, Mr. Stark. They are agents.”

“But if they were, you wouldn’t pay them, would you?”

Coulson presses his lips together and gives a prim sniff. “Mr. Stark, your presence is no longer required. You may return to your home or place of business.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

He keeps talking over Stark. “The Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division thanks you for your outstanding civilian service - ”

“There’s no way in hell I’m leaving now, Coulson!” Tony Stark flails out a hand toward Thor. “Or should I start calling you Mulder, now that we’ve confirmed your story about aliens?”

“Mulder?” Coulson looks offended. “You can’t be serious. If anything, I’m Scully. You’re Mulder. You’ve got the antisocial tendencies down pat.”

“I can feel the romantic tension already.” Stark waggles his eyebrows. He turns to Thor. “What do you think, big guy? Is the truth out there?”

Roberts glances to Thor. He’s looking between them all, mouth slightly parted and brows quirked up. It’s kinda cute and kinda pitiful at the same time, like a puppy that keeps bumping his head on a glass door and can’t figure out why he’s not outside yet.

“I am Thor, of Asgard,” he says, in lieu of responding to Stark. “That is the truth. If you doubt my words or my intentions, I shall endeavor to prove myself to you.”

“No, no, he didn’t mean it like that,” Fitz blurts out. He stutters over an explanation. “It’s a television show - uh. That is, a program that, um, that actors - ”
“Television!” Thor cries. They all wince at the sudden volume. He visibly restrains himself, a bit of a sheepish smile on his face. “I know what that is.”

“You know what television is?” Tony Stark peers at the alien prince. “Well, I’ll be damned. Great reception up there in Asgard. Who’s your favorite Kardashian?”

“The boob tube,” Thor says with a knowing nod.

Fitz sputters. Tony Stark opens his mouth, a delighted sparkle in his eyes, and her boss hurries to cut him off. “This is all very illuminating, but Thor, I have to ask. Are you here for a reason?”

“I come to ask a favor,” Thor says. “And to extend an offer.”

“An offer,” Roberts repeats.

“An offer of goodwill.” He smiles, and his broad face seems younger, almost boyish.

“Who’s goodwill, exactly?” Tony asks.

Thor blinks. “The throne of Asgard’s.”

“And you can speak for the throne of Asgard, can you?” Stark says.

“Yes.” Thor looks at him funny.

“He neglected to properly introduce himself.” Coulson tilts his head back. Roberts thinks he wants to smile. “Right, your highness?”

“Ah - forgive my oversight.” He fiddles with the handle of his hammer. “I am Thor, Crown Prince of Asgard.”
“Ohhh. Oh, I see. Don’t worry, I get it now. You’re probably used to being recognized.” Tony strides forward, flinging out his hands. “Listen, I understand, buddy. Me and you. We’re in the same boat.”

Thor looks down at Iron Man. His metal faceplate barely comes to Thor’s shoulder, but that doesn’t stop Tony from clapping him on the back. “We’ve got the notoriety. The fame. Everyone wants to know us, or to be us. All the wealth, all the power. Women and men throwing themselves at our feet.”

Stark sighs, gazing out at the lit skyline. Thor looks up too, glancing around, his brow furrowed. “But sometimes, the burden is too heavy, ya know?” Tony continues. “Sometimes we just wanna be that regular, Average Joe again. The one with the pure heart of gold, hidden under the layers of cynicism we’ve had to build up to survive the limelight.”

Thor, bless his heart, nods. “A title is often a burden, yes, my friend. You speak well.”

“Like a turtle!” Stark says, too loud, hand still clasping Thor’s shoulder as he gestures wildly. “A hard exterior and a soft underbelly - ”

“Okay,” Coulson interrupts. “Alright. Unless you’d like us to start calling you the Iron Turtle, can it.”

Tony lays a hand over his heart, staggering back, as if Coulson’s given him that piece of lead he’s always threatening. “And there it is, the greatest curse of lives like ours - to be so tragically misunderstood!”

“I am grateful for your sympathy, Lord Stark.” Thor bows his neck. On anyone else, the motion would seem ostentatious. Somehow, and Roberts isn’t sure if it’s cause she knows he’s a prince, Thor pulls it off.

“Lord! It does suit me - ”

“Good god, stop giving him ideas.” Coulson ushers Thor away to the command tent.
“Can we use that phrase anymore? I mean, if we’re gonna have a buncha gods descending in some sorta outerspace Second Coming, it just seems weird.” Coulson ignores Stark’s parting comment, but of course the billionaire follows them into the command tent. They won’t get rid of him easily. Roberts wishes curiosity would get this particular cat.

Seeing the detritus of all their work laid out on the folding tables sobers her. Fitz’s printed readings of the distortion, pictures of the initial stages, the final stages. The rubble and the injuries. Any lingering giddiness she might have felt soon departs.

Coulson must have the same thoughts. He leans on the table, posture slightly bowed with weariness. “Thor, can I ask - what exactly does Asgard’s goodwill entail?”

“My father has given me leave to travel to your realm and to offer you Asgard’s friendship and protection.”

In his sheepskin coat and blue jeans, long blond hair brushing his shoulders and ruddy cheeks, he looks more like an energetic college student out for a sightseeing hike than a prince of an alien civilization.

“Your pops gave you permission to offer us protection.” Tony Stark squints at Thor. “How generous of him.” Roberts detects a slightly acidic undertone to the comment. Coulson gives the billionaire a sharp look.

“How come you didn’t do this last time?” She can’t help but ask, and only partly to divert Stark’s focus.

“The last time I visited Midgard…” The kind smile Thor had worn now fades. “I was not myself. And I was in no position to speak for Asgard.”

Coulson chews on his lower lip. She can tell he wants to hammer out all the specifics of Thor’s offer, since he’s being undeniably vague about it. But first, he asks, “Is that the only reason you’re here?”

As Thor’s brows draw down, Coulson hurries to correct himself. “Not that I’m not pleased to see you. And Asgard’s goodwill is a great thing to have, I’m sure. But why here, in this specific location, and why now?”
Roberts sees what he’s getting at. “Is it the distortion?” she asks eagerly. “Are you here about the distortion?”

Thor shakes his head and she slumps back against the pole of the tent. So much for a little ancient extraterrestrial wisdom.

“I confess I know nothing of any distortion. I came in search of you,” he tells Coulson. “You did me a great service when I was last on Midgard. Watching over Mjölnir while I was not - ” Brenna can see his throat bob as he swallows. “While I was not able.”

Tony Stark interrupts. Honest to god interrupts the alien prince as he’s explaining what brought him to Earth. Roberts stifles the urge to scream. At this point, she’s sure that if Stark ever met the Pope, he’d probably give him a wet willy before loudly declaring his agnosticism.

“So, this hammer - it’s like a sword in the stone situation, is it?” He mimics a terribly bad accent. “Whosoever pulleth the sword Excalibur from the stone shall be once and forevermore King of all Glorious Englandshire!” His tone is light and teasing, but his eyes are still narrowed. She’s not sure what response he’s looking for.

Thor steps forward, a hand extended. “Lord Stark, are you quite well?”

Coulson elbows Tony Stark out of the way. “Please, ignore him. I mean that in the most literal way possible. If he’s in a chair, feel free to pretend he’s not and sit on him.”

Stark tries to lean around Coulson. “Godly lap dance, I’m in - ow!”

Coulson grinds his shoe down harder. “You know, Thor, I was kind of expecting you to come back sooner. After you’d dealt with everything in Asgard, that thing you called the Destroyer. I think a lot of people were.”

Thor squeezes his eyes shut. “I promised that I would,” he says softly. “But I was unable. The Bifröst was - damaged.” He opens his eyes, cloudless blue like the sky at midday. Roberts clears her throat, feeling heat rise on her cheeks. Alien, she reminds herself. He’s an alien.

“And this is partly the reason I have sought you out.” Thor shifts on his feet. “I know you and Jane Foster did not have the most amicable of relationships before the Battle at the Ancient Bridge, but I
have found that bonds forged in the midst of peril are often the most durable of links.”

Coulson blinks. “Thor, what can I do for you?”

“I know not where Jane Foster now resides, and I wish to speak to her. Will you tell me where I must go?”

“Coulson, are you running an intergalactic dating service that I wasn’t aware of?” Stark folds his arms over his chest. “If you are and you haven’t told me, we can’t be friends anymore. You’re uninvited to my next sleepover. Also, I want in.”

Her boss seems to be an expert at ignoring Stark. “I know where Dr. Foster is, and yes, I can tell you.”

Thor grins. “You have my thanks.” He makes for the flap of the door. “I shall go and see her directly.”

“I can tell you,” Coulson continues. “As long as you promise to come back. If Asgard is really offering us all that you say, then we need to discuss it.”

Thor nods quickly. Coulson pulls him aside, draws out his tablet. Roberts can see him loading an aerial map. Stark pretends like he’s not watching them, but keeps Thor in his peripheral vision. Brenna tries to move casually between them. If there’s anyone she doesn’t want acting as Earth’s unofficial ambassador to Asgard, it’s Tony Stark. And not just because Coulson would have a coronary. Stark gives her a half-smile that says he notices what she’s doing. Brenna doesn’t move.

“Dr. Foster has my number,” Coulson says as he steps away from Thor. “Have her call me when you’re done visiting.” Thor agrees.

“Hang on - if you can’t find your way around Midgard, how did you get to New York?” Fitz asks, apparently channeling Stark’s curiosity.

“I asked for directions.” The prince shrugs. “Unfortunately, the man I spoke to could not tell me where Puente Antiguo lies, but he did know of New York City.” He flexes his fingers on the handle of his hammer, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “I shall return, you have my word.”
At Coulson’s slight nod, he hurries from the tent. They trail out to watch the spectacle of his leaving, with a blast of wind, a sudden drop in pressure, and the fresh taste of water lingering in the air. Roberts doesn’t take her eyes off him until he’s a speck in the sky, lost among the lofty spires of Manhattan to the east.

“So is he on the payroll too?” Stark asks. He glances sideways at Coulson. “You keep showing up with superpowered consultants and I’m gonna start to feel a little self-conscious. You told me I was the only one, babe.”

Roberts stifles a grin. Damn, she wishes Lukas Eld had been here. She would have loved to see his face.
LI & LII

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this chapter is a monster and I couldn't find a way to cut it down, so I said to hell with it, I'll post as is.
And I know I go a long time between updates - so I wanna thank y'all for your patience. And your kindness, your enthusiasm. The response to this fic keeps me going long past where I would have stopped on my own.

LI

Roseanne left them alone. The man’s library was small, but clearly well-used. The spines of books cracked from repeated readings, the corners of their covers worn. Richard smiled at Lukas. “Back for more, eh?”

He nodded, fractionally. Perhaps he had been too hasty. But Richard only hummed, fetching tomes from his shelves.

Lukas had little else to do, besides tend his growing garden. Roseanne’s own collection was limited to melodramatic romance novels, which he had rather enjoyed - he had edited the endings with a few whispered words of seidr, that the heroine might lose herself in a torrid romance with the castle’s groundskeeper, rather than the beautiful, arrogant prince. Or, he’d switched the roles entirely, so that the lonely, neurotic and obsessive yet successful young man might fall for the cocky, overtly sensual and obnoxious older woman. Midgardian literature reflected its culture, as all forms of art are wont to do. It amused him to warp the stories so thoroughly.

The slick magazines, on the other hand, were mostly plastered over with images of mortals he did not recognize nor care to. He had grown heartily sick of the searing bright colors and bolded, nonsensical titles. Fifty Stylish Ways to Catch His Eye! Why Doesn’t He Notice When You’re Upset? What Does He Mean When He Says ‘K’? Lukas was of the opinion that this monolithic ‘He’ was decidedly dim-witted and unobservant. The magazines were beginning to meet mysterious
and destructive ends, by an unattended fire and an accidental soaking. And so Roseanne had called upon her neighbor, Richard, to ply him with texts that were altogether thicker, more dense, and comprised of more than just gleaming bodies.

He had accepted gratefully. Even written down his thoughts, the impulse taking him by surprise. Reams of pages, runes inked in black. Roseanne had caught him at it. Rather than explain the symbols, he’d told her he made his notes in a simple code that only he could read.

She had asked him to translate. He had done so, on a whim, sure that when she looked over the first page or two she would set them back down. Say something bland and pleasant, How interesting, Loki. And never mention them again.

Instead, she had asked, “Can I show these to someone?”

Richard gestured him forward, into a sagging leather chair stuffed between shelves in the corner. “Roseanne showed me a little piece of what you did,” he said. His face was creased with easy lines, a calm sort of joviality. Brown skin weathered like the covers of his books. “I wanted your permission to read through the rest.”

He could not fathom their interest in his distracted musing, but he gave Richard a spare nod. Released the pages into his keeping, sat back on the chair to rifle through a stack of volumes about something called the Bolshevik Revolution.

Richard read his manuscript over quickly. He glanced up at Lukas, looked back to the papers in his hand, then back to Lukas again. Lukas shifted underneath his stare, letting his book thump shut.

“Perhaps my assertions are too bold - ” he began, but Richard cut him off.

“You read the books I gave you in three days,” he said. “All of them. And then you wrote this.”

Lukas nodded uncertainly.

“And you’ve never studied history before,” Richard confirmed.
Lukas shook his head. “A casual interest, at best.” He was startled when Richard burst out laughing, a booming sound full of raucous joy that had Lukas’s heart clenching with a misplaced sense of familiarity.

"Boy, you gotta be one of the smartest fellas I ever had the pleasure to meet,” Richard said when his fit of humor died down.

Lukas blinked. “You agree with my conclusions?” he asked slowly.

“Agree? Damn right I agree! Hell, I’m gonna send this to a colleague at my old university for him to read over and see if we can’t get this submitted to a journal.” He smiled at Lukas’s expression. “Your reasoning is extremely unusual. The way you piece together a clear picture from the artifacts left behind. I’m not sure anyone else in the field has quite the same take as you.”

He fidgeted, unsure at the thought of others reading his manuscript. Richard and Roseanne were only two, and known to him. He’d never been keen to show his work publically - Before. Few would have understood and even fewer would have appreciated it. “I merely wrote it for my own indulgence,” he protested.

Richard wagged a finger at him. “Now don’t sell yourself short, son. This here deserves to be read.”

Though the idea was foreign, it stirred a warm feeling in his chest.

When he and Roseanne left, she had to be enlisted to help carry the pile of books Richard had bequeathed.

He cracked the covers that night, nestled in the blankets of his bed, and found something jarring. Unexpected.

Histories that spoke of Asgard, Vanaheim. Of Odin and Frigg and Freyr. In these books they were gods, and so took on the sheen of the unreal, with opaque motives, mysterious knowledge. The dead gods of a way of life long since past, gods of reavers and farmers from a harsh outcropping of rock, who spread throughout the continent with a prayer to the All-Father on their lips.

It was easier, to think of them this way. Objects of worship, of devotion. He could finally conjure
them in his mind, a facet of his past, without wanting to rend the skin from his face with his nails. He no longer had to fracture his mind in two. Blot them from every memory.

His pen fell to paper, a torrent rushing through.

Richard gladly accepted every page. He liked to talk them over with Lukas, sitting in his cramped study, steaming cups of tea at their elbow. “I was a professor, you know,” he explained. “At Yale, before I retired. A history professor. Now I’m just a silly old man, who still dabbles for fun.”

The old man sipped from his cup, fingers crawling across the words on the page. "You know, it looks like you've found your wheelhouse, with this. It seems like you just get these people, this place. These gods."

They had been his gods, once. He had held them in reverence, lights in the dark. As precious as starlight, and just as distant, as unreachable.

Lukas wrote down everything he knew. Worship and heresy both. Things he had never spoken aloud when he had been among their pantheon. Only after having fallen from that great height could he paint their figures upon a paper canvas. Two dimensional beings. In that way, he could bear to look upon them.

The sun was sinking outside the wooden frame of the window when Lukas and Richard spoke of honor. There was a burial uncovered in the far northern reaches of Europe. A warrior’s burial. Richard shook his head, blowing ripples in the surface of his tea.

“I’m no expert on Scandinavian culture, my focus was more recent, post industrial. So what I’m having trouble understanding is the motivation - why would these men take their own lives? They’re warriors, that’s obvious. They’ve got a catalog of old injuries and breaks that illustrate a tough life. If they survived all that, why would they just decide to die?”

Lukas peered out the window, thinking of the stiff honor of those sworn to the path of the warrior. Unbending, even facing their own demise.

“A mark of their shame, perhaps,” he mused.

"Shame?"
“If they committed a dishonorable act… or failed their liege, their sworn king or lord, they could have chosen to ameliorate their mistakes, to cleanse themselves through death. A chance to enter the golden hall of kings.”

“But how would that fix their mistakes? They’d just be dead.”

Lukas tapped his chin, wondering how to explain the deeply rooted sense of honor – an honor he had always observed but rarely felt. The mortal was no warrior; he was a scholar. Richard could follow a clear, delineated path of logic, but the vows of a warrior followed a path that twisted and turned upon minor distinctions he himself had trouble picking apart.

“Shame is a debt,” he began.

Richard’s brow furrowed. “A debt owed to who?”

“To whomever they pledged their sword and service. To whom they owe their lives and loyalty to.” Lukas found himself gesturing vaguely in the air as he tried to find the words, and clasped his hands behind his back instead. “By their own dishonor, they have dishonored their king. They must make amends as they can. To require themselves to sacrifice their very lives, the shame must have been acute. A terrible act committed, or a terrible failure observed.”

Lukas shook his head minutely. “They dishonored their liege so greatly that the very act of still drawing breath shamed him, and so they ceased.”

Richard blinked at him. When he did not move or speak, only continued blinking, Lukas became concerned. “Are you discomfited by the custom?” he hazarded a guess.

“Well, yes – of course. But I suppose I sort of see what you mean. It’s just – you seem to have an impressive grasp on the intricacies of patriarchal warrior culture and their internalized standards of honor.” Richard cocked his head to the side.

Lukas’s heart stuttered a moment in his chest. This was not common knowledge. He had made himself a curiosity, and curiosities drew unwanted attention. He drew back a step.
But Richard only smiled warmly. “You must have done quite a lot of reading up. This is fascinating. Can you tell me more?”

“You – wish to hear my thoughts on such matters?” Lukas asked, shocked. His amateur treatises had been one thing. Richard said he liked the way Lukas was able to contextualize objects and their cultural function. But this… that the mortal was interested in something Lukas had often struggled with, at times detested and despised, something he had long pondered in an attempt to fit himself into the framework and had never quite succeeded at, was baffling. What was more baffling was that he clearly agreed with Lukas.

“Course! I myself have trouble with the concept. It’s so short-sighted to me,” Richard admitted. “I mean, what good does it do to go and end things when you can do more to actually make up for your mistakes while you’re alive?”

The wise words felt like a sharp blow to the chest, pushing the air out of Lukas’s lungs in a gust. “Perhaps – perhaps their act was so despicable there was no possible way to make amends. Perhaps taking their life was the only act likely to remedy anything. Perhaps it was better for all involved if they were to simply disappear forever. Easier to mourn one gone on to Valhalla than to forgive a criminal that kneels at your feet.”

His voice was too unsteady. Lukas clenched his hands into fists to forestall any tremble and stared bleakly out the window. He could just make out Roseanne’s farmhouse in the distance, a smudge of white among the frosted green fields.

Richard spoke slowly, his voice deep and careful. “Maybe that’s what they thought in the moment. Maybe it seemed like the only option. But the funny thing about life is there’s always something new that might pop up. You just gotta give it a little time. Like scattering seeds and waiting to see the flowers.”

Lukas considered this. Unexpected options, unexpected landings. He cleared his throat and gave a noncommittal noise.

“A warrior’s honor is a confounding thing,” he said abruptly. Lukas turned from the window and sat heavily in the chair across from Richard. The man did not appear perturbed at the sudden change of topic. “It is a code, a set of rigid principles that rules their behavior, their thoughts, and their tactics in battle.”

Richard leaned forward, his eyes alight. “What do you mean by that? Their tactics in battle?”
Lukas allowed himself a smile. “There is a tale I heard once. In my... studies. There was a man, a prince of great renown, gold of hair and powerful in bearing. The prince was known as a paragon of honor and strength, though not overburdened with intellect or cunning. This would come to serve him poorly when he was challenged to single combat one midday while two armies looked on...”

He chronicled them into history, into dust. Lukas Eld had no family now, only knowledge of times that had passed.

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His mouth feels dry. Agent Simmons is at his side. “The Tesseract,” she says. Needlessly. Lukas could sense it the moment he stepped into the base. Now it is even stronger, wrapping cold tendrils around his mind.

He stares at the pulsing blue. “Can... can you feel it?” the agent asks.

Lukas glances at her out of the corner of his eye. She flushes. “Well, I mean. I don’t know. You said you could manipulate energy, and the Tesseract seems to be giving off all kinds of readings.”

“Yes.” Lukas steps closer. “Yes, I can.”

“What does it feel like?” Her eyes are keen as she turns her gaze to the same point.

“Like...” The Void. That is his first thought. And one he cannot voice.
A whisper against his throat, like a cool hand. Lukas sucks in a breath, blinking at the glow of the Tesseract.

His *seidr* fluctuates this close to such a power source. Unsettling, but nothing more.

“It’s difficult to explain.” The scientist hums off-key, and he knows she is thinking, just as she has been since they undertook the journey to this distant desert base.

The transport from New York City had been an exercise in patience. In fraying his patience, that is.

Lukas was subject to the full force of the scientist’s scrutiny, weighed and measured in her gaze until he felt like an insect trapped underneath glass. She did not ask questions. Jemma Simmons would simply turn abruptly from what she was doing, stare at him, then make a considering sound. “Hmm,” she said. Or - “Ah, yes, that could…” It nearly drove him to distraction.

She would not speak during the bumpy ride, and so the young Agent Skye had taken it upon herself to act as the voice of the pair.

“So00… metahuman, huh?” That had been her opening gambit, to which he had only replied with a nod. Skye had then seated herself obnoxiously close to Lukas. Strapped in as he was, he could not move to avoid her. Every thirty minutes or so, it was some variation on the same.

“Okay, so at least answer me this. Not your real name, or how you got to be a metahuman. Just - where’d you come from, exactly? Where were you before you were here?” Skye had asked him just before they departed the jet, a touch too nonchalant.

“A galaxy far, far away,” Lukas had drawled, unbuckling his seatbelt. The first time she’d asked, he’d said England. The time before, he’d said he had amnesia and no longer possessed any of his childhood memories. He almost plans on saying Jotunheim when the next question comes, just to see the look on her face.

She had laughed. “Okay, okay, fine. Don’t tell me.”

“A golden palace that sits high among the stars,” Lukas said, with a melodramatic flourish, a grand
sweeping gesture of his arm.

Skye rolled her eyes. Jemma giggled. “I said fine! Don’t know why I even bothered asking, I knew you were gonna lie.”

*It is a lie, mortal girl, but not the one you think it is.*

He can feel Jemma Simmons’ eyes on the side of his face again. But she sticks to the matter at hand, at least for now. “How are you going to find the daughter portals, if any manifest?”

Lukas considers his answer. “If I am correct in assuming the Tesseract is the power source of these distortions, then it follows that they should echo some qualities of the Tesseract. The feel of it, as you said.”

“You’re going to feel them out?”

“I need a better sense of the Tesseract before I can do so.”

“What if we subject the Tesseract to several frequencies? Then you can feel how it reacts.”

“That won’t be necessary. I simply need time, and quiet. And,” he adds, in a warning tone, "be careful bandying about such propositions. It would not do to meddle with the Tesseract overlong.” The Cube flickers in the edges of his vision. “It is powerful. Unpredictable.”

“We’re following all the proper containment procedures,” Simmons points out.

“Clearly, you cannot contain it as well as you would like, or we would not have these distortions forming.” Lukas turns to her. The painfully leashed inquisitiveness he can read on her face is more annoying than amusing now. “What is it?”

Simmons is chewing on her lower lip. “I’m sorry. I guess I just don’t understand. You said you can manipulate light - or energy. So how do you know all this stuff about portals? Where’s the connection? Obviously, they need an energy source to form, which you say is the Tesseract, but I don’t…” she trails off.
“Everything around us possesses some form of energy.” Lukas taps himself on the chest. “You and I, and the Tesseract, and all matter. We give off energy, we react to energy. We use energy. I simply make use of some unconventional avenues while doing so.”

“So portals use energy, and give off energy too. That’s why you can feel them.”

“Precisely. You cannot sense the way they twist the space around them. I can. I have always been able to.”

“But you have to be in their proximity, right?”

“Yes. Which is why I need to use the Tesseract,” he reiterates. His patience is in tatters, and the Tesseract’s song, just below the edge of his hearing, only aggravates him more.

“How do you use something like the Tesseract?” Jemma’s tongue pokes at the corner of her lips. “How does your… sense of the portal energies work with it?”

Lukas clicks his teeth together and summons restraint. She wants to know what he will do with the Tesseract. It is not unreasonable. Irritatingly diligent, yes. Dr. Selvig himself had taken several hours of convincing to even let them near the laboratory in which the Tesseract is housed. Simmons finally had to call Coulson to circumvent his authority. At least she is willing to listen to his explanation. Willing and demonstrably eager.

The singularity that is the Cube exists at all points of space. At its most essential, it is a portal, or it has the ability to be one. If he can project his will through this network of potentiality, he can feel the places in this realm where it touches another, like a double-knot in a piece of thread. He must translate this instinctive sense of the boundary, but he is not certain that one who does not possess seidr will grasp the concept.

“I can use it to feel farther,” he says. “I can direct the Tesseract’s unlimited energy, use it as a sort of… a sort of sensing device. Like how sound thrown back from a cave can tell an explorer how deep it extends.”

“Okay. Okay - so it sort of helps you project your, um, ability. Acts like a kind of lidar.”
“Lidar?”

“Basically, it’s a laser. And a receiver that catches the laser’s reflection. It’s aimed at a surface that’s being mapped. When the laser pulse bounces back from this surface, the receiver records the time it took to travel, and this gives us the distance between where the pulse emanates and the mapping surface.”

Jemma points at the cube. “So, let’s say the Tesseract is the energy source that produces the laser pulse.” She draws her finger through the air, and then to him. “And you’re the receiver that calculates the time it takes the pulse to bounce back from the portal, because you can sense the energy. You use a series of these Tesseract pulses to determine the location of any developing anomalies. Is that close enough?”

“Yes, I believe that is a fair representation,” Lukas answers. In fact, it’s more accurate than he would have thought possible for a human to articulate. He’s more convinced than ever that Midgardian scientists are the closest relation this realm has to the mages of Asgard.

The thrill of a new problem to solve spurs him forward, closer to the Cube, within inches. He reaches his magic out, deliberately this time, and sends a thread of seidr into its white heart. Shoving it outward, through the Tesseract’s infinite reach, he closes his eyes and listens to the reverberations. Nothing tastes cold or metallic, he does not feel any emptiness. No nascent portal energies. Yet. He needs more time, to go into a deeper meditation, to be sure.

When he opens his eyes, Jemma is frowning. “Do you need to be in contact with the Tesseract at all times to do this? That might not be feasible.”

“I may have a solution for that,” Lukas says, rolling the possibilities over the tip of his tongue. “When I send a pulse through the Tesseract, it is at a certain pitch - a frequency. If it were to bounce off, as you say, a distortion, and reflect this pulse back to the Tesseract, it would be at a different frequency. A specific one. If I could construct a device to alert us when the Tesseract’s pitch resonates at that specific frequency, then it can serve as a warning beacon.” He maps the inside edges of his teeth as he thinks. “Perhaps prone to false alarms, certainly not foolproof, but it could work without unfettered access to the Tesseract.”


“I can acquire most of the necessary parts on my own. But perhaps a casing. Something to contain it.”
“How big?”

“How big?”

“The size of an egg, let’s say. Hollow. That can open and close.”

“Any particular material?” She gets out her phone, seems to be making notes.

“Not any alloys with iron.” The resonance of ljósvaldr crystal does not interact well with iron, nor copper. He wants to ask for uru, but as far as he is aware, that metal is not known on Midgard. “But still something from the earth itself.”

“Let me do some digging,” she says.

“There is one more thing I need.” Jemma blinks at him, waiting. “Something that has traveled through one of these distortions.”

“Oh? I don’t - ”

“The beast. Do you still have it?”

“Beast?” Her thoughts catch up quickly. “You mean - the skeleton? The one we recovered from Mexico?”

“Yes, the skeleton.” He remembers the black skull he’d seen in their lab, the sharp serrated fang. A shadow beast from Niflheim. There is no other way it could have come to be on Midgard.

“You think it traveled through?”

“It was not of this world, correct?”

“No,” the agent mutters. “No, it’s completely alien. You’re right.” Jemma Simmons fidgets, twisting her mechanical notepad back and forth in her grasp. He tilts an eyebrow at her, and she
huffs a breath. “Am I that transparent?”

“A scholar’s curiosity is not to be denied,” Lukas offers. Generosity will get him far, no matter how it grates at him.

“You’re planning on making this device yourself. I’m just… surprised, I guess. You didn’t strike me as much of a tinkerer.”

“I used to fashion useful little trinkets all the time.” Lukas bites his tongue. He had. When such inventions were still considered intriguing, clever. After the shine had worn off, when he was no longer considered a precocious child meddling with seidr but a man indulging a perverse interest, he’d refrained from giving them away. Kept them for himself, little constructs of will and magic.

Now that she has broken her silence, he can see the questions bubbling up. “Can I just ask one thing, please?” Simmons pleads. “Where - hmm. Where were you born?”

The S.H.I.E.L.D. agents seem to be treating this as a matter of trial and error. As if Lukas will be tricked into answering the question if it is phrased differently. She has taken a lesson from Skye’s failures.

Lukas waves a careless hand. “Why, how should I remember? I was only a babe at the time.”

Simmons rolls her eyes. “You could ask your mother. I’m sure she would.”

His smile freezes in place. Simmons bites her lip. “I mean - I’m sorry. Is she - never mind. Please, please ignore me. I’ll just go and shut up now.”

The agent hunches over the lab bench, buries her nose in her notes. Her skin is pink with embarrassment. The silence between them is fraught. He cannot fault her for asking. Well - he should not.

“Such a conversation is not possible,” he murmurs, a belated explanation.

Hello, Mother. Where was I born? And how long after that was it when you decided to toss me out
in the snow to die?

Or the reverse, which is somehow even worse, to Lukas’s mind. Asking the question of a mother that was never his, not truly. Why did you tell me I was born on Asgard? Why did you let me believe that I was yours? He looks up into her clearwater eyes, and it is a child’s voice that issues from his throat. Mother, why did you lie?

Lukas stares at the cold blue of the Tesseract. He struggles to put the idea out of his mind, but he can see too much in the facets of the Cube. Pale as winter ice, glowing like the moon on the frost, that night in Jotunheim. Did one of the soldiers he had killed have a babe, resting in some forsaken cave, doomed to cry for milk that never came? Frost giant, and mother. The concepts themselves are enemies. Perhaps a frost giant mother can whelp so many beasts that she does not recall the faces of those she discards.

Do you even remember me? He does not know which mother he wants to answer that last question. Neither. Or both.

He clenches his fist. This is all immaterial. Lukas Eld has no mother.

“Er…” Agent Simmons clears her throat when she captures his attention. “Um. Sorry, it’s just - Fitz texted me. He’s finally here. Says we should come to the cafeteria right away.” Simmons frowns down at her cell. “I think something’s happened.”

The Tesseract pulses in the corner of his eye. Lukas turns to it, wary. He had not felt any surge of energy, nothing that would indicate another distortion forming. “Lead on,” he tells her, the line of his shoulders stiff.

They traverse the length in silence, reaching the hall where the agents on this base gather together and eat.

Lukas slows to a halt before entering. There are agents here now, huddled in little groups, bent over and whispering furiously to each other, in every spare corner. One knocks into him as she rushes past to join the closest trio, throwing a hasty sorry! over her shoulder.

He spies the pair adjacent to the refrigerator. The young Agent Skye and Fitz. Lukas trails Jemma’s footsteps as she hurries over.
“Fitz,” Agent Simmons calls out. “I just got your text. What’s up?”

“I assume it is at the root of all this excitement,” he says.

Skye’s face lights up and she lets out a cackle that sounds too full of unholy glee to ease Lukas’s apprehension. “You haven’t heard either? Oh, that’s fantastic. I just love seeing people’s faces when I tell them!”

Fitz giggles at her side, pitched high with a slight hysteria. Jemma turns to Lukas, but doesn’t quite meet his eye. “Fitz and Skye are the worst gossips in the building,” she says. “They’ll certainly have inside info.”

Lukas nearly retreats a step at the combined intensity of Skye and Fitz’s grinning expressions, but perseveres, for he detests leaving anything unanswered. “Now you’ve intrigued me. What is it?”

“Coulson got a special visitor last night.” Agent Skye leans in, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial level. “Asked for him by name and everything. Well - actually, he asked for the guy who watched over his hammer.”

A chill grips his guts in an icy fist. “Hammer?” Lukas repeats faintly.

“Yeah! You remember the file from the New Mexico Incident? A bunch of people said Coulson got hoodwinked. But this proves he was right,” Skye reveals.

Lukas needs her to say it. He needs confirmation, before he loses his composure over nothing. “What exactly proves him right?” he asks tightly.

“The dude claiming to be a Norse god. He came back! Straight in front of Coulson and a dozen agents in a whirlwind, from the sky. It’s all over the base! Thor is real!” Skye squeals.

This time, Lukas does lurch backward. No. Not here, not now. The ice in his stomach solidifies, colder than the hateful touch of a jotun.

His first instinct is to turn away, disappear into the ether, and never return to this cursed realm and
its foolish humans. Worshiping Thor already, before they’d even met him. He should be used to it, but the thought still rankles.

He needs to know more. Why is Thor here? Has Thor come to collect him? Drag him back to Asgard, to the Allfather’s judgment, to the condemnation of the entire court? Or has he only returned for his mortal woman? Then why appear to Agent Coulson?

“Lukas?” Jemma’s voice jars him from the endless loop of his questions, and he returns his attention to the agents.

“Wow,” Skye remarks. “I think you got a whole two shades paler. That’s impressive, especially for a guy like you. Best reaction I’ve seen so far.”

He wipes his face clean of any emotion other than shock and bemusement. “Thor – as in the god of thunder? Thor Giantsbane, wielder of Mjölnir? You can’t be serious.”

Fitz gasps theatrically. “I nearly forgot – you’re an expert in Norse mythology! Of course – you must be having heart palpitations!”

It takes him precious seconds to construct an appropriate response, his mind buzzing white with panic.

“It is - I - it is unexpected,” he stammers. Lukas jerks his head, not a nod or a shake, just a tremor. “I need to - excuse me.”

He barely manages the words before his feet steer him away. Lukas bumps into the frame of the door as he hurries past, out into the hall. He needs to find somewhere isolated, hidden. Somewhere he can close his eyes and think. He can feel their gazes, raking over his back, itching, crawling under his skin, writhing.

Lukas needs to be alone.

It is an old impulse. From the time he does not acknowledge, from the prince who never was, who never should have been. The one he can see in the shadow cast by the light of the Tesseract.
Find somewhere and hide away, alone in the dark, to lick his wounds and nurse his anxieties. Thor is already driving him back. Into the past. Lukas fists his hands in his hair, pulling sharply at the roots. Wanting the pain to clarify his thoughts. It is no use. His mind jumps, skitters from one consideration to the next, unable to settle.

He pushes blindly through a door, finds himself huddled in a supply closet. A broom leans against a mop bucket. Sinking down, he presses his back against the opposite wall.

Thor. Thor is here, on Midgard. It feels like an intrusion. A foreign object pushed into an open wound. This is his place, now. He has made it his place. Lukas’s place. He is valued, here, for his knowledge, his expertise.

He had been rejected from realm after realm, and finally found a corner of the world that he could claim for his own. A life he could claim.

And Thor is here to supersede that claim, as he always does. To take anything that is Lo - Lukas’s and make it his own.

His fingers dig into his skull, sharp points of relief where the nails start to pierce the thin skin. When his vision begins to grey, go dim and distant, Lukas realizes he is on the verge of losing consciousness. He closes his eyes. Sucks in a deep breath, slow, now. Lukas eases his lungs into an even rhythm. Laying his forehead against his knees, he just inhales, then exhales.

Fate is a better trickster than he, as always. He dared to name her Mother, even if only in his thoughts, and thus drew her trueborn son to correct the sweet delusion.

Time stretches in the dark and the quiet. Like the Void, almost. There is something there, a pang of wanting, to go back, into the endless silence, to fall forever and never have to face Thor or Thor’s cursed brother again. He buries it with ruthless effort.

You are Lukas. Lukas. It sounds like a lie. Weak, in a way that it hasn’t felt for months.

He stays huddled in the closet until his phone buzzes and jolts him. Legs numb and tingling when he moves, Lukas slips the pink cell out of his pocket, half-dreading to see the name on the screen. But it is only Caroline, a text about some inane child’s television show. He stares at the little colorful characters, the string of pink and purple hearts, the yellow faces in their range of expressions, jarred by their strangeness.
can u believe it

lukas!!

Respond!

She calls him by his chosen name and it works like a summoning, as if she speaks words of power, as if the child has drawn a circle of seidr around him. Pulled him forth, from dark water.

The part of him that is Lukas rises to the surface, buoyed by her childish insistence. He submerges all else in the lifeless depths. Pushes Thor’s brother back down, holds Frigga’s second son under until he stops fighting.

Lukas wets his dry lips with his tongue. He opens his cell and types a message for Caroline as he hauls himself to his feet. She who knows nothing of other realms, of shadowed pasts and shattered bridges. He is only Lukas, to her. To Roseanne. To Clayton and Connor. Not even a metahuman, just Lukas Eld.

He pulls that mortal cloak tightly around himself. There is no need for hasty decisions, no need to run about blindly, like cornered prey. Thor will not get the better of him, he refuses. Enough of cowering, enough of fear.

He thinks of the device he has agreed to make. Yes. The mortals need him. Only him. They do not know it, but Lukas does. He is a consultant. Thor’s arrival has done nothing to change that agreement.

Pushing out of the closet, he glances up and down the hall. No one is there. Good. He follows the cool thread of the Tesseract through the winding labyrinth of unchanging stone walls.

Agent Romanova awaits within, directing Simmons and Fitz in a flurry of activity. The Tesseract is bundled into a metal cage. Half-full trunks surround her feet.

“The transport will be ready in a few hours. Pack anything that needs to come with you,” she tells the scientists. “But remember we’ll be more cramped on the Helicarrier than we are here.”
Her eyes fall on Lukas. He makes sure his hands hang at his sides, open and free. Afraid if he catches hold of anything, he will accidentally crush it in his grip. The shaky, uncertain pulse pounding through his veins is familiar to him. Like there’s another edge beneath the soles of his feet. Waiting. *Lukas has never fallen, and he never will*, he reminds himself.

“And will I be coming with you?” he asks.

“Yes,” Natasha Romanova says.

“Let me guess. Coulson would like to make use of my expertise.”

Her smile is more of a quirk of lips. “You’ve heard about our guest.”

“I believe the entirety of S.H.I.E.L.D. has heard.” His fingers twitch. “But I am not sure how much help I can give.”

“You’re better than nothing.” She shrugs. “And Coulson’s assembling all our experts in one place.”

“Why, thank you for the stellar recommendation,” he rasps, dredging up a smile.

“Very welcome.” She goes to leave. Lukas takes a shallow breath.

Natasha spins around before she gets too far, leaning against the doorframe. “By the way, all those things that you’re not telling us - will they put any of the agents in danger? S.H.I.E.L.D. in jeopardy?”

Lukas pauses, his lips parted. Wondering what has shown on his face. “Ah. No, I should not think any of you are in mortal peril.”

She raises a brow. “Just you, then?”
He swallows, then tilts his head to give her a wry smile. “Perhaps it won’t come to that.”

“You know…” Natasha looks down. “Keeping your secrets isn’t always a bad thing. You can rely on them. They remind you who you are, and where you come from.” Her greenish eyes are piercing when she turns her gaze to him. “If they help you hold onto your identity, then keep them close.”

“Speaking from experience, are we?” His voice sounds brittle to his own ears.

“Yes.” Natasha doesn’t blink. “Sometimes all we are is a collection of secrets and lies, memories and regrets. But they’re ours. That matters. I think you understand that.”

The mortal is more perceptive than he gave her credit for. “Are you advising me to remain silent?”

“I’m saying that it’s up to you.” Natasha tucks her hair, venomous red, red as a warning, behind her ear. “Your secrets can be sacred, but they also give people power over you. If you’re not the one to tell them… the whole house of cards could come falling down before you can blink.”

Lukas does not respond. Natasha Romanova leaves.

Perhaps this fragile house of cards will tumble. But Lukas is a mage, and the impossible is the province of seidr. He shall hold up this paper façade with his strength of will. With a judicious lie, a clever misdirection. As he has always done.

Thor will not linger long on Midgard. His focus is that of a mayfly, flitting about, alighting from leaf to leaf, sudden and bright and then fading fast. Thor will lose interest in these petty mortals and return to his precious Asgard, his sycophants and his golden crown.

He will remain here. In the shadows, with his sacred secrets. That is how he likes it, after all. That is who he is. A liar.

Lukas Eld has no brother.
Excerpt from *Theories of Celestial Geometry* by Prince Loki Odinsson, stored in the Sky Spire of the Academy of Mysteries on Asgard

The foundation of an interrealm gate must be strongly anchored. The runes chosen for such a purpose should be powerful, able to hold a great deal of seidr, such as those carved upon the walls of the Bifröst Observatory. But also, crucially, they must be flexible. They must shift with the boundaries of the realm. This is where an understanding of celestial geometry becomes paramount.

Seidr fluctuates with the orbit of the realms around Yggdrasil. The angle of the boundary to the branches is not constant. Maintaining a magical working in such conditions requires the use of a link to the realm from which the gate is anchored, the better to account for the shift in ambient power on the other side of the gate. Without such a link, without the appropriate runes, the portal will be unstable, even destructive.

To that end, I have compiled several theories regarding rune design and composition that I hope to test in the coming months…
Fitz's phone alarm buzzes and startles him. It's been quiet in the lab all morning, just him and Jemma sorting the equipment from the Helicarrier's loading bay. “Almost time for our briefing,” he reminds her.

“You mean the mini-briefing before the full briefing,” she says.

He groans. “Ah, yes. The joys of compartmentalization.”

Those who know of the Tesseract are meeting to clear what they’ll tell the rest who aren't in the loop. “Do you have your notes on Eld's little project?” he asks.

Jemma nods. "I've got a list going of what we'll need." She pulls up the document and Fitz scans it. He stops at the third item.

“He wants a piece of the extraterrestrial skeleton. Hmm. What for?”

She shrugs. "Said he needs something that has passed through the distortion, and I think the specimen almost definitely did. As a working theory, that's better than anything we've come up with.”

"Do you think Coulson will approve the request?"

She reads over his shoulder. “Yep. Already has. He only needs a small sample - I’m thinking about excising a piece of a long bone. Thoughts on the casing?"'

“Not copper or iron, I see. Would steel work? I mean, I know it’s an iron alloy, but…”

“We’ll have to ask. He said something from the earth itself, which is pretty broad.”

“Did he mean an element found in the crust, or something just buried under the earth?” Fitz chews on his lip. “If it’s an element in the crust, then what about aluminum?”
“Oh, that might work. And it’s a lot cheaper than anything else I was considering.”

He pulls up the requisitions site on his tablet and puts in an order request for the aluminum, with the rough dimensions of the egg-shaped device Lukas had outlined to Simmons. “Think it’ll work?” he asks.

“I dunno,” Jemma replies. Her gaze is distant. Fitz knows there is something complex and wonderful happening right now, deep in her grey matter. Jemma doesn’t like to share her thoughts until she’s considered every angle. Fitz, on the other hand, likes to bounce ideas off anyone and everyone that will stand still and listen for a minute. It’s part of his process. But he knows better than to push Jemma. On that, at least.

“What do you think about Eld? Seems like every day it’s something else with him.”

“I think he’s very good at avoiding questions he doesn’t want to answer.”

“Yeah?”

“I asked him how he knows all this stuff about portals. He said he can feel them.”

“Not exactly up to scientific rigor, is it?” Fitz snorts. "Convenient that only he can feel them.”

“You’re quite the grump this morning.” She smiles, with a teasing edge.

“Yes, well, I’m a empiricist, not a metahuman. I don't feel things.” She giggles. "You know what I mean," Fitz grumbles. "I'll wait for the results, thank you very much.” He leans in. “Although, I heard - ” He glances around for listening ears and finds none but Jemma. “I heard that Fury was even thinking about bringing in Dr. Banner if the project really stalls.”

“No! You think he would?” Jemma’s eyes shine. “I’d love to meet him, though. Even - even with everything, you know.”
"We'll be the only normal ones left at this rate," he mutters. First metahumans, and then scientists that have gotten on the wrong side of gamma radiation. Fitz shakes his head. Jemma's right. Dr. Banner would be an asset. He's just being a wanker.

Leo’s tired. That’s where the irritation is coming from, he knows, but it’s hard to shake off.

Last night’s sleep hadn’t been restful, crammed into a crew bunk deep in the lower levels. The Helicarrier’s engines aren’t loud. Not by a long shot. That would render the cloaking device useless.

The vibration. That's what had gotten to him. Low enough that it didn’t register at a decibel that his brain classified as a sound. More a feeling. A rattle in his bones, an uneasiness crawling across his skin. *So much for not paying mind to feelings.*

And there was a dream that he doesn’t remember. He’d been trapped, left behind. They’d abandoned him. He doesn’t know who they were - that’s always the way of dream knowledge, effortless and vague at the same time. But it had woken him in the night and left something cold, like he’d swallowed liquid nitrogen.

The constant vibration is still there, now under the soles of his feet. They’re moving, but he can’t see it. Leo wishes they’d thought to put a window in here.

The labs are always shoved in out of the way closets. Field agents seem to think all scientists live underground, like hobbits. Fitz had heard that comment enough when he was a teenager, for being a Tolkien fan on the scrawny side. He *does* wants a glimpse of the sky, now and then, even if it makes it more difficult to read his computer screen.

And just the thought, of looking out and seeing the tops of clouds skimming by… he wriggles his toes in his boots. He needs to stop being such an arse. Annoying vibration or not - he’s on an honest-to-god, flying, cloaked, aircraft carrier base, buzzing along at a casual altitude of 30,000 feet. Leo used to fall asleep imagining such a scenario. Ten years old, burrowed under the bedcovers, the next four issues of his favorite comic stashed beneath his pillow and a flashlight in his mouth. Stars in his eyes and his toy rocket in one hand.

Of course, in that alternate universe, he’d also been famous, a renowned physicist and billionaire inventor who could barely walk outside without being mobbed by crowds of his biggest fans.
Yes, alright, maybe he had modeled his dream self by Tony Stark. Who could blame him, though? Finally, it had been cool to be smart. A genius, a nerd. Stark had changed everything, in the landscape of his childhood. The occasional hobbit remark had been the exception, not the rule.

“We’re all here,” Fitz repeats, slower. “All of us. Oh god, Jemma, Tony Stark is going to be at the briefing too.”

Her lips twitch. “Talk to him like a human being, Fitz. You know,” she says, standing up and putting on a high-pitched voice, which is very offensive, if it’s supposed to be a serious imitation of him. “Hello there, Mr. Stark. S’a bit windy out there, huh? In the suit?” She clasps her hands together in front of her chest, widening her eyes. “You know, that metal suit you designed? Yeah, the one I recreated in my CAD program. And then photoshopped my face onto. And then put as my desktop background. That suit.”

“One time,” he grits out. “That was one time.”

“You kept that as your background for six months.”

“Alright, that’s enough jabbering. We need to get back to work.”

Jemma laughs in his face. It’s great to have such a supportive lab partner. Fitz buries his nose in her list of materials, successfully ignoring her, until he thinks of a way to distract her from ever mentioning that photo to Tony Stark.

"How’d Eld do with the Tesseract? I heard they’d been rotating out the lab technicians."

Jemma shoots him a quizzical look. "Anxiety attacks," Fitz explains. "From the stress of the project and such."

"Well, I didn't have a chance to ask. Our discussion was derailed." Jemma squeezes her eyes shut and rests a hand on the side of her head. "I sort of, somehow, managed to bring up his absent mother."

"What?" He bites his tongue against any laughter. "Absent?"
“Absent, or passed on, I don’t know! Oh, Fitz, it was terrible either way. You should have seen the look on his face.” Jemma slumps down, resting her forehead on the flat surface of the lab bench, hiding her own expression. “Just awful.”

“I’m sure he knows you didn’t mean anything by it.” He tries a consoling pat on the shoulder. Jemma finally glances up at him, eyes wide and mournful, lips turned down.


“You’re curious,” Fitz says. “He can’t fault you for that. If he hadn’t gone and lied about who he is, he wouldn’t be fielding so many questions about his past. It’s his own fault, really.”

She casts him a doubtful look. Fitz squares his shoulders. “I’m serious. I think he likes it, you know. Holding all the cards. Keeping secrets. He’s always got that smirk.” For some reason, the mental image of that smug little facial expression sets Leo’s teeth on edge.

Jemma frowns at him. “And here I thought you liked him.”

“I do,” he admits. Grudgingly. Fitz rubs at his forehead, trying to think past the low grade hum of the turbines. “But he’s not exactly S.H.I.E.L.D. material, is he? First the thing with Raina. And now he’s a metahuman? Coulson doesn’t like someone on his team he can’t predict.”

“Then why did he recruit Lukas?”


“And it doesn’t hurt to keep all the people that know about the Tesseract together in the same place,” Jemma observes.

“Which is why we’re all here,” Fitz says. The Tesseract sits in its innocuous metal container, off to the side on an unused lab bench. “Don’t you think Coulson should tell everyone about S.H.I.E.L.D. having the Cube?”
“I don’t think he wants to open that can of worms just yet.” Jemma shrugs. “Plus, he’s still trying to crack Raina. Figure out where she got that 0-8-4.”

Fitz glances around, suddenly not so enthused about being 30,000 feet in the air with a criminal in the brig. Or whatever they call the holding cells in the Helicarrier. He calls it the brig in the privacy of his own mind, because Fury’s got an eyepatch, of course, and one of the other daydreams he used to entertain featured himself as a pirate, scourge of the great sea. With a fantastic tricorn hat. Naturally.

“I don’t envy him that,” he says. “Eld’s still not cleared the ring to be used for interrogation.”

“Coulson has his ways,” Jemma replies. “I don’t know what they are or how he got them, but you know how he is.”

Fitz hums his agreement. "The CIA, I've always thought. They've got those seminars and classes. You know. Intro to Interrogation Techniques. Psychological Terror 101. I think he and my grandmother might have graduated together."

"No, I believe she taught the courses," Jemma says. "Graduate level. Learn to Make A Human Sweat With the Strength of Your Gaze."

"You forgot her masterclass. How to Intimidate Friends and Manipulate Family Members." Fitz grins and nudges the black screen of his mounted computer, to wake it from resting mode. They've got to get to that briefing, and he wants to bring a printout of the report he'd prepared about theories of spacetime. His tablet's not hooked up to the printer yet and he doesn’t want to bother with it.

The screen doesn’t flicker. He taps it, hard. Nothing. “What the - ” Fitz presses the power button. Still, the screen remains empty.

Jemma notices his efforts. “Is it unplugged?”

He checks the power cord is in full contact with the outlet and depresses the button again. Dead. “The grid’s not gone out, has it?” The Helicarrier is powered by both solar panels and generators in the base of the ship, near the engines. Even if one went out, the backups should work. And maybe he wouldn't be nursing this blasted headache.
She turns her screen to show him. “Mine’s on.”

Fitz plugs in to her station’s outlet instead. The computer remains black. Frustration bubbles up. “This doesn’t make sense.”

Jemma bends over to examine the connections. “Well, you’ve got a crack in the base, right here.”

“But that wasn’t there last night. I know it wasn’t. I checked over all our equipment after it was loaded, to make sure the techs didn’t damage anything, and I inspected the lab space to make sure all our specifications were met. I didn’t see any crack.” Fitz glances at her, puzzled.

Her face drains of color. “A crack…”

His own stomach swoops, as if the Helicarrier has taken a sudden loss of altitude. “You don’t think…”

Jemma gnaws on her lip. “This isn’t good. If this is another distortion - up here, on the carrier…”

Fitz does his best not to think what would happen if such a distortion appeared in the floor below their feet. How that vibration would stop, go silent, how the sky would fall away as they tumbled, only air currents below.

“We’ve got to tell Coulson,” he decides. “The Tesseract should be moved. Somewhere away from anything important. Maybe we shouldn’t have brought it up here at all.” Perhaps it would have been better, to leave it buried in that desert.

Swiveling the monitor out of the way, he studies the base with its crack. It certainly doesn’t look like much. Nothing like the distortion in the Bronx. That had been rubble strewn over the street, dust in the air, crunching between his teeth. A deep abyss beyond the cordoned police line.

He puts his finger to the crack and hisses, snatching it back instantly. Jemma grips his shoulder, tight. “What are you doing?” she demands.

Brenna Roberts hooks her hand around the door frame, pulling her head into view. “Everyone’s down the hall. You ready?” Neither he nor Jemma respond right away. “Fitz?” she asks.

“Better bring them here.” He digs his teeth into his cheek. “The briefing can wait.” There’s been at least three briefings a day since Agent Martinez was found in the S.H.I.E.L.D. storage facility in New Jersey. It’s the bureaucracy’s reaction to panic. Makes them feel like they’re accomplishing something useful.

But Fitz has a better idea.

“Jemma,” he says, “Did you pack the case with the aerial probes?”

“Sure I did.” She moves a crate away from the interior wall. “You’re thinking what I am, yes?”

“We need more information,” Fitz agrees. “An unmanned probe has a better chance of getting near this distortion than we do.” He nurses the tips of his fingers in his mouth. He’d swear on his first edition Captain America comic that the surface of his computer had been absolute zero.

"Wait - distortion?" Roberts barges into the lab. "Where?" She looks up, like the ceiling is about to cave in. He points to his computer. She frowns. "Just this? You're sure it’s the same?"

"Not sure. Which is why we're going to test that supposition. Right now."

"How?" She squints at him. No respect for the scientific method, as per usual.

"Look," Fitz says. "It's wide enough here to slip something in. If I take the backup battery off - maybe even the protective casing - I can dispatch a probe to peek around inside." He modifies the probe even as he’s speaking, multi-tool to hand.

"Didn't you do that with the one in the Bronx? Send probes through?"

"They never came back," he admits. "They stopped responding to my signal."
"So..."

"Fitz has been preparing," Jemma tells her. She hefts one of the probes in her palm. A long chain of metal links is attached to the tail end of the sensor relays. It'd only cost him a quick trip to the machine shop, a favor from a welder that likes meatball subs. The connection should stand up to fairly high pressure.

"You've leashed them," Roberts observes. "Like robot dogs."

The humor grates at him. Leo suppresses the urge to rub his knuckles into his forehead. "Any better ideas?"

"Nope." Brenna twirls the chain around her pinky. "Sic' em, boy."

Fitz doesn't wait around for Coulson to come in and put a stop to this. Experimentation is a tried and true method of information gathering. He grabs the chain with both hands and motions to Jemma. She flicks the power switch of the modified probe.

"Here goes," she says, and settles the nose of the probe against the distortion. A breath later, it's sucked in.

Links of metal click together as they begin to slide out of his hand. "Okay," Fitz says. "Okay." The chain uncoils, slow and steady at first, then gaining speed. "Ooookay - maybe another minute." He holds tight as the pressure starts to grow. Walks forward to give it more slack. His palms sweat and slide. The muscles of his arms strain. "It's - " he huffs, "It's getting a bit - difficult." Inching a few more steps toward the distortion, Fitz braces his legs up against the lab bench.

With a sudden pop, the chain is yanked out of his grip, clangs against the ceiling, smacks into the base of the computer, and disappears the way of the probe. His stomach slams into the lab bench as he is propelled forward, fruitlessly grabbing for the chain, arms stretched out.

"Ow," Fitz whimpers, half-prone across the work surface. He examines his reddened palms. "Ow, ow ow!"
Jemma scratches at her forehead. "Clearly you're too weak to be the anchor point," she mutters. "Now, if we had some real strength, we could - "

"I've just been injured in the line of duty, Christ, Jemma! Give me a mo’ before you begin compiling an itemized list of my faults."

"Oh, don’t be a baby. I've had that saved on my desktop for years," she retorts. "But you know that's not what I meant."

"We'll need a real bloody anchor to hold it down." Fitz flexes his hands and winces. "Solid ton of metal."

"Or..." Jemma grins, eyes bright under the fluorescents. "We could ask Captain Rogers to step in and help. He's just come off the landing deck, you know."

Roberts jerks to attention. "Oh, I am so on it. He's wearing a t-shirt today." She darts into the corridor before Fitz can snap his jaw shut.

"I'm - that's - " Actually a fantastic idea, he realizes. “Hand me that probe.”

Jemma does. “This is Rex. He’s a good boy.”

“I get to name the next one.” Leo strips the bulky covering off.

They’re on the fourth probe when Brenna Roberts comes back with Captain Rogers in tow. Coulson is right behind them. Next is an older man, who dodders in, tugging at the too-long sleeves of his wrinkled sport coat, a white puff of facial hair protruding from his chin.

Fitz almost swallows his tongue as Tony Stark saunters after, hands stuffed into his pockets. Stark glances around like he’d gotten lost on the official Helicarrier tour and ended up joining this group by mistake. “I thought you said there’d be bagels, Coulson. You know I don’t attend briefings unless there’s free food.”

Captain Rogers eyes him. “They told me you were a millionaire.”
“I have very low standards.” Stark winks. “And it’s billionaire, actually.”

Lukas Eld is the last to duck into the lab. He strides over to Fitz’s station. “Agent Roberts said you needed help walking your dogs,” Eld tells him. “I assume that was an attempt at humor?”

“Jeez, harsh.” Agent Roberts blows out a breath of air. “Attempt?”

“This is Rex,” Fitz says, holding out the modified probe. He doesn’t respond to Lukas’s jibe. “Scientist’s best friend.”

Jemma juggles a few others. “And Fido! And Mitzy, I think. This one with the bent corner casing is Sparky.”

“I said I wanted to name one!”

Lukas Eld sighs. “Perhaps I overestimated the quality of your humor.”

“Probably,” Leo says, on the edge of snippy.

Jemma leans in towards Eld. “Who is that guy? The disheveled professor.”

“Dr. Pfeifer,” Lukas answers. “An expert in Northern European mythology and a professor of linguistics at Brown University.” He smiles with only one side of his mouth. “I believe he’s the sort of man that would find your childish jests hilarious.”

“Ooh, we don’t like to have any competition, do we?” Roberts tilts her head knowingly.

“To have any sort of rivalry, the competitors must be on equal intellectual footing. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case.” Lukas picks an invisible speck of lint off his pressed suit jacket.

A snicker passes between the three of them. “The claws are out.” Brenna says under her breath.
Coulson neglects to introduce the professor, but he doesn’t seem to mind, stepping forward and doing so himself. Loudly, with a grand flourish. “Greetings! I am Dr. Harrison Pfeifer. That is a doctorate, mind you - not a medical degree.” He proceeds to list off his academic accolades to a largely disinterested audience. Leo's not sure why he's even here.

“And I have been tasked by our Agent Coulson here to translate the journal found in - ”

The agent cuts him off. “Pardon me, Doctor, but we will cover that in another briefing. I want to hear about this distortion. Fitz?”

“It’s here.” They gather around his lab station. Fitz shows them Rex, with his makeshift leash, and outlines his sophisticated information gathering technique.

“Put the probe in the hole and hold on tight?” Stark summarizes. “Simple. Elegant. Kinky. I can get behind that kinda plan.”

Jemma starts to fan Fitz’s red hot face with her hands and he slaps her away. He gives the leash over. “Captain Rogers, if you would?”

With a bemused smile, the Captain plants his feet and wraps a few lengths of the metal chain around his fist. “Fire at will,” he says.

Rex is deployed through the distortion. Fitz realizes he's holding his breath. Forcing himself to exhale, he presses his sore hands to his trousers. The raw skin tingles.

The chain leash snaps to full tension. The Captain grimaces.

Steve Rogers, in the flesh, pulling back against a thousand Newtons of pressure emanating from a distortion in the fabric of spacetime. Fitz watches, slightly dazed. "I think I've seen this exact illustration in Issue #487 of The Amazing Captain America,” he whispers to Jemma. She shushes him.

After Rex goes Fido. Then Mitzy. Even Sparky gets a go, though the bent corner casing gets caught on the edge of the busted computer base and Fitz has to pry it loose. The tips of his fingers
are numb when he's done.

“Hell of a workout.” Captain Rogers recovers the last probe and transfers it to Fitz. Ice crystals have begun to grow on the steel frame.

“Yeah, looks like you’ve been slacking in the gym lately,” Stark says.

Leo and Jemma snigger at the face Steve Rogers makes at Stark’s back. Lukas Eld pretends to fiddle with his tie, but he’s grinning too.

Plugging in the probes to Jemma’s comp station, Fitz lets the data collate before he runs it through his standard sensory output program. His eyes flick over the results, and a thought begins to coalesce in his mind. One glance shared with Jemma, and he knows she’s with him.

“I can tell you one thing right now,” Leo says. “These probes went to the same place.”

“All four?” Coulson clarifies.

“Yep. They all came back with the exact same readings. Down to the last decimal.”

“Does that mean all the distortions are leading to that place?” Roberts asks. “The one in the Bronx and in the South China Sea? In New Jersey?”

“I’d have to run the probes through those distortions to be sure. But this one, at least, isn’t a random gate, dropping off at a different endpoint each time something goes through.”

“What is the place on the other end?” Stark raises his eyebrows. “That’s the question I want answered.”

“Not Earth.” Fitz studies the program output. “Different acceleration of gravity, and the ambient radiation isn’t the same as our upper atmosphere.”

“Another world,” Eld murmurs.
“And we happen to know someone who is from another world,” Coulson points out. “We need to ask Thor about this.”

“Is he gonna understand what we mean when we start talking about gravity and radiation?” Brenna asks. “I mean, I know he’s from an alien civilization, but he seems kinda - well, he talks like he’s from another time.”

“That’s something to consider,” Jemma agrees. “What does he know about science? Human science.”

“When’s the last time he was on Earth?” Fitz says. “Besides New Mexico.” Coulson turns to him and Leo tries to tease out his meaning. “He had to have been at one point. Right? A thousand or so years ago. Mythology, yes?”

They all end up looking at Lukas Eld.

He purses his lips. “My field of study,” Lukas begins, “is much the same as your Dr. Pfeifer.” Eld nods at the other expert like he’s doing him a favor by including them in the same group. “The human construct of Thor, not this - this - ”

“Alien?” Stark interjects. “He’s gotta point. I don’t remember there being any spaceships in those myths. I don’t remember the gods wearing jeans at any point either.”

“But the stories were clearly based on this Thor,” Captain America says. Fitz thinks he looks thoughtful, his blue eyes cloudy, brows drawn low.

“Dude who summons lightning, and has a giant metal hammer to lay the smack down? Yeah, good deduction, Cap.” Stark is fiddling with something in his hand. He doesn’t see the look Steve Rogers shoots him this time either.

Lukas interrupts. “Why exactly is he here? What did he say to you?”

“He was looking for Jane Foster,” Coulson explains. “He wanted our help to find her.”
“A woman,” Eld mutters.

“The one he met last time he was on Earth.” His supervisory agent nods.

“Is that all?” the consultant presses.

Fitz scuffs his feet back and forth on the grated floor. “He said something about Asgard’s goodwill, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” Stark drawls. “Said he was here to offer us Asgard’s goodwill. Dunno if that means he’s decided not to blast us to pieces or if we can expect a coupla nice fruit baskets this year for Christmas.”

“I would assume he meant an alliance,” the Captain says.

“An alliance, or a treaty?” Lukas’s question is sharp, almost irritable. Fitz looks more closely at him. His face is pale and drawn, dark smudges underneath bright eyes. Tired, on edge. Most agents who see the Tesseract look like that for a few days after. Or maybe that incessant vibration has gotten to him too.

“Does it matter?” Coulson asks.

“Not if you assume an alliance means the same thing to him as it does to you,” Lukas says.

Dr. Pfeifer scrunches his thick white eyebrows together. “Eh? An alliance is an agreement between two powers, to assist each other when needed.”

Lukas drums his fingers on the lab bench and sighs. “An alliance is made between two equal parties.” He lowers his gaze and smirks. “Much like an honest rivalry.”

“Okay...” Brenna draws the word out, prompting him on. “So when he says goodwill, he means an alliance?”
“Yes,” Dr. Pfeifer answers.

At the same time, Lukas says, “No.”

Brenna massages her temples. Leo can sympathize. His own skull is starting to ache, pulsing like the Helicarrier’s turbines have taken up residence. “Thanks for clearing that up,” she snarks.

“A treaty is an agreement between two parties with conditions that must be met,” Dr. Pfeifer insists. “Just like an alliance, only slightly more formal.”

“A treaty is dictated by a stronger party to a weaker party.” Lukas shakes his head. “They set the conditions. If the weaker party fails to live up to them - then the treaty is voided. It is about strength, and the honor of your word.”

“You’re saying he’s offering us a treaty, not an alliance?” Coulson chews on his lower lip.

“I am saying that it would serve you well to figure out what he is offering.” Lukas raises his hands, pushes them outward. A gesture Fitz interprets as him saying *go forth, and do as I bid you*.

Coulson does not look impressed. “Maybe you should ask Thor on our behalf. Since you seem to be on the same page as him.”

“Have the good doctor here ask him. I have other work I could be doing.” Lukas does not flinch away from Coulson’s stare.

“Will Thor even answer?” Brenna chews on her lower lip.

“Seemed like a friendly dude.” Stark puts a bottle of some energy drink to his lips and chugs the contents. He burps, then wipes his mouth on his sleeve. “Didn’t seem to mind when I shot a few repulsor beams at him.” Fitz cringes. No food or drink in the lab. But it’s Tony Stark. How’s he supposed to tell him off?
“You… attacked him?” Lukas cocks his head, fingers pausing in their rhythm, hovering over the table. “And he did not retaliate?”

“Nope.” Stark pops his lips.

“Well.” Lukas jerks his neck, one lock of black hair falling over his forehead. Fitz watches him. His eyes flicker, like he’s deep in thought. “Then I don’t see the harm in asking him to clarify,” he finally says.

Stark clangs the can down. “You don’t wanna meet him? Doesn’t this Old Norse stuff like, butter your bread?”

“No. I have no wish to bias myself. To read alien intelligence into what should be ascribed to human ingenuity.” Lukas straightens from where he was leaning against the wall. “Do I have your leave to go and resume my urgent work, Agent Coulson?”

Leo’s boss waves him off. “Alright. Fine. Dr. Pfeifer and I will question Thor when he returns from his visit with Foster.”

“Perfectly alright with me,” Pfeifer says, scratching at his fuzzy beard. Coulson looks resigned to the idea.

The strangest briefing Fitz has ever been a part of dissolves, and the attendees drift away. Fitz follows Roberts to the door. She turns right, towards the Helicarrier’s deck. “Where are you going?” he asks.

“I’ve got a few errands to run.”

“Errands? We’re 30,000 feet up.”

“Can’t talk, gotta go!” She bounds off. Fitz frowns after her.

Jemma is arranging the probes in their case. “C’mon, Rexy, sleepy time.”
“How are we going to tell them apart?” he wonders. “Other than Sparky.”

“Oh, I’ve got a label maker,” she says airily. “I always bring it. You wouldn’t believe how often it’s useful.”

“Of course you do.”

Soon they are alone again, and for a minute it feels like he’s back in the Academy, bumping shoulders with Jemma in his cramped makeshift lab. Except now the Tesseract hums dissonantly, a low warning, in the far corner.

Shaking his head, he recalls his mind to the here and now. It’s harder than it should be. He needs a cup of coffee - or maybe not, maybe he’s had too much. His mind is buzzing.

Jemma murmurs something, too low to hear. “What was that?” He looks over one shoulder, still typing absentmindedly.

“Hmm?” She is bent low over her tablet.

“I said what did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything,” she replies. Her thought process must be in overdrive, and Fitz is getting impatient waiting for her to share. But she doesn’t admit to whatever it was she just whispered under her breath, so Fitz leaves her be. For now. He’s not above wheedling and annoying her into talking to him. He does have to finish analyzing the probe readings, though. Willing any irritation he feels to fade, Fitz focuses on his computer screen. Too much coffee, for certain.
The Spider’s Web (previously titled Natural History), from “Poems & Sketches of E.B. White” published in 1966 by E.B. White

The spider, dropping down from twig,
Unfolds a plan of her devising,
A thin premeditated rig
To use in rising.

And all that journey down through space,
In cool descent and loyal hearted,
She spins a ladder to the place
From where she started.

Thus I, gone forth as spiders do
In spider’s web a truth discerning,
Attach one silken thread to you
For my returning.
The runes are dark against the gold band. He can feel the power embedded in the sharp angles, the sinuous curves. They are made from old magic. Older than he.

Lukas has compiled his report. He will advise S.H.I.E.L.D. against making use of the Ring. As much as he desires answers from Raina, it is these runes that halt him.

*Seidr* lives in his bones, in his blood, it is the spark in the deepest chambers of his heart. On his most fundamental level, he is magic. And thus he knows the necessity of caution. To treat the Ring with less than absolute delicacy is folly. Lukas learned well from his time under its enchantment. To blunder on without a planned approach of any sort would be as foolish for a mortal as approaching - well, *him*, were he unbound by disguise. If he were unallied to the realm of Midgard, uncaring of their flamespark lives.

*As it was the last time, when you set the Destroyer upon one of their towns.* He grinds his teeth.

Dr. Pfeifer pokes the ancient magical object. “A pretty thing,” he declares. Lukas sighs.

“Do not think to wear it,” he cautions. “I would not risk the Ring’s *seidr.*”

“*Seidr*?” Dr. Pfeifer snorts. “You’ve spent too long reading those neo-pagan mythology books.”

“Thor has come to earth, and you doubt the existence of *seidr*?”

“He is not a god, at least, not in the way the Norse of old would have understood it.”

“Yet he wields the hammer Mjölnir, and descends from the sky. If Thor exists, then it follows other aspects of his mythology should as well.”

Dr. Pfeifer frowns. Lukas does not want him to contemplate the existence of the rest of the pantheon overlong. “The Ring has power, whatever its provenance.”
“If this is *seidr*, then why are the runes not recognizable? They are like nothing I have seen.”

“I think it is older than we know.”

“It doesn’t make sense. The runes on the Ring itself are not any permutation of Norse writing I can make out, but those burned into that agent’s chest are?”

Agent Morris. The runes that he had been called to examine in the beginning of his acquaintance with S.H.I.E.L.D. *Lie-spinner.*

“Perhaps it has been modified, in the centuries since its forging. To accept Æsir magic,” Lukas muses.

Barton groans, loud and long. “Can I put it back away, now? You can have your debate later. I would say over beers, but it’s pretty clear neither of you are any fun.”

The archer sits next to the open lead-lined case. Coulson has taken no end of precautions when storing his 0-8-4. Barton was his trusted courier, and will ferry the Ring back to wherever his boss has hidden it after Lukas and Dr. Pfeifer are done with their examination. It was a pointless endeavor. Lukas has already made up his mind. Coulson’s last ditch effort to sway him, enticing him with its delicious potential, did not work.

“You may put it away,” Lukas instructs. Barton snaps off a sarcastic salute.

“I might ask Thor to take a look,” Dr. Pfeifer says. As if he can be assured the prince will grant him any favor he thinks to ask.

“He would not know it.” Lukas gathers his papers together, straightening the edges with an overly-hard tap on the metal table.

“And why is that? Didn’t you just say it had been modified for Æsir magic?”
It is not that Lukas cannot think of a response. There is no blankness, no searching and stumbling. Truly, there is too much he could say - and all of it revealing, answers that will bare the skin of a pale throat. Unarmored words. He cannot afford to be anything less than a fortress. Something that will withstand the brash fury of a storm’s reckless onslaught.

“Thor has never been named a master of *seidr*, ” he manages.

“True enough,” Dr. Pfeifer concedes. “But it couldn’t hurt.”

“To show a wildly powerful foreign prince who hopes to form a treaty with your planet a cursed magical object that was either lost - or stolen - from his own homeland? Yes, seems harmless.”

Barton glances to the Ring. “Ah, better put a sock in it, Doc, until Coulson says otherwise.”

“Thor is honorable,” Pfeifer argues. “He will not hold us responsible. The first humans to actually hold this Ring, *assuming* it even came from his homeland, are long dead now. There is no blame on our part for simply finding it.”

“You forget he is Prince of Asgard,” Lukas warns. The title sticks in his throat, and he clears it. “The weight of his duty may compel him to act to recover the Ring, no matter its human caretakers.”

It *could* happen. Theoretically. If Thor were to recognize the Ring’s power, and decide it was best kept from meddling hands in Asgard’s vault. With the other dangerous treasures.

His throat is too dry now to even clear. Lukas swallows, trying to rein in his thoughts - they had been scattered by dreams last night, flung apart to wander the realms - of memory and cosmology both. Sleep had been a remote prize. Coveted and denied.

To have the Ring so near, a clarion bell ringing discordant, blurring the more fine and delicate of his senses, does not help. And the Tesseract is a constant tugging in the back of his mind, like a well of dark gravity. Though - farther now, than it used to be. Perhaps Coulson has taken to storing that treasure in a lead-lined case as well. Remarkably cautious, for one so eager to use other objects of power towards his own ends.

“And you disposed to consider him an ally before any agreement has been made.” Lukas shoves the Ring’s stand into Barton’s hand and waves urgently at the lead-lined case.

Barton follows his command, though he bristles as a grumpy stallion would against the bridle. “Prince of Asgard, right, okay. So what - are we ‘sposed to bow or something when we meet him?”

“A show of obeisance is protocol when being introduced to royalty.” Dr. Pfeifer manages to look self-important despite the crumbs in his scraggly beard. “An accomplished warrior such as Thor Odinson would expect as much.”

Lukas rolls his eyes. “Perhaps you could try a curtsy, Barton. Or get on your knees.”

The man flips him off. “Only if someone buys me dinner first.”

“I’m sure Thor would happily provision you with a meal if he knew such a boon awaited him at the end of it.”

“Mocking a god might not be the most prudent course of action.” Dr. Pfeifer fixes him with a stare, down his nose.


Coulson arrives before Lukas can poke Dr. Pfeifer hard enough to deflate the pretentious shell of the academic.

He had called Agent Roberts, to tell her it was done, but she hadn’t answered. That was mildly annoying, since she’d been pestering him about this report for weeks. Lukas had emailed it instead, forwarded to Coulson. He knew that his conclusions would not be well received. But they had asked for an expert’s opinion, and that is what they had received, as little as S.H.I.E.L.D. knew or appreciated their good fortune.

“I read your report.” Coulson pinches the bridge of his nose. “And - seriously? We can’t use the Ring because - magic? Curses?”
“Is it so unreasonable, to expect an object of great power to have equally heavy consequences?”

“We don’t have time for this,” he complains. “The Tesseract might be compromised. Distortions in space and time are beginning to open in random places. I finally have Raina in the detention facility, right here in the Helicarrier, and now I can’t use the best weapon I’ve got against her?”

“You’ll just have to rely on your wits, Agent Coulson. Such as they are.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he says dryly.

“And Roberts? Has she read my report yet?”

Coulson shifts his gaze away from Lukas. Minutely. A tiny break in his constant calm. In his pocket, Lukas presses his finger and thumb together tightly. Coulson knows where Roberts is, and he feels guilty, for some reason.

He’s about to press for more when Coulson’s phone chimes. “It’s Hill,” he mutters, eyes skimming the text. His posture loosens. “Thor’s back,” he says, evidently relieved.

Lukas does not twitch. “Oh?”

“Yeah. C’mon, Dr. Pfeifer. Unless - you sure you don’t wanna come?”

“The detector,” he reminds Coulson. “More important.”

“Alright.” His lips purse.

The three of them leave, taking that bedeviled Ring with them. Lukas stands a moment, alone. He does not want to dawdle here in this base, with Coulson’s honored guest so close. But he cannot spur his feet onward. Constructing the detector should be his next step, as he told the agent. The ljósvaldr crystal is in his possession, the runes themselves chosen... but the task does not appeal. He needs focus, concentration, for carving the runes and channeling his intent. Something that
eludes at present.

Frustration grips him. The muscles in his neck are tense, driving an ache upward into his skull. Lukas makes a conscious effort to gather the dispersed parts of himself to the present. He has not fully succeeded when a young S.H.I.E.L.D. lab tech barges in.

“Oh, uh - sorry, thought this one was free,” she mumbles.

Lukas quickly evacuates the area, not wanting to explain why he was brooding in an empty darkened room. He roams the corridor. Now that he has started moving he cannot seem to stop.

Roseanne’s garden sprouts in his mind. He has long found solace there. Lukas turns with new purpose, descending a short flight of stairs into another ubiquitous, blandly pleasant hall. An inoffensive watercolor in muddled tones of blue and green hangs suspended upon the riveted metal wall, a touch of color that is wildly out of place in the bulk of the Helicarrier.

He’s reached a junction when he stutters to a halt. It is a voice that tugs at him, latching chains to his ankles. Utterly foreign, when contrasted with the humans’ chatter. Projected far enough down the hall, deep and loud, that Lukas can hear his half of the conversation with no effort.

Foreign to Lukas, out of place and strange and at once breathtakingly common. Anticipated, even though the wait felt like centuries, eons, a lifetime. A voice he would know even in the deepest sleep, one that wakes something in him now, a long forgotten instinct, to turn his body fully and look up at the speaker, neglected flower to the sun of his presence.

The last word he’d heard Thor speak was his name. No - not his name. The other. And not spoken. Screamed.

Lukas freezes in place.

There are no convenient doors in this stretch of corridor to slip through. No stairs, he’s come too far. Just blank stretches of grey metal, a cold expanse of blue-white fluorescent lights. The voice grows ever louder, closer.

Shock transmutes into panic, bubbling in his gut, casting every inch of space around him into sudden, excruciating detail: the shiver of air in his lungs, the rapid tattoo of his heart, the
clamminess of his palms. The bright, electric pulse of seidr crackling through the air.

Seidr. He shifts to the first form that comes to him.

The woman straightens her blazer, now too tight, ill-fitting upon her chest and loose in the waist. She tugs on the edge of her newly shortened skirt. Thick dark hair is a blanket on her back, tickling at her elbows. She stares down at the screen of her cell, though it is black. Breath comes too quick from her lips.

They pass within inches of her. Coulson and Dr. Pfeifer. Tony Stark. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents and handlers.

The prince.

Dr. Pfeifer is rambling, dissonant sounds, what seems like a stream of unending questions. Thor’s response rises above the din. “Goats? For transport? I do not - I was given to understand they are not truly ridden here on Midgard.”

“No, no, they draw a chariot, you see…”

The cavalcade passes. She grips her phone tightly. Risks a glance upward, and meets Tony Stark’s eye. He dawdles behind the rest, smirking at her.


She stares at him, and past him, to Thor’s retreating back. Unwilling to speak just yet. She can shift her features, her body, but her voice is not so easily disguised.

“Don’t be intimidated,” Stark tells her. “The only charge for my autograph is an ten digit number.” His gaze flicks to her cell phone.

This is too ungodly bizarre, on a day full of other disturbances. Shoving past him, she goes to the junction of the halls and turns left, the opposite way of Thor’s party.
“You S.H.I.E.L.D. types play hard to get, but you know where to find me!”

Nearly running, she ducks into the first bathroom she sees, locks herself in a stall. Rests her forehead on the door, clenches her trembling fingers into fists.

She needs to be Lukas to leave the base. Her badge will no doubt record her travels, and this badge is registered to a consultant for S.H.I.E.L.D. A male consultant.

The change comes as she bids, sideways, like sliding into the etherpaths between realms. Not a transformation so much as a lateral shift, another form that she claims as much as this one.


A weight descends on the crown of her head and she rejects it with a jerky movement, without daring to examine the shape. “Lukas,” she prays.

It comes together slowly. He leaves the stall and examines himself in the mirror. Looking for cracks, and seeing none, though he feels shattered, the fragments hastily pieced together, the glue disintegrating.

Hurrying through the halls, head canted down, he nearly lays Jemma Simmons out. She and Fitz are coming from the cafeteria. “Lukas!” she calls out, surprised. “There you - are you alright?”

They peer at him. He cannot find anything to reassure them with. Mumbling an excuse, he darts past, out the Helicarrier’s side exit. Thank bloody Helheim they are temporarily grounded, for maintenance and a resupply. He has only to make it to the nearest alley, where he steps through a broken doorway and comes out from underneath the willow tree in Roseanne’s yard. He halts, breathing in warm soil and freshly cut grass. There is no room for anyone else but Lukas Eld here. It is a relief.

The kitchen counters are cluttered with ingredients. An empty mixing bowl, a wooden spoon with batter crusted on the edge. Lukas is making a cup of tea when Roseanne bustles in. She hums happily when she sees him. “Well hello, stranger! You’ve been busy lately.”
“Working diligently,” he agrees, after a slight pause. “I was finally able to get away.”

“It’s a shame you didn’t come earlier.” Roseanne comes over and pats him on the cheek. “You’re a few minutes too late.” She notices his expression and explains. “You just missed your friend.”

“Friend?” His tongue is numb. Vision spotty. Beyond every corner he turns, he thinks he sees a broad back, a flowing red cape. She can’t mean -

“The pretty little agent. Roberts.”

“Agent Roberts?” Understanding comes with much difficulty, filtering in and out of the sieve that is his mind. He sets the teacup down, hard. “Why?”

“Why was she here? Said she was looking for you. I invited her to stay for some coffee, and we got to talkin’. You know how I get.”

She knew Lukas would be on the Helicarrier. “About what?” he asks hoarsely. There is a deepening pit inside of him, a yawning darkness, intimate, known. Betrayed again, of course. Did you expect better? They do not trust you.

“Oh, just chatting. About the kids, and the museum. You, of course. She was so curious to know all about you. How you got here.” Roseanne shows her dimples. “I think that means she’s sweet on you! And don’t worry. I only told her the best.”


She looks pleased. “Hungry? I’ve got some lemon bars in the oven.”

“No, thank you, my lady.” Lukas retreats from her, stumbling over his own feet. Vertigo washes over him, the ground tips up, the ceiling bends down. “I’m - tired. Very tired. Going to bed.”

He doesn’t wait to hear her answer. Lukas staggers out of the house, across the garden, no longer a
place of refuge, tainted, trodden upon by another life. All of his other lives, colliding here, a cataclysm, an impending death. A mortal death. His mortal death.

He trips up the steps to the guesthouse. The quilt lain upon the bed is soft beneath him. He shuts his eyes, fists his hands in the coverlet, and tries to anchor himself to the earth. Breathes out and banishes all thought, as long as he possibly can.

The quiet does not last.

Thor’s voice echoes in the hollows of his skull. He sees Asgard, rising from the dark behind his lids - the pitching sea under a star-speckled sky, a garden with white and gold tiled paths, a mage’s library nested high upon a spire, so high that he can look down and see the main courtyard before the palace, the sparring ring to the west, the stretch of rainbow bridge.

The courtyard is empty, as is the sparring ring. No one comes down the bridge, or in and out of the palace. Asgard is empty of people, blessedly silent. Even the sea is muffled, waves breaking soundless against the stone beaches.

Lukas turns back from the view, adjusts his seat in the cushioned chair. The mage’s cuffs he wears are bright in the dim, gilded, rather than silver like the rest of the apprentices. A concession to his title.

A consultant. You’re a consultant. Lukas frowns at the thought, the peculiar word. He takes a deep breath through his nose and is distracted by the scent, the air filled with incense. Sweet and fragrant, rich with pine and the musk of willow-fly blossoms, the salt tang of the rim-ocean. It smells like home, and his tense shoulders relax.

Roseanne reclines in the mahogany chair across from him. He remembers that chair. The Head Mage’s study. Lukas had attended her at this very desk when he was at the Academy of Mysteries.

“Sweetheart, I need you to talk to me.”

His tongue is thick in his throat. “The theory is sound,” he argues. That was what this had been about - Lukas knows the Head Mage had disagreed with him. Interrealm travel. She hadn’t believed the gates he’d designed were stable enough to use. “I did the calculations myself.”
“I understand,” Roseanne answers. He shakes his head, wrong-footed.

“But you disagreed. They - they disagreed.”

“Is that why you left?”

Left? He’s in Asgard. The Sky Spire rises against the glimmer of the emerald nebula, outside of the arched windows. He had been reading there this afternoon.

“Tell me, hon. Did they exile you for your theories?” Her voice is soft, patient. “They never did appreciate magecraft. Forever mired in their own cowardice. Too afraid to strive for greatness.”

No, no, there was a bridge. I fell. I let go. He didn't catch me. Lukas’s mind is muddled. He fell, but he is in Asgard now, sitting across from the Head Mage. Roseanne.

“You are not supposed to be here.” The conviction is unearthed from the depths of his subconscious. Wrong, his thoughts whisper. Wrong.

“But that what they told you? Is that why you left, little mage?” Roseanne leans forward. There are red runes painted across the line of her cheekbones.

“I knew it,” he says slowly. “I knew I did not belong here. They did not tell me, but I knew.”

“It is the practice of the throne of Asgard to cast out those who disagree with them.” Her lips twist. “Those they scorn. Those they consider inferior. Even Odin’s own children are not safe from his hypocrisy.”

I am not Odin’s child. And Thor was not cast out, not truly. The return path was laid for him before he travelled to Midgard. There was no path for Lo - Lukas.

Any potential words in this direction die upon his lips. Instead - “He didn’t cast me out. I fell.”

She muses, hand to her chin. “Did you?”
Lukas clutches the arms of his chair. “I don’t know,” he tries to whisper. It comes out garbled, indecipherable.

“My prince,” she says. His mind spins, disjointed. “Why did you leave Asgard?”

Her eyes flash up to him. The tawny, golden brown color glows in the soft light of the torches, mouth twisted up cruelly.

_Brown._ Roseanne’s eyes are blue. Pale, ice blue, eyes that used to remind him of snow-covered plains and a raw, aching loss, and now instead call back to something even more dangerous. A childhood, a past deeply buried.

Her eyes are brown and apprehension grips his limbs, melding him to the chair in which he sits. “Who are you?” Lukas whispers.

“A mage. Like you.” Her white hair lies across one shoulder in a many-layered braid. “An exile. Also like you, I believe.”

He glances down, and sees a ring upon his finger. A golden band, constricting ever tighter.

_This is not possible. I warded the Ring of Andvari myself... _And then handed it over to Coulson. To S.H.I.E.L.D. This cannot be the actual Ring.

If the Ring is an illusion, then so is the room. The Head Mage’s study, the starfires of the nebulae outside the window, his own gilded collar and embroidered tunic. Head Mage _Isli_, he remembers.

Roseanne, clad in Æsir robes and reclining in the chair across from him, now strikes a discordant note, off-key. “A dream,” he says, as she stares at him. “You have walked into my dream.”

A catlike smile uncurls on her face. She looks less and less like Roseanne with every moment. Golden-brown eyes narrow at him. “And you let me,” the woman tells him. “Forgetting within your mortal skin. Careless of you, child.”
He pulls sharply on his *seidr*, tightening the weave around himself. Sleeping loosens the mind, lets the thoughts unspool, the magic seep out, into realms unseen, imperceptible during the waking hours. Not that his mind had been particularly guarded before he fell asleep. Careless is one word. Complacent is another.

There are workings to guard against dream thieves and wandering. One is carved into the headboard above his bed in Asgard. He hadn’t thought to deface Roseanne’s wall replacing it. Hadn’t needed to, until he’d seen the Tesseract, felt the space within.

Something in that space had clearly felt him. His fingers shape a rune of banishment.

The study shatters apart, cracks crawling across the stone, splitting the walls, black streaks of lightning shooting through the illusion. Lukas focuses on the boundary between his mind and the space beyond, yanking every part of himself back inside before he squeezes all the holes closed.

The woman with the red-painted runes on her cheek watches, unsmiling now. The Ring twists on his finger, so tight he cannot escape it, and painful, like it is anchoring the whole of his body there, taking all of its weight.

He pulls against it. The Ring tugs back, or the woman, and he falls forward as the floor dissipates beneath him.

Struggling to shore up the shield of *seidr* around his mind, Lukas closes his eyes. He can feel the rush of air, the fingers of the Void, snatching at his clothing, his ankles, pulling at his hair. *Falling, again, always falling.*

This is a nightmare, he tells himself. No more. His mouth tastes like rust, or old blood, and he resists the urge to spit. That is the woman - her *seidr* manifesting as a sensory experience, a way for him to interpret the foreign magic that is invading his skull.

He does spit, then, and at the same time lets his own power flare, burning out the shadows. Pain splits him in two, an axe strike to the temple, but he succeeds. The metallic taste vanishes, the scent of ancient blood evaporates.

He’s still falling.
Opening his eyes as wide as they can go, Lukas glances around, frantic to make out a shape in the consuming blackness. There is nothing. He screws them shut again.

“Wake up,” he commands. A dark wind blows his hair against his face. “Wake up!”

When he was young, and trapped by terrors within his own head, someone was there to wake him. To shake his shoulders, brush fingers across his brow. Murmur softly in his ear, *Loki, Loki, I am here. You are well.*

Tears spring to line his lower lashes. He tries to bury the haunting voice, that voice, so familiar, not so strange, tries to banish the phantom touch.

The fingers tangle in his hair. Warm breath on his cheek. “Loki,” the voice says. “All is well. I am here.”

His back is flat on something soft. A blanket is around his knees, kicked away. The person next to him taps him on the forehead. “Wake up, Loki.”

He opens his eyes. The blond child is curled up on top of the covers, head resting on the same pillow as his own. “You were having a nightmare,” Thor says, his eyes an unwavering blue. “But you don’t have to be scared anymore. I’m here, Loki.”

A sob catches in his throat. “Leave,” he begs the child. “Just go.”

“I won’t leave you.”

“Thor,” he whispers. The name fractures within him, like an impact, radiating pain. “Go.”

“Why?” the child asks.

“Because I hate you.” Water leaks onto the silk pillowcase they share.

Thor smiles and it is blinding. “Loki,” he laughs. “You’re such a liar.”
He rips apart the dream, slashes it open with a scream that scalds his throat. The bedroom is no more, the child is long dead. Both of them. He stares up at the low plaster ceiling of a mortal house and promises the ghosts in his mind, “I am not Loki. My name is Lukas Eld.”

He turns on his side, presses his cheek into the cotton pillowcase. It is wet.
From the comments on MH Dispatch Worldwide, a forum dedicated to tracking people with metahuman abilities:

fthisbullsht:

Oh so now we’re worshipping them

acheronislive:

You’re missing the point here. I’m not saying metahumans are gods - I’m saying they are a reincarnation of those old powers. The universe is cyclical. Someone said that in an earlier comment and I totally agree with them. We used to worship beings with special powers as gods. Their power made sense in that context, for past humans. But now we’ve moved on, as a society. We don’t need gods. We don’t need concepts like worship and devotion. But we still need a word to describe the power that these people hold.

hediN209:

yeah i get what your saying. metahuman is kinda the word were looking for but not quite. they’re like neo-gods.
fthisbullsht:

this has nothing to do with the goddamn universe. its evolution. yall r goin wild with this shit n im not in for the cult vibes

acheronislive:

Oh so you can lift things three times your body weight? You can emit glowing radiation from your hands?
You’re literally ignoring everything i’m saying. This isn’t some cult shit. I’m acknowledging the fact that people with incredible powers exist. Maybe this has always happened. Cycles. And in this most recent cycle, we’re no longer calling them gods, but metahumans. That’s it. That’s my entire point.

fthisbullsht:

this hasn’t happened before. there are no cycles. time is a progression. i bet u believe in the multiverse theory too. And essential oils. Jesus

hediN209:

Dont be an asshole

fthisbullsht:

oh ok they’re talking about gods actually being metahumans and disrespecting ppl’s religious beliefs but im the asshole ok

acheronislive:

It’s a theory. I’m allowed to talk about my theories and if you don’t like it get off this forum. You’re not contributing anything constructive here.

fthisbullsht:

Yeah you’re allowed to talk about your theories but this is a free country and im allowed to call u out on your stupidity

hediN209:

get out of ur moms basement and get a fuckin life bottomfeeder
fthisbullsht:

*You give metahumans this platform & they will for sure take advantage of it thats all im sayin.*

*lmao. no need to get so butthurt. beep me when the first metahuman starts claiming they’re a god & try to start a church & they want you to donate ur money. its gonna happen. & you sad mfers will be the ones doin it. Peace out & suck on a lemon*

acheronislive:

*God I hate the internet sometimes.*

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**LVIII**

Raina is wearing S.H.I.E.L.D.-issue sweatpants. Something petty that lives deep in Coulson’s stomach is gratified by this. “Looking good, Detainee Number Three Thousand Seventy Nine.”

Raina tilts her head. “You knew my size. Should I be charmed, or worried?”

“I’d prefer intimidated and willing to cooperate.” Coulson sits down on the other side of the table. He didn’t bother bringing a manila folder. No victim pictures, none of the physical evidence. They know what she’s done, and she’s well aware. And not the type to be stung with remorse.

“Well, that depends.” Raina smiles. “What do you want?”

“Your supplier.”
“How very lowbrow of you, Coulson. Following the money.” She blinks almond-shaped eyes at him. “Not all of us are so constrained by material possessions. I let the universe furnish what I need. I trust in powers higher than humanity.”

He barely acknowledges the New Age bullshit she’s spouting. “Let me know when the universe starts accepting cash or credit. In the meantime, tell me who your supplier is.”

“Or what?”

There’s that feeling of being a school principal again. Coulson didn’t miss it. He glances down and sighs. Then tries another tack.

“I could take a leaf out of your book.” Raina’s expression is blank. With a hint of vitriol, Coulson clarifies. “What you did to Agent Morris. To the doctor you kidnapped, Dr. Flagretti.”

“You could,” she agrees. “Though I fear that would reveal more about you than me.” Raina arches one brow in a challenge.

“Did they fight you?” Coulson presses. “When you forced the Ring on them?”

“The doctor did. Stubborn one. That agent of yours, though…” She laughs. “He only trembled.”

Raina taps her fingers against the table. “Eld, on the other hand. That masochistic bastard seemed to enjoy it. At first.”

The last thing Coulson wants Raina fixating on is Eld. Those two seem to be a volatile mix. “And what would you do, I wonder?”

Her eyes are dark. “If you used the ring on me? I’d tell you the truth, I expect. And I’m sure you wouldn’t want that. Too many listening ears.” She looks to the one-sided mirror.

He lets that pass without comment. There’s no one back there who doesn’t know. About the
Tesseract weapons. Only Roberts, and May. Lukas Eld was supposed to attend, but with the recent enmity between him and Raina… not to mention what Roberts had told him about her visit to the old woman’s house.

Still, some things are better left unsaid for now. A lot of potential complications. “Let’s talk about this ring. It isn’t yours. You didn’t make it. You couldn’t. So where’d you get it?”

“It was entrusted to me.” Such a statement could be worrying, but she follows it up with, “By higher powers. You wouldn’t understand.”

“The universe again?” The derisiveness in his voice isn’t faked.

“Humanity is a stepping stone. There is so much more.” Raina folds her hands delicately in her lap. The chains around her wrists clink together. “That’s the difference between you and me, Coulson. You’re trapped in the mortal realm. The lowest order. Whereas I… I can see the future clearly. The path to ascension.”

“Is that why you’re trying to recreate the serum? Is that your path to ascend?”

Trying being the operative word. Skye had dug into their system, when they’d raided Centipede’s base. Simmons had sifted through their reports. Raina’s people are making advances, but they don’t have anything like the serum that turned Steve Rogers into Captain America. Thank god they’d gotten Dr. Flagretti out of there before Raina had squeezed out all the information she could.

The woman is serene, calm across the table. “We need to be strong. It’s the way forward, to become what we are meant to be. To meet our destiny.”

“The universe? Destiny? Next you’ll be giving me my horoscope.” Coulson shakes his head. “I never took you for a mystic.”

“Narrow minds. That’s what has always held S.H.I.E.L.D. back from greatness. So focused on your trivial concerns that you can’t see the bigger picture. Striking off one enemy’s head and letting another flourish.” She smirks.

Coulson decides to needle her. “I’m a Libra, by the way. If you were wondering.”
“You’re funny,” Raina tells him indulgently. “It’s a pity you’ll be culled with the rest of the unworthy when we ascend.”

For the first time in days, Coulson thinks of the short-lived supersoldier. The one who’d died, gurgling, poisoned by his own blood, a victim of Centipede’s attempts at ascension. The disappointment and relief mingled in Steve Rogers’ face. Dr. Flagretti has his body at her temporary medical facility in Manhattan. No one’s quite decided what to do with it.

“If your path is the way to ascend, I think I’m just fine down here in the lowest order.” Coulson shakes his head. “And I have to say, I’m glad Eld found your little hiding place.”

Raina pauses, searching his expression. “He didn’t find it. More like stumbled in, when I was in the middle of a business meeting. I wouldn’t call that particularly clever.”

“I don’t mean your personal weapons convention at the warehouse by the river.” It’s not completely relevant, but Coulson does want to see her face when she realizes how easily Eld had recovered the ring. “Centipede’s base,” he reminds her. “Where you stashed the ring.”

She tilts her head. “Are you trying to be cryptic, or are you just confused?”

“Eld found your precious ring, Gollum.” Raina rolls her eyes. He continues, knowing he sounds just a touch too self-satisfied and not able to hide it. “Where you hid it, in the cell you’d kept Dr. Flagretti.”

Her annoyance vanishes. A giggle escapes her throat. Coulson watches her. There is no effort to hide her amusement. It’s not a cover for resentment. No anger or disdain twists her features. “Hid it?” she asks. “Oh, that sneak. I would never have hidden it. I tried to take it with me, of course. Until Lukas Eld stole it away.”

“He -” Coulson stops.

“Yes, you heard me correctly. Eld hunted me down, assaulted me, and then stole the ring while I lay bleeding on the floor. And then lied about it.” She hums. “I had thought that was strange. Giving up the ring to S.H.I.E.L.D. But now I understand. It was a ploy to gain your trust.”
Swallowing, Coulson struggles to meet her gaze. Like this isn’t a revelation. As if there had been no trick, no misdirection.

“But you can’t trust him. You know that, don’t you?”

“However he did it... he helped us catch you,” Coulson settles on, grasping. “I’d say that’s a point in his favor.”

“Don’t play the fool. It doesn’t suit you,” she says, her dark eyes cold. “He shouldn’t be here. He’s dangerous.”

“A bit hypocritical, don’t you think?” His palms are slick and clammy.

“And you’re being a bit naive.”

“Lukas Eld is a consultant for S.H.I.E.L.D. He made a pledge to us. That means something. You wouldn’t understand.” Coulson holds on to this. So Eld lied. That’s the currency S.H.I.E.L.D. works with. Everyone he knows is a spy. Everyone he knows lies, at some point.

Raina leans forward, slow. Her gaze is calculating, her posture tense and ready, almost predatory. “You know, don’t you?” she asks softly. “About Eld? And what he can do.”

“What about him?” Coulson says. The muscles in his back ache from his own rigidity.

“He’s not one of us,” she hisses, tugging at her cuffs. “His power...”

Now that’s something to dig into. “Why, I’m surprised, Raina. I thought you were all for the great evolution of the human race. Or is that just rhetoric?”


“Then why reject Eld from your future? If he can do whatever you imagine.”
She darts a glance at his face from under her lashes. “Why… indeed.”

Raina suddenly stretches, all but reclining in her metal chair. Coulson watches, his throat dry. “So you don’t know,” she drawls. “Not really.”

He makes a noise of disgust, low in his throat. “We’re back to the same old schtick, then. You always have to know more than all of us combined. It’s transparent insecurity.”

“Oh, but I have seen him. Pathetic, lost creature. Falling and falling, reaching out to stop the inevitable descent and only succeeding in tearing down everything around him. He’ll pull you down, too.” Her voice grows harsh by the end, rasping and edged with malice.

Coulson stands and pushes his chair back. He’s nearly at the door when Raina speaks again. “Perhaps you should ask your pet prince of thunder.”

He stops in his tracks. How did she know? Someone must have let it slip. She’s been in holding the entire time since Thor arrived.

The question comes unwillingly. “What do you mean?”

“The great Thor knows a thing or two about secrets in his midst.”

Coulson wrenches the door handle harder than he means to. He doesn’t like the idea of being in the dark.

“Haven’t you heard?” She calls after him, taunting. “There are traitors in the House of Odin.”

He pushes the door shut behind him.

Roberts is waiting in the hall. “What did she mean?” she asks, blunt and straightforward.
“I don’t know.”

“Do you think - what Mrs. Franklin said…”

The old lady likes to talk, Roberts had told him when she got back to the Helicarrier from her trip to Virginia. Roseanne Franklin was sweet and accommodating and chattered like a hen. Most of what she’d said had corroborated Eld’s story. He works at the museum, he’s a historian, he came from the UK. But when she was making the third cup of tea, Brenna told Coulson, she’d mentioned how glad she was to see Lukas happy. That she’d often worried someone was going to come looking for him, that she knew he was afraid of being found. Roseanne had been glad he was finally adjusting, no longer jumping at shadows.

Coulson frowns at the steel flooring. Brenna hesitates, shuffling her feet. He waves her on and she blurts out words like she’s been choking on them. “I just - I know it’s crazy, but… I’ve been thinking. We don’t know where the ring came from. We don’t know how Raina got it. But Eld knows it. He knows it. He told us not to use it. He told us how dangerous it was. And he’s running from something, hiding from something… and he doesn’t want to see Thor.”

That jolts him. “You think - he stole the ring from one of Thor’s people?”

“I don’t know! I don’t see how. I just… he makes me question everything I’ve ever known to be true.” Brenna squeezes her eyes shut. “I thought I finally understood. When we found out he was a metahuman. I thought I finally knew what he was hiding. But what Raina said makes it clear that we don’t have any real idea who he is.”

Eld showed up two years ago in this country, without explanation and with a fake name, apparently running scared. The ring showed up a while ago, indeterminate, but long enough that Raina found it and learned how to use it.

“It’s not a theory that I like, but it’s one that I can’t discount out of hand,” Coulson admits. “We need more information.”

“Well, Eld is back on the Helicarrier,” Roberts mutters. “So we’ll get our chance, I bet.”

“When did he get back?”
“An hour or so ago. He came on Captain Rogers’ transport. Everyone’s in the lab. I think Tony Stark wanted to see Eld’s device.”

“It’s done?” This was news to Coulson.

“That’s what I heard.”

Coulson’s started walking before she finishes her sentence. Brenna’s theory rattles around in his head. Something is off with it, something is wrong in her conclusions. Nothing he can pinpoint precisely. And he can’t help but see Raina’s smug face. So you don’t know. Not really.

The lab door slides open with their approach. Stark glances up, as does Eld. Fitz and Simmons wave at them. Tony quickly ducks back down, ignoring them, focused on what’s in front of him. Eld’s gaze lingers. His eyes are deeply shadowed. There is no hint of a smile on his face.

“He knows, doesn’t he?” Brenna says under her breath.

“That you were at his house? I think so.”

She seems to find that blank spot on the wall remarkably fascinating. “He’s angry.”

“He couldn’t have expected any different,” Coulson argues. She doesn’t seem placated. “You were doing your job, Agent Roberts. You have nothing to be ashamed of.” They enter the lab. Eld’s device sits in the middle of the almost comically mismatched group.

Stark tilts his head at a ridiculous angle. “Looks like an egg, don’t it?”

Barton hums his agreement. “Yeah. But, like - from a robot chicken.”

“Who would make a robot chicken?” Fitz asks, leaning forward to get a better look. “I mean. Robots don’t eat, so they wouldn’t make a robot chicken. And we couldn’t eat a robot chicken. And to have functional reproductive systems - it seems so unnecessarily complicated.”
The archer shoots Fitz a look. “Unlike your thought process?”

“Well, you can’t just say things like robot chicken, without being prepared to defend your reasoning as to their existence.”

“How come there’s gotta be a reason? Maybe I just like chickens. And robots. Although - ” A suddenly thoughtful expression comes over Clint Barton’s face. “Could be cool to see ‘em fight. You know, without any real chickens gettin’ killed.”

“Are we assuming these robot chickens haven’t gained consciousness - ” Stark breaks in, but Coulson has had enough.

“I thought you were working on the distortions.”

“We are,” Stark protests.

“And that’s your plan? We’re building an army of robot chickens?” Coulson flicks a glance at Fitz. “Next time, don’t let him sneak in any Redbull.”

The kid sputters. “Mr. Stark said it was his medicine - ”

“It’s my brain juice,” the billionaire says. “Just a splash of Redbull with my vodka in the morning and I’m raring to go.”

Clint shoots him a sideways look. “And here I thought I was fucked up.”

Coulson sighs. “I’m going take a wild guess and assume no progress has been made on the distortions.”


The consultant narrows his eyes. “Yes?”
“If these distortions are portals, how come nothing has come through?”

“Well,” Barton coughs. “Um.”

“The alien panther thing in Mexico.” Steve pipes up, and Coulson blinks over. He hadn’t even seen him, leaning over his knees in a chair by the wall. He seems surprised when someone hears him, and his cheeks tint pink. Coulson presumes this is the first time he’s been able to get a word in edgewise.

“Alien panther?” Tony raises an eyebrow. “Has someone been hitting the brain juice over there?”

Steve stands, unfolding to his full height. Stark has to look up and doesn’t seem happy about it.

Simmons nods. “He’s right. We think it came through a distortion.” She glances at Eld.

“So there’s at least two aliens on Earth right now,” Stark summarizes. “A panther thing and a handsome blond thing. That brings me to my next question. How did the handsome blond thing get here? Through a distortion?”

“No,” Coulson answers. “The first time - it was some kind of colorful wormhole.”


“I dunno about you, but this is the first I’ve ever worked with interdimensional portals,” Stark says. “Do we know that the colorful wormhole isn’t a distortion too?”

Simmons hums thoughtfully. “How does Thor open the wormhole?”

“And did he happen to leave a manual lying around?” Tony babbles. “Does he - I dunno, wave his hammer around and smash a hole in the universe so he can fly through screaming Yeahhhhhhhhh like the hunky Viking version of the Koolaid man?”
Lukas Eld stares at Stark like he’s something pulled off the bottom of one perfectly shined shoe. “Wave his hammer around? Smash a hole in the universe? Hunky - Koolaid man?” He turns to Coulson. “And why did you tell me this man was a genius?”

“Ha! I knew you thought I was smart, Coulson.” Tony shoots him with a couple of finger-guns. “And as for you, O High And Mighty One, at least I’m throwing around some practical theories. You’ve given us jack squat.” Tony throws up his hands. “Thor pops up on Earth round the same time these distortions do. Just sayin’.”

As Eld popped up when the ring did. All circumstantial. It’s enough to make Coulson want to bash his head into the bulletproof glass of the windows. “We need clarification. Someone get Thor here,” he says.

“Thor’s not on the Helicarrier,” Simmons reports.

“What? Where is he?”

“He said he was going to take a look around.” Fitz shrugs. “Then he flew off the upper deck.”

“Take a look around what?” Steve asks.

Simmons scrunches up her nose. “Earth, I guess.”

“Can we get a hold of him?” Coulson says.

“He doesn’t have a phone,” Fitz tells him.

Tony Stark puts his hands together in a mimicry of prayer. “Please hear us now, Thunder God! Hear our plea and deliver us from evil!” He waits a moment, then snaps his eyes open. “Looks like his voicemail box is full.”

“When he gets back here, I want to talk to him. Shouldn’t be too much of a wait. How long can he
fly around, anyway?” Coulson’s not expecting an answer, but this does spark a debate between Stark and Fitz that he does he best to shut down quickly.

“You’re welcome to ask, but I wouldn’t bet on either of you getting a look at his hammer.” Coulson glances to Eld, who has been uncharacteristically quiet. “Will you show your device to everyone when Thor gets back?”

Eld blinks rapidly, seeming to take a few seconds to come back to the present moment. “There is nothing to show. The device is ready. I have only to activate it, which I can do when the right power source is in the vicinity. Once activated, it will alert us automatically when it senses any portal energies forming.”

That’s not the answer that Coulson is looking for. He tries to be more direct. “Okay. That’s great. Will you stick around a while and ask Thor how he accomplishes interdimensional travel? I think you’d be the best guy for the job, seeing as you already know all this stuff about portals.”

Lukas all but radiates reluctance. “I know little more than your Agents Simmons and Fitz here. They will be just as effective.”

He’s stalling. Brenna was right. He doesn’t want to meet Thor. “You got somewhere else to be?” Coulson asks, pointed.

Eld’s jaw tightens just a fraction. “Yes, actually. I am only here to consult, remember? I do have other responsibilities that I have been neglecting while I opted to help you and your organization.”

Stark is studying him intently. He’s the one to finally come out and say it. “I don’t get it. You don’t wanna meet the guy who literally inspired the myths and legends you based your entire career on? I thought you’d be jumping at the chance.”

“I have no need to meet him. He only inspired the legends, he did not create them, nor did he have any direct influence on how they evolved throughout the years or how they affected culture and society. That is my area of study.”

“But aren’t you curious?” Stark presses.

“Of course,” Lukas grudgingly admits.
“What then—are you afraid of his big metal hammer?”

Eld does not respond immediately. He shakes his head, huffs his breath. There is no cringing. No trembling.

But something in his whole posture speaks of hesitation. His eyes move, not settling on anything, seeming almost to dart to the sky and then back down. His fingers twitch against his black pant leg.

Stark’s eyes flash with comprehension, and he speaks in tune with Coulson’s thoughts. “You are,” he says. “You are.”

Anger brings a flush to the consultant’s cheeks. Stark heads him off before he can bite any words out. “No! I get it! I really do. The guy could crush us like bugs if he wanted.” Stark shrugs. “But he says he’s here to help.”

“It is not that I don’t believe he believes in his good intentions,” Eld says, each word clipped. “The legends I study are not borne of nothing, as you say. I know well his power, as the rest of you do not. I am simply wary of how he may wield it, as you should be. As your entire organization should be. He threatens you all by merely setting foot on this realm.”

“He’s here to offer us an alliance,” Brenna Roberts breaks in. “That’s what he said. He’s not here to threaten us.”

“He is the prince of a powerful alien civilization,” Eld says. “Everything he does has more weight to it because of this fact. He could mark this planet as a target by his simple presence. Or - were something to befall him, here on Earth, you could very well become the enemies of Asgard.”

None of that is incorrect. “What would you have us do?” Coulson says, irritation poking at him like he’s sat in a patch of nettles. “Turn him away?”

“Yes,” Lukas snaps. “Ideally, yes. Send him back where he came from.”

They’re on the brink of a full-blown argument, and Coulson refuses to do this in front of a crowd. “Get back to work,” he barks at his agents. “Stark, the distortions. Fitz, Simmons, help him. Barton
- I don’t even know what you do half the time, but go and do that.”

Brenna stubbornly remains at his side while the others file out. Stark pretends to tiptoe past Coulson. He resists the urge to trip the billionaire. Soon it’s just them and Eld. And Captain America, who stands with his arms folded. Coulson can’t bring himself to order Steve out.

“What’s the problem?” Coulson demands. “C’mon. Out with it.”

“You’re mad that we talked to your landlady,” Brenna says before Eld can speak. “That we tried to dig into your little secrets. Well, tough. It’s part of the job.” It’s an admirable effort to disguise her guilt, Coulson thinks.

“Oh, forgive me for being upset that you barged into my residence and interrogated an old woman who has no knowledge of my being associated with S.H.I.E.L.D.” He makes a sound of exasperation in the back of his throat. “I did not realize that becoming a consultant would require an absolute invasion of my privacy and a disruption of my life.”

Steve is frowning behind Eld’s shoulder. Coulson doesn’t know what Eld told him, but it was surely biased against S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Secrets don’t work in an environment like this,” he tells Eld sternly. “I need to be able to know the people I work with. Trust them. Understand them. S.H.I.E.L.D. has a big job to do. I can’t be second-guessing my team.” He chews on his lip for a moment before he decides to say it. “For example. I’d like to know whether or not my consultant really happened to find the ring that Raina hid. Or whether he planted it there to be found after taking it off her.”

“I see,” Eld says, stiffly. “Now you’re taking the word of a proven kidnapper over my own. That is comforting.”

“I’m not taking her word,” Coulson argues. “I’m asking you directly about what she said. Was she lying? If she was, fine. If she wasn’t, then you let me go into an interrogation and be blindsided by a suspect. This is what I mean - we can’t afford these kinds of secrets.”

“And what of your secrets, Agent Coulson?” Eld asks, low, almost a growl.

“What?”
“Surely you do not want them bandied about carelessly for anyone to hear.” Lukas leans forward, his irises bright as emerald fire. Coulson wonders if he’s doing that on purpose. Reflecting the light.

Raina had mentioned his power. She’d seemed - not frightened, exactly, but wary. He’s more convinced than ever that Eld is holding out on them. How much, though. That’s the question.

“I wasn’t going to post your secrets on Facebook, Mr. Eld.” He sighs. “Your past may contain a potential security risk. I’m doing my duty by investigating it.”

“You agents do have a curious definition of risk,” Eld says sharply. “A person’s dead past qualifies, but tinkering about with objects of power is perfectly alright.”

Something twists, low in Coulson’s gut. He has a sudden premonition of Eld’s next words. *He’ll pull you down, too.*

“The Tesseract is not to be handled lightly, Agent Coulson.”

Steve’s head whips around so fast his neck cracks. “The Tesseract?” he demands, the ends of his words clipped and sharp. “S.H.I.E.L.D. has the Tesseract?”

“I - ” There’s no way he can finish that sentence without tripping and falling into a trap of some kind.

“Wait…” Steve rests two fingers on his temple, leans the weight of his head on his hand. Coulson has to look away from Captain Rogers’ face as he continues speaking.

“The weapons - Raina stole them - from S.H.I.E.L.D.? You were developing weapons from the Tesseract?”

He won’t deny it. It’s the truth, and anyway, Coulson doesn’t believe it was wrong. The fact that Raina was able to steal them is appalling, and embarrassing, yes. And, of course, he hadn’t wanted Captain Rogers to find out. A touchy subject, what with Johann Schmidt, and how Hydra handled the Cube.
“Not all of us can use a shield, Captain,” Coulson finally says. “We’re building an arsenal for defense. Of the human race. To protect people.”

Steve’s response is quiet and controlled. “S.H.I.E.L.D. is doing exactly what Hydra was doing. Taking the Tesseract’s power and forging weapons from it.”

Coulson meets his gaze and realizes there is no convincing Steve. His jaw is set, pushing his chin stubbornly outward.

Agent Coulson had read internal reports - from back when S.H.I.E.L.D. wasn’t S.H.I.E.L.D., but the SSR. Reports from wartime commanders, with their blunt complaints about Captain America’s reluctance to follow orders alongside their commendations of his actions. Memos alluding to the futility of getting Captain Rogers to do something he doesn’t want to do. Operation set to proceed - though likelihood of success remains extremely low given opposition’s tactics - disrupting the chain of command - including but not limited to barging into General’s tent while he’s sleeping and shouting about casualties loud enough to wake entire barracks - will report after first stage has commenced.

Captain Rogers isn’t shouting now, but Coulson feels distinctly wrong-footed, as the General in that memo must have felt, like he’s been woken too soon and unexpectedly come face to face with an immovable wall colored in red white and blue.

“Agree to disagree,” he manages.

Steve does not like that answer. “I died to stop the Tesseract from being exploited. To stop civilians from losing their lives.” He leans forward. “I took that plane into the water to end a war, and S.H.I.E.L.D. is doing its damned best to start one up again.”

Coulson feels that as a gut punch. Captain America’s sacrifice is the benchmark by which he measures his own morality. *Am I willing to die to defend this?* That question knocks around in his head, when it’s quiet in the Helicarrier. *Would I be strong enough, to give my life if it were necessary?*

He doesn’t know the answer. How he would react, in a certain situation. But he knows how Steve Rogers would respond. Has responded. Which is why Coulson holds him in the highest esteem, and why it seems like his spine in contracting inward with every syllable from the Captain’s mouth, crunching down, rendering him smaller and smaller, less and less.
“We’re protecting civilians,” Coulson argues.

“From what I understand, one civilian is already dead at the hands of these weapons,” Steve shoots back. “A bystander to a robbery. If it had been a gunshot, he might have survived.”

“And we apprehended those responsible. We recaptured the weapons. We stopped the operation that was selling them. We have this under control.”

Steve flings his arms out. “Clearly, S.H.I.E.L.D. isn’t in control, if you allowed Raina to steal your weapons! And then - and then you didn’t even notice that she had.” He huffs. “Tell me - do you even know how she got ahold of them?”

There is nothing to say to that. He won’t admit his ignorance, not out loud. S.H.I.E.L.D. is working on it. They will find out how.

Steve’s face is grim. “I’m not going to agree. At all,” he declares. “Having the biggest arsenal isn’t a defense. It’s ruling with fear. Putting a weapon to an enemy’s head and telling him to back down, because you’re holding the better gun. You really think that’s gonna stop anyone who is determined? It’s temporary. All short-term.”

His shoulders sag, those clear blue eyes looking down and his words coming quietly. “I’m not gonna agree with anything less than S.H.I.E.L.D.’s firm commitment to destroying these weapons and never attempting to create anything using the Tesseract’s power again.”

“That, I think, is wise,” Eld puts in.

Coulson glares across the table at him.

Lukas simply points his nose in the air. “My official position as S.H.I.E.L.D.’s consultant is that the Tesseract is an astonishingly dangerous alien object, and, as such, should not be interfered with.” His eyes seem to lose focus. “With untold power… connecting that which should not be connected…” His voice grows soft, trails off, face suddenly somber. “Dangerous,” Lukas finally repeats.
A dangerous alien object. Like the one Eld stole from Raina. Maybe even stole from Thor’s people to begin with. A spike of paranoia pierces him through the chest. Is that what this was about? Eld maneuvering himself into place, getting close, near enough to lay hands on the Tesseract too…

But he’d given the ring to S.H.I.E.L.D. Coulson bites the inside of his cheek. Raina’s words are digging into his brain. That’s most likely what she wanted. He can’t figure it out. What does Eld want?

“Then what about your metal egg pod - uh, robot chicken… device thing?” Roberts challenges him. “Isn’t that supposed to use the Tesseract to sense any distortions opening?”

The consultant taps the egg-shaped device, sitting on its one flat end. “This isn’t a weapon. And it’s not drawing on the Tesseract’s power to fuel itself, it is only making use of what is already there, the potentiality of the cube’s infinite existence.”

“And we’re taking your word for that,” she says flatly.

Eld stiffens. As does Coulson, for different reasons, he’s sure.

If he could just figure it out - why Eld is here, what he’s doing, what does he want -

The consultant notices Coulson’s gaze dart to the pod device. Silence stretches between them, a fine thread, barely tethered.


Lukas Eld stalks out of the room. Captain Rogers looks at Coulson, then Roberts, gives his head a shake, and follows him.

Brenna takes the pod with her when she leaves. “I’ll, uh, I’ll get Fitz and Simmons to take a look.”

Coulson nods, still silent. She hovers by the door. “I’m sure he hasn’t tampered with it.”
“Are you?” he finally says. “I’m not.”

Roberts’ face scrunches into a frown, but she doesn’t add anything else before she slips out.

Coulson remains sitting in the dim, diffuse light of the Helicarrier’s deep interior. And he thinks.

Not about Captain Rogers. He can’t. Not right now, not without a sick feeling low in his stomach. Instead - he thinks about what he’s good at.

As a S.H.I.E.L.D. handler, he’s had to become an expert in logistics. Moving things around where they are needed, and moving people too. People are the hardest part. Getting them to do what you want them to, what they’re supposed to do, or not strictly supposed to. Applying the right amount of pressure. Motivation.

Coulson sits and thinks of Lukas Eld, the way he’d flayed open S.H.I.E.L.D.’s secrets, a sort of petty vengeance for prying into his own. Of Tony’s assertion that Eld is afraid of Thor. What was it Raina had said - *ask your pet prince of thunder.*

Fear is a very successful motivator. Coulson is certain it can work just as well for metahumans as it does for humans. And what is a metahuman to a god? Now there’s somebody he can throw at Eld. Somebody who Coulson’s confident can handle the consultant, and, bonus, isn’t one of his own agents just in case things go bad. Throw at him, and see what happens. See what falls out.

Lukas doesn’t want to meet Thor, which is more than enough for Coulson to decide that’s exactly what has to happen. Even if Eld didn’t steal the ring from an Asgardian. He needs someone to - to just hold Lukas Eld in place, hell, just block the damn exit, while Coulson asks him. *What do you want? Why are you here?*

*Who are you?*

There is something hidden here, and if Coulson’s good at anything, it’s digging up information.
LIX & LX

Chapter Notes

Been working up to this one for a while - really stressed over it!! Hope it's okay :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

LIX

Daybreak, on Midgard

I saw the jotunn today. Well - I saw one of them. Only two survived the attack last night. They have the bigger one bound hand and foot, outside the temple.

I thought I knew what it would look like. I’ve read about Jotunheim. There are only a few books that mention the savage realms in the library, and I’ve read them all. I doubt the authors ever laid eyes upon one. There were fewer tusks and fangs than they described.

Master Alfarr has told me of them. But he does not like to speak of the war, and hurries our lesson on when I try to ask more questions.

Master Tyr loves to speak of the war when he is instructing us in the training yard. Thor would like the stories - they are bloody, dramatic retellings that I suspect are embellished... but he’s moved on, to more advanced techniques and instructors. I am stuck with the younger cohort.

Last week Master Tyr told us of the time a jotunn beast, a female one, stuck its claw through his shoulder. He showed us the scar. I asked him how he survived, and he laughed. He said that he
stuck a dagger in her belly, and ripped out her guts with his free hand. He said she wailed and snarled. He said the most fearsome beasts are the cornered ones, and he barely dug out her claw from his flesh in time to escape. He took the claw home as a prize. He wears it looped round his neck on a leather thong. A piece of the monster that nearly had him, Master Tyr is fond of saying.

I think this beast was male. The one Thor and I saw today. It was freakishly tall, thick and broad and such a strange blue color. There were patterns on its skin, I think - I couldn’t tell what they were, Father wouldn’t let me get too close. He held me at his side the entire audience, like I am an unruly child. Not Thor. Of course not Thor. It was very embarrassing. I only wanted to see the patterns, maybe see if a jotunn’s skin is truly freezing to the touch.

The other is inside the temple, unbound but guarded. Master Tyr grumbles about it, but Father cut him off and said something about the lines on his brow demanding respect. I wonder what these lines look like, what they mean, to have wrought such a storm in Father’s temperament.

That other jotunn didn’t attend the audience. Father went in to question it in private. When he came forth later, he told us that they were fragment of a raiding party. Though he put down Laufey’s Rebellion three centuries ago, the jotnar still attempt to take advantage of the weak humans, from time to time.

The presence of a jotunn on Midgard’s soil violates the terms of Jotunheim’s surrender. Father says he must speak to King Laufey about the fate of the pair. But he will execute them, no doubt. At least the bigger one.

Master Tyr says he must. What else could he do? Just let the beast roam, hunting and slaughtering at its brutal will? That will do no good, Master Tyr says.

I wonder if we will be expected to attend the execution.

It is the duty of the King of Asgard to dispense justice, and as its princes, Thor and I must learn to carry it out.

Thor says he wants to go, but I can’t tell if he was only saying that because we were in front of Master Tyr and the other commanders.

I don’t know - I don’t know if I do.
Loki Odinsson, Prince of Asgard

LX

He does not sleep. Has not slept, for several nights. Dreams have too many doors.

Instead, Lukas barricades himself within. Paves over the thin places that could be mistaken for anything other than mortal. Binds his magic down as tightly as he possibly can, until the air feels empty of oxygen, suffocating.

There will be no more conversations with that witch. Until she looks elsewhere, Lukas can bear the discomfort of being entirely Lukas. Human but for a few sparks that stubbornly remain. It is safer to become him fully, what with the increasing number of otherworldly visitors.

There is no one else. There will be no one else.

Lukas watches the soft currents of cloud from the window as the Helicarrier begins a gentle descent, a slow thousand mile arc towards the ground. A headache drums against his skull. An echo of a vibration, though he can tell it is not from the turbines of the engine - rather, the shift of something much deeper.

The realms.

They have long been locked in ancient orbit, circling round Yggdrasil’s trunk. But this is faster. It feels artificial, almost. As if a hand has reached through the depths of space, grasped at a mountain
The boundaries are weakening in the wake of that unknown force. Which is likely how the witch was able to dreamwalk with such ease into his mind. His seidr fluctuates in strength, and it is difficult to predict how it will interact with the increasing fluidity of geometry.

Perhaps it is the Tesseract that warps the natural orbit of the realms. That is his hypothesis, and one he will not be able to test anytime soon. Until S.H.I.E.L.D. realizes they are hopeless to halt these distortions without his expertise, and forget any pretensions to knowing the useless dead past.

“You look tired.”

That is Steve, from the doorway. His jacket is on, the collar turned up. A bag slung from his shoulder.

“Don’t tell me I am to deal with Stark alone,” Lukas says, his voice nearly a croak from lack of use. He clears his throat.

Steve ducks into the room. He joins Lukas at the window, shoulder to shoulder. “Ah, Natasha’ll keep him reined in, till I get back.”

“From where?”

“I’m taking a helicopter back to Brooklyn.”

“For how long?”

Steve’s face creases, somewhere between a smile and a frown. “Not forever. Just - I need to - I need a break from this. All of this.” He waves a hand, encompassing the hangar to their left, the quinjets, the bulk of the Helicarrier itself. “Fury’s on his way up from DC. I know Coulson probably sent for him. To talk me down, about the Tesseract.”

“And you don’t want that. I admire your dedication. Or should I say, stubbornness.”
Now his lips tilt a fraction more towards a smile. “I’m not admitting to anything.” He rubs a hand over his chin. “But no. I don’t want that. Fury will come in and he’ll be practical. He’ll tell me all the reasons why we should use the Tesseract. He’ll probably have a bullet-point list. And I don’t want to hear it.” He shakes his head. “All this time spent with S.H.I.E.L.D. agents… I feel like I’m losing sight of myself. Of why I joined up.”

“That’s a story I never heard,” Lukas says.

“Really? You might be the only one. I think they made a few movies about it. Wrote up the story and put it in a museum, even.”

“Lucky for me, I’ve a primary source right here.” Lukas gestures with a flourish. “Every historian’s dream.”

“Strange to think of it as history,” he mutters. “I wanted to protect people that couldn’t protect themselves.” Steve’s breath fogs a tiny spot on the window. “S.H.I.E.L.D. wants to protect the lives that they judge have value. They see it all as some grand strategy… and I don’t.”

The worth of an individual life is not something Lukas understands. He listens to Steve and knows, in his deepest heart, that were he to be weighed and measured against the Captain, he would fall short.

It is an eternal knowledge, this lack of density. This hollowness of his soul. A fact that has been with him always, learned alongside the mechanics of walking and the fluency of speech.

And as for a grand strategy - Lukas cannot even trust the paths of the stars, anymore. He is left with just chaos and twisted dreams that he fears will soon come with waking instead of sleeping. Just the Void and not the Void. Dark and light.

“What do you see?” Lukas asks. He wants to be told where the horizon is, by someone he trusts to have a keener, clearer eye.

“All I know,” Steve tells him, “is that if I had been judged a few years ago, by S.H.I.E.L.D.’s arbitrary standards, I might not have made the cut. All I know is that we don’t know the worth of a life. Which means we’ve got to treat all of them as important.”
There is weariness in the set of his broad shoulders. More than just fatigue. It is older, a tired grief, worn smooth by the passage of time, but immovable. It calls to Lukas like a familiar reflection.

He cannot resist plying the Captain with more questions. “In your war, was there truly a man who tried to tame the Tesseract?”

“Yeah. Johann Schmidt. And Hydra.” Steve breathes a long sigh from his nose.

“What happened?” Lukas half-whispers.

“They made weapons, like I said. They took a power they shouldn’t have had and used it to hurt people.”

“I have studied the history of this world,” Lukas reminds him. “And you do not speak alone, but with a thousand voices.”

Steve tilts his head. Touches his breath fog on the glass, and leaves a fingerprint. “We can’t change human nature. But that doesn’t mean we should give people stronger weapons to kill each other. We don’t have to make it easier.”

Lukas concedes with a nod. “I assume you did not make it easy for this Schmidt.”

Steve snorts. “Tried my best. And at the end - when Schmidt held it in his hands… it did something. Disintegrated him. Took him apart, or took him somewhere else. I don’t know. I saw a field of stars…” Steve shakes his head. “We’re not meant to handle it. I know that. I’ve seen what it can do.”

Spontaneous, unwilled transportation. That is power indeed. All magic at its core is tied to a being’s will. To have a portal form undirected seems a fundamental transgression. As if time had spun backward, or the realms had grown still, halted, frozen in their orbits.

_Or, say - if the dance of the realms were to accelerate, gain speed, even collide?_
That primordial vibration resounds in his head again, a great cosmic movement. These distortions that are forming now are not true portals. He has no reason to think so. Just a casualty of the unseen power of the Tesseract. Unless... there is a will directing it. *The witch*, Lukas thinks. It could explain the acceleration of the realms, the spontaneous distortions, the invasion of his dreams.

That information rests on the tip of his tongue. Lukas swallows. He is determined to cast his vision back to earth. To possess only the dream of mortality.

The denial throbs like an old wound, lips sewn shut.

Steve shoots a glance at him. “About the Tesseract… meant to say thanks. For telling me.”

Lukas bites the inside of his cheek. “Yes, of course.”

“It’s okay. I know that’s not why you did it.” Steve nudges him with a shoulder, a friendly motion that catches him off guard, given the words he’s speaking. “Telling me was an unintended consequence to pissing off Coulson. But still. I needed to know. So, thanks.”

He can only nod, and follow the Captain as he walks to the door.

“Don’t do anything crazy while I’m gone,” Steve calls as he retreats down the hallway.

The humor jars him. In his strange, half-awake state, the reply is a beat too long in coming, and just slightly off-kilter. “Oh? Any ideas you’d be willing to share?”

“I dunno - no revealing any more shocking information, I guess.”

A sense of irony sits like a lump of coal at the base of his throat. He can feel the hysteric edge in his voice. “I’ve got plenty of secrets, Captain. Which would you like me to keep?”

Steve hesitates on his path. Lukas thinks he might ask. The idea of his soft concern is unsupportable, now, when all is brittle, fault lines in every direction. But to his relief, Steve peeks out the small porthole window and appears to note the position of the sun. He hefts his bag higher
and speaks while walking backwards. “Well, Clint’s always taking bets on whether or not Fury’s a boxers or briefs man. I’d be glad to let that one stay a mystery.”

“Oh, but I know for certain the only undergarment Fury wears with that getup is a black leather cup.”

If he had the energy, Lukas would wink at the two passing lab technicians who have stopped to gape. Steve tries to stifle his laughter. Waving, he turns the corner.

And then Lukas is alone again. He stares, an afterimage of the Captain imprinted upon his gaze until he blinks. It is absurd, but he feels as if he’s lost his only ally. Left with just the S.H.I.E.L.D. drones. No one left now to advocate for the worth of a life against the Void.

Those drones soon track him down. “Coulson wants you in the conference room on the upper deck,” an agent informs him.

“Why?” he snaps.


Lukas grumbles, but he meanders in that direction. Roundabout. There is nothing he wants to say to Coulson. The damnably perceptive man. Lukas’s tongue is dull and heavy. His skin might well be as transparent as glass, his joints just as fragile. A wave of exhaustion sweeps over him.

He nearly keeps walking when he reaches the appointed meeting place. Agent Roberts is there to catch him, with a curt wave. “Here,” she says.

Coulson stands with Natasha Romanova and Clint Barton, thick as thieves. Lukas drifts in the room, but says nothing. The supervisory agent clears his throat.

“I’ve invited a few potential members of a new initiative that we’re starting here at S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Coulson says. “Captain Rogers, unfortunately, could not attend, but he is on the shortlist as well.”

Natasha glances around. Her lips quirk up. “No Stark?” she asks, a tinge of hope in her voice.
“He’s on the shortlist too, but final approval is still pending. For as long as I can manage it,” Coulson replies with a smirk.

Barton glances around the room. “I thought you said there’d be six of us on this initiative thing, including Stark.”

Lukas counts in his head. Natasha, Barton, the absent Captain. Lukas himself. Tony Stark. That makes five.

“We’re waiting on one more,” Coulson says, casually looking down at his watch.

Foreboding, all spindly-legged and eerie, crawls up Lukas’s spine. Who else on the realm of Midgard could match this group for strength and power?

The door opens.

Thor’s large frame dwarfs the metal entrance. It swishes shut behind him, nearly catching the corner of his bright cape. Thor pulls the fabric away, saving it the ignominy, before he faces the group in the conference room on the upper deck of the Helicarrier.

His vision shivers, almost doubles. Thor, here, in front of him, and Thor, a ghost, a memory. Screwing his eyes shut for a moment, he grasps for Lukas. Holds him so tightly that if there were flesh beneath his palms it would bruise. Tight enough to snap a human’s neck.

Lukas opens them in time to see the realization play out upon Thor’s face. Silent, but shattering. It migrates to his body like a shockwave. First, he stumbles back a step. He drops Mjölnir. The head of the hammer crunches the riveted metal of the floor. Then, Thor lurches forward, and finally halts, frozen with confusion. The white ring around his eyes is visible from this distance.

Lukas wants to look away. He wants it desperately, but Thor commands attention. He always despised that.

Coulson starts to speak, officious, nearly smug. “Everyone, this is Thor. Thor, this is - ”
The man cuts him off by shoving past. “Loki?” he breathes, so quietly.

He had despised that unthinking authority, and despised Thor himself, a constant low-grade fire in his gut that radiated through his chest and mixed with the absolute ache of affection such that he could not tell the difference.

“Not Loki,” he insists, a wish spoken from the depths. “My name is not Loki. I am Lukas Eld.”

The prince halts in his tracks.

Lukas turns on Roberts. “Tell him. Tell him who I am.”

Her gaze flicks wildly between them. “Lukas Eld,” she stutters. “You’re Lukas Eld.”

Thor looks as if he’s taken a brick to the head. Or, worse, as if he’s woken, into a nightmare, surrounded by familiar faces that gaze upon him without recognition.

Lukas grasps at that. Perhaps - an illusion, or, he can say something, anything, to make the mortals believe Thor has lost his wits.

“You have mistaken me for another,” he says, but that is all he manages.

“Lukas Eld is a consultant for S.H.I.E.L.D,” Coulson says, slowly. Not firmly, and with little of the conviction the agent typically brims with.

“He’s been working with us for months,” Natasha adds. Her tone is impenetrable.

Thor doesn’t seem to hear them. He stares at Lukas, his expression like a ragged wound. “I would know you anywhere, Loki, even in death.” He reaches out one hand and the next sentence from his mouth is the softest malediction. “Please, brother.”
The house of cards tumbles beneath Lukas’s feet. He’s falling again, gravity like shackles on his limbs, his mind whirling down, down, down.

He backs away, puts the metal lab bench as a barrier between their bodies.

Thor, as ever, does not adjust his course. Certain of his own purpose. “Your mind is addled - you have forgotten yourself,” he mumbles. “We shall return home and - ”

“No.” The word is ground out between his teeth.

The golden prince of Asgard, there in front of him, present and solid and the distillation of everything he has disavowed. His past, the people he once believed were his, the family he once laid claim to.

Lukas looks to each of the mortals in turn. “Tell him,” he whispers. “Tell him who I am.”

They say nothing, frozen in a watchful tableau, a silent chorus witness to a foreign drama.

“You know me,” he insists. Desperation stifles all his wit. A sudden thought possesses him - that this might truly be a dream and he the dreamer, not Thor. The witch has invaded his mind before, and created for herself a skin of a person known to him.

It was only in speaking to the imitation of Roseanne that he gained the advantage of knowing her deception.

“Have I not done you service?” Lukas says to Coulson. His eyes are the correct color. “Did I not deliver you the Ring you sought and keep to our agreement?”

“You did,” he replies, cautious. “The spirit of it, though decidedly not the letter. As it suited you.”

That response is likewise perfectly in line with Coulson’s temperament. Lukas jumps at this thin proof and decides to make his case, reasonably certain of reality.
“I might not be transparent enough for your taste, but you agree I have proven myself as one with S.H.I.E.L.D.’s best interests in my care. I tell you such that you will remember this not as a debt but rather as an illustration of my credibility. I have been in your country for years. You have known me.” Lukas points at the prince without glancing over. “You have known this man for all of a week. I tell you - ”

The interruption from Thor is not unprecedented. It is unusually quiet, his tone vibrating with something too deep to name. “Is that true?”

He forces himself to look at Thor. A cloud sits heavy on his brow, a promise of lashing rain in his eyes. Fury. Loki recognizes it where Lukas might not.

Coulson opens his mouth again but Thor cuts him off, verbally this time. “Years? You have been here for years, Loki?” Wheeling on the spot, he claps a hand to his forehead and lets out a noise somewhere between a groan and a cry. “How - how could you?”

Thor is as he has always been, when he thinks himself wronged. He takes up all the space in the room, sucks in all the air. Blows it back out again, twice as hard. “How could you let us think you dead, dust and ash, and all the while, you have been here? Here, on Midgard?”

Thor crosses to him in a few steps, and fists his hands in Loki’s shirt. He shakes him, hard and sharp. Lukas’s field of vision rattles. “We mourned you!” Thor cries. “I mourned you! Mother mourned you!”

The veneer of Lukas Eld is thin as mist. It dissipates, violently, with Thor’s hot breath on his cheek, fingers digging into his collarbones, with Thor’s earnest lies in his ear, and despite everything Lukas has just denied.

Loki knees him in the gut. Thor doubles over, gasping. The fury is contagious, and it spreads in his chest, a black virus. “Mourned me?” he rasps. Loki leans over Thor, not letting him rise. “You accuse me of ill intent, yet by speaking such untruths reveal yourself a more audacious villain. Lying to me, no less. Me. The very one your precious mortals branded as the god of lies. Your arrogance knows no bounds.”

Thor gapes up at him. “I - it, it is you. Loki.”

In the steady state of freefall, you can almost forget the inevitable end.
Turning away, retreating behind the metal table again, giving his back to all of them, he claws for control, for a handhold. The way he’s been taught. The only way he knows how to, faced with Thor, the only way to make Thor see, to make him understand. Just like on the Bridge.

If Thor wants Loki, he will come to regret it.

A spear materializes in his grip. Armor crawls over his forearms, across his chest, growing sharp angles like teeth. He stops the expansion of metal with a thought, refusing to form a golden helm, to form a pair of horns that reach for the stars.

Lukas turns, takes the spear and brings it down, severing the table between them. The halves fall away, their edges glowing orange with heat. He levels the spear at Thor. “No,” he says. “No.”

Mjölnir rattles in its crater. Thor has dropped into a balanced stance, ready to absorb the force of a hit. Defensive - he does not move to attack. “Loki,” he cries. “Loki, please do not do this!”

“NO!” Loki spits. The words are out before he has time to think. His mind is split, each half unaware of what the other will do. It feels like madness. It feels like the Void. “I will not be dragged back to Asgard, like a dog, to bow before the whims of Odin!” The spear shivers in his hold. He clutchestightener, until his fingers begin to ache.

“Brother - ”

“I am not your brother.” There is momentary unity in that unassailable fact.

Thor steps forward and Lukas launches a blast of energy at his chest.

He twists out of the way and it rips through the interior wall of the Helicarrier, and then another, and another, until it has cleared a path to the distant sky. Lights begin to flash, alternately casting the room in shades of red and white. An alarm whines, high and shrill. Under the bloody glare, he can see Thor waver. When the next wash of fluorescence lights his features, his expression is hard with resolve.

“Enough destruction, Loki.” Bending down, he grasps Mjölnir. “I will not have you harm any more
“Harm them?” he snarls. “Look around you, halfwit. You landed here for the span of three days and decided to claim this realm as your protectorate. I have been here for years. I have exerted myself to aid them, little as they appreciate my efforts.”

Lukas turns on Roberts again. “Is that not so?”

The woman appears unable to speak. “Tell him!” Lukas demands.

Coulson has not been rendered mute. “You did,” he says. His eyes dart back and forth, between Thor and himself, to the gaping hole in the wall. “When it became convenient. But you admitted it yourself. You could have ended up working for Raina if we hadn't come first.”

A spark of energy flares from the trembling end of the spear. The humans flock to support Thor. As they have done, time and again, just like the Æsir, and the Vanir. A feast of sycophants for the golden prince and aught left but the crumbs for Loki. Nothing has changed.

There is one source of power here that Thor cannot hope to grasp at.

Loki reaches forward, the fingers of his seidr seeking that depthless power, the infinite space of the Tesseract.

It is not near. That jolts him - what have the humans done with it? Where have they taken it?

He can still feel it. A flaming star, dimmed with distance, but not in power. His seidr cannot reach the faint whisper.

“But it is true that you helped us,” Natasha says suddenly. She steps toward Loki, her hands open and relaxed at her sides. Unarmed, and making a show of it.

“Your attempt at placating me is noted,” Loki hisses. The spear in his hand turns to her chest. He has no intention of discharging an energy blast at her, but the threat is useful. He might change his mind. Plans and counter-plans flit through, rearranging themselves by the second.
Thor clearly believes he will shoot her. Mjölnir sails through the air, hitting him square on the golden breastplate. Loki goes flying, into the inch-thick glass of the conference room, sending spiderwebs of cracks shooting outwards, a fractal pattern of impact.

Magic bursts from inside him, like the head of the hammer has pierced a secret well, all the power that Loki has been burying, has hidden deep. The humans are thrust backward. Roberts flies out of the hole in the far wall into the corridor. The glass of the windows, weakened from his body, blows out. A savage wind from the lower atmosphere whips through the room. Only Thor stands, braced on one knee.

Loki picks up a piece of the window and chucks it at Thor, wanting to see him laid out, like the others. Thor rolls.

“What in the HELL is going - ”

Fury comes through the door and immediately ducks. Wisely. A shard of bulletproof glass spears into the wall behind where his head had been.

Loki turns the spear on him. “You - you brought Thor here, didn’t you? How did you know - how - it was the witch, wasn’t it?” He barks out a laugh. “She has walked in your dreams as well, then?”

He could see it all. Laid out like a map, a web, the sticky threads of corruption, betrayal. And he will not be pinned like some helpless fly.

The Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. gapes at him, then turns to Coulson and Natasha, where they are plastered against the wall. “He - what?” Fury’s gaze flicks to the right. “Thor?”

“Loki, stop this!” Thor roars, instead of responding. “Loki, just put down your weapon - just stop, please, Loki!”

The next energy blast shreds the floor. Thor dances away, doing something resembling a little jig that Loki would have found hilarious in any other circumstance.

Then the Helicarrier shudders. With a grating, shearing sound, the floor tips. The blast must have
hit something vital, below in the engine. Everyone and everything goes sideways. Loki lands on his back, on the section of half-destroyed wall. The two halves of the lab bench come careening towards him. He lies flat as he can while they tumble into the gap that used to be the row of conference room windows just beyond his body. One metal corner scrapes along his calf, sharp pain drawing a cry from his throat.

“Loki!” Thor screams. He has caught Natasha by the arm, suspended above a pile of edged glass. Clint Barton hangs from a twisted metal bar protruding from the hole in the wall of the corridor that is now the ceiling.

Panic is a great, black, sucking depth at the heart of him. Pulling, tugging on his ankle, the call of the Void so loud in his ears that he can barely hear as Thor shouts a dead man’s name.

“Shut UP! ” Loki - Lukas shouts at his brother - not-brother. “Shut up!”

The spear has fallen away, most likely through the sheet of clouds with the lab bench. His head is splitting. Vertigo. His senses tip forward as the Helicarrier does. He is falling, he has already fallen, slammed into the earth, an impact like as not to split the seam of the world, the way Thor’s hammer had split open his chest, in the dream. One dream, or another, they all blur and drip from his memory into his waking sight.

Blue sparks climb up the fabric of his sleeves. He waits for the burn, the sizzle of Thor’s lightning, the numbing impact of Mjölnir.

There is nothing. Not lightning - those sparks are not lightning. His breath catches. They’re cast by ambient seidr. The Tesseract’s power curls into him, like a cat seeking a scratch behind the ears. Fills his veins, his bones, sears in his eyes, as they drip liquid fire on his cheeks, hot and wet.

I have come at your call, a voice whispers. You have the power to destroy him now. As you could not on the Bridge.

He teeters, staggers up to his feet on the partial wall. The fire is within him, and it hurts. He is not made for the heat. “No,” he breathes.

“Loki - don’t,” Thor begs him, as he stumbles forward. “Please don’t.”
He glances behind, and there is the bitter edge of the Helicarrier, the jagged glass of the windows, a breeze that stirs the highest reaches of Midgard's painfully blue sky. Thor thinks he will jump. Thor fears it. Thor is moored on that Bridge, he realizes in a flash. Just as Loki is. They are both stranded in that world-defining moment, when he chose to fall, the singularity that has warped every other second of his life, cast a pall on his birth and childhood, shaded every word he has spoken to his mother and brother and father into a strange color. The moment that formed Lukas Eld from the Void, his own personal shadow.

“I am not Loki," he whispers.

Lukas looks at Thor, who stares back, wide-eyed, hand outstretched, and he chooses the path that Loki has always chosen. Not to fight. That was a show, a bluff. A lie. Because he’s a coward, and a thief. A cornered monster, stripped of the cover it hid behind, and faced with a worthy foe.

He flees. Not over the edge, this time. He rips open a path into the ether, underneath his feet, and falls straight down, knowing it is not the Void that waits.

End of Part Two.

Chapter End Notes

sorry i haven't been responding to comments -- was just out of it.

also, idk if anyone is interested, but i started a weird little blog thing where post some of my original poetry/writing. if you're into that, take a look here

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!