Refrain

by Liannabob

Summary

Post Iron Man 3, Tony looks into why the rest of his team didn't help him. Mind-control, kidnappings and corruption, oh my.

Notes

Refrain: 1) A repeated utterance or theme 2) To hold oneself back
Chapter 1

‘Stable’ had never really been one of Tony’s settings.

It was something he was proud of, or had been. He was a genius, an innovator, a hero. None of those attributes really lent oneself to gathering moss.

The insomnia and frenetic energy had been a part of him for such a long time that now, in the aftermath of another crisis; battered, scarred, and more sure of his purpose than ever, Tony didn’t really know how to feel. He was… stable.

Nominally.

No more crazy hours in his basement building suit after suit, no more manic obsession with improving a design that was already decades ahead of the closest competition.

He had Pepper and Rhodey and a job to do that wouldn’t demand so much of him that he had nothing left for himself.

It unsettled him in a way he didn’t really know how to express.

He touched the soft, sore place in the middle of his chest where his arc reactor had been. It was a mess of wrinkled tissue over torn muscle now. The doctors had replaced the missing bit of his sternum with metal. It had bothered him, a little; those metal bits. The point of this was to cut all the unnatural parts out and leave just Tony behind.

But, well. Practicality and general health safety had won that one.

The skin graphs were going well but it was still going to be painful for a while.

It would always be an ugly mess of damaged skin, which Tony found perversely satisfying. He knew there were cosmetic surgeries that would be able to smooth the flesh into something less horror-flick chic, but it wasn’t something Tony wanted. He wanted to be able to touch those imperfections and remember what he wasn’t anymore, the same way he had touched the reactor in remembrance of what he hadn’t been before that.

Tony took a long sip of his unpleasantly cool coffee. He was back in New York, back in the tower that he and Pepper were rebuilding, and standing on the balcony. He was looking down at the city.

With the Malibu house destroyed and his own new commitment to put the past behind him, coming to New York had been… something he thought he was ready to do.

Fleeing the west coast had nothing at all to do with the smell of the surf bringing the dirty, salty taste of the Pacific back into his mouth.

Tony didn’t think he’d build another house in California.

New York had done a remarkable job of bouncing back but there were still signs of the battle. Still pieces missing, still buildings taken down by Chitauri warships that hadn’t been built back up yet.

He tipped his head back and stared up at the sky, feeling brave and defiant and foolish because,
after all, he was only looking up. It wasn’t something to brag about.

But it still made his hands shake. He still remembered the cold pull of the portal. The long, helpless fall. The sky bothered him here in a way that it hadn’t in California.

Tony heard his breath catch and the sound of it made him jerk back, eyes snapping down.

He braced his hands on the railing and bowed his head.

Stability.

Right.

He snorted bitterly and turned back inside.

*

*

*

The thing was, now that he wasn’t in motion – either building or fighting or drinking himself stupid – he was dwelling.

Part of it was being back in New York and letting the memories of what had happened here surface. The anxiety attacks he’d been suffering from made him bottle the entire experience up – or try to. But now that it wasn’t crippling him in the middle of the street anymore, Tony started feeling… angry.

Bruce had gone off the grid again and Tony was willing to extend plausible deniability to the man. He’d been the first and thus far only member of that supposed ‘team’ to get in contact with him.

And he’d extend that grace to Thor – the dude was off planet. It made Tony’s drama categorically not his problem.

But what about the rest of them? Where the hell had the assassin twins been? Hell, the President of the United States had been threatened. Wasn’t that bone fide Captain America bait?

Even if something had been preventing each of them as individuals from coming to help him, Tony couldn’t get past the tang of betrayal when he thought about SHIELD.

Why hadn’t they stepped in?

Extremis had turned people into literally fire-breathing monsters. It seemed like SHIELD’s jurisdiction.

“What are you thinking about?” Pepper said, stepping up behind him and sliding hands around his waist.

Tony closed his eyes and leaned back into her, resting the back of his head on her shoulder.

“I met a guy who had a tattoo of my face on his arm. I’m awesome.”

Tony could hear the eye roll, the nose wrinkle.

“But he was incredibly sad and misguided. One of the two.”
“Hey,” Tony protested without any real heat, not opening his eyes, “I’m an excellent role model.” Pepper kissed his ear and insinuated a hand under his shirt, stroking it across his belly.

Tony stopped thinking about SHIELD for a while.

*
*
*

Tony was thinking about SHIELD.

And Extremis.

And how Extremis would be something that SHIELD would probably love to get its grubby hands on.

JARVIS had quarantined the information as much as he was able to but there might still be labs out there, or Extremis-infected people that hadn’t been part of that battle on the oil tanker. The thing had burned and Tony felt reasonably confident that any traces of the nanovirus in the genetic material left behind would be just about as replicatable as the Super Soldier Serum.

“Jarvis,” He said.

“Sir?”

Tony fell silent.

He lowered the hand holding his screwdriver. Dum-E was offline at the moment and he’d been working on the arm joints. The bot wasn’t extending it properly and Tony was tracking down what it was catching on.

“Sir?” Jarvis prompted.

“Extremis,” Tony said, bending back to his work and saying the word like he wasn’t haunted by visions of Pepper’s flesh burning from the inside. “I want to know how much SHIELD knows about it. Reach out, babe. Pickpocket protocol.”

“Of course, sir.”

Jarvis fell silent, already, Tony knew, working on slipping over SHIELD’s admirable walls and finding exploitable cracks to sneak through.

He pulled the casing off of Dum-E’s arm and went back to the task at hand.

*
*
*

Bruce was staring at him.

Tony had come down to the common level to get something to eat and had, admittedly, punched
the toaster. It might be worth a raised eyebrow but he expected Bruce to know him well enough by
now to take a little appliance-mauling in stride.

Bruce sipped his tea and regarded him with patient inquiry from his chair.

“You’re looking a little… green, Stark.” Bruce commented lightly.

Tony huffed and raked a hand through his hair.

He flicked the dented toaster and stomped around the kitchen island, taking the seat next to Bruce.

“I’m fine,” He said.

Bruce nodded placidly.

“Really,” Tony insisted.

“Okay,” Bruce agreed.

Tony clasped his hands together between his knees, leaning forward.

“This… thing that went down with the Mander- I mean, well, with AIM. Well, Killian. I haven’t –
that, well, what I’m saying is – wait, do you even know what happened? You were under a rock,
right?”

“Pepper filled me in,” Bruce said.

“It’s just,” Tony continued. He inhaled sharply and coughed, the breath sucking spit into his lungs
ungracefully.

“We make our own demons,” He said. Bruce would understand that. Bruce would understand that
more than most, maybe more perfectly than even Tony did.

Tony felt his shoulders relaxing and he started to speak.

A burden shared was a burden halved, right?

*

*

*

Later, Tony tried again.

“I almost died. A lot. I was overpowered and out of my league and I was… I was going to die. The
last time that happened, I had anxiety attacks for months,” Tony said quietly, turning the corners of
his mouth upwards to try and make it a joke.

Dum-E whirred at him and handed him an empty coffee cup sympathetically.

*

*

*
Tony combed through the files Jarvis had brought him and felt his forehead crinkling in confusion.

SHIELD’s intel on Extremis was… lacking. It was minimal to the point of apathetic and Tony couldn’t wrap his head around it.

This had been important. It still very much was important.

He tapped to the file on Maya Hansen, then on Killian, on AIM, the Mandarin… Pepper.

SHIELD’s files were thorough but… succinct. Abridged, almost.

Tony went through them and read a lack of interest in the to-the-point sentences. Either the bulk of SHIELD’s files were hard-copied only and offline, or they really hadn’t had an interest in the entire Extremis event.

He opened the file they had on him. Stark, Anthony E.

His last four months had been condensed into a page and a half brief.

Tony flicked his fingers angrily and the display closed.

He stared at the blank holomonitor for a long time.

*  
*

*  

But, fine, whatever. Fuck them. Tony hadn’t even been a proper member of the boy band anyway – his file still listed him as a consultant.

He hadn’t looked into Captain America’s file, or Barton’s or Romanov’s. Benefit of the doubt would break if he knew for sure they were around and had just chosen not to help.

He checked his mail tentatively. Would it be better or worse if he had pending messages from them?

There was a forest of emails from his company, from reporters begging for some of his time and universities and conferences wanting him to speak and the hundreds of other messages that comprised the detritus of his fame.

In amongst them, there was what had to be an auto-generated email from the custom-fabrics place asking him if he was satisfied with his recent purchase of a 15’ tall rabbit.

Tony stared at the message for a long time before deleting it.

There was nothing from his team.

*  
*

*  

Tony groaned and shuddered and clutched the pillow hard enough to strain the fabric. It was that or
pull Pepper’s hair and Tony didn’t want to do that.

“Pepper,” He gasped, leg spasming as she did something particularly wicked with her mouth.

Her hair brushed his thighs and Tony was hyper-aware of the strands of it sticking in the crease where his left leg met his body.

She rolled her tongue and Tony whimpered, feeling blood pounding hot and heavy in every bit of him that Pepper touched.

The skin around his heart ached. It felt stretched too tight and for a wild moment Tony was afraid that the exertion would damage those bones and muscles still weak from the surgery. The vision of it hit his mind obscenely – the hard beating of his heart pulling the seams of the graph apart and turning his chest into a sticky, red mess of blood and pulp.

The happy sex-sweat on his forehead went cold and the shivery feeling in his stomach turned from arousal to nausea.

His cock, stupid thing that it was, didn’t seem to notice. Pepper swallowed him down deeply and that was it, he was gone, the orgasm dragged out of him with yell that wasn’t entirely borne of pleasure.

He gathered Pepper in his arms, panting, holding her tight while he trembled.

She kissed him and he tasted himself on her tongue, the bitter salt of it driving out the last taste of her own sex that lingered in his mouth.

It made him feel startlingly alone.

He squeezed her tighter against him and tried to make the feeling go.

*

*

*

He woke that night pale and sweating and on the verge of panic.

He’d destroyed all of his suits. All of them. Every one of them.

What kind of a fucking idiot was he? God, the vulnerable position he’d put himself in – them all in – hit him like a punch from the Other Guy.

He extricated himself from the bed, vision pinpointed with focus and need but careful, so careful not to wake Pepper.

Silently, he stole down to his lab. He always had a lab. Resolutions or no, Tony Stark couldn’t be Tony Stark without a space to create things.

“Jarvis,” He whispered, voice tight and high.

“Yes, sir?”

“Open the backups from mid-December. I want the schematics for the Mark 41.”
Tony had taken out the implants along with the shrapnel; the Mark 42 would be useless without getting them injected again.

But he didn’t need to be able to control the suit with his mind. He just needed armor. The lack of any at all made him feel horribly exposed.

“Sir, the ‘clean slate’ protocol erases all of the suit schematics.”

Tony squeezed his eyes shut. He’d known that, of course.

“Then we have some coding to do, Jay,” He said thinly.

He was a mechanic. He was the mechanic. He made things. He could do this.

His heart fluttered at the magnitude of the task at hand. Building a suit from scratch would take, what, three weeks? If he really pushed it? Probably closer to a month and a half since he didn’t want Pepper to think he was backsliding. He’d have to schedule this very carefully.

A month and a half where any damn thing could happen to them.

His fingers trembled on the keyboard. He took a breath. He took another.

He threw himself out of the chair and backed up against a wall, sliding down and gripping his head in his hands.

“Fuck,” He gasped, “Fuck, fuck.”

“Sir?”

“I’m fine!” He barked, lying but terrified that Jarvis would alert Pepper. She didn’t need to see this.

“Get it together, asshole,” He hissed angrily.

His pulse threaded in his throat and Tony shook, waiting for this moment to pass, half-sure that this would be the time that it didn’t. That he was going to lose his mind and that would be it.

Dum-E whirred, powering up, and rolled out of his alcove. Tony tracked the bot’s movements with wide eyes, focusing on something benign and trusted and trying to use that to get his breathing back under control.

Dum-E put his extensor on Tony’s knee comfortably.

Tony patted the rubber-tipped metal fingers, exhaling hard and finally pulling in a deep breath.

He pushed himself to his feet and walked over to the small kitchenette he kept in the corner of his lab, wavered for a moment between coffee or scotch before opting for the latter and pouring a few fingers of the amber liquid into his mug.

The familiar burn of it down his throat made him relax even more.

“Jarvis,” He said when the cup was empty. “Pull those screens back up. Let’s get to work.”

“Sir, there is a… potentially viable option to consider.”

Tony looked at the closest camera, tentative hope sinking tiny, sharp teeth into him.
“The ‘Blank Slate’ protocol initiated a self-destruct sequence for suits Mark 1 - 42.”

Jarvis fell silent.

Tony waited.

“Yeah,” Tony said slowly, “That’s kind of the problem I’m having now.”

“The ‘Blank Slate’ protocol initiated a self-destruct sequence for suits Mark 1- 42 only, sir.” Jarvis corrected himself.

Tony inhaled to make a scathing reply, and then stopped.

“War Machine,” He said, the fact of it making his chest loosen.


The holomonitor brought up the schematics; bulky guns and heavy augmentations making the shape of the suit ugly and overly masculine. But peeling that nonsense away would be easy enough – underneath that, there was still an Iron Man suit; sleek and beautiful and entirely needed.

Tony’s fingers flashed over the design, stripping and pulling and typing up code to make it better in a flurry of concentrated genius.

Tony felt his mouth stretching in a smile.

This was who he was, after all.

He shoulders finally relaxed as he worked.

*

*

*

Tony wasn’t sure how many hours later it was when he surfaced, jolted back to his surroundings by Pepper’s gentle hands on his waist.

He turned, smile fading at the worried look she gave him. She looked past him to the screen displaying what was unmistakably one of the gauntlets.

“Tony?” She asked.

Tony looked at the design then back to her.

“It… I just need one. This isn’t what it was, I promise, it just… I need one. Just one. Just in case,” Tony said, feeling like an asshole. That ‘clean slate’ had lasted for less than a month.

But Pepper only smiled at him.

“Probably for the best,” She said. She slid her hands down his arms and gripped his wrists, pulling him lightly from the chair.

Tony went willingly and without glancing back.

It made something in him unclench when he realized that he could do that.
Pepper was still more important. The most important.

He stopped her in the doorway and turned her, kissing her hard and sweet, trying to channel how much she meant to him into that small connection of mouths.

Pepper smiled and it stretched his lips too.

* 

* 

* 

Stark Industries had taking a hit when Tony had been declared dead.

That wasn’t surprising.

In the wake of AIM’s complete shutdown, though, and what had become Tony’s very publicized help in saving the President of the United States with a swarm of autonomous Iron Men suits, Tony had very little doubt they’d exceed the quarterly expectations.

The thing was, the growth was a lot slower than he would have expected.

He’d been expecting SI stock prices to jump after the White House debriefing and then jump more with the Vice President’s indictment. At his treason hearing the man had admitted to a connection with AIM. Had divulged specific, detailed information about AIM’s involvement in the treason conspiracy.

Tony had been pulled in as a witness and had testified.

The courthouse was the first time he’d seen Rhodey since the oil rig and it hit Tony low and strange that weeks had passed without the man coming to see him.

“Stark,” The man had greeted him warmly, rolling his eyes with a nod at the cameras and pulling him into a hug.

Tony had returned it, just as sincere, but after a moment turned to face his audience and raised one arm to flash a peace sign, trademark grin in place.

He already knew that wouldn’t be the picture they’d run.

“What the hell, buddy, you don’t call, you don’t write,” Tony groused, something bitter and too-real slipping into the joking tone.

Rhodey waved at the cameras with him, his own public smile fixed in place. He turned them, dropping his arm and smile both.

“Iron Patriot was compromised. My bosses have had me answering questions for the last month straight and I might end up facing a discharge.”

“The fuck?” Tony barked.

“It might not to come to that, but…” Rhodey shrugged, pretending it didn’t matter. “I was the face of that machine and duty and I failed. I put the President of the United States in danger. The military doesn’t let that kind of thing quietly slide.”
“War Machine is keyed to your DNA,” Tony said angrily. “You’re literally irreplaceable. I personally purged Killian’s bug from that thing.”

Rhodey gave him a look that made Tony’s blood run cold.

Tony laughed humorlessly.

“When did they crack it?” He asked. As soon as he was sure no one was in the radius, he was going to detonate the suit. It was too much of a weapon to leave in the military’s hands. He trusted Rhodey – he didn’t trust them.

“I’m betting not long before they handed me my hearing notice. And whatever you’re thinking of doing, don’t,” Rhodey warned. “This isn’t broken yet.”

Tony ran a hand over his eyes and felt very tired.

“Let’s get this shitshow over with,” Tony said, putting a swagger back in his gait as he approached the security checkpoint.

*

*

*

Rhodey and Bruce got along like a house on fire, which Tony hadn’t anticipated.

When the court released them for the day it had taken a fair amount of wheedling to get Rhodey to agree to come home with him. They’d both known from the outset that Tony would win that one.

Bruce was meditating on the balcony when they came in, because of course he was.

Introductions had been made. Jarvis ordered food from the Greek place a few blocks over. Pepper called to say she’d been delayed by the board and to have fun without her.

They sprawled on the couches, the three of them, eating kolokythoanthoi and mussels with expensive wine from Tony’s collection. Bruce didn’t drink much of it but he’d surprised Tony by drinking at all.

What Tony should have realized that, spikey difference in background aside, the two men had an undeniable common ground in swapping stories about the outlandish things Tony had done in their presence. The hardware jargon went over Bruce’s head and the science jargon went over Rhodey’s, but those were unimportant details, really.

It was lighthearted, and finding a sympathetic, trusted ear to vent some of his Tony Stark experiences on was something Rhodey was clearly enjoying. Likewise, the laughter seemed to take years off of Bruce, whose hair was still too short and grey for Tony’s liking. He knew it was just his own baby-duckling syndrome – this new style bothered him because it didn’t match the picture in Tony’s brain’s file.

Bruce looked older and, while he technically was, it didn’t sit right with Tony.

“Where were you?” He asked, interrupting Rhodey. It wasn’t one of his better stories and the punchline could die unspoken.

Tony didn’t think he’d said the words with any severity but the tone in the room shifted, the humor
Bruce took another sip of his wine before answering.

“Calcutta,” He said. “There were people there who ne-,” Bruce cleared his throat and changed what he’d been about to say, “There was… work there I’d left unfinished. I didn’t even know about the Mandarin until a few days after Christmas.”

Rhodey raised eyebrows at that.

“You really were under a rock, weren’t you? Don’t they have TVs in Calcutta?”

It won a huff of a laugh and the moment broke, the mood shifting back into something softer, comfortable.

Tony took a swallow of wine.

“What was I talking about?” Rhodey asked, pursing his mouth in thought.


*  

*  

*  

Tony stared at the column of Pepper’s throat. He remembered how it had looked in that holographic projection, exposed and glowing an angry orange while he’d been chained up and impotent, watching his worst nightmare come to writhing, pained life.

He knew he must have been staring for quite a while when Pepper ducked her head down to meet his eyes, eyebrow raised in question.

Tony blinked and lowered his fork back to the plate. It was raining outside and the Tower felt somewhat claustrophobic today. Nothing quite like being locked in a basement to make you appreciate open windows more.

“You’re beautiful, strong, and I don’t deserve you,” Tony told her, mouth twisting.

“Well,” Pepper mused, considering him with mock severity, “You’re a breadwinner and you’re good at sex. I suppose I’ll keep you.”

“‘Good?’” He huffed indignantly, playing along, letting himself be diverted from his thoughts.

Pepper shrugged.

“Adequate,” She corrected herself, looking skywards, musing but not quite able to keep the smile suppressed.

Tony dropped his napkin on the table and slid to his knees under it, fingers finding the hem of Pepper’s business skirt and pushing the fabric up along her legs.

Pepper was wearing teal panties and Tony kissed the soft fabric with a closed mouth, pressing just with his lips against the mound of her sex.

He kissed her again, and again, and Pepper dropped her hand to slide firm fingers in his hair and
direct him a little further down.

Tony let himself be led.

Pepper lifted herself and together they wriggled her out of her underwear. Tony cupped the undersides of her thighs and pulled her to the edge of the chair, parting her legs wide and obscenely open, for all that the tablecloth hid most of what they were doing.

He loved the way Pepper smelled.

He’d been with so many sexual partners; bouncy, firm young things with sticky sweet cheap perfumes and business liaisons who’d worn mature fragrances and the odd scientist who’d been too clever and interesting to resist despite lapses in their hygiene.

He sucked on his fingers, getting them sloppy wet before he stroked them into Pepper, and he thought about what sex with Bruce would be like. Did the jolly green doctor even indulge? He must, of course he must.

But maybe he didn’t?

Tony sucked on Pepper’s clit and she gasped, a small kittenish sound and the hand in Tony’s hair tightened. He smiled, knowing his beard tickled the sensitive pink flesh and smiled more because he knew it drove her wild.

Bruce would look ridiculous mid-coitus. He wasn’t beautiful, not in a traditional sense, and the charm that came from his calm humor would be superseded by his body in those moments.

Poor Betty, he thought, but the humor felt rote and he knew this mad mental tangent was a defense against thinking about how hot Pepper was under his tongue.

This was normal, human heat – no lingering, barely-contained inferno courtesy of a nanovirus- and it was his mind playing tricks on him that she was any hotter than she should be. He did the quick math from Fahrenheit to Kelvins to Celsius. Pepper wasn’t going to become a bomb, burning so hot that her body would vanish in the blast. Particles and ash and atoms scattered so far and thin that there would be nothing of her at all left.

Tony was aware, distantly, that he had tear tracks on his face. He ground into Pepper harder, suckling and demanding and not at all thinking about the wild gamble Killian had played injecting her with Extremis, or that even Russian roulette had better odds.

“Tony?”

He crooked his fingers inside her, thrusting them a little too hard, a little too firmly and Pepper flinched around him.

“Tony,” Pepper gasped, her voice hitched and uncertain, her hand against his shoulder fluttering.

He pulled back because he couldn’t breathe. He was crying quietly.

He drew a hand over his eyes, hiding from her and unable, at the moment, to lock this down and pretend that everything was okay.

“You almost died,” He said, and it came out sharp, an accusation.

Other people would console him now, or offer him meaningless platitudes or even throw his own
flirtations with mortality back in his face.

Pepper wasn’t other people.

“‘Enthusiastic fingering’ never looks good in an obituary, granted, but I think I’m made of sterner stuff than that.”

He snorted a weak laugh.

He felt fragile and it made him angry. This mess was supposed to be behind him.

“But what a way to go,” He joked.

It didn’t really lighten the atmosphere.

They both pretended that it did.

*  

*  

*

Tony’s resolve broke two days later.

He was surprised by how much digging it took to find out where Natasha has been. She was in Lensk, on a wild goose chase in Russia and had been for the last half a year. It’s more or less what he’d (hoped for) expected.

The knowledge made something inside him unclench a little.

Barton was easier to find. He was being held under observation following his stint as Loki’s mind-slave. That made Tony frown with displeasure but it did at least explain where the archer had been.

He took a breath and opened the file for ‘Rogers, Steven G’ before he could think himself out of it.

He looked at the file for a long time, not really sure how he felt about the contents. Dates and interviews, analysis, leads to be followed up on.

It was mostly speculation.

Steve Rogers had been missing since October.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not entirely sure where this is going yet, but if I wait for all the plot points to line up I find I procrastinate to the point of never posting at all.

Please let me know if there's an interest to continue this - comments are *ridiculously* motivating.
Tony found Bruce on the balcony again.

“Are you meditating or sleeping?” He asked as he opened the door and walked out, tilting his head at the scientist’s relaxed sprawl in the lounge chair.

“I have to choose?” Bruce quirked an eyebrow without opening his eyes.

Tony dropped himself into the seat next to him.

“Captain America is missing,” Tony said bluntly.

Bruce did open his eyes at that. He gave Tony a look that prompted him to continue.

“I was digging around and I found some things. He’s missing.”

Bruce frowned.

“S.H.I.E.L.D.’s looking for him?”

“Since October.”

“Jarvis is looking for him too, I imagine?” Bruce sat up, stretching his back in a remarkably flexible curve as he did so.

“For about…” Tony glanced at his naked wrist, “Nineteen minutes now.”

Bruce’s mouth quirked in a smile at that, but faded as he looked out at the skyline, considering the news.

“Does S.H.I.E.L.D. think he went off the grid intentionally?”

“It doesn’t sound like it. The reports are a little too… tense. It doesn’t read like a passive search.”

Bruce went quiet.

Tony took a drink from the glass of scotch he’d brought with him.

“Someone tried to grab me in Calcutta,” Bruce said at length. “It’s why I came back when I did. It…” Bruce cleared his throat. “I spotted the trap I was being led into and I… avoided it. I made my way to an airport before they could regroup. I had lucky timing – I was able to get on a flight back to the States within the hour.”

“You’re just mentioning this now?” Tony asked incredulously, but Bruce only shrugged.

“Ross never stopped looking for me, I don’t think. I was kind of expecting to encounter something after all the media attention the Other Guy got during that fight.”

Tony drummed fingers on the armrest and didn’t ask Bruce why he hadn’t stayed with him, then. He couldn’t conjure any answer to that that he’d particularly like.
Bruce took off his glasses and rubbed at the lenses with the corner of his shirt.

“Grabbing Captain America… is a little bolder and I have to imagine far less governmentally sanctioned. The attempt on me and his current MIA status could be unrelated, but I,” Bruce bit the inside of his lip, “I kind of doubt it. It just makes me think it’s not Ross this time.”

“You’re thinking someone’s trying to recreate the Super Soldier Serum again?”

“Of course,” Bruce said, without surprise or hesitation. “I don’t think there’s been a time since the 40s that people weren’t actively working on it.” Bruce twisted his mouth into something self-mocking. Tony hated it when he did that. The Other Guy wasn’t a super soldier but it annoyed Tony no end that Bruce couldn’t see the success in his results regardless. Alexander Fleming Bruce was not.

“My first thought would have been S.H.I.E.L.D., but if they’re looking for him, it means someone else has him. Which is, going out on a limb here, not good,” Bruce slid his glasses back on.

Tony took another drink.

“This would be the wrong time to suggest getting you hooked up with a subdermal tracker again, wouldn’t it?” He quipped.

Bruce gave him a flat look that, oddly, turned considering.

“You’d be the only one with access to its signal?” Bruce asked. Tony carefully swallowed his mouthful, sinuses burning from the near cough of surprise.

“Seriously? You’d let me?” He asked after a careful inhale. He could hear the higher, excited pitch to his voice and tried to dial it down.

“I’m considering it. It might not be a bad idea.”

“I never have bad ideas,” Tony asserted, mind already spinning with the best way to implant the tracker.

Bruce snorted a disagreement and Tony gave him a haughty look.

“You’ve spent too much time with Rhodey. He’s ruined you. He’s planted all of these false ideas in your head about me ever being less than entirely awesome and you believed him, you poor sap.”

“Do you think we should talk to S.H.I.E.L.D. on this? Coordinate our efforts?” Bruce asked, derailing Tony’s line of thought. He tipped his head at Bruce.

“A moment ago, you were surprised they weren’t using Steve as a guinea pig.”

“I am. Surprised, that is. We know they’re looking for better weapons and an army of Steves would line right up with that ambition.”

“Well, in fairness they didn’t give a shit about Extremis either and that would’ve lined up just as well,” Tony said, taking another drink.

Bruce quietly regarded him for a bit too long. Perhaps that had come out more angrily than he’d intended.

“Anyway,” Tony got out of the chair and paced back to the balcony door. “Nothing to share yet. May as well wait to make a decision until there’s something to make a decision about.”
“I can’t tell if that’s pragmatic or incredibly lazy,” Bruce quipped, but the look he was still giving Tony didn’t quite match the humor in his tone.

Tony smirked by way of answer and closed the door behind him as he went back inside.

*  
*  
*  

When Tony accessed the Iron Patriot’s system, he wasn’t terribly surprised to find the suit in use. The military wouldn’t be wasting any time training Rhodey’s replacement. Even if they hadn’t stated that they were replacing him yet, Tony knew these assclowns well enough to know that they would probably try.

He accessed the HUD, projecting his video call on the internal screen.

The man inside the suit visibly started on seeing him. Tony took him in; mid-twenties, dark hair, handsome in a wholesome, traditional way. Tony took an instant dislike for the kid just on the principle of him not being Rhody.

“Hi,” Tony said pleasantly.

The kid’s eyes darted around the helmet, probably looking for a way to get rid of him. Tony had to smile at that.

“Sirs, I’m receiving a call from Tony Stark,” The kid said, and Tony heard the curses from whoever was outside the suit.

“So, here’s the deal; I gave this suit to James Rhodes. I’m pretty sure he would have mentioned if he’d regifted it – which, let’s face it, regifting is a tacky thing to do in any situation and Rhody has more class than that. Which means I’m going to go ahead and treat this suit as stolen. You have thirty seconds to get out.” Tony grinned when the kid’s eyes widened.

When he got called to answer for this, Tony would be able to say with perfect sincerity that he hadn’t made a threat.

He toasted the screen with his coffee cup while the kid scrambled out. Once he was clear, Jarvis activated the program he’d uploaded to lock the suit.

Tony turned on the suit’s external speakers.

“Kindly note that I’ve reprogrammed Rhody’s suit to activate to his biological signature only. Any attempts – and by that what I do mean is any attempts - to circumvent this protocol will cause the suit to self-destruct. You can take it up with Stark legal if you have any questions; they’ll be happy to help you as I sure as hell never gave one of my suits to the military. Have a fantastic day,” Tony closed the screen, cutting off the outraged commentary he’d been talking over.

He sprawled back in his chair, satisfied. He debated sending a text to Rhody but, well. Giving the man a head’s up wasn’t really how their relationship worked.

He went back to work on the Mark 43.
In the morning, Pepper’s hair was loose around her shoulders, and she gave Tony an indulgent smile when he reached out and started to braid a lock of it. It was a piece of hair above her ear and the solitary braid looked silly and out-of-place when he finished.

He smiled at the work, pleased when Pepper rolled her eyes at him. She left the braid in her hair while they finished breakfast, though, and it made Tony grin perhaps more than it should have.

This was something almost entirely new to him; sharing a meal with someone with barely any conversation. For all that Pepper liked to pretend otherwise, she wasn’t really a morning person. She could fake it extraordinarily well but underneath her competent, fierce demeanor there was someone who really just wanted a cup of coffee and another hour of sleep. It was a side of her that Tony hadn’t known about until after they’d started sleeping together.

The lapel of Pepper’s bath robe was open just enough for Tony to glimpse the shadow of a nipple peeked against the satin nightgown she was wearing underneath. She’d been taking her showers much colder since Extremis. Tony could understand that, even if he didn’t know how to talk to her about what she went through. Pepper was the strongest person he knew and if she wanted to pretend the cracks weren’t there, he’d be the worst kind of hypocrite not to let her try.

The nightgown was satin, not silk, because Pepper didn’t like the way silk felt on her skin. She’d told Tony that while explaining that she could never quite forget that the material came from worm butts. Naturally, it had been while she was knotting one of Tony’s silk ties.

He loved it that Pepper tied his ties for him. He’d been doing it himself since he was seven years old and it was odd and intimate to let someone else do it for him. His mother had done it for him, a few times, not often. He hadn’t worn a suit much as a child but there had been the odd occasion where he was expected to be ‘presentable.’

Obie had done it for him more. Straightening Tony up when he’d been too drunk or apathetic to give a shit about his clothing; making him slightly less of an embarrassment when the paparazzi inevitably snapped pictures of him. At the time, the gesture had seemed paternal and caring. Now, Tony couldn’t help imposing a possessive glint in his remembrance of Obadiah’s eyes.

Pepper didn’t remind Tony of either of them. When her fingers smoothed the fabric over his chest, the knot secured against his throat, his thoughts were quiet in a way they rarely were. He enjoyed the moment. The loving, competent contact of Pepper’s fingers, the way she smelled, the heat of her. When he kissed her, she tasted sharply of the grapefruit she’d been eating. Tony didn’t particularly like grapefruit but he chased the taste anyway, stroking his tongue inside her cheek.

“Sir,” Jarvis said, and Tony drew back to glance at one of the cameras. Jarvis wouldn’t interrupt a moment like this if it wasn’t important. He’d been programmed better than that.

Pepper knew it too, from the concerned wrinkle in her brow.

“I believe I have located the last known whereabouts of Steve Rogers,” Jarvis reported. “I was only able find a 58% validation on his facial profile; however, proximity to the last complete match strongly suggests the man’s identity is, in fact, the captain.”

“Where?” Tony asked.

“Phoenix, Arizona.”

“Phoenix?” Tony squinted, wondering what could have brought the man there. “You’re sure?”

“Reasonably so, yes. The last 100% match for his facial profile was recorded south of Flagstaff.”
“Huh.” Tony looked at Pepper, mind chewing on this. “Jay, send everything you’ve got down to my lab.”

“Tony?” Pepper had pulled her robe closed, which was a damn shame.

“I was doing some research. You know. Thinking of drumming up some press for a charity gala and thought, hey, the Avengers; that’ll fill the seats. Turns out, though, Captain Tightpants is a bit… missing.”

Pepper didn’t call bullshit on him, but Tony knew she knew. There was pity in her gaze and, Tony was gratified to see, anger as well. Tony wouldn’t have been the only one wondering why no one had helped him. Helped them.

“I’m glad you’re looking for him, then,” She said instead. She undid the loose braid with her fingers. “If Steve is Captain Tightpants, does that make you Kaylee?”

“Absolutely,” Tony said immediately.

Pepper hummed, turning back to her breakfast. She shooed him with a gesture that wasn’t as casual as she’d have him believe.

Tony headed back down to his lab.

Chapter End Notes

I'm writing this as I get time and editing only passingly. I'm sure I have mistakes. My apologies for that, and kindly let me know if you spot something.

I'll have more out soon. :)


Tony detoured to grab Bruce. The scientist was in the kitchen making something that, Tony noted with both envy and incredulity, didn’t look burnt or greasy at all. It smelled wonderful.

“You can cook?” He asked, coming over.

Bruce stirred the contents of his pan with a wooden spoon. “It’s an experiment,” Bruce said in a neutral tone without looking up. “I’m exposing gallus domesticus muscle samples to heat in a nutrient bath augmented with a diverse spectrum of vegetation. Would you like to help me analyze the results?”

“I just ate, but thanks,” Tony swiped a finger over the spoon when Bruce set it down and brought it to his mouth. He considered the taste. “Yeah, I’m definitely keeping you. Good reminder for that subdermal tracker.”

Bruce snorted and moved the pan to a cold burner, turning off the one he’d been using.

“Jarvis has a lead on Rogers,” Tony said. “He disappeared in Phoenix. It’s a place to start.”

Bruce opened the lid of the rice cooker (He owned a rice cooker? Since when?) and scooped some onto his plate.

“Does SHIELD have any likely suspects?” Bruce asked, tipping the pan and pouring a generous portion of his concoction over the rice.

“I don’t think SHIELD even knows he went missing in Arizona.”

Bruce grabbed a pair of titanium chopsticks from a drawer.

“That’s almost as worrisome as Rogers going missing, you know,” Bruce said, meeting Tony’s eyes.

“What?”

“SHIELD’s…” Bruce played with his chopsticks for a moment, picked up a lump of rice, put it back. “Incompetence,” He finished, settling on the word with obvious reluctance. “I got caught up on local affairs yesterday. I can’t for the life of me figure out why SHIELD wasn’t a presence during, well.” Bruce gestured at Tony.

“I’m not sure whether to be amused or miffed that a domestic crisis just got summarized by a waving a hand at me.”

Bruce gave him a lopsided grin.

“Take it as a compliment?” Bruce suggested.

“You’re not wrong, though,” Tony said, ignoring him. “We should probably talk to Fury and find out why SHIELD seems to have put out an agency-wide mandate to relocate their thumbs to their asses.” He looked at Bruce. “You know, after we have something solid on Rogers to poke him with.”
“Show me what you’ve found?” Bruce asked, picking up his plate and looking at Tony expectantly.

“Fair warning; keep an eye on your plate. Dum-E sometimes tries to eat food,” Tony said, already walking towards the elevator.

“…should I even ask why?”

Tony shrugged.

“He’s programmed to learn behavior based off of human interactions.”

“Well,” Bruce looked at his plate, “It isn’t scotch. I think I’ll risk it.”

“Ooo, catty.”

*

*

*

The pictures Jarvis had found were from a Facebook page. The focus had been some celebrating men but in the background, barely in frame, was Steve. Or enough of the side of Steve’s face to register as a hit against Jarvis’s database.

The potential-Steve was wearing the same brown leather jacket Tony had last seen him wearing.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s him,” Tony said. Bruce nodded agreement.

They both studied the pictures. Bits of Steve only showed up in the background a few times – mostly they were pictures of young men engaging in the drunken antics of a bachelor party that Steve had clearly not been a part of.

“Here,” Bruce gestured at another profiled face, circling a finger. The holographic projector responded by flipping to the next photo in the set. Tony rolled his eyes.

“I really need to teach you how to use the screen at some point,” He said, batting Bruce's hand out of the way. He flipped the image back and ‘pinched’ the corners, zooming in on the man Bruce indicated.

Tony tipped his head and regarded the picture. The man was a complete stranger to him.

“That’s one of the men that came after me in Calcutta,” Bruce said firmly.

“Jarvis, run a trace.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bruce circled his finger at the screen a few times to scroll through the images.
“Knew you’d get the hang of it,” Tony said. Bruce switched from scrolling with his index finger to scrolling with his middle finger. Tony smirked.

The man didn’t show up again. The picture that he had been in was a somewhat blurred motion shot - it had been random chance that the man had been in frame.

Tony frowned and wished he could say he was surprised a few moments later when Jarvis pulled up someone professional in the match.

The man was a SHIELD agent. Alexander Adad, a pilot and surveillance specialist. Bruce exhaled sharply through his nose in a disdainful laugh.

“Well that’s interesting,” Tony said, agreeing with Bruce’s cynicism but curious nonetheless. He pointed at the date of birth listed on the file.

And at the information below that.

“Killed in action last May?” Bruce read. He looked at the bar picture again. “Looking awfully spry for a dead fellow.”

“Oh, it gets better,” Tony said, reading on. “Participated in the attack on the helicarrier May 2012, confirmed by Agent C. Barton.’ The dude was one of Loki’s human puppets.”

They both went quiet, considering that.

“Loki left on a quinjet, right?” Tony asked although, considering it, he doubted Bruce would be the best person to ask for details about that attack. “He must have been one of the SHIELD personnel on it with him. Hell, he might’ve flown the thing. And, you know what, aside from Selvig I don’t remember seeing any other glow-stick recruits during the New York battle.”

“You’re thinking he’s still, ah, possessed?” Bruce asked. He flipped back to the bar picture.

The room was too dark to really be sure of the man’s eye color but they might well have been blue.

“I think it’s time we talk to Fury,” Tony said.

A chime sounded in the lab, startling them both.

“Incoming call from Colonel Rhodes, sir.”

He and Bruce exchanged a glance, neither admitting they’d thought it would be the Director.

“Put it on the screen – this’ll just take a moment, Bruce,” Tony said. “Rhodey, hi! You’re looking bright-eyed and bushy tailed. How are you this morning?”

Colonel Rhodes glowered. He looked like he’d been awake for a couple of days and was planning to take it out on Tony personally.

“Where is your phone?” He asked flatly.

Tony considered.

“I think it’s still in a wine case somewhere in the Pacific.”

It won him no sympathy.
“Still? Tony, that was weeks ago.”

“I’ve been busy!” He protested.

“I’m very well aware of that. Tony, you’ve got to take that lock off the suit.”

“Nope.”

“Tony-”

“No,” Tony said, and the humor had completely dropped out of his voice. Rhodey paused, hearing it.

“I’m not going to give the military access to the suit, Rhodey.”

Rhodey’s jaw ticked.

“The military’s been using it for a couple of years now.”

“No, you’ve been using it for a couple of years now.”

“Tony, I’m military!”

Bruce leaned back in his chair and scooped up a bite of food, clearly intending to enjoy this show.

“Not in the ways that matter,” Tony stated.

“You make it extremely hard not to take offense, do you realize that?”

“It’s the price of admission,” Tony quipped back.

“Stark, that suit needs to be out there helping people.”

“And again, I’ll agree that you should be out there helping people. I find that the definitions of both ‘help’ and ‘people’ get a little bit vague when decided on by an organization rather than a person.”

“Oh fuck me, are we really doing this?” Rhodey swiped a hand over his face roughly. “I can give you a list of pilots that I trust. People that I’ll personally vouch for.”

Tony shook his head.

“Don’t make this easy for them,” Tony said.

Bruce put down his chopsticks.

“Sorry, make what easy for whom?” He asked. Rhodey twitched. Bruce was out of the video frame.

Tony turned to him.

“The military is trying to scapegoat Rhodey for the thing with the President.”

Bruce blinked at Tony, then leaned into frame to look at Rhodes.

“Hi, Banner,” Rhodey said, wiggling two fingers in an unenthusiastic wave.
“Hi James. Don’t be a scapegoat,” Bruce said. He snagged another piece of chicken and chewed placidly while Rhodey frowned and switched his attention back to Tony.

“My superiors are getting a lot of heat for this. I know you’re trying to help, Tony, I get that, I do, and I love you for it, man. But seriously. Unlock the suit.”

“It’s not happening.”

Rhodey inhaled, but then shook his head and clearly changed what he’d been about to say.

“It’s not just the military, you know; there’s a requisition from SHIELD for use of the Iron Patriot. I know you have your issues, but I’d thought you were on good terms with them, at least.”

Tony narrowed his eyes.

“What does SHIELD want with War Machine?” He hated the name Iron Patriot. It sounded like something Rogers would come up with.

“It’s classified.”

“Jarvis,” Tony said.

“Yes, sir; I am already running a query.”

“You know, I really wish you wouldn’t do that right in front of me,” Rhodey complained.

“Pick your battles, soldier-boy.”

“Sir, the requisition is for assistance on a retrieval mission.”

“Retrieving what, exactly?” Tony asked.

“The requisition doesn’t state, sir.”

Tony looked at Rhodey expectantly.

Rhodey sighed.

“Personnel. SHIELD had some people go missing over in Lensk.”

“Lensk?” Tony asked, leaning forward.

“That mean something to you?” Rhodey’s eyes were sharp on him.

Tony looked at Bruce.

“Natasha was working a job there. Jarvis, when did the requisition come in?”

“Two days ago, sir.”

“Two DAYS?” Tony repeated.

“Tony, you’ve got to unlock the suit. I’m tied up in bureaucracy and that’s not going to go away just because you want it to. Meanwhile, there are people that need it.”

“I could-“
"You blew up your suits."

"You what?" Bruce interrupted.

Tony spared him a dirty look. "You see what you miss when you fall asleep during story time?" He turned back to Rhodey. "I could pilot War Machine."

"Tony, be reasonable. This might be a lengthy operation and you’re not that guy."

Tony drummed his fingers on the table and stared at Rhodey. Rhodey calmly stared back.

Tony hated this. The idea of an Iron Man suit in some stranger’s hands made his blood run cold. For all that he’d protested the title, it was a weapon; a very powerful weapon. Its potential for misuse was incalculable.

He thought about Natasha. A mission going bad and her needing help.

"Give me your pilot of choice. I’ll give him access. And this is a temporary measure, Rhodes. I’m putting an expiration date on this – I gave that suit to you."

"I remember taking it after I beat your ass, actually," Rhodey pointed out, but his posture was slumping slightly in relief.

"Oh, we’ll have to agree to disagree, there," Tony made his tone stay light and teasing. All the ways that this could go wrong were already nipping at him.

"Carol Danvers," Rhodey said. "I’ve been working with her for years. I trust her."

"Reeeeeeallly," Tony drawled knowingly, fingers already flashing to pull up her information. He regarded her picture. Her hair was cropped military short in the shot but she was undeniably a looker.

"Jim Rhodes, you've been keeping secrets from me."

"Don't even start."

Tony glanced back at him.

"It’ll take me a while to get her information loaded into the suit. Tell your bosses. If I have to talk to them, it’ll end in a lawsuit and you know it."

"I do Tony. Thanks."

Rhodes hung up before Tony could reply.

Tony stared at the line of Carol's file stating that she’d been with Rhodey searching for him when he’d disappeared in Afghanistan. A flick of his fingers closed the screen.

"Jarvis," He said.

"Working on it now, sir."

"You blew up your suits?" Bruce asked.

"I wanted a clean slate," Tony explained. He sighed and fell back in his chair, rubbing his closed eyes with his fingertips. "I’m already building another one," He added after a quiet moment.
Bruce considered that.

“Probably for the best,” He said.

Tony huffed a breath of air through his nose.

“That’s what Pepper said.”

He dropped his hands.

“Okay, so; next problem. Jarvis, call Fury.”

Chapter End Notes

Many kind thanks to blackglass for pointing out that Carol Danvers would be a perfect fit for that-potential-pilot-that-Rhodey-knew. You get full credit for that one, hon.
Pepper finished her grapefruit, still thinking about the news that Captain America had gone missing.

She hadn't been a Captain America fangirl as a child. She thought that that was largely because she'd gotten hit in the eye with a toy shield on the playground growing up and had refused to have anything to do with the red, white and blue icon after that.

But Tony... well.

Having Howard Stark for a father must give one a very different perspective on Captain Rogers. A different level of importance and sanctity.

Some of that had shone through when Tony had broken the news to her that Phil was dead.

“It was my fault, Pep. My fault. Squabbling with Rogers like a child, trying to drag him down to my level instead of stepping past my own bullshit and working with him. If I had... it... if,” He'd broken off with a bitter laugh. “It would have gone down differently. Agent might not have been put in that situation. I'm so sorry, Pepper.”

She still wasn't completely sure what Steve Rogers meant to Tony. There was almost a level of hero worship in there that she hadn't known Tony had in him.

It had mattered to Tony that the man hadn't been there when he'd been needed. She could read it in the way he'd looked at the television any time news stations replayed footage of the New York battle. As if Iron Man needed to be put in the context of that for people to know who he was for the A.I.M. case coverage.

Pepper washed her bowl out in the sink. She took her robe off and folded on the back of her chair. She put her nightgown in her hamper and stared at her naked body in the dresser's wide mirror.

She bent close and studied her eyes for a long time, verifying the absence of any orange.

She'd been in situations where her life had been in danger before – Stane, Vanko, Hammer droid explosions, the attack on the Malibu house – but what she'd gone through with Killian lingered in her mind in a way that they just hadn't. Maybe it was because it was personal. Violence directed at her specifically rather than as just someone in proximity to Tony.

Waking up with her shirt missing, tied up and helpless with Killian - it left her terrified in a visceral, female way.

And then he'd injected her with Extremis.

Pepper pushed back, dropping her eyes from the mirror and hastily grabbing panties and a bra. She got dressed. Pale blue trousers, cream blouse. Today, she needed to feel a little closer to Tony and so she put on the necklace he had given her just after his surgery. A heart locket on a chain made from the shrapnel.

She put on the ring Tony had given her after the events in New York. It was a little loose on her ring finger and she frowned. Everything her body had gone through lately left her burning more calories than normal. She slid the ring onto her middle finger and it fit correctly.
She studied her hand. There was something very appropriate, she thought, in wearing a present from Tony Stark on that digit.

She went back out to the kitchen, still barefoot, and pulled out the box of cheesecake. The slices were divided with paper and she ate a piece with her fingers standing at the counter because she didn't want to bother with a plate.

She glanced at the time and sighed.

Happy was getting released from the hospital this afternoon and she wanted to swing by this morning to see him in case she couldn't get out of her meeting with the Chinese diplomats in time for a proper homecoming.

She grabbed a pair of heels by the ankle straps and walked over to the elevator. She'd talk to Tony before she left and remind him.

“Jarvis, which floor is he on?”

“The lab on 37, Miss Potts. He's consulting with Doctor Banner.”

The elevator started moving.

Pepper liked Bruce, in no small part because he'd saved Tony's life. Had saved him when Pepper hadn't even been able to answer her phone for him. The footage of Iron Man falling, the suit dead, Tony...

That missed call still haunted her.

She wondered if Bruce knew that Stark Industries had, if only briefly, been contracted to design weapons specifically to take down the Hulk.

Bruce gave her a nod and wave when she walked in. Tony had his back to her and seemed to be focused on arguing with Jarvis.

“What do you mean you can't find it? Are you looking in the phone book? Because I really doubt he's listed.”

“Sir, his contact information is unavailable. I can find no direct number extant. And no, I am not looking in the phone book,” Jarvis almost sounded tetchy. Pepper never stopped marveling at how much personality Tony had programed into the A.I.

“That cagey bastard. Fine. Call... oh, what was her name. Deputy Angrybouncy.”

“Hill?” Bruce offered.

Tony snapped his fingers in agreement.

“Tony,” Pepper said while Jarvis searched. Tony turned. His mouth stretched into a soft smile on seeing her necklace.

“I'm heading out to the hospital. Don't forget-”

“-that Happy's getting released at 3,” He finished for her. He was still smiling but his eyes were serious. She closed the distance and kissed him lightly on the lips.

She ruffled Bruce's hair when she drew back. She was glad it was starting to grow out again. There
was something imminently ruffle-able about those dark curls, and Pepper got the impression the doctor had been missing human contact for quite a while. It made her reach out and give in to that tactile impulse where she otherwise would have respected his personal space.

Bruce had such a dorky grin.

“Sir, there is no contact information available for Deputy Director Hill.”

“This is ridiculous,” Tony huffed. “Jarvis, is the Mark 43 ready?”

“Barring any further modifications you wish to make, production can be finished within the hour.”

“Nothing to add just now, no. I want to get airborne asap. And get me the coordinates for the helicarrier. We do have that at least, right?”

“Yes sir. I was not completely purged from that system. The helicarrier completed repairs two months ago and is airborne over the Atlantic thirty miles east of Virginia. I am uploading a flight plan into the Mark 43 now.”

“Excellent,” Tony turned to Bruce. “I’m much harder to ignore in person.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Bruce dead-panned.

“You can’t get a hold of Director Fury?” Pepper asked, frowning.

Tony shrugged.

“Apparently being a super spy means not leaving your card,” He kissed her on the cheek and started walking to the door. “Bruce, honey-bear, sorry to leave you out of this one. I’ll be back soon.”

“Have fun storming the castle,” Bruce said. Tony was smiling when he turned the corner.

Pepper exchanged a look with Bruce, a silent understanding and worry passing between them.

SHIELD was a policing force.

It shouldn’t have been this difficult to get a hold of them.

*

*

*

Tony had taken the advice of a promising young mechanic from Rose Hill, Tennessee and designed the Mark 43 with retro reflective panels. They made the suit heavier and gave the whole thing a damp, slate-gray color, like hematite.

Once the assembly rig did its work, Tony left via the balcony.

He closed his eyes and rolled his hands a bit, causing his trajectory to sway.

He loved flying. Giving this up had been one of the hardest parts of the Clean Slate protocol.

He handed the piloting over to Jarvis and pulled up his email. It’d take him about a half an hour to
get to his destination and he had work he could do in the meantime.

He fired off a quick message to Bruce to start looking into the other Loki-owned SHIELD agents supposedly killed in action.

SI California had sent him a few projects to take a look at. He’d managed to tweak two designs into something ready for production by the time he hit the Virginia coast.

“Incoming pilot, you are not cleared to board.”

Tony twitched, startled, as the message broadcasted in his suit.

“Hold your position and confirm authorization or you will be fired upon.”

“Excuse me?” He asked. He switched to manual flight.

“If you do not stop your approach, we will take action.”

The helicarrier was visible now. He zoomed the display in on it just in time to catch sight of guns targeting towards him.

He stopped, killing his forward momentum with a careful repulsor blast. He hovered, confused and annoyed.

“This is Tony Stark. I’m here to talk to Director Fury.”

“You are not cleared to board.”

Tony didn’t recognize the voice but he had no trouble hearing the humorless conviction in it.

He hesitated, debating whether or not to test the suit’s stealth mode.

“Iron Man, you landing has been authorized,” The voice called before he made a decision.

He flew in slowly, taking in the changes to the helicarrier’s hull. There was a hell of a lot more artillery than he remembered.

He touched down on the main landing pad. An internal door opened and four armed SHIELD agents came out wearing breathers to compensate for the altitude. Tony didn’t recognize the guns they were carrying.

“Where’s Fury?” He asked once they were inside, voice coming out emotionless and mechanical. It didn’t sound out of place here.

“Remove your helmet,” One of the guards said.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not.” His suit had been scanned three times since stepping through the doors.

The agent’s grip on his weapon shifted to something less casual.

“We need to confirm your identity. Remove your helmet.”

Reluctantly, Tony took off the faceplate. He gave the guard an unimpressed look before sliding the mask back on. The atmosphere in here was making his skin crawl. He had no intention of being out of his armor longer than necessary.
The agents led him down a wing and stopped in front of a heavily reinforced door.

As he stood there, the mechanisms in the door clicked and hissed. One of the agents stepped forward and opened it, gesturing Tony inside.

“Tony Stark, please come in.”

The woman on the far side of the desk was thin and short and had an unmistakable air of authority about her.

The agent closed the door behind him, leaving Tony alone with her.

“Hi,” Tony ventured. “And you are…?”

“I’m Director Fury of SHIELD.”
Chapter 5

Tony blinked at the woman.

“Come again?”

The smile she gave him didn't reach her eyes.

“Director Nicole Fury. I am the acting Director of SHIELD.”

“Okay, yeah, no,” Tony shook his head. “What happened to Nick? You know, yea high, leather fetish, eye-patch?” He held a hand at chin height. He did like it that the suit made him taller. “Also black and not female. At least I don’t think so. Pretty sure.”

“Have a seat, Mr. Stark,” She said and gestured to the chair in front of the desk. After a moment of consideration, Tony settled into it warily; there weren’t a lot of materials that could easily support the weight of his suit.

The chair held him.

He propped his right ankle on the opposite knee and settled his chin in his hand, wanting to project patient skepticism as clearly as he could without taking the faceplate off.

“The previous Director has been removed from duty due to mishandling of his responsibilities.”

“Mishandling?”

Tony blinked.

“Are we talking about the same guy? Nick was instrumental in saving the world.”

The woman – Tony refused to think of her as Fury – gave him a steady look.

“He failed to prevent the tesseract from being taken from a SHIELD facility by a hostile entity; he brought unstable and untrustworthy persons on board the helicarrier which resulted in our system being hacked, personnel being killed and millions of dollars in damage to this craft; he allowed the war criminal Loki to escape – twice – and he fired upon a jet to prevent it from carrying out a direct order. He’s lucky he was only demoted and transferred.”

Tony lifted the face plate because some things just needed eye contact.

“Transferred where?”

“Classified,” She said simply.

Tony drummed his fingers on the armrest.

“Why are you calling yourself Fury?”

“You didn't think my predecessor was actually born Nick Fury, did you? He was hardly the first man to occupy this role and title. Why were you seeking him out, Mr. Stark?” Her eyes were narrow and intense.

This meeting had put him off-balance. Fury's absence had thrown him more than he would like to
But Tony knew that he absolutely didn’t want this woman, this version of SHIELD, getting their hands on Steve Rogers.

“I wanted to know where SHIELD was during this situation with President Ellis. With Extremis,” He said instead.

She gave him a look that was pitying and scornful. How the hell had this woman replaced Nick?

“That was a purely terrestrial, domestic event. There are other agencies that handle those. It was not SHIELD’s duty to step in.”

“I… seem to have misunderstood what the ‘H’ in SHIELD stands for, then.”

“Our definition of homeland is altogether broader that just America, Mr. Stark.”

Tony flashed her a humorless smile, which she returned.

“Right. Of course. My mistake. Well,” He clapped his hands together with a loud, metal sound. “I’m clearly overstaying my welcome. I’ll just see myself out.”

“I do hope you aren’t harboring any hard feelings, Mr. Stark. SHIELD highly regards you as a consultant and hopes to be able to call on you in the future if there’s a need. In point of fact, if you ever decide to reconsider your stance on weapons making, there are quite a few projects we’re working on where your expertise would be invaluable. Well, I say invaluable – you would be compensated, of course. Quite generously.” She smiled at him.

Tony couldn’t muster a reply to that. He nodded in what he hoped wasn't too hostile and sarcastic a fashion.

He put his faceplate back on, stood and turned. The door unlocked and he walked out.

There were guards stationed on either side of the door and an agent walking towards them with his nose buried in an open file. Tony had just enough time to register him in his periphery before the man had walked into him, spilling the papers on the ground.

“Shit, sorry about that!” The man said, scrambling the papers together.

A silent alarm flared on the HUD – someone - the short, bald bespeckled man at his feet pulling together his mess of paperwork – had just attached something to the suit.

The man glanced up and met the suit’s eyes briefly.

“Excuse me, Mr. Stark. “

“Watch where you’re going, Sitwell.” One of the guards said.

There had been… something, something weighted and important in the man's (Sitwell, apparently) expression before he dropped his eyes and finished collecting his papers.

“No problem,” Tony replied. The man stood up and moved past him, muttering another apology.

Tony was escorted back outside.

He flew inland just north of Connecticut to take a look at the device that had been planted on him.
It took him a while to find it. He’d been expecting a tracker; something high tech and potentially malevolent.

It turned out to be a small magnet. Round and flat, like a neodymium refrigerator magnet.

He stared at it in confusion.

“Jarvis,” He said, “Run a scan on this. What am I missing?”

With some effort he turned it over. It stuck to the suit’s fingers.

The HUD zoomed in.

There was a seam running through the middle of the thing. He had to take the gauntlets off to open it.

There was a microchip inside. The case must have been lined with something to keep the magnet from ruining the data.

He carefully closed the capsule again and headed back for New York.

*

*

*

To say that Carol Danvers was surprised by the call would be under-crediting her awareness of the situation.

To say that she was pleased by it, though. Well. That was just dead on.

She didn’t know how Jim had managed to put up with Stark for so many years but if the payoff was a toy like this, she’d have to reevaluate her standards.

“Do you two need to be alone?” Jim asked her.

Carol admitted, if only to herself, that she was... fondling... the machine a bit.

“It's my turn to get inside this bad boy so you can shut your pretty, pretty mouth Rhodes.”

“Really, did you have to say it like that?” He squeezed the bridge of his nose and shot her a pained look.

She smirked back at him.

They were both falling back on a habit of flirting, neither one of them acknowledging that he was here to train her to replace him.

She’d been watching the trial and knew that Rhodes would be decorated for what he’d done in saving President Ellis. It would be publicized and fluffed for public consumption, and when the cameras stopped rolling Rhodes would probably be discharged for his perceived failures in duty in putting the President in that position in the first place.

It was politics, and absolute bullshit.
Carol cupped the codpiece of the suit.

“Is this going to be roomy enough, do you think?”

“Only you, Danvers, can make me feel molested from three yards away.”

There was a pointed clearing of Colonel... oh she forgot his name. Their babysitter's throat. Carol fussed with at a strand of hair making an escape from the tight pin-up she'd done (she didn't want to get her hair caught in the helmet) and motioned for Rhodes to get on with it.

Colonel Babysitter was here to record the training session. Carol kind of greatly admired Rhodes for keeping the piloting of the War Machine such a secret for so long.

They did need to get on with it, though. SHIELD was waiting.

“The suit is constantly scanning its surroundings. It'll open up when it registers your bio-signature.”

Jim walked up behind the thing and the suit unfolded. Carol peered inside curiously.

“Go in feet and fingers first. It'll mold around you once you make contact.”

Carol stepped into it, narrowing her hands and feeling her way down to the gauntlet's fingers. Once her fingertips touched the inside plates, the machine smoothly enfolded her.

The head's up display activated, showing her a feed outside the helmet and enough information to make her faintly giddy.

“How's it feel in there?” Jim was looking at the machine's torso.

She considered.

“A little snug, but not as much as I would have thought.” She brought her hands up to view them on the screen, wiggling her gauntleted fingers. She couldn't quite wrap her head around how fluidly this machine moved.

Jim smiled at her knowingly. Yeah, Jim had the coolest toys.

“Okay,” He said. “Let me talk you through the screens.”

“Probably for the best if I don’t fly into a wall and scratch your suit up,” She agreed.

He flashed her a smile that was a little more pained than he'd probably intended.

“I'm only a temp, Rhodes. You're getting this suit back.”

“Of course,” He said without conviction.

Carol let him talk her through the screens. There was a lot of parallel to what she already knew as a pilot, but she knew that wasn’t why she’d been selected for this job.

She didn't mention that she was only a provisional pilot again.

Neither of them was quite up to pretending it was true.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay; please enjoy this longer-than-usual chapter.

Happy regarded the marks lingering along his right brow and down his jaw. They weren’t throbbing points of pain anymore; just sore, tender places.

They were going to scar, though.

Happy tried to imagine what the marks would look like once the lingering red and pinks of a freshly knit wound faded into proper scar tissue. He’d never been a traditionally handsome man but he did have some vanity. He cared about his appearance and these smeared burns were going to be a part of that now.

Scars were cool, he thought. Women liked them. They made him look tough.

His internal pep talk wasn’t entirely successful.

“Happy?” Pepper’s voice called from the door to his room. He flipped off the light and walked out of the bathroom. Pepper was wearing her badge, and it made the corners of his mouth twitch in amusement.

“Miss Potts.”

He started to say something but Pepper took a few steps forward and hugged him. He put an arm around her shoulders when a beat passed and she didn’t draw back. He still hadn’t quite gotten the hang of hug durations.

Pepper’s hair smelled nice—something light and floral.

She drew back and gave him a sincere smile. Her eyes darted briefly to his scarred brow and it made him wither a bit.

“It’s good to see you on your feet again,” She said.

“Gonna take more than a little explosion to keep me down,” He replied, forcing a grin. “I was Iron Man’s bodyguard, you know.”

“You know, I believe I did have that mentioned to me at one point,” She teased.

Happy sat back down on the bed. He was ready to be discharged but he’d have to take it easy for a while. He grimaced thinking about the PT sessions he had ahead of him.

“Are you okay?” Pepper asked, fluttering a hand in his direction.

“Yeah, no, I’m great,” He waved her off. “I’m just supposed to be resting until the doc finishes clearing me. Talk to me, Potts. What have I been missing?”

Pepper rolled her eyes fondly.
“Tony’s stirring things up again. It’ll be good to have another set of eyes keeping track of him.”

“Oh? What’s he up to now?” He asked.

Pepper sighed and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I don’t know if I should say, here,” She looked around the room and Happy shrugged in agreement. It wouldn’t be the first time someone had left a bug in a place Tony Stark was known to visit.

“All the more reason for me to get back to the Tower sooner rather than later, huh? That Bruce guy not making the cut?”

Pepper gave him a long-suffering, conspiratorial look.

“Bruce is proving a compatible playmate but I think if Tony presented a plan to set something on fire he’d probably offer to record the results before trying to talk Tony out of it.”

Happy had to snort a laugh at that.

“What about Rhodey?”

Pepper smoothed her hands down her thighs. Her smile didn’t falter but Happy knew her, knew that tell, and he frowned in concern.

“Pepper?”

“He’s fine, Happy.”

“He’s not fine. You did the leg thing. You do that when you’re… politely omitting something.”

She flicked a glance at him, surprised at having been caught, he supposed. She sat down beside him on the bed.

“I talked to him a few days ago, after Tony came back from the hearing in a huff. Rhodey’s been tasked to train a replacement pilot for the Iron Patriot. It very much looks like his superior officers are going to hand down a discharge, make him responsible for the events leading up to the president getting kidnapped.”

“What? That’s- what? How? Did they completely miss the part where he saved Ellis’s life?”

“His superior officers needed someone to blame for it getting to that point. And-” Pepper looked reluctant to finish the sentence. Happy stared at her until she did.

“When he escaped Killian… the way his superiors are approaching this is that he should have informed people of the situation. Tony called the Vice President. Rhodey didn’t contact anyone. The thought is that if he’d gotten a message out in time, there could have been a faster response to the attack on Air Force One. That it might have been circumvented entirely.”

Happy wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“How’s Jim taking this?”

Pepper considered her answer. “Stoically,” She said at length.

“Well, you know Tony will offer him a job the moment that goes through.”
Pepper smiled, but there wasn’t any real humor in it. They were both well aware James Rhodes would never take that offer.

Pepper reached out and a finger along the petals of one of the orchids Tony had had delivered. Happy had gotten into a conversation with Stark years ago about obscene flowers. It had kind of touched him that the man had remembered.

“I think the next thing is right around the corner, Happy,” Pepper confided quietly.

“Next thing?” Happy asked. He shifted a little to put less pressure on his left side. Pepper was a warm, welcome presence there but he did have healing muscles making demands.

“Afghanistan, Iron Man, Stane. Then Vanko, Loki, Malibu… Killian,” She rolled her hand listing them off, and rolled it once more when she’d finished her list.

“Something isn’t right. Tony’s looking into it, but,” She crossed her arms.

“Hey,” Happy said, and he took Pepper's shoulders in his hands firmly.

“Pepper, hey, there is no one that I have more faith in than you and Tony. Whatever comes next – if there even is anything – it isn’t going to stand a chance against you.”

Pepper closed a hand over one of his.

She met his eyes and smiled, and, for the moment, it was enough.

*

*

*

Bruce counted slowly back from ten and exhaled.

“Give it back, please,” He asked politely for the third time. He held out his hand and wiggled his fingers, trying to prompt the correct reaction.

Dum-E rotated its arm quizzically, like a confused puppy. It would have been cuter if the robot wasn’t holding one of Bruce’s chopsticks.

The robot chirped and didn’t move, seemingly content to just stare at Bruce.

Bruce reached out and tried to tug the utensil free again. Dum-E’s rubber-tipped fingers didn’t give in the slightest. It chirped again.

Bruce scrubbed a hand through his hair and glared at the machine.

Dum-E wheeled forward a bit and stretched out to poke the contents of Bruce’s plate with the wrong end of the chopstick.

Bruce had gotten caught up in playing with the holographic projectors and had forgotten his plate of food. He’d been reminded of it something like an hour later when Dum-E had knocked one of the chopsticks off the plate with a clatter. The robot had then grabbed the other one and was proving somewhat stubborn about surrendering it back.

The food was a cold, unappetizing coagulation by now but that didn’t mean Bruce wanted the
robot making a mess with it.

“Sir,” Jarvis said, quietly interrupting the staring contest, “I have found seven persons meeting your criteria.”

Bruce looked up towards the ceiling. He knew he didn’t need to but it still felt rude not to look somewhere to indicate he was talking to the A.I.

“Seven? That’s… well, that could be worse, I suppose. Can you bring their profiles up, please?”

The floor glittered and threw up projections of the men’s files. Or - no, six men, one woman, he saw.

These were SHIELD personnel Loki had taken. Each of them was listed killed in action, all of them had shown up in global video surveillance after the supposed time of their death.

Bruce absently moved the plate of food into a desk drawer to thwart Dum-E and turned his attention to the information in front of him.

Field agents, pilots, a biologist, a sniper - Bruce didn’t know if these people were chosen for their skill sets or if they’d just been unfortunates in range of Loki’s staff.

Bruce scrolled through a few pages of the biologist’s file. It was a field of expertise he didn’t immediately associate with SHIELD and it left him curious.

“What are their last known locations?” Tony asked from behind him.

Bruce startled badly, banging his knee against the side of the desk. He glowered over his shoulder at Tony.

Tony winked at him and walked into the room, giving his attention to the display.

The floor projected an image of the world map.

All seven flags indicating persons of interest were on or near Arizona.

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised,” Bruce said.

“You were. I totally got you,” Tony said cheerfully.

“You were. I totally got you,” Tony said cheerfully.

Bruce gave him an unimpressed look.

“I’m not surprised they’re in the same location,” Bruce clarified. “If they’re still under Loki’s control, it would make sense for them to be working together.”

He swiveled in his chair to face Tony fully.

“What did Fury have to say?” He asked.

Tony's smile dropped.

“Fury's gone. I talked to his replacement.”

“What?”

“Fury was demoted and transferred. I don't know where. And the new creature they have running
the place,” Tony sucked his teeth in an unhappy noise. “It's... not good, Bruce.”

Tony said this while rolling something small and metallic-looking between his fingers. He manipulated the little thing until it came apart.

Tony stroked a hand down the side of a machine and a panel came out. He carefully tipped the contents inside.

“Jarvis, I’m not sure what’s in that. Treat it carefully.”

“Securing the contents and disabling remote connections now, sir. Would you like me to proceed?”

“Yeah, save this and bring it up,” Tony said, waving a hand at the search Bruce had been running.

Tony propped himself on the desk beside Bruce and watched the floor glitter and bring up… timestamped video files, as it turned out.

Tony sifted a finger through the hologram. There were maybe a dozen files. The first was dated two days after Thor took Loki back to Asgard; the last was from yesterday.

Tony poked the first file.

The video was a slow track up Loki’s spear. A male voice that Bruce didn't recognize was narrating.

“Initial testing of the device performed by Doctor Banner-” Bruce twitched at hearing his name “-revealed that it is emitting low amounts of energy. Within the spectrum that we are able to test, this output level remains static while the device remains in a controlled, stable environment. Review of the footage from the delta lab on the helicarrier showed an increase in the energy readings when the device was in proximity to people. In fact, the highest spike was recorded when Doctor Banner picked the device up.”

The video cut away to the delta lab. There they all stood, the Avengers and Fury, arguing with each other. They were muted and a graph was overlaid, showing the gradually increasing EMR readings. When on-screen Bruce backed against the table and picked up the staff the reading easily quintupled.

“We have been able to replicate these results consistently,” The voice continued. “We will proceed with testing.”

The video closed.

“Well, that’s… ominous,” Tony observed after they’d both been quiet for a moment.

The next video showed attempts at using the device to create a blast of concussive force, as Loki had done. The technician was unable to get it to fire.

The video after that showed a second attempt, this time with the man touching the staff with his bare hands rather than with gloves.

He was successful.

“I really don’t like where this is going,” Bruce muttered.

“You and me both, big guy,” Tony agreed. He brought up the fourth video.
Bruce inhaled sharply and heard Tony curse.

“How don’t know how else I can say this,” Clint Barton said. He was wearing handcuffs and what Bruce was pretty sure was SHIELD’s version of prison clothes.

Clint’s mouth twisted angrily as he continued.

“The moment he touched me with the staff, everything I am, all of the things that make me a person, they went away. It was painful, and it lasted a fucking lot longer than that video shows. Is that what you want to hear?”

“How was Loki giving you orders?” It was a woman’s voice this time, someone standing off screen.

Clint snarled and glared, presumably in her direction.

“Answer the question, Agent Barton,” She calmly demanded when Clint went silent.

“I’m not going to go through this again. If you want my statement, get it from Hill,” He said.

“Answer the question,” She repeated, voice just as calm as before.

“Fuck you,” Clint answered tiredly and thunked his head back against the chair.

Clint was in visibly worse shape in the next video.

The normal handcuffs he’d been wearing had been upgraded to something heavier that extended down his wrist to cover part of his forearms. It wasn’t quite inside the frame from the camera’s angle but Bruce strongly suspected the chains hanging off the cuffs were bolted to the chair. Clint’s eyes were bloodshot and drooping with dark circles.

“How was Loki giving you orders?”

“I want to speak with Fury,” Clint demanded.

“There is nothing Director Fury can or will do to discontinue our assessment, Agent Barton.”

“Coulson, then,” Clint returned.

“Agent Phillip Coulson was killed in the assault you led on the helicarrier,” The woman answered, voice still unaffected and professional.

“What?” Clint asked softly. His brow was crinkled in disbelief, the obvious signs of sleep deprivation leaving him raw and exposed. It gave way to anger quickly.

“You’re lying,” He snapped.

“Loki impaled him after his escape from the holding cell.”

Clint waved in his seat. Bruce saw Tony swallow in the corner of his vision.

“Why wasn’t I told?” Clint asked roughly.

“How was Loki giving you orders?” The woman returned instead of answering. “If you cooperate, you will be released back to SHIELD’s custody.”
Clint looked away.

The video continued for a few moments before it closed, the question repeated and ignored several times. It was clear Clint wasn’t going to say anything further.

Tony drummed his fingers on his knee, probably thinking along the same lines as Bruce. He’d been assuming this was SHIELD interrogating Clint, which would have been bad enough. That it wasn’t SHIELD opened up a new can of worms.

In the next clip, Clint's mouth and temple were bruised. His eyebrow was scabbed and being held together with butterfly bandages. The circles under his eyes were even more pronounced and Bruce doubted the archer had had any decent sleep since these interrogations had started. This was timestamped August.

“He's drugged,” Tony said, pointing a finger to Clint's pupils. They were too wide for the room's lighting and unevenly dilated. Bruce took a few deep breaths, trying to keep a hold of his calm.

“How was Loki giving you orders?”

“Orders?” Clint slurred back, confusion plain.

“The surveillance from the New Mexico research facility shows you holstering your weapon the moment after Loki compromised you. You then informed Loki that the Director was stalling, shot the Director and picked up the tesseract case before leading an escape. How was Loki ordering you to do these things?”

Clint blinked slowly.

“It's what he wanted,” Clint replied. He gave a lopsided shrug. “Just... what he wanted. Everything else was all... blue.”

“Please explain.”

Clint focused on the speaker with effort. His eyes widened in what Bruce thought was recognition. Clint closed his lips tightly.

As with the last clip, the woman repeated herself a few times before accepting that she wasn't going to get anything else out of Clint.

Tony hesitated before playing the next file and Bruce couldn’t blame him.

It wasn't another of Clint's interrogation sessions, though.

“Oh fuck me,” Tony breathed.

There was a heavily tattooed woman in a prison uniform standing upright against the testing center's wall, hands and ankles cuffed to the surface behind her. Her eyes darted to the camera nervously. Bruce's heart pounded with anger. He took a deep breath in and slowly let it out.

The technician from the earlier videos stepped forward holding the spear in a gloved hand.

“I am going to touch the center of your sternum with the tip of this device,” The man explained.

“Oh fuck me,” Tony repeated a bit louder.

“Please describe any sensations you might feel as it makes contact.”
He moved forward (the woman's chest rose and fell in nervous breaths) and touched her with the tip of the spear.

The technician held it there for a few seconds but the woman's eyes didn't change color.

“It is cold. It feels, it is a bit of a tingle to it, like, electrical?” She offered. Bruce couldn't place the accent. She sagged a little in relief when he lowered the spear, likely having expected something worse even though Bruce very thoroughly doubted she'd been informed of the test's intended result.

Bruce's fists were clenched and he made himself open them. It was an effort.

The technician took a step back.

Tony leaned forward in obvious preparation to play the next video and jumped in surprise along with Bruce when the technician abruptly pulled his glove off, lifted the spear and touched the woman with it again.

Her mouth stretched open in a short, silent expression of pain. And then her features cleared, brow smoothing out as her eyes flooded with unnatural blue.

The technician let out a surprised, pleased laugh.

Bruce threw himself out of the chair and walked away. He heard Tony calling after him, heard the technician start questioning the woman, heard her voice calmly replying.

Bruce ignored them all.

The Other Guy was pressing against him, hungry and angry and imminent.

Bruce put a hand out and traced the smooth wall with his fingertips while he walked further away from the lab. His labored breathing sounded too loud in the echoing hallway.

He made it to the living room, sat down heavily on a couch and put his head in his hands. This was the worst part - this, this prolonged moment of not knowing if his will was going to be enough. It felt like holding a boulder back with a thin sheet of membrane.

At some indefinable point, though, the balance shifted.

Maybe ten minutes of just breathing, turning his mind away from the human experimentation. Eventually, it was enough, and the Other Guy fed him a wave of disgust and disappointment and retreated.

It was a few minutes more before Tony padded out of the lab. He bypassed Bruce and went into the small kitchen area. Bruce heard him pour two drinks.

Tony came back over and passed him a glass of what turned out to be pineapple juice. Bruce drank it gladly, the cold, sweet tang of it changing the sour flavor of his mouth.

Tony took the seat opposite him and drank from his own glass, looking out the windows onto the city below.

“Did you finish watching them?” Bruce asked.

Tony shook his head without looking at him.

“I needed a break from them too. I started Jarvis working on a couple of projects. It looks like I'm
going to need some tricks in my bag sooner rather than never.”

After another moment, Bruce asked “Where did you get those files?”

“Ah, well,” Tony sniffed. “That is a bright side to all of this. It got planted on me while I was in the helicarrier.”

“Someone not on board with SHIELD's current direction,” Bruce stated. He rubbed his eyes and considered the situation.

“Let me know what's in the rest of the videos?” Bruce asked, knowing Tony would hear his inability there without damaging his pride and making him state it outright.

Tony nodded without comment. He finished his drink, stood and walked back into the lab.
If asked, and if he’d been inclined to give an honest answer, Clint Barton would say that one of the worst moments of his life had been when Loki touched him with his spear. Nothing he’d been through before that really compared – not his brother’s betrayal, not the Swordsman, not the times he’d been captured and tortured – none of it was even on the same page.

And these cocksuckers wouldn’t stop asking him about it.

After the battle, after Thor had put Loki in chains and dropped his hammer on him, after shawarma and a round through medical, Maria Hill had pulled him aside and gotten a full statement from him. He’d known someone would have to do it and was glad it was her.

Coulson tended to make him bluster past his injuries, physical or otherwise; Fury was too important to waste time with feeling sorry for himself; Sitwell would try to make him feel better instead of just taking the statement…

Hill, though. Clint had met her just after she’d been promoted to handler and could vouch that she’d earned every inch of her rise in the ranks since then. He’d only done a few missions with her voice in his ear but it hadn’t taken long for him to recognize her worth. She was ferociously competent and adaptable and understood that sometimes shit just happened. She also didn’t shy away from embarrassing herself with karaoke when there was downtime.

It made it easier to talk to her. As easy as a thing like confessing you’d been completely unmade could be. She’d collected him when he and Nat had stumbled back to the New York headquarters still tacky with sweat and dust, breaths reeking of spiced meat.

The last time he’d seen Maria he’d had a bow in his hands. He’d been the enemy. The memory of it surfaced, vivid and undeniable. Maria had wounds on the right side of her face, scabbed and old enough that he knew they’d happened in the assault.

She drew him aside, sat him in an empty office and kept the judgment off her face while she asked the questions SHIELD needed answered.

He explained, as much as he was able to put it into words, what it had been like to be Loki’s pet assassin. He detailed the enemies of SHIELD that he had sought out and recruited to expand Loki’s ranks. He told her that he’d planned every stage of the attack on the helicarrier. She must have suspected that, of course; who but him knew the ventilation system of the helicarrier that thoroughly?

It was exhausting.

He’d tracked down Natasha’s quarters afterwards. She woke when he entered her room as he’d known she would, but only stirred enough to move over in her bed to make room for him. She’d kissed his temple and the corner of his mouth when he settled in next to her. They didn’t do this often - both of them were too wired and solitary by nature.

He’d sought her out for comfort and to have someone else to watch his back while he slept. Even if someone wanted to get their pound of flesh out of him for the people he’d killed, there weren’t many people stupid enough to take on Natasha.
It meant that Natasha would be sleeping even more lightly than usual but Clint felt pretty sure she wouldn’t begrudge him for it, circumstances being what they were.

In the morning, they parted to go to their respective apartments and change.

Pointing his weapon at a defeated Loki had thrilled and satisfied him, but seeing the god chained and muzzled undeniably had merit too.

Loki flicked a glance in his direction and Clint smirked back, cocky and unaffected and glad that the sunglasses hid his eyes.

When they were assembled, Natasha bent to his ear and reminded him that according to the Norse idea of punishment, Loki’s day was going to get a whole lot worse very soon.

It made him genuinely smile.

After Thor and Loki were gone, everyone had gone their separate ways. Clint was sorry he didn’t get a chance to really talk to Captain America – he’d get to lord it over Coulson for years – but Steve had set off with determination and Clint accepted that he wasn’t the only one who had some things to work through.

When he and Natasha made it back to HQ there were people waiting for him – two bureaucrats and a matching set of enforcers, Clint guessed, judging from the cut of their suits.

“Agent Barton, we’d like you to come with us, please.”

Clint raised an eyebrow. There was something a little too focused in the way they looked at him. It put him on edge and beside him he could feel Natasha casually continue walking. She’d circle around to get behind them, he knew.

“I need to report to Coulson,” Clint said.

“We are handing your assessment, not SHIELD,” The woman replied.

“Who’s ‘we,’ exactly?”

She smiled at him and didn’t answer.

Clint resisted the urge to put his thumbs in his belt loops to get his hands closer to his weapons.

“Agent Barton,” Fury called, walking up to join them. Clint didn’t relax, exactly, because Fury wasn’t looking at these people like they were allies. Natasha appeared behind his shoulder, still affecting an air of unconcern and inattention.

“Silverton. Meggs,” Fury greeted the two officials. His eye flicked over the other two men without naming them, solidifying Clint’s suspicion that they were just muscle.

“Nick,” The woman – Silverton – said, smiling a professional, dishonest smile. “It’s good to see you again.”

“What’s your business with my asset?” Fury replied, nodding at Clint.

The smile didn’t waver.
“We’ve been keeping an eye on things. With recent performance in mind, the Council needs to assess to its standards that Agent Barton is no longer compromised.”

“You say ‘recent performance,’” Fury said, displeasure clear, “Did you miss the part where Barton fought as a member of the Avengers team?”

“I wasn’t referring to Agent Barton’s performance,” Silverton replied. “In fact, I’m glad you came out to meet us, Nick. There are things we need to discuss too. Agent Barton, if you would please follow my associates?”

Clint looked at Fury for confirmation. The man inclined his head slightly, not looking away from Silverton.

He caught Natasha’s eye only briefly before he followed the other three back out to the street and the waiting van. He wasn’t the only one with a bad feeling about this.

“So,” Clint asked after he’d taken a seat. He rubbed his hands over his knees and inhaled to continue.

“Please remove any weapons you are carrying,” The man across from him interrupted.

Clint paused, but accepted the necessity and surrendered his knives and pistol. He was sure Loki was out of his head and couldn’t really fault these people for wanting to verify his claim.

Of course, he thought, the sticky question was: how were they planning to test for magical mind control?

He left the wire in the cuff of his sleeve.

“Should I just keep internally calling you Henchman One?” Clint asked, handing everything else over.

Henchman One gave him an unimpressed look and removed a pair of handcuffs from the case he’d secured Clint’s weapons in.

“Put these on.”

Clint did.

They were standard police issue and if he needed to work around them or take them off, he could.

He started to ask, again, how the assessment was going to proceed when Henchman 2 put a hood over face.

Clint automatically reached up to take it off.

“Agent Barton,” The bureaucrat, Meggs, said, “Leave it on. If you are still compromised, you cannot know our facilities’ location. And if you aren't, you'll understand the necessity.”

Clint dropped his hands to his lap with some effort. He didn't like being blindfolded. At all.

“How does this assessment work?” He asked.

He wasn’t really expecting an answer. Meggs was clearly enjoying being in control and holding information back from him just added to that.
Of course, Clint also very much wasn’t expecting the dart that pierced him in the chest, either.

Whatever was in it was ridiculously strong. Clint only had time to fumble a hand up and pull the thing free before his body went numb.

His consciousness left soon after.

*  
*  
*  

Clint woke to the hiss and sigh sounds of machinery. The smell of the place made him sure that he was in a medical facility.

He stayed limp, kept his heart rate even and calm and assessed himself.

He was still drugged. There was a decided lag between his command to move his fingers and the digits actually moving, and his thoughts were still foggy. He had a pounding headache and his mouth was dry. He hated being drugged.

On the bright side, though, he wasn’t wearing the hood anymore.

On the downside, he was tied to the table he was lying on. And there was a soreness in his muscles that made him think he’d been out of it for some time.

“Welcome back, Agent Barton. Please do not move,” Clint didn’t know the voice and wondered what had given away the fact that he was awake.

He opened his eyes.

He was on an MRI table, which was actually somewhat reassuring. He understood the point of that. When the table retracted, he did as told and held still.

Over the noise of the machine, he heard the click of heels on tile.

“Progress?” That was Silverton.

The rattle of a wheeled chair being moved.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Blood came back clean, aside from what we gave him. The scan’s still working but I’m not seeing anything abnormal yet.”

The MRI finished. Clint looked down at his arms when the table drew back out. The crook of his right elbow was dotted with needle marks. More than what would have been needed to draw blood. How long had they been keeping him under?

“Agent Barton,” Silverton said. She stepped around the doctor and started undoing the straps holding him to the table.

Clint sat up with a groan, spine crackling audibly when he twisted his torso. He felt a flood of dizziness and held the edge of the table in a white-knuckled grip until it passed.

Silverton gave him the moment patiently.
When he steadied, she gestured for him to give her his hands. She was holding the standard issue cuffs out in obvious intent.

Clint glowered but let her secure his wrists.

“How long was I out?” He asked.

“Longer than we’d intended. Our transport was delayed. How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” He answered candidly. Silverton set his teeth on edge but cooperating might get him out of this place faster. He brought his cuffed hands up to his face and wiped his mouth and gummy eyes. Fuck, he could use a shower.

It was then that he noticed what he was wearing. He’d felt the difference, of course, and had thought he’d been changed into scrubs. That had been irritating and disturbing enough; he didn’t like the thought of someone undressing him while he’d been knocked unconscious.

But this was a prisoner’s uniform.

He plucked at it and gave Silverton his clearest ‘the fuck?’ look.

“You were asked to remove all of your weapons, Agent Barton.”

The wire in his sleeve. Damn it.

Something of the thought must have flashed across his face because Silverton smiled at him.

“I do wish you hadn’t disobeyed, Agent Barton.” She said, but she didn’t stop smiling as she said it. “It is going to make proving your loyalty a lot more difficult.”

*

*

*

Silverton asked him about his time with Loki, of course. The first time, Clint gave her the story with as much detail as he could let go of. It may have been a bit abridged but it was more or less what he’d told Hill.

They took a break for lunch. Silverton wandered off and Clint was given pasta and a spoon. Clint was sure there was some smartass behind that well aware of how difficult it would be to eat with hands cuffed to the chair and spited them by more or less bending forward and eating from the bowl directly.

Well. It was half spite and half ravenous hunger that had snuck up on him when he’d smelled the food.

He wiped his fingers over his nose and cheeks and licked them clean afterwards, grimacing at the chemical taste lingering on his skin.

There were ten punctures with varying ages dotting his arms. Clint shifted in his seat and pulled
down his pants enough to take a good look at his hip. He’d landed hard during the battle and knew the skin there had been a mottled purple bruise.

Clint considered his flesh and estimated that he’d been out of it for at least three but perhaps as many as five days.

Fucking hell.

Henchman Two came to retrieve his plate and ignored Clint when he asked for a beer and a Snickers bar.

It was over an hour before Silverton came back.

Her eyes flicked to his chin and Clint was sure there was a spot of sauce he’d missed. He grinned cheekily at her and left his hands on the arm rests.

“Tell me about your time with Loki,” Silverton ordered, and Clint’s smile faded.

“I just did,” He said.

Silverton smiled placidly at him. Clint was really beginning to dislike that expression.

“Tell me again.”

So Clint did.

*

*

*

The third time, she asked that he try to use as few of the words he’d used previously as possible.

Clint understood that. It was an interrogation technique. If it had really happened the way Clint said it did, he should be able to describe it without using memorized words.

Fine. Whatever.

He talked her through the events again.

Silverton called it a day when he got to the part where he explained waking up in the helicarrier.

Clint was led to his cell.

It was smaller than prison standard. There was a toilet and a fucking bright overhead light, but no bed. When Henchmens 3-7 started rotating to bang on the bars throughout what Clint supposed was the night, Clint understood that sleep deprivation would also be a part of his interrogation.

*
The fourth time she had him repeat himself, she asked a lot more questions about how it had felt when Loki touched him with the staff.

Clint explained, as objectively as he could, what it had been like.

The fifth time she asked, he stopped cooperating and let his irritation bleed through.

After that, she showed him the surveillance of the New Mexico research facility. Clint watched, over and over, Loki reach out and casually destroy him.

“You say that the process lasted for a long time, but as you see here it’s a length of only a few seconds. Can you explain that discrepancy?”

“You’re fucking with me, right?” Clint asked.

Silverton narrowed her eyes warningly and Clint rolled his own.

“Have you ever been tortured?”

She regarded him levelly and didn’t answer.

*  

*  

*  

The time after that, she didn’t ask for the full story again. Her questions were much narrower and focused.

How had it felt when Loki took possession of him, and how had Loki been giving him orders.

He miiiiight have lost his patience at that point.

*  

*  

*  

He managed to fall asleep even with the guards banging on the bars of his cell.

He woke to hands on him, dragging him out of the corner he was slumped in. They took him down to the shower room and stripped him of the uniform he was wearing. The guards took hoses and blasted Clint with cold water.

The force of it stole his breath and bruised him. Furious, hurt, he didn’t really think it through before he attacked.

It took four of them to subdue him but it ended with a cracked rib and a new round of tranquilizers in his system.

*
It was perhaps another day after that before he saw Silverton again. The cuffs that he’d snapped in the fight had been replaced with heavy manacles. Clint wouldn’t be getting out of them.

He ignored Silverton when she asked about Loki.

“I want to speak with Fury.”

“There is nothing Director Fury can or will do to discontinue our assessment, Agent Barton.”

“Coulson, then,” Clint answered. He really doubted the way he was being treated had been sanctioned by SHIELD.

“Agent Phillip Coulson was killed in the assault you led on the helicarrier,”

“What?” He asked. The world whited out for Clint for a moment, the words existing in the space between them without connecting to him at all.

“You’re lying,” He barked when the words did connect. His anger spiked at being played like this. Repetition and sleep deprivation hadn’t been enough to get what they wanted from him, apparently.

“Loki impaled him after his escape from the holding cell.”

Silverton gave him an unsympathetic look, and comprehension blossomed in Clint’s mind.

Coulson. Dead.

Clint still owed Coulson a beer from the bet they’d made in New Mexico. And he’d been sitting on a great story from his time babysitting Selvig to rebut with the next time Phil mentioned Stark.

“How was Loki giving you orders?” Silverton said instead of answering. “If you cooperate, you will be released back to SHIELD’s custody.”

Clint looked away.

Silverton repeated herself a few times. That professional mask of hers slipped noticeably when she called for the guards to take him back to his cell.

They didn’t feed him that night, and when he nodded off in his corner he was taken out for another round with the hoses.

Clint didn’t fight that time.

* 

* 

* 

Weeks passed like that. Clint still wasn’t allowed to sleep for any length of time, Silverton asked
the same questions again and again that Clint continued to refuse to answer.

Clint just had to wait for someone at SHIELD to step in. Or, hell, the way things were going he wouldn’t object to a save from his team. He could imagine Captain America’s response to this, or Banner’s. Fuck, Tony would probably blow the place up just on principle. The man did have a love for explosions.

Any day now.

They were coming.

*

*

*

This time, he woke up to the sound of the door being opened. He’d gotten jaded to the sound of batons on the bars quite a while ago, but the door opening was something that usually meant he was being dragged out for either another 'shower' or another session with Silverton.

The guards shoved someone else inside.

“Miller?” Clint asked in confusion when the door was locked again. Miller was a SHIELD agent. Clint was pretty sure he’d been stationed on the helicarrier.

Miller turned to look at him, a moment of recognition giving way to furious disgust as he took Clint in.

“You traitorous son of a bitch,” The man hissed.

Clint could blame a lot of things for his failure to react – fatigue, surprise, hunger – but Miller landed a solid punch across his temple that left him stunned before Clint really registered he was being attacked.

Miller got in a second blow that caught him in the mouth, bursting his lower lip. Clint got his manacled hands up after that. Miller’s third punch hit the metal of them hard and the man grunted in pain as his knuckle broke.

Clint rolled to the side, trying to get his feet under him but that blow to the head had disoriented him. He stumbled.

Miller kicked him in the stomach, leaving Clint gasping and undefended when he was kicked again in the ribs.

The guards came in then. Miller got in a few more kicks before he was pulled off, and Clint looked up just in time to catch the man’s spit across his cheek.

The guards pulled Miller out and locked the doors.

Clint could hear the man cursing him the entire length of the walk down the corridor.

He curled around his ribs, the cracked one definitely broken now. He wiped his cheek off. Blood was pouring from his split eyebrow and blinding his left eye. His burst lip was making just as much of a mess.
He was there for maybe an hour when the guards came back and took him to medical. His ribs were wrapped and eyebrow taped up.

He didn’t fall asleep again when they took him back to his cell.

*

*

*

In the next round with Silverton, Clint spat at her.

It wasn’t a particularly good idea, but it was the only thing he wanted to do in that moment.

*

*

*

They injected him with something before they took him out again.

The walk from his cell to the interrogation room was a warped distension of time. This wasn’t sodium penethol – Clint knew what that did to him. This was something else.

He didn’t even really hear her when she asked her questions. Her voice closed the distance to him and he felt the question with his fingers.

How had Loki given him orders?

He replied, fascinated by the shifting weight of his tongue as he spoke.

The voice asked him to explain.

Clint had to look up at that, annoyed since he’d been perfectly concise.

Silverton’s face was a tangle of deceit. Clint saw her hunger the way he’d seen Loki’s hunger, and he swallowed hard.

He didn’t want to give Loki anything else. Loki had taken too much as it was.

Clint bit the tip of his tongue. It hurt, but he kept the white of the pain between his teeth and bit down on that too.

Jesus, he was high.

The Loki woman asked him some more questions, but Clint just bit his tongue harder.

When they dragged him out, it took Clint a while to find his feet.

This time, the guards let him sleep.

*
Clint barely made it to the toilet to vomit when he woke up. The bile burned his throat, the force of it splitting his lip again and adding the tang of blood to the foulness in his mouth.

His ribs screamed at him for all the heaving but nausea was winning this one.

It took him a long time to stop.

He collapsed, exhausted and in pain when he was finished.

The guards had left him sandwiches on a napkin and a Styrofoam cup filled with juice.

He knew it was perverse and manipulative to feel grateful to them.

Clint ate and drank greedily, his lip making everything taste slightly of blood.

When he was brought back into the interrogation room, he felt better than he had in at least a month.

The guards chained him to the chair at his wrists and ankles. They sent another strap around his waist to hold him in place.

Clint’s heart sank, because it was pretty clear they were planning to either drug him or torture him. Conversations didn’t require this many restraints.

Silverton entered the room empty handed and sat, as she always did, in her seat across the room from him. She crossed her legs and cupped her hands on her knee, patient and expectant. Clint eyed the door warily and wasn’t disappointed when a moment later someone else came in. The man was wearing a white coat. Clint thought he was a lab technician.

“No,” Clint whispered, the sound dragged out of him, the sheer force of his denial forcing the word out.

“Agent Barton, we’d like you to describe what you feel when I touch the device to your sternum,” The man said, hefting Loki’s spear.

Clint struggled against the restraints, bucking and straining and accomplishing nothing.

“No!” He yelled, panicked adrenaline flooding his system and narrowing his vision. “Don’t, don’t do this, don’t do this! Fucking please!”

The tip of the spear pressed against him and the pain swallowed him.

It lasted too long to measure but on the other side of it everything fell into the peace Clint remembered.

“It hurt, sir,” He replied calmly, “But it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

The man wanted to know if Clint felt the same as he had with Loki; if he was as powerful in his command of the spear.

“No, sir,” He said. He noticed Silverton twitching in surprise at his response. His master hadn’t said anything aloud but that was hardly a deterrent in answering a question. It wasn’t Clint’s fault
Silverton couldn’t hear it.

His master wanted to know how his command was different.

“You’re human; Loki wasn’t.”

His master was angry with the response.

“I still answer to you completely.” Clint assured him, wishing he wasn’t tied to the chair so he could sink to his knees and show his sincerity.

“Why is he saying that?” Silverton demanded.

A flash of hatred and impatience. His master wanted Silverton dead.

“Untie me, sir, and I’ll make it happen.”

Ah, but that was wrong. The man felt a wave of indecision and panic. Clint fell silent. He’d spoken and it made his master unhappy. Solution – don’t speak.

He stared forward passively, willing to wait until he received a new command.

“Bring him out of it,” Silverton commanded.

Clint’s brow wrinkled. Neither he nor his master wanted Clint ‘brought out of it.’

A wave of hesitation, and then the man spun the staff around and cracked him in the side of the head with the end of it.

The world came gasping back.

The enormity of what had just happened to him left him speechless and shaking.

He had to swallow twice before he could speak.

“Let me go,” He said hoarsely. The guy with the staff – his previous fucking master – actually fucking laughed.

Clint saw red, but he spoke very slowly and clearly.

“There is no chance that my team will not find out what you just did, and these are people you do not want to go against. Let me go, and I’ll do my best to convince them not to skin you.”

Silverton signaled at the camera and a moment later the guards came in.

Clint could no more fight the syringe they jabbed him with than he could avoid the spear that had come before it.

“He wanted to kill you, you know,” Clint slurred to Silverton while he was still able.

He thought he might have seen some wariness in her eyes, a flicker of doubt, before the drug took him under.

*  

*
Clint was moved to a room with a bed and for the most part was left alone. He was fed on a schedule and ignored the rest of the time.

He slept and paced, ate, used the toilet, glared at the camera and slept again. Every other day, he was escorted down to the shower rooms and allowed to actually shower. He was given a change of clothes afterward and led back to his cell.

It was better than being denied sleep and blasted with water but boredom and dread had him climbing the walls three days in.

Two weeks passed.

*  
*  
*  

When the guards came to collect him again, leading him to the interrogation room instead of the baths, Clint fought.

He took down one of them with an elbow to the throat before he got shot with a dart.

He woke tied to the chair again.

He glared across the room at Silverton even though fear was making his pulse hammer in his throat. His forehead beaded with sweat and his mouth took on the metallic taste of panic long before the door opened again.

It took Clint a moment to remember the name – Meggs.

“What happened to the last guy?” Clint asked, trying not to be so obvious in the way he stared at the spear Meggs was carrying.

Silverton smiled at him.

“How many people did Loki have under his control?” She asked.

Clint licked his lips. He drew a breath and let it out.

Meggs hefted the spear and walked towards him.

“Stop!” He barked, recoiling into the chair as much as he was able to.

Meggs let the butt of the spear hit the floor with a heavy clang. He leaned towards Clint with an expectant smirk.

“John,” Silverton chided.


“Ah, not anymore,” She corrected.
Meggs smiled widely at her.

“Nicole,” He amended, dipping his head in teasing apology. He turned back to Clint, picking up the spear again in obvious threat.

Clint turned his head away from it.

“Fourteen,” He replied.

“Are you sure?” Silverton asked.

“Yes!” Clint answered, anger bleeding over the fear and making his voice louder than he’d intended.

“Cano only had half that many,” Meggs told Silverton.

She nodded.

“Really, only five before he started showing strain,” Meggs added.

The two of them regarded Clint with obvious consideration.

Clint fought the urge to drop his gaze, make himself small. If they were going to enslave him again they were fucking well going to have to look him in the eyes while they did it.

“Let's start with three,” Meggs said and signaled to the camera. “We need to know if there's any deterioration in the bond. Let's say one month? That should be a good trial period.”

Silverton hummed an agreement.

The door opened and a new technician entered. Meggs handed him the spear. The man took it, rotating it in his hand with an excited, wary expression.

“Please don't do this,” Clint said. His wrists had started bleeding at some point but Clint couldn't manage to make himself stop pulling at the cuffs.

The technician met his eyes and Clint tried to pour every ounce of his surety that this was wrong into his gaze.

The man wavered and flicked his eyes away.

Clint took a tentative breath.

The man stepped forward and touched the spear to Clint's chest.

*

*

*

The month passed easily.

Clint's new master was less focused than either of the previous two. His orders lacked Loki's burning, angry passion or Cano's eagerness.

Jason's command was more academic than ambitious.
Still, Clint followed his orders with the single-minded devotion his master deserved. It was to test his loyalty, he knew, and so Clint readily answered when he was asked intimate questions about his past. He raked a puckered stripe across his thigh with a hot poker when asked to burn himself. When he was told to kill his blue-eyed companion, a girl with a Hungarian accent and beautiful tattoos, he snapped her neck without hesitation. He didn't know why Jason would want one of his own to be killed, but it wasn't Clint's place to question.

Jason had faltered a little at that. Clint tried to console him – the desire for comfort came through the bond very clearly – but was pushed away in disgust.

It was confusing, in some ways. What Jason asked him to do often contrasted with what Jason wanted him to do. Clint learned quickly that the spoken commands were paramount.

Miller replaced the tattooed girl. Clint accepted the man as his comrade easily. Whatever had happened between them before wasn't important next to the bond they shared with Jason now.

Their willingness to work together pleased Silverton which, in turn, pleased Jason. It was all that mattered.

In the evening, Clint placidly walked back to his cell, secured his handcuffs to the bed and rested. He didn't need sleep, not like this, but he let his master's dreams seep into his mind while he lay in bed.

Every morning, Clint sat up when he felt Jason come awake and waited patiently for the guards to come in and take him back to the lab.

He was tested. He went through physical exams and mental exams, he demonstrated his marksmanship, he surrendered samples of blood and urine and semen when asked.

Days turned into weeks.

Silverton interviewed him several times. She wanted to know if they (he and his two blue-eyed companions) could be ordered to do specific tasks even when Jason wasn't present.

Clint wanted to scoff at her.

This woman thought herself so far above Jason, but here she sat – ignorant and small.

He answered her questions because Jason wanted him to. He demonstrated the bond, because of course he could act on Jason's commands outside of his presence. What use would he be if he couldn't?

Clint was sent on a wetwork assignment.

He'd done many of these in SHIELD. The only real difference this time was that he was entirely solo. No back-up, no handler in his ear, no superior officer to report back to.

Jason asked him to take the equipment he needed and go kill a reporter causing trouble, and so Clint did.

When he came back successful, he was sent out again.

At the end of the month, Jason's intention came across the bond.

“You don't have to do this,” Clint told him. “Really, I don't mind being yours. This is better than
what I was before.”

Uncertainty washed across the bond and Clint dared to press the advantage.

“You don't need to answer to her. I could get rid of her for you easily.”

Clint wanted to dodge the blow to the head.

But that would displease Jason and Clint was, first and foremost, loyal.

When the world came back, Clint fell to his knees and threw up violently.

It took a long time for the retching to subside enough for him to stand, but when it did it took three guards to pry his hands away from Jason's neck.

*

*

*

Clint was taken back to his cell.

The nightmares left him twitching and exhausted; the nausea destroyed his appetite. He screamed vitriol at the guards and camera until he went hoarse, throat bleeding and dry.

He gave up.

Too much time had passed for him to believe anything other than that SHIELD had no intention of retrieving him. As for the Avengers, did any of them even know he was missing? They might try to find him if they knew, but Clint really doubted SHIELD would have told them.

Clint thought about Natasha.

No. These people were too powerful to confront outright. He knew Natasha. She wasn't coming for him – not while he was in this facility.

But, then he thought about the reporters he'd killed.

Whatever the Council was doing in testing that spear, Clint knew that his skill as a marksman was too far above average for them to waste him as an asset. At some point, they would send him out again.

It meant being turned into a puppet again but Natasha was out there. She knew Clint was missing. And she knew how to snap him out of that hold.

The only way out was through.

The realization – the plan, really, feeble though it was - did nothing at all to stop him from shaking with apprehension.

It did, though, let him stare down Meggs coldly when he was taken back to the interrogation room two weeks later.
He still fought when Meggs brought the spear to his chest. He thrashed hard enough in his restraints that Meggs overshot the mark and dug the point through the prison clothes and into the flesh of Clint's chest.

Natasha would save him.

It was Clint's last thought before the pain and the blue nothingness of servitude took him away again.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was really quite difficult to write.
Chapter 8

For the most part, Tony liked being right. It satisfied his ego and comforted him; the world lining up to his expectations.

Tony watched the videos and wished, passionately, to be wrong.

He’d thought he recognized the woman’s voice. In point of fact, he’d been planning to get Jarvis to run voice recognition on it against what his suit had recorded when he’d visited the helicarrier. He didn’t need to.

Once he had her name he was able to find her and her organization. It put dates on her promotion to SHIELD’s director and opened up new trails to be explored.

When he’d finished watching the last video file, Tony downed the scotch he’d poured (pineapple juice didn’t really cut it for this) and made his way back out to the den.

Bruce had migrated out to the balcony. Tony joined him, wrapping fingers around the railing and leaning towards Bruce so that their shoulders touched.

Bruce’s mouth tightened – not at the invasion of his personal space, Tony knew, but at the knowledge that if Tony was reacting like this the rest of videos couldn’t have been good.

“How bad?” Bruce asked after a moment.

“Very.”

Bruce nodded and they both lapsed back into silence.

The fresh, cold air made Tony feel better. The bite of the wind was almost painful and Tony found that oddly soothing just then.

“It’s a group called the World Security Council. Privately funded. They own SHIELD, technically, although that doesn’t show up on paper. It’s a global organization. Fun fact: they’re the dicks that sent a nuke into New York.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Tony said, “I’d thought that was SHIELD, too. Not so much. Or – not originally, I should say, since it was a SHIELD jet. You know, Fury actually shot down the first plane with an anti-aircraft missile?”

Bruce’s other eyebrow joined the first.

Tony drummed his fingers on the railing.

“They’ve figured out how to use Loki’s staff. Silverton… that’s the woman in charge, the one who’s calling herself Fury. She has a second-in-command, John Meggs; he’s the one with the godstick now but she’s clearly the one calling the shots.”

Tony huffed a bitter laugh.

“That first guy we saw, the one who,” Tony gestured, implying a jab, “That tattooed girl. They were testing how many people the staff could control. Turns out, and how’s this for a shitty bright
“What happened to Clint?” Bruce asked.

Tony took a deep breath and the cold air scaled his lungs. He suppressed a cough and the aborted movement sent a twinge of pain through his mangled sternum.

“I need a drink,” He said and turned back inside.

Bruce followed.

Tony went to the bar and, considering it, had to set the scotch back down with conscious effort. He'd had enough to be buzzed and loose – more and he'd get sloppy, and now wasn't a good time for that, however much he wanted it.

He poured himself water instead.

“They guinea pigged him,” He continued, back to Bruce. “They wanted to know how complete the control was. How much they could make him do. It was... probably a very good idea you left when you did, because I've got to say I was pretty hard pressed not to turn green and go on a rampage myself.”

Tony turned back around in time to see Bruce's mouth quirk slightly at that. It wasn't humor, really; just acknowledgment of the line.

“Do you remember the Everhart thing that happened back in October?” Tony asked.

Bruce shook his head.

“No, I was-”

“Under a rock, right,” Tony interrupted.

He ran a hand through his hair.

“She was a reporter. I knew her, actually. Well, I say 'knew,' but... She was feisty, ambitious, a little bitchy. I think you'd have hated her to be honest. But she was a great reporter. She was shot in the head with a sniper rifle. It sparked a scare because two more reporters were killed the same way within a week of it.”

“Clint?” Bruce asked quietly.

Tony nodded slowly, taking another drink before he continued.

“The thing with the Mandarin blew up in a big way after that and the reporter assassinations lost the public's attention. It got lumped into something the Mandarin was responsible for, and with that guy being an active, obvious threat...”

Tony trailed off.

“So,” Bruce said after a moment, “How do we go about getting Clint back?”

Tony put his glass down. He leaned back against the counter and laced his fingers together.

“I have Jarvis analyzing the videos to try and figure out where Clint was being held, but it might
not be where he is now. And even if he's still there the Council controls SHIELD. Taking them on directly would be an ugly fight,” He rubbed a hand over his mouth. “We need to assemble the team.”

“Bring Rhodes and the new pilot into the loop,” Bruce said. “If SHIELD is using the Iron Patriot to look for Natasha, it-”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I called Rhodey in. He's on his way.”

“We'll be looking for Rogers, then?” Bruce considered that. He made his voice light when he added; “I hear Phoenix is nice this time of year.”

“Whoever told you that lied,” Tony asserted. “But before we do that, come here.”

Tony led Bruce back into the lab.

“Jarvis, you got it?”

“Production is complete, sir,” Jarvis said. “And Colonel Rhodes will be arriving in two minutes.”

He picked the tool up out of the cradle, angling it in his hands to look at it.

“Awesome. Okay, you're going to want to jab me, give of take, here,” Tony said, passing it to Bruce and indicating a spot on his lower back.

“Is this a tracker? You want me to put a tracker on you?”

“Given everything that's happening, I can't say that it doesn't sound like a good idea. A rage monster is great and all, but with my knowledge of weaponry and their new joy for mind control? If the Council is given a chance to snatch me... Yeah. I want someone to be able to find me too. I don't have the arc reactor to get in the way anymore.”

“That's optimistic,” Bruce observed dryly. Tony sniffed and pulled a couple of band-aids out of a cupboard, setting them on the desk in preparation.

“You're next, big guy. Just think of them like friendship bracelets. It's silly if only one of us has them.”

“Not the word choice I'd've gone with,” Bruce said.

Tony resisted the urge to flinch when the cold tip of the machine touched his skin.

“Count of three?” Bruce asked.

“Sure,” Tony agreed.

“One,” Bruce said, then triggered the injection.

“Ow fucking damnit, I knew you were going to do that!” Tony complained. Bruce applied the band-aid over the little well of blood and dropped Tony's shirt back down.

Tony waggled his hand for the tool and Bruce gave it to him.

He carefully changed the needle and inserted another tracker. It was a beautiful design, and one that he couldn't risk patenting. Right now Jarvis was the only one who could access the signal and it needed to stay that way.
Rhodey arrived while Tony was returning the favor.

“Should I ask?”

“Tracking devices. You want one?” Tony offered, mostly joking. He washed his hands carefully after applying the bandage. He hadn't gotten any of Bruce’s blood on him but better safe than sorry.

“I'm good, thanks,” Rhodey replied.

“So, first things first. There's something I think you both should see.”

The lights in the lab dropped. Jarvis brought up the screen he and Bruce had been viewing.

“This is going to be a little rough, Bruce,” Tony warned. He waited for Bruce to nod before playing the clip.

“Don't!” Clint was yelling, writhing against his restraints in obvious distress, “Don't do this, don't do this! Fucking please!”

“Is that Loki's... um, spear?” Rhodey asked. Tony watched both men's faces tighten in anger at the scene unfolding.

“Yeah,” Bruce answered simply.

The moment the spear touched Clint, the archer relaxed against his restraints. His eyes washed black and faded almost immediately into that unnatural blue.

“It hurt, sir, but it doesn't hurt anymore,” Clint said calmly.

“Who's doing this?” Rhodey demanded.

“The guy with the staff dies a week after this video was taken. He works for an organization called the World Security Council. Keep watching,” Tony said.

On screen, Clint answered a few more unspoken questions.

“I still answer to you completely,” Clint said, face and tone earnest, eager to please.

“Why is he saying that?”

“That,” Tony said, “Is the voice of a woman named Andrea Silverton. She's going by Nicole Fury now. She's the acting director of SHIELD.”

“Oh shit,” Rhodey breathed.

“Untie me, sir, and I’ll make it happen,” Clint's smile was coy and promising. Tony didn't really want to know what the promise had been for.

“Bring him out of it,” Silverton ordered.

They watched Clint get smacked in the head with the end of the staff. It was an audible crack, and it was a moment before Clint blinked his eyes back into focus.

They could all see him shaking, swallowing in horror with what he just went through.

“This,” Tony said, waving a hand at the screen.
“Let me go,” Clint said quietly. The guy holding the spear laughed and, not for the first time, Tony felt a twinge of satisfaction knowing the man was dead.

“There is no chance that my team will not find out what you just did, and these are people you do not want to go against. Let me go, and I’ll do my best to convince them not to skin you.”

Jarvis closed the video.

“Bruce, you okay?” Tony asked. Bruce's grip on the desk was a little... white-knuckled.

“Dandy,” The scientist replied.

“Tony, what the hell is going on?” Rhodey asked.

Tony scratched his beard. “We have people out there who are counting on us to bring them back. I don't want to fail them, and I don't think I can do this alone.”

It was more honest than Tony generally liked to be but having watched Clint beg and be tortured, his mask was a little thin at the moment.

Bruce started ticking it off on his fingers.

“Natasha is MIA in Russia, Captain Rogers has disappeared somewhere out in Arizona, and Clint Barton is being used by the Council as a mind-controlled assassin. Thor's still off world. No idea how to get in touch with him. We can't trust SHIELD right now. So... that leaves us.”

“I need to call Carol.”

“In a second,” Tony said, glancing at his watch to confirm the time. “She's still in-transit to Lensk. Bruce should fill you in on the details first; I've got to go get Happy. But.. you're probably going to need to suit up, soon. Happy Birthday.”

“My birthday isn't until – wait, what?”

“Sir,” Jarvis said, “Completion of War Machine Mark 2 e.t.a. twenty minutes.”

Despite everything that was going on, Tony couldn't help but smirk at the expression that put on Rhodey's face.

*  
*  
*  

The first time, Loki dismissed the little stab of pain as his magics trying to heal his body against the suppressing cuffs and muzzle. The green beast had been thorough and his bruises went deep.

It had been short- a hot, sharp pulse like being bitten by a flea- that faded fairly quickly into an ache. The feeling was dismissed as Loki had had larger hurts and concerns at the time.

The second time he felt it had been at his trial. The unexpected bite of it had made him twitch in surprise in the middle of his defense. It hadn't gone away that second time, and the pull of it had distracted him.
Not that Loki really believed his sentence would have been the slightest bit different if he'd been completely hale and focused.

The Allfather had stripped him of his powers, sealing Loki's magics from him and leaving that part of his mind a raw, maddening wound.

He was imprisoned deep below the palace in a cage that reminded him of the glass room he'd stayed in on the mortal's clever little flying ship. More square, perhaps, a cheerier fire to brighten the place up a bit. He had a table, books that the guards left which he knew to be a gift from his mother.

Loki was left to rot.

It was a kinder punishment than he'd expected.

The third time, perhaps a week later, the pain in his head grew sharper, more insistent. With nothing at all to distract himself, Loki settled on the floor and poured his attention inward, trying to stamp it out. His bones would knit, his bruises would fade in their own time; this persistent reach of magics that he couldn't access hurt more than helped.

Except, it wasn't coming from inside him.

Loki had opened his eyes at that, losing that connection with his innermost mind in a wash of shock. He squared himself in the corner of his cage and felt his heart beat heavily with unwelcome dread.

The Chitauri. The Other.

Loki didn't know how they had found him, threats of being able to track him to any crevasse or barren moon aside. Loki knew posturing when he heard it. With his magics stifled and sealed there should have been no connection for them to follow.

There should have been no connection for them to follow, he mentally amended.

Loki grit his teeth and tried to ignore the ache in his head. If he did not reach for them, it would take them much longer to project themselves in his mind.

He would ignore them.

For now, it was the best he could do.

Loki's days passed with torturous boredom. He finished the books too quickly. With no one and nothing else to interact with, he slept more often than not.

His hair grew longer. His skin, always damningly pale in golden Asgard, grew paler.

The throbbing in his head ebbed and flowed.

At one point the pain hit a crescendo so sharp it had left Loki squeezing his temples and moaning like an animal. It stayed like that for a day. He was sure the Chitauri would steal into his mind, speak to him, punish him, gloat at their victory in finding him.

But, all at once, the pain had snapped and vanished entirely.

Loki hadn't known what to make of it.
Two days passed with nothing and Loki began to tentatively explore his inner mind again.

He was in a deep, meditative state when the next pulse hit him and the surprise of recognizing it knocked him out of his trance again.

This wasn't the Chitauri.

Someone was using his scepter.
The second time the pain in his head hit that overwhelming plateau, Loki became aware of hands over his cupping his face.

He’d wanted to recoil, to shove this person away and curse them for their presumption.

Loki’s head hurt too much for him to organize his objections and, besides, the hands were cool and firm. They felt like a balm and there was something teasingly familiar about them.

The pain snapped, receding all at once and leaving him reeling in surprise and relief with its abrupt absence.

He took a steadying breath and opened his eyes.

“Mother,” He whispered. She had not been to see him once in the months he’d been down here. Loki had assumed himself abandoned.

Frigga smoothed her hands through his hair and he wanted to object for the sweat and dirt he would stain her fingers with - but, greedy and tired, he held his tongue.

“The guards brought your condition to our attention,” Frigga said, her eyes on his dry, cracked lips. “They thought you were trying to trick them.”

Loki huffed a small, bitter laugh.

“What is this, Loki?” Frigga asked quietly, still gliding her hands over his brow. A mother’s touch. He leaned into it.

He considered holding the information back from her- a habit of secret keeping that had grown during his absence. But, of everyone, he realized Frigga was his best chance at fixing this.

“There is a connection to my magic that Odin did not smother completely,” He divulged, weighing and considering each word as he spoke them.

Frigga’s hands stilled and Loki smiled. Powerless, imprisoned, weakened with pain and still he could inspire worry and wariness.

He shifted and an echo of that intangible hurt washed red through his vision.

Oh yes, he thought; how fearsome I am indeed.

“The scepter I was given… the power poured into it was partially my own. When the Allfather sealed my magics, he only sealed those inside me. The barriers do not stifle that external force from feeding off me.”

Frigga drew her hands back and sat down, meeting his eyes at last and regarding him closely.

“The scepter is still on Midgard,” She said. It wasn’t a question but Loki inclined his head in agreement anyway.
He didn’t need to say anything else. Frigga had taught him the basics of magic; he knew she could fill in the rest. What she would do about it, if anything, he had no idea.

He held his silence as she gracefully rose and left him.

*
*
*

Carol twitched in surprise when the corner of her screen lit with an incoming call.

She answered it without meaning to when her eyes flicked to the corner of the screen. Controlling things with her eyes was taking some getting used to.

“Hey, Danvers,” Colonel Rhodes greeted.

“Colonel Rhodes. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

She carefully, slowly scanned the HUD to make sure she was still on course. The programming of the suit was a marvel but she didn’t quite trust it yet. The machine had been famously compromised twice. It made a girl cautious.

“You’re still on your way to Russia?”

She carefully glanced at the other side of her screen. “About fifteen minutes out.”

Rhodes nodded.

Carol eyeballed him.

“What’s wrong?” She asked when the pause went on a beat too long.

Rhodey rubbed a hand over his mouth and it made her tense.

“SHIELD is… compromised, Carol.”

She inhaled, but he continued before she could get anything out.

“We – Stark and I – received footage of… very illegal things SHILD has been instigating under their new management. You know that staff/spear thing Loki was using?”

She had to think about it. She’d been on a mission in the Middle East when the thing with New York had gone down. She’d seen the news footage, of course; everyone had. Aliens, magic and superheroes, oh my. But she didn’t know the details.

“I wasn’t briefed on it, no.”

Rhodes nodded again, unsurprised.

“Loki was using that staff as a tool for magical mind control.” He paused. “You still with me?”

“Okay. Zombie stick. Got it,” She said. She didn’t like where this was going.
“SHIELD took possession of it after the battle. And they’ve been using it.”

Carol checked the HUD again, scanned the horizon. Thought about what Rhodes was saying.

“Don’t trust them, Carol. This is not the same SHIELD it was a year ago.”

“This mission I’m on,” She started. “For them. Finding Natasha Romanov. Advice?”

“She’s one of ours,” A new voice came. A scruffy-looking middle-aged man stuck his head in the video frame.

“Hi,” He said.

Jim, in the background now, rolled his eyes.

“Doctor Banner, Carol Danvers. Carol, this is Bruce Banner,” He said by way of introduction.

Carol raised an eyebrow.

“Natasha is technically a SHIELD agent, but she’s one of the good guys,” The interloper, Bruce, asserted. “We… really need to get her back.”

There was a ping on her display notifying her that she was approaching her destination.

“Guys, give me the bullet points. I’ve got a thing to do here.”

She wished she could gesture. The suit was wonderful but it was constricting in some ways.

When they ended the call ten minutes later, Carol felt a low buzz of adrenaline threading through her. SHIELD – compromised. She was going to have to tread very carefully.

Her rendezvous point was a hidden outpost in the forest along the Lena River. She was flying at a high altitude to avoid radar and her planned descent was more of, well, a slow, controlled drop; her suit pretending to be something organic and not at all a highly advanced weapon. It had been stressed in her mission briefing that the Iron Patriot hadn’t strictly speaking been approved for entry into Russia. There were technicalities in the agreement that could be exploited if it became an issue but… better all-around if it stayed a secret.

Although, thinking about it again in the context of what she’d just been told, she thought it just as likely that there wasn’t an agreement at all.

Carol had been to Russia before when she was younger. She’d done most of the Golden Ring tour (she’d missed going to Kostroma and Ivanovo because she’d picked up a stomach bug and had to spend a day and a half hugging her hotel’s toilet).

The bits of Russia she had seen had been beautiful and exotic and exciting.

Lensk was… not.

The Iron Patriot suit had been repainted a dull, mottled gray for added camouflage and Carol had to admit it was pretty spot on for a color palate. Maybe it would look better in the daylight, but she kind of doubted it.

She retracted the zoom on her HUD, focusing instead on her targeted drop zone. Someone was outside the little cabin holding a hand out to signal her down. The suit ran a search on his face and pulled up his SHIELD personnel file. Carol blinked, surprised by how quickly that information
came across.

Caution and constriction aside, she understood why Rhodes loved this machine.

It was nearly midnight local time but between the snowfall and the nearly full moon visibility wasn’t really down that much.

She slowly cut the power to the repulsors and touched down with a ‘thump.’ The snow came up to her knee. She knew the suit was insulated but didn’t quite realize how much until she retracted the faceplate to identify herself. The cold, pine-scented air hit her like a slap.

She quickly followed the agent inside.

The cabin was surprisingly warm, all things considered. She triggered the suit’s dismantling mechanism and squirmed her way out. Her breasts were sore from being compressed inside that metal torso. She wished she had some privacy so she could massage them because god knows most of the men she worked with had an eight-year-old’s sense of humor, SHIELD or not.

“Carol Danvers, reporting,” She said.

“We’ve been expecting you,” The agent replied. He gestured her over to a table that had been set up with maps and computers. Carol had, at first, dismissed the woman bent over the screen as support staff. She reassessed when the woman turned around and made eye contact.

“Hill,” She said, offering her hand after giving Carol a scrutinizing once-over. Carol took it and exchanged a firm handshake. “I’m glad the requisition didn’t sit waiting.”

“Always a pleasure to be of use,” Carol replied tactfully.

Hill drew back and crooked a finger, beckoning Carol to the table. Carol flicked an assessing glance at the other two agents in the cabin but took her lead from Hill. Plainclothes aside it was clear she was in charge.

“We sent Agent Romanov out to investigate a potential threat in Yekaterinburg. This had been ongoing surveillance that finally pulled together enough evidence to send someone in.” Hill indicated Romanov's file.

“She spent four months tracking our target until she completely fell off the grid in mid-September. We thought she was dead until we got a signal from her in Kansk, then two months later in Berdigestyakh.”

Hill traced the path along the map with a finger while she spoke.

“Two weeks ago, she was spotted with the target in Mirnyy. They were heading south. There’s a hell of a lot of frozen nothing in Russia so it puts good odds on them showing up in Lensk. We have teams monitoring the other options and people stationed inside the city but,” Hill tapped her finger on the little ‘Lensk’ dot, “You're here because this is the most likely. Sneaking the Iron Patriot into the city is going to be difficult. We were supposed to have a truck here to bring you in but there was a delay. When it gets here, you’ll be transported in the back. From there it’s a waiting game until we get eyes on them.”

Hill met Carol’s eyes, expression cold and serious.

“Romanov is one of our top agents, but she wasn’t always. The target she was tracking is suspected
to have ties to the same organization she broke away from twenty years ago, and the fact that the two of them have been seen together doesn’t fill my superiors with confidence.”

Carol considered the map for a moment, and then nodded her head at the files.

“Who was the target?”

Hill moved to open one of the folders but one of the agents detached from the wall and closed the file, giving Hill a significant glance.

He turned to Carol.

“This is need-to-know only.”

Carol stared at him.

“I’m assuming at some point I’m going to be in contact with this… target. I do, actually, need to know what it is I’m getting myself into.”

“Agent Shaw,” Hill said, quiet but firm. “I’ll remind you I’m running this op.”

The two of them stared at each other and, after a tense moment, Shaw withdrew his hand.

Hill continued.

“The target is an operative codenamed the Winter Soldier. SHIELD had been tracking reports of him for the last thirty years but we didn’t get a solid, traceable hit on him until half a year ago. His work turned sloppy and he nearly got caught. We sent in Agent Romanov then.”

The man in the photo looked late thirties, early forties maybe. It wasn’t a perfect shot; a little blurred and distant but it was enough for Carol to feel incredulous.

“Thirty years?” She asked.

“We have contacts who say he’s been in the field for twice that, but, well.”

Carol sniffed an agreement. Codenames were easy enough to pass down or steal to boost a reputation.

“Whether or not it’s been the same person isn’t the issue at the moment. This man,” Hill tapped the photo, “Is a very, very skilled sniper with credited kills all over the globe, although the organization he works for operates primarily out of Russia. Agent Romanov was sent to recruit him to SHIELD if possible and neutralize him if not.”

“That’s why you needed the suit? Because of the sniping?”

“We lost four agents before we sent Romanov in. The Winter Soldier is a marksman probably on par with –” Hill broke off and flipped the file closed again.

“Doesn’t matter. But you’re right; that’s why you’re here. Someone who can find them, grab them and not get shot in the face, neck or groin.”

“Yeesh,” Carol breathed. “What is-”

Carol saw the ricochet take Shaw through the left eye before she heard the bullet pinging off her armor. Glass spray from the shattered window cut her cheek and then her arms and she dove to
take cover. Hill was hugging the wall next to her, gun in hand.

“Michaels!” Hill barked, and the other agent, also low to the ground, called back an affirmation that he hadn’t been hit.

The crack of the rifle echoed for a moment before the woods subsided into an eerie quiet. Cold poured in from the broken window and their breaths fogged the air.

“You need to get in the suit,” Hill hissed. She hefted her gun, the intent obvious.

Hill gave Carol a nod and rose, her gun’s report loud in the small cabin as she provided cover.

Carol dove for the suit.

Hill dropped back down the moment it sealed around her.

Carol kept expecting another bullet to come their way and it unnerved her that one didn’t. She flew out of the cabin, HUD scanning the surroundings for heat signatures.

She found the two of them in plain sight and it made her wary. She kept scanning, looking for the trap.

After a minute of looking and turning up nothing, she dropped in front of them, hand repulsors up and charged.

They were kneeling in the snow. The woman had guns dangling off her thumbs and, as Carol touched down, she deliberately threw them to the side. The man had his hands behind his head submissively. The sniper rifle had been carefully placed on the snow a few yards away. It hadn’t been thrown or it would have sunk.

They were maybe half a mile from the cabin.

“Colonel Rhodes,” The woman said, “Please do not fire - the people you’re working for are not to be trusted.”

“I’m not Colonel Rhodes,” Carol said. The woman (the HUD couldn’t scan her eyes through the goggles she was wearing but Carol thought it was Natasha) tensed at that, and the man beside her shot her a look that said ‘I told you so.’ His hair was long, shaggy and dark. They were both dressed in thick black gear with too many pockets, mouths and noses covered in masks against the cold.

Carol didn’t lower her hands.

“And you just shot a man. It doesn’t exactly endear you to me.”

Carol trusted Jim and if this was Natasha, she was willing to give her benefit of the doubt. But she couldn’t be stupid, here, and she didn’t have anyone vouching for tall-dark-and-deadly beside her.

“He was a WSC enforcer,” The man, the Winter Soldier, groused. At Carol’s silence, he added, “It was only supposed to be a graze? Ricochets are hard.”

There was something wrong with his left arm. The heat signal of his body didn’t extend much past his shoulder. She focused and the HUD sketched out an outline of a metal prosthetic.

Carol carefully pressed her fingertips into the pads of the gauntlet, activating her shoulder guns. A flick of her eyes and they locked on Natasha.
“Don’t move,” Carol warned. Natasha dipped her head slightly in acquiescence. “Take your jacked off,” She told the Winter Soldier, pointed both repulsors at the man.

He paused, expression annoyed and considering before he stood and slowly stripped off the jacket. He had a black sweater on underneath. Carol wished she could see more of his face. Unlike Romanov he wasn’t wearing goggles. His eyes were expressive but the mask still made it hard to read him.

“Throw the jacket over here. Strip.”

“I’d really rather not.”

“I’ve read your files – I’m not getting in range to give you pat downs and we’re not moving until you’re both disarmed.”

“I’m already disarmed,” He said, nodding to the shining metal of his left arm as he pulled the sweater off.

Carol blinked. Had that been a joke?

The man sighed and took his boots off, tossing aside a pistol and a pair of knives.


“Yeah, I know,” He replied and tossed the sweater to Carol. He had another pistol holstered on his belt.

In the corner of the HUD, Carol saw a pair of heat signatures coming from the direction of the cabin.

The Winter Soldier drew the belt off and lobbed it towards her without taking the pistol out. He was down to socks, pants, an undershirt, gloves and mask. Carol would have expected him to be more affected by the cold but he stood stoically, seemingly unbothered.

His breath came through the mask in little huffs. The look he gave Carol clearly implied she’d be kind of a dick to make him undress further. But the pants were thick thermals and, like the jacket, covered in pockets.

“Pants too.”

He growled unhappily but moved to comply.

Better safe than soh god he wasn’t wearing underwear.

He let the pants pool at his ankles without kicking them off and stared at Carol, probably hoping she’d relent and let him pull them back up. The cold wasn’t doing him favors and Carol couldn’t help cringing in sympathetic pain.

“Sorry,” She apologized. “I can’t take any chances. She’s next, if that makes you feel any better.”

He made a sound that might have been an amused snort. If presumably-Romanov had any reaction to the news at all, she kept it to herself.

Hill crunched through the snow and stood beside Carol. Michaels circled around to cover the two assassins from behind.
“Kick the pants to me,” Hill ordered. The Winter Soldier did.

While the pants were mid-air and Carol’s attention was on the man, Hill shifted her aim and shot Michaels.

Carol spun to take Hill down and saw Romanov aim something at her.

The suit went dark, the supports abruptly giving out and Carol toppled onto the snow.

She was proud of herself for not crying out in alarm even as she became aware of how potentially fucked she was.

“Danvers,” Hill’s voice was muffled by the metal but still audible. Had Romanov had an EMP? The suit was completely dead.

A series of clicks and the faceplate was removed.

Double fuck.

Moving the depowered suit wasn’t easy – gold titanium alloy wasn’t light. The fear that she was about to be shot in the head was remarkably motivating, though, and Carol managed to turn in the snow, presenting the suit’s impenetrable back while she got her bearings.

“Danvers, I realize this must look…bad. Please give me a chance to explain,” Hill said. Carol breathed into the snow. She hauled herself up with effort. She’d be able to pack a hell of a punch in this thing, depowered or not, but she could also hear the Winter Soldier putting his clothes back on, the light crunch of footsteps in snow that she was fairly sure to be Natasha retrieving her guns.

Three against one. Robot suit or no she didn’t like those odds.

She kept her back to them and considered her options.

“SHIELD isn’t what you think it is,” Hill said. “The people running it now are powerful, dangerous and need to be stopped. We need your help.”

The suit’s suspension system kicked back in. Carol carefully shifted her weight. Without the faceplate she was still exposed and without the HUD, she only had the repulsors at her disposal.

“The suit’s live,” The Winter Soldier remarked, probably seeing the glow of the reactor reconnecting.

Hill circled. Of the three, Carol would rather keep her armored back facing the two highly trained assassins. She let Hill come around.

The woman had her hands open and low, visibly empty, gun back in her holster. Carol powered her repulsors and held them up warningly. What Hill was saying meshed with what Jim had told her but two people had just been killed. Carol needed to know where she stood before she lowered her weapons.

“Carol, let’s head back to the cabin and talk. I can prove what I’m saying. The suit is full of tracking software and I know Stark added a cavalcade of integrity validations to it – we couldn’t use it even if you were out of it. We’ve managed to pass communication on to Stark – he can verifying what I’m telling you. SHIELD needs to be stopped. I’ll give you the faceplate back when
we're in the cabin and you can call him and ask.”

“I'm up to speed,” Carol told her. “Unless there's more than the mind control, murders and weaponry that I don't know about. I spoke with a Doctor Banner.”

“Bruce,” Romanov said quietly behind her.

Carol nodded.

“He wanted me to get you back safely,” She affirmed.

Her heart was pounding.

Rhodes just lost his career for going off-book for the greater good. If she allied with these people she didn’t hold any illusions about going back to the air force when it was over.

Carol started walking back to the cabin without turning to face them. She could have powered the repulsors and flown the distance back in a moment but she needed to think.

The Winter Soldier picked up his pace to get to the cabin first. He didn’t look over at Carol when he passed her and Carol didn’t increase her steps. A cautious silence had settled on all of them and Carol appreciated it.

When she got to the cabin, Shaw’s body was noticeably absent.

Carol looked at the blood smear on the floor where he had been.

Hill and Romanov followed her inside, watching her closely. Tall, dark and deadly – Teddy, until she got a proper name out of him – came back in, wiping his palms against his thighs.

“Where do we start?” Carol asked and, committing to the decision, stepped out of the suit.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote and rewrote this chapter I think five times. I'm still not entirely happy with it but I needed to post something.*

I sincerely apologize for any narrative clunkiness. :/

Also - *facepalm* lol, fuck. Typo - I tweaked the wordflow in this sentence and didn't fix my articles, so I had "The breasts had been compressed by the metal torso" instead of "Her breasts," and now I can't stop thinking of Carol's boobs as either sentient or detached.

... I'll just be over here.
Happy had been hoping Potts would be able to break away from her meetings to pick him up from the hospital but, well. He understood that she took her professional responsibilities seriously and hadn’t been holding his breath. The proposed contract was a big deal and it would potentially create a lot of opportunity for Stark Industries to expand. Potts would be working hard to make sure those potential business partners were content.

So it wasn’t Pepper’s absence that tipped Happy off. Rather, it was look on Tony’s face that let Happy know that there was something very wrong.

The boss hid it well but Happy knew him. Under the smile there was tension in the set of his mouth and around his eyes. It reminded Happy of the moron’s stint at palladium poisoning.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

Tony flashed him a brighter, faker smile. He was pushing a wheelchair ahead of himself. Happy knew hospital protocol and it would be just like the eccentric man to insist on being the one to schlep his ass out of here.

“Paparazzi flocking the exit, you know,” Tony sniffed, “The usual.”

Tony’s eyes tracked to Happy’s eyebrow, to the scar there. He didn’t say anything about it, though, and that wasn’t like him. Tony was always the brat to bring things to the surface and poke them blatantly. His tactlessness went hand in hand with the charm that let him get away with the assholery.

But Tony didn’t say anything – no quip about it making him look rugged or being a draw for the bad-girl socialites.

For Happy, that missing jibe confirmed that something was wrong.

“Is it Rhodey? Potts mentioned…” He trailed off when Tony’s mouth twitched unhappily.

“Still waiting for final word on that,” Tony said quietly.

“There’s nothing you could have done differently, boss. You both did the right thing.”

“Yeah,” Tony said and started drumming his fingers on the wheelchair’s handles. He inhaled and, like a switch was flipped bounced back into his normal frenetic energy. He gave Happy a challenging, playful look.

“You going to stay in bed all day? As much grief as you give me over my – what did you call it, ‘substandard training regimen’ nowadays, I wouldn’t peg you for such laziness. I’ll hold this against you, Hogan. Just you wait.”

“Looking forward to it, boss. This scenery’s getting old,” Happy returned.

The doctor came in, then. There was some paperwork Happy needed to sign before he could leave and appointments for physical therapy to schedule, but it only took a few minutes before Tony was
wheeling him out.

The comforting patter of nonsense Tony picked up made it easier to be moved around like an invalid. The man could talk about nothing like a pro.

When they got to the exit Happy was allowed to get out of the chair. Just as well, too; Tony hadn’t been lying and there were indeed reporters waiting outside.

“Happy Hogun, ladies and gentlemen,” Tony said, waving at him grandly and applauding.

Tentatively, some of the reporters followed suit and started clapping. Happy rolled his eyes but smiled.

“Mr. Stark, there’s a rumor that you destroyed the Iron Man suits - can you comment?”

“Do you have any comment on the Mandarin trial?”

“How did you survive the attack on your Malibu house?”

“Guys,” Tony interrupted. “Seriously; I’m just here to pick up my friend. You remember he got blown up in a terrorist attack a few weeks ago, right? Could we tone it down just a little?”

A beat, and then predictably the questions started again.

Tony put his arm around Happy’s shoulder as they walked, keeping close to him as they worked their way through the little gathering. This wasn’t as bad as it could have been – only a dozen or so media people. From what Happy gathered Tony had been a little reclusive since his day in court. It was understandable, if annoying, that they were taking the chance to pounce when they saw it.

“Witnesses said AIM personnel could melt things with their hands – is this true?”

“Where was Captain America?”

“Mr. Stark, can you comment on the lack of evidence linking Aldrich Killian to the reporter assassinations?”

Tony’s hand was gradually increasing pressure on Happy’s shoulder. The man’s polite no-comment smile stayed fixed in place but Happy knew he was relieved when they finally got to the car. A limousine, because of course Tony would take a limo to a hospital.

Happy glowered at the new driver out of reflex but admitted it was better than Stark driving himself. The man had an off-and-on relationship with traffic laws.

“Can we talk now?” Happy prodded, activating the divide to the driver once they’d left the hospital parking lot.

“Yeah, Happy, what’s up?”

Tony sprawled but, after a moment of fidgeting apparently became discontent with this half-measure of laziness and slid sideways until he was lying down on the seat.

It was a caricature of playful unconcern and Happy wasn’t buying it.

“What’s wrong?” He asked again.

Tony gave him a sideways look like he was assessing if he could get away with not answering.
“Straight answer or I tell Pepper about Munich ’91,” Happy warned.

Tony sat back upright in the seat.

“You should really only be allowed to use that threat once.”

Happy raised a challenging eyebrow and waited the man out.

After a beat, Tony lowered the divide.

“Take the scenic route back.”

*

*

*

Bruce and Rhodey were still down in the lab with Tony got back.

He’d dropped Happy off at his apartment. The man had wanted to tag along and help but Tony managed to talk him out of it.

Of course, he’d only told Happy about the part where Captain America was missing. There might have been more protest if he’d given a more thorough disclosure.

Tony didn’t want him involved with this. Happy was still healing and he deserved a chance to rest.

He still felt like an asshole leaving the man behind.

Tony walked into the lab rubbing his eyes. He felt old and he hated that.

“You okay?” Rhodey asked him, breaking off mid-sentence whatever he’d been saying to Bruce.

Tony dropped his hand.

“I’m peachy with a side of keen,” He replied, smiling. “What’s the news for Phoenix?”

“Ah, well…” Bruce quirked his mouth to the side.

“That’s not a good ‘ah well.’ ‘Ah well’ what?”

“Sir, there was a warehouse explosion off of the Piestewa Freeway. I’ve analyzed the response team’s initial photos and can state with 98% surety that this was an attack; not an accident.”

The holographic projector brought up a still image of a warehouse on fire.

“When did this happen?” Tony asked.

“Three hours and seventeen minutes ago, sir.”

Tony considered that.

“Fuck,” He decided on at last. “Jarvis, search for bugs.”

“I have already swept the residence, sir. There are no traces of listening devices.”
“It’s what we were thinking, too,” Rhodey said. “But this might just be a coincidence.”

“Surveillance in the area? Any more hits on the staff-infected?”

“Staff-infected? Really?” Bruce complained.

“Yes. Well, sort of,” Rhodey said, ignoring the by-play.

The projector brought up the pavement by the warehouse. There were three body bags clearly visible.

“Jarvis grabbed photos of two of them before they were sealed up.”

The pictures and the corresponding SHIELD personnel files floated out over the surveillance image.

“Huh,” Tony remarked. “What are we thinking? Rogers broke out?”

“Maybe,” Bruce offered.

“Jarvis is keeping a close eye on the area. If the Captain’s face pops up, we’ll know in seconds. I think we should relocate to Phoenix. When we do get a hit on him, odds are whoever snagged him in the first place will too. We need to be the people that find him first.”

“You just want to break in the suit,” Tony accused, but his attention was still focused on the warehouse images. Jarvis had tapped into a satellite and was providing a live feed of the smoldering structure. It was cordoned off, the bodies already transported off site.

The place was swarming with officials. It was a suspiciously fast response time.

Tony frowned at the holograph and tried to be optimistic.

He wasn’t entirely successful.

* 
* 
* 

Steve Rogers snapped his eyes back down to his beer and tried to fight the blush he could feel creeping up his face. He didn’t mean to stare – honestly he didn’t. He just couldn’t quite wrap his head around the casual indecency nowadays.

The girl’s clothes were so tight he could see her –

Steve shook his head.

He was pretty sure that even the USO girls would be scandalized. Their outfits had been skimpy but they hadn’t been so… lewd.

But, he thought, and took a drink. Some of those girls had probably lived through these fashion changes. It probably wouldn’t be so shocking if he’d seen the gradual shift throughout the years.
Steve finished his beer.

“Another, please,” He signaled to the bartender. He had silver hoops through his eyebrow and tattoos over his forearms. His hair was spikey with Brylcreem.

Men’s fashion today left a lot to be desired, too.

The music in the bar changed – something almost lyrical giving way to loud, rhythmic noise.

Steve was undecided on music in the 21st century. There was a lot to catch up on and not a lot of it seemed worth it. He didn’t dislike everything he’d heard so far but...

He didn’t seem to hear brass instruments at all anymore. Or, for that matter (and considering the electronic warbling he was being subjected to), talented singers.

Steve sighed.

He’d been tempted to stay with Stark when the man had offered over shawarma. It had been tacked on like an afterthought to a truly awkward apology on both their sides. Still, Steve thought it had been genuine, and the idea of finding somewhere quiet and safe to lick his wounds had had more appeal than he’d like to admit to.

But the world still needed him. Fury had been right about that, too, and it was time for him to stop hiding.

The motorcycle had been a gift from SHIELD. Likewise the clothes and debit cards – payment that had been accumulating for the last seventy years, apparently. Steve had been shocked by the amount of money he had now until he’d started venturing out of the compound and seeing inflation firsthand.

When they’d finished sending Thor and Loki off, he took the motorcycle on a road trip.

He drove down to the Veteran’s Memorial in DC. He found the graves he was looking for and paid his respects. There was a crowd gathered around his own grave marker – the battle in New York had stirred curiosity, he knew. Steve had stayed well clear of it.

After that, he ventured west.

It took him almost a month to make it out to California. He didn’t have any particular route in mind; mostly, he followed road signs and stopped whenever something caught his eye. He made an effort to start conversations with people. He volunteered in soup kitchens and visited retirement communities.

Talking to people that Steve considered old, some of whom hadn’t been born yet when Steve went into the ice, was surreal but not as painful as he expected it to be.

When he got to the West Coast, he fell in with a group of men only a few years younger than he was (his actual age; he didn’t count the time spent frozen in that number). He learned how to surf quickly enough to impress them and they’d invited him to stay at their beach house. Steve knew they found his upright politeness an amusing oddity.

It had been a good week. Steve basked in the sun and enjoyed the ocean; discovered new and wonderful food and learned a whole new language in the slang the boys used. These young men had no concept at all of war, of loss. It fascinated Steve. He’d have liked to have stayed longer.
But, one of the boys went into his knapsack and found the shield. Steve wanted to believe he hadn’t been trying to steal from him but… he wasn’t quite that naïve.

So, Steve had moved on. There was still a lot of America to see.

On the way to San Francisco he found a museum doing an exhibit on Norse mythology and spent most of the day there. Trying to put the people he’d actually met into the context of the myths amused him maybe more than it should have. But, then he’d turned into a wing that featured the supposed Thor and Loki appearances in the Battle of New York. Steve decided to leave before someone recognized him in those pictures.

San Francisco was beautiful and… startling in some ways. The second evening he was there, Steve, declared “too pretty to be wasted on this lighting,” by a friendly (if handsy) drunk, got pulled into a dance hall. Full of men. Who dressed as women.

He kept getting free drinks and, after a few careful conversations, got brought up to speed on remarkably recent civil rights movements.

The accounts of hate crimes upset and disgusted him - he was and always had been against bullying. At some point the culture shock receded into support.

He still firmly batted away the hands that tried to sneak into his trousers, though.

He discovered sushi in San Francisco and fell in love with it, eating so much that first time that the restaurant ran out of eel. The awed, desperate look the chef gave him after giving him that announcement made Steve leave a tip equal to the cost of the bill when he left.

He’d lingered in the city until he got spotted while browsing an art gallery by a group of teenage girls. He wasn’t sure how much SHIELD wanted him to disclose so, at their instance, had only agreed that yes, he’d helped in the Battle of New York. It had been enough to send them into squealing joy.

He’d managed to extract himself before they’d done more than take a few pictures (with their phones, which were themselves small enough to fit in a pocket).

Steve left San Francisco.

Las Vegas had horrified him. He hadn’t stayed long.

He went to see the Grand Canyon.

It was something his mother had wanted to see and never had. Steve himself had never seen it before and it satisfied him, in some ways, to sit and look at this unchanging marvel. This was something time hadn’t changed. Or… well. Not changed significantly, he mentally amended.

He’d spent the day walking the path alongside the canyon and camped beside his motorcycle to take in the stars that night.

He woke up pre-dawn to find a coyote snuffling around his knapsack. Steve had stared at it and it had stared back at him, both of them, Steve thought, unsure of how to proceed.

It had slowly snagged a ration pack and, when Steve started laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation, had skittered off in alarm.

Steve packed up and headed south to Phoenix.
The bar he was in now was dark and stank of beer. It reminded him of the sorts of places Bucky would wander into and the nostalgia sent a pang through him. Time supposedly healed all wounds. Steve just had to wait this one out.

The bartender gave him his beer and Steve turned around to survey the room, leaning back against the bar. The televisions were showing American football. As he watched, the image zoomed in on a player as he sloshed water over his face.

Steve thought the new camera technologies were both amazing and wasted on things he couldn’t really believe anyone wanted to see.

“Hi,” A feminine voice chirped beside him.

Steve turned, surprised at being addressed. This wasn’t really a social environment, the one rowdy group of men enjoying a private celebration aside.

The woman was short and had hair done up in a neat braid. She was maybe thirty years old and, unlike the younger women in the bar, was wearing clothing that didn’t make Steve flustered.

“Hello,” He replied.

“I’m bored, and you look like you could use a distraction. Play darts with me?”

Steve had to smile at that.

“I have to warn you,” He said, “I’m pretty good at darts.”

“Big talk, pretty boy.” She pushed her tinted glasses up her nose and smirked challengingly at him.

Steve noticed a man by the back wall watching them. Her boyfriend, maybe. Steve smiled politely and the man turned his attention away.

They’d been playing for maybe ten minutes when Steve started feeling… off. He’d only had – three? Four beers? Not enough for him to even get buzzed, but as he lined up his shot he was undeniably lightheaded.

He missed his mark by a lot more than he’d been aiming for. He’d been playing to let her win – his reflexes and hand-eye coordination gave him an unfair advantage in the game.

This, though…

Steve wiped his hand over his mouth.

“You feeling okay?”

“Yeah,” Steve replied. He looked at the board and it wavered. “Actually, I’m a little…”

He thought he heard his motorcycle revving outside and turned his head sharply towards the door. The wave of dizziness that evoked made him taste bile.

“Hey,” The woman sidled up beside him and put his arm over her shoulder.

She started heading him towards the back exit. Steve was aware, somewhat, of the man who had been watching them following them.

Drugged. He’d been drugged. Adrenaline hit his system and he shoved the woman away.
“Ow, what the fuck?” The look she gave him was genuine and hurt and Steve immediately felt like an ass.

“I’m sorry,” He mumbled. His mouth felt strange.

She rolled her eyes and, squinting at him, frowned in concern.

“You’re really flushed, sweety. Let’s get you some fresh air.”

Steve paused long enough for her to get close to him again.

He blinked at her in dumb surprise at the sharp prick of a needle sliding into his side. The world wavered and his last awareness before blacking out was the feeling of two pairs of arms pulling him outside.

*

*

*

Steve felt awful when he woke up. His mouth was painfully dry and his head was pounding.

He shivered.

He felt sick and, disoriented, it took him a long moment to remember he wasn’t in his skinny, asthmatic body anymore. His eyes snapped open.

The room was punishingly bright and he squinted against the glare.

“He's awake,” Someone said. It took Steve's eyes a moment to focus.

He couldn't say he was surprised that it was the woman from the bar.

Her tinted glasses were gone, now, and Steve swallowed in alarm when he recognized the blue glimmer of her eyes.

He pulled backwards, jerking to an abrupt stop at the straps holding him down. He looked down at himself.

He was naked; bound at his wrists, ankles, across his chest and around his waist and biceps. His arms were stretched out to his sides and tubes were feeding into his veins.

No – tubes were taking blood from his veins. Well, that would explain why he felt so weak, then.

The woman pressed something to his chest – a wired pad that connected to what looked like medical equipment.

“So,” Steve said slowly. “Loki’s back from Asgard?”

The woman stared at him and said nothing. She wasn’t pretending to be a flirtatious barfly anymore and in the absence of that persona, she struck Steve as being empty. Her blue eyes took him in and there was nothing behind them.

“I can help you,” Steve said. “Let me up and I can help you.”
He knew how Romanov had freed Barton from Loki’s hold. It was inelegant but if it worked he’d hardly complain.

He heard booted footsteps on the concrete floor and two men came into view. Like the woman, their possessed blue eyes were vacant and cold.

She bent towards him and pinched the skin of his forearm, watching the way the pale flesh dimpled and filled. She considered the information the machines were showing and adjusted the tube taking blood from him.

“He’s hypotensive. We’ll need to monitor his heart rate but at the current rate of loss we should be able to keep him restrained without having to contaminate his blood. Tape his mouth,” She said to the men.

Sweat prickled Steve’s hairline. He tried the restraints again but he was too weak, the straps too strong. When the tape was firmly but gently pressed over his lips he panicked a little.

He thought about finding Bucky in that Hydra base.

“Fix him with a feeding tube and catheter. We’re going to be here for a while.”

*

*

*

It didn’t take Steve long to work out that they were trying to replicate the Super Soldier Serum.

There were six of them in total that Steve had seen, all with those same possessed blue eyes. Loki had yet to make an appearance.

Every so often they would take the tape off his mouth and ask him about Erskine’s procedure. And every time, Steve refused to answer. His own questions went ignored and, after a few minutes of the mutually futile exchange, the tape was put back on his mouth.

They never unstrapped him.

The feeding tube stayed taped to his nose, the catheter bag was changed. They took his blood and examined his body.

His healing factor was a point of interest. The wounds inflicted on his chest and thighs were never extensive, never really crossed the threshold from pain into agony, but his skin was used as a canvas for experimentation.

By degrees, the humiliation of being treated like this - the helplessness and dehumanization – made him feel feral and hopeless.

When the tape was taken off his mouth the next time, he’d lunged and caught the man’s hand at the meat of his thumb. He sank his teeth in hard and didn’t let go. The flesh severed before the blows to the head could make him loosen his jaws and he spat the red lump back at the man.

The woman adjusted the valve on the tube taking his blood and, within moments, Steve passed out.
After that, Steve started losing track of time.

Whenever he was awake, he was a sweaty mess. If he didn't have the serum he was sure he'd have bedsores by now. His head ached with dizziness, his mouth was dry and nausea burned his throat. The effort of keeping his eyes open surpassed him more often than not.

Even if the straps were removed, Steve doubted he’d have the strength to get off the table.

The bright side, in as much as there was one, was that they’d stopped cutting him now that they were taking more blood.

Weeks passed.

Steve wasn’t sure what woke him. He blearily fought his way back to consciousness and stared at the familiar ceiling. He was about to fall back to sleep when he heard the noise again.

He turned his head and tried to figure out what it had been.

The far side of the warehouse went up in an explosion.

Steve blinked, alert and awake in a way he hadn’t been in a long time.

One of the men staggered across the floor clutching his throat. He turned as he fell.

An arrow. He’d been shot in the neck with an arrow.

Steve turned is eyes to the scaffolding, looking for Clint. His heart started pounding with relief. They’d come for him.

*Thwack!* 

Another man fell.

Steve coughed – smoke from the fire reaching him.

He coughed again, feeling lightheaded.

The woman fell trying to reach him and Steve’s brow wrinkled in confusion. He hadn’t heard another arrow. The clatter of someone else falling to the ground.

Steve coughed again.

Ah, he thought just before falling unconscious. Smoke bomb.

*
Steve woke up in a quinjet. He was on a gurney and the feeling of having his arms tucked to his body instead of stretched out and exposed – of being covered with a blanket - made him shiver with relief. He was still strapped down but, on a gurney and in transit by jet, this, at least, made practical sense.

He turned his head and saw Clint, head bent in concentration as he checked over his bow. Steve smiled and inhaled to call out-

-except the smile stretched the tape still over his lips.

He frowned, still groggy and disconnected from blood loss. He snapped his fingers instead, trying to signal Clint because the man must have forgotten to take the tape off.

Clint paused, hand stilling on the string.

“Captain Rogers,” A familiar voice said. Nick Fury walked to back of the jet.

Steve stared up at the director’s solitary blue eye and felt his heart stop in his chest. Clint looked up from his bow, meeting Steve’s gaze with his own possessed stare.

Slowly, Steve turned his head away and closed his eyes. He took a controlled breath in through his nose and tried to relax the painful knot his stomach had turned into.

“I realize this may be a bit much to take in, soldier,” Fury said. He put a sympathetic hand on Steve’s shoulder. Steve, tied down and still weak, couldn’t jerk away from the touch.

“Don’t worry,” The director continued, ignoring the way Steve twitched under his fingers. “You’ll feel better once you’re one of us.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like the next story I write should be something along the lines of "The Avengers go to a petting zoo and then go get cupcakes." Balance it out a little. Maybe I'll have Steve and Clint get swarmed by baby goats...

Anyway, many thanks for the comments! Sorry for the delay - I deliberately don't answer until I have the next chapter to post. The rudeness of not replying eats at me and makes me write faster. It's a thing. Feedback makes me stop procrastinating because I hate being a dick.

More soon.
Chapter 11

The next time the pressure inside his head changed, Loki had been waiting for it. He had turned his attention completely inward, wanting to explore the connection. He didn’t know if he’d be able to do anything with it but, well. Any connection to his magics was a step in the right direction. The Allfather was not as infallible as he’d have people believe.

The problem was, Odin’s punishment was stifling and… thorough. Touching that connection to the scepter was like finding the muscles to move his ears. He knew they were there but actually locating them took some effort.

Loki wasn’t sure how long he’d been waiting but when that little increase of pressure struck, he latched onto the pulse of it.

He dug into it and, with dismay, felt Clint Barton on the other end.

He blinked his eyes open, letting his hold drop. Disappointment welled up in him in a choking wave.

An echo.

This was just an echo of the minds he had been harnessing.

Loki pulled himself stiffly to his feet, body sore and tight from having spent so long unmoving. He stretched and walked until his limbs were loose once more. He paced to the table and considered the book he’d been reading. Had read. And reread.

He hurled it against the wall of his cell hard enough to send a warning crackle of energy through the panes. Loki snarled, frustrated, and threw the contents of his desk. When that wasn’t enough, he also threw the desk.

The guards came in and stared at him while he enjoyed the moment. They didn’t move to stop him – why should they? Loki presented no threat. None at all.

He slammed the flat of his fist against the glass and the heat of Odin’s magic made his arm numb to the elbow. He punched again and this time the pain seeped into his bones.

He turned away, breathing heavily and chest tight with impotent anger.

Raking shaking fingers through his hair, Loki took a deep breath and centered himself.

Methodically, he put his cell back to rights. There was a weakness in one corner of his desk. Loki felt it give a little under a cautious touch, pretending his attention was instead on his books for the benefit of the guards. The corner would definitely come off with only a little effort. A sad, improvised weapon but a weapon nonetheless.

He’d broken the spine of a text older than he was. Loki considered the damaged thing with some measure of regret. In Asgard, he was one of the few people that really appreciated the palace’s library.

Had.

Had appreciated the palace’s library, because Loki doubted very much he’d ever go back even if
he did break free of his current state.

He settled himself back on the ground, crossing his legs and assuming his meditative stance. He was feeling vicious and wanted to rip that echo to shreds.

It took a while to feel his way back to that tether, finding it the second time no easier than finding it the first had been, although Loki admitted he may have been hampered by his ire.

Find it he did, though, and he dug himself in, focusing and immersing himself in that remembered bond.

His little Hawk.

Like dry weeds being lit, awareness burst in Loki’s mind. He felt Barton’s consciousness like a weight against his own, insistent and not unwelcome.

And after a moment, he realized that that awareness was feeding him information that hadn’t been there before. Surprised and unsure, he patiently took in everything he could.

Finished for the moment with Barton, he reached out and explored the next strand of connection.

And then the next.

*  
*  
*  

Clint regarded the prisoners with unease and vague feelings of disgust. Like everything that didn’t originate from his master, Clint’s personal opinions were muted and unimportant. He would of course carry out his mission to the absolute best of his ability. It was just that these people, these disconnected remnants of Loki’s personal guard sent the hairs on the back of his neck rising. It was almost like they gave off a frequency that rubbed just so, just slightly wrong against him. Clint supposed it was because they’d both been freed by the spear and the discordance came from having different masters.

The raid on the Phoenix warehouse had gone beautifully. It was nice to have Nick on the right side again, and the idea that Captain Rogers would be one of them very soon pleased him.

Rogers had his face turned away but Clint could see moisture at the edges of the man’s tightly shut eyelids, could read misery in the set of his jaw.

As he watched, the man shivered. They had been keeping him weak with controlled blood loss and he only had a blanket covering him. He must be cold.

Clint set his bow aside and rummaged through the jet’s storage compartments. He found two more blankets and carefully tucked them around Steve’s body. It would be impractical to try and get clothes on the man while he was strapped down but this should at least alleviate some of his discomfort.

Clint frowned and, considering, retrieved a bottle of water for him as well.
He was aware of Fury’s eye on him, carefully keeping track of his assets. Clint paid it no mind. Meggs would want Rogers healthy and there was no reason Clint could see not to follow this impulse.

He pulled the tape off slowly, not wanting to rip Steve’s skin. Clint carefully guided the bottle to Steve’s mouth and tipped it. Steve choked a little on the first few sips but, patiently, Clint got him to drink the contents. The rub marks from the tape faded as Clint watched.

“Thank you,” Steve rasped when he’d finished drinking.

Clint grunted an acknowledgment and balled the used tape up, dropping it in the empty bottle before screwing the lid back on.

A command came through the bond and Clint made his way back to the cockpit. Bremer, the agent flying the quinjet, unbuckled and let Clint take his seat in the pilot’s chair.

Bremer was a good agent and a great pilot but needed to be decommissioned. Meggs didn’t like loose ends and the strain of adding Rogers to his inner circle without first cutting off an existing connection would be a bit much. Bremer was replaceable.

They were over an empty expanse of forest, now, so Clint opened the hatch. Bremer stripped off his gear and calmly walked out. The fall would kill him, of course, and if his body got found it’d be easy enough to say it happened on a mission.

Clint closed the hatch and, a few seconds later, felt Bremer die through their shared bond. It was a strange, not-quite-painful sensation of something leaving – like losing a baby tooth.

Steve was saying something low and angry that Clint couldn’t quite catch. He ignored it. If it was important, Nick would deal with it.

They were heading to a SHIELD research facility in northern Texas. Ten minutes out he received confirmation that Meggs would be meeting them there. Clint peered back at the prisoners they were toting. The doctor who had been working on the serum would be joining them. Clint wasn’t sure what the plan for the other two was but he’d know when Meggs wanted him to know.

Clint flew and enjoyed, as much as the emotion would form, the contentment the came from losing the burden of free will.

*

*

*

Jane Foster liked working for SHIELD.

They’d snapped her up after the incident with Thor in New Mexico and, after a few rough starts, Jane realized she was getting a better deal with them than she could hope to on the open market. SHIELD funded her work and, more than that, gave her all the equipment and staff she needed to succeed with her research.

Phil Coulson, once she got past the man-in-black façade, was wonderful. They had more in common than she’d have thought – apparently, there was a parallel between dealing with Darcy and dealing with Tony Stark.
He stayed with the facility while she got set up and was, technically, assigned as her superior.

“Einstein-Rosen bridges aren’t a theory; not anymore,” He’d told her over lunch on perhaps the third day of organizing the lab. “Too many people saw what happened in New Mexico and we need to stay ahead of anyone trying to recreate the technology. Ask for whatever you need and don’t hesitate to call me with problems.”

Sevlig and Darcy both stayed with SHIELD, too. Darcy as her lab assistant, Selvig doing... she wasn't really sure what. He'd gotten pulled aside for a separate research assignment and signed confidentiality agreements 'stacked as thick as my thumb, girl.' Despite her prying Selvig did keep his mouth closed on it.

There was a common cafeteria in the New Mexico facility where they would occasionally bump into each other. But, for the most part, their hours were both too erratic for any scheduled bonding time.

Strangely, she spent the meals she took outside of her lab more often than not accompanied by Phil, Clint Barton or both.

She was pretty sure Clint stayed in Selvig's wing of the facility most of the time and, like the curmudgeonly man, kept his silence when Jane asked what Selvig was up to.

Still, she liked Clint. He and Phil both had a dry, sharp sense of humor that Jane enjoyed. Plus, it was fun watching Clint and Phil quietly, calmly try to out-snark each other. Jane wasn't sure what the history was there but when Darcy had flumped back into her lab, moaning about “Hot Arms” being taken, Jane hadn't been particularly surprised.

She was making progress with the arrays. She was sure she would figure out it any day now.

When Phil came into her lab one night and told her there was a helicopter prepped to take her to their Norway facility, Jane had been annoyed at being pulled away from her work but didn't complain. She trusted Phil and if he told her there was time-critical work there that could use her expertise, she wasn't going to make a stink.

Darcy whined but, well, Dacry was hard-wired for that.

There was an eight hour time difference between New Mexico and Norway and it was the middle of the night when she and Darcy arrived.

The facility in Tromso had been expecting her but that was, as far as Jane could tell, the absolute extent of their awareness of her. After about ten minutes of fumbling around and speaking to people, she put in a call to Phil.

“Coulson.”

“Phil! I'm in Tromso but no one seems to know where I'm supposed to be. Who should I be asking for?”

“Ah, right...” A pause, the sound of Phil's footsteps echoing as he walked. “Let me talk to the facility manager, please.”

Jane had passed the phone over.

The man's face went through a tense series of emotions as he listened to Coulson talk. Jane had figured out fairly quickly that Phil was important inside SHIELD and kind of a badass besides. She
wasn't sure what he was saying but the way the man holding her phone went pale made her think that maybe he was getting reprimanded for being disorganized.

He gave her the phone back after making a promise to Coulson that things would be taken care of.

When he explained what Jane and Darcy were doing here, she couldn't help but roll her eyes.

Apparently, looking into the Norse myths was part of what SHIELD was doing in Norway. So. Coulson had sent them less for Jane’s theoretical physicist applications and more because they'd both spent some time with Thor.

The researchers they'd be speaking with weren't in, yet. She and Darcy were led to quarters and, exhausted, Jane fell asleep without really giving her situation more thought. It'd still be waiting for her in the morning.

*  
*  
*  

The next day passed in a cocoon of conversation and research.

There were a lot of myths to go through and Jane and Darcy were both consulted on which ones they thought were plausible, which ones were nonsense and which ones they had to promise to ask Thor about the next time they saw him.

Jane liked that they spoke of her seeing Thor again with so much certainty. She didn't have the arrays working yet but the confidence that either she would succeed or Thor would come back for her made her happy.

“My phone isn't working,” Darcy complained the second day.

Jane looked up from the report she was combing through.

“What?”

“My phone. Not working. I have no larger words to express the depths of my despair.”

“Weren't you complaining about it yesterday?”

“I was complaining that my battery had turned into the equivalent of toddler on taco night.” Darcy paused and pushed her glasses up. “Absolutely full of shit. Claiming it had hours left and then dying the minute I dialed. But I've charged it and it's still not working. Let me see your phone.”

Darcy wiggled her fingers imperiously.

Jane fished into her pocket.

Then, finding it empty, she started patting down her clothes.

“I must have left it in my room, Darce.”

Darcy wandered off in search of it.
Jane went back to making notes in the report. Even aside from the relevant-to-science inquiries, she was reading all sorts of myths she was going to ask Thor about.

Thor in drag. Jane had to grin just thinking about it.

*
*
*

Darcy came back in a huff a few hours later.

“I couldn't find it.”

It took Jane a moment to recall their last conversation.

“Oh,” Jane frowned. “Well, I know it's around here somewhere; I talked to Coulson when we first got in. Ask one of the lab guys if you can borrow theirs to track it down.”

“Miss Lewis,” One of the junior agents cut in. Jane forgot her name. “It occurs to me that since you've finished your work, you would perhaps like to go to the city? Do some shopping, perhaps?”

Darcy perked up at that. She grinned toothily at Jane.

“I'm abandoning you.”

“Have fun,” Jane mumbled around the pen in her mouth.

“Seriously, though – look for your freaking phone.”

“I will,” Jane promised absently.

She was pretty sure Darcy started bemoaning her to the junior agent as soon as the door was closed.

*
*
*
*

“Something's going on,” Darcy announced, dropping her shopping bag in front of Jane's face.

Jane looked up.

“How do you mean?”

Darcy was wearing a Viking helmet and had a fur wrap over her shoulders. Jane wrinkled her nose.

“Really?” She asked.
Darcy ignored the criticism, as she often did.

“My phone has tanked. Yours is missing. I got a power adaptor while I was in town – and, on that note, steering Maia into a shop that sold them took more effort than it should have – so I’ve finally been able to plug my laptop in. But it can’t connect. I ‘borrowed’ - and please yes do hear the quote marks in that - someone’s computer and I haven’t gotten a single new email in the two days we’ve been here. I subscribe to enough shit that that’s just not possible. Something’s going on. I think SHIELD is deliberately keeping us,” She waved her hands, looking for the word. “Disconnected.” She settled on, looking at Jane expectantly.

Jane thought through the two days they’d been here.

“What time is it, noonish? I think Lukas is in the cafeteria.”

“It’s almost five but, sure.” Darcy took the fur throw off but left her helmet on.

Lukas wasn’t in the cafeteria. Nor were any agents that Jane recognized, although she hadn’t really been socializing that much. There were a lot of myths to go through and she’d had to repeat the complete story of what she’d done with Thor at least twice.

Which… was suspicious, now that she thought about it.

“Hey,” Jane called out, smiling at the first agent they approached. “Can I borrow your phone?”

He looked at her and said something apologetic in what Jane thought was German.

Surprise briefly washed over his face when Darcy replied in the same.

The two of them went back in forth in those odd syllables until Darcy apparently won.

Jane didn’t think she was imagining reluctance when he handed the phone over.

She called Erik.

When she got voicemail she hung up and tried him again. The man was sometimes terrible about picking his phone up in time.

She called again.

After the fourth try, the phone’s owner stood up and softly said something to Darcy, holding his hand out to Jane in a universal ‘give that to me’ gesture.

Jane held up a finger in what she hoped was an equally universal ‘give me a minute’ sign.

She called Erik a fifth time before giving that up as lost. She gave the phone back. The man said something Jane took to be a goodbye and then strode from the cafeteria, dumping his mostly full tray of food on the way out.

“Not at all suspicious,” Darcy observed.

“I couldn’t get a hold of Erik.”

Darcy fiddle with the horns on her helmet.

“Track down another goon and try for Hot Arms?”
They did.

Clint didn’t pick up either.

“This is getting to be genuinely worrisome.”

“‘Getting to be?’” Darcy gave her an incredulous glare.

“That computer that you ‘borrowed’… I think it’s time to borrow it again.”

“Jane, Darcy, there you are!” Lukas called, walking down the hallway to meet them.

“Lukas,” Jane greeted, smiling tightly.

“Come with me, please,” He asked.

*

*

*

Lukas brought them up to speed, apologizing for the deception.

“Agent Coulson wanted you kept safe while this was resolved.”

Jane stared at the report rehashing the incident in New York and couldn’t stop staring at the picture of Thor.

“That’s bullshit!” Darcy squawked on her behalf.

Jane tuned them out while they went back and forth, explaining and cursing. It wasn’t important now, really.

“Is he still here?” She asked, cutting them off.

“Yes, ma’am. We’re arranging transport to take you back to New York. Again, thank you for your cooperation.”

“Right,” Jane settled on, unable to find a nicer reply. She was angry at Coulson and taking it out on Lukas wasn’t fair.

The trip back to New York took an agonizing length of time, for all that the quinjet’s airspeed would have been impressive in other circumstances. The two of them hunched over Darcy’s laptop, absorbed in watching the news coverage.

She stared, enraptured, at the swirling image of the wormhole, and touched curious fingers to the screen. Thor had been there as well, firing lightning from that improbable hammer of his. She thought she saw Clint once or twice but it was hard to tell.

It had been a terrifying attack and she couldn’t help but be glad that she’d missed it.

She tried calling Erik again.

He still didn’t pick up.
“No answer.”

She called the lab phone for the New Mexico facility, uneasy when the phone produced an out-of-order tone.

“I can’t get a hold of the lab,” Jane said. Another phone call and a beat later, she added, “Or Coulson.”

“Shit,” Darcy murmured.

The jet landed at SHIELD HQ in New York. It was early afternoon and despite the news they’d been devouring on the way over, from here it looked like any other beautiful day in the city. Jane stared at the horizon, looking for buildings damaged by the invasion and as she watched, a column of light pierced the sky.

The Bifrost.

“Thor?”

The light disappeared and Jane’s stomach clenched.

She stared at where it had been until Darcy took her by the arm and pulled her inside.

“I want to speak to Coulson,” She demanded. Their escort gave her a strange, unsettled glance but led her past the security checkpoints and into the building proper.

“Doctor Foster, Miss Lewis,” A man said. “I’m Agent Jasper Sitwell.”

“Where is Agent Coulson?” Jane asked, shaking the offered hand tentatively.

Sitwell paused.

“I’m sorry, but he’s not available. But don’t worry - he left me in charge of your assignment. If you’ll follow me, please?”

SHIELD was buzzing with activity. Jane imagined with the recent attack that there was probably quite a lot for them to do and as they walked, she was nearly bumped into a handful of times by people scurrying about.

“Sorry for the chaos – alien invasions are a bitch to clean up,” Sitwell said once they were in his office.

“They happen a lot?” Darcy asked.

He quirked an eyebrow. “You’ve been present for most of them, oddly enough. Jane,” He said, shifting his attention to her. “I’m sorry. Thor had to leave.”

Jane clenched her fists in her lap.

“His brother, Loki, was leading the attack,” Sitwell continued sympathetically. “Thor took him back to Asgard. I know he wanted to see you but we needed to get Loki off-world sooner rather than later. I’m really very sorry.”

“Did he say when he’d be back?” Jane asked.

Sitwell shook his head.
Jane nodded, lifting her chin and accepting it.

“Back to work on the arrays, then,” She said, smiling tightly.

“Ah,” Sitwell said hesitantly.

“That’s not a good ‘ah,’” Darcy remarked.

“No, not so much,” Sitwell agreed. He took his glasses off and polished them, avoiding Jane’s gaze.

“When Loki arrived, he caused an event in the New Mexico facility. It… well, imploded.”

“Oh my God,” Jane breathed. She clutched at Darcy’s arm. “Oh my God, Erik.”

“Selvig? Erik Selvig, right?” Sitwell asked.

Jane nodded, pale.

“No, he’s fine. Ish. He was out of the facility before it got toasted.”

“What about Hot Arms?” Darcy asked.

Sitwell blinked at that.

“Oh, Barton,” He said after a beat. It left Jane bemused that the moniker was enough to identify him. “Same deal. Fine. Ish.”

“What does ‘fine-ish’ mean?” Darcy pressed.

“That’s… classified. But I promise they’re alive, functional and have all of their working limbs.”

“…Good?” Jane ventured, mind running through possibilities of what else could be wrong with them.

“Good,” Sitwell confirmed. “But about New Mexico-”

“Oh my God,” Jane repeated. “My research.”

“Yeaaaah,” Sitwell agreed. “We can access anything that was in the data cloud, of course, but any hard-copied notes or machinery you were working on will have to wait for salvage and, honestly, it’d probably be best to assume they’re destroyed. The facility is… well. It imploded.”

Sitwell brought his hands together in a doubled fist, mimicking it.

Jane bit her lip and took a deep breath through her nose.

“So,” She exhaled, “Darcy, we have some work to do.”

* 

* 

*
She and Darcy fell back into their established rhythm after that. They were moved down to a lab in Louisiana because testing the arrays required more flat, open space than was readily available in New York.

Darcy remembered more of Jane’s work than Jane had given her credit for. Between the two of them, the data cloud and SHIELD’s resources, Jane didn’t think the destruction of the New Mexico facility had put her back as far as she’d feared.

SHIELD had recorded a substantial amount of data for the Manhattan wormhole event and it was less than a month later that Jane started making significant strides in the research.

She sent a message to Sitwell that she had a prototype ready to test.

A SHIELD van came to collect them and the array that evening. Instead of Sitwell, though, she was introduced to a new contact.

“John Meggs,” He’d said, settling into the seat across from them. “Sitwell’s tied up just now.”

“Oh,” Jane replied. It was the hazard, she supposed, of an organization like SHIELD. The personnel seemed very interchangeable. She hadn’t been able to get a hold of Coulson since she’d left New Mexico and, after Sitwell asserted himself as her contact stopped trying. Jane assumed he was busy with the Avengers and the alien invasion.

John Meggs was about Sitwell’s age. His chin and nose were too pronounced to be traditionally handsome, but he was well-groomed and wore a suit like he’d been born to it. He had laugh lines crinkled around his brown eyes.

“I’ve been reviewing your research and believe I’m up to speed. Can you walk me through what you’re planning to test tonight?” He asked. When he looked at Darcy he kept his eyes above her neckline, which Jane appreciated. She loved Darcy but between her taste in sweaters and generous assets, Jane herself had been caught staring more than a few times.

“I have a calculation programmed into the feed that, if it works, may be able to open an Einstein-Rosen bridge to Asgard. I’ve got the device set to a kill switch that’ll shut everything down after twenty seconds in case I’m, well, wrong. But the math is solid – I think this has a real chance at working.”

Meggs settled back into the chair, giving her an impressed look.

“That’s remarkable. I’m looking forward to seeing this.”

He tapped his earpiece.

“Set up a perimeter around the site. We’re looking at a twenty second event. Be ready in case something comes through.”

Jane respected the precaution.

Setting up took maybe ten minutes and Jane was aware of the armed guards ringing the site the entire time. Guns made her nervous and, even though Darcy took her Taser everywhere Jane knew the other woman was also paying attention to how much firepower these SHIELD agents were packing.

Meggs helped her move things out, carrying the heavier metal components and following her directions without comment.
“Darcy, everything’s set up to record?”

“Good to go.”

“Alright,” Jane wiped sweaty hands down her jeans. “Let’s do this. Agent Meggs, I’m going to start the initiation sequence. Ready?”

He nodded, relaying the notice to the other agents.

Jane activated the array.

She held her breath. A moment passed. Then another.

Nothing happened.

She sighed, disappointment hitting her.

The array shot out a beam of light, fractured and unsteady but when it hit the sky, Jane could clearly see the portal opening.

Darcy grabbed her shoulder, squeaking a triumphal sound.

The portal closed and the light shimmered out, the kill switch activating and doing its job.

“Holy shit!” Darcy crowed. “Awesome!”

“Well done!” Meggs agreed, applauding her.

Jane felt dizzy. She started babbling, voice high and fast, grin stretching her mouth wide.

“You do realize what this means, right? If we can create a stable wormhole, we can establish contact with Asgard. I mean, there’s a lot of work to be done first. I’ll need to run more tests and verify that it actually is stable, and if it can sustain objects through travel, and if it can –”

“Doctor Foster,” Meggs cut her off, smiling. “I have to admit, this is a lot more than I was expecting from this outing. This is all… very exciting.”

He touched his earpiece.

“Pack everything up. Be very careful with it,” He ordered.

Jane’s smile faded a little. She was a little wary of other people handling the equipment.

“Doctor Foster, I’d like you to come with me to meet Director Fury. Miss Lewis, do you feel you can oversee the equipment?”

Darcy shrugged.

“Sure.”

“Director Fury? Really?”

Coulson had told her a few stories about SHIELD’s leader which Barton had later embellished. Jane was pretty sure they were embellishments, anyway.

“Please, yes. There are some potential applications for the technology you’re developing we’d really like your input on.”
Jane didn’t know what to make of the helicarrier. It was impressive, of course, but she couldn’t imagine it was actually practical.

Director Fury was… not at all how Jane had pictured him. She’d been imagining someone more like Samuel L. Jackson with an eyepatch and a leather duster and less a middle-aged woman in a business suit. Her dishwater blond hair was cut in a short bob and Jane swallowed at the assessing look she was given.

“Doctor Foster,” Fury said. “Please, have a seat.”

Meggs settled himself against the wall by the door. Jane took the seat in front of Fury’s desk.

“Agent Meggs tells me the prototype test was a success. That you opened a portal. It’s very impressive, Doctor Foster.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m sure you’re aware of the attack we recently suffered in New York,” Fury said, shifting the tone so unexpectedly that a beat of uncomfortable silence passed before Jane settled on a response.

“I am,” Jane replied carefully. She felt nervous and defensive and couldn’t quite put her finger on why.

“Are you aware that it was caused by a hostile alien race utilizing wormhole technology to invade us?”

Jane frowned.

“My research is to establish contact with Asgard.”

“Oh yes, I know,” Fury said. “I’m familiar with your interest in reestablish contact with Thor.”

“This isn’t just about Thor,” Jane insisted. It annoyed her that people thought her research was so singular in its purpose. “This is about opening up communication with another world. The benefit we could gain from that is… it’s incalculable.”

The woman smiled knowingly at her. “But Asgard isn’t necessarily an ally.”

“I’m… not sure I understand,” Jane said. “SHIELD has been funding my research since the attack.”

“It’s valuable research,” Fury agreed, clasping her hands together on the desk. “But there are other directions we’d like you to take it in.”

She waved a hand at Meggs and the man left the room. Jane stared after him, feeling uncertain. She turned back to Fury and straightened her spine. Coulson had gone over her contract with her point by point and Jane knew what rights she had here.

“My research is mine. If I’m going in a direction SHIELD doesn’t like, you’re legally allowed to
use what I’ve created so far but I can also take my work and go elsewhere.”

Fury gave her a level look.

“I thought you might say that.” Fury gathered the file on her folder and tapped it to order.

“Doctor Foster, I’d like to thank you for your cooperation. This really would have been much easier if you’d given it willingly.”

“What are you talking about?”

An unexpected hand on her shoulder turned her in her seat.

She looked at Meggs in surprise, then down at her chest, at the spear pressing into her skin, dumbfounded.

The pressure against her chest blossomed into agony and everything else fell away.

*

*

*

Loki surfaced at the sound of the chamber doors opening. It wasn’t time for his meal or for a change in guards.

Thor walked in.

His armor was polished to a silky gleam, his cape clean and resplendent on his shoulders. He looked healthy, if pensive. It made Loki all the more aware of his common clothing and the greasy, unkempt state of his hair. He’d always been a pale shadow to Thor but the contrast was particularly biting now.

The aching pull of someone else using the staff had settled in his head; unrelenting and throbbing in time with his heart. As glad as he was to have this new channel to explore, these new minds to tap into, the pain and draw of someone stealing his trapped magic left his mouth tight and eyes bloodshot.

He laced his fingers together and lay them in his lap to hide from Thor the way they shook.

The oaf’s steps slowed to a stop as he reached Loki’s cage and for a long, quiet minute Thor merely stared at him.

Loki’s brow quirked in challenge. At some point baiting Thor had become habit.

“I have come to apologize,” Thor said at last.

Loki resisted the urge to roll his eyes at Thor’s sincerity. He smoothed his face into a veneer of patience, wanting to see where he was going with this.

“Oh?” He asked.
“Leaving the scepter on Midgard was a mistake. It was an oversight which has caused you injury.”

Thor ran a thumb down Mjolnir’s handle, an obvious tell of his discomfort.

“I do not understand the magics that tie you to that weapon. Mother tells me the drain of its use harms you – that she found you convulsed with pain. I need not know more than that to realize the wrong I have done you in leaving it behind. Loki, can you forgive me?”

Loki narrowed his eyes at Thor.

“Does the Allfather make plans to retrieve it?” He asked, ignoring Thor’s question. “I imagine it would be another enticing bauble for his collection. He does have that magpie tendency.” Loki would have brought a hand up to consider his nails dismissively had his hands not still been trembling.

“Do you know what they’re doing with it, Thor?” Loki asked, smiling thinly. “It is not idle curiosity that spurs your precious mortals on. Really, has Heimdall mentioned nothing at all of note in his observation of the realms?”

Thor met his eyes in a hard, considering stare.

“If your aim is to shock me that the Midgardians would use it as a weapon, you will be disappointed, brother.”

“I am not your brother,” Loki corrected absently, speaking over Thor when he inhaled to deny the truth of the statement. “And of course, that part is obvious. But the how of it – that part is interesting. This is not the blunt SHIELD, channeling the tesseract into coarse artillery. The hand that steals my power now works by more subtle means.”

He sniffed dismissively, turning his head away from Thor in a show of boredom. Thor stepped closer to the glass.

“Speak plainly, Loki.”

“I can feel them, you know, those little mortal minds. Such a diverse collection their leader is gathering. A strategist with a cache of secrets deep enough to pierce the world, soldier ants to keep the queen safe. Do you know that they have an interest in … oh, now what does she call them…” Loki tapped a finger against his lip, pretending to think. “Einstein-Rosen bridges?”

Thor drew back, fear and surprise stealing across his face.

“Jane,” He whispered.

“Such an interesting mind she has, Thor,” Loki said, low and confiding as if speaking of a delicacy. “She was quite cross with you when you didn’t appear to her when last you came to Midgard. Although I assure you, her thoughts of you have, well, how shall I say this… diminished, recently.”

Thor spun on his heel and all but ran from the room.

Loki smiled at the door as it clumsily banged shut.

His own discomfort and the follies of Midgard could be trivialized by the court.

Thor would be much harder to ignore.
Chapter 12

The Bifrost once more glittered with fierce, beautiful power, the tesseract having been put to use in its repair.

Thor stood on the bridge, braced and ready for Heimdall to open the gate. It had not taken as long as Thor had feared to persuade his father to allow this quest. The realm was at peace and the indulgence had been easily given. For all that Loki’s actions against Jotenheim had been horrific and murderous, it was also undeniable that the savagery he’d wrought had extinguished the threat that realm possessed. Jotenheim wouldn't be able to rise against Asgard for at least another few centuries.

Heimdall put his sword, the massive key to this lock, in place. Thor's skin tingled with the building energy.

The Watcher had his eyes turned to the waypoint closest to SHIELD's puppetmasters. Thor clutched the handle of Mjolnir tight, ferocious glee at the violence he would unleash pounding through him in time with his heart. He would take his vengeance and then be reunited with his beloved Jane.

Soon, so very soon.

Heimdall pushed the sword forward to open the gate.

* *

“This sucks,” Tony remarked.

He and Rhodey were sitting atop the Chase Tower in Phoenix. The flight out here had felt good, had felt promising and productive but, once they'd arrived, the lack of any tangible leads to follow had left them perched and waiting.

Jarvis had yet to find an identifiable hit on any of their people of interest.

“I don't disagree. I really would have thought Jarvis would have found something by the time we got here,” Rhodey commented.

Tony dropped his faceplate back down and ruffled the suit's armaments, a weapons check to make sure every port opened smoothly.

“Jarvis,” He said inside his helmet, “If we're not getting anything off the street, what about air traffic. What's come through here in the last, what is it, five hours? Maybe he stole a helicopter.”

“Displaying the air space events for the last five hours,” Jarvis said, bringing up the list.

Tony skimmed it.

“Son of a bitch.”

“What?” Rhodey asked, coming over.
“Jarvis, show him.”

A pause while the data was sent to War Machine.

“What am I looking at?” Rhodey asked, dropping his own faceplate to view the HUD.

“Fifth one down, arriving 12:17 local and departing 12:28. That's a quinjet designation. Jarvis, what was the exact time for the explosion in the warehouse?”

“12:19, sir.”

“Son of a bitch,” Rhodey echoed.

“Jarvis, do you have the current location of the helicarrier?”

“It has not changed its position, sir.”

“Good. Rhodey, I think we need to go have some words with SHIELD.”

Rhodey tipped his head in agreement but when Tony fired his repulsors, Jim caught him by the calf and brought him back down to the rooftop.

“This may be unrelated to what's been happening with the staff,” Rhodey told him, voice serious. “I read the reports with Bruce. SHIELD was looking for him and this might just be a straightforward rescue.”

“You really think that?” Tony asked.

A pause, then; “No. Not really. But I don't think an attack on the helicarrier is the best move, here.”

“Who said anything about an attack? I,” Tony pressed a gauntlet to his chest, miming indignation, “Am the soul of diplomacy.”

“I can't even imagine how many reincarnations it must've taken for diplomacy to end up like that.”

“Was that a Buddhism joke? That was a Buddhism joke,” Tony said, impressed. War Machine gazed back at him levelly.

“Fine. What do you suggest we do instead, then?” Tony asked.

“Walk softly and carry a big stick.”

Tony thought about it.

“We take Bruce with us,” He concluded. “I love this plan.”

*

*

*

Bruce was working through the files Jarvis had so far been able to retrieve from SHIELD's systems.
“Shall I go ahead and narrow it down to the ones with the highest level of classification?” Jarvis asked.

“Please,” Bruce answered. Anything SHIELD wanted kept secret was bound to be interesting. The list diminished significantly.

He opened the first one.

“Oooh, hey,” Bruce observed wryly, “They’re looking into the Hulkbuster weapons again. Or still.”

He skimmed through their progress. It was... less theoretical than he was expecting. There were working prototypes. Looking through the designs, though, he was still fairly sure that even these wouldn’t be able to do more than slow him down.

He felt a twinge of disappointment in that purely as a pragmatist. Well, mostly as a pragmatist. Somebody should be able to stop the Hulk if and when the day came that it was needed.

Bruce flipped to the next file.

“Jane Foster... why do I know that name?” Bruce muttered, reading.

Jarvis supplied a summary of the scientist off to the side of the file he had open. Bruce skimmed it.

She had received her doctorate in theoretical physics half a year ago. Bruce looked through her published works and didn’t think he’d read any of them. He couldn’t put his finger on why the name was familiar.

Bruce kept reading.

Einstein-Rosen bridges. Wormholes. He could certainly understand why SHIELD would have an interest there, given what had happened with the Chitauri. Maybe that’s why he knew her name – it’d probably come up at some point in the aftermath of that event.

Bruce eyed the machine schematics and was impressed with how much of it went over his head. Jane Foster was brilliant.

There were a lot of by-notes for the logistics for the device she’d created – power grid reassignment and continental placements. But the project had been labeled a success.

Doctor Foster had created a functional suppression field for Earth.

*  
*  
*  

Loki smiled into his book when Thor came back to his cell.

“Having trouble, Thor?” He asked.

Loki glanced up from the page, marking his spot with a carefully placed fingertip. He gave Thor a
look of patient curiosity.

Thor, meanwhile, glowered. Even with the aching pain worming inside his head, Loki couldn’t resist provoking him further.

“I have to say, I did not expect you back so quickly. Was the Lady Jane really satisfied with so little? Rumors paint you as more generous than that.”

Loki was expecting the brat to strike out in anger at the words. But Thor surprised him.

He took a breath and looped the hammer to his belt. He ran a weary hand over his face.

“The Bifrost cannot open a path to Midgard,” Thor said. “Heimdall’s eyes have found machines he thinks responsible.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “Your lady built them.”

Thor closed his eyes briefly.

“Does she suffer?” He asked.

Loki decided to answer honestly.

“Not as much as you do.”

Thor sniffed a small, bitter laugh at that. In that moment, the weight in his features made Loki truly see him as Odin’s son.

Thor walked to the glass wall and sat on the floor, his back to Loki’s back. The unexpected intimacy made Loki uncomfortable and he stayed still and seated only with effort. Had it not been for the inch-thick walls, they would have been touching.

Minutes passed like this, silently.

“We have both changed so much since last we sat together,” Thor said at last. “Do you remember, Loki, what a fool I was in the days before my coronation ceremony?”

A jibe died unspoken on Loki’s tongue. He held his silence, made curious by this quiet version of Thor.

“Drinking all the evening, boasting of conquests and making promises of future, glorious battles. And even in the heights of my roaring stupidity, there you always were, trusted, at my side.”

Loki turned his head slightly, seeing Thor’s bent shoulders and the fall of his hair in the corner of his eye.

“I have loved you always, Loki. Even now, even with this distance you’ve erected between us, you are still loved to me.”

“You do not know me,” Loki said, quiet but firm.

“Nor do you know who I have become,” Thor returned. “Odin’s banishment and then your death—I changed, brother, from who I had been. As I know you have too. We have much to learn about each other.”

“What is the point of this, Thor?” Loki hissed, angry at the oaf’s clumsy attempt at manipulation.
Thor turned to meet Loki’s gaze.

“Do you remember the boar hunt we went on for my 400th birthday?”

Loki narrowed his eyes and turned his back.

Thor continued.

“We were three days deep in the forest. I tripped and woke a nesting viper who struck me in the stomach. My flesh was purpled with her venom before I made it back to our camp.”

Loki remembered. Fandral and Hogun, earlier risers both, had gone ahead to scout the area; Volstagg had been sleeping still from overindulgence and Loki had been alone with what he’d in his panic thought to be a dying Thor.

“You threw me to the dirt,” Thor said, turning to point his face once more towards the room’s fireplace, “And spent your magics pulling the poison from my veins. I remember the effort of it left you sweating and shaking, as pale as a fish belly.”

That had been partially due to fear but if Thor wanted to remember it as strain, Loki wouldn’t correct him.

“I never thanked you,” Thor added quietly. “Not as you deserved. And it was only one occasion in dozens when the good you did me was taken for granted.”

“I did not need your thanks, nor do I want them now.”

“Nonetheless. They are given.”

Loki spun and struck the glass, sending a spike of warning magic crackling through it. Thor gratifyingly flinched. Apparently the pain of it lashed out on his side as well.

“I would have been a conqueror. You cannot be unaware that your triumph over me was secured only by the smallest of chances. How dare you pity me!”

Thor stood and gave Loki such a sorrowful look that he wanted to strike the glass again.

“How much wrong I must have done you that you would mistake gratitude for pity, I cannot begin to measure.”

The pain in Loki’s head grew – a new mind being added to the web. It felt like jaws wrapping around his skull and squeezing tight.

Loki fought the urge to clutch his temple. It wouldn’t help.

Thor put a hand to the glass, concern obvious on his face and Loki became aware of the trickle of blood wetting his upper lip.

He wiped it away angrily.

“Your Lady Jane doesn’t suffer, Thor. She knows no pain, or fear, or doubt. She is a pure instrument of purpose until her master finishes his use of her,” He bit out. He added in mock sympathy; “He’s killed the last three that his needs outgrew but I’m sure her loveliness will make him stay his hand.”

Thor swallowed hard.
“There are ways between the realms known to you. Secret magics you've kept hidden from Heimdall's regard.”

Ah, Loki thought. Now we come to the real reason for his visit.

He wiped the blood from his nose again and turned his back to Thor, picking up the book he'd dropped in his small attack.

“There are,” Loki agreed. “I have no need of the Bifrost to travel to those places in Yggdrasil's roots. And what of it, Thor? I could help you, were I inclined, were I not imprisoned, were I not robbed of my magics. Fewer obstacles than that bar bilgesnipe from flight.”

He slammed the book down on the desk.

“Would you?”

“Would I what? Fly?”

“Help me,” Thor replied. It came out more of a request than a statement and, perversely, this show of weakness from Thor made Loki angrier.

“Do you truly think the Allfather would free the likes of me for a whim of yours? I knew you to be a fool but this is beyond even my imaginings. And even if the crowned thief has succumbed to the madness of old men, what cause have I to aid you?”

Thor's jaw tightened.

“The blood on your face, for one,” Thor said pointedly. Loki refused to give Thor the satisfaction of wiping at his nose again. “And that I am your brother and I need you for another.”

“I would gut you the moment the cage opened,” Loki promised. He ran fingers over the weakness in the desk's corner.

“No, Loki,” Thor disagreed. “Were my death truly something you desired, you'd have achieved it long before now.”

Thor turned quiet once more.

“When I thought to my future on the throne as king of Asgard, always I imagined that you would be with me.”

“Your shadow,” Loki said bitterly.

“My dearest council,” Thor corrected. “You, with your quick mind and silver tongue - even when I favored battle more I never believed your strengths without worth.”

Thor waited until Loki turned around and met his gaze to finish.

“So I do not say that I will ask our father for this, Loki. Instead, I ask you what I must say to convince him.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the delay. I was spending a few days dead for tax reasons.

Carol sat back and watched with interest as Romanov carefully ran a small device around the suit.

“The crotch,” She muttered, stilling her hand there when the device clicked, “I don’t know why I’m even surprised he’d put it there. Danvers, I need your help here. Please open the suit up.”

“What are we doing?” She asked, coming over.

“Removing the tracking chip.”

“Right,” Carol said. “Of course.”

Hill and Teddy were both moving to pack up anything of use in the cabin. Carol didn’t know where they were heading but it was clear staying here wouldn’t be an option.

She stepped behind the suit and it unfolded for her.

“You’ll need to be the one to do this - I’ll set it off if I go inside.” The rogue agent handed Carol the device. “Pinpoint the location as closely as you can. I’d really rather leave the suit as intact as possible.”

Carol went to work.

“Do we have a plan?”

“It’s more like an outline,” Hill said, tying off their bag of supplies.

Carol looked up at that.

“Focus,” Romanov chided, flicking fingers at the suit’s internals. Carol bent back to it.

She found the curve of metal she’d need to peel back and sucked her teeth, considering it. She put the tracking tool down and ran her fingers over the smoothly jointed piece, trying to figure out how remove it and trying, too, not to think too hard about how much contact Jim’s… Jim would have had with that piece.

“I’ll need something to pry this up,” She said.

“Yeah, please don’t,” Tony Stark’s voice came from the helmet, causing her to jump. She was gratified to note that Natasha and Hill had also twitched in surprise at that. Teddy hadn’t moved. Teddy kind of made the hair at the back of Carol’s neck rise. There was something profoundly, subtly off about the man.

The HUD flickered, the screen turning on and projecting a video call. From the dark, confined look around Stark, Carol thought he was in the Iron Man suit.
Carol took a breath and considered how to explain.

Romanov put a hand on her shoulder and gently moved her out of the way, positioning herself in front of the suit instead.

“Ms. Rushman!” Stark grinned, obviously pleased. Romanov gave him a flat look at the name. “Glad to see you’re with us.” The man paused, then added, tone more serious; “Really glad.”

“Stark,” She returned.

“Why are you dismantling my suit?” He asked, still smiling but edged with something not quite friendly.

“We don’t want SHIELD to be able to track it.”

“Why not just remove the tracking signature from SHIELD's database?”

Natasha’s expression took a step further away from cordial.

“This is easier,” She said.

Tony snorted a laugh.

“It’s adorable that you think that. Give me a minute.”

The HUD went dark.

“We’re ready to move,” Hill said and put the laptop case by the door. “Our transport should be here soon.”

“Friendly?” Teddy asked.

Hill gave a single, firm nod.

“Where is it planning on taking us?”

“I have a contact in Mirnyy.”

As Carol watched, Teddy peeled up the sleeve of his sweater and opened the back of his wrist. It was a gleaming tangle of wires and circuitry – beautiful, and far above what Carol had thought possible with prosthetics. Every part of him moved with the smoothness of a predator.

He flicked his eyes up to meet hers, acknowledging her curiosity with a warning look.

Carol raised an eyebrow. She refused to be intimidated by him.

He snapped the panel shut.

“Mirnyy’s no good,” He said, focusing his attention on Hill. “Petyr is as subtle as a grenade. SHIELD has eyes on him.”

Hill’s mouth firmed. If she was otherwise surprised that the Winter Soldier knew her man, she gave no sign.

“We need to get back to the States,” Natasha asserted. She tipped her head to indicate Teddy. “We have a way in that’ll get us around SHIELD’s surveillance.”
“Agreed,” Stark’s voice came from the dark suit. The screen turned back on.

“Wipe’s complete. You’re good to go,” He said. It was difficult to pinpoint where he was looking from the curve of the HUD but Carol thought he was looking at Natasha. His face was drawn in pensive, considering lines.

Outside, they heard a truck pulling up.

“Let me know when you’re back,” Stark said, dropping whatever he’d been about to say. “I've increased security at Stark Tower. Jarvis'll know to let you in.”

“Acknowledged,” Hill said, the word short and crisp but not unfriendly. “Danvers, check in with the SHIELD handler working this op and confirm that you’ve arrived at this outpost. Let them know you’ve been briefed on the mission details, keep it uninteresting and make them believe everything is still going according to their plans. We aren't going to have a long window where subterfuge is going to work, and we need to make the most of it.”

“See you soon,” Stark said and ended the call. Carol was glad for the timing of that. It would have been weird climbing into the suit with his face right there.

She put in the call to SHIELD.

*

*

*

Assured that high court would put too much weight on the issue and a private conversation too little, Thor waiting until the evening meal to seek his father out.

The milieu was quiet – many of the warriors had yet to trickle in from the grounds, and yet there were enough eyes present that Odin sat as his king, not as his father.

It was known that Midgard was inaccessible by the Bifrost. The tesseract, perhaps, could transport Thor there, or the dark magics Odin had summoned before. There was no guarantee that either would work, though, nor what the consequences would be of a failed attempt.

The affairs of Midgard were of little concern to Asgard these days. Thor had received sympathy, as, too, it was known that he was now separated once more from his beloved Jane. But neither that nor that Loki suffered was enough to incite further action. Midgard would be cut off from them. Heimdall would monitor the realm and, as a whole, they would simply wait for the next age of Midgard to replace the current one.

Thor took his place at the table. Frigga squeezed his shoulder and he smiled at her gladly. He would present himself as a man accepting his burdens.

He must pretend that he believed Midgard to be beyond his reach.

So he spoke with his mother on Idunn’s crops, and on the wager Hogun had made with the stable-boy that Sif was sure Hogun would lose.
Engaging in the trivial conversations and waiting for the right moment to broach the subject nearly pained him. Still, Thor endured, until at last an ebb settled at the table.

“There is something from my time in Midgard that lingers in my thoughts, Allfather,” He mused.

Thor kept his voice casual but people from the tables looked up as he spoke, curious, as always, to the tales he brought from their protectorate.

“Speak on it,” Odin prompted.

Thor set his drink down. Loki told him fiddled too much with his hands when he lied, and so Thor schooled himself to keep his fingers still.

“The otherworldly army I faced was formidable. They fought with the ferociousness of animals and the battle was hard fought for it. I hold my victory against them with pride.”

“It was well fought, Thor,” Sif agreed.

Odin's lips curved into smile that Thor could see some wariness in. His father knew he was not finished.

“They were a dumb, bestial enemies,” Thor continued. “And yet the craftsmanship of their tools belied their simplicity. The staff that gathered thralls was unique, yes, but the magics in the weapons each of them carried - the way they discharged energy - they were not so dissimilar than what I see in Gungnir.”

“By Loki's account, their leader was not of their ilk,” Odin remarked. “Doubtless, this other's was the hand that made them.”

Thor bit back a small smile. Loki had insisted that Thor must never be the one to bring up Loki's name first. It should emerge from Odin's lips, that the man would think the plan to come was his own design.

In that counseling, Thor couldn't but remember countless times Loki had used the same trick on him.

“I'm sure that is so,” Thor agreed.

He let the topic fall and continued his meal. Loki had also been firm on this – let those listening dwell, for a while, on the idea of weapons that could rival Odin's spear in the hands of proven enemies.

He ate, keeping his features bland with unconcern. After a while, he heard a murmur of conversation. Curious voices mulling over possibilities.

Patience came with effort (he could not but think of the threat hanging over his Jane), but listening to his work taking root, Thor held his tongue and let the seeds grow.
Bruce had the schematics for the new generation of Hulkbusters up on the hologram. Running the figures through his head, he couldn't help but cringe.

Weapons, and he would never say this out loud, were really more Tony's department. Still, Bruce could follow the design well enough. If his math on those gamma cannons was right, anyone not-him inside half a kilometer radius of the blast wouldn't be walking away from it.

“Jarvis, cancel that, please,” He said. He'd asked the AI to create a projection of the weapon's damage but the longer he looked at the diagrams, the less he doubted his conclusions.

And he didn't want it absolutely confirmed. The idea that SHIELD would design weapons that would almost surely leave civilian causalities just for the chance at taking him out...

Well.

It was anger-inducing.

He swiped a finger through the file to close it.

The schematic stayed up. Bruce huffed an annoyed breath and tried poking the top right corner. That didn't work either.

“Jarvis, how do I close this?”

He glanced up towards a camera. He was determined to get the hang of the holographic projector if for no other reason than that Tony took far too much delight in watching him fumble with it.

A few seconds passed without a reply. Bruce frowned.

“Jarvis?”

Another beat of silence.

“Great,” Bruce groused, rubbing a hand through his hair. “And I've managed to freeze an AI.” He flicked fingers through the hologram again fruitlessly. He imagined an error message popping up inside the Iron Man helmet. 'Jarvis.exe has stopped working.'

He heard the clack of high-heeled shoes coming down the corridor to the lab. Pepper, then. He turned to the door, face sheepish and ready to apologize.

Except, it wasn't Pepper that came through the doors.

“Doctor Banner,” The woman greeted pleasantly.

The lab door closed behind her and Bruce's skin tightened in warning.

“Sorry for the inconvenience,” She apologized, waving a hand to indicate the lab and, in a broader sense, Jarvis. Bruce watched her eyes rake over the frozen schematic. There was no doubt in his mind she knew exactly what she was looking at.

“Director Fury?” He asked, wanting his suspicions confirmed.

She gave him a tight smile andinclined her head, agreeing.
The Other Guy thrummed inside him.

“Please don't,” She asked calmly. And, unlike Natasha during that first meeting, Bruce thought this woman was genuinely unconcerned about the danger she was in. It made Bruce wary because it sure as hell wasn't confidence borne from ignorance.

“I've seen some pretty compelling reasons to let you meet my counterpart,” He stated, mouth quirking in a wry, apologetic expression. He clasped his hands together. “Give me a reason why I shouldn't.”

“That's why I'm here,” She replied, composure unruffled by the threat. “I believe it's time we had a conversation.”
Steve made himself relax. It didn’t take much effort - his thoughts were still slow and sluggish. He was still exhausted and weak.

But the longer he was left alone the better he felt, and he hadn’t survived a war (sort of) by letting opportunities slip by.

He pretended his angry outburst at the pilot’s death drained him more than it had. He slumped down afterwards and closed his eyes, grateful for the extra blankets Clint had draped over him even if the motivations behind that action were suspect at best.

When the quinjet landed, Steve kept his limbs limp. Fury checked the straps on the gurney and Steve made a show of opening his eyes. He wanted Fury to believe that the action took far more effort than it had.

Steve could feel his heart laboring from the blood loss and knew the fingers that checked his neck would find his pulse thin and thready.

The hatch opened and people came on board. The other prisoners were moved out first before Fury released the gurney’s wheels and rolled him outside.

The harsh daylight made him twitch and squeeze his eyes shut, as did the slap of cold air. He moaned piteously, playing it up a bit.

They took him inside. Steve slitted his eyes and took in the security at the doors. Key-card access and a pair of stationed guards. It could certainly be worse.

He was handed off to a person in surgical scrubs.

“Be careful with him. He’s still out of it but that won’t last. Get him intubated and on a drip soon,” Fury ordered.

“Yes sir,” The man replied.

Steve fought hard not to tense at that. He was taken past security and separated from Clint and Fury. What little Steve could see reminded him of a hospital hallway.

“Doctor Blankenship,” Someone called out. The man paused in wheeling his cart. “I need you to sign this.”

“A little busy,” The man said archly.

“It’s for his transfer. He’s your department’s responsibility and I need you to sign acknowledging that. If you want to take it up with the Director, I’m sure she’ll be happy to answer any of your questions.”

A beat of silent communication passed between the two men. Blankenship sighed. Steve heard papers being handed over.

Something was pressed into Steve’s hand. Something small and sharp.

“It’s just at the bottom of the page,” The man said. Steve risked a glance. Nothing at all in the man’s bearing made it look like he’d just given Steve a blade.
“Thank you, Jas, I don’t think I ever would have figured that out,” The doctor groused.

“And initial on the next page,” Jas replied back blandly.

The sound of a page being flipped.

Steve started slowly, carefully sawing at the strap by his wrist.

Jas shifted his weight, angling his hip to further hide Steve’s movements. Steve wished the blanket covered his hands.

“Is it just you working in the lab?” Jas asked. “Page 4, too, by the way. Personal effects. The shield’s still in the jet.”

“Me and Richards. The deputy director’s bringing more staff with him,” Blankenship answered. There was a flourishing sound of pen strokes. “Anything else?”

Another moment while Jas flipped back through the papers, buying Steve more time. Steve could have kissed the man.

“That’ll do it. Have fun with your…experiment.” Jas shifted his weight and Steve stilled his fingers. He was maybe halfway through the strap.

“Jas,” The doctor said, quiet and confiding. Steve risked another few strokes with the blade. “Don’t let them hear you talking like that. I know this isn’t… it’s…” A gust of exhalation. “Not ideal. But SHIELD tried idealism and we almost lost. The next time Earth is attacked, we have to do better. And this is how we get there.”

“I know,” Jas said. Then, more convincingly, “I know you’re right. Ignore me; it’s just been a long shift.”

“Get some coffee,” Blankenship replied and the gurney started moving again. “And for god’s sake, Sitwell, watch your tongue.”

“I can’t get it far enough out of my mouth for that,” Jas called back from further down the hallway.

The doctor mumbled something Steve missed and then they were moving again.

The last fiber of the strap gave way just as they passed through a doorway. Steve tucked the blade under his body and laid his hand flat once more.

Steve looked around the room, keeping his face slack. The doctor bent over him.

“Waking up?”

Steve blinked slowly and crinkled his brow as though confused. He shouldn’t make his move until he knew where the other doctor was.

Blankenship brought a light to Steve’s eyes and checked his pupils. Steve kept them unfocused as best he was able but there was only so much he could do against his body’s natural reaction.

The doctor frowned.

“Richards, help me get him in place. The knock-out gas is wearing off.”

A grunt of assent from the other side of the room, and then footsteps heading towards him.
“Not surprising with his metabolism,” A new voice said. “It’ll be interesting to see how the records from the 40s match up.”

“Security first, curiosity later.”

“Ketamine?”

“Not with his heart rate this slow. Give me the –”

Steve didn’t hear the end of the sentence. When Blankenship put fingers to his pulse point, Steve snapped his free arm up and grabbed the man by the neck, jerking his head down hard against the railing of the gurney.

The blow rendered him unconscious. Steve dropped him.

“Fuck!” The other man barked, stumbling back.

Steve just barely managed to catch his coat with his fingers. It was a struggle to pull the man back in range. When he did, Steve repeated the move and knocked him out as well.

Steve dropped him to land on top of the other doctor and lay back, panting and sweating from the exertion.

It took him a minute to get his breath back before he could sit up to undo the other straps. Going vertical after so long spent on his back left him dizzy and nauseated.

Working the buckles off took effort. His hands were shaking, which made everything harder, and when he was finished Steve nearly cried with relief.

He stepped down onto the cold lab floor. He underestimated how unsteady he’d be on his feet and stumbled, falling on top of the doctors.

One of them groaned.

Steve scrambled back up. He had to get moving, now. He braced his hands on his knees and willed the dizziness to pass.

He used the gurney to pull himself back upright and sliced a fingertip open on the blade he’d left there. He grunted at the pain and drew his hand back, scowling at the sharp little piece of metal. He grabbed one of the blankets and knotted it around his waist. He’d have preferred clothes but it would take too much time and effort to strip one of the doctors.

There was a key-card scanner by the door. Steve’s head swam as he bent to steal an access card from the man on top. His vision narrowed as he righted himself.

Deep breaths, he thought. C’mon, soldier, move.

He waved the badge at the scanner. The little light flashed green and the door clicked.

Steve carefully peeked out through the door frame, verifying the hallway was empty before easing himself out of the room.

The way he’d come had had too many people. Steve ran… well, hobbled, in the other direction.

He came to a juncture and, glancing around the corner, came nose to nose with Jas.
“Keep quiet,” The man said immediately. “Follow me. We’re going to circle around and get back to the quinjet. Jasper Sitwell, by the way. Good to meet you.” He put out a hand.

Steve, bemused, took it.

Sitwell shook it once then put the hand on his shoulder and half-dragged Steve behind him.

For all the speed they were putting into it, Steve was surprised at how quietly they managed to move. Sitwell was short, bald and bespectacled. He looked like an office worker and it juxtaposed against the competence with which he led them through the compound. The man reminded Steve of Coulson.

Sitwell swiped his badge and opened a door Steve would have assumed to be another lab. Instead, he found himself being led outside.

Steve squinted against the sun, head pounding despite the adrenaline he could feel coursing through him.

The gravel cut his feet as they ran around the building. Steve didn’t let it slow him. He did spare a hand to keep his blanket from making an escape, though.

Steve kept close to the wall and let Sitwell scout around the corner when they reached it.

The man drew back and hissed.

“Shit. Shit shit.”

“How bad?” Steve asked, voice rough with disuse.

“Could be worse.” He met Steve’s eyes and gave him a lopsided grin. “It’s a clear shot to the quinjet, at least. And the hatch is still open.”

Steve tied his blanket more tightly around his waist. He gave the man an expectant look.

“But there are guards in the yard,” Sitwell continued, adjusting his glasses. “They’ll see us as soon as we break the corner. And we’ve got to go now – there are reinforcements inbound. Do you think you have a sprint in you? It’s about 40 meters.”

Steve seriously assessed himself.

“Yes,” He said. He didn’t think he’d be able to go much further than that distance, but if that’s what stood between him and getting out of here? Yes, he could do that.

“After you, then.”

They switched positions. Steve knew it was so he could be caught if he fell. Steve took it as a sign of how tired he was that he accepted the precaution without any stirrings from his pride.

He, too, took a quick glance around the corner to get a feel for the layout.

“On three?”

“Sounds good.”

Steve took a breath, nodded his head for the countdown, and then broke cover at a run.
They closed half the distance before the guards reacted. A cry of alarm went up and Steve didn’t let it distract him. Sitwell’s hand met his back and Steve pushed himself harder. Ten meters. Five.

A bullet ricocheted off the ramp next to his foot. Steve ignored it and slapped the control to close the hatch.

He saw a slash of red appear on Sitwell’s arm before he got to cover beside Steve. The other man grimaced but Steve could see it was only a graze.

“We need to get to Stark Tow-”

The hatch finished clicking shut but Steve barely heard it.

All of his attention was on the arrow in Sitwell’s neck.

Both of their hands flew to it, the wound pulsing thick spurts of blood.

“Go!” Sitwell’s voice was a wet gurgle. His face, under the blood, was angry and determined. He pushed Steve’s hands away and pointed firmly to the cockpit.

Steve swallowed hard.

He drew his hands back, numb and horrified, and did what he had to do. He could still hear small arms fire pinging off the jet’s sides and knew if he lingered they’d organize and find a way to stop them from leaving.

Stop him from leaving.

He’d seen the quinjet fly enough times to get it in the air. Photographic memory and pilot’s training – they came in handy.

He took off, intent first on simply getting distance from the facility before he entered coordinates. He set the altitude far above normal cruising. He didn’t want to risk running into whoever was on the way in. Steve did it as quickly as he could but knew before he engaged the autopilot that Sitwell would be dead before he finished.

He should be saying something, provide the dying man at least that comfort, but Steve’s throat was too tight to get any words out. It shamed him that he couldn’t. He tried again and it came out as a sob.

Sitwell’s wet breaths quickly became too quiet to hear.

Steve wanted to pretend it was because the noise the engines made drowned him out.

When he had the course set, he flung himself out of the chair and stumbled to the back of the jet. There was a great deal of blood and it seeped into his blanket, onto his skin.

Sitwell was still warm. Blood oozed around the arrow but it wasn’t being pulsed out by a beating heart. It was the only thing about the body that moved.

Steve reached out and closed Sitwell's eyes.
When, perhaps an hour later, he was satisfied with the murmurings of the hall Thor finished his ale and made to rise from the table.

“Linger a while, Thor,” Odin said.

Thor tried to keep his wariness from his face and obligingly settled back down into his seat. He glanced at his father, who returned a smile Thor could read nothing in. He was on Odin’s left side. It was normally an honor he bore with pride that he was trusted to guard the king’s blind spot but in this moment the inscrutable gold patch left him frustrated and chary.

Odin bent his head to him, still with his good eye hidden from Thor, and asked: “What else has Loki instructed you to say?”

The words were dropped so softly none save Thor would hear them.

Thor swallowed hard.

“What makes you think-”

“Thor,” Odin said, voice laced with calm amusement. “He is my son. Do you truly think I cannot see the words are his for all that they spill from your mouth?”

Thor did not know how to reply and so kept quiet.

Odin rose and, hesitantly, Thor stood and followed him.

They slipped away from the hall, Thor unsure how to broach the silence that fell between them as they walked.

It was not long before he realized their destination.

When they at last passed the guards and entered Loki’s prison, Thor had still not found the right words to explain.

Loki looked up from his book as they entered. He shot Thor a brief, accusing glance.

Thor mouthed back ‘sorry,’ shrugging in apology.
Loki rolled his eyes.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” He drawled, closing the book and settling his hands in his lap.

To Thor’s eyes, Loki looked like he was suffering from a long sickness. His skin was too pale, the circles under his eyes deep and dark. As he watched, his brother trembled as though beset by cold. The hands in Loki’s lap were clenched together tightly for all that his expression implied boredom.

“Speak to me about the battle on Midgard, Loki,” Odin said.

Loki flicked his eyes to Thor briefly, then tipped his head and settled back against the glass.

“What would you have me say?”

“Your brother brings concerns to the court. I would be remiss not to investigate them.”

Thor looked at Odin curiously. That was not what he’d been expecting.

Odin continued, ignoring him.

“When the Midgardians sent their magics to the Chitauri’s heart, it was a blow that slew the army. A curious thing.”

“They were a people that held sorcerous craft as the work of weaklings,” Loki explained dryly. “Those ‘weaklings’ stayed behind and bound their warriors in magics that let them breathe and bear the weight of Midgard’s air. When the spell-casters died, the magic withered as well. Their common warrior beasts knew how to wield nothing beyond brute strength and died as crushed, land-thrown fish.”

Odin nodded and thumbed his beard thoughtfully.

“The Chitauri leader yet lives, then.”

“Allfather?” Thor asked.

Odin waved a hand at Loki, who narrowed his eyes in return.

“The scepter. Were the Chitauri leader dead, the bond between Loki and that staff would be broken.”

Thor looked at Loki, not wanting to ask this but unable to embrace his father’s certainty.

“Would not the bond remain as Loki himself lives?”

“It was not Loki’s magic that bound him to the staff.”

Loki stiffened at that announcement.

The startlement did not last long, though, and Loki’s regard shifted into something hateful.

“You would be foolish to discount him as an enemy,” Loki said, low and dangerous. “He is powerful beyond anything you have seen and he knows of Asgard.”

As Loki spoke, a fresh trickle of blood stemmed from his nose. He let out an impatient breath and produced an already blood-stained scrap of fabric that had been tucked against his waist. He
pressed it to the flow.

Odin waited patiently and Thor took his lead from his father. They waited and, at length, Loki seemed to let go of his anger.

He slumped against the glass and, clutching the cloth, settled his shaking hands once more in his lap.

“You need to destroy the scepter,” Loki said tonelessly. He did not look at Odin as he spoke. “Without the tesseract, he has no easy means of travel, and without that connection to the scepter and through it to me, he has no coordinates by which to guide himself here.”

“How unfortunate it is, then, that this information was so late in coming. The Bifrost cannot find Midgard now,” Odin stated.

Thor took a breath but Loki’s eyes flicked to him and he stayed his silence.

“Surely a mere inconvenience,” Loki remarked, meeting Odin’s eye again. “The Bifrost was shattered still when you sent Thor to retrieve the tesseract. With it in hand, do you yet hesitate?”

“I am aware that there are subtler means of ingress, ways with fewer risks against this barrier Midgard has erected.”

Loki smiled without any humor.

“It is because you are Jotunn, you know,” Odin said calmly. Loki’s mouth tightened. “Those crafts that are unique to you. In the realms, you are singular: innate talents refined by Asgardian tutelage.”

“Indeed. Is it any wonder why you stole me?” Loki mocked. The fingers around his bloodied cloth were white-knuckled.

This was like watching Sif spar with apprentices – brutal and inevitable, and yet an undeniable draw for the eye.

Thor stepped in.

“If the scepter is destroyed, so too is the Chitauri’s path destroyed?” He asked.

Loki inclined his head, agreeing.

Odin smiled.

“Well, then.”

Thor watched his father ascend the steps and then walk through the glass of Loki’s cage.

Odin stood before his adopted son. Loki, with visible wariness, took the hand the king offered and rose.

Odin pulled him in and placed his other hand at Loki’s temple.

Energy cracked around his fingertips, wild and bright enough to sting Thor’s eyes. He saw Loki throw his head back hard against the glass and cry out in pain.

Thor closed the distance and pounded on the glass. The magic of it crackled back at him.
“Father, stop!”

Thor’s arm went numb from pounding at the glass. It was only the space of seconds but felt an age before Odin dropped his hands.

Loki slumped, bloodshot eyes rolling in his head. Odin caught him with firm hands under his arms.

Thor watched his brother sway woozily, forehead pressed to his father’s shoulder and his thick, unwashed hair hiding his face.

The two men stood, unmoving save for their breaths. Thor’s heart beat in his throat and he knew his eyes were wide in surprise and trepidation.

At last, Loki seemed to regain himself. He drew back from Odin, and Thor remembered how to breathe.

Odin turned to Thor and Loki lunged, grabbing something from his desk and plunging it into Odin’s shoulder at the joint where his armor opened.

Thor cried out… as did Loki.

His brother crumpled to the ground, clutching at his own shoulder.

Odin grunted and walked back through the glass. Thor’s hands went to his father’s shoulder, pulling the wooden wedge out. It was the corner of Loki’s desk.

The wound was not deep and Odin bore it no mind. The weapon was too thick to make it far into the armor’s opening.

His back to Loki, Odin met Thor’s glance, his eye glittering with mischief.

Thor regarded his brother. Loki’s hand was wet with blood as he drew it away from the matching wound in his own back.

Odin turned to him.

Loki shook his hand out, sending red droplets to splatter onto the ground. He stood and rolled his shoulder in assessment.

“Any injury you cause, Loki, will be felt doubled. Do you understand?”

Loki bared his teeth in something that wasn’t a smile.

“Perfectly,” He said.

He closed the distance and pressed his bloodied fingertips to the glass. His fingers pieced through the other side, the spelled glass clinging around his skin like a resilient soap bubble. Loki stepped through.

Thor put a hand on Loki’s good shoulder, which Loki immediately smacked away. The predictability of it oddly warmed Thor’s heart.

“A further precaution,” Odin said. Loki looked at him narrowly. “Thor, walk to the fireplace.”

Eyebrow raised, Thor did so. Perhaps five steps from the hearth, twenty paces from Loki, Thor felt a resistant, intangible tugging. Loki stumbled as though pushed.
Or, considering it, as though he’d been pulled. Thor took another step towards the fire and Loki again lurched towards him, drawn by an invisible hand.

Thor took another step backwards and Loki followed, scowling at him.

Thor took another step.

He wasn’t really surprised when Loki conjured and threw a blade of ice at him. Thor ducked, but it still caught him high on his temple.

He watched as the mirroring mark opened on Loki’s brow.

“Thor,” Odin said sternly.

Thor thought that somewhat unfair given that Loki had been the one to attack, but he held his tongue.

“There is a third measure,” Odin said, once more addressing Loki.

“So much caution, Allfather,” Loki spoke with soft disinterest belied by the tight and uneasy set of his mouth.

“So many reasons to be cautious, my too-clever son,” Odin replied.

Odin cupped his hands and a shape appeared, perhaps the size of a large apple, in a glittering membrane of magic.

Loki gasped and clutched at his thin chest, eyes wide.

“What is it?” Thor asked, not sure whom the question was directed towards.

“My heart,” Loki answered thinly. He sneered and repeated, angrily; “My heart.”

Odin closed his hands and the lights disappeared back into Odin’s palms.

“We will be watching, Loki. Take your brother and go to Midgard. Destroy the scepter. And do not delay in returning.”

“I’m sure my cage will miss me,” Loki said. He had not dropped his hand from his chest.

“Serve Asgard well in this and perhaps the conditions of your punishment will be revisited.”

Loki’s face gave away no reaction to that. Thor’s eyes darted between the two of them.

A few long seconds passed before Loki bent his head in agreement.

“I’ll need a mirror large enough to walk through,” He said.

Chapter End Notes

Kind of a short chapter but I think these next couple of sections will take me a few days to get right.
More soon.
Chapter 16

Loki eyed his image with distaste.

The mirror had been brought from his rooms; Loki knew it well and there was no mistaking it. What he didn’t know was if Odin had sent for this piece specifically because it was the nearest large mirror at hand, or out of some attempt at manipulating his emotions.

It felt like a very long time had passed since Loki had last stood before it.

It would serve his purposes, though, and any thoughts or feelings the familiar relic evoked would be put aside until this was done. This magic didn’t allow for distraction and navigating through it with Thor in tow would not be easily accomplished.

The wraith in the mirror was too thin and too pale. He needed a bath and fresh clothes. The wound above his eyebrow was messily caked in blood.

“We’ll need to dress for travel,” Loki said, turning his back on the sight.

Thor eyed him with distrust but held still as Loki placed his hands atop Thor’s head. Loki concentrated, and then slowly swept his palms down Thor’s body.

Thor sagged a little as the spell changed him but firmed his knees and bore it.

Loki took a step back and surveyed his work.

“It’ll do,” He said, pursing his lips.

Thor touched his smooth face.

“My beard!” He cried indignantly, striding in front of the mirror and verifying what his fingers told him.

Loki considered the breasts awkwardly bunched under Thor’s armor and the smooth absence at his crotch. He raised an eyebrow.

“Your beard? Really? That is the lack that is most keenly felt?”

Thor glowered. It was not a comely look.

“It took months to grow back last time.”

Loki rolled his eyes.

“Is this necessary?” Odin asked, a quiet warning in his voice.

“The Midgardians have sentinels everywhere, and ours are known faces. This shift should be enough to keep us secret,” Loki said.

Thor nodded his reluctant agreement.

“It is so.”

Loki concentrated and rolled his hands down his own body, following suit.
He stood beside Thor and regarded the image two of them made.

Loki smugly acknowledged that he made a much prettier woman than Thor. He smirked, and Thor scowled, crossing too-muscular arms across his generous chest.

Loki saw the reflection of Odin rub a thumb at his temple and cast his eye towards the ceiling.

“Your armor,” Loki said, getting back to the matter. How many times had he seen his father make that same gesture when he and Thor were unruly in their youth? Loki did not want to think of those days. They were irrevocably gone.

Thor looked down at himself and back up.

“What of my armor?”

“It is far too distinctive. I would say go and change, but…” Loki trailed off and waved a hand between them to indicate the invisible bond. "And you will need to leave Mjolnir where we come through. I will not ask you to leave it here as there may come need for it, but it will be summoned, not carried.”

Thor’s scowl deepened but he removed his cape, gauntlets and chest plate. The shirt he wore beneath the armor was functional and stained, pulled taut by the unusual burden adorning Thor’s chest. He looked ridiculous and it made Loki smile.

“Loki,” Odin said.

Loki flicked the smallest of glances at the king before he acquiesced. The sooner he was in Midgard, the sooner he could make changes.

He closed his eyes and pressed his hand to the cool glass, relaxing and bringing up a meditative state. It was harder with both Odin and Thor watching him but both held their tongues and let him work.

It took several minutes. He was out of practice and the distracting throbbing in his head made it all the harder to channel his power correctly. Changing genders was easy – it was only the smallest whims of fate that determined what one was born with and altering it took little effort. This, though, was a far more significant deviation from the natural order of things.

Loki kept his eyes closed and reached out, testing his magic. He was looking for the right place to emerge. He pushed forward, the mirror parting for him like dipping his fingers into a pool of water just turning to ice. He sank his hand in to the wrist.

Behind him, Thor made a surprised sound.

“I’m ready,” Loki said. He pulled back so that only the tips of his fingers remained on the other side. The digits shook traitorously with fatigue and pain, the wound pulling at his shoulder a hot knot he worked to ignore.

“Thor, you’ll need to slide in front of me. I need to be both first and last. Settle your hand under mine.”

It was awkward and unwelcomingly intimate. Thor ducked under his outstretched arm and pressed the back of his hand to Loki’s palm. Loki pressed up against Thor’s back, closing the space between them.
Thor’s skin was so warm he could feel it even through their clothes. He had always been warmer than Loki. It had fascinated him, back before he’d known his true heritage.

Loki slowly stepped forward and pressed his knee into the back of Thor’s to make him move synchronously.

Thor gasped at the cold shock when his hand pierced the mirror. Another step and he was engulfed, only his back remaining on this side.

“Loki,” Odin said softly. Loki could not spare him the attention to turn his head. He shifted forward slightly and Thor disappeared, leaving Loki looking at his unimpeded reflection in the mirror.

“Be careful,” The Allfather said.

Loki paused only a moment before he pressed through.

*

*

*

“I believe it’s time we had a conversation.”

Bruce took a calming breath. And then another.

Everything about this situation set him on edge and the absence of Jarvis was more keenly felt than he thought it should be given that he’d only been working with the AI for a few days.

“Are you really planning to justify what you’ve done?” He asked.

“No,” She replied calmly. “The actions we’ve taken to prevent another attack are harsh. Of course we know that. But you’re a scientist, Doctor Banner; I would have expected more objectivity from you.”

The Other Guy grumbled, but…

Bruce was curious.

It had been on his mind: why SHIELD was doing this.

“How does mind rape protect anyone from an alien invasion?”

“I would have thought that obvious,” She said, a hint of challenge creeping into her tone.

“It’s not,” Bruce replied flatly.

The woman – Silverton. He couldn’t think of her as Fury – clasped her hands in front of herself.

“Why did Loki escape from the helicarrier?” She asked.

Bruce glanced away, mouth firming.

“No,” She corrected even though he hadn’t said anything. “The Hulk was only part of it. A significant part, but not the root cause. Why did Loki escape?”
Bruce set aside his distaste for the name and considered, instead, what answer she was fishing for.

“In-fighting.”

She nodded. Bruce looked up and found that she was looking at the frozen hologram - the Hulkbuster schematics.

“The Avengers Initiative came together only once the portal was open. When it was too late to prevent civilian casualties. Do you know what final death count was?”

Bruce didn’t answer.

“We have a tool at our disposal that would guarantee a unified, organized force to help prevent a disaster like that from happening again. And it doesn’t have to be cruel, not the way it was under Loki. The connection can allow both parties autonomous control, used as a directive only when there is genuine need. The rest of the time, there’s no reason at all our assets couldn’t live a normal life.”

“Like sleeper agents?”

“Exactly so,” She smiled.

“Yeah,” Bruce ran the pads of his fingers over his thumbnail. “Bullshit.”

She nodded as though unsurprised by his response.

“Why come to me?” He asked.

“We want you working with us. I know our recent direction has caused some concerns and I wanted to address them.”

“‘Concerns’ is putting it… lightly,” Bruce answered. “And if you’re so invested in my cooperation, why not take it? I really can’t see morals holding you back.”

“We are not villains, Doctor Banner. You should know it isn’t as simple as that. We’re doing what we must to protect Earth. And besides,” She smiled tightly, “The Hulk’s emergence is probably a concussive force. The staff is an invaluable tool but it isn’t perfect. Even if we could add you, Bruce, to our team through anything other than your own accord, it would be impermanent.”

She stepped forward and ran a fingertip through the hologram.

“What we’ve seen of the Hulk strongly suggests he follows whatever your subconscious wants. I’m here because I believe I can convince you that the good of what we’re doing far outweighs the bad. This,” She spread her fingers and the image warped, the projection bouncing off her skin, “Is a remnant from a flawed plan put forth by the previous director. A safe-guard more dangerous than the Hulk. Waste like this is what I’m working to prevent.”

She looked back at him.

“I don’t want to kill you. At all. The lives saved in the attack far outweighed the casualties caused by the debris he flung around.”

Bruce’s stomach clenched painfully at that, but she continued.

“Come with me. I have a jet waiting on the roof. Speak to the pilot and see for yourself that the staff isn’t as absolute as you think.”
“No,” Bruce said firmly. He let his hold slip enough to flash green in his eyes. “I saw what you did to Clint Barton. What you forced on him. There was nothing ambiguous about that.”

“Are you so sure? You spent such a short amount of time with Agent Barton. We’ve been working closely with him for almost two decades. How much did you see? Only the moment of transition where he fought against his memories of what Loki did to him, or did you get to see how calm and collected he was once we took that trauma away? Clint Barton has never been an emotionally stable man. You see what we did as immoral but the truth is we gave him stability.”

“You took away his free will,” Bruce growled.

“No,” She disagreed immediately. “We just took away the pain he felt at actions he couldn’t have controlled anyway.”

The Other Guy shifted inside him, annoyed with the uncertainty he was feeling.

“We want you working with us, Doctor Banner,” She repeated. “A scientist of your caliber is an asset we need entirely separate from the obvious merits of your... counterpart. With SHIELD’s resources, you could make a serious difference in protecting the world.”

She walked towards him as she spoke and stood, now, within arm’s reach.

“All I ask is that you let me show you exactly what we're doing, and that you give me a fair chance to explain.”

*  
*
*  

“Sir,” Jarvis said. “I have reestablished contact with the tower.”

“Reestablished? When did you lose it?”

“I have a sixteen minute gap in my records.”

“Rhodes,” Tony said, flicking his eyes to open the channel. They’d just crossed the New York state line and would be back to the Tower in a few minutes.

“What is it?”

“Probably trouble. Someone’s tampered with the house system.”

Rhodey went quiet at that. The War Machine armor accelerated past him, pushing the reactor, and Tony followed. He gunned it to take the lead (he didn’t want Rhodey thinking War Machine surpassed the Iron Man suit).
“Jarvis, put me through to Bruce.”

“Doctor Banner is no longer in the tower.”

“Okay, yeah, that really can’t be good.”

Nothing looked out of place with the Tower when they approached. Tony wasn’t sure what he thought about that. If someone had come for Bruce, he would have expected a Hulk-sized hole adorning the wall.

But Jarvis going offline couldn’t be just an innocent coincidence to Bruce popping out to restock the Cheetos.

“Quinjet incoming,” Rhodey said.

Tony snapped his attention to the horizon.

It was clear the jet was heading for the Tower.

He and Rhodey got there first.

They waited, repulsors ready, while the pilot touched down.

Tony was just establishing a lock with the jet’s console when the hatch opened.

Tony was expecting SHIELD agents or one of their pet assassins, or even the new fake-Fury.

“Show me your eyes,” Steve Rogers demanded. He shuffled out leaning on the metal sides - either for support or cover, Tony wasn’t sure.

The man was naked save for a blood-stained blanket knotted around his waist. He was so white beneath the smears on his skin that Tony thought most of the blood was probably his.

Steve held his shield in a crooked defensive stance that Tony knew could swing out into an attack easily, and held a pistol in the hand near the wall. The man was trembling with obvious fatigue.

“Show me your eyes!” Steve repeated in an unexpectedly forceful bark, his mouth curling in a snarl.

It jolted Tony out of his shocked appraisal. He retracted his faceplate, meeting Steve’s wild eyes with what he hoped was a reassuring gaze.

Beside him, Rhodey did the same.

Steve scrutinized them.

“Captain?” Tony ventured, taking a tentative step forward.

The shield sagged, the arm holding the pistol falling to Steve’s side.

“Captain?” Tony asked again, alarmed enough that the respectful title didn’t feel odd in his mouth.

The pistol slid from Steve's fingers and fell onto the ramp. Steve himself, the reassurance that they weren't possessed evidently enough for him to give in to his exhaustion, was only a moment behind it.
Thor blinked and took in the new surroundings. His body ached from the icy grip of the mirror and the resettling of his flesh.

It was a room – a bedroom, in fact, and a fairly lavish one from what he’d seen of Midgard’s standards.

He turned and finished watching Loki ease his way through the mirror affixed to what Thor thought to be a closet door.

“Where are we?” Thor asked. His feminine throat didn’t let him reach the deeper, warning register he was used to.

His brother smiled at him and leaned back against the now-solid pane.

“Althoff Hotel am Schlossgarten,” He said, then added in mock surprise: “Oh, look, a bed.”

Loki sauntered over to it and flopped on top of the covers. He writhed and let out a husky moan, rolling onto his back with a grunt. The simple shirt he’d been wearing had rucked up and left the bottom curve of his breasts exposed.

Thor bit back a reprimand. Every time his brother turned female casual indecency seemed to soon follow, and protesting had only ever encouraged him.

Loki stretched towards the bedside table and plucked the top piece off of the device sitting there. He spoke into it, rattling out a request that Thor barely understood even with the Allspeak. What he made out, though, was an order for food.

Loki set the piece back down with a ‘click’ and rolled himself off the bed.

“I’m going to bathe,” He announced and, with no further comment, strode into an adjoining room and firmly shut the door.

Thor stared after him and ran a hand through his hair. After a moment the sound of cascading water reached his ears.

Thor settled on the edge of the bed.

He would allow Loki this. A moment to rest, to bathe and eat. It was not too much to give and the shaking in his brother’s hands lingered. It did not matter that this estranged version of Loki would mock him for it – Thor gained no pleasure to see him suffer.

The mirror was positioned such that he could see his image from his seat on the bed. Thor took in the womanly form he presented.
He disliked being female.

As a woman, his muscles, even diminished, were too pronounced to be graceful. His jaw too wide, his brow too thick. His features remained heavy and masculine and it ill-matched the swell of his breasts and the narrowness of his waist.

Thor did not like to think himself vain, but… well.

It was perhaps ten minutes later that a knock came from the other door.

As he reached the doorknob he felt a tug at the bond to Loki. There was a clatter and curse from the bathroom.

Thor stretched to open the door without moving his feet further.

The covered dishes that were brought in smelled unusual and savory. Midgardian food was something he had sorely missed. Coffee, poptarts, shawarma and now whatever these foods were.

“I thank you,” Thor beamed.

The man returned a carefully polite expression but his eyes dropped to Mjolnir, hanging at Thor’s belt.

Thor searched for the words to explain.

“He’s waiting for payment, Thor,” Loki said.

The man’s eyes widened considerably. Thor turned as Loki sauntered forward, entirely unclothed and glistening with water.

Loki slid his fingers against each other and produced a small, rectangular sheet of paper heavily adorned with ink. He offered it.

The man blinked and swallowed. He took the paper and sketched a quick bow before leaving the room.

Loki sniffed a laugh and began opening the metal covers.

“Was that necessary?” Thor groused.

“I am not putting those foul garments back on. And conjuring something else is easier done with a full belly. What harm was there, Thor, in truth?” He popped a morsel in his mouth and smirked around it.

The plates were full of… he knew not what. Starchy, meaty fare, vegetables that carried the sharp tang of fermentation to his nose and what he thought was a beautifully constructed chocolate cake.

He picked up one of the doughy balls and bit into it.

“Kartoffelkloesse. The Hawk has a fondness for them,” Loki said.

Loki tossed the blanket off the bed, then took the sheet and wrapped it around himself in a simple dress.

He pulled the tray over to the bed and sat cross-legged, eating with his fingers. Thor sat beside him and sampled, not really hungry but curious nonetheless.
Loki nearly inhaled the food, eating steadily until the plates were empty.

He settled back against the pillow and pressed his hands to a stomach visibly bulging even through the rumple of damp white fabric. After a moment he belched loudly.

“Clothes, Loki,” Thor prompted. The show at the door had not bothered him, save for the impropriety and clear intent for mischief. He had seen his brother nude too many times to be ruffled by it. Often enough, they and the warriors three would veer off hunting paths to swim in the crystal lakes when the heat of summer was upon Asgard.

Thor smiled as he recalled it.

“Do you remember that first summer we convinced Sif to come swimming with us?” He asked, sliding a finger through the chocolate sauce left on a dish and licking it off. “Fandral was so sure she would say ‘no’ to the invitation that I’m sure she said ‘yes’ only to spite him.”

He sniffed a laugh.

“When we got to the lake, none of us wanted to be the first to strip. And then there you were, disrobing and as female as Sif herself. Do you remember how Volstagg looked at you? One would have thought you’d turned yourself into a bear again.”

He turned to look at Loki, mouth stretched in a wide smile and was startled by the venomous look his brother returned.

“What purpose to the story, Thor?” He spat. “Those days are gone.”

“Loki?” Thor asked, genuinely confused.

Loki rolled out of the bed and turned his back to Thor. The wound at Loki's shoulder – which, to his shame, Thor had forgotten – was a pink, sealed mark, as though it had been inflicted a week ago instead of a span of barely an hour. The wound at Loki's brow had vanished completely.

As he watched, Loki seemed to shimmer and in short order the sheet warped and distorted around his body.

Loki garbed himself in dark jeans and an emerald green sweater. It was the sort of boyish clothing the Midgardian women wore and it made Thor miss Jane anew.

Loki ran hands through his hair and the tendrils dried, leaving them a silky mass along his back.

As Thor watched, Loki swayed; the rigid, angry line of his back folding at some fresh onslaught of pain.

Loki brought a hand up to his face, no doubt wiping away the evidence of a fresh nosebleed.

“Let us not delay, brother.” Thor said, careful to keep any pity from his voice. “Let us find the staff and unburden you from its influence.”

“Unburden me,” Loki repeated quietly. He turned at looked at Thor with dangerous glass-green eyes.

“Yes,” He said; “Let’s see to that.”

“Lo-” Thor started, the name cut off as Loki pounced, seizing Thor’s head between his cold palms. Thor twitched hard as a spark of magic ran through him.
He shoved Loki back, harder than he’d intended, and Loki was thrown off the side of the bed.

His brother landed in an undignified flail off limbs.

Unsure of what had just happened, Thor regained his breath and crawled the length of the bed tentatively.

Loki lay on the ground, sprawled where he’d fallen, and flashed Thor a smile full of teeth.

“Better,” He said.

Loki pulled himself up and brushed off his clothes in a show of indifference.

“Loki?” Thor asked warily. He assessed himself but could discern no difference. “What have you done?”

Loki only grinned widely in response.

Thor glared, unease coiling through him.

“Brother, think carefully,” Thor said. “Your deeds are being watched and any leniency for your punishment will be determined by what you do in this undertaking.”

“Truly?” Loki smiled. “Do you really think that hiding us from their eyes was not the first thing I did?”

“Loki!”

Thor’s stomach clenched. His disbelief that Loki would throw away this chance hit him as near-physical pain.

It must have shown on his face for Loki’s self-satisfied smile dropped into a scowl.

“Oh fear not, Thor; those things I have agreed to do I shall do.”

Thor stared at him levelly.

“What other magics have you wrought?”

The smile came back.

“I shortened our tether.”

Thor blinked.

“To what purpose?” He asked, bewildered. Loki had made it plain he wanted distance from Thor.

Loki gave him a pitying look.

“Twenty paces and I’d no choice but to follow you,” Loki said, and no more than that, his air implying he’d given the answer.

Thor considered.

It clicked.

“Nineteen paces, but you hold the leash,” Thor said. It was not a question.
Loki gave him a surprised, pleased look.

He waved his hands at Thor and Thor moved back on the bed, making room for Loki.

His brother settled on his back and closed his eyes, body limp with unconcern.

Thor waited a moment and Loki sighed, wriggling into a more comfortable position.

Thor clenched his fists and took a long, slow breath.

“The staff, Loki,” He gritted out.

“It does not work the same as Mjolnir,” Loki replied without opening his eyes.

“What?”

“The bond between my mind and the staff; it is not the same as you and Mjolnir. The enchantment is entirely alien and the staff only a tool. There is no sentience in the metalwork.”

“What do you mean?”

“Need I truly spell this out?” Loki opened an eye and gave Thor a sour look. “I cannot summon it, nor deliver myself to it. It is not so simple as holding out my hand and willing it to come.”

“But,” Thor frowned. “How do you intend to retrieve it then?”

“By a more circuitous route.”

“We must act, Loki! My lady Jane cannot-”

“She is safe for now,” Loki interrupted. Thor knew his eyes betrayed his suspicion.

“The work she does is uniquely hers,” Loki said. “Until she has finished, she is irreplaceable. I’ve looked in on her mind and she does not believe she will be finished within the week. Now hush, Thor, and let me rest.”

Thor inhaled but Loki brought up a sharp finger in warning. Thor let out the breath, question unasked, and Loki settled his hand once more on the bed. He composed himself as if for sleep.

Thor… could allow this. He knew his brother needed the rest and the imperiousness was only Loki’s way of hiding his weaknesses. As lovely a woman as Loki made, his face still revealed the strain he suffered.

Thor need not question Loki’s resolve to destroy the staff.

He would believe Loki’s assurance that they had time.

At length, he released his anger and lay beside his brother on the bed.

Thor turned his thoughts to Jane.

Imagining her as a thrall laced his heart with pain. How beautiful she was, and how fierce. The theft of her will would do her such injury.

He thought forward to the moment he would rid her of the enchantment.

She would be glad to see him, he felt sure, but so soon removed from suffering her joy would be a
stained, fragile thing.

He should like to take her back to Asgard, let her eat of Idunn’s harvest and be soothed.

Thor turned his head and watched Loki breathing, clearly asleep already.

The delay bothered him. Of course it did.

But if Loki spoke in truth, the postponement could surely do little further harm.

*

*

*

Tony stood frozen with indecision and shock.

It took Rhodey shouting his name twice before he roused himself from staring at the crumpled, bloodied figure on his rooftop.

It hit him all at once that he had no idea what had happened to Maya Hansen’s body. Had anyone gone back to the mansion? Someone must have.

The idea that the mansion might just have been left abandoned, that she might be rotting there, made him swallow bile.

“Tony!” Rhodey said again.

“Right,” Tony said, shaking himself out of it. Focus on the problem at hand.

He closed the distance and scooped Rogers up carefully. He would deal with the quinjet later – for now he concerned himself with getting Rogers inside and seeing what could be done to help him.

He settled the man on the couch.

Rhodey came in behind him carrying the shield and pistol. He stepped out of his armor and Tony followed suit, wanting his actual hands to assess things.

He pinched the captain’s skin and watched the dimpled flesh slowly fill. His skin was unhealthily cold.

Tony carefully prodded and shifted limbs but couldn’t find any injury. The blood, despite the alarming quantity, didn’t appear to be his.

The fading track marks in the crook of the man’s elbow were suggestive and ominous.

Tony frowned.
“Tony?”

“I don’t know. Blood loss and dehydration at least. Probably malnourished? I really wish Bruce was here. I know the basics but…” Tony shrugged.

“No visible wounds so it should be fine to get some liquid in him,” Rhodey said. He disappeared and came back with a bottle of water.

Tony peeked open one of Rogers’ eyes. His eyelids were a white-pink. Definitely blood loss.

Rogers twitched, rousing at the contact.

Tony unscrewed the bottle and had it up and offered when Rogers finished waking up.

Probably should have given him some room, Tony realized a moment later as the bottle went flying from his hand.

He waved out his stung fingers. Even half-dead, the man could slap like he meant it.

“Welcome back,” Tony said dryly.

“Stark?” Confused blue eyes blinked at him, focusing slowly.

“Hi,” Tony replied. Rogers’ eyes tracked to the man behind him, widening in alarm. Tony quickly waved a hand, “No, it’s fine; that’s Rhodey. He’s with-”

The rest of Tony’s sentence was cut off in a high-pitched whine. It felt like someone clenching the base of his skull in a vise.

He fell to his knees and the world whited out as raw fear crashed through him.

The whining noise lasted an agonizing few seconds, and then subsided.

He heard the click of Rhodey putting the sonic taser away.

Tony was paralyzed. He knew he would be for at least another twelve minutes.

His mind ran in panicked circles – not again, not again, fuck no please not again.

Rhodey walked into his line of sight. He plucked the earpieces out and pocketed them. His brown eyes were blank and compassionless when they met Tony’s.

On the couch, Steve made a small choked sound.

Jarvis. Jarvis would send an alert to –

Fuck. To Rhodey.

Tony’s heart was hammering in his chest so hard it was physically painful. He felt blood begin to trickle from his ears, felt the veins in his face tightening with his useless effort to move.

He slid to the ground and Rhodey’s eyes sharpened on him. He needn’t have bothered. Tony had no control over his body; it was just gravity finishing the fall that he had started.

Still, Rhodey came over and propped up him against the couch so that he was sitting upright.

The contact made Tony’s skin crawl with revulsion.
The wild thought struck him that least he wouldn’t have his heart pulled out of his chest this time.

It wasn’t a comfort.

Rhodes walked away and out of Tony’s line of sight. Tony thought the man might be heading towards the lab.

Steve made another painful, aborted sound.

As panicked and sick with fear as Tony felt, he acknowledged that this was also pretty fucked up for Steve. Out of the frying pan, Tony thought.

It sent an incredibly inappropriate burble of humor through him.

Rhodey was gone for long enough that in the corner or his eye he saw Steve’s fingers twitching. It evolved into a grasping motion.

Tony kept his hope in check; wisely, as it turned out. Rhodey came back before Steve could shake the paralysis. Tony himself had only just gotten to the twitching stage.

He watched Rhodey put his earplugs back in and pull the sonic taser out of his coat pocket.

Tony gurgled something that would have been a protest given another minute.

When the agonizing whine hit him he felt a blood vessel pop in his eye.

Rhodey turned the device off more quickly this time, at least.

The relief was short lived.

Tony’s body was still working on how to breathe when he was hauled onto the coffee table, face down.

Rhodey pulled his shirt up and Tony realized what he was after even before he peeled the bandage off Tony’s skin.

He was taking the tracer out.

Tony couldn’t even flinch when he was cut into.

Rhodey worked quickly and efficiently. There was no sadism in this; just a purpose to be accomplished.

Tweezers pulled the chip out of his flesh. There was a cold splash of alcohol over the small wound. Tony was able to grunt at that pain.

Gauze and tape were applied and his shirt was rolled back down.

He heard Rhodey walk off and climb back into the War Machine. Its firm metal hands scooped him up a moment later.

Tony wasn’t surprised when he was taken into the quinjet.

Rhodey strapped him into one of the jumpseats. It gave Tony an unobstructed view of the unexpected body on the floor.
He swallowed hard. He couldn’t see the corpse’s face from here but he’d bet his fortune it was the agent from the helicarrier who’d given him the SHIELD intel.

There was an arrow through the man’s throat.

Rhodey went back into the Tower.

Tony heard the faint sound of the sonic taser. He was out of range, thankfully. His neck was wet with blood from his ears and he really didn’t want to find out what another exposure so quickly would do to him.

Rhodey came back with Rogers, whom Tony was fairly sure was unconscious again.

He was strapped into the seat across from Tony.

Rhodey walked into the cockpit and Tony felt the quinjet hum to life around him. He felt the engines kick in and lift.

Tony didn’t want to think about where Rhodey was taking them but he couldn’t avoid it. This wasn’t Rhodey – brown eyes or no, there was no way he wasn’t compromised. And it followed naturally that he was taking Tony to be added to SHIELD’s mind slave collection.

They’d make him manufacture weapons again.

Tony’s skin went cold. When he’d been a war merchant before he hadn’t yet figured out arc reactor technology. If he applied that knowledge to weaponry...

Tony’s eyes watered but he didn’t have the coordination yet to blink the tears away.

Something slammed hard into the front of the quinjet. It threw him sideways against the seat’s straps hard enough to bruise.

The jet crashed into the roof of the Tower.

There was an ugly shriek of tearing metal and the sound of the War Machine’s repulsor blasts.

Tony’s eyes widened.

Not just War Machine. That was two sets of weapons discharging.

Iron Patriot.

Steve woke up when something smashed into the side of the quinjet. His blue eyes met Tony’s and he exchanged an intense look.

Tony didn’t believe this would be any more than a delay.

Danvers hadn’t used the suit as long as Rhodey; she wouldn’t be as familiar with the weaponry or controls, even aside from the fact that the Iron Patriot was an older model. The new War Machine suit was a superior design.

She was going to fail.

The fight didn’t last long. A final loud metallic clatter and rooftop subsided into quiet.

The quinjet hatch was torn open and gold titanium footsteps clanged their way to him.
Tony glanced up, resigned.

“Jesus Christ, Stark, I can understand you driving Jim to drink. This, though? This is a bit much,” Carol said.
Tony was still paralyzed but thought that even if it hadn’t been for the sonic taser he would have been speechless.

He looked at Danvers and the surprise and gratitude overwhelmed him.

She raked her eyes over the two of them, then to the body on the ground.

Tony watched her freeze, a thought striking her, and her wide eyes turned back to Steve.

“You’re Captain America, aren’t you?”

Steve blinked and the corner of his mouth twitched. It was as much as he could do just then.

“Right,” She said and shook her head in self-reprimand. “Okay.”

The faceplate snapped back down.

“Jarvis, how long until this… whatever this is, wears off?”

Tony couldn’t hear the reply but thought it’d be about another five minutes until he could move.

“What about Jim? Can I get him out of the suit? I don’t want him waking up in there.”

Yeah, that would… not be good, Tony thought, brain kicking back into gear.

“I’ll be right back,” Danvers said, the tilt of her head making it clear she was addressing them. She stomped out of the quinjet.

He met Steve’s eyes again – not a lot else to do while waiting for the paralysis to wear off. No, wait, nevermind; that was awkward. He looked out at the open hatch instead.

He could hear what he thought to be Danvers picking up the War Machine suit. He frowned (hey, progress – he could frown) and ran through scenarios, trying to figure out where she’d be going with it. There were all kinds of validations and security measure to make sure the suits couldn’t be opened without authorization.

Another few moments passed and he regained some control of limbs. Fine motor control was still a non-option but it was getting better.

He fumbled to open the jump seat’s belt and let his hand fall limply a moment later. The longer Danvers and Rhodey were out of eyesight, the more sure he became that something had gone wrong.

Another minute and he was able undo the clasp. He bent forward and barely caught himself on his knees. He could probably drag himself out of here but his dignity was holding ground against his upwelling of paranoid speculation. He waited a bit longer.

Steve was still working on twitching his fingers when Tony gathered himself enough to stand.
“I’m,” He coughed, cleared his throat, tried again. “I’m going to find out what’s going on.”

Steve made a displeased grunting noise.

Tony avoided his eyes.

He knew Rogers wasn’t okay and he was an asshole for leaving him there, but… Tony had his own issues he needed to get a hold on first.

Besides, what could he do? Hold a one-sided conversation, feed the man placating possible-lies about how everything would be okay? Put a comforting hand on Rogers’ shoulder?

That wasn’t the relationship they had.

They had worked together, fought together, eaten shawarma together. But they weren’t friends.

Steve had gone his separate way after seeing Loki off-planet and Tony hadn’t made a move to stop him. It had been cordial. There’d been what Tony had thought was an unspoken agreement that if there was a need, they’d come together as a team again.

Then The Mandarin had happened.

It hadn’t been Rogers’ fault. Tony knew that. As soon as he’d known the man was missing he’d gotten to work trying to find him.

Still, Tony had spent a lot of time bitterly thinking about Captain America’s absence and the resentment didn’t vanish just because he’d been wrong. It was a petty feeling - small and stubborn and human.

Hanging onto the side of the quinjet, Tony took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He felt like he’d been run over; dizzy and weak, every muscle aching. He made himself turn back and offer Rogers what he could.

“I’ll be back soon,” Tony said, repeating Carols words. He put a reassurance in his eyes. Rogers returned a firm nod and it was all Tony needed to continue his progress out of the jet.

He stumbled his way back into the Tower and into his suit. Encasing himself in titanium alloy finally let him feel like he could breathe again. He locked the joints and collapsed, letting the armor hold him up. He just… he needed a minute.

Or two.

“Stark?” Carol’s modulated voice called out.

Tony opened his eyes. The Iron Patriot suit was in the balcony’s doorway. Rogers was being supported by one metal arm. The captain looked like he was still having trouble finding his feet. Carol tromped inside and set him down on the couch. Tony winced – it was almost exactly where Rogers had just been laying paralyzed.

Steve’s arms and shoulders twitched and Tony thought he was trying to get into a sitting position.

He walked over and pulled the man upright. Steve shot him a grateful look that Tony didn’t comment on.

“What’s Rhodes?” Tony asked instead.
“I am holding him, sir,” Jarvis replied.

Tony considered that.

“You don’t have hands. What?”

“I got him through that… suit-dismantling rig you have on the upper balcony,” Carol explained. “Didn’t want him in the suit in case he woke up still… umh,” She rolled her gauntlet in a way that suggested she was searching for the right word.

“Mind-fucked?” Tony offered. He refused to believe Rhodey had been acting on his own free will. He just couldn’t believe that. “Possessed? I was rooting for ‘staff infected’ but Bruce shot that down.”

Carol nodded and Tony continued. “Jarvis, how are you holding him?”

“This may be easier explained if you see for yourself, sir.”

“That’s ominous,” Tony quipped, but he walked back outside and activated his boot repulsors.

James Rhodes was hanging inside the dismantling rig, wrists firmly grasped by the hydraulic winches that pulled off the suit’s shoulder plates. Mechanical arms held him dangling inside the massive, articulated titanium ring, feet just barely touching the gearwork on the walkway.

Rhodey looked like he’d been crucified by a steam punk fetishist.

“Good… job,” Tony said hesitantly.

“Short-term solution until I got backup,” Carol said as she flew up behind him. “Now that you’re here – Jarvis, let him down please?”

The rig carefully finished its rotation and dropped Rhodey into Carol’s arms. Tony thought he should have been the one to pick him up but he’d hesitated and Carol beat him to it.

They returned to the den.

Steve was rubbing the corner of his mouth as they walked in. His fingers still looked a bit uncoordinated but Tony figured the sonic taser should be wearing off completely in another minute or so.

“Who is he?” Steve rasped. Tony considered getting him another bottle of water but his hand still stung from the last offer.

“Jim Rhodes. Rhodey. He’s a friend,” Tony said.

“His eyes were brown,” Steve said softly.

Tony retracted the plates of his gauntlet and touched Rhodey’s eyelids with his bare fingers, prying them open. They were still brown, of course.

“We’ll have to wait until he-”

The eyelid twitched shut under his fingers and Rhodey groaned.

Tony snapped the gauntlet back into place.
The three of them waited in a tense silence for a beat, and Rhodey groaned again.

“Fucking,” He mumbled, dragging a hand up and fumbling with his eyes. Tony watched, fascinated and disgusted, as his friend pinched against the surface. The lens he pulled out was large, membranous; it would have covered his entire eye.

“Okay, sure, that would be why I didn’t see the contact seam,” Tony said, largely to himself.

Rhodey made a gagging sound as he fished the other lens out. He threw it towards the table with an angry flick of his wrist, then bent forward and pressed unsteady hands to his forehead.

“Are you going to hurl?” Tony asked.

“No,” Rhodey answered, not looking up.

“Are you sure?” Tony probed suspiciously.

“No,” Rhodey said again

“When were you compromised?” Tony asked.

A pause while Rhodey thought it through. Tony couldn’t imagine what was going on in Rhodey’s head right now.

“On my way back from training Carol.”

Rhodey sighed and sat back, meeting Tony’s eyes only briefly before skating them away.

“We need to move,” Steve said, interrupting whatever apology or self-recrimination Rhodes had been about to make.

“He’s right,” Carol agreed. “We can’t stay at here.”

“I’ve got to warn Pepper,” Tony said.

“Tony,” Rhodey said, and something in his voice, something in the tightness of it, made Tony’s stomach drop with fear.

“Pepper… isn’t in danger,” Rhodey said carefully. His voice was slurred and slightly sluggish. Tony thought he was probably concussed. “They have no intention of harming her.”

“But?” Tony demanded. There was a ‘but;’ he could read plainly on Rhodey’s face.

“I… got to know these people, a bit. I’m fairly sure their next step is going to be securing her.”

Tony locked the suit’s joints while his knees wavered.

“Jarvis, call Pepper,” He hissed and slammed the faceplate back down.

He ignored the voices outside his suit. Everything in him was focused on watching the HUD, listening to Pepper’s cell ring.

He was hit with a vivid flashback of calling Pepper on his way through the Chitauri portal. If he hadn’t locked the suit’s legs he would have stumbled.

“Sir,” Jarvis said quietly, “Would you like to leave a message?”
“Yes,” He said thinly. He tried to convince himself Pepper was just in a meeting.

“Pep,” His voice sound too strained and he tried again. “Pepper. There’s... a situation happening. Don’t trust SHIELD. Do not trust SHIELD. Get yourself somewhere safe – the White House owes me a favor. Go collect. Just – stay safe until I can get to you. I love you.”

He paused, searching for something else to say.

He flicked his eyes to disconnect the call.

“Damnit, damnit, damnit!” He roared, pulling the helmet off and hurling it at the counter. It crashed satisfyingly into a glass tumbler.

“Stark!” Rogers barked. “We don’t have time for this. We stay here, we get captured too.”

Steve pulled himself up from the couch, still pale and nearly-naked, still covered in dried blood and shaking with weakness.

The look of determination on his face humbled Tony.

“I have coordinates for a safe house,” Carol said. “It would be better if we could fly there. SHIELD definitely has this place monitored. Between knocking Jim free and what I just did to one of their quinjets, it’s very safe to assume they’ll try to grab us when we leave. So – three suits, four people. How are we doing this?”

“The Captain takes War Machine,” Rhodey said, not meeting their eyes.

Carol took the four strides over to him and punched his shoulder. Tony winced – she was still wearing the gauntlets.

“The only reason that wasn’t to the back of your head is that you’re brain’s clearly rattled enough already,” Carol said angrily. “Now let’s try this again; logistics. Stark, any chance you’ve got a spare undersuit and a breather lying around? With proper insulation and a way to breathe, we should be able to carry Captain Rogers, right?”

“I can probably rig something up. But I’m not going with you. I’m going after Pepper.”

“You’ll be shot down if you go to the ‘carrier like this, Tony,” Rhodey said. “I’ve seen the armaments they have in place. They know what you can do and they’re not going to take a chance. You were supposed to come in sedated. They see you coming and they’re going to shoot first. And we don’t even know that that’s where they’d take her. Tony,” Rhodey paused until Tony looked at him. “Tony, she’s no good to them dead. They’re not going to hurt her.”

“Romanov is working on another way to take them down,” Carol said. “Don’t be stupid, Stark. Come with us.”

Tony raked metal fingers through his hair. His need to go to Pepper howled through him.

He looked at Steve, and at the wreckage of the quinjet lying outside.

“Okay,” He said.

One problem at a time.
The meeting was going well, all things considered. There was the normal half-hour of conversation wasted while these new potential partners asked about Iron Man. Everybody did.

Pepper understood the curiosity, especially in the context of a business that wanted to ally itself financially with Stark Industries. Iron Man, whether Tony acknowledged it or not, was the mascot of SI. The company could manufacture clean energy solutions and engineering marvels all it wanted – when people heard the name ‘Stark,’ they thought of Iron Man.

(Or Winterfell, but mostly that didn’t come up in business meetings.)

The meeting today was a negotiation to put down roots in Asia. It was something Stark Industries hadn’t considered in depth while they’d been a weapons manufacturer, but now? Pepper saw it as a logical expansion.

Especially with the vacuum left by Advanced Idea Mechanics.

If Pepper derived any satisfaction in snapping up the niche they’d left behind, well. It was important to love what you did.

Her phone vibrated against her hip.

“Excuse me,” She waved an embarrassed hand. “I’m very sorry – I need to take this. Bambi, would you please continue? I’ll be right back.”

Tony had at least picked a decent place in the presentation to call. Her new PA would be able to walk them through the infographics without any problems.

Tony wouldn’t be calling if it wasn’t important, and Pepper had made a promise to always pick up. Tony hadn’t asked for that promise but seeing that missed call after the Battle of Manhattan had shaken her into giving it.

“Miss Potts,” A voice called out from across the room. Pepper blinked up, surprised. This was a private floor.

She took in the SHIELD agent smiling at her and was struck dumb.

“Phil?”

Chapter End Notes

A note on the contact lenses I gave Rhodey - Originally, I'd been toying with the idea of SHIELD using dye on his irises (googling this is not for the weak of stomach), but between what's over-the-counter avaible in FX full-eye contacts and the engineering at SHIELD, I feel confident that they'd be able to make something that would fool an observer.
Thor jolted out of his light doze at the sound of fists upon their door. Beside him, Loki grumbled and shifted. He sat up, stretching. For all that it had scarce been two hours, Loki did look significantly better for the rest.

“That’ll be the hotel’s security then,” He mused. “Come along, Thor.”

“Security? Loki, what did you do?”

Loki gave him an impatient look.

“Did you not notice that we were stealing the room? Really, Thor,” He chided.

“Loki!”

“Hush.”

The knocking at the door was accompanied, now, by politely firm voices. The light on the lock flashed green but the door remained firmly shut. Thor called Mjolnir to hand but, at Loki’s obvious unconcern, looped it in his belt.

Thor watched his brother press pale fingertips against the mirror. It only took a few seconds this time for him to pierce the surface. Thor eeld his way into position and Loki moved them both through.

On the other side of that icy shock, Thor found them in a poorly lit, uninhabited room. Something about the place made Thor think they were underground. The pane they’d come through hadn’t been glass but a polished sheet of metal in a stack of many like it.

“Where are we?”

“A warehouse in New York.”

Thor looked around with mild interest at the rows of boxes and tools.

“Why here?”

“We are not far outside of our destination, and some alterations should be made before we proceed.”

Loki walked towards the darker, cluttered back of the room. Thor picked up one of the tools and studied it, trying to discern its purpose, and abruptly remembered the tether as he was dragged stumbling along a second later.

He righted himself and picked up his steps to close the distance. There was truly no dignity in
being dragged along like a leashed pet.

Loki moved the top few boxes off of a stack and pried the lid off the bottom one. He pulled out a few tightly bundled coils of... something or other, and dropped them out of sight behind the crates.

“Leave Mjölnir here,” Loki said, waving at the newly hollowed space.

Thor frowned, and did as he was bade reluctantly.

“It is too obviously your token to carry without detection and would require a great deal of magic to hide. Easier to leave it and call it in the unlikely event there is need. These fragile mortals hardly require such force.”

Thor hid his surprise only with effort – not at the request, as Loki had mentioned leaving Mjölnir behind before – but that his brother would explain the need. It was not Loki’s habit to give information so freely even before things had soured between them.

At Loki’s gesture, Thor stacked the boxes back up, and twitched at the unexpected touch to his shoulders. Loki tugged at the fabric and soon Thor felt the slithering shift of the material changing shape and form.

He nearly growled in annoyance as the fabric against his legs withdrew into a skirt.

Loki took a step back and regarded him, tipping his head and pursing his lips in consideration.

“It’ll do.”

“Truly, is this necessary?” Thor groused, plucking at the material of his blouse.

“We need to blend in. As you were, you did not. This is... marginally better,” Loki frowned, but Thor could see the self-amused glint in his eye.

It was a small mischief and Thor decided it wasn’t worth arguing.

When they walked past the metal sheets on their way out, he stole a glimpse at himself. The skirt and top were both a muted gold color. His boots had been transfigured into shiny, thin shoes much like Loki wore, but without the tall heel.

It reminded him strongly of one of his mother’s dresses – the sleeves and backing were more in keeping with Midgardian fashion, but looking at his reflection Thor couldn’t help but see his resemblance to Frigga staring back at him.

“You would attract too much attention ugly,” Loki dismissed and did not slow his steps. Thor followed after him.

“Miss, you shouldn’t be back here,” A youth called out to them. “Ma’am,” He added when Thor came into sight.

“Oh, excuse us, I believe we’ve gotten turned around,” Loki said, charming and casual. “Could you show us the way out please?”

Thor watched the lad fall in love with Loki. He kept a warning behind his teeth only with effort.

They were led through a set of doors that opened into a merchant hall. The racks and wares all seemed purposed towards carpentry, and the Midgardians that wandered about pushed carts laden with lumber and tools.
Loki paused at a display of hammers and smiled back at Thor.

“Perhaps one of these to tide you over?”

Thor narrowed his eyes and sniffed.

“Ah, were you looking for a hammer? We’re having a sale right now on the straight-peens,” The eager boy pointed out.

Loki slid suggestive fingers around the handle in a way that made the boy swallow.

“A little small, don’t you think?” Loki said coyly.

“Come along, brother,” Thor scolded.

The boy blanched and returned a sharp look at Loki that skated below the waist.

Loki winked at him and, in a saunter, led Thor past the merchant stalls and outside.

Midgard was in a winter season now and the air was crisp with the cold. It was late afternoon.

“Where do we go?” Thor asked. Loki was weaving his way through the foot traffic with a purposed mien.

“There are some things done more easily with proximity,” Loki replied. He stopped and turned, flashing Thor a smile full of teeth. “You truly do not realize what you’ve given me back with the return of my magics, do you? More than tricks and an appetite, Thor.”

“What do you mean?” He asked. There was a frenetic energy in Loki’s steps, something dangerous in his eyes. It made him wary.

Loki turned and kept walking.

Thor had no choice but to follow.

*

*

*

It was not the easiest flight Tony had ever made. Not by a long shot.

The mask he’d cannibalized from the quinjet wreck was hooked into his suit. He and Rogers were breathing the same air. Thank god for the thick layers turning Steve into a bundle of thermals more than a person because the unwanted intimacy of it made Tony's skin tight.

But Tony hadn’t even tried to argue for connecting Rogers to one of the other suits. Tony had the most experience flying and the Iron Man suit was better equipped to handle anything that might come up in transit.

Thankfully, nothing did.

They knew SHIELD would be trying to track them but there was only so much SHIELD could possibly do to monitor three relatively tiny crafts that could break the sound barrier.
They changed direction and altitude several times. Jarvis temporarily disabled every satellite he could find.

It amounted to Tony being relatively sure that they were genuinely in the clear when they finally touched down behind an abandoned-looking storefront in North Vancouver.

Jarvis found Romanov’s face in a window a moment before Danvers altered her own trajectory. Tony smiled at the reaffirmation that his suit was the best.

Inside, Deputy Angrybouncy was pointing something at him that… definitely fell into the ‘weapon’ category. He didn't recognize it.

He lowered Rogers carefully to his feet. The man wobbled – the thermals and mask aside, it had to be rough to travel like that even if you were in good health. Rogers dropped the blankets and braced a hand against the wall. The dark fabric of his borrowed clothes only made him look paler.

Rhodey unstrapped the shield from his chestplate and handed it over. Rogers looked glad to have it.

“Jarvis,” Tony said, shutting down the external speakers but looping in Danvers and Rhodey. “Scan her irises. Any irregularities?”

“I am not detecting a lens, sir.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes sir.”

“Really?”

Danvers stepped out of her suit. Tony retracted his faceplate and behind him he heard Rhodey do the same.

Hill (yes, he knew her name) scrutinized their eyes closely.

“You should know that doesn’t actually work,” Rhodey said, tone dark. “SHIELD is using fitted, full-eye lenses to hide the…” He trailed off and waved a hand at his eyes.

Hill returned the device (EMP, maybe?) to her belt.

“Follow me,” She ordered. “We have an organization to topple.”

*  
*  
*  

Clint watched the quinjet depart with a vague sense of guilt. The shot he’d made had certainly killed Sitwell.

And it had been fired too damn late.

He snapped his bow closed and sprinted back inside.

“Scramble a jet,” He barked. “Rogers is…”
A pulse came through the bond. Meggs, of course, knew what Clint knew. He was aware that Rogers had just escaped.

“Sir?” One of the techs asked.

“Cancel that,” Clint dismissed, listening.

Rogers would head to Stark Tower. The Colonel was en route back with Stark from Phoenix. Rogers would be exactly the right distraction for Rhodes to take advantage of, and Rhodes would be in position to bring down two birds with one stone.

Clint met Fury’s eye and they exchanged a look. As a plan it had… potential, but it wasn’t foolproof.

Fury must have mentioned as much because a hot wave of intent came through the bond.

Clint firmed his jaw and got back to work.

Meggs was superior, of course, but… Clint recognized that Loki had been much more open to taking advice.

Clint went down to the medical lab they’d been preparing for Rogers.

So far, it looked like destroying the warehouse had knocked the fight out of their prisoners. They weren't struggling and placidly stared into the middle-distance. Clint didn't trust it, though, or them. After all, Rogers had seemed weak as a kitten before he'd escaped. He ordered the medics to inject them with muscle relaxants; something to keep them from fighting that wouldn't interfere with the scans.

The medical processing took perhaps half an hour, the brain scans being the most important. Meggs wanted as much information as he could get about these vestigial bonds. Why had these people kept working after Loki had been removed?

Well. Silverton wanted the information. A gauge in case anything happened to Meggs.

Clint turned his mind away from those speculations. He didn't want to think about that.

He brought the prisoners back to an interrogation room and cuffed them, wrists and ankles, to the floor-bolted chairs.

Clint stationed a couple of Agents at the door and then headed to the mess. He wasn't hungry (it was another desire he'd been freed from), but he needed the calories to keep performing at optimum efficiency. Besides, he needed to kill some time while the relaxants wore off.

He didn't linger in the common area, eating quickly and heading back to the interrogation room.

Clint really doubted torture would get anything out of these two. They were loyal to their master, as Clint was loyal to his own, and Clint would happily part with his life before he gave away any secrets that would harm Meggs’ cause.

Yet, the order remained, and Clint would obey.

He sat across the table from them and finished the last few bites of his cookie.

“He’s how this works,” Clint explained, chewing. The prisoners looked back at him with hazy blue eyes.
“We need to know why you were working on the Serum. What was the purpose, and how were you receiving orders?”

They looked at him blankly.

Fury came in with a set of tools and gave the prisoners a long, assessing glance.

At a tip of his head, Clint rose and met Fury at the far side of the room.

“We don’t need the Junior,” Fury said quietly.

Clint nodded. Meggs would want to pick the doctor’s mind and see if she’d made any progress with the Serum. The Junior Agent had no value.

Clint would have said ‘no value beyond inspiring empathy and cooperation,’ but the emptiness he saw in their eyes made him doubt the likelihood of that.

The door closed and locked behind Fury. He would leave Clint to it. Neither of them had clean hands but Clint had more practical experience. Fury was more... big picture.

Clint picked up cattle prod and set it back down with a sniff of displeasure. It probably wouldn’t break the vestigial connection, but ‘probably’ wasn’t good enough. Silverton, and therefore Meggs, wanted to study the phenomenon.

Instead, he picked up the pliers. He knew first-hand that getting fingernails ripped out hurt like a sonofabitch and doubted that if the Junior were in his right mind he’d have the spine to withstand it. It was a place to start, at least.

The young man did struggle when Clint grabbed his hand, and grunted in pain when the first nail came off. Not completely vacant, then, and it looked like the timetable Clint had been given for the drugs was pretty accurate.

“Why were you working on the Serum?” Clint asked, dropping the nail onto the table in front of the doctor.

Clint pressed his thumb gently into the torn, bleeding flesh where the nail had been.

The Agent’s mouth firmed in a tight line and he moaned with the pain.

Clint broke the second joint of the next finger before getting the pliers in place. Clint hesitated, eyebrows repeating the question patiently.

He pulled the nail off when no answer followed.

Clint paused to wipe the blood off his fingers. He didn't like the slick, tacky feeling it left on his skin.

"Why were you working on the Serum?" Clint repeated. The Junior fought hard to keep his fingers curled in a protective fist. Clint patiently pried his ring finger up and slid the tool into place under the nail.

The doctor snapped her head sideways to stare at her companion. Clint barely avoided twiching in surprise.

The Junior turned his head to meet her steady gaze.
Her lips moved and there was a low hiss of her whispering, too quiet for Clint - or, surely, the Junior - to hear. He nodded in response and Clint, stupidly, leaned towards her.

He stayed out of the doctor's range.

He hadn't stayed out of the Junior's. It had never occurred to him that the Junior would use this tactic. He had as much to lose as Clint, after all.

The Junior Agent threw himself forward and rammed his forehead into Clint's temple with an audible 'crack.'

The haze of Meggs' ownership broke. Clint's knees gave out and he fell against the Junior's bound legs.

"Welcome back, little Hawk," The doctor said evenly. Her eyes, when Clint looked up, burned a sharp and calculating blue.
Clint’s vision popped with dark spots.

The Junior Agent he’d been torturing had knocked himself unconscious. Clint looked at the man’s bloodied hand and gagged. Clint’s chest was tight, his head a pounding lump of pain.

It took effort not to pass out.

The doctor was watching him and Clint knew, knew beyond any question that Loki was behind her eyes.

Clint forced himself to his feet.

He had to get out of here. He had to move, now, or he’d certainly be caught. Meggs would have felt the bond break and Fury was probably already arranging an intercept.

He entered his code to unlock the door and felt his heart stutter in fear when the light stayed red. He tried again.

After the third attempt, he raked his trembling hands through his sweaty hair and looked around the room.

The ceiling was too high to reach even if he jumped from the table. The mirrored wall of the interrogation room was shatterproof and the others made of thick concrete. It was a room designed to keep people like Clint prisoner and he knew he wasn’t going to get out.

“What was the point?!” He snarled, facing the doctor but addressing Loki.

The doctor’s lips curled in a smirk.

“It’s a matter of timing,” She said.

Knock-out gas started pouring down from the ceiling.

Clint covered his nose and mouth with the collar of his uniform shirt. It was a pointless delay of the inevitable but he couldn’t bear the thought of losing his control again.

“Patience, little hawk,” The doctor said, flashing her white teeth in a grin.

Clint was tempted to punch the expression off her face, but this wasn’t her fault. She closed her eyes as the gas took hold of her and collapsed in her bonds.

Clint went to his knees unwillingly.

It sparked across his mind that he should punch her – a cognitive recalibration to knock Loki out of her head. The thought came too late, though.

It probably wouldn’t have mattered anyway.
Technically, Phil had in fact died.

Fury hadn’t lied about that - not really.

Rather, the Director had simply… stretched the truth a bit. A lot. As needed.

Phil’s punctured heart had stopped twice during surgery. It had been extremely touch-and-go and Phil wasn’t the only one surprised when he did finally wake up in recovery.

He had recognized the medical staff attending him as SHIELD personnel and was able to wrangle out answers regarding the attack.

They had won.

The doctors had their own questions, of course, and Phil would get to them as soon as he could. First, though, he needed some more sleep.

When he woke up the second time, he could hear Nick cursing creatively. A pause, and then more arguing. A phone call then.

He heard a precise, angry tap against an earpiece when Nick disconnected the call.

“I love the new tech but I do miss the satisfaction of snapping a flip phone closed, or slamming a receiver down. It really let the other person hear the thoroughness with which I wanted them to go fuck themselves.”

This was clearly addressed to Phil.

He opened his eyes and tracked Fury. The Director strode across the room and settled into the chair beside Phil’s bed.

“Welcome back, Agent,” Fury continued.

“Good to be back, sir,” Phil replied in a rasp. His torso was one throbbing wound and the drugs nominally numbing that made everything feel a bit disconnected and fuzzy.

“You’re legally dead, by the way.”

“…ah.” Phil said.

“You weren’t wrong, Coulson. Hit that nail on the damn head.” Fury rubbed a hand over his mouth. He looked tired.

“Sir?”

“They needed something to avenge. It’d’ve been nice, though, if that pack of assholes could’ve gotten their wake-up call before they wrecked my damn ship. We got a list of dead from that and a bill that even Stark would balk at, even before we consider the collateral on the street level from the fight.”

Phil raised an eyebrow.
“Loki opened an interdimensional portal and brought an army of aliens through,” Fury explained briefly.

Phil blinked.

“I see,” He said.

“Yeeah,” Fury drawled. “We won, but the Council ain’t happy with the particulars.”

He met Phil’s eye and rose, slapping him on the shoulder in a show of camaraderie that made Phil’s stitches twinge in protest.

“Rest up. Dead or not, we need you. There’s a lot brewing and we need to get in front of it.”

“Sir,” Phil agreed. It had taken Romanov six weeks to recover when she’d gotten stabbed in Madrid. That hadn’t been through the heart, though. That, and she was a lot younger than him.

Coulson was still considering the time tables for his recover when Fury left the room.

The next couple of weeks were a haze of medication, sleep and physical therapy. Sometimes he was awake and alert. He had access to a television but not a computer, and Phil guessed it was a precautionary measure to keep his not-dead status a secret.

He watched the news. For a while, the stations played footage of the Battle of New York relentlessly. The populace was responding more or less how Phil would have expected; terrified and skeptical in turns. Mostly, people believed the aliens were genuine.

SHIELD would have its work cut out for them in the clean-up.

The first time Phil caught a glimpse of Barton in one of those clips, his damaged heart had clenched and stuttered. It was only a glimpse but it told Phil everything he needed to know about the archer. It was an unexpected and incredible relief.

After a few weeks, the news stories started shifting and quieting. Celebrity gossip and political scandals and bad weather started taking the focus. In it, Phil could see SHIELD's strings at work.

It wasn’t really a surprise when, at the end of a month, he heard Jasper Sitwell’s footfalls making their way up the corridor to his room. There was always something a bit cocky in the way he walked.

Jasper opened the door without knocking.

“I’m naked,” Coulson said dryly. He was wearing a hospital gown.

“Like I haven’t seen it,” Jasper answered without slowing down. Phil caught the bundle of clothes Jasper threw at him. “Get dressed. Time to go.”

“I don’t think I’m actually cleared to leave yet,” Phil pointed out, already working his way upright. His chest hurt but he’d progressed far enough in his PT that getting dressed and walking shouldn’t do him injury. Assuming they weren’t going far. “I got stabbed, you know. I’m officially dead.”

“And I’m officially unaware that that’s a load of crap,” Jasper said. There was an urgency in the way he was holding himself that his smile wasn’t doing much to hide.

“What’s the situation?” Phil grunted as he pulled his shirt on. It buttoned in the front, which was useful. Getting the garment over his head would have been painful.
“Short version?” Jasper asked but was visibly searching for the words before Phil nodded in reply.

“Nope,” Jasper said, shaking his head as he came to the decision. “Not here. I’ve got something in place to kill the surveillance but…” He trailed off and shrugged. Phil knew. Better safe than sorry.

Jasper helped him get his shoes on. Bending over still hurt more than it was worth but soon Sitwell had looped an arm around him for support and they were off down the corridor.

There was a marked absence of medical staff as they made their way through the hospital wing.

It was overcast when they got outside and would probably snow before long. It was nice to be outside, even though after even this short of a walk his stitches were aching and his breath was coming a bit short.

Sitwell helped him up into the passenger seat of an SUV. The cluttered interior made him think it wasn’t a SHIELD issued car.

The silence that settled between them as Sitwell started to drive was tense and uncomfortable.

“How was Norway?” Coulson asked in an attempt to break it.

“Foster was a peach. I can see why Thor likes her. And her assistant was being underutilized. I put in a recommendation to recruit her into our support staff.”

Phil raised an eyebrow.

“Hey, SHIELD’s an important cog in the world's defense. Gotta keep turning even if the cog’s design has gone a bit bellicose.” Jasper sniffed. “You should see the ‘carrier, Coulson. They’re turning it into a flying weapon.”

“They?”

“The Council. Fury’s been compromised,” Jasper said simply.

He was quiet for a minute, letting Phil turn that over.

It did take the minute.

“How?”

“You remember that scepter Loki was wielding?”

“Vaguely,” Phil said in a perfectly flat voice.

“I’m fairly sure they turned it on Fury. The fail-safes the man put in place for telepathic hostilities got triggered. Imagine my surprise when I was randomly selected to relocate you. Glad you’re not dead, by the by.”

Phil hummed an agreement.

The drove in silence for a moment.

“What’s the plan to get Fury back?” Phil asked. “And what else has the Council been up to?”

Jasper spent the next hour filling him in.
They crossed the state line into Pennsylvania. It started snowing.

Eventually, they arrived in a residential suburb and Jasper pulled into a driveway.

The house was small but sheltered and obscured by surrounding trees. Two of the houses on the street were foreclosed and from what Phil could see his neighbors on either side were elderly and unlikely to present any security problem.

The heating wasn’t on in the house when them came in and the cold air had an unforgiving bite to it. Sitwell lugged in two duffles and went out a second time to retrieve a laptop case.

The plan was for Phil to lie low while things at SHIELD got sorted.

He was annoyed at being sidelined but... this wasn't just because of his convalescence.

Phil could read between the lines.

If his death had been a motivating factor in bringing the Avengers team together, the part where he was still alive was a complication the new management might not want to deal with.

He and Sitwell exchanged the details for contact and coordination. Then the man was tromping back out into the cold and into the SUV he hadn’t actually turned off.

Phil watched him drive off.

He took in his new surroundings.

The house was old and untended but it could certainly be worse.

First things first, he thought: getting the heater going.

*

*

*

Months passed, and Phil slowly healed.

He didn't leave the house. Even though the boredom drove him nuts, it was too much of a risk. It would have been noticed that he was missing and SHIELD would be actively looking for him.

Sitwell arranged for orders of supplies to be delivered to his door. Phil collected them only after the couriers left.

Sitwell kept him as up to date as he could get away with. The email contact was sparse and coded and the news was rarely encouraging. He doubted Sitwell was gathering all of this intel himself and could take a guess as to the person or persons helping him. He didn't ask and Sitwell didn't offer. Even with all the precautions they were taking naming an accomplice would be a stupid risk.

Coulson had been given a phone that he carefully kept charged and on hand. It never rang, and he never used it. It was understood that it was for emergencies only.

He spent his days watching the news and digging around online. It made him miss SHIELD's intelligence network fiercely.
Reporters started dying in professional assassinations. It made Phil worry.

The Mandarin made his splashy debut.

SHIELD and the Council were treating the threat the Mandarin presented as entirely domestic; something to be handled by other agencies.

Phil wasn't sure he disagreed with that.

Then Stark made his very public, very rash threat.

'We should step and assist,' Phil wrote to Jasper. 'Stark is a valuable consultant. It would be a ridiculous waste of an asset if we lost him because we didn't provide support security.'

'I've put in the recommendation,' Jasper wrote back.

It wasn't long after that that the Mandarin attacked Stark's Malibu house. He watched the footage, horrified. He tolerated Stark but he genuinely liked Pepper. Seeing her almost die on national television sent pangs through his mostly-healed heart.

Stark was declared dead and Phil admitted to himself that he hadn't just tolerated the man.

The loss made him angry.

Nick Fury, Phil thought, was a hard-assed, belligerent stubborn bastard but he was an excellent strategist and leader. The new management at SHIELD wasn't living up to Nick's absence and too many important things were being delegated and dismissed.

At least, he thought, this might be the push SHIELD needed to get involved with the Mandarin threat.

It wasn't, though.

It wasn't until the aftermath, when Stark turned up alive, when the truth about A.I.M and Killian came out and statements were collected and testimonials were given... only then did SHIELD renew their interest in Stark.

Sitwell thought it related to Stark blowing up the Iron Man suits but he wasn't in a position to find out more. It was a maddening delay on information but Sitwell just wasn't a high enough rank to access the files. It was all he could do to find out they existed.

The first thing he would do when he came back, Coulson swore, would be to promote Jasper.

The arc reactor technology and the Iron Man suits had been an interest to SHIELD for years. Ultimately, Fury had given up on it not long after the palladium incident. Stark knew exactly how powerful they were and showed every inclination on taking the designs to the grave.

It took over a week for Sitwell to finally manage to get past SHIELD's security and steal detailed information. He had to have been helped with that bit of hacking but, again, Phil knew better than to ask for particulars.

He sent the files to Phil.

He got a notice of a new email while he was reading about Natasha's assignment in Russia.

'Stark is inbound to 'carrier. New suit. Will pass intel on to him if possible.'
Phil wasn't surprised that Stark had built another suit. He wasn't entirely convinced that the man had destroyed them to begin with. Stark loved the things like children.

Phil thought about the genius, billionaire, playboy philanthropist’s value as an ally.

It would be a significant step in the right direction if Sitwell could bring him in discretely.

‘Be careful,’ He sent.

The reply Sitwell sent back was an emoticon smiley face. Phil frowned at it for a long minute before turning back to the files he'd received.

Perhaps he should reconsider promoting Jasper.

*  
*  
*  

To say it was a surprise when the long-quiet phone suddenly rang would be understating Phil's ability to predict things.

And if he were ever accused of jumping when the tone rang out, he'd firmly deny it.

“SHIELD's moving to capture Captain America,” Jasper said without any greeting and continued before Phil could respond. “I'm being transferred to the lab where we're going to hold him. We'll meet up with Stark at the Tower once we break out. I need you to get to Pepper.”

“Pepper? Why?” Phil asked. He was already packing his laptop. This, this blatant relay of information was bold in a way that screamed haste was more important than discretion.

“I was wrong about their interest in Stark. It's bioengineering. Weaponized humans. They're going to try to recreate the Super Soldier Serum using Steve's blood, but they also want Pepper for Extremis.”

“What?” Phil buttoned his coat.

“She was injected with it. Stark got the virus to go dormant but given his field of expertise? Odds are if he could manipulate the virus, so can SHIELD. I'm not sure what changed but they've moving to take Stark and Pepper both today. Rogers and I will take care of Stark. You go get Pepper. Stark won't play ball in taking back SHIELD if he's worried about her.”

Phil slung his go-bag over his shoulder with only the faintest twinge from the scar tissue along his back.

“Where will I find her?”

When he ended the call a few moments later, he was already trudging out into the snow. One of his neighbors had a car he could easily steal.

Even with the threat hanging over them, Phil couldn't deny how completely he'd missed this.

It was good to be back.
Chapter End Notes

What's that? Oh. Why yes, I do seem to have indicated I'll have this story wrapped up in another five chapters.

I'm pretty sure it'll be 5, anyway. Pretty sure.
Chapter 21

The phone in Pepper’s hand vibrated again. She jolted out of her shock and moved to open it.

“Please don’t,” Phil said calmly, and Pepper hesitated. Her phone went to voicemail.

Guilt pricked at her but would have to wait.

“Tony told me you were dead.”

“Rumors of my death were-”

“Don’t,” She cut him off, voice tight. “Please don’t quip about this.”

She grabbed Phil and pulled him into a hug. He grunted. Pepper thought she might have actually managed to surprise him.

“I apologize for the deception, Miss Potts. It was… unintentional, and then necessary,” He quietly said into her hair.

He drew back.

“I’m not sure how much of the current situation you ‘know nothing about,’” He said with a dry edge, “But things are escalating and you’ve become a target. I need you to come with me, please.”

Well.

The ‘next thing’ that she’d worried about with Happy seemed to have arrived.

Pepper glanced back at the meeting room. It was a significant deal for Stark Industries and walking out like this might cost them millions.

She squared her shoulders and followed him.

In the private elevator down, she turned her phone to text a message to Bambi. Again, though, Phil stopped her.

“Please hold off on letting them know you aren’t coming back until we're in transit. I can't vouch that everyone in that meeting is who they say they are.”

She nodded once, sharply, then put her phone to her ear to play her voicemail.

Tony’s voice was fraught and serious in her ear.


The message ended and her phone prompted her to save or delete. Pepper took a slow breath and tapped the button to disconnect without making that decision.

Fear had sunk into her when Phil had told her she was a target but now it wrapped hot fingers around the base of her spine.
Phil was giving her a curious look that Pepper observed with her peripheral vision. She hoped he couldn’t see the tension she was feeling.

Because as glad as she was to see that Phil was still alive, if Tony said SHIELD couldn’t be trusted she was going to believe it.

“That would have been Stark, then?” Phil asked politely.

She forced a smile. The elevator numbers ticked down from 21 to 20.

“He and Rhodey are having a tiff and he’s trying to get me to choose sides,” She lied, rolling her eyes in a show of fond exasperation.

Phil returned the smile but Pepper wasn’t sure he believed her.

“Where are we going, exactly?” She asked to distract him, proud of how professional and calm the words came out. Floor 11 turned into floor 10.

Pepper’s driver would be waiting for her in front of the building.

So too, presumably, whatever SHIELD entourage Phil had brought with him.

“Somewhere safe. That voicemail - Stark advised you of at least some of the problem,” Phil said, not a question. Pepper’s heart beat a little harder in her chest. Floor six. “But I’m thinking he was probably too vague from the way you’re not-looking at me. Pepper, I’m not-”

The doors dinged open.

Pepper jabbed Phil’s instep hard with the point of her heel and threw an elbow into his side. Phil moved to block her just a bit too slowly, and she wondered and worried about that. It was an absurd concern – if Phil was an enemy, why should it matter that he was injured?

She ran across the lobby, her heels clacking loudly on the marble. The security guard at the door was visibly surprised but knew Pepper and didn’t stop her. She saw him turn back to deal with Phil.

Pepper burst through the front doors and looked for her driver.

Hands grabbed her, a suited agent materializing from beside the building’s entrance. She fought hard and managed to wriggle an arm out of the hold.

She felt the sting of a needle sliding into her side.

Panic made her vision white, her mouth taste chalky. She remembered Killian and being injected with Extremis. It made her breathless with fear.

The drug was pulling her under, though. The bruising hands on her body released and scooped her up, carrying her to the waiting car.

Things took a disconnected turn after that.

Pepper heard the car door open and felt the cold cushions of the seat against the heated skin of her legs and neck as she was laid down.

There was a loud crack of a gun going off. She flinched. She couldn't really feel her body anymore and had no idea whether or not she was dying. She could smell blood but she was pretty sure the
bullet had gone into the man abducting her. Hard to say, though.

“Pepper,” Someone was saying, the voice growing in volume as the owner got closer. “Pepper.”

“Catch me this time?” She asked Tony in a slurred voice.

A face appeared in her line of vision.

Oh, it was Phil. Right. Phil not-dead Coulson.

He cocked his head at her and frowned.

“Not the smoothest extraction I've ever done, I'll admit.”

He said other things, and the agent with the bullet in him groaned in pain. Still alive, then.

Pepper slid her eyes closed and lost track.

*

*

*

Natasha had been suspicious from the moment Fury watched the Council reps escorting Barton away. She was always suspicious; that went without saying. SHIELD was a large, powerful and goal-oriented organization – the Council even more so. Natasha had enough experience with the type not to trust them no matter that they were the name on her paychecks.

She was distrustful of organizations as a rule but she did, reluctantly and with a grain of salt, trust Fury.

Clint Barton was taken away and Fury had watched it happen, as powerless as Natasha to stop it.

On the rare occasions she’d heard Coulson bitch (in that dry, professional manner of his that she already missed), she’d gathered that the Council manipulated things from behind the scenes but was never very hands on.

The nuclear strike they ordered on Manhattan was surprising. This – the physically removing Barton to subject him to an inquisition – was surprising.

Fury quietly accepting it wasn’t surprising.

It was frightening.

She was sent on a mission in Mumbai not long after that. It made sense to get her out of New York while the News was obsessively pouring over every inch of footage they had from the attack. Natasha’s face showed up more often than any of them were comfortable with. She might need to get facial surgery if she was going to continue to be a useful operative.

It took her just shy of three weeks to wrap up in Mumbai. After that, she was sent to Khartoum, then Algiers, then Cairo.
She was recognized in Egypt and had had to abandon the op. It rankled, but it was what it was.

She was moved to an assignment in Turkey within a few hours.

It did not escape her notice that she was being kept busy.

Coulson was dead, Barton detained and she didn’t have a direct line to Fury. What she needed to ask couldn’t go through casual channels and it left her frustrated and worried.

She was sent to Berlin to find a hacker and it was the opportunity she needed.

Birgit Hahn was a self-proclaimed hacktivist. She was responsible for leaking footage of the New York attack that SHIELD had thought they’d successfully confiscated and contained before it could be aired. Specifically, it was the cell phone video of Bruce Banner transforming.

Birgit was young and too-confident and easier to find that SHIELD was probably expecting. Natasha found her within the first few hours of being in the city and was waiting in her apartment when the girl returned.

There was the inevitable fight-or-flight response and Natasha subdued her as gently as she could. She needed Birgit and getting cooperation out of someone you’d just knocked out cold was always tricky.

“You know who I am, I think,” Natasha said quietly. Birgit uselessly thrashed in the hold Natasha had her in. Natasha waited until she stilled to continue. “And you probably believe I’m here to kill you. I’m not. Today, Birgit, I need you.”

She released the girl.

Birgit stumbled back and stared at Natasha with wide, disbelieving eyes.

But she didn’t go for her computer, or move her hands to her pockets to activate a fail-safe.

Good.

“What do you want?” Birgit asked, voice trembling but fierce. Braver than Natasha was expecting, all things considered.

“I need you to break into SHIELD,” Natasha said simply, and grinned at the astonished look that garnered.

It wasn’t that easy, of course. It had taken cajoling and assurances (the fact that Birgit was gay made parts of the negotiation process easier) and more time than Natasha was hoping before she finally got the girl to agree to do what Natasha needed.

With Natasha’s help they were able to pierce alarmingly deep into SHIELD. When this was over Natasha would need to make sure their security was significantly beefed up. Possibly she’d even be able to convince Fury to use Stark – at least then the only back doors they’d need to worry about would be the ones Stark left intentionally.

She considered it while Birgit grabbed the files Natasha wanted to explore.

When the last of it was extracted, Birgit turned a smile on her like a pleased puppy. It took effort not to pat the girl’s head.

“Thank you,” Natasha smiled, wide and flirty. Birgit read in it what Natasha wanted her to and
smiled back.

Birgit wasn’t beautiful. She was destructive but well-intentioned, boastful but talented. Natasha slid onto her lap and bent close enough to tickle the girl’s face with her hair.

“Let’s talk about your future,” Natasha said.

When Natasha left Berlin two days later, she’d managed to not only recruit Birgit to SHIELD but get the girl to track down and erase all evidence of the footage she’d leaked. It wasn’t easily done and it had impressed Natasha.

Letting her live was risky but Natasha didn’t think she’d tell anyone about the files Natasha had had her retrieve. The girl loved her and love was an easy thing to manipulate.

She would be a useful asset.

It had taken a few days after that to find time and privacy to review the files she’d stolen. SHIELD was watching her closely. Maybe it was because things in the States were tense following a new terrorist attack but maybe not.

Natasha read the files. She watched the videos.

It wasn’t her absolute worst-case scenario but had to admit to herself that it was fairly close to it.

*  
*  
*  

When the orders came down for her to take a mission in Russia, she wasn’t sure what to think. She pretended she was still ignorant of the power shift inside SHIELD. She accepted her orders like a loyal agent and kept her doubts out of the questions she asked for the mission specs.

Even if she hadn’t known Fury wasn’t still in charge, this move - sending her to Russia to investigate the remnants of the people who had unmade her - would have made her wary.

“Why now?” She’d asked instead.

“There are signs that the Winter Soldier is becoming sloppy,” Her handler relayed. “The title’s been around long enough that it’s either the original operative losing touch with age or a green sniper making newbie mistakes. Either way, it’s a window for us to get in there and get some solid intel on his associates.”

SHIELD… wasn’t in the habit of sending her into Russia. It had only happened twice and both occasions had been for small and very supervised translation jobs when she’d been the closest agent at hand. She understood that. There would always be some doubt about her loyalty no matter how long she was with SHIELD.

But she didn’t ask the obvious question to this mission request.

She’d kept her mouth shut and packed her bags. She’d seen what had happened to Barton and Fury. While SHIELD and the Council didn’t know she knew, she wanted to get as far away from Loki’s scepter as physically possible and work out how to proceed.

She would continue to play the role of a dutiful agent until it was no longer viable. If nothing else,
it bought her room to maneuver.

Except, what could she do?

She was a solitary assassin and wouldn’t stand a chance against SHIELD and the Council by herself. She knew she was excellent but… she was also finite. It would be stupid to try this alone.

As unreliable as he’d been in the past, Stark would be her first choice for an ally in this. He really was senselessly powerful and could probably take over the world if he had half a mind to it – he stood the best chance of bringing the Council down.

Except, obtaining Stark would also be her first move if she were working for the Council. Arc reactor or no, enthraling him would be too valuable to let an obstacle like that stand in the way.

He was probably compromised by now and she couldn’t risk contacting him.

Who else, then? Captain Rogers? Iconic and physically powerful but what use would he be against a technological threat? Doctor Banner would be a better choice but he’d also be high on the Council’s list of to-acquire as well.

It was Asgardian tech that they were abusing. Thor had ties here now. It wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that he’d come back and fix this.

Of course, she thought sourly, it’d also be a nice solution if Meggs happened to trip in front of a bus. It wasn’t useful to hope for things that might happen. Natasha much preferred to have a hand in the pushing.

Without SHIELD, though, her options for action were depressingly limited.

Powers rose and fell all the time and for this, she would just need to wait until an exploitable crack presented itself. She thought it would probably come from within SHIELD itself. She couldn’t be the only one to realize something was wrong.

In the meantime, her best defense and camouflage was to work the mission.

*

*

*

Nearly a month into looking for the Winter Soldier, Natasha had only a tenuous trail to follow. The man was a legend for a reason, after all.

She got a call from Fury and wasn’t surprised.

It didn’t normally take Natasha this long to track people down. She explained what she’d been doing.

It was incredibly disconcerting talking to Fury knowing he’d been turned into a thrall. The Nick Fury on the comm sounded exactly like the Nick Fury she’d spent years working with.
“The Winter Soldier is a very closely kept secret,” She explained. “In a ‘three men can keep a secret if two of them are dead’ sort of way. Finding people that actually know anything isn’t easy. His hits are random and sporadic; it’s hard to say when he’ll be sent out, and no one seems to know where he spends his downtime. A lot of the talk I’ve heard so far is…not credible. Getting intel while staying below the organization’s radar is going to take more time.”

Fury made his usual grunt of acceptance and displeasure at her report.

He took an audible breath.

“I want you to report back to HQ,” He said.

“Sir, I realize this is taking longer than projected but I am making progress.”

“This isn’t a formal extraction,” Fury soothed. “We have something that’ll help with the mission. You’ll be back in Russia in two days tops.”

Well, she thought.

Fuck.

She didn’t frown. She didn’t think anyone had eyes on her just now but better not to risk it.

“Of course, sir,” She said instead.

He gave her the details of her transport and she disconnected when he’d finished.

Natasha took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

There was a chance she wasn’t being brought back to the States to get mind-whammied.

It wasn’t a large chance, though. She didn’t like the odds.

*

*

*

Some things always stayed with you – how to ride a bicycle, how to snap your fingers, how to break a choke-hold. For Natasha, disappearing in Russia was apparently also one of those things.

It took her almost two weeks to be sure she’d shaken SHIELD. She’d had to remove a tooth to get a tracer out, which was unpleasant, and had spent six hours tromping through a Russian sewer which was, to her mind, worse.

Two days after that, she was in a bar in a seedier part of Moskova (which was saying something by itself), nursing black bread and a peppered vodka.

To say she was surprised when the Winter Soldier walked in and took the seat next to her would be very seriously understating the matter. It was him, it was definitely him – the young man she’d met when she’d still been property of the Red Room. He hadn’t aged a day.

He ordered himself a beer and sat quietly drinking for a minute. Natasha knew her face remained a controlled mask, and likewise knew that he had probably seen right through it.
The ceiling in this place was low. The walls were the caramel color of neglect and layered with graffiti.

“I know you, don't I?” He murmured. He cut his eyes towards her without looking up from the grimy counter.

Natasha was playing the role of a mobster’s girlfriend to blend in and looked less like herself than she normally did. Nobody knew who she belonged to, exactly, but it was clear that she was owned. For the most part it kept people from flirting with her.

The Winter Soldier’s question didn't sound like a line, though; there was something honest and almost tentative in the question. It had to be a cover – of course he knew her. Natasha flattered herself that the time they'd spent together wouldn't be quickly forgotten.

She took another swallow of her vodka before she answered. How to play this?

“We've met,” She said simply.

He grunted – a noncommittal sound, as though pleased he'd been right and nothing more.

Natasha waited to see where he would take the conversation.

The Winter Soldier finished his beer and stood.

She tensed, ready for whatever he did next. She had knives hidden in her dress, a pistol in her boot, a SHIELD-issued taser that could drop an elephant and a hand-held EMP cannon.

He nodded politely at her and headed for the door.

A trap – a set up. He was probably bugged. 'I know you, don't I’ was probably a coded sentence.

She picked up her purse, smoothed her hair down and headed for the unisex toilet at the back of the bar.

Getting out through the window was done quickly and easily. She was braced and ready for an ambush – the front of the bar would be better manned, probably, but any half-wit would also guard this exit.

There was no ambush.

It had started snowing again and the streetlights were turning everything a filmy yellow. She waited, gun in hand, with her back pressed to the wall.

She could hear a drunk singing to himself in the street and the crunch of car tires on the snow. Other than that, nothing.

Natasha scaled her way to the roof of the bar to get a better look, keeping her body low and in the shadows.

She knew what to look for and there really was nothing.

It didn't make any sense.

*
It was easy to pick up the Winter Soldier's trail. He was making efforts to hide it but not nearly the standard she had expected. SHIELD intel was right; he was getting sloppy.

Probably the only reason Natasha hadn't found him in the weeks of searching for him had been that if tonight was any sort of indication, the legendary Soviet sniper was just... wandering. She followed him for three hours and the non-existent patterns of his movement made her really wonder if he had any actual destination in mind.

After those three hours, she felt sure enough that he wasn't being followed by anyone else to make a move.

Even in a city like this, it was mostly quiet at this time of night. She had to choose her steps carefully to close the distance silently and spin him into an alley.

He fought back instantly and ferociously.

It was almost a relief. This, Natasha knew what to do with.

His left side had been his weakness before and Natasha sent a jab into his ribs. He blocked and returned a sweeping kick that she nimbly avoided. She brought another attack against his left side while he was still low.

Except, the clumsiness she remembered in his left hand was gone now. He closed gloved fingers over around her wrist tightly enough to make her gasp in pain. Through the leather, his fingers felt like steel. Not the prosthetic she remembered, then.

She slammed the back of her fist into his nose and he stumbled back, releasing her.

They both brought guns out.

“I want to talk.” She said.

The scarf over the lower half of his face went dark with the blood stemming from his nose. He gave her an incredulous look.

“Funny way to go about it,” He spat.

But there was something there – something unsure and open in his expression that didn't belong there.

“I know you,” He snarled, angry... not at Natasha, though. Not entirely.

“We've met,” She repeated.

“No,” He shook his shaggy mess of black hair. “I've seen you. You're... SHIELD's spider.”

“You're mistaken,” She said flatly.

She'd followed him to find out why he'd tracked her down, but... this little confrontation confirmed it for her. As mad an unlikely as it seemed it really had been just pure, random chance that he walked into that bar. The Winter Soldier really didn't remember her. It made the rumored brainwashing a lot more credible.

She should walk away. She should walk away now; try to get some distance before he set his
organization after her.

She considered killing him.

“I saw you in the news. The alien attack in America. You were fighting alongside...”

He cut himself off and Natasha got the impression he’d pressed his lips together tightly.

If she killed him, it would eliminate a lot of variables. Plus, while SHIELD hadn't stated that they
wanted the Winter Soldier assassinated, she doubted it would be a hardship for them to learn of his
death.

“You’re here for me, aren’t you? SHIELD sent you after me.”

He didn’t lower the gun but his stance shifted into something less poised and hostile.

It made him vulnerable.

Natasha weighed her options and, slowly, she nodded.

He holstered his weapon.

“We do not have long. I am expected back in less than an hour.”

“You’re remanding yourself to my custody?” She asked. She didn’t trust this and he must have
been able to read that.

“I am.”

A look crossed his face as though he couldn't believe he was saying it either.

“SHIELD has something I want,” He said when Natasha continued to hesitate. “And my keepers
abandoned the cause decades ago.”

The ways this could go wrong were innumerable. She should put a bullet in him and walk away.

Still, she hadn't survived this long by letting opportunities pass her by just because there were risks
attached.

*

*

*

They'd been on the run for six days before Natasha let him know it wasn't just his organization
they were running from. He was annoyed, of course, but by then Natasha knew it wouldn't be a
problem. For her, six days was plenty of time to get to know a person – even him.

The Winter Soldier showed every sign of someone shaking off mental conditioning. It was more
than that, she was sure, but it was also obvious to her that he had been unmade and was slowly
piecing himself back together.

What she couldn't work out was what he wanted from SHIELD so badly. The gun he was using
was thirty years old at least, so it was unlikely he was after weapons tech. Or technology in general for that matter – the way he frowned sometimes when they paused to eat and someone around them pulled out a tablet or smartphone made her really wonder how long he’d been disconnected from the rest of the world.

Natasha would lay good odds that it was someone rather than something that he was after. He’d mentioned the battle of New York and she wondered if it was a member of the Avengers team.

Of all the scenarios it seemed the most likely.

He stayed with her because she could get him into SHIELD. She stayed with him because he could be valuable in, if nothing else, getting Barton back.

That, and if worse came to worst she could use him as a bargaining chip.

The problem was, neither party they were running from suffered from incompetence. A month into her defection and she still hadn't managed to secure a way back into the States. The contacts he had had been murdered before they got to them. They were almost caught twice.

As for Natasha, she didn't have non-SHIELD contacts in Russia. The informants she'd used in the past would certainly be being watched – likewise, if they tried to bribe or threaten local mafia it had a good chance of getting back to someone.

It made for slow going across the country.

On a tentatively bright side, it was winter. It slowed the two of them down but it would slow down a manhunt just as much.

Two weeks after they left Krasnoyarsk, still heading East, Natasha opened her laptop (stolen nearly a month ago from a trophy wife) to see if anything had changed while she’d slept.

She stared, dumbfounded, at the dancing icon of a new message.

Natasha hadn't set up a mail notification system on the stripped machine and if she had, she certainly wouldn't have chosen something so chipper and cartoonish.

It had to have been someone tampering with her computer.

The Winter Soldier – James, he'd told her to call him. Natasha wasn't sure if that was actually his name or just a name he liked- detached from a shadow on the wall by the window and came over to her. He looked at the bouncing icon and then went to shoulder their gear without comment.

Natasha clicked it open and, reading it through twice, exhaled sharply in relief.

It was from Maria Hill. Apparently, a newly recruited hacker had been quite valuable in tracking Natasha's machine down.

The message was the inside link to SHIELD resistance Natasha had been hoping for.

* 

* 

*
From there it was a matter of coordinating. Leading SHIELD without SHIELD realizing they were being led. There was a lot of Russian wilderness to get lost in, and they did. She arranged for them to be spotted a few times, passing through cities on their way East. It was enough of a trail that she wasn't really surprised to receive a message from Hill that SHIELD was sending a specialized team to extract or neutralize them.

Hill also sent her news that Captain Rogers was officially missing. Hill thought the Council had picked him up. Natasha agreed.

Relaying the info to James, she finally got the confirmation she was looking for that Rogers was the person he was after.

The thing about James, Natasha thought – or, rather, one of the many, many things about James – was that something fundamentally human was missing in him. She had an easier time reading Loki – which was somewhat ridiculous, given that Loki hadn't even been human.

Getting answers out of people was something she was trained to do, and yet she still didn't have a firm handle on what exactly James wanted from Captain Rogers.

When Natasha told him she thought the Council had probably using Rogers to recreate the Super Soldier Serum, something went unexpectedly violent in his eyes.

Seeing it, Natasha didn't have any doubt he truly wanted to retrieve Rogers. She still didn't trust him further than she could throw him but this proof that they shared a common goal went a long way towards cementing him as an ally.

And, she thought; she could probably throw him quite a distance, all things considered.

*  
*  
*  

Not far outside of Bratsk, she came back from getting food and found James on the laptop.

He didn't look up when she came in, even though he must know she was there. She came around to see what was holding his attention.

There were lurid pictures of a smoking, blown-up building she immediately recognized as Stark's Malibu house.

The news scrawl read: Iron Man Killed In Mandarin Attack.

She looked at James. He was reading the article with interest.

“WSC?” He asked, nodding his head at the screen without looking up.

Natasha didn't answer. She didn't know.

It was a hell of a bright side that at least if he was dead he wasn't working against her.
But then, she supposed, that might've been the Council's reasoning as well.

*

*

*

After Stark turned up alive, things started happening more quickly.

In Mirnyy, James dragged Natasha to a rooftop and set up his sniper rifle.

“What is it?” She asked. She was guarding the access door.


It wasn't long before he fired out two shots, smoothly rising with his gun the moment after the second shot rang out and not even checking that he'd hit his targets. It reminded her strongly of Barton.

“Let's go.”

Natasha wasn't surprised to encounter ex-Red Room operatives not long after that, or that SHIELD also managed to close in on them.

She and James left seven more people dead before they managed to escape the city.

If Natasha needed any further proof that the hierarchy at SHIELD was fucked right now, Hill managed to get herself assigned to run the now-escalated retrieval/assassination op.

“We're setting up to head you off in Lensk,” Hill wrote. “There are teams in the city but my group is going to be working back-up. I've requisitioned the Iron Patriot. I'm sure we'll be able to get Rhodey on our side.”

She sent Natasha the coordinates.

From there, it was a pretty straight-forward plan for a triple-cross.

*

*

*

Carol Danvers was an unexpected twist to the plan, but other than that? Natasha was pleased with how well things went.

Danvers received an alarm from Jarvis and left, agreeing to meet up with them later. They didn't get a word in edgewise. Natasha would never say this (Stark had too much of an ego already), but watching the easy way an Iron Man suit could break the sound barrier really was a marvel. Natasha hoped she knew what she was doing.
It wasn't a small distance to travel and they hadn't been in the safehouse long when Danvers returned. She'd brought Rhodey and Stark with her.

She and James had been keeping an eye out from the upstairs windows but drifted to the stairs to hear what was going on.

“You should know that doesn't actually work. SHIELD is using fitted, full-eye lenses to hide the...” Rhodey's voice went too soft for her to hear the rest.

Hill's said: “Follow me. We have an organization to topple.”

A new voice chimed in asking about the plan and Natasha realized the bundle Iron Man had carried in must have been a person.

And not just anyone - Captain Rogers.

She trained her eyes on James, her whole body tense.

This was not a scenario she had prepared for. Rogers wasn't supposed to be a part of this equation yet and there was no telling how the tentative alliance she'd built with the Winter Soldier would fare over the next few minutes.

James' eyes were dark above the scarf wrapped around his face, but his expression was... almost confused.

He brushed past Natasha without a glance in her direction and went down the stairs, footsteps heavy and unconsidered. It wasn't the way an assassin moved.

She followed after him with her gun in hand, ready to take him down if this went badly.

Steve Rogers was beyond pale. He was wearing thermals that were at least a size too small for him and the battered way he held himself spoke clearly enough that wherever he'd disappeared to, he wasn't the better for it.

Rogers looked up at the noise James made descending and... froze. Whatever blood was left in his face vanished and he visibly reeled.

The two men stared at each other. She couldn't see James' expression from here but Rogers looked like he'd seen a ghost.

Rogers croaked a disbelieving sound and it catalyzed James into movement.

Instead of forward into the room, though, he lashed backwards at her. Natasha blocked but was thrown off balance on the stairs. He used it to sweep her feet out from under her and sprint past into the room above.

She heard a repulsor being powered up and a sharp “Don't!” from Rogers.

Natasha wasn't slow in regaining herself in pursuing.

He was out the window already. The ground below was icy and treacherous – she could make the jump, of course, but decided against it. Why should she, when Iron Man could fetch him back without risking his ankles?

“Heading south,” She called heading back into the room.
“Bigger problem,” Stark said. He had his helmet tilted the way he so often did when listening to Jarvis. “We’ve got company incoming.”
Hit a bit of an apathetic rut, but I'm back now. And I'm very excited about the next chapter, so that shouldn't take as long to post.

“It’s a matter of timing,” Loki said, the words a soft murmur that, even walking beside him as he was, Thor barely caught.

His brother had a far-off and contemplative look that, paired with the grin stretching his lips, made Thor’s stomach cold with unease.

“A matter of timing?” He repeated, tilting the syllables into a question.

Loki ignored him.

The crowd parted around them as they walked. It was, for Thor at least, a novel experience to walk unnoticed amongst so many people. Loki still drew plenty of attention but it was plainly more for his comely form and not because he was a prince of Asgard.

They passed a pair of men in suits. Thor noted that they had the look about them of trained fighters. SHIELD agents, perhaps? The amused glint in Loki’s eye as they continued walking past them made Thor think it was so.

They turned the corner and Thor felt a tight prickling along his skin.

“Loki?” He asked. This had the feel of magic.

“Stay quiet and follow – we are unseen and, for the most part, unheard. Better not to test it, though,” Came the quick reply.

The two of them slipped into a doorway as it opened to disgorge another young man in a suit.

Inside, the building exhibited the kind of security that made Thor even more sure this was a SHIELD facility. Loki paid no mind to the cameras or guards. He paused only as they approached a narrow gateway, hopping over the guard’s desk instead of going through the intended corridor.

Thor did the same, albeit not so nimbly. There were challenges in doing these sorts of things in a long skirt. Just walking the obvious path would have been much easier but Thor supposed there was some alarm Loki was guiding them around.

The interior of the building was a sprawl of hallways and featureless doors. Sometimes they passed a meshed window and Thor could see people inside bent in concentration over tools and machines and flasks of oddly colored liquids. They were craftsmen – that was plain, although Thor could only guess at what they were making.

The building was a maze to Thor yet Loki navigated it without hesitation.

The people they passed in the hallways didn’t react to them at all. They were, as Loki said, unseen.
He caught snatches of their conversations – it was incomprehensible, like listening to Stark speak of his machines.

In front of a door Loki stopped so suddenly that Thor walked into him. Loki shot him an unimpressed look before turning his attention back to the door.

Loki put his long, pale fingers around the blinking, numbered box affixed to the wall. After a few seconds the light flashed green. Loki smirked and turned the handle.

The room was filled with tightly organized shelves and labeled parcels. Thor wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting but this wasn’t it.

Loki hunted through the racks for a few moments before snatching up a small, flat shape triumphantly.

“What is that?” Thor asked.

“Do you know what causes illusions to fail?” Loki asked instead of answering. “If they disappear, certainly. Sometimes, it is because the caster runs out of energy. Sometimes, it is because the spellwork is sloppy and doesn’t hold. If it’s a skilled caster, though, if it’s somebody truly powerful and good at the art, neither option can really be counted on, can it?”

Loki regarded the contents of the little, oval case. It was small enough to be engulfed in a closed hand. Thor couldn’t see what it contained from where he stood.

Loki looked up at him, expectant and waiting, then rolled his eyes when Thor only frowned.

“If I doubled myself,” Loki said slowly, as though talking to a child. “How would you know which me was the illusion?”

“I could…” Thor chose his words carefully, sure that he would get this wrong and be mocked. Illusions were Loki’s expertise. “Reach out. Whichever form my hand passed through would be the false one.”

“Exactly.” Loki snapped the little box closed and pocketed it. In a few short strides they were back in the hallway. “Touch. It only takes a small puncture to reveal a falsehood, especially if you’re looking. Even the most beautiful illusion is proven meretricious if one merely throws a rock through it.”

“But what does that –” Thor took a breath. “What are you scheming, Loki?” He demanded in a whisper.

“When people are distracted and panicked, they make mistakes,” Loki replied, also keeping his voice low as he led them through the building. “They hurry and do not think their actions through with care. We go to steal the scepter, Thor, but it will be easier done if its guards are… made careless with urgency. The more direct attack I would prefer is somewhat limited by Odin’s oh so thoughtful hobbling. This is more circuitous but it should still get the results we’re after. As I said – it’s a matter of timing.”

“What do you mean? What are we doing?”

“We’re going to throw a rock.”

*
The ride to SHIELD’s R&D facility hadn’t taken long.

Through it, the pilot regarded either him or the quinjet’s instruments with the sickly blue eyes of possession. Silverton – ‘Fury’ - had left the cockpit to the two of them.

“I don’t want you to feel that his answers are biased,” She’d said.

There was a gulf, Bruce thought, between ‘I don’t want you to feel that his answers are biased’ and ‘his answers are unbiased.’

Still, he didn’t really know what to ask.

He hadn’t gone into this with much of a gameplan. It frightened and sickened him a little that he’d gone into it at all banking on the fact that if worse came to worst, the Other Guy could get him out. It wasn’t a mindset Bruce liked to rely on. He shouldn’t put himself in situations where that became an option so easily.

And yet…

And yet, what better opportunity to see what SHIELD and the Council were up to? These were people that had sent a special ops team to retrieve him from India. They really didn’t know him, and that meant they probably underestimated him.

The pilot remained silent and let Bruce gather his thoughts.

“What’s your favorite color?” Bruce asked at length, mouth twitching in a wry smile.

The pilot shared the look. It was a ridiculous opener.

“Green,” He replied. And winked.

Bruce snorted.

The flirtation was an obvious attempt at throwing him off. He decided to play along – let them think it flustered him.

“Tell me about yourself,” Bruce returned. The pilot shrugged, an easy, fluid movement. He flicked a switch on the console.

“Born in ’73, Gemini, originally from Virginia. Went into the Air Force after a year in college. SHIELD picked me up not long after.”

“What were you majoring in?”

“Engineering,” The pilot wrinkled his nose. “It didn’t play to my strengths the way I thought it would. But this isn’t what you really want to know, is it? We're not going far, you know, and this thing flies fast. Ask away.”

Unnatural blue eyes cut to him.

“No,” Bruce admitted easily. “And you know that the only way I’ll believe any of this is if I get to talk to you again once you’re not… like this.” He waved a hand to the pilot’s face.
“Oh sure. Fury knows it too.”

“Because you know?”

The pilot shook his head.

“Because she’s not stupid.”

They dropped altitude and they came in for a landing.

“If you weren’t possessed, what would you like to do?” Bruce asked. That was the essence, wasn’t it? Loki had taken away people’s will.

The pilot paused until the quinjet had touched down, his attention focused on landing the jet on the roof’s helicopter pad. When he’d finished, he turned to Bruce. His candid expression was marred somewhat by his eyes.

“Exactly what I’m doing. SHIELD is doing good work, Doctor Banner. Truly.”

He smiled at Bruce and unbuckled himself. He strode out of the cockpit.

Bruce lingered, mulling things over.

Silverton came to the front.

“Walk with me – I’ll show you around while he’s brought out of it.”

“I’d like to see that,” Bruce said firmly.

Silverton smiled tightly.

“You’re not on our team yet, Doctor.”

“Is the method supposed to be a secret? It’s a whump to the head,” He raised an eyebrow.

Silverton wrinkled her nose.

“A little barbaric, don’t you think?”

“It’s a tool that you stole from a Viking god. Just… throwing that out there.”

Bruce wondered if Silverton had any idea how fake her smile was.

“Nevertheless. We do have other ways less likely to cause a concussion. Tell me, how did you find your conversation with Agent Kennes?”

Frighteningly normal, Bruce didn’t say.

He unstrapped himself and rose from the copilot chair. Silverton led him out.

Once they were past security, the facility looked much like other collaborative laboratories Bruce had worked in.

“Some of these things I can’t show you, not yet,” Silverton said, waving a hand at a closed, windowless door. “And even if you accept a position at SHIELD, there will likely always be some aspects of our work you will not have authorization to be involved in.”
“You’re doing a great job of selling this to me,” Bruce said dryly. The cameras followed them as they walked and it made him irrationally nervous. Of course there were eyes on them.

“You’re far too intelligent to abide bullshit, Doctor Banner. You’re coming into this as a civilian scientist, and SHIELD is global. Some secrets need to stay just that to ensure the safety of the people and countries involved. But neither am I going to hide the worst of it from you. I say ‘civilian scientist’ but we both know that’s not where your merit begins and ends.”

“My ‘merit,’” Bruce repeated. The Other Guy shifted, picking up on his discomfort and displeasure. His presence in Bruce’s head had been like the throbbing of a migraine ever since this woman had invaded Stark’s lab.

“The Hulk was valuable in the Chitauri attack. Had you still been hiding in India, who knows how many more people would have died? I want to be very plain here, Doctor. It isn’t my intention to send you into situations as a weapon or even as a SHIELD agent. What I want is to have you on hand and informed if another disaster strikes.”

She bent forward and the retinal scanner swept her face. The door unlocked and she led him in. Some of the white-coated technicians glanced up curiously when they entered but for the most part heads remained bent over equipment and computer screens.

Bruce took it in. He walked around and took a closer look at some of the readouts.

“This is… are you trying to recreate the interdimensional portal?”

“We’re studying it. We’ve even had success in preventing such a portal from opening again.”

Bruce felt his pulse increase.

“The Chitauri? They tried to come back?”

Silverton pulled a display around.

“Doctor Foster, please bring up the readings from the last event.”

The recording had yesterday’s date stamp on it. Bruce’s stomach twisted with an unwelcome jolt of fear as he watched the comparison between those readings and what had been taken during the Battle of New York. They weren’t identical but there was an unmistakable similarity.

There was a small, muffled sound - like a hiss, and then a noise like someone growling in frustration. Bruce turned his head in curiosity, and in a smaller way out of schadenfreude. He well knew the pain of dealing with data that wouldn’t add up.

Something dropped into Bruce’s pocket. He twitched in surprise and turned back around. There were technicians at the desks all around them.

Bruce frowned. It wasn’t obvious which of them had done it.

“Doctor Banner?” Silverton asked.

Tony had said intel had been planted on him when he visited the helicarrier. A member of SHIELD passing on information the higher-ups didn’t want getting out.

“Nothing,” Bruce said, smiling dismissively. “It was nothing. Thought I heard something.” He shrugged.
Silverton studied him for a moment, then glanced to the side and tapped her earpiece.

“Agent Kennes is available. Would you like to speak to him now or continue the tour?” She asked Bruce when she’d finished listening to whatever was being said.

“Now, please.” The less time that passed, the less Kennes could be coached or threatened to answer his questions correctly.

“Of course.”

“Actually,” Bruce said once they were back in the hallway. “I realize this isn’t part of your… tour, but we did leave the Tower on kind of a short notice. Is there a bathroom around here?”

Silverton smiled.

“Ahead and to the left. I’ll need to hold on to your cell phone, Doctor Banner. I’m sure you understand.”

“Right.” He fished it out and handed it over, unspeakably glad he’d actually remembered to bring the thing. He didn’t always and he didn’t want a pat-down to reveal whatever had been slipped into his pocket.

There were cameras in the bathroom too, naturally. Bruce went into a stall and as casually as he could, withdrew… what turned out to be an oval-shaped case.

He opened it.

There were a pair of small sealed packages inside holding something floating in liquid. Bruce angled it, getting a look through the transparent plastic.

He stared for a second before he realized what he was looking at. The membranous item was shot through with a sickly pastel blue that Bruce recognized. This was a contact lens. These were contact lenses.

It was so obvious that he had to take a seat on the closed toilet lid and have a moment to come to terms with his own stupidity.

He pocketed the case and took a deep, slow breath. The Other Guy was seething. Keeping this contained wasn’t outside of Bruce’s control but that barrier had just taken a substantial blow.

He went ahead and used the facilities. It would be suspicious if he didn’t and, besides, he hadn’t actually been lying to Silverton about being rushed out of the Tower.

He took a good look at his eyes while he washed his hands. Still brown. He fixed a bland expression back in place and left the room.

Silverton danced her fingers across the surface of her… Bruce thought it was a smartphone, or SHIELD’s equivalent… for a moment more before pocketing the device and continuing to walk. Bruce fell into step beside her.

Agent Kennes was waiting in the cafeteria and was already partway through a sandwich.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Silverton said, although there were other people scattered around the tables. Bruce nodded.

“You hungry?” Kennes asked him. The man nudged half of his sandwich in Bruce’s direction.
Drugged, maybe? That Kennes was eating the other half suggested it wasn’t but that could just be a ploy.

“No, thanks, I’m good,” Bruce said. Kennes’ eyes were still blue but it was a natural, human color. Bruce looked at those eyes closely and Kennes let him, no doubt thinking Bruce was verifying the possession was gone. The blood vessels in his sclera did look a little swollen – not much, and likely he had dropped his eyes with something for the redness – but enough that any doubts Kennes had been wearing contacts vanished.

“So, I’m sure you have questions. You want to know if I still believe what I said, now that I’m... ‘me’ again?” The man grinned. His posture was easy and open. Objectively, he was very charming. Bruce Banner didn’t like being played. The Other Guy liked it even less.

Bruce smiled back and settled himself at the table.

“That’s a good place to start,” He agreed.

“Well, I’m still an uninspiring engineer, green is still my favorite color and, yes,” He leaned forward. “Yes, I still think SHIELD is doing good work. I am exactly where I want to be.”

“And being possessed; having your will taken away. What was it like? How do you feel about it?” Kennes sniffed a disagreeing sound.

“It's not like you're making it sound. I was still me - Fury isn't an active presence in my head. It's like... it's a dormant voice. It's just there for guidance in emergencies. If it weren't for the eyes,” He laughed. “You wouldn't even know I was different.”

“It is uncanny,” Bruce said, and easily let a flicker of green seep up into his own eyes. The Other Guy was decidedly not a 'dormant' voice in Bruce's head.

Kennes noticed, and the man's expression went tight and uncertain.

Bruce placed the contact case on the table between them. From the look Kennes gave it Bruce may as well have put a cobra on the table. Bruce opened it, displaying the contents to Kennes to be very clear about what was inside.

“Would you like to try again?” Bruce asked.

Kennes licked his lips, his gaze fixed on the contacts.

“Are you threatening me? Really?” Bruce crossed his legs and cupped his hand over his top knee.

“I'm making you aware of your options. With Steve Rogers unfrozen, we're closer than ever to unlocking the Super Soldier Serum and you must be aware of that. Just as we're aware of the fact that nothing would alienate you faster than resuming experiments to get it right.”

“You're really not wrong about that,” Bruce agreed. The Other Guy shifted and squirmed just at the idea. Bruce took a few slow breaths.

“Here’s the offer. If you agree to work with us – and I meant what I said, Banner, SHIELD is doing
good work. If you work with us, if you agree to support SHIELD, then we will not continue research on the Serum.”

“Why should I believe that?”

“It's the truth,” Kennes insisted.

Bruce rubbed fingers over his thumbnail.

Startling Natasha had been the fastest way to get her to show her hand. He didn't doubt that it would work the same way on Kennes.

He bent forward abruptly, hands flat on the table, and let out a growl.

It did startle Kennes. It did get him to show his hand.

Bruce stared at the dart embedded in his chest. A second one followed quickly and he looked back up at Kennes. The grip the agent had on his gun was white-knuckled.

“I really,” Bruce said thickly. “Really wouldn't have done that.”

He could feel the drug seeping into his blood. A tranquilizer. This wasn't good.

The Other Guy pressed against him violently.

Kennes shot him again and it was the last push his control could take.

Bruce held on for as long as he could.

Then, with a furious howl, the Other Guy took over.
Chapter 23

Clint blearily became aware of his surroundings. He held still and kept quiet while he figured out what was going on.

Unsurprisingly, he was strapped to a chair. He cracked an eye and verified his surroundings. He was seated across from Loki’s minions – SHIELD hadn’t even taken him out of the interrogation room.

Clint brought his head up. He could hear footsteps outside the room – voices raised. Something was going on.

“Wait for it,” The doctor said. Clint twitched. He’d thought she was still out of it.

He met her unnatural blue eyes and she smiled secretively.

The door was unlocked and then banged open.

Meggs entered, scepter in hand. He waved off the agent following.

“Get the jet prepped,” He ordered brusquely.

Clint gave him a tight-lipped smirk.

“Having a problem?”

Meggs was tense. He scowled at the question.

“It’s the Avengers, isn’t it?” Clint asked with a vicious sort of glee.

Meggs hefted the scepter and walked around the chair to get a clear line on Clint’s chest.

“Well,” Meggs said bitingly, “Why don’t you go see for yourself?”

Clint clenched his jaw tightly and bared his teeth at the man.

The mirrored wall of the interrogation room warped behind Meggs. Clint kept his eyes fixed on the man, on the tip of the spear as it was raised with obvious intent, but he watched with choked disbelief as… a muscular blonde woman quietly stepped through. There was another figure behind her, half-in the mirror with her hand outstretched.

The blonde woman darted forward and seized Meggs, forcing his arms down to his sides, staff and all.

Meggs cried out in surprise and immediately started thrashing in the hold. The other woman stepped out of the mirror and plucked the staff out of Meggs’ hand. Clint could see his knuckles white with the force of his grip on the thing but the black-haired woman pried it out with only a moment’s tugging. She was a hell of a lot stronger than she looked.

She turned to look at Clint and he felt his heart freeze in his chest.

“Loki?” He breathed, disbelief thick in his voice.

She smirked.
She turned and walked towards Clint, scepter in hand.

“Brother,” The blonde woman said warningly. Holy fuck was that Thor?

Loki bent into Clint’s personal space, face close to his, and Clint’s heart pounded. Slim, cool fingers slid to Clint’s wrist.

Loki tugged sharply and the strap broke.

She winked and walked back to the mirror, stepping into it backwards so that half her body vanished into the pane.

Her green eyes shifted to Thor. Meggs was shouting vitriol, muffled by the hand that had been shifted to cover his mouth.

The two of them joined Loki at the mirror and in short order stepped through and vanished, leaving the pane flat and reflective once more.

Clint’s fingers flew to the strap around his other wrist.

Meggs had obviously been expecting this to be brief. It had been hasty – the intent had clearly been a fleeting stop to re-possess Clint before sending him out to fight.

Meggs hadn’t closed the door behind him.

*

*

*

The biting cold of traveling through a mirror didn’t abate as Thor stepped out onto the other side. He took in the surroundings and realized with a sense of foreboding that it wasn’t the cold of transition clinging to his skin.

The surface he’d stepped through had been a glacial wall of ice. In the small seconds it took Loki to follow him through, Thor had already begun shivering. The man in his arms, wearing garments much as the Son of Coul had worn, fared no better.

“Loki!” He shouted. The landscape was a dark, frozen waste. He cast his eyes to the stars to verify that Loki hadn’t taken them to Jotenheim. No, this was still Midgard; merely a particularly inhospitable region.

“Release him, Thor,” Loki ordered, voice as cold as their environs.

Thor did so. Even though he was a spot of warmth in this ferocious cold, Thor found the man loathsome. Seeing Jane – seeing the blankness in her expression and her obedience in sealing off Midgard from the Bifrost – had made his anger burn anew. It had taken considerable force from Loki to keep him from going to her.

The vicious smile on Loki’s face as he regarded SHIELD’s man, though, gave him pause.

“What do you intend, Loki? Surely you haven’t forgotten that any harm wrought-“

“Is brought back against me twice.” Loki finished. “Do you think I’ve forgotten?”
“How did you escape Asgard?” The man spat, voice stuttered and teeth chattering.

“Little it matters to you, mortal,” Loki scoffed. “Such a tiny thing you are, thinking yourself a king, thinking yourself worthy to wield this.” He brought the staff up and the curved end glimmered with energy. It reflected against Loki’s skin, making his flesh echo that blue.

But – no.

Loki stood unaffected by the cold. His brother stood triumphant, scepter in hand and magic glittering in his eyes.

His red eyes.

Loki’s skin was turning a dark blue as Thor's own prickled and trembled in the cold.

Thor had known Loki was descended of Frost Giants. He had been told that his brother had been an abandoned babe, rescued after the battle on Jotenheim.

But even after he had accepted the knowledge that his brother wasn’t technically his blood, Thor hadn’t thought of Loki as anything less than an Asguardian.

What stood before him now was a Frost Giant. A Jotun.

Thor felt foolish and sick even as the cold crackled in his lungs and tore at his face.

“Any wound doubled,” Loki said, words almost lost in the noise of an icy gust. “But what wound am I causing?” He laughed. “What harm is cold to a creature like me?”

Thor was jolted out of his shock at the report of a Midgardian weapon firing. A gun, clutched in the SHIELD agent’s violently shaking hand.

The projectile sliced a path along Loki’s cheekbone. Thor raised a hand and summoned Mjolnir out of instinct. Loki moved first, sending a blast of energy and knocking the weapon from the man’s hand.

The blood hadn’t even reached Loki’s chin before it froze, a dark smear on his brother’s sapphire cheek. Loki shook his hand, stung in retaliation for the blast.

The mortal’s mouth and fingers were purpling from the cold and he fell to his knees in the snow. Where Thor was discomforted by the climate the Midgardian was simply not build to endure it.

“Loki, he will die.”

“Very soon, yes,” Loki agreed easily. He thumbed at the raised Jotun markings on his brow.

“This is needless!” Thor yelled. “We have the scepter. Let us destroy it and leave this Midgardian to the justice of his people. Can you truly think Odin will not punish this?”

“The Allfather cannot see me,” Loki returned.

“But I can. He holds your heart, Loki. Do not do this!”

Loki laughed, red eyes alight with malevolence and mirth.

“Odinson, what need have I for a heart?”
Thor could bear this no longer.

He tackled Loki into the snow. The bare skin of Loki’s arms burned against Thor’s palms but he didn’t release his grip. He shook Loki, furious and desperate.

Loki snarled at him and writhed, trying to break the hold. Those attacks he could employ he didn’t. Were he to headbutt Thor or batter him with the staff, he’d likely only render himself unconscious.

It was unfair of Thor to fight him with that disadvantage but Thor wasn’t feeling noble now.

“Are you so stubborn and blind that still you cannot see the chance you have been given? What need have you for a heart indeed!” Thor roared. He shook Loki again, wanting to knock that willful expression from his brother’s face.

“And what of your blindness?” Loki shouted back. “I am no Asgardian princeling following in your wake, playing at a second son. It is my right to rule. Look at me!” His red gaze was an uncompromising challenge. Thor stared back at him and did not give an inch.

Loki slapped his hand against Thor’s face and the touch burned. The cold ate at his flesh and Thor realized in shock that Loki would scar him, as Volstagg had been scarred by a Jotun’s touch.

Thor did not back away and did not release him.

“Will you not be content until I see you as my enemy?” Thor demanded. “Until I hate you as you hate yourself?” He released one hand from Loki’s arm and pressed Loki’s palm more firmly against his face, glaring defiance at his brother. “I shall be dust long before it happens, Loki.”

Loki hissed and bucked and used Thor’s slackened grip to eel himself out of the hold.

He retreated until his back was against the wall of ice they’d come through. He met Thor’s eyes and there was hate in his gaze. Though it hurt him greatly, Thor couldn’t deny the hate there.

With no further word, Loki turned and stepped through the ice.

There was a sharp snap, like a bone breaking in his sinuses and his nose flooded with blood. He reeled, dizzy, and fell to his knees on the ice. His panting breath came in fogging clouds as he bloodied the snow beneath him. It felt like being struck by a snapped bowstring. Ten times that. A hundred.

The bond tethering them together had been broken. Thor did not know where Loki had taken himself but the distance was apparently too great for the magical leash to endure.

It took long moments before Thor regained control of himself.

SHIELD’s man was dead. There was no heat, no movement from him. His eyes were open and frozen in a disbelieving stare.

Thor looked upon him and wasn’t sure how to feel. He didn’t pity this man – his fury at what he had done to Jane boiled inside him – but this was not how his death should have been meted out.

Mjolnir drew closer but it would still take some time to reach him. Thor had no knowledge of where he was or how far he was from civilization. It would not be a pleasant journey back. Less so given the skirt he was wearing.

A golden glint in the snow snagged his eye and Thor turned his head.
Keeping his hand raised in summon he knelt and picked up the scepter. It gleamed in blue and gold. What role did this tool have, Thor wondered, in shaping Loki’s madness, his twisted ambitions?

Perhaps not as much of one as Thor would hope.

When his hammer closed the distance and slapped into his waiting hand, Thor didn’t hesitate. He brought it down against the curving gold and brought it down again. He struck against it with all his rage and frustration fueling the blows. The ice cracked beneath him and it didn’t slow him. The blue energy emanating from the foul thing flickered out, turning black before fading completely. The metalwork split and crumbled into shards and pieces.

He did not stop until no part of it was left whole. His anger unabated, he blasted the remains with lightening until they had scattered beyond his sight, lost in the wind and snow.

Spent, Mjolnir dropped from his hand and he cupped his eyes. Grief took its moment over him but Thor knew he could not linger here.

He needed to find his brother.

* *

* *

* *

Andrea Silverton was not unused to acting in a crisis. She had had plans fall through and assets fail her before.

Kennes had failed spectacularly.

She had been watching from a security room and knew even before the second dart was fired that this facility and any chance of obtaining Bruce Banner for SHIELD had been lost.

She stayed just long enough to see that the tranquilizer wasn't working before she was on the move.

She tapped her comms. “I’m ordering an evacuation. Get everyone out over here now.”

The alarm sounded seconds after the Hulk’s howl echoed through the building.

It was easy to keep track of the Hulk. He was not a subtle presence and she kept an ear out for him as she jogged through the fleeing agents.

Bringing him to this facility had been a risk. She’d wanted him to see the progress they’d made in the interdimensional portal technology. Readouts could be faked and he was already skeptical - she had wanted him to see what they had accomplished; be in the lab and observe the actual equipment.

She’d been sure that the proof of what they were doing to keep Earth safe would have had more impact on him. That he could come to see the merit of what they were doing; that even the worst of it was for the greater good.

Another roar rang out through the compound.

Some hero he turned out to be, she thought bitterly.
“Clear the labs. Leave the equipment running – we cannot let that net go down,” She barked. “Keep him away from the East wing no matter what!”

Gunshots sounded and were answered by the cacophony of cement breaking and metal tearing. The Hulk was ripping the building apart, it sounded like.

Andrea swiped her card through the access door and impatiently bent for a retinal scan. The security check was too slow on this door – she would have to review the protocols after this, see how they could be improved.

Andrea knew even as the thought crossed her mind that it was likely pointless. Had Barton been here or the previous Director, she could have given this job to them. But they weren't, and she couldn't trust this task to anyone else.

She grabbed the prototype and listened, tracking the Hulk’s movement through the building.

Best case scenario, he would leave the facility, storm around, hopefully not cause too much property damage and wear himself out somewhere SHIELD could find and collect him.

Worst case scenario, he destroyed the equipment sustaining the portal net around this part of the hemisphere and the Chitauri acted on that moment of weakness.

She wasn’t going to let that happen. She was Director Fury of SHIELD and she would not fail her duty.

“Meggs,” She tapped to his channel. “Meggs, code green. We need reinforcements, now.”

“On the way to secure our sniper,” Meggs answered. She could hear footsteps picking up speed on his end of the line. “Quiver’s already loaded with tranqs and gamma suppressants. ETA 10 minutes.”

“Hurry.”

Andrea took her position at the entrance to the East wing. She stayed ducked in a doorway to keep out of sight, confident that she would hear the Hulk approaching if and when he came this way.

The prototype was heavy in her hands. She didn’t like touching it.

She tapped her comm. “Let me know if he leaves the building. Get wings in the air – we need to keep him away from the city if we can. Guide him out to the ocean if at all possible. Bring the helicarrier in – this will probably get Iron Man’s attention. Take him down if you need to.”

“Roger that.”

The facility fell ominously quiet. Andrea could hear the distant shifting clatter of broken things settling but it was a very different sound to active violence.

“Eyes on him?” She asked.

“No ma’am. He ripped out the wiring around the cafeteria. We do not have surveillance.”

Another minute, and then there it was – a low, snuffling breath exhaling on something not quite a growl. Massive footsteps on tile.

Without a visible target, the Hulk was wandering, unfocused. Andrea winced as he punched through one of the walls. One of the reinforced walls.
If he turned right, there was no guarantee he wouldn’t break through the lab walls and destroy Foster’s equipment.

Turn left, she thought. Turn left turn left turn left turn left.

“Evac complete, ma’am,” The update chirped in her ear.

The Hulk snorted, hearing it, and turned to the right.

Had it been a tactical mistake, she wondered; staying to protect the array? Had her presence drawn him in this direction?

But, no. Even if that were the case, she couldn't have left it unguarded. It was too important to leave to chance.

Andrea stepped out of the doorway and he howled at seeing her.

“Doctor Banner,” She said. She leveled the Hulkbuster at him. “If you do not stand down, I will fire.”

Enormous green lips pulled back in a snarl.

He charged.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

I think I miiiiight've been a little ambitious in trying to wrap this up by chapter 25... I think two more will do it. Maybe two more and an epilogue. :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jane didn’t like getting conflicting orders. Probably no one did, she thought, but getting orders at all was a new enough experience for her that she didn’t feel unjustified in complaining when they weren’t clear.

Her master wanted her to keep the array running and continue her work.

Her master’s boss wanted her to evacuate the building.

“Come on!” Raj barked at her, grabbing his satchel and running out the door.

Jane watched him go but didn’t move to follow.

The array took precedence, she decided. Fury wanted it up and running, too. The order to evacuate probably didn’t apply to her.

The Hulk’s roar could be heard even through the reinforced walls. Jane was glad, in an abstract sort of way, that she’d lost her capacity to feel fear. She was sure that she’d be terrified now if Meggs hadn’t relieved her of that emotion.

The net was passive – it would have taken entirely too much energy to sustain it around the entire globe all the time. It was a monitoring system that could been activated into something more if the need arose.

The automation was mapped but almost completely untested. The equipment should be able to respond correctly... but why risk it? Better to have an actual body keeping an eye on things.

Jane watched the scroll of information and listened as the Hulk tore around the building. She hoped he didn’t come to the East wing. The walls were meant to survive an explosion but she didn’t know how they’d fare against Dr. Banner’s alter ego.

Things went quiet after a few minutes. Perhaps the Hulk had left the facility. That seemed likely. Now it would just be a matter of waiting for the all-clear.

SHIELD would probably have their hands full with repairing this place for a while. She was sure she’d heard walls breaking earlier.

Jane took a long drink from her coffee and pulled a face. It had gone cold. The microwave wasn’t in the lab, though, so she’d have to endure it.

She glanced up when she heard the Hulk roaring from very nearby.

Jane thought she was probably about to die, which was a shame. Someone needed to keep an eye
on the readouts. She crawled under her desk. If a punch came through the wall the desk should afford her some protection, at least.

She fell against the back panel of it in a stumble.

Her master was sending images that didn't make sense. An arctic landscape, two women – one of them turning blue and not just from the cold.

There were no orders. He wasn't sending commands. The projection was gray-tinged and left the metallic taste of fear in her mouth, like the thoughts of a panicking animal. Or, she thought, like a man facing down his imminent death.

In moments, though, the connection started to become sluggish and discordant. He was freezing.

Vaguely, Jane was aware of a sound like someone had detonated a bomb in the hallway. The lab shook as it was battered. Jane heard glass breaking and the crack of something near the door giving way but it was a distant concern. She couldn't concentrate on it.

The last shred of connection faded out when her master died. Almost instantly it felt like something in her mind had ripped.

Jane gasped in pain and doubled over, clutching her hands to the sides of her head.

It took a while for the white-hot agony of it to recede.

“Oh god,” She moaned. “Oh god, oh god.”

With shaking fingers she plucked the brown contact lenses from her eyes and threw them onto the ground. She gagged and wasn't able to keep it down. She scrambled out from under the desk and vomited into the trash bin.

Her mind raced backwards. Weeks. She had been a mind slave for weeks. Her stomach roiled again and Jane didn’t fight the tears that started streaming down her cheeks.

She stood and regarded the lab and had no idea of what to do next. Her entire body was shaking and she couldn’t stop crying.

Her eyes landed on her screen and anger seized her like a maelstrom. She grabbed the monitor up, ripped the cords from the wall and threw the whole thing into the array.

She felt a vicious thrill of satisfaction as the machine spluttered to a stop. Jane damn well could read the difference between the Chitauri portal and the Bifrost. She’d been studying the latter obsessively before she’d been stolen and it hadn’t been the Chitauri she’d stopped from coming to Earth yesterday.

She scrubbed at her face angrily. More tears welled up to replace what she’d wiped away but she’d worry about that later.

The door to the lab was singed around the edges. It took a worrying amount of tugging to get it to open but, at last, it did.

The hallway was scorched and fractured. There was rubble everywhere – parts of the ceilings and walls were missing. The reinforcements on the lab hadn’t extended throughout the building and it was obvious a bomb had gone off out here. Could she trust the floor? It was hard to say how much was intact under the rubble.
She was eyeing it dubiously when she heard a voice moaning in pain nearby. It was followed by wet coughing.

Jane glanced down the hall in the direction of the exit and then glanced back towards the sound.

“Hello?” She called. Another moan. Someone was shifting in the broken concrete and tile.

Jane made a decision.

The building creaked and groaned but the floor felt solid. She picked her way over the debris. The voice hadn’t sounded far off. She would see if she could help and then get the hell out of here.

Her foot slipped in the dust and she fell. Her hand landed on something sticky and giving.

They were fingers. The hand they were attached to wasn’t attached to anything else.

Jane screamed and shoved it away.

At her shriek, the voice at the end of the hallway moaned a garbled response.

Jane was panting with fear and disgust but she levered herself back upright and continued forwards.

The man was naked from the waist up and his chest was a mottle of black and pale green flesh. There was a cracked and bleeding spiderweb of burn marks cutting along his torso, the split edges of skin charred black. Jane’s stomach tightened in sympathetic pain.

“Doctor Banner?” She whispered.

His eyes fluttered and he groaned. His hands came up to his chest weakly.

Jane delicately crossed the distance to him.

She hissed through her teeth.

“I don’t know how to move you,” She said, hovering her hands over him without touching.

He shifted.

“Don’t,” He snapped. He coughed again and blood dribbled down his chin. His eyes went wide and he turned his head away from her. “Don’t touch. Blood’s toxic.”

Jane bit her lip hard and drew her fluttering hands back.

Further down, a piece of ceiling rattled to the ground. Wires sparked but thankfully nothing caught fire. Yet.

“We shouldn’t stay here,” She pointed out.

Dr. Banner huffed a painful-sounding laugh.

“Gimme… minute,” He wheezed. Streaks of green bubbled under his flesh, shifting and fading. Jane wondered if he would transform again. She didn’t think so. Banner looked a tiny nudge away from passing out and she wouldn’t blame him if he did. “You’re SHIELD?” He asked. His eyes dropped to the insignia on her lab coat.

“No,” Jane said immediately and coldly. Banner’s eyebrow twitched upwards and he didn’t argue.
No, she was emphatically not SHIELD.

In a shameful way, she was almost glad she had Banner to focus on. If she thought too hard about what Fury had done to her she felt sure she’d start screaming.

Later. There would be time to break down later.

Jane looked at the doctor’s chest again and swallowed down bile.

“It doesn’t look like you’re bleeding too much,” She said, working to keep her tone detached and clinical. God, she hated the sight of blood. She swallowed again. “The… wounds, they’re open, but they’re not really bleeding freely. If I’m careful not to touch – if I get my coat around you, do you think it’ll be safe enough for me to help you up?”

The burnt furrows of flesh trembled. Jane thought it looked like they were trying to knit back together. She had to look away quickly, fearing she’d be sick again.

“Yes,” Banner breathed.

Jane stripped off her lab coat and carefully eased it around Dr. Banner’s shoulders. His skin felt hot and clammy under her hands. She was very careful to steer clear of any open wound.

He grunted in pain and grimaced but between the two of them they managed to get him upright.

He leaned his side against her heavily and shot her an embarrassed, grateful look.

They started their slow shuffle out of the building.

“Well,” A voice called gleefully. Jane turned them.

The smile that split the woman’s face gleamed white and dangerous against her blue skin. No – the blue was fading, turning pale as Jane watched.

The woman’s red – now blue/green - gaze raked over Banner. “Aren’t you just a bonus?”

*  

*  

*  

Clint took the gamble and climbed aboard the quinjet. The crisis Meggs had been hurrying to get to turned out to be Bruce rampaging through one of the nearby SHIELD labs.

What was being done with the scepter was a very closely kept secret. Fury would know he wasn’t supposed to be out of the interrogation room as he was but for anyone else in SHIELD his presence wouldn’t be questioned. They were expecting him.

His equipment was pressed into his hands as soon as he boarded. Clint quickly strapped his bracers on and shouldered his quiver.

It was unsettling to move in such a small space with people who had placidly, blindly worked with him while he’d been a meat puppet. Clint somewhat hated them even as he recognized that it hadn’t been their fault.

He tested his string and remembered shooting those reporters.
He locked the emotion down and got his game face in place. He couldn’t think about that now.

SHIELD was sending him in to try and take Bruce down. Clint had no intention of doing that.

The Council was going to burn for what they’d done and Clint had no doubt that Bruce would be willing to help.

“When we get there,” Clint ordered. The agents around him were below his rank. He had their complete attention. “Drop me and go. The blast radius on these things isn’t small,” He said, tapping his quiver to indicate the specialized arrowheads it contained. “And nothing you’ve got in your arsenal will do anything more than piss him off. Just fall back and keep eyes-on.”

“Sir,” Came the chorus of agreement.

He didn’t know where Loki had taken Meggs but it was a safe bet that Meggs would be busy for a while. The only other person in the mental web Clint really had to be concerned about now was Fury.

His comm ticked to a private channel and like his thoughts had summoned the man, Fury’s voice came down the line.

“Meggs is dead.”

Clint’s skin went tight at being caught a moment before the words registered.

Fury continued.

“He was transmitting at the end there. Loki dropped him in an arctic wasteland, looked like. He’s dead.”

Clint was silent. There was no way he could trust this.

“You’ve got no cause to believe me and that’s fine, but if you try to punch me out of it when I see you again we’re going to have words.”

Clint had worked with Fury for long enough to hear the anger under his words. Not directed at Clint, but there.

The private line clicked off and it was just as well. Clint didn’t know what to say.

They were coming in over the roof of a building opposite the lab.

Clint would worry about Meggs and about Loki returning later. The quinjet was maneuvering into position for him to jump and he couldn’t be distracted right now.

He swung down the line and rolled when he hit the roof. It was a quick few gestures to switch out the gamma suppressant arrowheads for his normal fare. He wanted to get Bruce’s attention, not actually hurt him.

The lab showed obvious signs of destruction. It looked like a bomb had gone off inside.

“Any sign of the target?” Clint asked on the team line.

“Negative. He hasn’t left the building.”

“Keep me informed,” He ordered and made his way down the fire escape.
The lab was where the Hulkbusters were being developed, amongst other things. The damage to the building could have been from the Other Guy running amok but the longer things were silent the more Clint worried that someone had done something stupid.

He really, really didn’t want Bruce to be dead.

SHIELD was doing a good job of keeping people off the street. He’d expected to encounter more gawkers, especially this soon after an evacuation.

His access card got him into the building and he started quietly picking his way through the rubble. If the damage he’d seen from above was anything to go by, he’d find Bruce somewhere between the main building and East corridor.

His ears pricked at the sound of voices and he picked up speed. He had to scale part of a collapsed wall and it shifted under him in a way that sent a fresh wave of adrenaline through him. Part of the ceiling broke and crashed to the floor off to the side.

He paused, letting things settle for a moment before he pushed through.

“Aren’t you just a bonus?”

Well. At least he knew where Loki had gone now. Clint’s fingers tightened on his bow.

“You,” A new female voice said in surprise and recognition. Did she know Loki?

Clint edged around the corner and got eyes on the three of them. Loki’s back was to him. Banner, further down the hallway, looked ripped up and barely able to stay upright.

Jane Foster. That was who was holding him up. Clint remembered her face from the New Mexico thing.

She was part of Meggs’ mental web, or had been. There were tear-tracks down the girl’s face and it gave a lot of credence to Fury’s words. Maybe Meggs really was dead.

How… incredibly dissatisfying.

The back of Loki’s head lined up too neatly with Bruce’s side from this angle. If Loki moved Clint would hit the wrong target. Loki’s shoulder, though, was fair game.

Clint didn’t hesitate.

Part of him had expected Loki to spin and catch the arrow like he (she, now, and that wasn’t going to stop being weird any time soon) had done during the New York battle. It was almost a surprise when the bolt struck true.

Loki spun, snarling. There was a cut on her cheek and smudges still visible around her nose and mouth from what must have been a pretty substantial nosebleed. Clint wasn’t sure what she’d been doing before showing up here but it had taken a toll. It was an advantage to press.

Loki caught the second arrow Clint fired and threw it back. Clint had to duck and roll to avoid it, and when he came back up there were eight Lokis cluttering the hallway, all with fresh bleeding wounds at their shoulders.

Bruce had pushed Jane behind him when Clint had revealed himself, shielding her. More Lokis appeared behind them.
“Is this how you show your gratitude, little hawk?”

The words echoed, projecting from a dozen different voices. Each mouth turned up in a wicked, self-satisfied grin.

Clint ducked low around his piece of wall, eyes darting from Loki to Loki, string drawn and ready.

“How did you get out of Asgard?” He demanded.

A dozen unimpressed sniffs.

“So pedantic,” They chorused.

Clint loosed the arrow through his likeliest candidate and in the same motion scooped up a handful of gravel, throwing it in an arc. Whichever Loki the gravel didn’t pass through would get the next arrow.

Something displaced the air behind him and Clint rolled.

Clint had been expecting it. He had the footage of Coulson’s death burned into his memory and he had been expecting Loki to pop up behind him. The son of a bitch wasn’t going to survive that trick a second time.

Loki blinked at him from only a few feet away, knife in hand, and Clint shot.

The arrow clattered down the hallway, harmlessly passing through the illusion. Loki smiled and flickered out.

Not just that one – when Clint turned he saw that every iteration of the god had vanished. Dust was still drifting down from the grit he’d thrown and Bruce stood in the middle of it, looking battered and wary. The burns on his chest were hideous.

He was also alone.

Jane Foster was gone.

“For what it’s worth,” Bruce said, breaking the tense silence. “We’re trying to save you. I don’t know how much of you is in there, but…we’re going to get you back, Barton.”

The words… very nearly hurt. They were soft in a way that jarred badly against the mindset Clint had worked himself into.

“I’m me,” He said, voice tight. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I’m not… I’m out. But… thank you.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes but nodded. Good for him. Skepticism was prudent.

Clint shouldered his bow and picked his way over to him. Bruce looked at his eyes closely but didn’t resist the arm sliding around his shoulders, supporting him.

“Don’t touch my blood,” Bruce warned.

“I’ve read the files, doc. What happened to you?” Clint jerked his chin at Bruce’s twitching, charred skin. God, that was uncomfortable to look at. The blotchy patches of shifting pale green made Clint think Bruce would probably have transformed already if he could have.
“The new ‘Fury’ shot me with… something. The new line of Hulkbusters, probably.”

“Fury? Silverton?” Clint’s heart skipped a beat.

Bruce waved a hand at the hall, finger pausing in various spots. He was point out bits of a person. It was gruesome and most of it wasn’t recognizable. His gaze landed on what was definitely a hand and he focused.

Clint had spent too many interrogation sessions with Silverton not to recognize those nails as hers.

“The way you’ve been staring at me makes me think you’re aware of the contacts. Am I wrong?”

Bruce slowly shook his head.

“Was Foster wearing contacts?”

“Who?”

“The girl,” Clint waved to indicate the space she’d been occupying.

Bruce answered immediately. “No. No she wasn’t; she was crying pretty hard and I would have seen it.”

Clint’s hand flew to his comm and picked out the private line Fury had used.

“Sir,” Clint said.

“Agent,” Fury acknowledged. The background noise made Clint think Fury was on the move.

“I’m staring at bits of Silverton. Thought you’d like to know.”

A long pause followed this pronouncement.

“Noted,” Fury said, two short syllables before the line clicked off perfunctorily but Clint didn’t doubt the cold satisfaction he’d heard in them.

He started walking Bruce out of the building, careful to keep the path as level as he could. Bruce was manning up admirably but Clint didn’t doubt those burns were an agony.

Clint tapped his earpiece again.

“Jane Foster has been kidnapped. Get a search running – she was grabbed by a known hostile.”

“Yes sir.”

Meggs would have been his handler for this mission and no doubt the rest of his team thought Clint had checked in with him already. It was a satisfying bit of deception.

“Looks like Banner exited through the west side of this building. Start looking for him, and review the goddamn footage. I want to know how in the hell he got out of here without anyone noticing.” Clint made his voice thick with derision and could almost feel the squirming anxiety on the other end of the line.

“The rest of you fall back and keep a perimeter,” He continued, keeping his tone annoyed and authoritative. The threat of getting ripped a new one was a great deterrent for questions Clint didn’t want asked. “I’ve called in the hazmats – looks like some of the labs got cracked open and who
knows what’s spilling out here. I’ll handle my own extraction.”

“Yes sir.”

Bruce raised an eloquent eyebrow at him when Clint tapped the line closed.

Clint gave half a shrug, not wanting to shift Bruce more than necessary.

“I don’t think either of us wants to be taken back to SHIELD just now,” He said. Bruce’s features darkened.

“No,” He said simply. “Can you get us to Stark Tower? Tony and Colonel Rhodes should be back from Phoenix by now, I think. They were-”

“Going after Captain America, right,” Clint finished. “Shit, Rhodes was one of ours – one of Meggs’,” He corrected himself angrily. Bruce grunted as Clint’s grip around him tightened. Clint made himself relax.

Bruce’s expression made it plain that he didn’t need to explain who Meggs had been. Clint was glad of it.

“So we need to get there sooner rather than later,” Bruce said grimly. His chest was already starting to look better. It was a very relative thing, though.

“Meggs is dead.” Saying the words felt wonderful. “But I don’t know where Rhodes was when it happened. I’m not sure how long I was out of it.”

He ticked over to Fury’s line and got a receiving-only tone. Was Fury in a meeting? Seriously?

“Sir, please advise on the Stark’s status.”

He waited a moment but didn’t get a reply.

SHIELD would be keeping close eyes on Stark. Clint was good but he doubted he could get the two of them into the Tower without being observed.

On the other hand, though, with both Meggs and Silverton dead, who was going to order action against them even if they were seen? Fury sure as hell wasn’t going to and Clint hadn’t heard from anyone else in the WSC for months. The lack of orders would at the very least create a delay long enough for them to get to Stark.

Bruce was looking at him expectantly.

“You’re right,” Clint decided. “We should get to the Tower.”

*  
*  
*  

SHIELD knew how to attack them – had had plans in place well before Tony Stark had even
formally announced that he was Iron Man.

The first wave was a barrage of EMP cannons and knock-out gas, and if Stark hadn't gotten an advanced warning the fight would have probably been over embarrassingly quickly.

The store they were using as a safe house went dark in the wake of that barrage, the air thick. It stung Natasha’s eyes.

She was sharing a breather with Rogers. It wasn’t ideal but even Stark couldn’t magically create gas masks in such a short span of time.

The building was multistoried but she and Rogers were keeping to the first floor. It was a space open enough to fight but full of enough empty shelving units to use as cover if needed. Hill had staked out a window on the top floor. They didn't have a rifle but Hill's aim was good enough to help from that vantage even with the pistols they did have.

The only suit to withstand the EMP had been Tony’s. It had some sort of manual hydraulic mode – he hadn’t really explained in detail. She would have put solid money on the upgrade being a direct result of the suit falling dead in the wake of that nuclear bomb, but Natasha knew better than to ask.

Rogers touched her shoulder and she passed the mask to him. He took a few deep breaths and passed it back to her.

It was only a few more seconds before the front entrance was kicked in. SHIELD would be expecting them all to be unconscious or compromised. The agents would come in thinking this was a window of opportunity to exploit before the Iron Man suits came back online.

They wouldn’t be expecting organized resistance.

Stark waited until there were six agents inside before he started firing his repulsors. Rogers sent his shield arcing out and knocked the weapon out of the closest agent’s hand, and then it was on.

Danvers and Rhodes were still in dead suits and would be for another four minutes (Stark’s estimate). The unexpected fury that Rogers and Stark brought to the melee made up for the absence.

Natasha took down her own opponents and couldn’t deny that she was somewhat startled by the ferocity the other two were lashing out with.

She pistol-whipped the next specialist with his own tranq gun and ripped his gas mask off while he reeled. She rolled back into what was probably a manager’s office while she fitted the mask over her face.

A powerful pair of repulsor blasts sent an agent through the wall in a flurry of splintering wood and plaster.

She dove back into the fray.

A high-pitched whine filled the air, unexpected and biting. It made her dizzy almost instantly and drove her to her knees.

Stark snarled something, the words lost in the mechanical filter his voice came through. Beside her, Rogers was also being pressed down under the onslaught.

Sonic taser, she thought. This version was new. She hadn’t known SHIELD was working on a
larger model.

A dart hit her in the shoulder, followed quickly by another to the stomach. She wanted to pull them out but couldn’t imagine taking her hands away from her ears. It wasn’t a full paralysis but it was close enough, and the drugs were closing the middle-ground fast.

She saw Rogers duck one dart but the next pierced his chest. The thermals wouldn’t be thick enough to stop the needle.

She heard Stark outside, repulsors firing. She hoped he was trying to destroy the source of the sonic taser.

Agents swarmed Rogers and pulled his hands down from his ears to cuff him. The captain was still struggling but it was a losing battle. There were too many of them. The gasmask was ripped off her face and beside her she saw the same happen to Rogers. The air had cleared somewhat but it was still thick.

Natasha wasn’t able to stop the agents that headed up the stairs. The steady sound of Hill’s weapon discharging had stopped with sonic taser and Natasha had no doubt Hill was in a similar state to herself.

Hands were on Natasha. She sank her teeth deeply into someone’s forearm, similarly unwilling to take her hands from her ears and not nearly drugged enough to be cooperative.

Before the zip-ties were in place on Rogers’ wrists, though, the back of an agent’s head exploded in a red mist.

The crack of a sniper rifle was audible even over this whine of the taser and the cacophony of repulsor blasts outside.

Crack, and another of the agents holding Rogers dropped.

The agent Natasha was still holding with her teeth ducked for cover and did a messy job of freeing himself. Natasha spat out a mouthful of blood after him.

“Sniper!” The agent hissed into his comm.

The sonic taser abruptly cut out.

Natasha lunged, grabbing the agent’s head in her hands and sending it back against the wall hard enough to knock him unconscious. The captain’s shield clanged heavily against someone else.

She got her mask back on. She threw the second one at Rogers and looked up when it noisily fell to the floor.

He was standing at the shattered storefront window.

In plain view, a perfectly visible target for SHIELD. Or the Winter Soldier, for that matter, if he decided to change his alliances.

“Captain!” She barked.

He seemed to come back to himself. He flinched and turned away, picking up the mask and rejoining her.

She was deeply, deeply curious as to what there was exactly – what there could possibly be -
between Rogers and the Winter Soldier.

They took positions on either side of the door and assessed the melee going on between SHIELD and the Iron Man suits.

It was hard to say who was winning. She couldn’t see Danvers but the way Rhodes was targeting one of the carriers made her wonder if SHIELD had managed to secure that suit and pilot.

Stark was aloft and tearing at the wiring on one of the quinjet’s wings. She really hoped he had a plan for where the machine was going to land.

SHIELD wasn’t passively taking any of this. The field sparked and glittered with weapons discharging. The suits could deflect them but that didn’t mean it didn’t slow them down considerably.

“Stand down!”

The voice was projecting loudly from the speaker systems on the quinjets.

“This is Director Nick Fury of SHIELD, I am ordering a stop to this mission, authorization code epsilon delta motherfucking bravo, now stand the hell down! Avengers team, that goes for you too.”

Natasha didn’t loosen her grip on her gun. The tranquilizers were making her sluggish but she’d fought through worse and she didn’t trust this yet.

Beside her, Rogers was coiled and wore a matching wary expression.

There were sirens in the distance. Local police force scurrying to deal with the commotion. SHIELD would intercept them before they got here. The carrier Rhodes had been tearing apart whined and creaked in a pathetic mechanical way and aside from that the silence was palpable.

“Anyone wearing a SHIELD insignia, report to the Coquitlam office immediately,” Fury's voice continued darkly. "I will deal with you later. As for the rest of you - Stark, open a line. I think we need to speak face to face.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, would you look at that? This is officially the longest thing I've ever written.
Loki dropped the girl as soon as they were through and continued walking until his shoes touched the ledge rimming the roof. His shoulder was a throbbing place of pain and it took a few long breaths before he summoned the energy to mend himself.

Behind him, Jane Foster rose to her feet. Glancing at his own hands he affirmed that the tumble had only scratched her palms. She was fine.

The shiny metal door they’d come through was only a few feet from her. Loki bit back a groan as nerves in his shoulder pieced back together but, even in his distraction, he was aware of her shifting her weight in preparation to run. Loki doubted the door was unlocked. Still, why let her try?

“I wouldn’t,” He said without looking over and felt a stab of satisfaction when she paused.

The city below was beginning to twinkle in places. It would be an hour or so yet before the sun set completely and the full spectacle of Midgardian lights would be on display. Loki spent a moment watching the car lights smear along the streets. His shoulder whole, he ran assessing fingers over the cut on his cheek.

He decided to leave it be. It was a small wound and not worth the energy to repair.

“You’re Loki, aren’t you?”

The words were dropped quietly. Loki could hear the doubt in her words and turned.

“Of course,” Loki said.

The girl’s fist clenched. Loki watched, amused, as she made up her mind on whether or not to strike him. He smiled even wider as Jane made her hand relax. Smart girl.

“What do you want with me?” She asked instead.

Jane’s mouth was a thin line - anger being used to hide fear. Her face was blotchy still from crying, the salt of it streaking her cheeks. Her clothes were dirty from crouching in the destroyed building, her hair a disarray. Beneath that superficiality, though, she was undeniably beautiful.

“You truly don’t realize what value you hold to Thor, do you?” Loki asked. “What I want with you, Jane Foster, is simply a small degree of cooperation.”

Loki raised a hand to stave off her protest.

“You can wait patiently or I can tie you down. The end result is unchanged to me. Which would you prefer?”

Again, her fingers flexed with imagined violence. At length, though, she pressed her back to the wall behind her and settled in to glower at him.

Loki smirked. He drew his hands down his body and reshaped his flesh into more familiar patterns. He summoned and formed his armor around himself. The time for subterfuge was over – Loki stood as himself.
Well.

He stood as the pale-skinned Asgardian Thor would recognize.

Loki had not imagined the shock and horror in Thor’s eyes when he had seen Loki for the Jotun he was. What a twisted sort of pleasure it had been to have that side of Thor at last revealed, to see that veneer of fraternal love stripped away.

Loki looked down at his pale hands and did not dwell on his desire to hide what he was once more.

He reached with his magic.

Odin had bound Loki to Thor and Loki had bound Thor to him. It was a twice-done bond and even broken the frayed ends were visible still for a time, if a person knew how to look.

Loki found the ragged answering half to his tether. Thor was too far away to pull the strands but not so distant that Loki couldn’t exert some influence on his flight path.

He wondered if this was what it felt like to summon Mjolnir.

But perhaps not. The tool on the other side of this bond was by no means as tractable.

“What are you going to do?” Jane asked. “What exactly do you think I will be… ‘cooperating’ with?”

Loki considered her. So much willfulness packed into such a lithe frame.

“So eager to protest already. I imagine the easiest way to get your help would be to simply ask for the opposite of what I wish.”

That earned a glare, as it was expected to.

Loki crossed the space and seized her head tightly between his fingers. She squeaked in alarm and dug her nails hard into his wrists, flailing and struggling. He paid it no mind.

It had been a complicated spell to suss out. But Loki was nothing if not patient for the things that mattered to him. Nothing if not detail oriented.

This was not a spell so easily broken and Loki applied it with thoroughness and care. Jane Foster thrashed beneath him. The spell was indeed painful.

When at last he released her she slumped to the ground, panting and shaking. Pitiful little thing.

Loki turned his attention back to the tether.

He had chosen a location Thor would find familiar. The Tower’s owner was busy elsewhere and he should remain busy for a good while longer by Loki’s estimate.

Thor drew nearer. It was only a few moments more before the speck of him was visible on the horizon. Loki watched his path veer towards the Tower of Thor’s own doing, Good.

The broken spell would fade completely in a few hours more. Loki released it.

Thor’s arrival on the rooftop was accompanied with a crackling of lightning. The heated arcs radiated from Thor’s hammer and matched his brother’s furious mien. The stone surface of the roof cracked under Thor’s feet as he landed.
Thor’s hair was matted with ice and his skirt had ripped from the wind at some point. He looked wild.

The skin across the bridge of Thor’s nose, across his cheek and up to his temple was dark and wrinkled. It was a perfect impression of Loki’s thumb, heel and first two fingers burned into Thor’s face, circling his left eye.

Loki’s gaze fixed there – at this mark he’d left on Thor.

Loki was torn somewhere between vicious pride and mortified regret.

“Stand away from her!” Thor bellowed at him, glittering hammer raised in clear warning.

Loki casually looked across the roof at where Jane Foster still sat.

“I am standing away from her,” He pointed out.

“Thor?” Jane’s voice was pitched with relief and bemusement. Thor really did make an atrocious woman. Jane took a few tentative steps in Thor’s direction. The both of them looked to Loki.

Loki snorted and sat down on the ledge. He would allow them a moment.

The lightning flickered and ceased as Jane ran to Thor. The hammer wasn’t released but shifted to a looser grip as Thor swept Jane up in an embrace.

Loki folded his hands and watched them.

Trapped in his Asgardian cell Loki had spent hours exploring Jane’s mind. She truly was a marvel. It would almost be interesting to try to teach her magic. Loki felt sure she would be able to understand the basics in only a few decades.

Beneath his interest in her intellect there had also been the trove of Jane’s thoughts for Thor. The memories and hopes and… all-too vivid fantasies. There was no doubt in Loki’s mind that Jane’s love for Thor was not borne of ambition for his wealth or his throne.

Thor had his face buried in Jane’s hair, his hands around her possibly too tight for Jane’s mortal body, for all that she did not protest. Thor drew back to kiss her and the answering ardor and affection there was unmistakable.

Loki gave them a moment but when that moment stretched Loki took it upon himself to refocus Thor’s attention.

He had the stairwell door open when Mjolnir clanged it shut. It was only the predictability of the response and his own reflexes that saved Loki’s fingertips.

“I would be more careful, Thor,” Loki drawled. The hammer snapped back into Thor’s palm and the blond’s attention once more fixed on Loki. “After all,” Loki continued, “It would be a shame to disfigure such a lovely creature.” He waved a hand at Jane.

Thor’s eyes narrowed, his brow folding into puzzlement.

“What?” Jane asked. Thor had put his body between them but Jane edged around to look at Loki full on.

“Any harm done, returned doubled,” Loki said, rolling a hand in Jane’s direction.
“Odin’s spell?” Thor asked, confusion still plain. The expression did not well suit the feminine tilt of his features.

Loki brought his hands up and flicked the knuckles of his own left index finger hard enough to sting.

Jane twitched in surprise.

Loki flicked his fingers again. And once more.

“Stop!” Jane hissed, shaking her hand out.

“A repetition of Odin’s spell,” Loki said to Thor. “A refrain.”

“What have you done?” Thor demanded, although there was no more confusion on Thor’s face. The handprint, Loki decided, really emphasized the anger that surfaced once more. He mused on how much more ferocious Thor would be in battle now for that mark.

“Is it not obvious?” Loki asked. Jane’s mouth had a grim set and Loki turned his gaze to meet hers.

“I’m a hostage,” She said.

Loki spread his hands in agreement but said: “Incentive. You’re an incentive.”

“This is how you’d buy my silence for your treachery,” Thor snarled.

“I have no desire to harm your Jane or see her harmed, and the same is true of my own person. We’ll soon return to Asgard and when we do I thought it best to have some assurance your words would not have me thrown back in that cell.”

“My words will not be all that speaks against your actions,” Thor said.

Loki stepped away from the door and came to stand in front of Thor, giving him a disdainful look when Thor tensed with palpable mistrust. There were a number of reasons for Thor to distrust Loki – his Jotun heritage was only the smallest part of that.

Loki touched his fingers to Thor’s temple just at the edge of the burn.

The skin was marred but it wasn’t a wound. It was a scar. Loki reached with his magic but there was nothing he could heal.

Loki closed his eyes and swept his hands down Thor anyway.

If there was, perhaps, an apology in the unprompted way Loki reshaped Thor back into his masculine body, it went unvoiced.

He stepped away from Thor when he had finished.

Jane touched Thor’s waist. Thor rolled Mjolnir in his palm and summoned his armor to himself. Loki obligingly dissolved the dress.

This was better, Loki thought; the two of them facing each other in familiar forms.

“An illusion can be layered on. It is a mark easily hidden.”

“It will deceive no one for long,” Thor replied. “And what would you have me say for all else that
“The staff was destroyed, I have aided your allies, I have even brought you to your lady Jane. What harm was done, in truth?”

“You killed! You severed magics the Allfather put in place, you have hidden us from Heimdall’s gaze, delayed and indulged when we were charged with a purpose… Loki, how can you ask what harm was done?”

“Delayed and indulged?” Loki repeated, letting incredulity seep into his voice. “Indeed, it was an indulgence to free your comrades and aid in their successes. Perhaps our task could have been completed more swiftly had I not lingered or influenced as I did.”

“As for breaking the binding or dropping that overreaching fool in the cold... I would say I did only what was necessary.”

Thor’s fingers flexed on the hammer.

“Do you truly deny that I was wrong to kill him? Jane Foster,” Loki switched his focus to the girl. “What would you have done with John Meggs had you been given a chance? How would you have answered what he did to you? What he did to so many people? What he would have kept doing without any hesitation or regret?”

Jane took a step back from him. Her mouth had gone back to being that tight, displeased line.

Loki smiled, showing too many teeth.

“Enough,” Thor told him shortly. He shifted Mjolnir in his fingers again – a tell of his uncertainty.

Loki subsided.

“You will not return us to Asgard until I agree, will you?” Thor asked.

He turned away before Loki could respond. The answer was obvious.

As Loki had done, Thor took a moment to stare down at the churning motion of Midgardians going about their lives.

“You’d be leaving already?” Jane asked. She went to stand beside Thor, her hand once more reaching up and finding Thor’s waist. He brought an arm around her.

“I must.”

“Of course,” Loki said, interrupting their small exchange. They looked at him. “Nothing says I need only bring the two of us, Thor. I’m sure your lady would quite enjoy seeing Asgard. Perhaps our healers may even attend to her mind.”
They were the both of them watching him carefully once more.

“What say you, Thor?” Loki dropped his voice into a cajoling tone. It was a transparent temptation. Thor would see that for what it was, and yet… and yet.

It was something Thor might want badly enough to bend for, Loki thought.

“The Bifrost may still be barred but my ways are flexible enough to take three. Would you like that, Jane Foster? To come with Thor and know the splendor of his home?”

Jane, though, had an expression painting her face that Loki had a hard time parsing.

He raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“The Bifrost was being barred by a suppression array I designed,” Jane said.

“I know, and I do not fault you for it Jane,” Thor reassured. “What your hands crafted was done against your will.”

“No,” Jane said, but shook her head. “Well, yes, but that’s not what I’m saying. What I’m saying is that before I left the lab, I destroyed the equipment maintaining the array.”

Oh.

Loki’s mind raced and he kept his face blank.

That was… both unexpected and unfortunate.

“Heimdall!” Jane shouted. Loki startled. Oh, that clever little mortal.

Loki had hidden himself and Thor from Heimdall’s gaze. Jane Foster was an oversight.

Loki moved forward to rectify that.

When the golden column of the Bifrost swept the three of them up (a heartbeat before he'd closed the distance to her), Loki couldn’t honestly say that he was surprised.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure why, but I had *such* ferocious writer's block while working on this chapter. There was supposed to be a whole nother section dealing with SHIELD here, but I figured as late as it is I'd better post what I had and work on the rest in the next chapter. Sorry about that!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

With apologies to CartoonCrusader and Cutycat, to whom I absolutely lied about how long it was going to take me to get this chapter out. :/ Sorry!

Carol Danvers didn’t recognize the man on the other side of the video call. A quick glance at everyone else told her she was alone in that.

Stark had wired up a laptop Agent Romanov had ‘borrowed’ from the departing SHIELD entourage, doing something to run it through the Iron Patriot helmet. Rhodey had forfeited it very grudgingly.

Agent Hill had been moved downstairs. She’d been hit by at least two darts and the woman was deeply asleep. Carol had spent a few minutes feeling her pulse. Hill was fine - just out of it for the time being.

Romanov was sitting on the floor and letting the wall behind her take most of her weight. She looked like she was on the verge of unconsciousness and Carol was surprised she wasn’t there already. She was impressed with the agent’s resistance to what had to be pretty powerful tranquilizers.

Rogers, by contrast, looked like it was taking every ounce of his willpower to stay in the room. He was pacing and fidgety; his attention kept getting drawn back to the window. Carol wasn’t sure why. It didn’t strike her as paranoia of another attack.

Rhodes was leaning against her and their suits clicked metallically whenever either of them shifted. The adrenaline from the fight was beginning to wear off and she was glad to have him there.

The man on the screen – presumably Nick Fury – had the same bearing of every hardened SO Carol had ever worked with. Which mostly translated to him looking pissed off and under-cafeinated.

“Good timing on that override,” Stark said, fake smile fixed on his face. “This would have gotten ugly in another few minutes.”

“Things already got too ugly,” Fury rebutted flatly. He could have been talking about the bodies SHIELD had taken with them but Carol didn’t think that was all he was referring to.

Stark nodded and sucked in his cheeks, agreeing.

“How do I know you’re really you?” Stark asked.

Fury gave him a resigned look. He brought a couple of fingers up to his eye and held open the lid, visibly touching the surface and moving the tip of his finger.

“Oh ew!” Stark barked. “Ew ew ew that can’t be sanitary! Is that what happened to the other eye?”

Fury glared.
“He’s not wearing a contact, Stark,” Rhodey said, exasperation audible.


Fury’s mouth took on an even unhappier tilt.

“I’ll check with the retrieval team. The orders were to bring her in unharmed, Stark.”

Stark swallowed visibly but bounced his eyebrows in a show of insouciance.

“Good to know.”

“I’m going to send you something,” Fury said, tone shifting into command once more. “And I need you to get to work on it right away.”

Stark inhaled to reply but Fury talked over him.

“Take a look and let me know how quickly you can get in this system. As payment, I’m sending you the program we’ve been using to shut down Jarvis.”

Stark visibly bristled and Fury raised an eyebrow. Stark nodded (mostly to himself, Carol thought), and did something on the keyboard – a flurry of deft fingers that Carol didn’t try to follow. He rose from the seat he’d appropriated in front of the laptop and closed the Iron Man helmet with a series of clicks. His body language made it pretty evident he was reviewing what Fury had sent in his HUD.

Romanov slid into the vacated seat. Carol twitched slightly – she hadn’t noticed Romanov standing up or crossing the room.

“Sir. Agent Barton,” Romanov said, and only that.

“He was out of the loop and en route to deal with a Code Green. With any luck, he’s with Banner.”

Romanov nodded.

“The reporters? Was that him?”

Carol thought Fury’s face was a stone wall in answer to that but Romanov apparently read confirmation in it. She let out an angry breath.

“Where’s Hill?”

Romanov flicked her fingers, indicating the side of the room. At Fury’s frown, she elaborated.

“Tranqued. Otherwise unharmed.”

“Good. Have her call me as soon as she comes around.”

“Son of a bitch,” Stark’s voice came from the helmet, incredulous and impressed. The helmet retracted.

“Whoever did the security on this deserves a raise. It’s beautiful.”

“Can you get into it?”

Stark gave Fury a condescending look.
“Give me ten minutes.”
*
*
*
The world resolved into the familiar gleaming curves of the Bifrost chamber. Jane’s hand had found its way to his waist again and Thor closed his fingers around hers.

She was flushed with excitement from the Bifrost but she held herself in check, keeping her eyes on Loki.

Loki, who had been reaching for Jane (to hide her in spells, no doubt) before the Bifrost was activated, stood within arm’s reach.

Thor watched emotions dance across his face – so many different expressions within the scant seconds it took for Heimdall to make his presence known. Loki flicked his fingers at Thor and Thor felt a soft shiver against his cheek.

Loki had cast an illusion over the handprint.

“Welcome back,” Heimdall said in his low rumble. He stepped down from the dais, orange gaze lingering on Loki for a long moment before it moved to Jane. Thor realized that from where he’d been standing, he might not have seen the mark before it was hidden.

“Jane Foster,” Heimdall continued. “Welcome to Asgard.”

“You must be Heimdall, right?” Jane asked, still a bit breathless.

“I must be.” Heimdall smiled.

“You have good timing,” Jane said.

And, all at once, a plan formed in Thor’s head.

There were so many different paths that these next few moments could take and only one that Thor could see ending with Jane unharmed.

“Indeed,” Heimdall continued. “It would not have been long before Midgard’s SHIELD joined us.”

Heimdall blinked with a not-quite neutral countenance and looked from Thor to Loki again.

“Come, Jane – Heimdall has not yet said, but I am sure the king would wish to see us.”

“It is so, my prince,” Heimdall agreed. He lifted his sword from the Bifrost’s gears and sheathed it. Thor raised an eyebrow despite himself. Heimdall did not often carry that sword. “I am to escort you.” The watcher continued.

“How nice,” Loki murmured. The jibe, Thor could see, was a reflex. The skin around Loki’s eyes and mouth was tight with wariness. He met Thor’s gaze again as they started to walk the bridge into the city. Thor smiled at him, which only made the wariness deepen, before he turned his back and looped an arm around Jane’s shoulders.
“Do you see there?” He asked, pointing out some distance where the water was rippling. Jane followed his hand and squinted. As they watched, gefken breached the surface and flapped silkily in the air for a moment before plunging back with barely a splash.

Jane’s shoulders did not relax under his hand, her attention more on Loki behind her than on the glittering spectacle.

He worried, but hoped it was obvious to his clever Jane that there were words that could not be exchanged under their current scrutiny.

Odin’s guards met them halfway down the bridge. They ringed Loki, mostly ignoring Thor but Thor wasn’t unaware that he was not exactly unattended at the moment.

Loki, to his credit, said nothing.

Their arrival at the palace was neither subtle nor entirely warm. People had not seen Loki since his last return from Midgard. While he wasn’t wearing chains this time it wasn’t unnotice that they were being escorted by guards.

Thor glanced back once to see Loki smiling and waving. Heimdall was scowling faintly behind him. Thor was fairly sure Heimdall hadn’t entirely forgiven Loki for encasing him in ice. The watcher would not be easily swayed on this nor, Thor thought, should he be.

Odin watched them from his seat as they entered the throne room. Most of the guards stayed at the doors.

“My king,” Heimdall called out. “Prince Thor and Loki are returned from Midgard. This is-”

“Jane Foster,” Odin interrupted. Jane let out a little huff of surprise. Had she thought Thor had not spoken of her?

Odin tilted his head at her and narrowed his eye. Jane made an awkward sort of curtsey, desperately out of place here. Thor felt an upswelling of love.

Odin’s attention moved to Loki.

“Allfather,” Loki said, back rigidly straight and hands clasped loosely. The smile hadn’t faded but neither did it reach Loki’s eyes. “We return victorious.”

“You hid yourself from Heimdall’s gaze.”

“It was a necessary measure,” Thor interrupted. Loki closed his mouth and waved a hand at him to continue, hiding well how surprised Thor knew him to be.

“Necessary,” Odin repeated, not quite a question.

Thor nodded. Odin waved a dismissal and Heimdall left without further word.

Thor made his hands stay relaxed at his sides as he spoke.

“As with the reshaping of our forms, those magics Loki employed were done to hide us. The spell was carefully considered and deemed necessary to our purpose. We know not the extent of Midgard’s observation – it seemed wisest to be prudent.”

Odin was quiet for a long moment.
“Tell me what happened on Midgard. Why was the bond tying you broken?”

Loki glanced at Thor.

“We were divided while searching for the scepter,” Thor said. “Loki took a path of retreat through a mirror. The distance between us in that moment was such that the bond broke but, as you can see, Loki was not long from my side.”

Odin scoffed. He rubbed a thin hand over his eye.

“Thor, if you hide the truth of this…” Odin trailed off warningly.

“I am not lying,” Thor lied.

Abruptly, Odin brought the butt of Gungnir down against the stones. A flash of white magic blasted outwards and Thor again felt a shiver against his cheek.

Odin's eye widened at the sight of the mark on Thor's face.

“I admit,” Odin said, “Not the illusion I was expecting. And yet not one that doesn't warrant answer nonetheless.”

“‘The illusion you were expecting?’” Thor asked.

Loki sniffed.

“He believed you to be conjured.”

“And now I believe you to be scarred,” Odin said. “Or does the answer for this too come as readily?”

Thor touched the mark on his cheek.

“We quarreled,” Thor said. “As we often do. The mark was hidden because I did not feel it should have reflected on the aid Loki granted on this quest. The scepter could not have been destroyed without him, nor could I have assured the safety of my friends and shieldbrothers, nor could Asgard have been protected from those forces that one day may have followed the scepter’s connection to my brother. Loki was the means by which all of this was accomplished and I would not have had an ill-considered moment of brotherly dispute be evidence by which he could be condemned upon his return here.”

Odin didn’t look convinced, but he did settle back on the throne.

“Tell me what transpired on Midgard.”

*  
*  
*  

Jane listened to Thor speak. She had dearly missed the low, accented roll of his voice.

Asgard was… unbelievable. The architecture was amazing and at times defied her understanding
of physics. She would love to take a closer look at the floating buildings. The palace was golden
and ostentatious in a way that would probably make an art student cream. And the Bifrost! The
internal mechanism – she would have to ask Thor to take her back there, and…

And all of this was Jane’s way of distracting herself from how goddamn scared she still was.

Loki was standing not ten feet away from her and it wasn’t nearly far enough for Jane’s peace of
mind.

Not that distance would make this any better.

She listened to Thor tell his father what he and Loki had gotten up to on Earth and didn’t doubt in
the slightest that there were omissions.

Thor was lying to Odin.

He was lying because if he told the truth, Loki would be punished, and if Loki was punished Jane
would suffer. That was probably what he'd wanted to say to her - trust me, because I'm going to
spin a story and want you to go along with it. Jane should have recognized the look from her
association with Darcy.

“The scepter was unguarded?” Odin asked.

“It was guarded well,” Thor denied. “Loki cast a spell to make us unseen and in such guise we
crept past the guard.”

Loki was watching Thor. Jane didn’t know Loki well but thought she could read… admiration,
almost, on his face as Thor continued to spin his story.

“How was the staff destroyed?”

In Norse mythology, Loki was punished by having his mouth stitched shut. In another story, he
was bound with the entrails of his son while a serpent dripped venom into his eyes.

Any damage inflicted returned double. Jane couldn’t repress a shudder.

“Jane Foster,” Odin said, and the unexpectedness of it made her jump.

“Yes sir… um… king,” Jane answered. How was she supposed to address Odin? She smoothed a
hand down her filthy clothes. This was surreal.

Thor smiled at her but it wasn’t as reassuring as she thought he’d like it to be. He darted his eyes
from hers to Loki and back, and the meaning was clear enough.

“Tell me what you saw,” Odin ordered simply.

Jane very carefully considered what she was going to say.

“I wasn’t with them for any of… that,” She said, and waved a hand to encompass the story Thor
had been telling.

“No, but you did have a mental link to the mortal commanding the scepter, did you not?”

She pressed her lips tightly together.

“Father,” Thor objected.
“No, Thor, it’s fine,” Jane said. It wasn’t, but she’d gone to grad school. Talking about her extremely recent mental rape couldn’t be worse than-

Christ, why did she have to think if it in those terms? In her head, that phrase, ‘mental rape,’ got stuck going around and around, echoing.

Jane swallowed dryly and her throat audibly clicked.

“What do you want to know?” She asked, keeping her chin up and her voice steady.

“What did the connection allow you to see? Could you see how the scepter was destroyed?”

“No,” She shook her head. “No, I didn't see that.”

Odin hummed a disappointed sound but Thor and Loki both relaxed a little at her words.

Jane looked at Loki, then at Thor, and made a decision.

“I didn't see the scepter being destroyed because Loki had already killed Meggs prior to that. This would have been just before he kidnapped me.”

Jane's mouth filled with blood as Loki bit his lip. Jane didn't let it stop her. She spat the mouthful out onto the golden floor and continued.

“He said there was a spell, Odin's spell, he said this was a refrain. Any harm done to him gets done to me.”

Fuck, her mouth hurt. She brought a hand up to swipe at the blood threading down her chin. Thor was moving to Loki, face a stormcloud.

Jane turned and hissed at Loki, anger bubbling out of her and superseding her fear. There was a right thing to do here and letting Loki get away with what he'd done wasn't it.

“I am not a damsel in distress, and I will not be a hostage!”

Loki released his bottom lip a moment before another flash of magic shot from Odin's spear.

Thor faltered to a stop as the shaft of light pierced Loki.

The illusion faltered and fell away.

Thor's head whipped around the throne-room.

He must have cast the spell right when Thor started telling his story, Jane thought.

Loki was gone.

Jane licked at her bleeding lip and tried hard not to think about what that angry Norse god was probably about to do to her.
Bruce’s chest was still looking ragged by the time Clint got him to Stark Tower.

It had healed, though, a bit. The open, burnt cracks crisscrossing his skin were shallower, less red maybe.

Aside from that Bruce was looking pale. He’d gone a bit clammy by the time Clint finally dumped him on a couch.

He’d had to pick the lock to get in.

Well, he said ‘pick.’ The doors on Stark Tower weren’t exactly lock-and-key. But he had gotten them inside and that was what had to count.

“Jarvis?” Clint asked, not for the first time.

He’d been in Stark Tower only once and briefly, rounding up Loki, but he’d listened to Coulson bitch about the AI that ran the building often enough that he was surprised by the lack of it now.

“Something’s wrong with his system,” Bruce mumbled. The man’s eyes were closed and Clint took him to be a few seconds away from falling asleep. “Silverton turned him off earlier.”

Clint frowned.

“The override should have only lasted a quarter hour. Jarvis should be turned back on by now,” He said, unsettled.

Bruce had fallen asleep and didn’t answer.

The couch, in fairness to him, did look really, really comfortable.

Clint was badly tempted to lie down too but knew that if he stopped moving, he’d start thinking.

“First aid,” He muttered, taking in Bruce’s chest again.

The first floor of Stark Tower was all sleek reception and polished, fancy surfaces. Clint had gotten them into the building through the maintenance entrance in the back and even that had been an exercise in espionage. The security on the Tower was really quite impressive.

Getting Bruce inside unnoticed had been tricky, but not the impossible feat Clint was expecting. Getting the both of them to the 73rd floor of the Tower had been the kind of excellence that Clint would brag about in other circumstances.

It hadn't been easily done, but that he'd been able to do it at all made him worry that it was a trap. Surely Jarvis must be wired through every back door and crevice of this place.

But, no alarm sounded.

Clint carried Bruce's mostly-dead weight to the door of the suite and, after a few moments to get through the lock, unloaded them both inside without incident.

He closed the door behind them and wasn't sure if he felt relieved.
Aside from the penthouse, the top floors of the Tower were devoted to R&D, but the section below them was technically residential. The top floor he knew belong to Stark himself. This, though, was clearly an unoccupied suite.

Clint figured the security would be better in the penthouse but also figured it was more likely someone would look there.

For now, they were hiding and recovering. An anonymous suite in Stark Tower was a better place than most to do that. The 73rd floor was a sprawling thing – half a dozen bedrooms and each of them larger than most houses Clint had lived in.

Clint found a first aid kit under the sink in the opulent bathroom off of the main den. He felt a rush of gratitude to whomever had stocked this floor.

He eyed the shower as he stood back up.

Bruce would definitely be asleep for a while, Clint thought. He could take a minute.

He laid his weapons belt on the sink carefully before all but tearing off the rest of the uniform his WSC masters had given him. He kicked the pile into the corner viciously.

He probably had some gamma-infected blood somewhere on his person – better to get that off before it found an open wound. A shower would also help clear his mind and relax some of his tension.

Clint was still rattling justifications around in his head when he stepped under the hot spray.

Clint bent his head and let the water wash over his neck and back. Dust and grime were still swirling away down the drain when he opened his eyes minutes later.

He thought about that first shower after the Chitauri battle. He hadn’t gotten around to it until the morning afterwards – had crawled into bed with Natasha still filthy from battle. That she hadn’t kicked him out was the surest sign of her affection.

That would have been a good moment to tell him that Coulson was dead. As exhausted as he’d been, it could only have hurt so much more.

Clint hoped Natasha was okay. He needed to yell at her about that.

The water washed clear and Clint levered himself back upright. He worked up a lather with the expensive soap and ran traitorously shaky hands over his body.

“Stop it,” He hissed angrily. His mind had never listened to him, though. That was most of the problem.

Clint's fingers found the scar he’d inflicted on himself raking a hot poker over his thigh. A test to his loyalty while they were experimenting with the staff. The mark was ugly, twisted and puckered like burn scars always tended to be. Clint wanted to tear it off his body. He could deal with the larger mess that violence would make. At least that would be something he'd done of his own volition.

He forced his fingers to move on.

He washed his chest, his arms, between his legs. He thought about the first WSC bastard to take control of him. Jason. The man would have happily fucked Clint if he could have gotten away with
it – Clint remembered the thoughts and desires echoing across that bond in his mind. It had only been that fear of reprimand that had saved Clint. The immorality hadn't been a factor. And puppet that he'd been, Clint wouldn't have even tried to fight.

Clint threw the washcloth down with an ugly snarl. He remembered the feel of his fingers around Jason's neck when the bond was broken. He'd been disoriented and overwhelmed with horror and nausea. If he'd been just a bit more put-together, if he'd squeezed just a bit harder, he could have crushed that fucker's trachea.

That he hadn't was something Clint bitterly regretted.

He took a long, deep breath, pulling hot and humid air into his lungs.

He exhaled slowly and made himself think about... he fished for anything unrelated. Iceland. The op he'd had in Iceland back in '06. It had been a vacation pretending to be a surveillance mission and it had been one of the most relaxing weeks of Clint's life.

He thought about swimming in those crystal blue waters and eating so much smoked lamb and kleina that he actually managed to put on a bit of fat. Natasha had mocked him endlessly for it when he'd gotten back at the end of that op.

After a few minutes, Clint switched off the shower with some reluctance. The water pressure in the Tower really was something else.

He almost felt human when he climbed out a moment later. Still furious and sick - that wasn't going to go away for a while - but at least able to focus.

There were fluffy white bath robes hanging on the hooks. Clint eyed them and then the dirty specialist gear he'd been wearing. He decided on the robe. He and Bruce were laying low and if he needed to fight a lack of armor wouldn’t stop him from drawing his bow.

He looped his weapons belt around the robe and wrapped his dripping hair up in with a couple of twists to a towel. He probably looked ridiculous but ask Clint if he gave a fuck.

He retrieved the first aid kit and walked back to the den.

Bruce Banner wasn’t alone.

The gun was out of Clint’s belt and pointed at the intruder instantly.

The person was so unexpected that Clint very nearly fired before the face registered.

When it did, he had to blink twice, hard.

“Clint.”

Clint didn’t lower the gun and Coulson, glancing at it, didn’t look particularly surprised or upset by that decision. Coulson kept his arms away from his body, showing Clint his empty hands.

Coulson looked like he was waiting for Clint to say something. He’d be waiting a while.

“Pepper is here, too.” Coulson shrugged. “It really is a bit too easy to get into the Tower while carrying an incapacitated person. I should talk to Stark about that.”

“What happened to Potts?” Clint’s gun hadn’t wavered. The concern that Coulson was the enemy was oddly a whole lot more real than the shock of Coulson still being alive.
“She’s fine,” Coulson soothed immediately. “The WSC was trying to capture her to use as leverage against Stark. I interfered. She was hit with a tranquilizer but other than that, I promise, she’s alright.”

Clint flicked his eyes to the hallway behind Coulson leading off to the first wing of bedrooms.

Coulson nodded.

“I didn’t know which side you were on,” He said. "I came out here to make an assessment.”

Clint felt an unexpected rush of anger at the words.

“How can you possibly know I won’t shoot you?”

“You came here obviously looking for a safehouse, which you wouldn’t be doing if you were still part of a mental network. You brought Banner with you. I can’t imagine a WSC operative doing anything but handing him over if they got him in such a compromised state. And for a third thing,” Coulson tipped his head to the side and gave Clint a once-over, “You took a shower. While essentially alone in an unexplored place. It was an emotional reaction. How did you get out? Natasha?”

"I haven't seen her since...No, it wasn't Natasha. I got headbutted."

Clint slowly lowered his pistol.

“Coulson?” He asked.

“Hi.”

“You absolute dick,” Clint said, still in that embarrassingly wondering tone of voice. He shook his head. “What would you have done if I wasn't... myself?”

“I've given the signal and Pepper would have shot you,” Coulson said simply.

Clint caught the movement in the reflection off a drink tumbler and brought his gun up and around to point at the figure in the hallway behind him.

It was Pepper, of course, and being surprised by a civilian was something Clint would be embarrassed about later. Pepper was armed with a tranq gun. She was holding it like she knew how to use it. Maybe she did. Probably she did, all things considered.

But the firearm was also being held low at her side. As Pepper walked into the room, she set it down on the table.

“Agent Barton,” She greeted.

Clint flicked his eyes to Phil, then back.

“Miss Potts.”

Was that shrapnel in her necklace?

“I've enacted an override on Jarvis. The basic security on the Tower is still in place, though,” She said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

Clint walked over to Bruce. He didn't like it that he hadn't woken up during all of this. He
remembered the man being a bit more tightly-wound.

Bruce was fine, though, and stirred when Clint's fingers went to check the pulse in his neck. Well, not fine, exactly, but at least not worse.

Clint turned back to Phil.

“Why would you override Jarvis? And for that matter,” His grip on the pistol tightened, “It's a hell of a coincidence that we both picked the Tower for a place to hide.”

Coulson raised a calm eyebrow.

“I'd mentioned it to you once that I thought the Tower would make a great bolt-hole.”

“You did?” Clint didn't remember that. “When?”

“At the New Mexico facility.” Coulson frowned. “You really just came here by chance?”

“It was Bruce's idea,” Clint started to gesture towards the man with his gun, thought better of it, and holstered it instead.

“Great minds...” Coulson huffed.

“Why is Jarvis turned off?”

Pepper had retrieved the first aid kit and had it open now on one of the sweeping marble counters. She answered without looking up.

“Because we don't know what's happened to Tony.”

She grabbed a pair of gloves (smart of her, Clint thought), antiseptic, bandages and a roll of gauze and walked over to Bruce. Clint knew she must be concerned about Stark and was impressed with how little she showed it.

“Hi Pepper,” Bruce sighed as she bent down next to him.

“What happened to you?” Pepper asked.

There was a friendship there, Clint realized. Must have happened after the Battle. Come to think of it, Banner did leave with Stark.

“Gamma cannon. I wouldn't recommend it,” He said.

Pepper's face made the suggestion of a smile.

She looked back over at them.

“I'm thinking the odds are pretty high that both of you are probably better at patching someone up than me.” She waved the gloves at them. Clint took them. Coulson probably was better at this than he was but Bruce didn't know Coulson.

It looked like whatever healing process Bruce's body had going for it was slowing down. The cracked skin didn't look any better than the last time Clint had checked. Clint snapped on the gloves and gave Bruce an exaggerated wink before he started gently cleaning the skin. Bruce rolled his eyes and tried not to wince. Clint didn't doubt that this was painful.
Pepper retreated around the other side of the couch. The high back on the thing gave them some
privacy, which Clint was sure Bruce appreciated.

“Who are you calling?” He heard Pepper ask. A glance up showed Coulson frowning at a cell
phone.

“Sitwell. He should have gotten in touch with me by now.”

It was clear the phone on the other end was ringing.

Coulson looked over at Clint.

Clint didn't know what expression he was wearing, but Coulson froze. A pause, and then without
comment Coulson slowly lowered the phone and disconnected.

Clint swallowed hard and got back to work. Bruce's eyes were hazy with pain but Clint could see
sympathy there as well. He ignored it and started unwrapping gauze.

Pepper, not catching the by-play, asked; “Phil?”

Coulson smiled at her and shook his head.

“I'm sure he'll get back to me when he can,” Coulson soothed. “Pepper, is there a computer I could
use that isn't connected to Jarvis? I have other contacts I can reach out to.”

“Fury,” Clint heard himself say.

He looked up and found Coulson and Pepper both looking at him with interest.

“I...probably should have mentioned this sooner. Fury's back. Thor and Loki showed up - in drag
- and stole the scepter. Fury says they broke it. Either way, that... bond. It's broken for everyone.”

Phil was giving him an incredulous look.

Clint shrugged.

“It slipped my mind. Besides, do you really have the high ground on withholding information, sir?”
He asked pointedly.

The look Coulson gave him said they weren't done with that conversation, but he did turn his
attention back to his cell phone.

*

*

Nick Fury allowed himself a deep breath after he hung up. The rest of the Avengers team was
already en route back to Stark Tower. That should be a fun reunion, he thought.

It was almost indescribably nice to have Coulson back as his ally. Phil really wasn't ever allowed to
die – Nick had even put it in his contract, much to the man's amusement.
Nick leaned against the console and continued waiting for his next call to connect.

The larger-than-life screens the WSC had installed on the helicarrier for these meetings were ridiculous. Fury had seen the budget and there really wasn’t any justifying them. Ostensibly, having these people stare down at him like gods on high was meant as an intimidation tool. A reminder that although Fury was the director of SHIELD, SHIELD didn’t get the final say.

The screens flickered (only twenty-seven minutes late for the requested meeting time; another transparent intimidation tactic) and came to life.

Andrea Silverton’s screen was, of course, blank.

Fury let his eye linger on that empty screen for a long beat, making sure the other WSC representatives saw him doing it. The screen would have been blank anyway with Silverton acting as director on-site but it had been hours since the Code Green. Word of what happened there would have made its way to them by now, Nick was sure.

He smiled.

“Councilmembers,” He greeted.

There was a collective pause where none of them seemed quite sure what to do with him. Fury went on.

“Let me first of all extend my condolences for your colleague.” He nodded his head at the blank screen. None of them looked surprised by the news. Good, Nick thought. All on the same page.

“Why have you called this meeting, Fury?” The representative from China, Jun Cho, asked. It was a little short of being a demand.

Fury hadn’t been sure how much the WSC knew about what Silverton had been doing here. He hadn’t known if they were in the know about Loki’s scepter, about the mind control and human experiments.

There was, after all, a chance that Silverton had gone rogue and had been acting without the WSC’s knowledge or approval. If that was the case, Fury had an archive of footage to send them.

But the ripple of unease that followed the question left him certain they’d known exactly what had been going on.

Fury shook his head once. He wasn’t disappointed – he hadn’t really expected anything else. Getting them to admit to it might take some work but Fury knew what he’d seen.

He touched his ear comm.

“Do it,” He said simply. He ignored the reply.

“Director?” That was Matthias Klein, the rep from Germany.

“Am I?” Fury asked, ignoring the question. “What with the displacement and then this recent loss,” He gestured at the blank screen again, “It’s good to know directorship of SHIELD has reverted back to me.”

Matthias looked like he wanted to say something else, so Fury continued.

“As advice, I wouldn’t recommend trying to replace me like that again.”
“Are you threatening us?” Matthias demanded. He was the oldest member of the WSC and, with Silverton dead, the one Fury had predicted the most push-back from.

“Just stating a fact,” Fury denied. “Aside from the phenomenally poor judgment displayed by my temporary successor, you should know that Asgard has reclaimed the scepter. I won't be so easy to replace a second time.”

“Asgard? How?” Alex Braxton, Washington D.C., had only been with the WSC for five years. Prior to that he’d been a political adviser. Fury did not particularly like him.

“From what I’ve gathered, they sent a party here for the express purpose of retrieving it. As it wasn’t exactly ours and given how the scepter was put to use while it was here, I haven’t bothered organizing a response.”

“Are they still on-planet?” Matthias asked.

That son of a bitch actually thought they could retrieve it.

“No,” He said firmly, although he didn’t actually know.

Matthias’ eyes narrowed to calculating slits.

“What is the plan here, Fury?” He asked.

“I’m curious about how much involvement you’ll admit to having in the actions taken by Silverton and Meggs,” He said, not really answering the question.

Jun Cho leaned forward.

“Director Fury, we sent councilmembers to have a more hands-on involvement in SHIELD following your unwillingness to follow orders during the attack on New York.”

“I understand that,” Fury nodded. “What I want to know is if the WSC approved your representative’s use of alien technology to mentally enslave SHIELD personnel. Last I checked, non-consenting human experimentation was… frowned upon.”

Braxton put his political, apologetic smile in place and nodded.

“What happened with the Chitauri staff wasn’t sanctioned,” He assured. It was probably technically true - Fury didn’t doubt there was a lack of official record behind their actions. “It’s clear now that a sufficient structure for communication was lacking between headquarters and our local agents. It's an oversight that will be corrected with the next representatives we send.”

“I’m sorry,” Fury allowed himself an incredulous glare. “‘Next representatives?’”

“Given recent events, SHIELD should have its directorship – temporarily, at least – surrendered to the Council. You have just been through a traumatic and compromising situation, Fury. You should be assessed before you’re put back in charge of SHIELD.”


“Be that as it may –” Matthias started.

“I found it interesting that you used the word ‘oversight’ for what happened with Meggs and Silverton,” Fury interrupted. “I did want to know how the Council planned to address the abuse of power exhibited by its representatives, and since your answer is just to send more representatives, I
think it’s time the power balance itself got addressed.”

Oh, did that get their attention.

“SHIELD and the WSC are working for a common goal: Global preservation. But SHIELD cannot work without a certain level of autonomy – the last couple of years have more than proved that to me. And since the Council is refusing to allow that autonomy, I’ve enlisted some help in acquiring it.”

“Fury?” Braxton asked. “What have you done?”

“As we speak, there is a very ambitious, very motivated and very recently upgraded AI running through your systems. The WSC’s funds are being redirected to SHIELD, where they will remain until we can verify that there aren’t any other… oversights.”

“Director Fury!” Matthias barked.

“In addition to that redirect, I notice that you’re down a member.” He waved a hand at Silverton’s blank screen again. “I recommend Maria Hill as a replacement. I think having someone capable of working with SHIELD instead of just working to control it would be mutually beneficial. Because I do recognize that the WSC is working towards the greater good. Think of this as me putting a much-needed checks and balances system in place.”

They were all three talking now, arguing, yelling. Fury ignored them.

“I’ll give you a few days to think about it,” He said and disconnected the video conference.

Fury looked at the too-large screens for a long moment.

He smiled.
Odin shouted for the guards but Thor barely heard him, all his attention focused on Jane, on the fear painting her face and speaking from her eyes.

Why, why, why had she done that?

He enclosed her in his arms, pulling her tight to his body and pressed his face to the crown of her head, breathing in her hair. He felt her fluttering heart and the tension in her limbs.

Of course he understood why she’d done it. As clever as she was, she was still more brave than wise.

“You humble me,” He whispered against her temple, and meant it. It was hazard enough to invoke Loki’s ire for an Aesir – for this little human girl to do so and at such a disadvantage was truly remarkable.

Fresh pain lanced through Thor as he turned his thoughts Loki. The chance Odin had given him was well and truly squandered. He would be returned to his cell (at best) and this flight would only be a delay to Loki’s return to punishment.

Jane let out a weak laugh.

“Bravery is the kindest word for stupidity,” She said, and her inflection made Thor think the words to borrowed from someone. Loki, perhaps? She had spent time alone with him and it sounded like something his brother would say.

Jane flinched, suddenly and violently. She squeaked in pain and flailed from his grasp, clutching at her wrist.

The knuckles of her right hand were split and bleeding. Blood ribboned over her finger and dripped to the floor as they both watched, tense as drawn bowstrings, for further harm to come.

“I think,” Jane said when a moment had passed. She swallowed before she continued. “I think he punched a wall.”

Thor nodded slowly and felt the immediate tension in his body fade into a weary dread. Nothing followed, but how long until Loki lashed out again?

Thor could not trust him, not in this.

A glitter of magical light caught his eye and he turned his head to look at Odin.

Odin’s hands swept through the air, gathering the strands of light and sculpting a shape that Thor knew well.

“Father?” He said thinly, warily.

Loki’s heart sat in Odin’s palm, the glowing simulacrum pulsing gently with its counterpart’s beating.

Odin didn’t answer. Thor could not read Odin’s expression for the reflected light bouncing in his eye.
“Father, what are you doing?”

Odin turned his hand gently, watching as errant strands of light curled around his fingers, into the creases of his knuckles, over the heel of his palm.

“What do you imagine the price will be, Thor, if I let him go?”

At last Odin looked up, and his features were grim. The words came slow and heavy, each clearly measured before being given voice.

For Thor, this calm was more frightening than fury. This was not Odin reacting out of rage. There was careful consideration behind each syllable - a king making a decision, not a father.

Odin curled his thumb up and gently swept it over the curved swell of the heart. The shifting golden strands shivered and twitched at the touch – a shuddering of the flesh at the too-intimate contact. Beside him, Jane’s breath stuttered and her hand flew to her chest.

“Do not do this,” Thor turned from her back to Odin and begged, throat too tight to make the words a demand. “Do not do this,” He repeated, louder.

“What should I do instead?” Odin asked. “Loki is proud, and powerful, and believes himself wronged. In my hand, I hold the power to stop him.” He looked briefly at Jane, then back at Thor. “Do you pretend that Loki will spare your lady? That he will not seek to retaliate against her, against me, against Asgard?”

“You would kill my brother and Jane both for the possibility of harm!”

Odin shook his head slowly but not in disagreement.

“Loki has left me with no other safe course.”

“Father, please, please-“

“My love for him does not make him trustworthy, nor can it justify the risk. Loki has murdered thousands and shows no remorse, no indication that he would hesitate to do so again. He cannot be left free and he has refused to be imprisoned or tempered. I am left no choice.”

Odin regarded Loki’s heart.

“Jane Foster, I cannot ask your forgiveness for this, although I believe I have, at least, your understanding. Truly, I am sorry. I see no other way.”

Beside him, Jane was pale, her breath coming fast. Her hand found Thor’s and the grip of her fingers was tight with unmistakable fear. Her knuckles started bleeding again but she seemed unaware of it.

She looked at Thor and tears broke over her white cheeks. She inhaled to speak. Thor drew Mjolnir to hand, ready to turn on his father and stop this. Odin closed his eye and curled his fingers.

“Stop!” Loki shouted.

He appeared from nothing, stumbling to his knees with his hand pressed to his chest.

The breath Thor let out was so full of relief it was nearly painful.

Thor caught Jane as she crumpled, her face an ashen mirror of Loki’s. Odin had not squeezed
fatally but the pressure had obviously had an effect. She lowered herself to sit and waved Thor away when he moved to help.

Loki’s eyes were fixed on the floor but there was no mistaking the anger and defeat in the set of his shoulders. If Odin had been surprised by his appearance, he showed no lingering sign of it.

The magic melted back into Odin’s palm. He raised the now-empty hand, summoning chains that pushed up from the ground and snaked their way around Loki’s wrists and ankles.

Loki jerked his hand at the first touch of the metal, but stilled, allowing them to close and seal his magic.

“Loki,” Odin said quietly. “You have broken the conditions of this probation and broken, too, the faith I had placed in your willingness to atone.”

“Is this how I am to be repaid?” Loki demanded, turning to Odin, then to Thor. “The good I did you and your friends went beyond what was needed for the task, and well you know it. Yet because I resisted being thrown back in a cell, I am nearly punished with death. Odinson, will you say nothing?”

The patronymic was an angry hiss.

Thor looked at Loki and felt a wealth of sadness.

“Your help was valuable. You aided me and my allies, I will not deny that or keep it silent. And had you stopped there, I would have…” He looked to Odin briefly. “I do not know what I would have done.”

Beside him, Jane shifted. Thor knew he did not need to explain the rest and said instead; “I love you, Loki. Dearly you are loved to me, but love alone is not an equal to trust. It is a lesson you have taught me many times and very well.”

Thor found that he could not hold Loki’s gaze and dropped his eyes to the heavy chains around Loki’s wrists.

“Were that it could be different, Loki, but this punishment is one you brought upon yourself.”

“It must give you great comfort to believe that,” Loki replied, bitter and quiet.

Even now, he would not see the wrong of his actions. Thor shook his head and turned to Jane. Color was coming back to her face and her breathing was easier. The momentary peril her heart had undergone would do her no lasting harm, Thor felt sure.

He stroked her hair lovingly and she tangled her fingers in his.

“You will be taken back to your cells, stripped of your magics and left until such at time as I see fit to sentence you in full.” Odin glanced at Thor and continued. “If the binding does not break the hold you hold on Jane Foster, know that any further injury evoked on her person as a result of your treachery shall not go unpunished. Am I understood?”

Loki made no move to indicate he’d heard a single word Odin had said. The disappointment on Odin’s face was unmistakable as he waved for the guards to come forward.

“Thank you,” Jane said.
At that, Loki’s head did snap up. His eyes blazed venomously as they met Jane’s. The glare shifted to a tight smile and Loki released a short, mirthless laugh.

Loki held his tongue as the guards collected him, and, though Thor called his name, Loki did not turn back around.

*

*

*

They’d flown back in a quinjet to accommodate the various people they’d added to the group.

Rogers nearly hadn’t agreed to come, wanting to stay and search for (from what Jim had gathered) the sniper. Agent Romanov had pulled Rogers aside and had a long, hissed conversation with him that culminated in the man relenting and joining them onboard.

There were a lot of questions Jim wanted to ask him – it really wasn’t every day one got face time with Captain America – but he bit them back. The Captain looked exhausted in a more-than-body way and anxious to boot. Not the best time to fanboy at him, he decided.

Halfway back, Jarvis apparently reconnected to the Tower. Tony had slammed his helmet back down without further explanation and spent the next twenty minutes pantomiming an impressive array of emotions. Jim hadn’t even been aware the connection to the Tower had been lost. He worried about what that meant.

Jim made a note to mention to Tony at some point that just because they couldn’t hear what was being said when he locked himself inside the suit like that, didn’t mean he wasn’t still giving onlookers a show. He had enough experience reading Tony’s body language to read relief, anger and hurt. It was hard to say which emotion was winning.

When the helmet retracted, Tony’s cheeks were flushed and he had a wild look about him.

“Tony?” He asked.

Tony pulled a hand through his hair.

“Pepper’s fine,” He said. He inhaled to say something, then let the breath out.

Surprisingly, he looked at Rogers.

The Captain looked up at him with tentative curiosity, as though braced for bad news. Jim totally understood that.

“I just had a conversation with Coulson,” Tony said, shaking his head like he didn’t believe what he was saying.

It didn’t look like the words registered for a second. When they did, the captain audibly drew in a breath.

“Come again?” Romanov asked, leaning forward in her seat and locking an intent gaze on Tony.

“Agent Agent. Apparently he’s not so much dead as the other thing.”

Coulson.
Right, that was why Jim knew the name.

Well shit. No wonder Tony was upset.

Rogers didn’t look like he knew what to say to that. Tony’s attention latched on Romanov.

“You didn’t know?”

“I didn’t know,” She affirmed immediately. Tony gave her a lingering look, like he wasn’t sure if he believed her.

She glared at him.

“I’ve been out of the fold and hiding in Russia for months. I did not know.”

She licked her lips and nodded.

“It’s good, though. It’s very, very good. It’ll be someone else in Barton’s court once we get him back.”

“Ah,” Tony said, shifting slightly. “Barton’s also at the Tower. With Bruce.”

Natasha’s hands clenched and Tony held up his gauntleted hands in a placating way.

“They’re both fine. Well, Bruce is more… fine…ish. He took a blast with the new line of Hulkbuster. He’s banged up but sleeping it off.” Tony rubbed a hand over his mouth. “Reason 258 I’m really glad I didn’t get mind whammied,” He muttered.

Jim followed that line of thought and wholeheartedly agreed. If Tony had had a hand in the Hulkbuster redesign, Bruce probably wouldn’t have walked away from it.

Tony stepped out of the suit, leaving the metal husk of it planted in the hanger, and walked over to plop into the open seat next to Rogers.

Tony sighed.

“Too much to hope that there are minibars on the quinjet, right?”

Rogers just gave him a look.

“I’m glad Coulson is alive. Although… I think I need to have some words with Fury,” The Captain said quietly. Tony sniffed in agreement.

It struck Jim as odd to see Tony sitting so close to Rogers. From Tony’s description of the Chitauri incident, he hadn’t thought the two men had exactly hit it off, and it wasn’t like they’d spent much time together since then. But neither man looked disturbed at having so little space between them.

Rhodey contemplated stepping out of his suit, too, and taking the seat across from them.

But, no; he’d wait until they got to the Tower. There was still a ways to go and he didn’t quite trust that the fight was really over yet.
Coulson allowed Clint twenty minutes to himself before following him up to the roof. The archer had retreated as soon as Banner had been bandaged up and Coulson knew him well enough to read the hemmed-in anxiety driving him to seek out open air.

Coulson probably should have come after him sooner, he realized, seeing the twisted remains of a quinjet as soon as he stepped out onto the roof.

There were long, ragged holes torn along the metal sides, large enough for a man to walk through. It looked like something Iron Man would do. Phil wondered if that had been what had happened.

A quick glance around confirmed that Clint was probably inside the jet. There were places to hide up here, but not many, and Phil didn’t think Clint would be making that effort just now.

He stepped in through the torn metal and cringed at the smell that greeted him.

Jasper’s body was laid out on the cargo floor. Cause of death had to be the bloody puncture wound through the man’s neck.

“He enabled Steve Rogers’ escape from the lab,” Clint said quietly. The archer was leaning against the ramp door, fingers loosely wrapped around the shaft of an arrow. His fingertips were stained the rust color of drying blood.

“The order came through to stop them. Rogers was ahead of him and the only shot I had would’ve been through his temple. Non-actionable; Meggs wanted Rogers alive. So I disabled his escort, thinking it would delay Rogers in taking off long enough for us to scramble a response.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Coulson said firmly. Sitwell had been a good friend and this hurt, it undeniably hurt to see the brutal proof that Jas was dead. But Clint needed him a lot more than Sitwell did right now.

“I know,” Clint said blankly. He spun the arrow in his fingers. He must have pulled it from Sitwell’s body not long before Phil had joined him because the blood on the shaft was still wet enough to catch the light.

Clint let the arrow drop and wiped his fingers on the bathrobe he was still wearing, leaving an obscene dark smear along the white fabric.

Clint realized what he’d done and looked at the sullied spot with obvious disgust, holding his still-bloodied fingers up and away from his body.

“I should probably change.”
“It’s not your best look,” Phil agreed gently. Aside from the absurdity of the outfit it was too cold out here to be wearing that little.

Clint glanced up and met Phil’s eyes for the first time since Phil had stepped in here.

“I’m glad you’re not dead,” Clint said. Jasper had been the last person to say that to him and Coulson hid his wince, smiling instead.

“Me too.”

Clint tipped his head, then, listening. The archer frowned and drew a gun from the weapons belt incongruously holding his bathrobe closed.

It took Phil a moment before he heard the approaching quinjet too.

He and Clint exchanged a glance and by mutual agreement shifted back in the wreck. They were expecting the rest of the Avengers team but better to be cautious.

There wasn’t an abundance of room on the roof with the awkward angle the wreck had been left at, and the incoming jet confidently set down near enough to reach out through the hole and touch. Coulson wondered who the pilot was. Probably Natasha, he thought. Or possibly Hill.

Phil withdrew and held his own gun low and ready, but holstered it with relief a moment later when, after hearing the other ramp come down, he heard the familiar sound of Tony Stark bitching.

“I just fixed this roof,” He groused.

“Stop complaining,” Natasha replied. Something in Phil’s chest relaxed a bit at hearing her voice and beside him, he saw some of the tension bleed out of Clint’s shoulders too.

Phil exchanged another look with Clint and then walked out onto the roof.

A repulsor got pointed in his direction immediately.

“Agent!” Stark said, surprised. He had his helmet tucked under his arm.

The Iron Patriot suit didn’t move for a beat, but then the arm lowered and the faceplate retracted.

“Colonel Rhodes,” Phil greeted pleasantly.

“Agent Coulson, I presume,” The man replied. The Colonel’s eyebrows rose when he caught sight of Clint.

The archer really did need to change out of the bathrobe.

Natasha swept by the two mech-suited men and stared hard at him and Clint.

“Hi Natasha,” Phil said.

She gave him a look that promised dire and extensive words once they were in private, then flicked her attention wholly to Clint.

“Do you remember that op where I got into a fire fight while wearing a swimsuit?” She asked.

Clint’s brow wrinkled and he nodded.
“You’re not allowed to make fun of me for it anymore,” She said simply and stepped around Phil to grab Clint’s fluffy white shoulder.

“That’s fair,” He agreed easily. Clint bent his head to rest on Natasha’s shoulder. It wasn’t quite a hug but the affection was nonetheless obvious.

More people had filtered out of the quinjet. Maria Hill and a woman Phil didn’t recognize. Steve Rogers, looking alarmingly pale and unwell.

“Let’s move this inside, yeah?” Stark suggested and turned to walk through his disassembly rig without waiting for a response.

*

*

*

Pepper met him as soon as the elevator doors opened, rushing into his arms with a heartfelt moan of relief.

Tony squeezed her back just as hard, pressing her against him so tightly that the twisted pieces of shrapnel in her necklace pressed into his skin and had to be pressing into hers as well.

Neither moved for a long moment.

When Tony pulled back from the embrace it was only to bend down and kiss her.

“Do you remember what I said about you two looking like seals fighting over a grape?” Rhodes asked. “I did mean it, you know.”

Tony broke the kiss to scowl over at him. Pepper only smiled.

“Where’s Bruce?” Tony asked.

A hand gingerly popped up from the far side of the couch and waved before falling back down.

Tony came around to get a look at him.

“Yeeesh,” Tony hissed, sucking air through his teeth. “That is not good.” It was kind of an understatement.

“Yeah,” Bruce agreed. “It’s gonna be a while before the big guy can come out to play.”

“You’d be surprised at how very far down my list that is in terms of reasons why I care,” Tony replied with a bit of an edge.

Bruce looked terrible. His torso was wrapped in bandages but the swollen edges of the crackling wound snaked up visibly over his shoulders. Tony’s eyes traced the pattern in the wound and extrapolated from the faint bleed-through in the bandages. He could almost see the dispersal pattern from the gamma blast. They probably could have focused the damage more if they’d-

Tony shook his head and forced himself to stop.

Bruce was looking back at him with something too shrewd in his eyes, and Tony made himself look away.
“Welcome to Stark Tower,” He said to the group. This suite was large enough that even with all ten of them occupying the space it didn’t feel cramped.

“Do you have a secure line?” Hill asked.

“Jarvis can escort you to my office.”

“Yes, sir,” Jarvis intoned. “If you’ll kindly return to the elevator, I can take you up now.”

“Thanks.”

“Hill,” Tony called before the doors closed. Knowing him, Jarvis kept them open until he said his piece. “Any snooping and Jarvis is authorized to let loose the neurotoxin.”

Jarvis closed the door.

Tony considered the rag-tag bunch left behind. Nearly everyone was visibly bruised and most were wavering. He was exhausted himself and ready for this conflict to be over.

“Order food, Jarvis,” He ordered. “See if that shawarma place delivers.”

The suite’s extensive first aid kit was on the couch next to Bruce.

The next ten minutes passed in quiet exchanges asking for tape or procuring ice.

“Stay,” Tony found himself saying. Eight pairs of eyes looked at him with varying levels of curiosity and confusion. “I mean,” He waved a hand. “I have the space and it’d probably be better to keep the team together while the whole SHIELD…thing… is sorted out.”

Pepper smiled at him and Tony relaxed, knowing the impulse had been the right one to follow.

“Thank you,” Steve said and gave Tony a look Tony didn’t really know how to parse. The surprised gratitude on Barton’s face was a lot easier to read.

Tony busied himself with his tablet, then, not wanting this to turn into a scene.

Coulson made a call not long after that and, not hiding the conversation for them, quietly asked for a team to recover the wrecked quinjet and Jasper Sitwell’s body.

When the food arrived, Tony was clearly not the only one surprised by the depth of his hunger. The table in this suite only sat six so most of them were eating on the couch in complete disregard for the expensive carpet. Bruce fell asleep with his half-eaten wrap on a plate on the cushion beside him, the scientist apparently unbothered by the noise the lot of them made moving around. Rogers tucked into the spiced meat like he’d been starving and Tony was uncomfortably reminded of the weeks of bloodletting the soldier had just been through on top of the fight itself.

He was pretty sure he had some bottles of orange juice in his lab fridge. Tony hauled himself back to his feet to go get them and it hit him, stupidly, halfway through crossing the kitchen, that it had been more than a week since his last panic attack.

He detoured and walked through the foyer to the side of the suite that had a balcony, stepping out into the brisk New York air.

Tony looked up at the vast, open sky and didn’t feel his heart clenching with fear. His pulse maybe ran a little faster. There was still a certain level of anxiety when he thought about falling from that portal. But it wasn’t a spiraling panic. The soft murmur of familiar voices drifted out to him and
the Tony found that the sky wasn’t overwhelming.

Tony smirked ruefully to himself and lowered his gaze to the horizon, letting his eyes wander over the jutting angles of New York’s architecture. He heard the door slide open behind him and Pepper’s hand slid around his waist.

“Alright?” She asked, kissing his ear.

“Yeah,” Tony answered. “Yeah, Pep, I’m fine.”

*

*

*

That night, Steve woke with a strangled scream in his throat, mind and body both rejecting the feeling of being flat on his back. He was out of the bed and across the room before he’d really woken up, his hip painfully banging into the corner of the expensive wooden bureau.

Steve pressed his back against the wall and panted. He rubbed a hand over his face. His skin was clammy with cold sweat.

The lights in the room faded on, the transition gentle and leaving the room in a soft glow of light that wasn’t out of place at this late hour.

“Captain Rogers,” Jarvis said quietly. “It is 3:01 a.m. on January 27th. You are in Manhattan, in Stark Tower, suite 7403. Would you like me to raise the lights more?”

Steve took a deep breath and let it out shakily. His shoulders and chest were tight and aching with unrelieved tension.

“Jarvis, does Stark have a gym? A… is there a punching bag around here?”

“There is a gym seven floors down; however, the boxing equipment is not calibrated for your strength.”

Steve nodded, unsurprised but nonetheless disappointed.

The closet was stocked with a variety of clothes in his size – it had been a surprisingly thoughtful gesture on Stark’s part, given that the travel bag Steve had been living out of was long gone and his clothes with it. That the man had been able to procure it all in under an hour was a little unsettling. Taking advantage of Stark’s wealth didn’t sit well with Steve and he debating making a point to pay for everything once he found his feet again.

He didn’t like being beholden, but Tony would probably read it as an insult or rejection. Steve had thanked him for the gifts and for opening his home to them, and maybe that really was all the other man wanted in return for his generosity.

Steve changed into something loose and warm; sweatpants and a hoodie. He put on the expensive-looking running shoes that he also found there.

If he couldn’t take his stress out on a punching bag, maybe a few laps around Manhattan would help settle him.

Steve felt eyes on him the moment he stepped foot outside the Tower. Fury, when he had joined
them at the Tower for a thorough debriefing, had told him to expect it. Until the dust had settled, Steve was going to have to put up with a security detail.

It had been an embarrassment, apparently, that Captain America had been kidnapped so easily.

The air was frigid and the cold slap of it felt oddly good burning its way into his lungs. The snow had accumulated into dirty mounds lining the street but the sidewalks, at least, were mostly cleared. Steve started off at a jog and found himself running outright not long after, keeping an eye out for ice.

He wished his SHIELD escort luck and wondered, offhandedly, how exactly they had planned to keep up with him.

The city was subdued at this hour and the few people Steve passed either ignored him, intent on their own purposes, or cried out in drunken fascination at seeing his speed.

In a grimier part of the city, Steve’s eyes caught the glint of a hypodermic needle on the ground in a side-street and his pace faltered with the sudden rush of nausea, remembering in too-vivid detail how it had felt to have his blood being methodically pulled from his body.

It only took a second for him to pass the street but he was still shivering with the memory nearly ten blocks later.

He stepped into the small shelter of a bus stop and sat on the bench, breath leaving him in plush white puffs.

Steve was aware of a person heading in his direction, their footsteps professional and nearly silent. He registered their body language in the corner of his eye – tense, but not aggressive - and sighed, not in the mood to get fussed at by his SHIELD escort.

Steve looked up at him and felt his heart skip a beat.

Bucky stared back levelly, his face an emotionless mask that Steve couldn’t read. His cheeks were starting to show stubble – he looked even more like his old self now than he had in that too-brief moment in the cabin.

Steve swallowed dryly. Bucky watched the movement of his throat before meeting Steve’s eyes again.

Steve stood, body cold where it had been in contact with the frozen bench. He kept the rise controlled and slow, afraid that a too-quick movement would send his friend back into hiding.

“Bucky?” He said, dropping the word carefully into the still air between them.

For a moment, Bucky didn’t react at all, didn’t so much as blink.

Then, slightly, Bucky turned his head and nodded; not in agreement, Steve realized after a beat, but to indicate the SHIELD agents standing on a rooftop behind him.

“They’re… protecting me. I was kidnapped a few months ago,” Steve explained. Would Bucky remember his own stint of being a prisoner under Zola? It would be a piece of his past, but maybe it would be better if that was something still forgotten.

Steve looked at Bucky and felt longing like an acid eating at his stomach. This – having his best friend right there and indefinably out of reach – was like the torment of Tantalus.
Some of the desperation must have been visible, some slight shift in the mood that changed the balance, because Bucky was turning away.

Steve launched forward and grabbed his shoulder before he could think twice on it, entirely ignoring everything Natasha had told him on how to handle this.

Bucky spun and caught him by the neck in a metal grip, slamming him back against the bus stop partition hard enough to send splintering cracks through the plexiglass.

Bucky released him immediately. His metal fingers grasped at the air in front of Steve and Steve could read uncertainty in every line of him now. There was fear and confusion in his eyes and Steve pitied him intensely.

“I’m not gonna hurt you, Buck,” Steve promised. He resisted the urge to rub at his neck, keeping his hands instead out at his sides, non-threatening.

“Steve,” Bucky said, as if tasting the word. His brow wrinkled and he inhaled to speak again.

The dart that blossomed on Bucky’s throat made them both cry out.

With a snarl, Bucky ripped the little barb out and started running. Steve went after him, unwilling to let Bucky out of his sight now that he was back.

Bucky threw a knife at him that cut a path through Steve’s left bicep. They hadn’t gone far but already Bucky’s steps were faltering. Steve didn’t know what he’d been hit with but it was obviously powerful. It was only half a block later that Bucky slid into an unwilling collapse. The clouds of his breath were ragged with the man’s obvious desire to keep fighting, but it only took a few more seconds for unconsciousness to overtake him.

Footsteps behind him made Steve jerk around, furious and fully prepared to rip his SHIELD detail apart for this move.

Natasha looked back at him neutrally. She was holding the bulky tranq gun low, making it clear that she had fired the shot.

Keeping her eye contact with Steve, Natasha brought her wrist comm up to her mouth and informed SHIELD to move in; target acquired and neutralized.

“Target,” Steve repeated, voice tight and low. He took a step backwards, his back to Bucky and the wall. If SHIELD wanted Bucky they would go through him to do it.

“Would ‘subject’ have been friendly?” Natasha asked, raising an eyebrow at Steve’s defensiveness. “We’re not imprisoning him, Steve. Or, well, not in the traditional sense.” He bristled and she shook her head, giving him a quelling look.

“I know what it’s like to come down from brain washing,” She said. “I know he’s your best friend, Steve, but I also know what his state of mind is like right now. He needs help. We intend to give it.”

“You didn’t need to do it like this,” Steve replied with flat anger. There wasn’t a chance Bucky wouldn’t read this as betrayal.

“He threw you into a wall, Rogers,” She said bluntly. Natasha’s eyes flicked to the fresh blood trailing down Steve’s arm. The cut wasn’t shallow but it wasn’t urgent either.
Steve clenched his jaw but didn’t give the ground.

“Fury knows what he’s doing,” Natasha continued. “And we don’t have any intention of keeping the process or his progress from you. You’re coming with us. It’s obvious that he remembers bits and pieces of you and that’s going to help.”

She took a step towards him and put her hand on his uninjured shoulder.

“We’re going to do everything we can to help him, Steve. Please, trust me. But we can’t leave him alone, not like this. Right now, he’s too dangerous and unpredictable. And you know that.”

Steve turned away from her, ignoring the sleek black SHIELD van that had pulled up, and regarded Bucky’s slumped, tangled form. The silver of his mechanical fingers caught the dim light and, clenched as they were, the metal curves looked much more like weapons than part of a hand.

Steve didn’t answer. But he didn’t fight when the SHIELD team stepped around him and, with professional care, picked Bucky up and strapped him to a gurney. Steve swallowed hard at the unpleasant association.

The unfamiliar dark curtain of Bucky’s hair fell across his eyes as he was loaded into the van.

Steve climbed in as well without waiting for permission and Natasha followed him.

The van shifted into motion, taking them to SHIELD and whatever they had planned for Bucky next.

“We’re going to get him back,” Steve said, brushing the hair off of Bucky’s face. There was a twist to his words that Natasha correctly read as a question.

“It won’t be easy. It won’t be painless and it won’t be perfect.” She closed her fingers around his and squeezed. “But we’re going to get him back.”

*

*

*

Nick Fury closed Andrea Silverton’s file and settled back in his desk chair with a long sigh.

It annoyed him that he hadn’t shot the woman himself.

And it infuriated him that she’d died in an effort to protect Earth. She hadn’t deserved to go out in a blaze of glory and, in an admittedly petty way, he hated her even more for not dying right.

He considered the list of active ops scrolling over his screen, populating with real-time updates. As it was, he was having a hard time properly caring.

Nick Fury didn’t like to dwell on the past. It tended to interfere with planning for the future, and yet it was impossible to let the last few months go.

What Silverton and Meggs had taken from him was unforgivable and massive; too personal and too thorough for him to think about at any length without feeling sick.

Nick had been captured before. He had been tortured before. He himself had done unforgivable things.
It didn’t even come close to this.

Nick clenched his fists and worked to control his breathing, recognizing the futile rage running through him and slowly shifting it aside. Barton had survived this twice, he reminded himself. Nick made himself focus on the scrolling ops again.

A tap at his door had his eye flicking to the hallway’s camera feed. Coulson.

Nick keyed the unlock code.

“Director,” Coulson greeted. He was wearing his dark gray and blue striped tie, which Nick read to mean his colleague was feeling ambitious today. The bulge of files tucked under Coulson’s arm did nothing to disabuse the history of that particular sartorial choice.

“Dare I ask?” Nick said, nodding at the stack.

“The ops Silverton authorized and ordered during her control of SHIELD,” Coulson said, laying most of the files down on Fury’s desk. “The full report on John Meggs,” He continued, laying down another folder.

“Confirmed dead?” Nick asked.

Coulson shook his head in a way that wasn’t quite ‘no.’ “We haven’t found the body, but… I suppose you would say ‘mind witness’ reports were consistent.”

Two more folders were laid down on the desk.

“Which brings me to this,” Coulson said, holding up the last folder.

Nick raised an eyebrow.

“The full statement and research notes from Doctor Gant, plus the details on everything SHIELD recovered from the lab in Phoenix.”

Coulson handed the folder over and Nick flicked it open, curious.

“Why did they kidnap Rogers?” He asked, already skimming. “What was the end goal?”

Coulson shifted his weight to his other foot and licked his lips.

“The… connection the team had had with Loki during the Chitauri invasion was damaged, in some way, when Loki was taken back to Asgard. The group-think was still in place but they’d lost most of their autonomy. They were working sort of like an RC with momentum and battery life, but receiving an incomplete signal from the controller. So, they were acting on plans based on the last signal they’d received.”

Nick waited.

“They were still working on orders to conquer Earth?” He asked.

Coulson nodded.

“Doctor Gant was trying to recreate the Super Soldier Serum. They didn’t have the numbers to invade, so she was trying to make up in quality what they lacked in quantity. After all, if the Avengers team could manage to stop the Chitauri army, why couldn’t a similar team achieve the same?”
“Rogers in their custody, Thor off-planet, Barton imprisoned, Romanov branded a traitor, Banner hiding in India and Stark depowered after with the Extremis situation… if they’d succeeded in unlocking the formula back in December, I wonder how long it would have taken SHIELD to stop them,” Nick commented darkly.

“Which reminds me,” Coulson said. “Stark has some comments and concerns about the alterations to the helicarrier.”

“Our floating warship? Whyever would he take issue with that?” Nick rolled his eye, but then bent forward and laced his hands on his desk. “When the Avengers team was scattered, SHIELD, even… Even in the state that it was in, was the strongest tool Earth had in its defense.”

Coulson gave him an expectant look but Nick didn’t continue. He didn’t trust that a time wouldn’t come when having a warship would make the needed difference in a battle.

“Darcy Lewis,” Coulson said on an inhale, obviously changing the subject. Which Nick took to mean he didn’t agree with the decision but wouldn’t argue. “Has been getting more insistent in her attempts to contact SHIELD. She wants to know where Jane Foster is. Her body wasn’t recovered from the lab site and we had a bifrost event not long after that explosion. Given her connection to Thor and the fact that surveillance hasn’t caught so much as a trace of her, the best bet is that Jane Foster is on Asgard.”

“Which means she’s going to be staying on Asgard for the foreseeable future,” Nick finished.

The arrays were up and running again. Doctor Foster’s notes had been thorough and, while not many of the lab staff completely understood the theory of the device, monitoring the machine was relatively simple.

Earth was sealed again.

In this, Fury did agree with the Council. The potential for keeping an ally out didn’t outweigh the protection of keeping known enemies at bay.

“Should I debrief Ms. Lewis?” Coulson asked.

“How likely is she to cause a problem about it?”

“Hard to say. She’s… plucky.”

“Recruitable?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“Bring her in, then. As much as she worked with Foster, I’m sure she could be useful in the lab.”

Coulson’s expression hinted at amusement at that pronouncement but, again, the man held his tongue.

“Have I mentioned how much I missed that smug, quiet judgment of yours, Coulson?”

“And you, sir,” Coulson returned easily.

Nick smiled.

“How is Hill settling in with the WSC?” Coulson asked.
“As expected. The council members are distrustful and their cooperation is a bit lacking, but at the end of the day we both sleep easier with her there. How’s the new position sitting with you?” It was a very short list of people that Nick would allow to step in as Deputy Director. He was glad Coulson was back.

“People keep testing to see if I’m a life model decoy. They’re being subtle about it, but…” Coulson trailed off with a slight shrug.

“Are you disabusing them of the notion?”

“I wouldn’t want to bias their results.” Nick had missed Coulson’s sense of humor, too. “I have my eye on a couple of Agents that I’m training up to step in as Deputy Director if needed. I’ll still need to liaise with the Avengers team if we’re in a crisis. There are remarkably few people that everyone in that group trusts. Even fewer now, all things considered.”

Nick drummed his fingers over the Phoenix lab report.

“How are they doing?”

Coulson shifted into a parade rest, which meant the news could be better.

“Barnes is making good progress in recovery but Rogers is still walking around clearly in need of more sleep. Same goes for Barton. Romanov is helping him. Stark is Stark. Between the lot of them, there are seven different flavors of PTSD and an across-the-board unwillingness to get professional help for it.”

Coulson gave Nick a pointed look at that that Nick ignored.

“Stark made the right call in opening the Tower to them,” Coulson added softly. “It’s providing them all with some badly needed structure and support.”

“And if we’re attacked again?” Nick asked.

“They’ll rise to it,” Coulson said without hesitation.

Nick believed him.

*

*

*

Every morning when Jane woke up, she had to reorient herself. The bedroom she had in the palace was larger than her mother’s ranch house, and that wasn’t even taking into account the bathroom and closets.

Jane would have rather stayed with Thor but he’d made noises about propriety. It would, she’d realized, be pretty much the equivalent of spending the night in your boyfriend’s bedroom while staying at his parent’s house.

Not to say that it really stop them from spending any time together. When Thor finished with his princely duties he was back at her side with flattering enthusiasm.

The Bifrost had been sealed to Midgard again – Jane had made copious notes for the array and wasn’t very surprised to find that it had been reactivated. Still, even though she missed Earth, these
last few weeks had been the happiest of her life. Heimdall kept her up to date on what was happening and, with the peace of mind that gave her, Asgard started to feel like a very well earned vacation.

Jane didn’t let herself believe that she was trapped here.

The handprint on Thor’s face remained a dark scar despite the efforts of Asgard’s healers. It didn’t make Thor any less stupidly handsome – instead, the clearness of the handprint almost made it look like war paint. It made Thor look dangerous.

He touched it often, tracing the edges where the difference in skin texture was the most noticeable, and Jane knew that it wasn’t Thor’s vanity that kept drawing his fingers back there. For all that Loki was in the cells deep beneath Asgard’s palace his presence wasn’t ever far from Thor’s mind.

They were on the balcony outside Thor’s room, sprawled in a pile of pillows and blankets borrowed from his bed. Thor was quietly telling her the names of Asgard’s glittering stars. She was listening to the words but mostly she was just listening to the cadence of Thor’s voice.

Thor pointed at a white/blue smear of stars, leaning in and pressing against her side to line up her gaze. The evening air was a little cool and Thor was warm. Jane leaned back in greedily.

“That is the Laemir cluster. Supposedly it looks like a warrior throwing a spear but I think it looks more like a raven.”

Jane laughed softly.

“A raven? How?”

Thor gestured, tracing a shape. Jane shamelessly used the shift in his arm to snuggle closer.

“See, there? The bright ones on either side are the tips of the wings, and then those at the bottom are its claws. It’s swooping.” He mimed a bird with his hand.

Jane thought it looked more like the molecular structure for caffeine than either a raven or person, but kept the thought to herself. She wrinkled her nose at Thor and he grinned back.

He settled so that his head touched hers slightly, the both of them watching the stars in silence. It was comfortable and still somewhat surreal for Jane. Asgard was the kind of beautiful that she continually had trouble believing actually existed. The night sky didn’t do a thing to detract from that.

“Of course, Fandral would say it looks like a beautiful woman,” Thor murmured, quiet humor unmistakable in his voice. “But then he says that for all the other stars as well. And Volstagg would find a way to make the shape reflect the feast-hall of Valhallah.”

It should have been a sweet and relaxed moment, and for a few seconds it was.

But then she felt Thor shift.

Without looking at his face she could sense that his thoughts had taken a turn and wasn’t surprised when he brought his hand up to touch his scar.

Loki was in every one of Thor’s stories.

It was hard not to be jealous.
Loki had been a constant part of Thor’s life for hundreds and hundreds of years – since they were children - and then that closeness had been broken by such a hurtful betrayal. Jane knew she couldn’t really understand what Thor was going through. Not really. Thor and Loki had spent lifetimes as brothers and friends. It was an unfathomable length of time.

In a lot of ways, Jane thought Thor would probably have been less wounded had Loki merely died when he fell from the Bifrost. Loki’s unwillingness to see how Thor still loved him; Loki’s rejection of that love, had to hurt even more than an absence would have.

Jane tangled her fingers in Thor’s and did her best to let him know that she, at least, loved him.

“My brother-“ And that was another thing. Loki was always ‘my brother,’ now, as though Thor didn’t want to say the name or couldn’t bear to obfuscate the fraternal bond he still very much believed in. “-once convinced us that we could knock a star from the sky if we tried hard enough. We were very young at the time,” He demurred. “I was not yet worthy of Mjolnir, and my brother had yet to grow taller than my shoulder. Our realm was at peace and, being at peace, we were as bored as any boys might be.

“We stole a catapult, the two of us, and settled it upon the slant of a hill. My brother assured me that was the key; getting the angle right so that the stone could be launched upwards to jostle loose a star. We simply needed to wait for twilight when the stars came out.”

Thor made a rueful sound.

“It sounded so reasonable at the time. Even young his ability to charm logical thought into looking the other way was formidable. The first rock dislodged nothing, of course, but, well, obviously that was just because we had missed. We had adjusted the angle and the second stone loaded when Heimdall and the guards found us.”

“I can’t imagine they were happy with you,” Jane said, smiling.

“Indeed not, my lady. You see, while the first rock we launched hadn’t brought down a star, it did have a somewhat… ah, unintended consequence of crushing a fountain.”

“Oh no,”

Thor nodded grimly.

“Our father was… not well-pleased. We were mucking stables for three years to pay for reparation.”

He fell silent for a while.

“My brother later told me that his theory was correct; merely that his method was wrong. This was years upon years later and it surprised me to hear him speak of it at all. Our folly was something to be ashamed off and I had turned to him to say as much, but before the words had left me he stretched up his hand and plucked a star from the sky.”

Thor made a grasping motion at the stars and then opened his empty hand.

“It was a ball of light no bigger than a hail-stone, but the brightness of it… I could only look for a moment before I had to turn my eyes aside. And when I looked away, he threw it into the heavens once more.”

“An illusion?” She asked. It was the only explanation that made sense.
Thor made a non-committal sound.

“But… it had to have been,” She insisted. “Stars are enormous.”

Thor turned enough to meet her eye and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, smiling in a way that wasn’t agreement so much as a friendly unwillingness to argue.

Jane let him let it go, feeling oddly disoriented by the whole thing.

*

Loki glanced up when the door to the dungeon opened. The guards weren’t due to change for another two hours. A visitor. Loki smiled to himself, guessing, correctly, the identity of the person when the light sound of female footsteps echoed off the stone. He had wondered how long it would take her to find her way down here.


Jane Foster was an unfamiliar sight in the courtly garments. She was dressed like a royal consort which, Loki supposed, was true enough. He couldn’t help but smile at the way she kicked the skirt as she walked, unused as she was to anything so voluminous.

Loki himself was dressed in the common clothes of a prisoner. Had he access to his illusions he might have hidden his state. As it was, he settled for keeping his chin up and projecting a sense that this was exactly as he wished to appear.

Jane came to a stop not far beyond his cell.

“Have you tired of Thor so quickly? Or have you simply come to see for yourself the justice of Odin’s court?” Loki spread his hands to indicate the cell, keeping his tone light with straightforward inquiry.

Jane bit her lip and walked a bit closer to the dividing pane. That close, she could probably feel the energy in the magic-proof walls vibrating the air.

Curiously, Jane said nothing, instead taking a long minute to stare at him and presumably gather her thoughts. Loki tilted his head but made no move beyond that. His back was to the wall, not quite in the corner of cell. His pale, naked feet were stretched out before him and he knew his hair was limp and greasy with neglect. He turned back to the book in his lap.

“I don’t understand you,” Jane said at last.

Loki’s eyebrows flickered. His smile widened as he looked back up.

“You’re there in every one of Thor’s stories,” She continued quickly, pressing on, no doubt, to cut off whatever he would say. “Even when he doesn’t mention you. He thinks about you constantly.”

She gave him an irritated look.

“It’s obvious how much he cares about you; how much he loves you. I think he’d be more subtle
carrying a sign. And I don’t understand why you…” She released a frustrated breath and waved a hand at him.

Loki took a bit of offense at being summed up in a gesture. He let some of the pleasantness fall from his face.

“It is hardly a surprise that my reasoning is beyond you,” He scorned. “And if you truly believe you know the whole of Thor’s mind and character, you are a fool.”

Jane stiffened at that and Loki continued.

“You forget, Jane Foster,” He said and tapped his temple. “I have been in your mind. I have spent days exploring the crooks and crevices of your thoughts. I have seen in your memory every moment and word shared between you and that oaf of Asgard’s prince.”

Loki smiled.

“He is charming,” He said, and fluttered his eyelashes. “And a very charming liar.”

Jane’s expression took on a stubbornness that was well suited to a companion of Thor’s.

Loki spread his hands.

“When I say you do not know him, I am stating only the simple truth.”

“I know… that there’s a lot that I don’t know about him,” Jane said. “It hasn’t escaped my notice that he has a few years on me. Anyone that long-lived is going to have skeletons in their closet. But if you think I’m going to be shocked or surprised or feel any differently about him because of something he did decades ago, then you really underestimate us both.”

Loki drew his legs to his body and leaned forward, bracing his hands on his now-crooked knees.

“If you think he is any less worthy than me for a place in this cell, you are deluding yourself.”

“You killed people,” Jane said fiercely. “You-”

“Do you truly think Thor hasn’t?” Loki interrupted, anger flaring inside him. He pushed himself up and closed the space between them, pressing his clenched fist to the crackling wall. Jane retreated a step, still angry, still righteous, but frightened by him now.

“I have killed for battle strategy. I have killed in wars. Thor has killed because his pride was wounded and because of restlessness.”

Jane shook her head, denying it, but Loki slammed his fist against the wall, startling her into looking up.

“Has Thor told you about the upcoming Convergence? Or has he let you believe you are trapped here?”

Jane startled at that, clearly caught off guard.

“Oh course he’s told me,” She lied, and Loki grinned at her knowingly.

He could press and reveal the untruth and, meeting her eyes, he knew that she knew it.

“This was a mistake,” Jane said abruptly. She turned to go with a kick to her skirts. “I don’t know
what I was expecting.”

Loki watched her retreat nearly to the door before he pinched the back of his hand, hard.

Jane gasped and clutched her hand. Loki could see that she didn’t immediately realize what had happened, looking around as if something had struck her.

He could read the moment she realized. She turned back, glaring incredulously. Her still-held hand had a bright spot of color marring its pale flesh, but Loki hadn’t broken the skin. It was a small wound.

“Forgive me, please” He said, making his expression soften. “I did not want to leave our conversation that way.”

Loki smoothed his fingers over the back of his hand. A barely visible spot of color was blooming where he’d pinched himself.

“After all,” He said, crouching down so that he would be at her eye level when she came back to the cell. Jane Foster was a petite thing. “I have so much more to tell you.”

He was counting on her scientific mind, on the curiosity that ran through her like blood, to draw her back to him. Still, she hesitated, waiting for something more compelling before she decided to stay or go. She was angry at him for the pinch, but not so angry that she wouldn’t listen. Such a careful calculation and Loki hid his delight at seeing the little gambit succeed.

“Do you know what else I found when I looked into your mind?” He asked, teasing her interest. She firmed her mouth but Loki could see it for the show that it was. “Beyond the cloying half-formed nonsense you’d decided on about Thor, I cannot deny that you have a glittering intellect,” He flattered. It was no hardship to do so.

Loki considered the consequences of doing this and could not entirely hide his mirth. The cell was a temporary measure that Loki allowed for now. Let Asgard grow complacent of him. Loki was nothing if not patient and this promised to be entertaining.

“More than that, Jane, you have potential.”

“Potential for what?” She asked. She had, as he had thought she would, stepped closer.

Loki’s smile widened.

He wondered how long it would take to draw her completely from Thor’s side.

“Magic.”

*

*

*

Today had been a good day to be CEO of Stark Industries, Pepper thought, stepping out of the helicopter and onto the Tower’s landing pad. There were some expansion projects she wanted to take a look into, R&D had turned out excellent results for one of their larger clean energy projects, and SI had officially destroyed the last marketable piece of AIM.

The last hadn’t been necessary or even profitable, really. But sometimes the little things (or
medium-sized hostile take-overs) were important.

If Pepper had gotten petty satisfaction out of signing off on that last coffin nail, well. Who could blame her?

She was nearly to the roof-access door when she noticed an out-of-place shape; a silhouette perched on the ledged backlit by the setting sun.

“Clint?” She called over.

The silhouette turned, confirming the archer’s profile.

“Hey,” He said, for all the world acting as if this was a chance meeting and no, he hadn’t at all noticed the helicopter that had just landed thirty feet from him.

Pepper tilted her head and regarded him.

“I’m going to order Thai, I think, unless Bruce has cooked something. Want me to order you anything if not?”

“I’m good. Thanks Pepper,” He declined politely. He turned back to the skyline and settled his chin on his knees, entirely unbothered by the formidable drop his feet were edging.

Pepper nodded even though he couldn’t see it and headed inside.

She wondered if it were a good thing or bad thing that Tony’s teammates were even more damaged than Tony himself.

Pepper chided herself for the thought as soon as it occurred to her. It was uncharitable. She liked Clint. On good days, he was as sweet and charming as they came. And when it was a bad day… given what he’d been through Pepper could understand his being withdrawn.

Still, Pepper decided to send Natasha in his direction if she was around. Pepper wasn’t entirely sure of the history or relationship between the two agents, and wasn’t even sure that she wanted to know, but they were good together. Pepper didn’t question it.

When Tony had decided to open the Tower to the Avengers team, Pepper had agreed and supported him completely. And Tony was thriving in their company. It had been weeks since his last nightmare.

Pepper still had them from time to time, but it was getting better.

Stranger, for her, was the daily oddity of interacting with so many people in what was essentially her home. Technically, her home was the penthouse suite. That belonged to her and Tony alone.

But more and more often she was joining the others for meals on what had become the communal floor, or bumping into Bruce when she fetched Tony from his workshop, or finding Clint and/or Natasha on the ledge outside her office. Steve was even more unpredictable, spending most of their time and SHIELD, and then there were the unscheduled visits from Phil...

It wasn’t unwelcome but Pepper was still getting used to it.

“Jarvis, Tony’s floor, please,” She asked, toeing off her heels and letting down her hair. CEO Potts was done for the day.

Jarvis stopped the elevator on one of the workshop floors Tony hadn’t used in a while. Mostly, he
and Bruce had been spending their time in the lower fabrication and testing levels. Tony did most of his software tinkering up here.

“Oh my god,” Tony’s disgusted voice drifted down the hall to her. “What is that? What in the hell is that?”

“Tony?” Pepper called, opening the door for the lab at the end.

The smell hit her immediately.

“Oh!” She said, holding her wrist in front of her mouth to breathe her perfume instead.

“Sir, I believe the cause of the situation is located in the drawer to your left,” Jarvis announced.

Tony gave Pepper a grim look and opened the drawer slowly. Tony took a peek and slammed it shut again.

“I’m going to kill him,” He vowed.


“Bruce. There’s a plate of… something… in there. Chinese, I think – kinda hard to tell, now.”

“I believe Doctor Banner had been trying to prevent Dum-E from creating a mess,” Jarvis said.

Dum-E was powered down against the far wall. Pepper tilted her head at the bot. Was it holding a chopstick?

“Speaking of,” Tony said. “It’s been too long since I’ve indulged this particular masochism - we need Dum-E two floors down. Did he wind himself out of juice again?” Tony asked, puttering around the bot’s base and sucking his teeth with a displeased sound. “Yep,” Tony answered himself. “Jarvis, reinstate the monitoring program. I’ll need to take a look at his code later and figure out why he isn’t going to his charging station.”

“Oh of course, sir.”

Tony turned his full attention to Pepper then. He clasped the hand she was holding in front of her mouth and pulled it away, sweeping in to kiss her soundly. It would have been romantic if the air hadn’t smelled like decaying meat.

She turned her hand around in his and pulled him out of the room.

“Did you see Rogers on the way in?” Tony asked, allowing himself to be led.

Pepper shook her head, still walking. She was feeling triumphant from the day’s accomplishments and had plans to spend the rest of the night celebrating, extensively, with Tony. Forget ordering in Thai food – she had better ideas for Tony’s mouth.

“Apparently Barnes remembered a chunk of their childhood today. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Cap this happy.”

Pepper made a pleased hum. She was glad.

“Which reminds me – when is Happy’s last PT session?” Tony asked.

“Thursday.”
“I can’t wait until he sees Natasha again. That’s going to be some quality entertainment, I think. Did I ever show you the footage of the two of them taking down Hammer’s security?”

“I don’t believe you did,” She replied, jabbing the elevator button for the penthouse.

“I can probably rope Rhodey into coming with us for drinks. Danvers took the job with NASA and I’m pretty sure he’s moping.” Tony shook his head. “It’s not like Rhodey’ll be seeing her any less frequently now with the reinstatement.”

Rhodes hadn’t ever officially been discharged – the procedure hadn’t gotten that far yet. In the week that followed the WSC take-down, the case against him had been dropped. Fury claimed he’d pulled some strings but Pepper thought it just as likely that he’d simply been undoing what the WSC operatives had put in motion. After all, they had planned to have Jim neutralize Tony. The colonel could hardly have done it if he’d been deployed on the other side of the world. It was a little too coincidental to swallow easily.

Tony frowned, probably thinking about the same thing.

Which really didn’t work for Pepper’s plan just then.

Pepper undid the clasp of Tony’s belt.

Tony finally seemed to realize what was going on.

If you had asked Pepper a month ago if she thought Tony Stark had den-mother tendencies, she would have laughed herself sick.

The elevator opened and she led him into their bedroom, tossing her jacket aside and unbuttoning her blouse.

Tony smirked, following her backwards steps to the bed.

“Can I help you, Miss Potts?” He murmured, bending close and kissing the curved jut made by her clavicle. He was picking up her playful mood. This was going to be a good night.

She slid her hands down his gently muscled sides and seized the hem of his t-shirt, pulling it and the undershirt off of him with a stroke back upwards.

Tony smiled at her when she traced the ridges of the cicatrix left from removing the arc reactor and shrapnel. Pepper had worried, when the operation was done, that Tony would become self-conscious about the scar. The open, easy way he held himself while she ran her fingers over him, though, spoke of something a lot closer to pride.

No, she thought, correcting herself.

It was more than that.

It was contentment.

The end.

Chapter End Notes
*deep, deep breath* Nine months I've been writing this. I'm feeling pretty accomplished just now. :)

Feedback is extremely welcome. Like, the neighbor you don't really know who tries to wave you in for a beer when they see you walking down the street. Welcome to the point of creepy. That's how I feel about feedback.
Author's Notes... literally

Just as a little bonus for the curious, here are some of the notes that went into writing “Refrain.” (There was also most of a pad of post-it notes and dozens of scrawled-on receipts that got used and thrown out before I thought to take a picture.) My chicken-scratch is probably indecipherable but, almost a year later, my doodle-notes kinda crack me up. I had honestly forgotten about drawing the Loki one.
Steve & mystery. Puppets so in Loki's absence.

Still in exile, seems that a

Coulson shot him - in motion

Fury.

Rhodey - dropped the ball, exile

No Rhodey pov - Puppet!

Rég - still in recovery from
Best Search

S. American

This 

smells

Champ

into ConsK
I sincerely hope you all enjoyed the story!

Works inspired by this [podfic] Refrain by Liannabob

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!