Enlightening Nuances

by RaphaelsDaughter

Summary

With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals. The Avengers watch MARVEL’S ‘The Avengers’. Further prepared for their enemy, they work to protect Loki from the consequences of aiding SHIELD.

Notes

Here is part two of my series, which will include many references to Norse Mythology in my depiction of Loki’s backstory as well as detailed explanations of my theories on his magic. Aspects of the contract in this chapter will come up in the future, so reading through it all would be beneficial (and just, since I spent a few hours putting it together).
“What – you think I can’t keep an eye on him all by myself?” Tony interrogated, insulted. Director Fury sat calmly behind an immaculate glass desk, the holographic interface currently dark as he effortlessly ignored the rant aimed at him. “I don’t need the rest of the team there for security – I thought one of the reasons for this was that JARVIS can watch everything? And, come on, are you asking for trouble – all of us living together with Loki?”

“You seemed to be quite cozy when talking about his magic yesterday.”

“Sure, but living together’s something else. And we’re practically strangers!”

Fury raised an eyebrow. “You already offered Dr. Banner a place to stay.”

“Well yeah,” he replied with a roll of his eyes, “He’s my Science Bro.”

“And I know you’re not complaining about unrestricted access to Loki’s magic – so it’s the rest of the Avengers that you have an issue with.

“Well, I’ve got news for you, Stark,” he said, leaning forward and folding his hands on the surface of the desk, “they’re going to be living with you. Your complaints are childish and I’m not about to indulge you. You have enough space to give each one their own floor, and it’ll benefit us to have you all together if something comes up.

“So deal with it.”

Tony huffed and stormed back out into the halls of the Helicarrier, a minuscule pout on his lips at his arguments not having been taken seriously. Living with people was a big deal – you had to adjust to others’ routines and habits. Many friendships had been ruined first year at college by deciding to room with a friend and all of a sudden knowing way too much about them. And this time it’s with strangers! We know squat real shit about each other (with the exception of Clint and Natasha, which I’m not going to ask about) – we were thrown together because of our skills.

But now, we have to live together. I can’t believe Fury’s forcing us to do this. I mean, my place was chosen for all the security detail, the rest of them don’t need to be there. Bruce could, of course, but he’s not expecting anything of me – wandering through third-world countries without access to my public rep. You’d think Fury’d want us all separate. Sure, that point about being in one place to call to take care of world takeovers is fine, but you’d think he wouldn’t want the others around me for very long.

I know my habits, and if even Pepper’s frustrated with them forcing the team to suffer them is only going to break us up – affect our ability to work together. Which is why this is beyond a bad idea.

He shook his head as he walked into the hanger where he had left his suit, pulling out his phone and remotely powering it up. He stepped onto the bases of the boots and inserted his hands into the gauntlets as the pieces separated from one another, standing still so to allow the metal alloy suit to encase his body. Once the faceplate was down he asked, “You up, Jarv?”

“As always, sir,” the AI answered as Tony signalled an agent to open one of the doors, the panel sliding down to expose the hanger to the thrashing winds of the elevated altitude the Helicarrier was soaring through. “Systems are functional and prepared for use.”

“Perfect – direct power to thrusters,” he ordered as he moved to the exit and dived out, JARVIS
answering, ‘Already done, sir,’ as he took to the air.

“Also notify Miss Potts of my chat with Nick – I’m sure she’ll be getting a lot of paperwork from SHIELD.”

“Right away, sir.”

After the announcement that they were going to be stationed out of Stark Tower instead of the airborne SHIELD vessel, the members of the Avengers quickly packed their things. None of them had an especially large amount to bring with them, Thor owning nothing himself as well as Bruce only having a few items of clothing. Steve kept his possessions in his Brooklyn apartment so he only had to pack the couple sets of clothing he had brought, his uniform, and his shield, deciding to return to his apartment later to cart over some more of his things. The two assassins have always travelled light, and in fact already had a bag of necessities prepared in case they were sent off quickly.

Clint was adding some more clothes and a few more weapons to his couple duffle bags when he felt someone’s gaze settle heavily on his back. Without hesitation he grasped the Glock he had been packing and spun with the pistol in hand. At the sight of Loki’s smirk, his finger twitched over the trigger.

“Hello, my hawk,” he greeted, revealing a few more teeth in his grin at the sight of Clint’s clenched jaw.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he asked, reaching back without turning away from Loki so to grab a thigh holster from the open pocket of his pack. He strapped it to his leg and forced himself to put the gun away, comforted in part that it was kept within easy reach.

“I found myself bored waiting for my ‘guard’ to fetch me from my quarters,” Loki explained, gaze roaming around the sparsely furnished bedroom. “I believe the Director is postponing my leave until your team is prepared to depart to Stark’s tower as well.”

“So he told you what’s up then?” he concluded, purposefully relaxing his posture in order to mask his agitation at the other’s presence. “I’m going to have to become accustomed to him – especially if this seeking-me-out thing is going to be the norm...

“Well, yes – I was sent a short notice,” he admitted, “but I had stumbled upon the conversation where they were originally figuring out all the details beforehand. Completely unintentionally.”

“I’m sure,” Clint snorted, zipping up his duffels. He slung one across his back along with his quiver, and draped the other over his shoulder. “You keeping tabs on everything around here?” he questioned as he picked up his collapsed bow, snapping his arm forward sharply to extend the weapon.

“Just events of importance,” he responded, returning his attention onto him.

He narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but chose not to continue his inquiry. “I’m done here,” he announced instead, waving Loki towards the door. “You first.” I’m NOT turning my back to you.

“How kind,” Loki said mockingly, exiting into the hall first.

Clint inhaled deeply before allowing the breath to escape through grit teeth, following after the god.
They walked side by side through the hallway, Loki’s longer strides making it appear as though
Clint was half a step behind and following him. He knew how it looked to the agents they passed,
but he chose not to make a fool of himself powerwalking for the sole reason of disabusing them of
their notions. They already thought the worst of him already.

When he saw Natasha stepping out of her room up ahead with her bags though, he defended
himself when her eyebrows twitched as though wanting to rise up in disbelief. “Look who appeared
in my room,” he said with a forced smile.

She read his unwillingness immediately, and directed her stony expression onto Loki, who greeted,
“Agent Romanoff.”

“Loki,” she replied before musing guardedly, “Fury didn’t mention we’d be taking you with us.”

“That would be because I’m travelling separately. In fact, the good Director is at my door now,”
Loki proclaimed, somewhat surprised at the alert from the defensive ward outside his suite. “I shall
see you later, Clinton,” he promised, allowing a fleeting nod of farewell toward Natasha before he
vanished.

Clint closed his eyes for a second as he let escape a sigh of relief before he returned to the eased
state of readiness that was his default. “Yo,” he said with a small, real smile as he began to pass
her.

She scrutinized his expression and posture carefully before answering with a ‘hi’, joining him in
his continuation towards the hanger they had been called to. “How many times has he done that?”

“What – appeared in my room? Just this once,” he responded. “But with how he toyed with me
yesterday during – and after – that ‘interrogation’ (if it can be called that), I’m thinking it’s going to
be a regular thing,” he confessed, apprehensive. “I’m not looking forward to this.”

“I don’t think any of us are.”

“Stark and Banner are, for science,” he said derisively. “And so’s Thor – as compromised as he is.”

“We’re all a bit compromised on this one,” she admitted. “Can you adjust to it? You were dealing,
but with him searching you out…”

“I can do it,” Clint asserted. “I’ve just got to work past it all.”

“Director,” Loki welcomed as Fury entered the passcode and his fingerprint so to open the heavy
electric door. He was lounged across the two-cushioned sofa with a chessboard hovering over
his stomach, the grid level so to balance the pieces in the middle of play. He waved his hand and
the conjured game dispersed into a fine mist. “Am I to ready myself for departure?”

“Not yet,” he remarked, taking the central seat of the couch across from him. Loki sat upright and
crossed one leg over the other, clasping his hands over his knee as he leaned forward in intrigue.
“As the agreement between us has been approved, you’ve got to sign this,” he declared, reaching
into the inner pocket of his long leather trench coat to pull out a sheaf of papers. He laid them on
the glass coffee table before spinning them around so they were upright from Loki’s perspective.

Loki seized the documents and leant back into the cushions as he perused their content.

INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR AGREEMENT
This Independent Contractor Agreement ("Agreement") is made and entered into by the undersigned parties:

The Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division
(the corporation/organization known as the "Company")

and

Loki
(the extraterrestrial being known as the "Contractor")

In consideration of the promises, rights, and obligations set forth below, the parties hereby agree as follows:

1. **Term**
   The term of this Agreement shall begin on the day this document is signed and continue until terminated as set forth in this Agreement.

2. **Services**
   The Contractor will provide the following services:
   - Shall be responsible for explaining the Contractor’s magical theory and/or practices to any scientist under the Company (that are confirmed to have the appropriate clearance levels) that inquires about the topic.
   - Shall willingly submit to any testing that is deemed beneficial to the Company’s understanding of the aforementioned field of study.
   - Shall aid the Company in the intellectual and/or physical opposition of any external or internal threats that are caused by or interfere with the Contractor’s participation in this Agreement.

   The Contractor shall take direction from the Company’s board of directors, i.e. the World Security Council. Additional services or amendments to the services described above may be agreed upon between the parties.

3. **Compensation**
   Subject to providing the services as outlined above, the Contractor will be compensated through:
   - The defense of his person against any and all beings that would remove him from the obligations of this Agreement, i.e. the extraterrestrials known as the Æsir, the Chitauri, and/or any individuals that associate themselves with the two threats aforementioned.
   - The provision of any and all materials required for the testing and/or understanding of the Contractor’s magic.
   - The arrangement and coverage of the Contractor’s boarding, should he or she be in need.

4. **Relationship**
   The Contractor will provide the Contractor’s services to the mutual benefit of both parties undersigned. Accordingly:
   - The Contractor agrees to behave in such a way to not actively harm in any emotional, mental, psychological, and/or physical manner those that are associated with the Company that do not aim to interfere with the obligations of the Agreement.
   - The Contractor agrees that any infringement upon the aforementioned condition will result in the Agreement and thereby the compensation requirements outlined above to become void and will allow the Company to seek a monetary fine and/or legal proceedings, if not the act of physical confrontation, in compensation for reparation of the resultant consequences, be they in relation to the Company’s employees,
consultants, reputation, assets, and/or future business.

The Contractor will provide the Contractor’s services to the Company as an independent contractor and not as an employee. Accordingly:

- The Contractor agrees that as an independent contractor, the Contractor will not be qualified to participate in or to receive any employee benefits that the Company may extend to its employees.
- The Contractor is not free to provide services to other clients, as such other clients are in competition with the Company, unless otherwise stated, and are thereby in interference with the Contractor’s contractual obligations to the Company.
- The Contractor has no authority to and will not exercise or hold itself out as having any authority to enter into or conclude any contract or to undertake any commitment or obligation for, in the name of or on behalf of the Company.

5. Confidentiality and Intellectual Property

The Contractor hereby acknowledges that he or she has read and agrees to be bound by the terms and conditions of the Company's confidentiality and proprietary information agreement attached hereto as Schedule “A” an which forms an integral part of this Agreement. The Contractor hereby represents and warrants to the Company that it is not party to any written or oral agreement with any third party that would restrict its ability to enter into this Agreement or the Confidentiality and Proprietary Information Agreement or to perform the Contractor’s obligations hereunder and that the Contractor will not, by providing services to the Company, breach any non-disclosure, proprietary rights, non-competition, non-solicitation, or other covenant in favour of any third party.

6. Termination

The independent contractor relationship contemplated by this Agreement is not set to conclude until the completion of the Contractor’s service. The Contractor agrees that an advance notice of 60 days and reasoning deemed acceptable by the Company is required in the event that the relationship terminates before the outlined condition. The Contractor agrees that the Company may terminate this Agreement at any time if the Contractor is in breach of any of the terms of this Agreement so long as the Contractor is notified of, and acquiesces to the unalterable consequences of, the breach before termination.

7. Obligations Surviving Termination of this Agreement

All obligations to preserve the Company’s Confidential Information, Intellectual Property, and other warranties and representations set forth herein shall survive the termination of this Agreement.

8. Entire Agreement

This Agreement, together with the Confidentiality and Proprietary Information Agreement, represents the entire agreement between the parties and the provisions of this Agreement shall supersede all prior oral and written commitments, contracts, and understandings with respect to the subject matter of this Agreement. This Agreement may be amended only by mutual agreement of the party.

9. Governing Law and Principles of Construction

This Agreement shall be governed and construed in accordance with existing United States of America law. If any provision in this Agreement is declared illegal or unenforceable, the provision will become void, leaving the remainder of this Agreement in full force and effect.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties hereto have caused this Agreement to be executed by their duly authorized representatives, effective as of the date first above specified.

Neither of the spaces below were signed for as of yet, the Director evidently awaiting Loki’s judgement of the draft before committing his signature to the papers. He continued to read through the following Confidentiality and Proprietary Information Agreement, covering SHIELD’s rights over any knowledge he gains regarding their organization as well as their rights to anything that is
developed through his interaction with them.

Loki hummed in interested, stating, “I’m surprised by the equality established in these conditions.”

“I was advised you’d be more cooperative if we didn’t try to pull anything,” Fury admitted.

He nodded. “Well, yes – it is obviously a display of your belief in my capability to catch such a thing. And sincere flattery is quite compelling…”

“Have you a pen?”

Director Fury allowed the muscles in his shoulders to relax at the query, reaching without question into the opposite pocket from which he had retrieved the documents to pull out a pen. He handed it over as Loki uncrossed his legs and leaned forward to lay the papers on the surface of the low table between them. Loki signed his name with a flourish twice, where indicated, rather fond of the fact that he was deemed son of no one; he was an individual without inheritance from anyone whom he would call Father.

When Loki turned the agreement back towards him and held out the pen, Fury took a hold of it and flipped through the pages to sign his name on behalf of SHIELD.

“Anthony Edward Stark!”

Tony winced when he heard his name ring out in a shrill call that undeniably belonged to Pepper. He wished he could say that this occasion was unique – her whipping out the full name – but it wasn’t. “Erm, hey Pep!” he called as he turned away from the couple of men currently reinforcing the bedframe. “One more a floor above, guys,” he instructed as he strode out of the room and into the common area of the floor.

Pepper’s knuckles were white at the pressure exerted as she clutched her clipboard, and her eyebrows were furrowed. “Why don’t you tell me, Tony,” she started as she marched towards him, her stilettos thankfully unable to intimidate through foreboding clacks once she crossed onto the carpeted floor, “why SHIELD just emailed me forms that cover Loki’s board here?”

“Ah, well, he’s going to be living here?” he tried to state, but her glower caused his voice to lilt up at the tail end.

“I know, Jarvis told me,” she growled before her shoulders suddenly slumped. She sighed, “Tony, why did you agree to it?” as she abruptly lost her fearsome visage and seemed to collapse in on herself with worry.

“Hey, hey,” he soothed, hurrying to her and guiding her to sit on one of the couches. He placed her clipboard on the coffee table and held her hands in his as he sat beside her, twisting so to face her. “We said we’d work to help him, right?”

“Yes, but having him live here? At SHIELD if he became violent they have agents to deal with it!”

“All the Avengers are moving in too – to keep an eye on things, alright? It’ll be fine.”

“They’re all going to be living here?” she asked, shocked. The two workmen that Tony had been talking to before left the previous room they were in and carted long metal beams into the stairwell. “And what are they doing?”

“I’m having them reinforce a few of the beds with a steel alloy,” he explained. At her raised
eyebrow he justified, “I think it’s necessary, with two Asgardians and a super soldier living here. I’m not saying they’re going to get up to anything… Though if they do I hope those frames hold, or else I’m going to have to custom-make a stronger alloy.”

“-Tony-”

“Right, but seriously, Peps, I heard about the Capsicle accidentally tearing off a bedpost at his place in Brooklyn – and he’s not as strong as the aliens we’re going to have crashing here.”

She removed her hands from his and rubbed her temples. “I forgot about them… I was so worried about Loki attacking you guys that I didn’t think of the accidents the others could cause that could hurt you.”

“I’m going to be fine, Pep,” he reassured. “My security’s part of the reason Fury chose this place. Jarvis’ on all the time keeping watch – aren’t you, J?”

“Indeed I am, sir. I monitor all going-ons in every residence that I am installed, and shall continue to do so. If there is any threat to Sir’s wellbeing, Miss Potts, rest assured that I shall contact the proper authorities so to handle it.”

“I trust you, Jarvis,” she said with a small smile.

“You’d better, he’s my most brilliant kid,” Tony teased with a smirk.

“That is an interesting paradigm, sir, as you cannot function without me,” the AI intoned.

“Don’t get cocky now.”

“It was you who created me, sir.”

“Ouch, right in the heart,” he gasped dramatically. Glancing over at Pepper, he smiled warmly and promised, “I’ll be okay.”

She nodded before standing, grabbing her clipboard. Tony protested immediately, “Woah, I’m going to be surrounded by upright morals soon – we’ve got to get up to some debauchery in the public areas while we can!”

She rolled her eyes and flipped through the pages she had carried in, ordering ‘Sign here’ as she handed him a pen. “Well, apparently I’ve got to fix the budget to account for all the food your team’s going to need, not to mention the money you’ll throw away at the beginning to impress them.”

“I don’t do that,” he denied instantly. “And what am I signing?” he added, careless of the fact that he had already followed her command.

“The forms Director Fury sent,” she enlightened. “We’re responsible for Loki. SHIELD will cover up and repair any damage he might cause, but while living here you, Tony, and Jarvis are responsible for keeping him happy with the arrangement he agreed on. That means you can’t just keep him locked up in your lab while you poke and prod him for days while you, and through you, he, don’t eat or sleep.”

“I know that,” he huffed.

“We’re also responsible for feeding and clothing him, obviously, and ensuring his mental and physical wellbeing. Plus, any damage to persons, places, or things proved to be caused through the
Avengers’ actions is billed to us,” she finished. “Which makes more sense if they are living here.”

“We have to pay if any of them screw up too? How’s that fair?” Tony questioned rhetorically.

“I was also given a copy of the agreement Loki signed with SHIELD,” she continued. “Jarvis, could you transfer the draft to Tony’s server, please? I’d rather not have anyone try and attack the company for the information.”

“Of course, Miss Potts,” Jarvis replied.

“Private, secure server, Jarv,” Tony corrected. “Should definitely not be shown to the public yet.”

“Yes, sir.”

Clint and Natasha arrived in one of the hangers that led out onto the unprotected tarmac runway to find the expected three teammates already present. Thor greeted them with an enthusiastic, “Isn’t this wonderful, my friends? We are to be living with my brother and he has sworn not to harm us!”

Bruce abruptly aborted the disbelieving shake of his head, not wanting to ruin Thor’s fervour. Natasha, however, remarked, “Don’t get carried away. We’re not sure what he’s agreed to, exactly – there may be room for him to take advantage of the situation, more than he has already.”

“I care more about him have access to all of Stark’s tech,” Clint muttered.

“Let’s hope he can’t hack into his mainframe,” Fury interjected, arriving in the hanger. “I’ve sent a copy of the contract to Miss Potts, so you’ll have access to the terms – if he needs reminding.

“Loki is a priority right now. We need to know who’s coming after him and all their strengths and weaknesses. We’ll also need to know as much about his magic as we can, and see if there’s a way to either advance or assimilate it into our tech to combat anyone who uses it.

“We’ll always be watching, so if anything comes up we’ll be informed immediately and will help you if necessary. If there’s anything anyone’d like to report, you know how to contact us.”

The Director waited for nods of confirmation from them all before he explained, “You five will be taking a jet to Stark’s place with Loki following with a squad of agents in another. Dismissed.”

The hatch was opened and they all strode out onto the tarmac, making their way to the awaiting Quinjet. Director Fury watched them as they boarded the craft, remaining a few minutes more to see her take off, and then made his way back to the bridge.

In the security room, he reminded the agents that were leading Loki out to the other aircraft through his earpiece that the god was an important consultant of SHIELD now and to treat him as such, regardless of their thoughts on his actions. Once the jet had taken off, Fury commanded the agent monitoring the screen that displayed the interior of the Quinjet Loki resided in to remain vigilant and to alert him directly if any conflict occurred.

He allowed his tensed muscles to relax as he walked through the halls of the Helicarrier. The reality of Loki agreeing to work with them and the advantages that were already apparent provided a state of relative ease that had been absent since the god had first appeared. A source of information on otherworldly magic and potentially hostile beings has signed on as an informant; Loki’s living situation is now under the responsibility of Stark, as is that of all the Avengers; the Avengers Initiative is assembled and gathered in one place if use of them is needed again.
Fury felt as though SHIELD finally had the resources in order to be prepared for any imminent catastrophe.

Then he stepped over the threshold of his office and saw a plain DVD case resting on the surface of his desk. He froze and drew his gun before understanding the situation, and then he sighed.
Commencement

Chapter Summary

With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals.

Clint expertly set down the Quinjet on the landing pad jutting out of the side of Stark Tower, lower than where there remained an ‘A’ and the peak of the building that rose several meters higher from where the Tesseract had opened the portal. Tony was standing out of reach of the jet’s wingspan, hands in his suit pockets, sunglasses glinting in the light, and wind ruffling his hair. He smirked as the engine quieted and the hatch opened for them to disembark.

“Sta- Tony,” Steve awkwardly greeted, remembering his request to use his first name. “Thanks for having us.”

“I was practically forced into it,” Tony dismissed with a wave as he peered at them over the rims of his sunglasses. His slight smile dissuaded them of the notion that he was truly adverse to their presence, though he did not immediately lead them inside. “Did Fury say I could keep her?” he asked, jerking his head towards the jet behind them.

They traded glances before Natasha conceded, “He didn’t say anything, but he might have told the agents guarding Loki to take it back.”

Tony pouted and pulled out his phone, disregarding her suggestion and stating, “I’ve been wanting to upgrade her and haven’t seen her since they sent the commission – so we’re keeping her. We’ll need some type of transportation if we’re called out to some emergency, anyways.” He tapped a code into his phone and warned, “Brace yourselves.”

The surface of the platform that they had landed on began to shift suddenly, the wall making up the side of the tower splitting down the middle and shifting to either side. The Quinjet, as well as the entirety of the Avengers, was drawn into a hanger that had previously been enclosed within the tower. The floor slid until the aircraft was parked alongside a helicopter, Jarvis announcing, “The jet is secured, sir,” when the motion stopped and four mechanical arms rose up out of the floor to hold the plane in place.

Steve had breathed deeply through the casual display of sophisticated technology while Thor had grinned, delighted, but when Jarvis’ confirmation had echoed throughout the room they both tensed and glanced warily up at the ceiling in search of the speaker.

“That’s Jarvis – best thing I’ve created,” Tony introduced when he noticed their reactions.

“Indeed, sir,” Jarvis replied before addressing his Creator’s teammates. “I am an Artificial Intelligence system that Sir relies on for daily functioning. I am connected to and control all manner of technology in this considerable estate, so if you ever find yourself having trouble with anything I can lend my aid.”

“Oh, well thank you,” Steve responded.
“Your watchful eye over us will not be forgotten, and we shall endeavor to repay this kindness at your call,” Thor added.

“It is my pleasure, Mr. Rogers. And your gratitude is noted with appreciation, Mr. Odinson,” Jarvis answered.

“Don’t go playing favourites now, Jarv,” Tony warned teasingly.

“I would never think to do such a thing, sir.”

Before Tony could utter a retort, the SHIELD jet that had been tailing them landed on the platform that remained outstretched. Loki disembarked without accompaniment, the plane lifting off as soon as he was clear. The god smirked and mused, “I don’t believe they enjoyed my presence.”

“Can’t imagine why – you’re a bundle of joy, Reindeer Games.”

“Sir,” Jarvis began, “if I may ask our newest arrival a question? I am unsure of the mode of address he would prefer.”

“I was thinking he could stick with that,” Tony jeered.

“Tony,” Steve scolded lightly.

Jarvis interjected, “That would be incredibly rude, sir,” before directing his attention onto Loki. “I am JARVIS, an Artificial Intelligence that Sir created. I handle all of the security, defensive, and domestic matters and will likely be in contact with all of you, but am unsure whether you would like to be called and referred to as a Mr. Odinson or a Mr. Laufeyson.”

Loki’s head was tilted as his gaze rested on the lens of the nearest camera in consideration of the AI; however, that did not mean he was oblivious to the tense atmosphere surrounding the Avengers, prompted by the words. “Neither,” he replied, seemingly without concern. Instead he requested politely, “As that only leaves my given name perhaps you can use a title instead so to avoid the informality – Sorcerer? In light of the conditions of my stay here.”

“Certainly, Sorcerer,” Jarvis acquiesced.

He cast his eyes over the others loitering in the hanger as if dismissive of their presence, but he took note of the thoughts he could observe from their expressions and body language. Thor was obviously disappointed in him having, though not in any official manner, denounced Odin’s name, whereas some were either projecting indifference or displaying curiosity (Stark and Rogers, respectively). Dr. Banner and the two assassins demonstrated thoughtful outlooks; his choosing of a title instead of either proffered name, and thereby heritage, presented a neutral stance instead of friendly or hostile.

“’Sorcerer’, Tony hummed. “Maybe I should assign myself a title too.”

“Tin can?” Clint snarked with a smirk.

“Watch it,” he sung in retaliation. “Else I’ll default you to ‘Birdbrain’."

Loki listened to their interaction as he nonchalantly sidled over to where the Quinjet and helicopter were braced, absorbing the details that he could discern about their workings and the mechanics of the floor.

Steve noticed where his attention had strayed and though curious about the extent of his knowledge
on their technological advancements, especially when compared to Thor and himself, he suggested, “Why don’t you give us a tour, Tony?”

“Sure thing, Cap.” He waved them all over to one of the pristine elevators as he entered another instruction into his phone, the landing pad that the jets had made use of retracting to the space underneath the hanger floor and the walls that had opened out to it sliding shut.

The elevator doors opened as they neared them, the seven able to stand comfortably inside the vessel even with their luggage, as it was larger than one would normally find in a typical corporate building. Ignoring the unease of his teammates, most likely caused by their proximity to the God of Mischief in an enclosed space, Tony began explaining, “You each have half a floor. I would’ve redone six floors so each of you could have your own, but apparently I was pushing Fury’s buttons enough with using his contacts for the remodelling when they’re supposed to be cleaning up the city.”

“This,” Tony said as the elevator eased to a stop and the doors slid open, “is the common floor that I designed so we have a place for meetings and hanging out and shit.” They all followed him out into the hall and then entered through one of the doors, finding themselves in an open-concept living room and kitchen. The latter was equipped with a large fridge, stove, and dishwasher, marble counters providing an area in excess of what would be needed to prepare daily means for their number. An island was situated in its center instead of any sort of table, eight tall stools around it. The white tiling of the floor transitioned into a plush cream carpet on a convex curve several feet from the eating area, a long couch that could comfortably seat ten people flanked by a couple of armchairs arranged on the soft covering. They sat in a semi-circle around a low glass coffee table, all facing the high definition television that encompassed the entirety of the 16 by 8 foot wall it was mounted on.

“There’s a little conference room through that door,” Tony continued, “for when Fury needs to talk to us all or something. And through here-” He led them all through a door off to their right and across the hall. He stepped through another automated door and gestured grandly to the open space before him, finishing, “-is where you guys can spar.”

The floor was completely covered in a thin padding similar to that of a doormat, sandbags piled off in a corner with boxing gloves and hand wrappings shelved nearby. There was a wrestling ring off-centre cordoned off with only the hemp ring ropes, as it was not raised, and there were another two doors. “That leads to the showers, and that leads to a training room I developed,” he enlightened, pointing to each door in turn. “I have the bots, targets, and obstacles made for it but I’m still ironing out the glitches in their attack algorithms. Should be up and running within the week though, then you can just walk in and Jarv will handle everything while you fight for your life.”

“You tease us with that then tell us we can’t go at it?” Clint scoffed, the fingers of his left hand jerking in his anticipation to test out the system.

“All good things to those who wait,” Tony mocked with a smirk.

He led them all back into the hall and detailed, “We’re on the 90th floor, Capsicle and Goldilocks are on the floor above, Rock of Ages and Jolly Green above them, then our two assassins up top. My bachelor pad’s at the very top, above the hanger and with the wickedest view.

“Everyone’s got a bedroom, ensuite bath, and kitchenette to themselves, then a shared living room for the floor. Call out to J if you need anything.” He received nods as they all piled into the elevator again, stopping off at each floor to let everyone unpack and settle in.

Tony followed Loki and Bruce onto their floor to mediate their situation.
After a few seconds of the three standing across from each other and staring awkwardly, Bruce admitted, “I don’t know if this is such a good idea…”

“It’s a brilliant idea,” Tony countered immediately. “It’s not like he’ll act out if you’re here! You smashed him into the ground – pretty sure you were the only one to injure him in the whole fight.” He directed a taunting smirk towards the god.

Loki sneered and reminded, “If that vulgar beast attacks me without due cause then that’s a breach of the terms of my living here.”

“Exactly,” Bruce agreed. “What if the Other Guy feels threatened? It’s not like I have that much control over him – then what would Fury do?”

“Relax. If you feel like you can’t handle it then I can move you,” he said with a shrug, “but I wanted you here just in case he tries something.”

“I’m constantly flattered that you mortals are always considering the reality of my ability to circumvent the terms I agreed to,” Loki confessed with a grin.

“We’re not completely ignorant of your powers,” Bruce declared.

“Yes, I’m very interested in how you came upon this knowledge,” Loki mused. “It’s not as though those little displays during the invasion were all that impressive, even taking into account the complete absence of magic on Midgard, and I can’t imagine Thor would be able to go into detail about my many abilities.”

Bruce focused on calming his breaths and body so his tense muscles wouldn’t give anything away. He wasn’t sure how Loki would react to them having all witnessed his actions on Asgard before he fell.

Tony did not react or even pause at the uttered thought, dismissing it entirely and returning to their previous topic. “It’s not like you’re going to be stuck in here with him all the time, Brucie. You’ve got the common floor and, of course, the labs.” His smirk widened into an honest smile at the thought of his labs. He knocked Bruce’s bag to the floor and impatiently ushered him back into the elevator, justifying, “You’ve got to see it – no expense spared in R&D here. It’s a crime you were off who-knows-where with the shittiest of equipment.”

The doors slid silently shut behind them, leaving Loki standing with a raised eyebrow.

Considering how the Avengers not only had to assimilate to living with each other but also the now-consulting previous war criminal known as Loki, Director Fury was reluctant to bring to their attention the disc that he had received. They had Loki as a magical consultant and an addition to their defenses if remaining Chitauri moved to attack Earth; in view of the radical changes in perception that the previous disc had caused, he was unsure whether he should risk the newly established equilibrium achieved. He read over the note again as his agents performed various tests on the disc so to deem that it was not a threat or beyond anything it appeared to be, the paper having already been cleared.

Avengers,

As the previous display has proven beneficial, this has been sent so to illuminate further the incident that occurred primarily in New York. The events leading up to the invasion that you were not privy to will hopefully convey more accurately the situation you were involved in, and direct
the questioning you are endeavouring to undertake towards a more fulfilling end.

The same requirements apply to the situation, and once again the choice of additional witnesses is presented to you.

Good luck.

The letter and disc had appeared in his office, not in the room that Stark had received the previous one, and he was not one of the Avengers, to which the note was addressed. It was obvious that whoever was sending these was able to somehow monitor their reactions, and therefore knew precisely who had viewed the images.

It was, however, curious that this had been sent to him. By inference from this unknown entity’s observation, he or she would then be aware that the Avengers were no longer aboard the Helicarrier. The argument could not be made that he or she had halted his or her scrutiny when they had finished with the disc, as he or she had stated plainly that they were “endeavouring to undertake” the questioning of Loki. This may just be guesswork, but it seemed more likely that he or she had surveyed SHIELD’s arranging of a contract with Loki.

This revisits the question of why the disc was sent to the Director. It could be possible that they were only able to be sent to the Helicarrier, though this seemed to be an irrational limitation to the transportation, or it may mean that it did not matter the time of delivery to the Avengers. If it was imperative that they view the images then it would have appeared near Stark again, or one of his teammates, and not Fury, who was a fair distance from sharing it with any one of them (nevermind that they all had to be gathered).

He sighed, for, although grateful of the control bestowed regarding the time of viewing, he knew that he was going to contact them as soon as the disc was cleared. No matter the intrigue Loki’s magic presented, it was essential for SHIELD to obtain all the information they could gather about any potential opposing forces. He could also assume that the disc would only take a few hours, with hopefully a limited number of psych-re-evaluation breaks, and therefore the team could resume their analysis and understanding of Loki’s powers promptly.

There was a line of the note that added to his decision though, implying that the actions of Loki that they had not seen would steer their inquiries so that they could acquire more applicable answers. Which was an apparent point, but none-the-less added to his ruling.

“Coulson,” he greeted as the named agent stepped into his office.

“Sir,” he replied, placing the DVD case on top of the desk for him. “The x-ray and thermo-imaging delivered nothing unexpected, and the chemical tests came up negative. And once again the disc will not allow itself to be played by the analysts.”

Fury nodded and cast a lingering gaze onto the case for a second before he ordered, “You’ll go to Stark Tower with it. I want an immediate report after you’ve gotten through it, or if there’s a shift in the dynamic of the Avengers’ relationship. I also want Loki to watch it with them – they’ll be able to directly question anything that’s happening on screen.”

Agent Coulson nodded and grasped the case again.

“You’re dismissed.”

“Mr. Rogers,” Jarvis called, said super soldier jerking and glancing up from where he was seated in one of the chairs of the four person table beside the kitchenette. He had been beckoned over into
the other half of the floor by Thor, who had wanted explained to him every food item in the pantry. He had reluctantly admitted to not having recognized a lot of the food, and the two had been trying to decipher the contents of each package or box (as the ingredients’ list was not helpful at all in identifying the products) when Jarvis had called his attention away from the pile he was riffling through atop the table.

“Er – yes, Jarvis?” Steve answered hesitantly, directing his gaze to the ceiling.

“Friend Tony’s machine in the ceiling!” Thor hailed excitedly. “You can aid us in our quest to name these foods.”

“It would be my pleasure, Mr. Odinson, but I believe that shortly you shall all be otherwise occupied,” the AI explained.

“What’s happening?” Steve asked.

“Agent Coulson has just arrived in the main lobby and is moving towards the elevators. I presume that he has something to speak to you about.”

“Have you told everyone else?”

“They have not been notified. Sir instructed me to redirect all Avengers business to you, and to await further instructions.”

Steve found the muscles in his shoulders relaxing at the thought of Jarvis being given such orders from Tony. He knew that Tony was reluctant to follow orders and thought he would be the most difficult to work with out of those on the team, but if he was willing to entrust some measure of control over Jarvis to him then he had chosen to recognize and respect the position of command Steve had been put in.

If asked Tony would probably flippantly respond with something along the lines of him simply not wanting to deal with all the SHIELD calls they would be getting, and though that might factor in there was still an aspect of trust involved.

“Relay the information to each of us and tell everyone to gather in the common floor’s conference room,” he ordered, standing.

“As you wish, Mr. Rogers.”

As he strode out of the room and into the shared living space and the elevator located there, Thor put the box he had been inspecting down on the counter with a frown and followed, questioning, “What do you think the Son of Coul needs of us, Captain?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “I doubt it’s a new threat we have to deal with – SHIELD would have called, not taken the time to send Agent Coulson in person.”

“But what would they send him for? What news is there, when we’ve not been separate from them for half a day?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sorcerer, your presence, as of that of the Avengers, is requested in the conference room on the 90th floor.”
Loki directed his gaze to the lens he could sense in one of the ceiling corners, wondering, “For what purpose?”

“Agent Coulson seems to have arrived on some principle.”

Loki hummed and vanished from his rooms, warping the light around him when he arrived so as to be invisible to those beginning to seat themselves around the long table. The Captain and Thor were settled comfortably in a couple of chairs as Black Widow and his archer took seats, having apparently just arrived. The door to the area opened once more and Stark, Banner, and Agent Coulson stepped in.

“So, what’s the deal, Phil?” Tony asked, throwing himself carelessly into one of the remaining chairs.

_Ah, so this agent is the Phil that I have heard about. My causing him injury affected the Avengers and SHIELD greatly – he must be an invaluable asset…_

“Director Fury received this a short while ago,” Coulson answered, removing a thin plain disc case from inside his suit jacket. Loki titled his head at the abrupt tensing of the Avengers’ bodies and the wary atmosphere that saturated the room.

“…What is it this time?” Steve asked after a moment.

“The note said it would revolve around the invasion,” he replied. “Fury also wants Loki to watch this one.”

_Curiouser and curiouser… That implies at least another had been sent to them before, _he thought.

“We were all there though,” Bruce inserted.

“Thor was involved in the last one and he was still surprised,” Natasha argued.

“Let’s get this show started then,” Tony declared. “Jarv, call Loki down here, would you?”

“He has already been alerted of the situation, sir.”

Loki vanished from the room and appeared outside the elevator, pausing to cast his gaze to one of the cameras in the hall. He wondered at the Artificial Intelligence’s motivation for not revealing his actions; even cloaked from its sight it would have noticed that he had teleported out of his chambers and seemingly disappeared for a few moments. Perhaps he would bring up the topic of the security on him when Stark began analyzing his magic, then he would likely converse with his AI about how it monitored him.

He entered the common and made his way to the conference room, his breathing soft as he listened for the computer’s voice. It was fully possible for one of its lenses to have had a way of pinpointing his location, and therefore it might have informed its creator of his invisible presence once he had departed. There was only the sound of the mortals’ mutterings though, so Loki concluded that either the AI would call on Stark in private with its report or it was unable to sense him when he made himself invisible. He wanted to believe the latter as presumably any evidence of his eavesdropping would be presented to the Avengers as a whole, but he did not know of the instructions the machine was operating under.

He arrived to the silence of a group that had been conversing about the one who had entered, and raised an eyebrow in pretended surprise.
“Loki,” Coulson said, gesturing for him to take a seat, “now we can get started.

“SHIELD received an anonymous disc and a letter explaining that it would show the events surrounding the invasion. It was addressed to the Avengers and claimed to only play when you were all present, pausing when you interrupted with comments or needed time to understand the information. All attempts at viewing the recording without you were unsuccessful.

“The Director wants you to be included in this, Loki, because the note hinted that what will be shown will prompt beneficial questions – and having you here to immediately answer such enquiries is preferred.”

Loki refrained from narrowing his eyes at the revelation this monologue provoked. Not only was it clear that they intended to keep from him the fact that this was at least their second missive, but the nature of these was revealed. They had obviously previously watched a number of events unfold, and adding to this the point that they had mentioned Thor was involved and their actions resulting from an alternative mindset regarding their view of him...

He was unsettled at the thought of them having had access to information regarding him that he was unaware of. He did not like this loss of control. The contract that he had agreed to was meant to ensure that he was protected and had leverage over SHIELD as well as the Avengers, but it appeared as though they were privy to information about him that initiated their offering of the alliance.

“Of course,” he responded calmly, replying without suspicious hesitation in order to not reveal the insight he had gained. There was no move he could make currently; he needed to find a way to gain the details of all they had seen of him. And discern who was compiling the images.

“Afterwards may I examine the disc and letter? Perhaps there are magical traces that you missed.”

Agent Coulson nodded his assent and moved to hand the case to Tony, who held his hands up in protest and justified, “You know I don’t like being handed things. J?”

A section of the wall slid to the side to display a large screen at the end of the room, a console revealed underneath. He masked his amusement and walked over to the controls, opening the case and removing the disc so to insert it into the machine. Jarvis lowered the brightness of the lights and initiated play once Coulson and Loki had chosen seats and the rest of the room’s occupants had swivelled their chairs so to view the monitor comfortably.

The azure blue of the Tesseract shone bright, its magic streaking restlessly within it as the cube spun in a void of darkness as a beacon of power. “The Tesseract has awakened,” intoned a deep voice that grated through the still air. “It is on a little world,” he continued, small platforms hovering in an arrangement not unlike a staircase far above mountains of scored rock and crumbling steps, the starry expanse of space stretching beneath, “a human world.”

“They would wield its power,” he said derisively as the suspended stairs climbed and merged into a series of steps flanked by stone walls, the slabs held above one another by ebony spikes and a sharp square of mineral in the middle with a pale gem glimmering at its center, “but our ally knows its workings as they never will.” A hooded figure cloaked in heavy, shimmering material was speaking, knelt to one side of an open landing before an intricate, raised device.

“He is ready to lead.” An elegantly curved and golden spear with a swirling blue orb set just below its sharpened tip was horizontally passed over to another’s hands, hands bearing a more flesh-like colour. This man wore an ensemble of black leather accented with green, the metal of his armour dull in the meagre light.
“And enter you,” Tony remarked. Loki was too focused on the thought of not only another having access to this information but also having the ability to assemble and deliver it to whatever individuals he or she wished to utter a scathing retort.

“And our force, our Chitauri, will follow.” Chittering creatures snapped faceplates to the metal helms encasing their heads, dark blue lights coming to life along the sides as they shifted anxiously in their numerous rows. “The world will be his, the universe yours, and the humans – what can they do… but burn?” The Tesseract spun as it shone, the strong streaks within its center eclipsing the outer blue and whiting out everything.

“There’s confirmation that you weren’t in charge,” Steve mumbled.

“I’m shocked that you didn’t take my word for it,” Loki responded sarcastically.

“Who was speaking, and who was he referring to – at the end, the one to have the universe?” Coulson asked.

“The Other was speaking, and the second is Thanos.”

Thor inhaled sharply at the name, closing his eyes and bowing his head.

They noted his reaction, Bruce probing, “Who’s Thanos?”
With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals.

“Thanos,” Thor began, “is one of the Eternals from Titan.”

“Alright, you’re going to have to go a bit slower for us,” Tony interrupted. “What is an Eternal – ’cause I would assume it equalled ‘Immortal’, but then you are that and you’ve never referred to yourself as Eternal – and where is Titan? We talking some place that the Titans of Greek mythology chilled and is actually inspired by these people on this place, or are we talking someplace named Titan? Because the only ‘Titan’ I know is orbiting Saturn.”

Loki sneered, “The Titans that the Hellenes spoke of were sealed away in Tartaros by the Olympians – they have no location that has taken their name.”

“You know the Greek myths?” Natasha said skeptically.

“Isn’t that, um…” Steve began only to trail off with an embarrassed flush.

“-sacrilege?” Tony snickered, finishing the thought.

Loki raised his eyebrow. “I think you severely underestimate the number of centuries we’ve lived.”

“That doesn’t particularly mean that you were visiting Earth that whole time,” Bruce defended. “And even if you were, considering where you’re worshipped we aren’t going to automatically assume you wandered to a variety of places.”

“We’re getting off-topic here,” Coulson interjected.

“I shall be clearer, my friends,” Thor proclaimed with a grin, the banter between his brother and his team warming his heart. “The Eternals were once human, but the Celestials (beings of indescribable cosmic power) selected a variety and experimented on them. Those that survived the testing of the flexibility of their very make-up had as a result much longer lifespans and more profound powers than will ever occur naturally in your evolution, I think.”

“There were quite a few civil wars between them,” Loki carried, tone expressing his disinterest as he propped his chin up on the fist held by his right elbow resting on the surface of the table, “but eventually there was founded a colony on Titan, the moon of Saturn which you mentioned.

“Thanos was born misshapen, and, though I didn’t lay eyes on him, I have no reason to disabuse this notion based on his keeping the company of those like the Chitauri. Word has spread continuously over time of his quest to gain power, going so far as to integrate cybernetic components into his body. He was exiled, for a reason I do not know, and evidently decided on conquering the Realms for some reason.”

“Well, that reason’s looking pretty important,” Clint commented.
“Jarvis, could you transmit the recording of Thor and Loki’s description of Thanos to my phone?” Coulson requested. “The information is critical to my report to Fury.”

“Of course, Agent,” the constantly surveying AI replied instantly.

“So it was Thanos that started all this?” Steve asked, seeking clarification.

“Yes,” Loki answered. “The Other devoted his service to him, but isn’t one to devise something of this magnitude. Grovelling waste of space.”

Not one lacking in opinion, Tony remarked, “I’m sensing some dislike here…”

“I have no respect for cowardly weaklings,” Loki huffed.

“Says the god who was forced to obey him.”

Said god’s glare could have incinerated his bones in a second if he had permitted his anger to allow the fire tearing through his veins freedom. He settled for a scathing retort, enlightening the mortal to his overwhelming inferiority when compared to the likes of him, “Perhaps I shall throw you to the abyss of Death and Chaos and all the forces that are intangible to your world that reside everywhere, and there between realms with only the heart in you to light the way watch as you try to claw your way through the infinite branches of Yggdrasil to some salvation without your senses to guide you.

“Then, maybe, we can speak of the control whatever insect that comes upon you has over you.”

The silence that lay thick in the air held as steady as Loki’s burning gaze, for he loathed the thought of any man thinking him less for the circumstances that he had found himself in.

Tony cast his eyes to the table, frozen in his seat. He needed to check his tongue more often, this wasn’t the first time it had nearly gotten him killed. It was the first time he truly regretted his words, though. Without the details of the fractured portal they had all been thinking on how bad it might have been, but hearing a description, no matter how brief…

He was right – Tony couldn’t understand it. Couldn’t grasp the concept of Nothing or Death or Chaos, sense deprivation and hopelessness, surviving only by the skin of your teeth in an environment that valued – what? He didn’t even know what qualities could have endured, nevermind were considered advantageous.

On one hand, he wanted to understand, but on the other, he never wanted to hear the concepts mentioned again. What would the knowledge, broken down and explained, add to him? It would likely break him, mortal, human, as he was.

He took a deep breath and lifted his eyes again, their regret and realization bared for the god who had put him in his place.

Loki narrowed his eyes, unwilling to forgive, but lifted his chin in the semblance of a nod before returning his attention to the screen.

The others in the room copied the shift in intent hesitantly, and after a second the images resumed their play.

A helicopter flew under the overcast night sky and over the ridge of a cliff, blades thrumming. On the other side of the formation a sprawling institution was revealed surrounded by dozens of satellite dishes sending and receiving information, the only lights piercing through the dim being
the fluorescents that leaked through the clear window panes of the buildings and the bright highlights of the vehicles.

“All personnel, the evacuation order has been confirmed,” an agent on the P.A. system informed as the helicopter soared low over the harried agents, his voice echoing throughout the compound. “Proceed to your designated vehicles for evacuation of the premises – immediately. This is not a drill…”

The agents and scientists weaved through each other in a state of organized disarray, running with papers, briefcases, and equipment in hand to their arranged modes of transport. Those armed carted trunks full of weapons as they drove off the grounds in their Humvees. A soldier directing others past stood in front of a plaque that read:

JOINT DARK ENERGY MISSION  
Western Division  
Project Pegasus  
NASA Space Radiation Facility-  
SHIELD Accelerator Test Facility SATF

“What do pegasi have to do with anything?” Thor questioned, turning to Coulson. “Are you trying to breed them?”

Natasha raised her eyebrows as Clint smirked, Coulson answering in amusement, “No, it’s an acronym that stands for the Potential Energy Group, Alternative Sources, United States. It titles those assigned to the task of researching unusual forms of energy.”

“Are you saying you’ve seen a Pegasus?” Bruce asked the Thunderer, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Thor shrugged. “That is one name for them – but they are simply winged steeds, I don’t understand how they came to be in your fantasy.”

The helicopter’s blades slowed as it lowered to a landing pad clear of agents, with the exception of one male who awaited the craft. Having donned sunglasses and dressed in a suit, Agent Coulson stood unruffled in the churning wind that resulted as the machine landed. Agent Hill slid the door aside and stepped out, closely followed by Director Fury.

He adjusted the tails of his leather jacket as he noted the agents’ hurrying in the distance, then strode to Hill and faced Coulson with her to ask, “How bad is it?”

He removed his sunglasses and uttered, “That’s the problem, sir – we don’t know.”

“Ah,” Loki muttered, “this is my arrival, then.”

“I hope you’re ready to lose an eye,” Clint said, the inevitability of seeing himself serving Loki setting him on edge. He monitored his breathing and reminded himself that Fury would kill him if he jeopardized SHIELD’s agreement with the Trickster. The one deciding to taunt him with a smirk.

The three descended into the depths of the base by use of an elevator, Agent Coulson beginning, “Dr. Selvig read an energy surge from the Tesseract four hours ago.”
“NASA didn’t authorize Selvig to go to test phase,” Fury objected, the scientists who still remained in the building working to cart out their equipment as their superiors strode purposefully through the disorder.

“He wasn’t testing it,” Coulson argued. “He wasn’t even in the room. Spontaneous event.”

“It just turned itself on?” Agent Hill questioned incredulously.

“Where are the energy levels now?”

“Climbing,” he answered instantly. “When Selvig couldn’t shut it down we ordered evac.”

“How long to get everyone out?”

“Campus should be clear in the next half hour.”

“Do better,” Fury commanded. Coulson nodded in acceptance and turned to move back to the surface.

“Sir, evacuation may be futile,” Hill said, following the Director down a stairwell that curved around the outside of a grand chamber.

“We should tell them to go back to sleep?” he suggested, tone thick with sarcasm.

“If we can’t control the Tesseract’s energy, there may not be a minimum safe distance.”

“I need you to make sure the Phase 2 prototypes are shipped out,” he ordered as they reached the landing.

“That shouldn’t be a priority,” Steve protested, frowning at the remembrance of the weapons SHIELD had been developing.

“Sir, is that really a priority right now-”

Natasha smirked. “I think that’s the third time someone’s interrupted and parroted the coming lines.” Steve flushed.

“Until such time as the world ends,” Fury started, turning from where he had stepped onto a row of stairs leading into the testing chamber to face her, “we will act as though it intends to spin on.” He continued up as he demanded, “Clear out the tech below – every piece of Phase 2 on a truck and gone.”

“Yes, sir,” she acquiesced softly as she walked past him, ordering the two armoured agents standing guard, “With me.”

He gave her back a considering look before he turned and entered into the large open cavity. “Talk to me, Doctor.”

Selvig stood from where he had been crouched behind an intricate device holding the Cube at its center, tubes and wiring connecting the heavy metal circle and vault lock to the hydraulic and monitoring devices that cluttered the area. The wall behind him displayed a couple of banners, boasting NASA and SHIELD’s support and funding of the project. “Director,” he welcomed, rushing over to his side.

“Wait, aren’t you controlling him?” Bruce questioned carelessly.
Loki titled his head and narrowed his eyes as the others in the room froze. “What do you mean?” he asked slowly.

Bruce gulped and darted his gaze around the room, shrinking down into his chair at his reference to the previous images of Loki that they had seen. Tony interrupted with a forced tone of arrogance, “Well, I was creeping through SHIELD’s cameras and rotating the lenses around the Tesseract, and there was this one time when Fury showed it to Selvig and he was giving off some magic. Similar to the readings I got from the security on my tower when he was brainwashed.

“So were you controlling him before?”

Loki’s scrutiny did not waver, despite the convincing excuse. Because though his teammates and Coulson breathed easier after Stark’s cover, it was obvious to Loki that it was a hurriedly constructed falsehood. The signature of the Mind Gem’s control compared to that of his personal magic’s slight persuasion, which is as of yet untraceable to human technology, are worlds apart. Nevermind that only the glaze over their eyes tells of the control caused by the former, as, again, their technology is unable to detect the frequency which the control resonates at within the host’s body.

He answered honestly, “Nothing as complete as what I accomplished with the gem – merely whispered words and a signal so to track him and watch his progress,” while musing on how to force the information from them. He could state outright his suspicions, but in their number they would likely rally so to keep the truth from him.

If he cornered one alone though, one he had leverage over… Loki’s shrewd gaze leapt to Clint, whose eyebrow twitched in wariness of the god’s thoughts.

“Is there anything we know for certain?”

“The Tesseract is misbehaving,” he said as behind him one of the scientists moved to prod the aforementioned artefact, the Cube jolting the intruding slim instrument with azure energy and forcing it back, the man gasping at the reaction.

“Is that supposed to be funny?” Fury asked dryly.

“No, it’s not funny at all. The Tesseract is not only active,” he tried to explain as he met with Fury and walked with him back towards the Cube, “she’s behaving.”

“I assume you pulled the plug?”

“She’s an energy source – we turn off the power, she turns it back on. If she reaches peak level-”

“We prepared for this, Doctor – harnessing energy from space,” Fury stated.

Steve frowned once again.

“But we don’t have the harness,” Selvig retorted. “My calculations are far from complete.” He moved around behind a computer that was charting the Tesseract’s activity as Fury stood before him. “She’s throwing off interference. Radiation. Nothing harmful – low levels of gamma radiation.”

“That can be harmful,” he muttered.

Bruce pretended not to notice the glances sent his way, admiring of SHIELD’s admittance of his mistakes. He didn’t want them trying to recreate the danger of what he was.
“Where’s Agent Barton?”

Selvig scoffed and clarified, “The Hawk?” He jerked a thumb to point over his shoulder, answering, “Up in his nest as usual.”

Clint was crouched on a long scaffolding in an upper corner of the space, arms crossed over the low rail as his sharp eyes took in the scene below. His earpiece crackled with Fury requesting, ‘Agent Barton, report.’ He placed his leather gloved hands on the bar, fingers uncovered and free for attack, and moved to obey.

He repelled from his vantage point down alongside the long banners, the font under the further SHIELD insignia listing the lead scientists for the project as, closer, there was dictated underneath the NASA logo:

**MISSIONS**

**JOINT DARK ENERGY MISSION**

**Western Division**

**ADVANCED DARK ENERGY PHYSICS TELESCOPE (ADEPT)**

**COSMIC INFLATION PROBE (CIP)**

**OR COSMIC EXPANSION PROBE (CEP)**

**DARK ENERGY SPACE TELESCOPE (DESTINY)**

**SUPERNOVA ACCELERATION PROBE-LENSING (SNAP-L)**

**J.D.E.M.**

“What are all those things?” Steve asked.

Tony answered, “It’s NASA, don’t worry – SHIELD’s the shady sector you’ve got to worry about. That was all their work around SHIELD’s information on the Tesseract, integrating it into their watchful spacey things.” Steve’s expression still displayed his confusion, but that was probably in regards to the satellites in orbit that hadn’t even been started at the time he was frozen. The history books Tony had stocked his room with should help with that.

“I gave you this detail so you could keep a close eye on things,” Director Fury said once he had landed.

“Well, I see better from a distance,” he replied as they walked across the floor.

“It’s your eyes that got you your name?” Tony snarked. “‘Cause I thought it was ‘cause of your holing up in high places and diving off buildings mid-fight.”

“Funny, ‘cause I’d always thought ‘Playboy’ was too nice a term for ‘Man-whore’,” Clint retorted.

“We’re in the middle of something,” Steve reminded. “Why don’t you two spar later?”

“You’re not allowed the suit,” Clint instantly commented.

“Bring it on – let’s see you without your arrows, Robin Hood.”
“Have you seen anything that might set this thing off?”

A blonde scientist warned, “Doctor, it’s spiking again,” as they ambled past. Selvig rushed to her side and observed the data on the screen with her.

“No one’s come or gone, and Selvig’s clean,” Clint responded, Fury stepping onto the short platform in front of the Tesseract before he joined him, crossing his arms over his chest. “No contacts, no IMs – if there was any tampering, sir, it wasn’t at this end.”

‘At this end’? Fury echoed.

Clint stared at him for a second before explaining, “Yeah – the Cube is a doorway to the other end of space, right?

“Doors open from both sides.”

“Look at how intelligent you are,” Loki praised mockingly.

“Shut it,” Clint growled.

“Take the compliment, Barton,” Coulson said. “Fury hadn’t thought of it and neither did Selvig or the other scientists. We could have been more prepared if we were all on our toes anticipating someone else activating it.”

Clint turned back to the screen.

Selvig’s head was craned down close to the screen as he mumbled in panic, “Not yet,” at the Tesseract abruptly beginning to hum. She started emitting crackling sparks and waves of visible blue energy, her actions jolting the very structure of the building and causing Fury and Clint to teeter before they were able to jerk back into balanced stances.

Above, Coulson was thrown slightly at the quake, his hand reaching back to steady himself on the metal pillar he was beside. In another sector, Agent Hill cast her gaze around in her wondering at the event.

The Cube gushed azure waves of bright light, sparking periodically with her radiation snapping around her as the scientists and agents in the room stood captivated in cautious anticipation. With a whir the energy swirled and focused before the Cube, gathering and building to initiate a horizontal vortex of thick threaded power from her position. Suddenly it congregated into a beam that shot forward, its rays halting at some point several yards away to begin blossoming outwards to form an ethereal, circular frame around a point that was dark and shining with stars present from another’s world. The energy rang thick in the air as the portal gradually grew, a cobalt haze coiling around it in mimicry of heat.

Without warning the act collapsed and exploded, the energy thrown from its coalesced spot to pass harmlessly through the scientists gaping in awe and the armed agents who threw up their arms to shield their heads. The remains blazed along the floor and up the walls before dispersing into the air, the only visual evidence left being the power that crackled along the tile that led to, and where it was gathered in a vague form, where the portal had been.

Some of the waves were drawn upwards to the ceiling by the partially completed device that Selvig had managed, but the rest disappeared as a kneeling figure was revealed. He had come through the portal, the magic of it now sizzling as it evaporated off of his leather clothing and dark hair. Four nameless SHIELD agents raised their guns and approached carefully as he stood, scepter in hand with a small glowing orb set above the staff and between the blades.
“If they’re planning on fighting you, they’re going to lose,” Tony commented, reclining in his chair. Loki hummed in agreement.

A delighted grin stretched Loki’s mouth as he breathed shakily, sweat dampening his brow, before he was able to calm the feeling of his success. A few seconds passed as the shock abated in those around him, and then he realized their opposition and readied his weapon.

“Sir, please put down the spear,” Fury called strongly.

Thor snorted as he stifled his laughter.

Loki cast a gaze to his scepter as if debating the request before his eyes darted to the Director and he thrust his arm forward to direct a shock of energy from the orb towards him. Clint tackled Fury out of the way and they grunted as they crashed to the grating of the floor. The agents began shooting from their automatic rifles but the bullets did not even penetrate his clothing as Loki leapt towards one and stabbed him in the chest, knocking another down. He threw knives at the two across the chamber and they yelled as the blades pierced their throats.

The female scientist cowering behind a computer was blasted by another beam from Loki’s scepter as the downed agent raised a gun and had his chest swiftly sliced from the blades atop it. Two agents and Clint, from his position knelt on the floor, raised their guns and began firing. Loki did not react to these until a shot rebounded off his cheekbone, causing his head to jerk.

“You were just shot in the face,” Natasha deadpanned.

“Yes,” he agreed with a small smile. “Æsir skin is invulnerable to most of your bullets, the guns you’ve fashioned not yet able to propel the rounds with sufficient velocity so to pierce it.”

Bruce physically bit his tongue to restrain himself from inquiring further, since Loki was not, in fact, one of the Æsir.

Loki noticed this of course, and even if he were to disregard the anonymous informant who provided information on his activities, Thor had stated several times that he was adopted and it was possible he had told them what he was.

He decided to reply to the unasked question. “When I shift my form takes on all of the physical qualities of the body I shift into.”

“Oh good, shapeshifting’s been broached,” Tony said excitedly. “When you change into animals do you lose parts of yourself while you’re in their bodies, since their brains and hormones don’t have the capacity for all things human – or, you know, Asgardian or whatever? How is it that you can change back if that’s the case? How much energy does it take? On a scale of illusions vs cloning, since those are my only points of reference.”

“Stark,” Coulson scolded after he had sighed. “There is an event that we’re watching.”

“Hey, magic’s important to SHIELD,” he argued.

“I shall be concise so to not upset Agent Coulson,” Loki declared, “and after we are finished here you can analyze various forms of mine.”

Bruce and Tony’s expressions were blissful at the thought of demonstrations.

“You are correct in your deduction that an animal’s body does not have the capacity to retain all of my knowledge and range of emotions, but I’m still able to have a firm grasp on my sense of self.
This might be different if this ability occurred in a gifted mortal or a sorcerer less powerful, but with it being a magical process – though it is a talent one is blessed with at birth – and taking into account my extensive magical core, when I shift the awareness that my… ‘natural’ form is one superior and more powerful remains with me. My fundamental personality remains as well. My experiences while shifted add to my overall mental and emotional development, but the limited mentalities do not carry over to my regular form.

“If I were to give an example, when I shift into a wolf my mind is more pack-oriented, focused on things like territory and possession and I’m quite aggressive, but I do have the knowledge that this is not my native form and my rational thinking processes carry over. It is the body’s natural hormones that want to fuel certain actions like… tearing out someone’s throat for trespassing, but I’m able to will my reason over such instincts or I can succumb to them if I feel it will be beneficial – it is under my control, to a certain degree.

“It’s the same situation if you were to step outside yourselves as humans. Most of the time it is your thoughts that give way to action, but under emotional duress it is the baser instincts that you comply with, disregarding the consequences.”

“Fascinating,” Bruce muttered. “So you have no issue shifting back into a humanoid form, then?”

“Not in regards to what was mentioned before, no,” Loki answered. “I might chose to remain in whatever form I’m in if it aids me in combatting something afterwards, like injury or environment, but it is my choice, once again.”

“And how much magic does it take?” Tony asked. “I’m going to guess less than cloning yourself, ‘cause it’s only transforming your body – not making another one – and you don’t have to split your consciousness and magic.”

“You’re correct.”

“Booyah.”

“You can continue this at a later time, Stark,” Coulson said. “I have other responsibilities.”

“Please, you can’t even pretend you don’t enjoy being here,” Tony remarked. “No one’s shooting at you, you don’t have any paperwork, Fury can’t boss you around – it’s like a vacation!”

“None of my vacations would include you.”

Tony pouted as Clint and Natasha snickered.

He fired one more beam into the fray, tossing the agents backward as Clint rolled out of the way. He kicked the cut agent at his side who had moved to get up again, his body slamming into the distant wall, and paused.

He panted as his eyes roved the area, all of the agents lying injured on the floor and smoke rising from where his scepter’s blasts had burned through the machinery, sparks flying in spurts from the damage to the wiring. Clint lifted himself to all-fours before climbing to his feet, spinning quickly just as Loki approached him. He raised his gun but Loki harshly threw his own wrist to meet Clint’s, the assassin’s face contorting in pain at the sensation of the end of his radius being bruised so easily.

He maintained his grip on his gun and tried to adjust the angle so to enable him to shoot, but Loki grabbed the injured bone firmly. “You have heart,” the god noted.
Fury got to his feet before the Tesseract as Loki raised his spear so the tip gently touched the center of Clint’s chest. The gem embedded in the tip pulsed and deep blue energy ghosted over the blade and through the agent. Clint emitted a groaning sigh as the power visibly crackled over his skin and up his neck, surging to his eyes and curtaining them over with shadow. Bright azure suddenly swirled and gathered over his irises as he lifted his gaze to meet Loki’s, an unnatural glaze settling over the pupil as he drew back with a sigh.

Clint stood before him as Loki waited, scepter still raised and hand outstretched, and then Clint holstered his firearm. Loki raised his chin in approval and tossed the staff into his other hand as he turned his back to his devotee and moved towards the other agents.

Clint’s fists were clenched beneath the table as he focused on calming his breathing, not on the eyes of his teammates and handler (or would that be former handler, as he wasn’t an assassin directly under SHIELD anymore – was there a liaison between the Avengers and SHIELD?), and most certainly not on the expression of the god whom he’d served. He could picture the smug expression on his face, and it wouldn’t help his precarious situation with Fury if he killed his magical consultant.

Watching his behaviour like this separated him further from the feelings he experienced under Loki’s control. And, unfortunately, he needed to confront the reality of them for him to come to terms with the Trickster as his ally. He needed to sort out his thoughts, and then confront Loki about what his plans for Clint are.

He was sure that if Loki had plans to regain control of his mind he’d tell him, taunt him with it, leave him hanging in suspense and fear, because any concerns that he brought to Fury would be dismissed in favour of the contract he’d signed. And even if they were informed, Loki would be able to get around their defenses. He always could. So asking him would prepare him for what stance he should take in his interactions with him. Loki would be straightforward.

And wasn’t it sick that he trusted him in that?

Fury’s brow furrowed in confusion at the interaction before he turned his attention to the Cube, reaching out to remove her from the large device she had been set in. He placed her with grit teeth, her fizzing power singeing his fingers, into the armoured briefcase she had been kept in before they had started testing her. He glanced towards where Loki stood converting the only other agent to survive the onslaught as he snapped the locks shut.

“Please don’t,” Loki uttered softly. He turned slowly to face towards where the Director had moved to exit. “I still need that.”

“Of course it does – I’ve come too far for anything else.” Fury cautiously came to face him directly as he proclaimed, “I am Loki, of Asgard, and I am burdened with glorious purpose.”

“Loki,” Selvig repeated, amazed as he stood from where he had crouched to check the pulse of one of the unconscious agents, “brother of Thor.” Loki sent a brief glower his way, splotches of bruising now evident beneath his eyes in the faint lighting.

They noted them.

“We have no quarrel with your people,” Fury said in an attempt to pacify, a palm raised forward as if to calm the tension of the situation.
“An ant has no quarrel with a boot,” Loki remarked succinctly.

“You planning to step on us?”

“I come with glad tidings-” he announced as he stepped over to Selvig before addressing Fury again, “-of a world made free.”

“Free from what?” he asked.

“Freedom, freedom is life’s great lie. Once you accept that, in your heart,” he spun and touched Selvig with his scepter, the gem pulsing again to flood his eyes with black and then bright blue as he gasped. He finished, crooning, “you will know peace.”

“Yeah, you say ‘peace’… I kind of think you mean the other thing.”

As Fury’s reply sounded a hum issued from the energy that had been captured above, Clint’s eyes darting up to observe the conglomeration of power.

“Sir, Director Fury is stalling,” Clint informed, pacing over to his god with a vigilant glance sent once more onto Fury and the hand on his gun. “This place is about to blow and drop a hundred feet of rock on us.” The energy swirled and shone brighter as it gained strength. “He means to bury us.”

“Like the pharaohs of old,” Fury confirmed.

“He’s right, the portal is collapsing in on itself,” Selvig reiterated. He summarized the data on the screen he had moved over to, one connected to the surveying equipment strategically placed around the area, “We’ve got maybe two minutes before this goes critical.”

“Well then,” Loki says decisively as he shares a glance with Clint. Without a word he draws his gun and shoots Fury in the chest, the Director thrown onto his back with a groan.

“Well shit,” Tony mutters. Clint taps his fingers in a nervous rhythm against this thigh under the surface of the table.

The four walk from the room, Clint bending down to grab the briefcase as they march past Fury’s prone form.

Selvig holds his hands out for the container and Clint hands it over, lengthening his stride in order to lead the group. Loki stumbles and bends over with a pained gasp before righting himself, the agent following placing a hand on the small of his back in support in case he falters again.

“Alright, what happened?” Tony sighed. “Make us feel bad for you so our guards are down when you slaughter us in our sleep.”

Loki chuckled and gracefully shrugged. “I was weakened due to the magic required to connect to the Tesseract and stabilize the portal.” It was plain that they did not believe him, but he was not one to call pity to himself or attention to his moments of weakness.

Clint ducked under a grating that cordoned off one of the underground garages as it raised, Selvig clutching the briefcase to his chest as he, Loki, and the additional agent followed. “I need these vehicles,” Clint said as he gestured to the parked trucks.

The radio on Agent Hill’s hip rustled with static as she asked, “Who’s that?” referring to Loki climbing into the box of one of the trucks and crouching low as he panted. Selvig piled himself and
the Tesseract into the front seat as the other agent chose the car beside them.

“They didn’t tell me,” Clint replied as he passed her and headed for the driver’s seat, opening the door.

She turned away with wondering, furrowed brows. “Hill!” Fury’s call came over the radio she held in her hand, causing Loki and Clint to whip their heads towards her. “Do you copy?”

In the other chamber he ripped the bullet out of his vest.

“Barton has turned.” She moved to face said agent as he drew his gun and began firing shots at her, Hill rolling to the side and kneeling behind a wall as she grabbed her gun.

Clint fired a few more shots as he leapt to the side of the truck, diving in before slamming the door closed. The tires screeched as he spun and pulled the vehicle onto the exit ramp, Hill’s shots bouncing off the doors of it and the car following.

The azure energy had collected into a large ball in the center of its growing influence on the ceiling of the space. Fury stumbled out, hunched over his radio as he braced himself on the frame of the exit for a second as he shouted, “They have the Tesseract – shut them down!”

Agent Hill threw her radio into the back of the jeep as she vaulted into the driver’s seat, starting the engine and engaging in the pursuit ordered.

There were several cars with flashing yellow lights that tailed the vehicle Clint was steering, and as one got too close and allowed the agent in the front seat to lean out his window and open fire Loki braced himself and shot another devastating ray from his scepter. The top half of the car was mangled as it veered off to run up a row of stairs, flipping and sliding as the truck behind it mercilessly shoved it onwards.

Bruce turned from the screen for a second as he imagined the remains of the agents who had been in that car.

The power above surged and gathered as it spun and pulsed. Fury ducked under the pipes and grating that fell from the ceiling and walls as he ran through the halls. A few agents carried a load of suitcases down the stairs when a shockwave shook the ground beneath their feet, knocking them down the flight of steps and sending their equipment tumbling. “Okay, let’s go. No-No, leave it! Go!” Coulson ushered, forcing them from the area.

Agent Hill’s jeep skid out from a passage that cut in front of Clint, and he frowned fiercely at the obstacle as she pulled the emergency brake to spin sharply around so to face his truck. He rammed into her front bumper and drove her back, dismissive of her brakes. She kept one hand on the steering wheel as she grabbed her gun, raising it to shoot through the windshield at them. Clint had his handgun held out the window as he returned fire.

“We’re clear upstairs, sir,” Coulson reported as he climbed into the back of a vehicle filled with half a dozen armed agents. “You need to go.” The tall lamps encircling the open landing pad burst into sparks at the quakes tearing their wiring as Director Fury ran out to the awaiting helicopter. They lifted as he was seating himself, the SHIELD logo imprinted on the ground below them fracturing at the disturbance from beneath it.

Clint drew his gun in after Hill had to focus on her braking, and jerked his steering wheel from side to side. His front wheels followed the motions and Hill’s jeep was spun and tossed to the side as they barreled past. She hurriedly regained control of the vehicle and sped after them.
The remaining energy of the portal condensed before exploding outwards, the ground above ballooning upwards before sinking abruptly. The campus collapsed in on itself as dictated by its distance from the origin, blasts igniting and smoking when machinery that had been left behind was impacted. The truck Coulson was seated in was jerked roughly when the lengthening radius reached them. Fury watched with wide eyes as all of the buildings were torn apart to gravel and pulled downwards.

Underground the tunnels were caving in onto the vehicles, the edge of the blast following Agent Hill’s truck as she sped to escape it. Loki turned away from the falling rock and shooting sparks and towards the exit ahead. Above, Coulson gaped as all of SHIELD’s satellites screeched as they were pulled down into the mammoth crater, the edge of destruction gaining on them before it halted.

The earth beneath fell heavily around Hill’s truck and she was forced to stop, her head slamming forward into the dashboard as boulders piled around her. A headlight shone as a display of her being at the fringe, Clint left without pursuit as the automatic doors out of the tunnels slid open before him. Loki stood in the back and faced forward with his scepter in hand at the chopping of the blades of the helicopter.

“This is one intense car chase,” Tony joked weakly.

Clint turned sharply when the aircraft descended onto them, then weaved over the dry terrain back around to face Fury once the helicopter had gained altitude again. Fury slid the door to the side and used his handgun to fire, the rounds piercing the glass of their truck and shooting into the front seats. Selvig ducked to the side as Clint flinched and used an arm to cover his eyes. The vehicle was held steady with determination, and Loki reeled back and shot a beam through the engine at the base of the chopper’s tail. It burst into flames and began to spin as Clint drove underneath its fall, Fury jumping out of the side and grunting as he rolled upon landing.

The helicopter’s blades continued to rotate and cut themselves into pieces against the ground, metal flying off with the momentum as the craft skid. Fury shot after Loki, but the god was out of range. Clint returned to the dirt road and drove on, Loki bracing himself on the roof as he stood, allowing an open-mouthed smile of victory as he exhaled heavily.

“Director?” Coulson inquired over the radio. “Director Fury do you copy?”

“The Tesseract is with a hostile force,” he responded. “I have men down. Hill?”

“A lot of men still under-” she replied, levering herself out of the wreckage, “-I don’t know how many survivors.”

“Sound the general call,” Fury ordered. “I want every living soul not working rescue out looking for that briefcase.”

“Roger that,” Hill murmured, voice filled with exhaustion.

“Coulson, get back to base – this is a Level 7. As of right now, we are at war.”

“What do we do?” Coulson asked. Fury lowered his radio and stared off into the distance, options and their outcomes vying for attention within his mind.
Chapter Summary

With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals. Further prepared for their enemy, they work to protect Loki from the consequences of aiding SHIELD.

“Quite the entrance there, Diva,” Tony jeered. “Think you overdid it a bit?”

“It was not my actions that caused the facility to implode,” Loki defended.

“With all the information supplied on Thanos, I think it’s better for me to send an immediate report to Fury,” Coulson commented, “and then provide an update when we know his goals. And seeing as I don’t know the content that I might be missing, you’ll wait to continue.”

“Sure, sure,” Tony waved away as the agent exited. He swivelled back and forth in his chair in the silence that followed, all of them at a loss without the images that have brought them such insight.

“I trust you will inform me when Agent Coulson returns, Jarvis?” Loki queried as he stood.

“Of course, Sorcerer.”

He nodded and vanished.

“J, send me the readings of his teleportation,” Tony ordered, tapping the surface of the table pointedly, the surface brightening and revealing itself to be translucent and an interactive interface. A hologram of Loki appeared standing before him on the table approximately two feet tall, the rest of the occupants that had been in the room cropped out of the display by Jarvis.

Clint lifted himself from his seat and slunk from the room as Tony added, “Give me infrared.”

Loki’s form was depicted in false-colour luminescent reds and oranges as Bruce circled to Tony’s side. Where the hologram had previously been suspended in a diminutive measure of time it now moved as a recording of the god vanishing. His teammates, who had leaned forward in eager anticipation, fell back into their seats when the image had disappeared without any visible change in the thermal reading.

“Can you slow it to 500 thousand frames per second?” Bruce requested.

“And make him life sized,” Tony said, kicking his chair back and standing. Jarvis projected the image before him and the teleportation was played in slow motion.

This time there was a noticeable difference; some visual evidence was provided to explain the process. Their teammates’ expressions, though intrigued, were not as animated as Bruce and Tony’s, their eyes wide at having caught anything at all. Though a part of them had been adamant that they could devise a way to observe the flow of magic, another part had believed Loki when he had said their technology was not yet able to.
It was true, what they were viewing was not magic, but it was proof of a certain measure. When depicted in the bright false-colour of the infrared camera, when Loki teleported it was evident that some energy was produced from the action. Before he disappeared, there was a change in the blood flow of his core, just beneath his sternum, and as he was disappearing indistinct, hazy waves of heat seemed to seep from all of the pores of his skin. And then he was gone, the impression of energy left in a long stripe at the center of where his torso had been situated for not half a second longer before it hastily dissipated.

“Fuck-damn-okay – makes sense for there not to be a point of concentration for his magic in this as he’s teleporting his whole body and so all parts of him have to be emitting magic for it to carry his complete form to another area,” Tony mused aloud quickly, his hand raising to make a sloppy circular motion in the air that Jarvis interpreted as the desire to repeat the projection’s activity under the same conditions. “I was thinking before that there would be magic coming from somewhere – like his hands – and then enveloping him to carry him off, but this makes more sense and really I should’ve thought of it-”

“What’s this though?” Bruce questioned, the teleportation running through a third time and his finger pointing at Loki’s stomach. The AI graciously paused the process for his examination. “It looks as though his blood suddenly picks up speed and… swirls inward? The lens must be picking up some other energy flow reading, but there’s no camera that can capture the underlying tissues.”

“We could dissect him,” Tony suggested before abruptly dismissing the idea, mumbling aloud, “But he’d have to be teleporting.”

“Maybe this is the source you expected, but instead of flowing externally to teleport him the force flows through him,” Bruce suggested. “There’s more heat generated at the point of origin, which is why the lens didn’t show any visible change over the rest of his limbs.”

“You’re thinking his magical core is his stomach?” Tony summarized, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “J, give me all of the Helicarrier’s footage when Loki’s using magic. Then we can see if it emits from different points when he does different things.”

“They have recalibrated their security systems against my intrusion, sir,” Jarvis responded. “With the knowledge I have gained of their structure from when you requested the incursion previously, I would be able to maneuver through their firewalls – if they had not improved upon them. I am afraid with an aspect of their defenses directed towards what they learned of my presence, I am unable to impose without a direct point of contact, as before, sir.”

“Don’t sweat it,” he responded, though a frown was present on his face. “Has Loki done any other magic here? Aside from the teleporting thing.”

“He transported himself from his rooms to the hall outside the elevator once he was summoned… Other than that instance, no he has not, sir,” the AI answered uncertainly.

“What’s up, Jarv?” Tony asked with a raised eyebrow, any tidiness on the computer’s part usually revealing something that he wishes to convey that confuses him. Emotion had begun developing in the system’s psyche due to the advanced nature of his Artificial Intelligence, and Tony had told him to simply state what it was he was feeling so his Creator could help him to understand it. In this instance, there may be a certain quality of Loki’s magic that the AI is linking some emotion to, or he may be experiencing confusion about a facet of it.

“When I alerted the Sorcerer of Agent Coulson’s arrival, he had immediately teleported out of his chambers, but did not arrive to this floor for a few minutes. During that time I had begun searching through the entirety of the Tower, starting at the roof and working downwards, to locate him and
ensure that he was not taking part in anything that you would disapprove of, sir. I had progressed through the levels that you had introduced him to and was 3 floors lower when he reappeared. As he had moved through to where I had directed him immediately, I was dissuaded from the belief that he had been engaged in some ulterior activity for the moment.

“I continued my scan of the footage of those few moments through the rest of the Tower while controlling and observing the progression of the disc you had received, but found no evidence of the Sorcerer’s presence within the timeframe. I had assumed there was a delay when he teleported his matter from one area to another.”

“What changed?” Tony asked with narrowed eyes.

“Twice the time has elapsed since his leaving this room, sir, and he has not yet reappeared,” Jarvis stated. “If my theory was correct then the same approximate amount of time should have elapsed between travels, as he has roughly the same distance to travel between floors, depending on where he wishes to arrive at in his rooms.”

By Jarvis’ thought process, Loki’s teleportation should have a delay. Either one that is static or that correlates to the distance he travels. But his absence dismissed the former and indicated that if associated with distance then Loki was travelling somewhere outside of the upper floors of the Tower, which was worrying.

“So he’s gone? You can’t find him right now?” Steve interrogated as he stood, the question directed towards Tony in contrast to his AI.

“My apologies,” Jarvis interrupted, “he has returned.”

“Where is he?” Natasha asked.

“He is with Agent Barton.”

“What’s he doing?” she pressured as she got to her feet.

“Let ‘em hash out their feelings,” Tony urged, “I’ll let us know if things start to heat up. But we need his ears here – we’ve got to figure this out.”

Steve and Natasha reluctantly reclaimed their seats, Tony inquiring of Jarvis, “Does the math add up?”

“I have only two points of reference, sir, but it seems unlikely that the delay between departure and arrival should exponentially increase to such a degree. With one floor’s, 3 yards’, increase in distance the time of 46 seconds increased to that of 4 minutes and 21 seconds.”

“There is something else he is doing, my friends,” Thor announced. “It happens in less than an instant, his travelling. In many battles he has vanished from my side and has carried others to the rear of the enemy so to surround them – a distance much greater than up and down through this palace.”

Tony’s thoughts on the magic of Loki’s teleportation were stalled by his ego’s surge at his tower being so naturally referred to as a ‘palace’. He shook his head to clear the notion as he clarified, “So it’s not a delay at all – but then where’s he transporting to? What point is there in popping into a place for less than a minute?”

“He may not be going anywhere at all,” Thor explained with a smile. “Where would he go? There is nowhere for him on Midgard other than here.”
“What are you saying?” Steve asked.

Thor shrugged, though he still wore a smile at the thought of Loki’s mischievous habits. “Perhaps it is simply that your recording devices cannot see him.”

Bruce sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “You’re saying he might just be invisibly eavesdropping on us.”

Tony narrowed his eyes and pouted slightly, an odd expression but one that conveyed both his aggravation at Loki having access to them while they were unaware of it and his fascination at the concept of invisibility and the unfortunate unlikelihood of Loki displaying it for him to analyze. “You ran through the Tower with all of your lenses, J?”

“Indeed, sir.” His AI sounded put-upon as well. “There are no thermal readings lacking a visual presence.”

“If he could stand in the middle of dozens of SHIELD personnel and try to steal that hammer without their cameras catching anything, then we should’ve expected this,” Natasha commented, her nails tapping a couple of times on the surface of the table in frustration, feeling free to refer to the previous images they had seen when it was definite that Loki was on another floor with Clint. It would have been advantageous to learn how Loki’s magic worked, but with the team gathered together in one room with Loki while watching the events around the invasion for the foreseeable future… Clint took the break that was offered and rode the elevator up to his floor. He had contemplated attacking one of the sandbags in the training room, but had wanted as much distance from the Trickster as possible while in a space comfortable enough to sort out his thoughts. He had to iron out his stance on the god before he watched himself killing SHIELD agents and obeying His every whim.

He’d debated going to the roof, but knew the temptation would be to swing down to another building, and then another; he’d travel the city by skyline and just avoid thinking about anything. Anyway, he needed to be in range of the AI’s call for when Phil returned.

He arrived at his floor and ensconced himself in his suite, perching atop the fridge in his kitchenette and easily arranging himself to sit cross-legged and hunched over so to rest his elbows on his knees and fold his hands under his chin.

_I don’t like having Him here – I’m allowed to admit that after what He’s done to me. And I don’t care if that scepter addled Him too! Being physically forced into something and having some fucking magical scepter make you want to do it all are two completely different things. And having Him here is out of my control, which reminds me of when He was in control – so I don’t like it. I wanted to just kill Him, or throw Him back to Asgard, and ignore the whole damn thing…_

_But now He’s here for good, it seems. And it’s not like SHIELD’s civil about it – no way in hell. They force us to live with Him. And now He’s here all the time. And I don’t know what will happen or what He’s thinking ‘cause on the Helicarrier during that mockery of an interrogation He was using fucking endearments and then He sought me out after and it’s not like I can shoot Him in the face ‘cause that’d jeopardize His contract with SHIELD-

_Not like it’d hurt Him – arrows would probably bounce right off his fucking eyeballs._

_But that’s not what really matters. I know I’m scared of being controlled again – anyone would be. Just like Tasha’s still wary of the Hulk after he came after her. You don’t just face the reality of_
shit like that and walk away going, ‘No biggie’. It was how alright I was with everything – how alright I still am.

It was being controlled that I look back on and loath Him for, but I can’t honestly feel hate towards Him for anything he made me do. Which is fucking stupid! But the control just revealed what I’d be like without rules or consequences – or really just a reason to defy them all. And that reason had been Him, for a time.

Under Him, it wasn’t any different from SHIELD, really. It was better. And I don’t know if these thoughts are ‘cause of the memories I have of His influence or not. But it was the same in that I’d be told who was opposing us, who to kill, and without asking for any further reasoning I’d obey. I was trained as an assassin – that’s what I do. But to have the whole thing flipped around and a parallel situation presented-

Now I have my mind back, but if I weren’t with the Avengers I’d be doing the same things for SHIELD that I was for Him. There’s no morality that occurred to me – it’s the same thing. Loki’s the ‘evil’ one – right now. Since He lost. If He’d won then where would I be? I’d still be His slave – or maybe He’d release me. Because what threat would I bring if He ruled the world? Would I have even tried to oppose Him, or would He have explained things as I’m working them out now? Would I be grateful that He’d taken me?

And what’s worse… He wasn’t a bad handler. I wasn’t abused or downtrodden by Him. I had to fight for my skills to be recognized by SHIELD, but He just waltzed in and appreciated my work. I was His favourite, He’d said. His Deputy. And He might’ve just been looking through my mind and knew that I was expendable at SHIELD, so played on it… But it doesn’t change how His words affected me. Plus the fact that He was my god while I was controlled… Praised by your god? Yeah, that’s a sensation you can just dismiss.

And… I’m worried about what this DVD’ll show. I was completely under his control, and there was that time…

I had offered myself to Him. He was my god and so I had offered my body for His use.

But He hadn’t taken it – me. I was confused at the time. He’d given an odd smile and shook His head, cooing as He ran His fingers through my hair, “You’re not thinking clearly, pet.”

And I’d been crushed, because I’d wanted to serve Him in every way – but I wasn’t good enough, of course not, not to a god…

He’d dissuaded those notions by continuing to pet my hair and praising my work, making excuses about how He was busy and couldn’t afford to be distracted – and so I’d continued to devote myself to Him.

But it makes sense now.

And no matter how much I want to hate Him for the control He had over me, how can I, really, when He didn’t take advantage of it?

And that was different. With SHIELD I’d have to torture kids or kill innocents for leverage over whatever target I was following, it didn’t matter my objections – but here was one who had my mind – heart – in His hand, one who had to only say the word and I’d be happy to obey Him. I would’ve done anything and been happy through it all.

But He didn’t abuse that power. Each target had a purpose, each hit worked towards something.
And when I practically threw myself at Him He only talked me down gently.

If I’d been in control I’d never have handed that level of trust over to anyone, but I did with Him and when He didn’t prove that that was misplaced… Even when I awoke and was horrified with what I’d done… I was grateful.

Because if anyone had raped me it might’ve broken me. But if He’d taken advantage of me while I was under His control, I’d have been forced to enjoy it and reciprocate – I know it would’ve slowly driven me insane. It would have destroyed me.

And I don’t know what to do with this, because I hate that He was able to turn my beliefs inside-out on a whim, but love that He appreciated my skillset. And I can’t help but want to kneel before Him and cry at His feet in thanks because He didn’t sleep with me even though I asked Him to.

“Hawk,” Loki called, and Clint wasn’t sure if he wanted it to be in his head or not.

His gaze refocused to find the god casually leaning with His back against the edge of the table looking up at him. Clint glowered and gruffly asked, “What?” because Loki had left before him, which implied He had something on His mind to do, and Jarvis had not announced Phil’s return yet. He forcefully pushed away the acceptance he felt at having received no strange look from Loki at his perch.

“I had something to ask you, but perhaps we should talk about what’s on your mind first,” Loki suggested with a smirk, a pointed glance sent towards Clint’s hands.

He relaxed his fingers from where they had reflexively clenched over the opposite hand’s knuckles, narrowing his eyes at the god before climbing down. He was planning on confronting Him about whatever it was the god wanted to ask, but once his feet touched the ground and he was officially not in his comfort zone and had to look up at Loki due to his height, his pulse sounded in his ears and a scowl twisted his mouth. Aware but dismissive of the foolhardiness of his actions, he marched over the few steps separating them to fist his hands at the collar of the god’s leather overcoat. “Yeah? You want to talk?”

Loki merely raised an eyebrow, humming in interest at the change in attitude from when they had interacted on the Helicarrier as Clint was packing. Consciously seeking to be aggravating, he remarked idly, “Are you experiencing a hormonal imbalance?”

Clint growled and reeled back a fist to slam it into the god’s face, consequences be damned, when it was stopped by Loki’s palm. He held the force of the attack at bay seemingly without any strain as Clint tried to drive it forward, and then Loki asked, curiously, “What instance in particular were you dwelling on that compelled you to break your hand against my face just to appease your urge for retribution?”

He drew back with an enraged snarl and put a couple of paces between them, hissing, “Everything! And you’re being a bastard about it all and confusing me ‘cause you should’ve just let me break my hand instead of stopping me! Wouldn’t that teach me a lesson about your superiority?!”

“What do you believe my thoughts regarding you to be, pet?”

“Don’t call me that!”

Loki moved closer, not cautiously but as one would when approaching an injured wildcat, perhaps; he was prepared to dodge any desperate attack that was forthcoming. He came to stand in front of Clint, whose muscles were taught with anger and confusion, and stooped slightly so to meet his
archer’s eyes without him having to crane his neck upward awkwardly. “It doesn’t matter to me that you’re free from my influence. I know you, through invasive and unprecedented force, maybe, but have come to know you and your talents, and I will have your loyalty if it takes an age of persuasion to convince you that I am worthy of it.

“Because you are the type of warrior who is treasured throughout the Nine Realms, and having met you I will not allow you to escape me so easily into hands that will not care for you properly. So I shall call you whatever I like, my Hawk, because though you don’t see me as your owner now, you are mine.”

And Clint glared at the god, hating him for sparing his sanity, and realizing his talents, and knowing that, though he stared up at him now with rebellion and defiance filling his eyes and stance, Clint could not escape his memories of the utter devotion he had felt for Him.

He dropped his gaze and glared at the floor for a moment before stepping back again, deciding to abandon the issue for now since Phil would likely be returning to the tower soon and this would be cut short. Clint’s eyes rose to meet Loki’s as he dismissed the previous conversation from his mind and tried to question politely, “What did you want to ask me when you came here?”

The Trickster’s eyes glinted in amusement at the avoidance of the topic instead of the expected rebuttal to his claims before he calmed and began, “Well, I had heard something interesting that implied that your team had received a disc previous to this one, one that I’ve also inferred had revolved around either I or Thor – and it fills in some questions I’ve been having about your information regarding me…”

“So, I came here to ask you about it,” he finished with a smirk, delighting in the held breath his words had caused. He had thought that the Avengers had, either vocally or with unspoken compliance, agreed to keep the information from him, but he felt quite satisfied at the confirmation.

Clint exhaled and glared at the Trickster for provoking a telling reaction out of him. He had thought it to be useless trying to keep the information from Him, seeing as most of their behaviour towards Him had changed drastically due to the disc, but particularly after Bruce had asked that telling question about His control over Selvig he shouldn’t have been surprised at Loki’s deduction. He admitted, “What do you want to know? You’re right.”

Loki nodded. “Perhaps I just wanted to hear that I was,” he confessed with a smirk. “I’m planning on asking the Director for it once we’re finished this.”

“You think he’s just going to hand it over to you?”

“Well, yes. I’ve already suggested to Agent Coulson my looking at this letter and disc to attempt to infer who is gathering and distributing the information, so I shall simply state outright my thoughts of there being another one – and it’s only natural for me to examine both for answers.”

Clint frowned and questioned guardedly, “How long have you known this?”

Loki grinned sharply and replied, “I’ve suspected it since Agent Coulson explained the disc, of course.”

“Agent Barton, Sorcerer,” Jarvis greeted, “Agent Coulson has returned and your presence is requested in the conference room on the 90th floor.”

“Well, isn’t that convenient,” Loki mused, having obtained the information he had wanted.
“So what’s old One-Eye doing about Thanos?” Tony asked cheekily when Coulson entered the room.

“That’s classified,” he answered instantly, the corners of his lips almost quirking upwards in a smile at Tony rolling his eyes.

Loki stepped into the room next, followed closely by Clint. Tony addressed them chirpily, “I said you two were together – were you talking about your feelings?”

Clint snorted as Loki smirked, both reclaiming their seats. Clint cast a discrete glance towards the god to question whether the team could be informed of His thoughts now. He wasn’t looking for orders, and he might decide to tell them against Loki’s wishes anyways, but having the knowledge ahead of time that the Trickster might come after him in anger would be nice.

Loki’s smirk widened to show his sharp white teeth at his hawk looking to him in question, but answered verbally so to lift the issue from his shoulders, “I was just questioning Clint on the disc you had received previous to this one.” He basked in their shocked and nervous expressions for a moment before mockingly chiding, “You didn’t truly expect to be able to hide it from me, did you? It was quite obvious from the second Agent Coulson explained this disc’s function to me.”

“Any of that insight come from listening in on things you shouldn’t?” Tony inquired nonchalantly.

“Whatever do you mean?” he asked with a smile.

Tony’s eyes narrowed but before he could retort Bruce questioned civilly, “Are you using your invisibility to spy on us?”

“‘Spying’ implies the necessity of the information gathering, I think,” Loki started. “I was merely curious and bored, and people speak differently when they believe certain others are absent.”

“If we ask you where you were when you disappeared from Jarvis’ cameras, would you answer?” Steve asked with a disapproving frown.

One of the god’s eyebrows quirked upwards as he replied, “Of course – I wasn’t up to anything I shouldn’t be.”

Steve settled at the admission, but Tony interrogated, “Where were you when you left from this room?”

“On the 93rd floor with Clint.”

“The whole time?”

“Yes,” Loki said as Clint narrowed his eyes.

“What were you doing – just standing in the corner watching me?”

Loki’s entertained smirk answered for him.

“And before,” Tony continued, “when Jarvis called you down after Coulson’d got here?”

“I came directly to this room,” he retorted. “When you requested my presence a second time I travelled to the hall and then re-entered.”

Bruce’s eyebrows were raised in surprise while Natasha restrained her smirk. She was amused at his actions, but didn’t want to show any approval; especially when it was magic that was hiding his
presence and no amount of skill.

“J, bring up the footage from here after Coulson entered,” Tony ordered, the holographic interface powering up again. On the surface of the table there was a small depiction of when they had all been gathered except for Loki, and they were discussing the disc. “Where are you?” he asked as he entered commands into the computer, the display cycling through an array of cameras and revealing no additional presence.

Loki obediently leaned forward and stretched his hand into the hologram, pointing at one of the corners of the room. Tony zoomed in and expanded the area and swept it with all of the cameras again, but nothing was shown.

“Is your creeping going to be a regular thing?” Tony snarled, angry at the failure of this tech and yet still drawn by the challenge Loki’s magic presented.

“If I’m kept suitably entertained then you need not worry,” Loki commented with a smirk.

Agent Coulson cleared his throat and directed the conversation back to its start as he asked, “What are your thoughts on the information we obtained through the prior disc?”

“I would like to know the exact contents of what you had access to,” Loki remarked in a tone that stated his wishes should be obvious. “I intend to press the issue once we’re finished here,” he gestured to the screen, “as I intend to examine the artefacts in order to attempt to locate their origin and the individual or group that decided to procure them.”

Coulson nodded.

"Come on now," Tony said in search of a distraction from his rapture at Loki’s invisibility, "Let's get this show on the road!"

A train whistled loudly as it clambered along its tracks under the starless night sky, a barren and wrecked multilevel warehouse standing alongside the rails. On the third level there shone a single spotlight, a woman with bright red, curly hair cropped level with her chin bound with her hands behind her back in a sturdy wooden chair. She was surrounded by three men, and one stepped forward to hit her across the face.

“What?” Steve growled in disgust at the man’s actions towards the sole female of their group, clenching his hands into fists. Natasha remained expressionless in response, not welcoming the captain’s defense of her but unable to blame him when he came from an era with such dissimilar gender roles.

She groaned sharply at the impact, but resolutely kept her mouth shut against letting escape any further sound of pain. She rolled her head along her shoulders in defiance to face forward again, the older man standing in the center wearing a military ensemble stating in Russian, “This is not how I wanted this evening to go.”

Jarvis helpfully provided subtitles at the bottom of the screen.

“I know how you wanted this evening to go,” she replied in the same language, displaying an unimpressed expression from her forced position. “Believe me – this is better.” Her black dress accentuated her curves and ended above her knees, black tights covering her legs and feet, the material over one knee ripped and depicting a bleeding scrape, her shoes removed.

Coulson and Clint smirked at her reply.
“Who are you working for?” he asked. “Lermentov, yes?” The male who had hit her before strode forward again to grasp the side of the chair, tilting her back threateningly over the drop to the ground floor. She tried to steady herself with the foot that barely toed the floor beneath her at the new angle as the other continued, “Does he think we have to go through him to move our cargo?”

“I thought General Solohob was in charge of the export business,” she interjected, confused. Her chair was set upright again and the man stepped back.

“Solohob? A bagman, a front,” he explained, his hands casually resting in his pockets. “Your outdated information betrays you. The famous Black Widow,” he announced, the male standing on his other side smirking in amusement, “and she turns out to be simply another pretty face.”

“You really think I’m pretty?” she teased, raising an eyebrow coquettishly.

He scoffed and motioned for the man to grab her as he walked away, ordering, “Tell Lermentov we don’t need him to move the tanks.” Her hair was fisted with one hand and her jaw with the other, her mouth forced open. “Tell him he is out.” He had moved over to a low chest upon which several tools lay, concluding in English as he lifted a pair of old pliers and turned to face her, “Well, you may have to write it down.”

She panted in fear of her tongue being ripped out-

The tension in the room rose as her teammates watched the scene, eyes darkening in anger. When in the midst of viewing images of such intensity they tended to forget that the individual in question was present and unharmed.

-just as a ring suddenly echoed through the space. The male not restraining Natasha blinked hurriedly in confusion and reached into his pocket to answer his cellphone, the other three watching him in surprise. “да?” he questioned, pausing for a reply. He turned to hand the phone to the older man, explaining in Russian, “It’s for her.”

He put down the pair of pliers with a clang and took the phone, starting heatedly, “You listen carefully-”

“You’re at 1-14 Silensky Plaza, third floor,” Agent Coulson interrupted in English. “We have an F-22 exactly eight miles out. Put the woman on the phone or I will blow up the block before you can make the lobby.”

He lowered the phone from his ear and walked over to Natasha, placing it underneath her ear for her to immediately pin to her shoulder. Coulson said, “We need you to come in.”

“Are you kidding? I’m working,” she argued in aggravation.

“This takes precedence.”

“I’m in the middle of an interrogation – this moron is giving me everything.”

“I don’t- give everything...” the man stuttered in reply. Natasha’s expression transformed into one of skepticism as she shot him a look, raising an eyebrow in disbelief from her seat.

Her teammates chuckled at her expression, immensely relieved that she had been on a mission and had the situation under control from the onset.

“Look, you can’t pull me out of this right now-”
“Natasha,” Coulson murmured, “Barton’s been compromised.”

Her eyes widened before her face settled into an impasive mask, uttering after a second, “Let me put you on hold.”

She jerked her head slightly and the older man moved forward to take the phone from her, as soon as he had her leg struck out and kicked him sharply in the knee. He flailed and fell as she threw her head forward to knock into his, and he tumbled backwards. She stood with her arms stretched uncomfortably behind her tied to the chair and carried it as she rushed one of the men charging with a knife, kicking him in the chest and sending him flying backwards.

The other male swung a wide punch that she ducked under, spinning and striking his midsection with the chair attached to her. She rolled sideways on her upper back so the chair was horizontal and did not impede her momentum to the first male who was getting to his feet, turning her back to him to use the chair as a shield against his attack. She then sat down and landed on his feet, whipping her head back to slam into his nose when he crouched down in pain.

She crouched low and spun on her heels in order to use the legs of the chair to knock the man’s feet out from under him, then she returned to the other man who had tried to attack her.

Agent Coulson waited patiently on the other end of the line, listening to the grunts of pain Natasha was eliciting.

She flipped away from the male’s form and flipped high in the air to land on her back on the other, the chair’s construction failing under the assault. She stood quickly with one of the wooden legs in hand but the other had run at her and wrapped his arms around her torso pinning her arms to her chest as she struggled. She managed to grasp his hand and twist his thumb backwards, his whole arm stiffening and following the motion as he emitted a yell. She swung the piece of wood at his side and then his chest when she had turned to face him, dropping the weapon and leaping into the air so to kick both feet to the center of his chest, land on her back and roll onto her shoulders with the momentum. Her arms raised above her head and she rocked her body forward to propel herself to her feet, dashing at him while he was still stunned and wrapping her thighs around his neck. She threw the entire weight of her body down and tossed him heavily onto the floor, landing on her feet.

She noticed the older man managing to roll onto his side and stand to attack her, and so she grabbed a hold of one of the long chains hanging from the ceiling and turned. She bashed his head into the low rail barring the drop to the lower floors and as he began to fall over the other side she tangled one of his lower legs in the chain.

He fell and jerked to a stop upside-down with a short scream, Natasha turning and bending down to pick up the cellphone and pair of black peep-toe heels that had been removed from her feet.

“Where’s Barton now?” she interrogated.

“We don’t know,” Coulson answered.

Most of those in the room felt rather ridiculous at thinking that she was ever defenseless, and Tony made a note not to piss her off even if it appeared that she had no weapons on her. She was obviously dangerous.

Clint sent her a small appreciative smile for abandoning the interrogation out of concern for him, and she nodded in response.

“But he’s alive?”
"We think so. I’ll brief you on everything when you get back.” On one of SHIELD’s mobile terminals there was displayed footage of the Abidjan Operation, Clint and Natasha fighting from behind a pile of rubble that they would occasionally duck behind, both firing their preferred weapons. Their identifications were brought up to the side under the tag Strike Team Delta, both considered for the Avengers Initiative. “But first, we need you to talk to the big guy.”

“Coulson, you know Stark trusts me about as far as he can throw me,” she responded with a smirk as she sauntered out of the warehouse.

“Yep,” Tony confirmed with a smirk while Bruce tilted his head minutely in confusion.

“No, I’ve got Stark – you get the Big Guy.”

“Боже мой,” she cursed, casting a longing gaze back towards the situation she was leaving behind.

At the looks he was receiving, Bruce shrugged and said, “I get that reaction a lot.”

A young girl in a frayed dress ran across a dirt street, bicycles and rusted cars ringing and honking at the pedestrians that crowded the walkways and corners of the Indian town. They were bartering and calling to each other as she weaved through them all, a firm destination in mind. She panted as she hurried, circling around a building and entering its neighbour, jogging up the steps.

A man at the top exclaimed in Hindi at the sight of her, another woman approaching where she had paused on the stairwell to ask in the same language, “Who are you?” And then she ushered worriedly, “Get out! There is sickness here!”

Jarvis having continued providing subtitles for this language as well.

Bruce was revealed at the sink behind her, pouring some water from a pitcher and washing his hands as he watched the interaction through the mirror. He dried them on the towel as the girl asked of the woman, “Are you a doctor? My father’s not waking up!” Bruce approached as he fished his glasses from the pocket of his worn suit jacket. She added, “He has a fever and he’s moaning, but his eyes won’t open-”

“Slow down,” Bruce beckoned in Hindi.

“My father…” she began to plead again, twisting the paper of some money in her hands.

Bruce crouched down so he was more level with her lowered stand on the steps and pointed off to the corner of the room where she had been gazing, asking, “Like them?” A couple of children lay covered in blankets as they coughed, the man that had met her on the stairs sitting and wiping the sweat off of one’s forehead.

“Please,” she reiterated in English, offering the money.

“How many languages do you know, Brucie?” Tony asked.

“Just a few – whatever I picked up as useful in the countries I’ve passed through.”

She led him out to a poorly constructed shack, Bruce reaching out a hand to hold out in front of her as they were about to cross a road. He casually turned his back to the armed truck that rolled by on patrol of the area, before he released her and they continued hurrying into the house.

He walked in through the tattered curtains that had once shielded the interior from view and
followed as the girl dashed into one of the back rooms. He paused as she climbed onto the bed and clambered out over the window frame and out of the house. He huffed out what might have been a laugh, resting a hand on the support pole he stood next to as he scolded himself, “You should’ve gotten paid up front, Banner.”

“You know, for a man who’s supposed to be avoiding stress you picked a hell of a place to settle,” Natasha commented as he turned to her, walking calmly out from behind a curtained section of the house. She had changed into a long blue skirt and a deep purple, modestly cut, sleeveless top, a red shawl wrapped around her upper arms that she held together over her stomach.

“That’s a hell of a different presentation,” Tony observed.

Loki hummed in intrigue, the effectiveness of her interrogation skills experienced but the extent of the adaptation of her person for optimal usage nonetheless impressive.

He removed his bag from his shoulder and gently placed it on the ground as he replied, “Avoiding stress isn’t the secret.”

“Then what is it? Yoga?” she asked with a small smile.

“Ah, you brought me to the edge of the city – smart,” he commented, bringing his hands together and rubbing them over each other anxiously. He sidled over to the window and peeked out the glass pane, asking, “I-uh, I assume the whole place is surrounded?”

“Just you and me,” she answered, removing her shawl and tossing it to the side.

“And, your actress buddy?” he questioned, gesturing vaguely in the direction the child had exited. “Is she a spy too – they start that young?”

“I did,” she admitted, her lips pursing slightly in a show of vulnerability.

“Who are you?”

“Natasha Romanoff,” she stated.

“Are you here to kill me, Ms. Romanoff?” he questioned, continuing to rub his hands over one another. “Because that’s not going to work out – for everyone.”

“No, no – of course not,” she protested. “I’m here on behalf of SHIELD.”

“SHIELD,” he muttered, lacing his fingers together in front of him. She tilted her head as she observed him, and he interrogated, “How did they find me?”

“We never lost you, Doctor. We’ve kept our distance,” she explained as he leaned back against the wall, “even helped keep some other interested parties off your scent.”

“Why?” he asked, averting his eyes to the floor before he flicked them to her as she answered.

“Nick Fury seems to trust you. But now we need you to come in.”

“What if I say no?” he said carefully.

“I’ll persuade you,” she answered with a smirk.

Steve blushed at the implication that reply brought to his mind.
He licked his lips in nervousness and added, “And what if the other guy says no?”

“You’ve been more than a year without an incident, I don’t think you want to break that streak,” she replied, turning away.

“Well, I don’t every time get what I want,” he muttered, stepping over to rock a wooden cradle where it was suspended.

“Doctor, we’re facing a potential global catastrophe,” she announced, having retrieved her cellphone and was focused on sifting through the information contained on it.

He chuckled and said, “Oh, those I actively try to avoid.”

“Oh sure, you’re all witty here,” Tony whined, “but when I meet you you’re all shrunk into yourself.”

Bruce chortled and shrugged. He was more comfortable in Kolkata than on an airship surrounded by armed agents, even while being ambushed.

“This,” she directed his attention to the picture she had selected, “is the Tesseract.” She took a seat at the table and slid the phone over its surface for his perusal. “It has the potential energy to wipe out the planet.”

He walked over to her and put his wire-framed glasses on before lifting the cell and staring at the image of the azure cube. “What does Fury want me to do – swallow it?” he asked in confusion.

That comment startled laughs out of his teammates.

“He wants you to find it – it’s been taken,” she elaborated, her elbows on the table as she leaned forward to impress upon him the importance of the event. “It emits a gamma signature that’s too weak for us to trace. There’s no one that knows gamma radiation like you do. If there was, that’s where I’d be.” She leaned back in her seat as she clarified her reason for confronting him.

“So Fury isn’t after the monster?” he questioned as he removed his glasses.

Loki narrowed his eyes slightly in remembrance of the sensitive conversation they had had while he was still aboard the Helicarrier. They had not used the term, but that was the topic they had orbited around.

“Not that he’s told me.”

“And he tells you everything?”

She cast her hard eyes up at him before suggesting, “Talk to Fury, he needs you on this.”

“He needs me in a cage-”

“No one’s going to put you in a c-”

“STOP LYING TO ME!” he yelled as he slammed his hands on the table. She had reached underneath its surface and ripped off the handgun she had attached there, jumping back and aiming it steadily at him.

The majority of the room was tense at the thought of Natasha having had to face the Hulk twice, and this time without most of SHIELD’s agents in the area.
He smirked and pulled back slowly, justifying, “I’m sorry, that was mean. I just wanted to see what you’d do.”

“Woah shit,” Tony said with a laugh, a few relieved sighs escaping from the others in the room.

She kept her firearm cocked, staring at him warily as he held up his hands and remarked, ”Why don’t we do this the easy way – where you don’t use that, and the Other Guy doesn’t make a mess?”

Her breathing and pulse were slow to calm, still unsure if he had started to lose control and might transform to tear her apart. It was only after he reiterated gently, “Okay, Natasha?” that she lowered her weapon and exhaled lengthily.

She raised her hand to her right ear and ordered, “Stand down – we’re good here,” into her earpiece. The two dozen armed agents surrounding the building relaxed their grasps on their rifles and shifted into less alert stances.

“Just you and me,” he quoted.

She lowered her arm and continued to compose herself.

“Well, I think that’s the most dramatic recruitment we’re going to see in this,” Clint remarked.
With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals. Further prepared for their enemy, they work to protect Loki from the consequences of aiding SHIELD.

“This is out of line, Director,” a man stated solemnly, his image cast in shadow as were his three fellow council members. The video feed from their individual locations was spread over four large screens on the wall in the dim lighting, Director Fury standing as the sole occupant of the room to face their inquiries. “You’re dealing with forces you can’t control.”

Tony’s attention was riveted on the display, his eyes memorizing the members of council that were presented to him since any attempt to record the disc’s information resulted in blurred video and skewed audio, unable to be cleared or enhanced. These were the ones at the top of the food chain, who called all the shots, and the ones who had ordered the nuclear strike on New York City for the ‘greater good’.

“You ever been in a war, councilman-” he retorted, “-in a firefight? Did you feel an overabundance of control?”

“SHIELD operates under the World Security Council – we should’ve been informed of all the details,” the councilman reprimanded. Director Fury stood before their displays tall and defiant, his hands clasped behind his back.

“The Council’s interest in our work has always been about results, not procedure,” he defended.

“Agent Clint Barton is intimate with SHIELD procedure, I believe.”

Said agent narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest at the mention, reluctant to hear what their plans regarding him had been.

“And now we learn he’s working with the enemy? A man whose talent appears to be-”

“Killing,” Fury interrupted, confessing the fact-

Clint clenched his jaw at the recollection of directing his skills onto the Director.

-and finishing the thought. “But he didn’t kill me. He didn’t take the head shot. He’s been brainwashed but I won’t write him off.”

Natasha shot him a small smile as his tense shoulders relaxed, Fury’s trust in him having not abated even though he had been forced onto the opposing side.

“We’re on Loki’s trail and we’re scrambling a response team.”

“You’re saying that this… Asgard is declaring war on our planet?” another male questioned.
“Not Asgard – Loki,” he repeated.

“He can’t be working alone,” the female council member argued. “What about the other one? His brother?”

“Our intelligence says Thor is not a hostile, but he’s worlds away – we can’t depend on him to help, either,” Fury responded. “It’s up to us.”

“Which is why you should be focusing on Phase 2, it was designed for exactly this-”

“Phase 2 isn’t ready – our enemy is,” Fury impressed. “We need a response team.”

“The Avengers Initiative was shut down.”

“This isn’t about the Avengers-” he started only to be cut off.

“We’ve seen the list.”

Another councilman detailed, “You’re running the world’s greatest covert security network and you’re going to leave the fate of the human race to a handful of freaks. It was a volatile concept at the best of times – which this is not.”

“Well, I’m offended,” Tony scoffed jokingly, though his eyes were hard.

“I’m not leaving anything to anyone – we need a response team,” Fury justified. “These people may be isolated – unbalanced, even – but I believe with the right push they could be exactly what we need.”

Steve was torn between pride at having a superior who obviously believed and supported his team, and irritation at the information that the Director had manipulated in order to force them into acting as he had wanted them to.

“You ‘believe’,,” the woman mocked.

“War isn’t won by sentiment, Director.”

“No,” Fury agreed, “It’s won by soldiers.”

“I suggest you make your response rapid,” the female interjected. “We all know what’s at stake.”

Their shadowed images faded as the connection was abruptly severed, the Director confirming, “Yes, we do.”

“Didn’t really have a hope without us, huh?” Tony snarked.

“War!” Printed boldly as the headline across the front page of The Star Dispatch was ‘WAR IN EUROPE!’, the logo above the newspaper company’s name bearing stars and stripes showing it to be of United States publication.

Some of the occupants of the room had thought that the declaration was due to some leak in SHIELD spreading Loki’s arrival and intentions until they noticed the date printed, showing it to have been regarding the conflicts of the early twentieth century. Expressions of confusion bearing furrowed brows spread throughout the space questioning the relevance of the image, with the exception being their Captain who was monitoring his breathing at the approaching first glimpse of himself.
“With the forces of darkness pressing in from the East,” an announcer dictated, squared ranks of German soldiers shown marching to Hitler’s command, and soldiers holding a Japanese flag gathering in support, “from the West America heeds the call to fight for freedom!”

Suddenly the black and white moving pictures showed Americans disembarking from a ship to train, and then the troops climbing over hilled terrain, providing propaganda to the masses regarding their soldiers’ efforts in the war overseas. And from a container that arrived at the shore of a beach Steve, dressed in his old uniform with packs of supplies on his belt, a gun on his hip, and shield in hand ran with the armed men.

Steve winced at the indoctrination of the masses that he voluntarily participated in, and also the reactions his teammates might have at the old videos and views surrounding him.

“And at the front of the fight, shoulder to shoulder with our battling boys, is Captain America!” He led a group through ruined streets and directed them to aid the survivors left in the buildings.

“A product of old fashioned values and exciting new science!” The images changed to capture scientists garbed in long lab coats bustling around counters filled with beakers, some of the men injecting additional components into the solutions of the vials.

The aforementioned teammates, as well as Loki, narrowed their eyes and frowned at the term ‘product’ used to encapsulate Steve’s being, Tony’s spiteful words from the Helicarrier echoing in a few of their minds.

“Captain America’s the name every Nazi fears!” Steve was caught for a moment dressed in a dark suit and light tie standing beside a smiling brunette before Captain America was once again on the field accompanying rows of enemy soldiers with their hands raised in surrender.

“Adolf’s secret new weapons are no match for our man.” Men covered in dark armour shoot weapons with the Hydra insignia on the side, Steve ploughing through to knock them aside with his shield before waving the troops behind him onwards. “When tough times turn tougher, when hope’s on the ropes,” Steve rode his old Harley Davidson motorbike between fortified tanks, “here’s the man to knock the Axis on their backs!”

The video was framed and shown to be played on a laptop, the reflection of a blond man overlaid on top of the monotone representation. “He’s out there fighting for the land that we love – and he won’t stop-” The screen darkened as the display was abruptly clicked off, Steve’s reflection staring morosely before his eyes lowered in remembrance of the war.

Now it was clear to the occupants of the room that they were still observing the time immediately after Loki’s arrival, in particular what Steve had been occupied with; the man that the Avengers had recognized as their Captain, and whom obviously felt displaced in the modern world that he awoke in.

Sunlight streamed through the pane that was levered open above the curtained window, Steve sitting in a small apartment at the wooden table of a cramped kitchen. In the corner, on a low mannequin of a torso, was the olive green suit jacket, collared shirt, and white tie he had worn in the forties. He carefully flipped through the pages of profiles stacked before him, each of the men he had known sporting a scarlet stamp beneath their image stating ‘DECEASED’.

His brow furrowed slightly as he lifted another page, white dress shirt buttoned up to the slightly open collar and sleeves rolled up above his elbows, coming to a sheet lacking the stark declaration: Carter, Margaret, “Peggy”, alive and retired. He stared into the dark eyes framed by
porcelain skin and glossy, tamed curls captured on the page for a moment before his gaze roved down to the information below it. Her address at 57-J Merryweather, Winchester, UK and her current telephone number of 020-7946 03560 was outlined plainly. He turned his head to the phone standing in its cradle on the end table before dismissing the idea of contact and putting the sheet off to the side.

“Why did you choose to not contact her, Steven?” Thor asked curiously.

He cast his gaze to the tabletop and jerked his shoulders in a semblance of a shrug, asking rhetorically, “It’s been 70 years for her – what would I say?”

He passed over the profile of Stark, Howard A. who was also deceased-

A brief scowl twisted Tony’s lips at the thought of his father.

-before gingerly lifting into his hands the only document that was not yet yellowed with age. A picture of Tony Stark outfitted in a tux was to one side, and beneath was a full-body shot of his Iron Man suit. His status with SHIELD was stated as Active, and that of an Advisor.

Steve lay the paper down again and raised a hand to his mouth to worry his lip before propping his chin onto his fist in thought.

“Should’ve called me up,” Tony said with a smile. It was plain that if he had at the time it would’ve made unlikely the companionship they had achieved during the invasion, as Steve would’ve been searching for the friend he’d had in Howard. Steve offered a slight smile in return though, due to the thought that he could call on Tony now.

Outside on the crowded sidewalks there was a man standing beside a couple of plastic tables with an array of phones advertised. Steve ambled past, now wearing a brown leather jacket and contrasting greatly with the businessmen, fashionable women, and young students hurrying to their destinations while obsessively checking their cellphones or listening to their iPods. The vendor called out, “Get your phones here! 300 minutes here! Buy some time, buy some time people. Buy a phone-”

Steve ended up wandering to a café with an outdoor patio. He lounged in his seat as he roughly sketched how Stark Tower stretched up into the sky.

“What was that about my tower being ugly?” Tony smirked. Steve flushed in embarrassment. He itched his forehead before continuing his work with the lead pencil, oblivious to the waitress’ approach. Half of her hair was piled atop her head, the rest of the long, waved, blonde locks let down, her lips quirking into a smile as she glanced at his accurate drawing and asked, “Waiting on the big guy?”

“Ma’am?” he questioned, confused.

“Iron Man,” she clarified, nodding. “Lot of people eat here just to see him fly by.”

Tony preened.

“Yes,” he said, eyes drawn up to the tower again. He smiled in amusement and reached into his jacket to pull out the bills to pay for his coffee, adding, “Maybe another time.”

“Table’s yours as long as you like,” she offered flirtatiously, refilling his mug. “Nobody’s waiting on it. Plus, we’ve got free wireless.”
He leaned forward in order to replace the remaining money in his pocket as she walked away, finally enquiring in puzzlement, “Radio?”

Most of his teammates were attempting to stifle their chuckles at his response while he blushed, but Bruce, and Loki, merely cast him pitying looks. Thor appeared confused, understanding the modern terms even less than him.

She looked over her shoulder but could not answer comfortably over the range, disbelieving of the accuracy of her hearing anyhow.

“Ask for her number, you moron,” the old man seated at the table behind him suggested as he leaned back before returning to his meal. Steve’s expression exhibited his mystification.

“You’re getting dating advice from old men, Old Man,” Tony chortled.

He travelled by subway, the cars rattling as they moved swiftly over the tracks, his hands folded in his lap as his fingers nervously rubbed along each other in a display of anxiety. He closed his eyes.

Thor narrowed his eyes in interest of the machine that was transporting Steve so quickly, it made of metal but not of the variety of smaller vehicles that he had some experience – being struck – with.

Steve tossed a few bills onto the low desk in front of him, a duffle bag grasped in his other hand. The male seated across from his impressive stature maneuvered a key and its ring off another and held it out to him, men shown through the large observation window walking away from the wrestling ring below covered in sweat and wiping their faces with small towels.

Steve had changed into grey sweatpants and a tight white tee, wrapped hands pounding into the hanging heavy bag in front of him. Jabs and punches slammed into the course material as he vented, recalling his final moments before he was frozen. His last words echoed in his mind, “There’s not enough time,” as he justified crashing the plane, and with it, the danger that the Tesseract posed, “I’ve got to put her in the water.”

Peggy’s voice reassuring him: “You won’t be alone.”

And then, faintly, “Oh my god – this guy’s still alive,” from one of the men who had found him encased in ice.

The bag that had been suspended on a chain from the ceiling flew across the space with the powerful punch Steve had thrown, his frustration at his predicament evident.

“Nice anger-management,” Tony joked weakly.

Steve’s last words replayed in their minds, his reality unimaginable as in most of their lives they had discovered great change within themselves, not the entirety of the world around them. The two gods, however, were able to empathize.

Thor sighed heavily in reflection of his exile the previous year. For not only had he been stranded upon the unknown world of Midgard and found that all of his actions were interpreted differently than they had been on Asgard, but also upon his return home his brother’s machinations had been revealed and their relationship had turned about on its head. But he had learned much through the drastic change and now was charged with the protection of Midgard and was working alongside his brother, just as Steve had awoken to a team that supported him and followed him into battle. They had suffered and learned, and are all the stronger for it.
Loki, in contrast to Thor’s calm contemplation, furrowed his brow in discontent as he allowed himself to face the reality of the difficulties that arose with the Captain’s situation. When he had been informed of it previously by Clint, he had absorbed only the facts of it so to utilize them to anger the man in order to motivate his actions against him. Now that Loki was allied with SHIELD, he needed to ensure that their strongest attack force, namely, the Avengers, were as prepared as possible to fight in his defense. This included keeping watch over their emotional states.

He had decided to assimilate and confront their personal issues as they surfaced, as he was still working to accept his own internal limitations highlighted by recent events, and thereby not overwhelm himself. Loki was aware that he could not afford to lash out else SHIELD would turn on him, and hiding from the Æsir, Thanos, and the forces of Midgard would be taxing. Obviously quite possible, but unnecessarily troublesome.

The first thing he noted to watch for in the Captain was symptoms of PTSD. Loki would be more surprised if he didn’t exhibit any symptoms, after the war as well as the severity of displacement in time. His connection to the team would be vital in his recovery of such an ailment. There was also the method of ice. He had heard the tale of Captain America’s final moments, and wondered at how long it took for him to completely become encased in the element. Had he been knocked out, or had he been submerged in water for a time? Had he blinked and then awoken in this new world, or had his consciousness resurfaced as he was trapped in the ice?

Loki made a note to watch the Captain carefully around water, ice, the cold, and the dark. The element may have been dismissed, or it might have been connected to the disconnect from his original timeline and cause flashbacks or panic attacks. There was also the emotional and psychological damage that would’ve resulted from the loss of all the customs and individuals that he had known.

He would have to find a way to discover the answers to all of these – the Captain had to have been questioned when he awoke.

He wiped his forehead with his bandaged knuckles before settling into a firm stance and raising his fists to resume determinedly pounding the heavy bag.

“Trouble sleeping?” Fury asked, having rounded one of the corners into the area.

“Slept for 70 years, sir,” he responded, turning back to his workout. “Think I’ve had my fill.”

Loki noted the implied refusal to sleep.

“Then you should be out – celebrating, seeing the world,” he retorted as he approached.

Steve halted his fierce movements and stepped over to the bench with his duffle, starting as he panted, “When I went under, the world was at war,” while he unwrapped his hands. “I wake up, they say we won – they didn’t say what we lost.”

“We’ve made some mistakes along the way,” Fury admitted, manila folder in hand with the SHIELD insignia inked on the front, “Some very recently.”
“Are you here with a mission, sir?” he asked, stuffing the removed bandages into the unzipped bag and starting on the other hand.

“I am.”

“Trying to get me back in the world?” He shoved the bandages into the duffle.

“Trying to save it,” Fury stated, flipping open the folder and spinning it carefully to show Steve the contents.

He gazed at the top page for a moment before reaching forward and taking the file into his hands. There was a large image of the azure cube to one side, ‘TESSERACT’ typed in bold beside it and a few paragraphs detailing what they have observed of its powers thus far. The information required a security clearance level of seven to access it. “HYDRA’s secret weapon,” Steve murmured.

Both Thor and Loki tilted their heads in confusion at the name, and Coulson, noting their expressions, clarified, “The organization that utilized the Tesseract during World War II.”

“It’s an appealing name,” Loki commented. “Quite a bit more intimidating than ‘SHIELD’.”

“It’s juvenile to name a professional organization after a creature,” Natasha derided.

“But effective,” Loki smirked.

“I think you’re merely biased, brother, in favour of large reptilian beasts,” Thor interrupted.

Loki nodded in acknowledgement and leaned back in his chair, the other occupants of the room dithering in their seats for a few minutes before Tony caved to his curiosity and questioned, “And that’s because…?”

Loki’s gaze flicked onto him before he drawled, “Because one of my sons is a great serpent, naturally.”

Bruce removed his glasses and rubbed at the bridge of his nose while Tony gaped, muttering, “If we had some down time before living with him, I would’ve researched Norse Mythology…”

Loki’s smirk stretched into a grin as Tony’s voice failed when he tried to speak, basking in the astonished stares of the engineer’s teammates as well. Steve cleared his throat and managed to asked, dazed, “You have a snake as a son?”

“I would not call him a ‘snake’, he is much too large,” Loki argued. “Jӧrmungand is my second eldest child, a sea serpent that Odin sent to Midgard.”

“He’s here?” Coulson interrogated with narrowed eyes.

“Yes, he grew so that he now encircles the world.”

“His is oft called the World Serpent,” Thor added. “I’ve seen him depicted as the symbol for eternity on Midgard – with him biting his own tail.”

“The Ouroboros?” Bruce clarified. “That’s your son?”

“Hold on!” Tony exclaimed with a flail of his hands to express how overwhelmed he was. “Hold on a sec. I’m totally fine with you somehow giving birth to an eight-legged horse, and a huge wolf, and even this eel or whatever – and I swear I’ll figure out this shape-shifting hocus-pocus shit – but us mere mortals aren’t so stupid as to not notice a snake, just chilling, around the Earth. We’ve
analyzed the levels of our atmosphere and have satellites keeping an eye on everything, and your son isn’t there.”

“He isn’t surrounding all of your cities and sky,” Loki said with a roll of his eyes. “That would be foolish, presenting a target for those who would do me harm and also subjecting him to the inquiries of all you Midgardians. He lies along the crust of the earth, at the base of your oceans.”

“We’ve probes down there too,” Tony contended stubbornly.

“He’s very large, I’m sure any human would dismiss his girth as a submerged mountain range,” Loki defended. “He has also inherited a small measure of magic from me, able to control his natural ability to alter the colouisation of his scales in response to light and environment and use it to his advantage.”

“Like a chameleon?” Steve asked.

“Or, you know, like an eel,” Clint corrected.

“Exactly how many fantastical creature-children do you have?” Tony groaned, slumping back in his chair.

Thor abruptly tensed and watched his brother warily, his teammates absorbing the sudden strained atmosphere and furrowing their brows in confusion as they stilled and similarly observed Loki.

Who was pointedly not looking at Thor, else his not-brother’s involvement in the repulsive treatment of Loki’s children be emphasized. He met Tony’s eyes and answered briefly, “Six.”

The God of Fire took great pains to project the appearance of indifference and loosen his taut musculature as he diverted the topic onto the film promptly, “With how often we’ve been distracted from this disc it’s a wonder we’re progressing at all. You mortals have the attention span of pups,” crossing his arms over his chest.

The occupants of the room allowed the return of their concentration onto the large flat-screen, the relief palpable that Tony had not angered Loki again, but their curiosity rampant as their thoughts dwelled on what boundary had been overstepped.

“Howard Stark fished that out of the ocean when he was looking for you,” Fury explained. Steve drew out the second sheet, finding another picture of the Tesseract as well as those of HYDRA’s signets; details of their use of the cube beneath the paper-clipped images. He cast his eyes up to Fury as he continued, “He thought what we think: the Tesseract could be the key to unlimited sustainable energy—”

Bruce, Tony, and Steve all remembered their discovery of SHIELD’s true thoughts on a use for the power the Tesseract offered.

“That’s something the world sorely needs.”

Steve put the papers back into their proper order and shut the folder with a flap, handing it back to the Director as he asked, “Who took it from you?”

“He’s called Loki. He’s… not from around here,” Fury answered before declaring, “There’s a lot we’ll have to bring you up to speed on if you’re in. The world has gotten even stranger than you already know.”

“At this point I doubt anything would surprise me,” he remarked, standing and turning away to
grab his duffle.

“Ten bucks says you’re wrong.” Fury bet as the Captain strode over to the line of abandoned punching bags and lifted one onto his shoulder, deltoid and trapezius muscles flexing over the movement of his shoulder blade. “There’s a debriefing packet waiting for you back at your apartment. Is there anything you can tell us about the Tesseract that we ought to know now?”

He walked away with the 70-pound heavy bag over one shoulder and in the other hand his duffle, asserting as he exited, “You should have left it in the ocean.”

“Hear, hear,” Tony agreed.

The environment was cloaked in darkness heavy as velvet, a faint bubbling revealing the blackness to be that of the depths of a body of water. A golden metal hand appeared, its palm emitting a bright white beam that surgically cut through the metal pipe through which the city’s power lines ran underwater.

“Booyah,” Tony cheered at his entrance.

Iron Man’s golden faceplate was dimly lit by his blue eyes, his scarlet chest-plating by the arc reactor shining through the triangular glass cover. He reached around to his back to grab an object and attach it to the lines he had revealed, illuminated by the rays of the twin spotlights that had slid out of the tops of his armoured shoulders.

The semi-circular device spun around the pipe before expanding into two rings encircling it and spreading lengthwise, orange spots lighting at the ends and tubes of blue columning the center. Iron Man idly floated away from his work before turning and sending power to his thrusters, shooting up through the expanse of water with countless bubbles trailing him.

He emerged into the night sky alongside a cruise ship with a spray of water streaming behind the beams of his thrusters, pausing in the air as he adjusted his trajectory before soaring towards New York City’s high-rises. “Good to go on this end – the rest is up to you,” Tony’s voice sounded as he weaved through the buildings and over the streets still crowded with cars.

“You disconnected the transmission lines?” Pepper asked, a video of her communication with him in the bottom corner of the interface inside Tony’s helmet. “Are we off the grid?”

“Stark Tower’s about to become a beacon of self-sustaining clean energy,” Tony declared, Jarvis’ diagnostics of the Tower forming a hologram in the opposite corner of her.

“Well, assuming the arc reactor takes over and it actually works.”

“I assume,” he conceded. “Light her up.”

He flew towards his tower as she obeyed, rooms littering the hundred stories lighting up from within as well as the bright blue STARK running across the top.

Coulson permitted himself a roll of his eyes as Steve, Clint, and Thor chuckled at Tony relishing the sight of his tower, Tony defending, “She’s gorgeous – you’re jealous.”

“How does it look?” Pepper asked.

“Like Christmas – but with more… me,” he answered, enthralled.

“We’ve got to go wider on the public awareness campaign – you need to do some press,” she said
as he arched his flight path and followed the curve of the building upwards. “I’m in DC tomorrow, I’m working on the zoning for the next three buildings—”

“Pepper, you’re killing me,” he interrupted, slowing as he reached the top of the tower and hovering. “The moment, remember—enjoy the moment.”

“Get in here and I will,” she responded seductively as he landed.

Steve blushed and asked cautiously, “Will we be seeing any of…that?”

“Would you like to?” Tony replied with a waggle of his eyebrows as he sung, “I’ve got videos.”

Steve’s flush deepened as Tony cackled, Coulson interfering in order to minimize his idol’s mortification, “They don’t do anything here, Captain.” Steve’s smile by far outweighed Tony’s dismayed pout at the interruption of his teasing.

He started down the row of steps as the sides of the landing platform leading into the tower retracted downwards and the ring that he had landed in the center of separated and tilted vertically as it followed at his sides. “Sir, Agent Coulson of SHIELD is on the line,” Jarvis informed through his Creator’s earpiece, the mechanical arms of the platform unfolding and reaching to remove Tony’s helmet from his head.

“I’m not in,” he answered instantly. “I’m actually out.” The arms unlatched his chest-plate and stripped him of the underlying frame and wiring that had covered his front and back as he walked before proceeding to remove the pieces covering his arms. The armour was safely compacted and transported to the area below, the flooring reassembling behind his progress.

“Grow a spine, Jarvis—I’ve got a date,” Tony retorted. The armour over his thighs was taken before the tiling under his feet slid sideways so to reveal machinery that grasped his boots and the metal over his lower legs. He stepped out of them and continued on in the black long-sleeve, dark pants, and running shoes he had been wearing underneath as the final pieces of his suit were taken and the panels that made up the floor stilled.

The ingenuity of the mechanics of the tower impressed Tony’s teammates, even though they were living within the marvel now. Even Loki had to concede the impact, though he had witnessed the disassembling during the invasion. He also recalled the reason he had chosen to open the portal above the Tower, beyond the need of the arc reactor and the jibe at the billionaire. It was a monument of individual brilliance, the podium upon which one placed oneself overlooking—above—all others. Even the removal of the suit, it was reminiscent of slaves dressing or disrobing their king.

“Levels are holding steady,” Pepper announced, the clear screen in front of her depicting the tower and a magnification of the arc reactor at its base, and their corresponding power levels. “I think,” she finished, biting her lip in uncertainty.

“Of course they are—I was directly involved,” Tony arrogantly surmised as he drew closer to her stand before the long desk displaying data in oranges and blues. “Which brings me to my next question: how does it feel to be a genius?” he asked brightly, removing his Bluetooth and tossing it onto the desk’s surface.

“Well, ha, I really wouldn’t know, now would I?” she replied as she turned to face him, leaning back against the tabletop behind her. She donned a white dress shirt with the top few buttons
undone and the sleeves rolled above her elbows, ripped jean shorts cut off high and revealing the entire expanse of tanned skin that covered her legs.

“What do you mean?” he asked as he powered down the computer’s holograms, before saying, “All this-” swivelling his right index finger around to indicate their surroundings, “-came from you.”

“No, all this came from that,” she argued, tapping the arc reactor that lay in his chest.

He smirked, imploring, “Give yourself some credit, please.” He held her upper arms and stated, “Stark Tower is your baby. Give yourself… 12 percent of the credit.”

“12 percent?” Clint snorted, Natasha casting a look towards Tony that bordered on pity while simultaneously criticizing his intellect.

“12 percent?” she repeated flatly.

“An argument can be made for 15,” he countered quickly.

“Not gonna save your ass,” Clint jeered.

“12 percent of my baby?” she scoffed as she walked past him, bare feet silent on the grey tile.

“Well, I did do all the heavy lifting,” he defended. “Literally – I lifted the heavy things. And, sorry, but the security snafu? That was on you.”

“Oh?” she drawled as she knelt in the middle of the living room section, several low chairs stationed around a glass coffee table. She lifted one of the two champagne flutes that was set on its surface and the bottle that had been resting in ice as Tony continued,

“My private elevator-”

“You mean our elevator?” she interjected as she poured the champagne into the glasses.

“-i-it was teeming with sweaty workmen,” he said in disgust before hissing in foreboding as he sat beside her on the carpet, “I’m going to pay for that comment about percentages in some subtle way later, aren’t I?”

“Not gonna be that subtle,” she said with a smile after she handed him his beverage.

The viewers shared a laugh at the interaction.

“I’ll tell you what, next building is gonna say Potts on the tower,” he offered.

“On the lease,” she grinned.

He jokingly recoiled and suggested further, “Call your mom – can you bunk over?” She laughed.

Natasha raised an eyebrow at the exchange, commenting, “Pepper was more reserved when I worked with her.”

“Good – there’s no place for behaviour like that in the workplace,” Tony nodded seriously. Bruce snorted before flushing when Tony’s gaze sprang to him, challenging, “Yes, Brucie?”

“I’m sure you behave like that.”
“Ah, but I’m me,” he retorted, as if that answered his statement. And Bruce found that it did: Tony was expected to act that way in public.

“Sir, the telephone,” Jarvis interrupted to Tony’s sigh and Pepper’s intrigue. “I’m afraid my protocols are being overridden.”

“Ugh,” he groaned as he lifted the small clear rectangle that served as a phone, Coulson’s voice relaying, ‘Mr. Stark, we need to talk.’

“You have reached the life model decoy of Tony Stark,” Tony began to Pepper’s muffled giggles. “Please leave a message.”

“This is urgent.”

“Then leave it urgently,” he recommended with impatience. The elevator doors slid open on the other side of the room to reveal Agent Coulson standing, exasperated, with his cell held to his ear. “Security breach,” Tony called, repeating to Pepper again, “This is on you.”

Steve shook his head at Tony’s avoidance of SHIELD’s summons.

“Mr. Stark,” Coulson greeted as he ended the call and entered onto the floor.

“Phil! Come in,” Pepper hailed as she stood, to Tony’s befuddled, ‘Phil?’

“I can’t stay,” Coulson said.

“Uh, his first name is Agent,” Tony objected as he leapt to follow Pepper’s approach of the aforementioned SHIELD agent.

“Your jealousy’s showing,” Clint taunted. Tony smirked and simply raised a middle finger in his direction.

“Settle down,” Coulson ordered, though his lips twitched upwards in entertainment.

“Come on in – we’re celebrating,” she welcomed.

“Which is why he can’t stay,” Tony muttered as he offered a wide, forced smile.

“We need you to look this over as soon as possible,” he explained, posing a thin SHIELD issued computer towards Tony.

“I… I don’t like being handed things,” Tony replied, shaking his head and casting his gaze from the offered object to Phil and back again.

“That’s fine because I love to be handed things,” Pepper interrupted, reaching forward and calling attention onto her. “So, let’s trade,” she suggested, taking the computer and handing him her glass before turning to lift Tony’s from him to replace it with the computer with a ‘thank you’ as she sipped the champagne.

Tony sent her a look that detailed how counterproductive her actions made his as he received the object easily.

Loki tapped a lazy rhythm onto the surface of the table they were seated around at the scene. Not willing to be handed items from individuals other than his partner is a severe social twitch, indicating, due to the acceptance of objects from Ms. Potts, uneasiness towards those who haven’t gained his trust. Perhaps Stark is wary of allowing others into his personal space for safety reasons,
or maybe it’s regarding the exchange of power the action represents. After all, an offering usually implies reciprocation; by refusing to receive, Stark isn’t required to submit in return.

_He begrudgingly addressed Coulson, “Official consulting hours are between eight and five every other... Thursday-“_

“This isn’t a consultation,” he stated, consciously holding the champagne flute he had been given.

“Is this about the Avengers?” Pepper asked. At the agent’s stare she added futilely, “Which I-I know nothing about.”

“The Avengers’ Initiative was scrapped, I thought.” Tony mused as he started towards his desk, setting the touchscreen in the base as he finished over his shoulder, bitterly, “-and I didn’t even qualify.”

Steve frowned at that fact.

“I didn’t know that either,” Pepper remarked.

“Yeah, apparently I’m volatile, self-obsessed, don’t play well with others...”

“That I did know.”

“This isn’t about personality profiles anymore,” Coulson responded.

“Whatever,” he dismissed, calling, “Ms. Potts, got a sec?” with a beckoning finger as he browsed through the information displayed on the computer that he had rested on the desk.

“Half a mo’,” she excused before she sauntered briskly over to Tony’s side.

“You know, I thought we were having a moment,” he expressed, entering a code on the touchscreen and digitally weaving through all of the security features that prevented him from transferring the information onto his server.

“I was having 12 percent of a moment,” she retorted with a smirk-

“And there it is,” Bruce mumbled, laughs emitting from around the table at her comeback.—before glancing back at the agent and stating earnestly, “This seems serious – Phil’s pretty shaken.”

“How would you know th- Why is he ‘Phil’?” Tony asked, casting a suspicious look over her shoulder.

“What is all this?” she questioned, drawing his attention back to the computer.

“This is, uh-” he began before finally bypassing the protective, copyright assets of the system and placing the tips of his fingers on three pictures and dragging them off-screen, the profiles and all of the information attached projected by Jarvis in a hovering semi-circle around them, “-this.”

On their left was a captured image of Dr. Bruce Banner, a roaring video recorded by a cellphone of the Hulk fighting against the military forces set against him on the Culver University campus. In the center was a military identification picture of Steve Rogers, Captain America, a clip of a propaganda video showing him fighting HYDRA agents, and beside that the footage of SHIELD discovering him in the ice. And on the far right was a photo of Thor, images of SHIELD’s readings of Mjolnir and Jane Foster’s descriptions of the construction of the Nine Realms scattered around
a video of the God of Thunder’s battle with the Destroyer.

Tony stared at the Hulk’s fight before casting his gaze to the other two videos, Pepper gazing at the monochrome evidence from the Forties before absorbing the destruction caused by the Destroyer.

“Great first impressions,” Clint noted.

“Nothing beats yours, Kili,” Tony said.

“Really?” Clint questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Tolkien’s awesome,” Tony justified. “And Peter Jackson’s directing is badass.”

Steve muttered a ‘what?’ as he sighed, the names flying over his head.

Tony noticed and an alarming grin grew on his face. “Hey Thor, buddy,” he started, Bruce, Natasha, and Loki narrowing their eyes as Steve watched warily, Clint suppressing his laughter, “how would you like, after this, to watch as nine brave warriors embark on a quest to save their world? They travel through the wild, are victorious in battles when they’re outnumbered, fight huge beasts, and forge everlasting bonds of friendship.”

Thor radiated happiness as he threw his arms into the air and cheered, “What a marvellous tale! A show of loyalty and bravery and heart! We shall all watch this and be invigorated for our own defense of this world!”

Tony shared a smile with Clint as Loki rolled his eyes at his not-brother’s enthusiasm.

She breathed out slowly, announcing, “I’m going to take the jet to DC tonight.”

“Tomorrow,” he corrected with a nudge.

“You have homework. You have a lot of homework.”

“Well, what if I didn’t?” he replied, tearing his gaze from the Hulk’s bellowing.

“If you didn’t?”

“Yeah.”

“You mean, when you’ve finished?” He nodded. “Well, um, then…” she began, her words trailing off into husky tones as she whispered suggestions into his ear that left the notorious playboy slack-jawed.

Natasha raised an eyebrow again at her behaviour.

Agent Coulson cast his eyes to the floor before turning his head away from the scene so not to intrude, an amused expression crossing his face.

Tony pulled back with a smile and acquiesced, “Square deal. Fly safe.”

She smirked and they leaned in to share a lingering kiss before she stepped back and instructed, “Work hard.” He watched her walk away and ask Coulson, “So any chance you’re driving by LaGuardia?”

“I can drop you,” he answered, prompting Pepper to utter a ‘fantastic’.
Tony turned back to the files he had been given, an image of Loki astride the debilitating damage SHIELD’s base of operations suffered. Below there was a representation of the stand Selvig had constructed to harness the Tesseract’s energy, and also the diagnostics he had been able to gather on the cube itself.

Pepper’s voice was heard faintly asking, “Oh, I wanna hear about the cellist – is that still a thing?”

“She moved back to Portland,” Coulson answered.

“What?! Boo,” she responded as they stepped into the elevator.

Tony reached into the hologram and plucked the image of the Tesseract out of the frame, stare drifting into the distance as his focus wandered.
Incitation

Chapter Summary

With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals.

Under the pale blue sky and scattered, airy gatherings of cloud, a jet soared over the choppy surface of a wide ocean. Its interior held two SHIELD-issue pilots in the cockpit, one announcing, “We’re about forty minutes out from home base, sir.” Agent Coulson, seated in the compact back space at a mobile terminal monitoring their progression, removed the connected headphones from his head, stood, and turned to step over to where Steve was seated.

“So this Dr. Banner was trying to replicate the serum they used on me?” he asked, touchscreen monitor held uncomfortably in hand.

Bruce shifted in unease at observing others’ thoughts on him. He wouldn’t blame them their comments, of course, but he was reluctant to have the illusion that the team accepted him ruptured by their underlying thoughts, voiced when he wasn’t present.

“A lot of people were,” Coulson answered, standing at his side with one hand braced where the wall of the aircraft’s hull curved into the ceiling. “You were the world’s first superhero.

“Banner thought gamma radiation might hold the key to unlocking Erskine’s original formula.”

“Didn’t really go his way, did it?” he replied, brows furrowed as he watched the footage of one of the Hulk’s battles with the military.

Bruce focused on his breathing, not wanting to display his shame at everyone’s (it seemed) viewing of his fight against Ross.

“Not so much. When he’s not that thing though, guy’s like a Steven Hawking,” Coulson illustrated.

Bruce smiled shyly at Agent Coulson at the compliment.

At Steve’s raised eyebrows of confusion, he elaborated, “He’s like a… smart person.” When Steve returned his attention to the video Coulson visibly gathered his nerve before uttering, “I gotta say, it’s an honour to meet you, officially.” At Steve’s modest smirk he continued, “I’ve sort of met you – I mean, I watched you, while you were sleeping.”

Tony’s laughter began as an incredulous snort before followed by loud guffaws, Clint, Natasha, and Bruce chortling at the sentence as well. “Smooth,” Tony gasped, Coulson determinedly suppressing his blush at the recollection of his words, as well as when Steve snapped a ‘That’s enough!’ in defense of him, the Captain sporting his own embarrassed flush.

Steve’s smile turned embarrassed as he averted his eyes downwards, Coulson quickly rephrasing, “I mean, I was present, while you were unconscious – from the ice.”

Their snickering continued.
Steve stood and stepped over to brace his arm on the security rim monitoring the number of individuals in the cockpit, gazing out through the glass panes and over the boundless ocean. Agent Coulson moved to join him, continuing, flustered, “You know, it’s really just-just a huge honour to have you on board, ‘cause...”

“Well, I hope I’m the man for the job,” he responded solemnly.

“Oh you are – absolutely.” Coulson cast his eyes to the flooring before drawing Steve’s attention onto him by adding with a bashful smile, “Uh, we made some modifications to the uniform – I had a little... design input.”

“The uniform?” Steve asked, explaining his confusion, “Aren’t the stars and stripes a little... old-fashioned?” with a self-conscious shrug.

“All flustered ‘cause you’re meeting Captain America.” Coulson glared before purposefully turning his attention to the screen.

The lighting was faint in the tunnels underground, the buttresses, pillars, and, overhead, ribbed vaults all composed of dull clay bricks. Two armed soldiers jogged side-by-side through one of the channels, the sounds of their boots absorbed by the layer of mud and general damp that covered the stone flooring. They moved swiftly through the passage into a large underground chamber, numerous soldiers and scientists arranging machinery and equipment.

The devices comprised of metal and wiring were organized on tables and carts, off of the ground whose pores were filled with moisture, and bundles of cable and cords ran up stone pillars and hung suspended beneath the ceiling to power the technology sitting in all corners of the cluttered area. The sear and flash of welding lit a spot intermittently, the only other clear light provided at the back of the mass of machinery and meandering, unyielding troops for a separate enclosure. Erik Selvig directed several scientists in their work within, the Tesseract placed in a recreation of the harnessing device SHIELD had had him design.

Loki sat cross-legged on the grime-covered floor at the fringe of the room, one hand braced on an ankle as he leaned over the shining blue orb at the head of the scepter gripped in his other hand. His eyes grew distant before his lids fell closed, breathing in deeply and relaxing his musculature as the gem flashed. The walls and pillars surrounding him dissolving as he opened his eyes, replaced with flurries of snow that drifted to the frosted, cracked ground below.

“Allright,” Tony started, leaning forward in his seat, “Did you do that or was that the spear?”

“Scepter,” Loki corrected before explaining, “It was a bit of both. The gem is powered by the Tesseract, and Thanos’ knowledge of its signature enables him to locate it and look upon its activities. I, as its temporary wielder, was permitted to trace the connection back to him. However, it would have been a purely mental communication with the Other, I believe, if I had not further strengthened the connection by tracing it with my magic as well – which allowed him to converse with a perception of myself that I cast to him.

“Suspending my conscious and projecting an alternate form in my battle armour was, of course, my magic. I chose to do so due to the inconvenience of the appearance of talking to myself, as well as the particular information that that would have revealed to those working under me.”
“It would have been obvious you were taking orders from someone else,” Natasha concluded to Loki’s confirming nod.

“So, more clone or illusion?” Tony asked, Bruce guessing ‘illusion’.

Loki smirked and answered, “More illusion, yes. There are some slight technical differences, due to its presence in a separate realm, but it’s essentially the same from your perspective.”

Tony narrowed his eyes and objected, “Tell us the differences then – we’re not retarded!”

He hummed in disagreement to the claim, but acquiesced to the request. “Illusions are creations that are formed by the manipulation of light, as I explained before. A limitation of them is that they can only be created within my field of vision, though – their primary use is as a distraction or to initiate confusion, obviously. Outside my field of vision, the figure must have use of its senses in order to assimilate the data it’s observing, hearing, et cetera. So, then I would use a clone.

“There is another form that falls ‘between’ the two, you could say,” Loki detailed. “Astral travel is a way to project an incorporeal figure over any distance. It’s used for relaying messages or reconnaissance, as I’m… ‘pushing’ my conscious away from my physical body. I would have access to, well, my ‘senses’, through the recognition of movement, colour, sound waves, et cetera, by my magic – but I would not be physically present.

“For others to perceive my being there, more strength is required than what I used here; due to the connection through the gem, the Other could ‘see’ what I was projecting to him. In other cases I would have to ‘solidify’ my form so that others’ sensory organs are able to comprehend it.

“I’m not able to physically interact with the environment, though, as with clones. To set my figure in the physical realm to that extent would completely divert my attention to that area, and leave this body unconscious to the world. It isn’t particularly a problem, as no damage would be inflicted upon me if this body were to be killed – just as if one of my clones were to be killed, if there was another present, the entirety of my consciousness and magic would be diverted to it – but I may as well simply teleport to the other area.”

“I see,” Bruce murmured.

“I have never heard it explained as such,” Thor stated.

“I don’t think you’ve heard it explained at all,” Loki snorted. “You didn’t ask for details. You might’ve thought all three were illusions.”

Thor flushed in embarrassment before his expression cleared, questioning with furrowed brows, “Brother, you said that you would be fine if one of your creations was killed as long as you had another one – but what if you did not have a copy of your body in existence?”

Loki raised an eyebrow and explained slowly, as one would to a child who could not grasp something obvious, “Then I would die. As would every other being who is killed.”

“But you could just create a clone somewhere else as you’re about to be killed, right?” Steve prompted after a glance at Thor’s disconcerted expression.

“I could also teleport to another location,” he replied with a roll of his eyes. “Honestly, as long as I have my magic I’m likely to survive anything.”

Thor grinned, though his teammates exchanged considering glances. Similar thoughts were pondered by each of them, wondering why Loki couldn’t escape Thanos and the role he’d been
forced to play in the invasion.

Eroded masses of rock stood high underneath the starry skies, while across from his seated position another figure appeared. The Other stood blindfolded and hooded, silken cloak falling to the ground from his shoulders, bits of metal ornamenting his clothing, the exposed parts of his chest, and what could be seen of his face. “The Chitauri grow restless,” he growled.

“Let them gird themselves,” Loki replied, a fully armoured form conjured on the planet so to converse with the being, “I will lead them in the glorious battle.”

“So that’s all in his head?” Tony asked for clarification. Loki gave an exasperated huff at the simplicity of the summarization, but nodded.

“Battle? Against the meager might of Earth?” he derided, circling around a central piece of some mineral.

“Glorious – not lengthy,” he elaborated, gazing away into distant formations though he matched the Other’s steps, keeping a measured distance between them. The scepter had lengthened into a ruling spear in his hand, the cold illumination of space gleaming off its shaft, the metal now furnishing his ensemble, and the horns atop his helmet as he finished, “if your force is as… formidable as you claim.”

“You question us? You question him-“ the Other spit out, one of his six-fingered hands gesturing upwards, “-he who put the scepter in your hand, who gave you ancient knowledge and new purpose when you were cast out – defeated!”

“I was a king!” Loki argued, eyes wide, “The rightful king of Asgard – betrayed…”

Some overt looks were directed towards him, but Loki did not deem them worth a vocal response. Perhaps as the words were strung together in that sentence they were evidence of delusion, but he stood by the sentiment expressed (even if under most circumstances he would never have articulated such things).

He had been King, however unintended the crowning from his preparation for Thor’s coronation. And even if he hadn’t wanted it, he had thought himself more suited for it when compared to Thor, before everything – Jötunheim, the Weapons’ Vault… And hadn’t he been betrayed? By those who he’d thought his family? Who had all lied to him?

“No doubt you’ll do better on Earth…” he drawled skeptically.

“They are a lost people. They mistake selfishness for spirit,” Loki detailed. “When the sky falls, it’ll be every man for himself.”

“How will you rule them, then?”

“Unmercifully.”

The Other snarled and turned to begin walking in the opposite direction, towards Loki, as he mocked, “Your ambition is little, and born of childish need.”

Tony resolutely relaxed his shoulders, counteracting his body’s instinctive wince. For that was exactly what Loki was doing, wasn’t it? Seeking attention, when he had gone how many decades, centuries, without notice or regard?

Loki turned his caped back and stepped further away, eyes drifting up the winding stair held
together by ebony spikes raised between the slabs, a sharp square of mineral in the middle of each support with a pale stone glimmering at its center. “We look beyond the Earth to the greater worlds the Tesseract will unveil.”

“You don’t have the Tesseract yet,” Loki stated.

The Other spun violently and appeared in front of the fallen god in but a blur of movement, six-fingered, grey hand, ridges burnished pale blue, outstretched as if to attack. “I don’t mean to threaten,” Loki began, “but until I open the doors, until your force is mine to command, you are but words.”

“You will have your war, Asgardian,” he hissed in reply, before slinking closer. “If you fail, if the Tesseract is kept from us,” he informed, circling him in malicious glee, “there will be no realm, no barren moon, no crevice where he cannot find you.” The Other’s bloodied teeth shone from over Loki’s shoulder as he continued to warn, “You think you know pain?

“He will make you long for something sweet as pain.”

His hand clasped onto the side of Loki’s head, and with a flash at the line of contact Loki was thrown back into his body on Earth. In the underground chamber with his forces, cross-legged on the floor once again, his head was thrown to the side, jaw clenched in pain at the touch of the Other. He panted as he opened his eyes, his stare troubled as he pursed his lips and began to slow his trembling.

Once again the occupants of the room directed their attention onto Loki, though this time he was resigned to their interrogation. He raised an eyebrow, daring one of them to emphasize his weakness.

No one vocalized the point, but other questions emerged. Agent Coulson asked, “If they were so confident in being able to find you, and you looked as though you believed them, then how is it you’re in our custody?”

“Your defeat of them eliminated nearly all of their forces,” Loki started. “Though I can only guess at their motivation for attacking Midgard, I think it probable that their attention is focused on regrouping and furthering their ultimate goal instead of locating and capturing me.

“Or they may simply be organizing a stealth force so to appear and perform such. I cannot say anything with certainty; it has been a short time yet.”

“How’re they planning on finding you?” Tony questioned, leaning forward slightly in his seat.

“I do not know,” Loki confessed. “It seems likely that Thanos would arrange transport to either the Tesseract or the Scepter to search for me, as it can be assumed I’m in SHIELD’s custody along with the artefacts. But… if he has a way of observing our actions, he could send others to me at any time, any place – which is why I desire to examine these discs and notes for their origin, because the individual compiling and sending them is obviously able to keep watch over us.”

“You can’t think it’s Thanos that’s doing this,” Natasha stated with a quirked eyebrow.

“Of course not,” he sneered in reply. “However, if there is an open channel from some place in the Realms to our current location, I am wary of him accessing it.” He received apprehensive nods in agreement to his concerns.

A lone Quinjet flew through the clear skies and over the expanse of the ocean, a hazy trail left in the wake of its rapid flight. It soared until descending onto the singular craft present in the large
body of water; a dark behemoth of a ship was sprawled over the rough waves, watchtowers filled with armed guards and long strips of tarmac coating her surface for the landing of her jets. The SHIELD crest was embossed in gold on her face.

The aircraft was guided to land by the ramp agents underneath its hovering form, the cacophony of agents’ communications muffled by the thrum of its engines. It landed effortlessly along the runway, wingspan the width of the track, and agents approached to guide the plane to the edge of the ship where a half-dozen jets and another Quinjet were secured, after they aided those inside in disembarking.

As the hatch opened, Coulson ordered, “Stow the Captain’s gear,” of the agents, who responded with a prompt, ‘Yes, sir’, as Natasha strode to meet them. Steve followed Agent Coulson out of the jet, both turning to address her advance. “Agent Romanoff, Captain Rogers,” Coulson formally introduced.

“Ma’am,” he greeted with a nod.

“Hi,” she replied, shoulders set in a black leather jacket overtop an orange cotton shirt and fitted jeans, directing towards Coulson, “They need you on the bridge – they’re starting the face-trace.”

“See you there,” he said as he stepped between them so to move in the direction of the area he had been informed of.

“It was quite the buzz around here, finding you in the ice,” she began, the two walking side-by-side over the surface of the Helicarrier as pilots and mechanics hastened past to prepare their equipment. “Thought Coulson was gonna swoon.”

Tony directed a mocking smirk towards said agent, who glared and threatened, “I will tase you.”

Steve smirked at the thought, recalling the Agent’s stumbling conversation with him. “Did he ask you to sign his Captain America trading cards yet?” she asked with a quirked brow, her face, turned towards him, showcasing her amusement.

“Trading cards?” he questioned, looking at her in disbelief.

“They’re vintage – he’s very proud.”

Coulson flushed in mortification at the first impression he had made upon the Captain.

They observed Bruce ahead of them, the man worrying his hands together as he stood uneasily by the side of one of the jets, quickly dodging out of the way of any soldier or agent that moved past him too closely. “Dr. Banner,” Steve hailed warmly, Bruce’s attention turning to him.

He cast his eyes to the couple of troops that had passed him as he skirted around their backs to draw closer to Steve and Natasha, saying, “Oh yeah, hi,” as he grasped Steve’s outstretched hand in his own to shake. “They told me you’d be coming,” he responded, arm extended fully so to not draw nearer than was required for the action, gaze drifting down the length of the Captain’s body and back up again to take in the ideal that he, himself, was the furthest from before he released him.

Bruce observed the handshake captured by the objective disc and thought that he might want a picture framed of the moment. The contrast between them (not the physical, which in itself was striking: blond to brunet, blue eyed and pale skinned to dark eyed and tanned, neat and composed to ragged, disheveled, and uncomfortable) would serve to remind him of what his arrogance had led to: his failure and the lives that were lost as a result of the Hulk’s destruction.
Captain Steve Rogers is a hero, had been the sole success of the super-soldier serum, and Bruce had thought to make himself equal to that. He had no right, wasn’t worthy of it as Steve was, and he deserved the monster that had resulted.

“Word is you can find the Cube,” Steve voiced jauntily.

“...Is that the only word on me?” he inquired, hands returning to rub against each other.

“Only word I care about,” he asserted with a nod, Bruce nodding in wary acceptance.

He gnawed on his lip for a moment before stuffing his hands in his pockets and broaching carefully, “Must be strange for you... all of this,” with a jerk of his head to indicate their general surroundings.

“Well, this is actually kind of familiar,” Steve admitted, a dozen agents donning sweats jogging around the perimeter of the ocean-born base.

“Gentlemen, you might want to step inside in a minute-” Natasha interjected, folding her hands in front of her as she finished teasingly, “-it’s going to get a little hard to breathe.”

The two men stared at her uncomprehendingly before a clang echoed from the depths of the hull and faint alarms sounded, an agent on the public announcement system commanding, “Flight crew, secure the deck.” The slate-grey panelling that made up the sides of the ship began to shift, mechanics whirring, as those on the tarmac started to hurry across the area.

“Is this a submarine?” Steve asked, astounded.

“Really? They want me in a submerged, pressurized, metal container?” Bruce questioned rhetorically as the two wandered to the edge. They stood at the yellow and black striped warning bar by their feet overlooking the action occurring below.

Water was being thrown off a hefty rising turbine as its wings increased in speed, another revealed further down the vessel and two emerging in symmetry on the opposite side. The waves frothed as they were thrashed around, tossed off the machinery as the turbines began to power up in earnest. The craft steadily lifted into the air as barrels of liquid poured off her sides, Bruce and Steve stepping back from the edge as the wind picked up speed as they gained altitude.

“No, no, this is much worse,” Bruce announced in trepidation.

The ramp agents and pilots ran to various jets to close the hatches over the cockpits and to secure the wheels underneath the aircrafts, oxygen masks fitted over those who would be dwelling on deck. The Helicarrier progressively lifted into the air, wind heaving through the turbines and raising her high above the ocean below.

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Tony sighed in marvel as the graceful mass of the Helicarrier took to the skies.

“Could you not praise yourself every second?” Clint muttered with a roll of his eyes.

“I do not understand,” Thor conceded.

“Stark designed the Helicarrier,” Natasha divulged as Tony beamed and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head and basking in their awe.

“That is truly wondrous, Anthony!” Thor proclaimed with a grin, Bruce and Steve agreeing with
amazed expressions.

It is truly informative... Loki thought, considering the genius of the engineer when compared to the standard set for technology that he had observed on Midgard.

Steve and Bruce had followed Natasha inside, her lead escorting them through the halls of the ship and through a pair of double doors into the expanse of the bridge. The raised flooring edged by steel rails opened to a hexagonal conference table and then led to Director Fury's position at four control panels, his attention on the view through the windows that made up the prow of the ship as well as the movement of his crew. The bridge's agents were outfitted in Prussian blue, the SHIELD logo paler in colour embossed on the upper left arm of the long sleeve. Some females elected to don skirts while others wore pants, but all of the agents wore leather boots that stretched up to their calves.

Agents were positioned at rows of monitors on the floor below the Director's stance, each with a microphone and headset in use for communication with all of the others that were coordinating the ship's control. A woman asked a seated male 'Check valves done?' within the clamour as she moved to his side, another agent in the row in front reporting, “Hover power check complete – position cyclic,” before informing, “Increase collective to 8.0%,” as he worked at his computer.

Steve wandered with his hands in his pockets, observing with a smile the organized chaos around him that was responsible for all of the functions of the craft. Bruce meandered around the edge of the space with his hands worrying each other in front of him before noticing he came upon an armoured door with the SHIELD insignia upon it, two agents eyeing him with suspicion. He hurriedly ducked his head and turned away, a hand rising to rub at his nose for a second in a show of nerves.

An agent’s voice echoed in announcement: “Preparing for maximum performance takeoff. Increase output capacity.”

“Power plant performing at capacity,” a female agent stated, circling around to verify the data displayed on one of the screens before declaring, “We are clear.”

“All engines operating,” Agent Hill surmised with her hands resting on her hips, “SHIELD Emergency Protocol 193.6 in effect.” She turned and addressed the Director, “We’re at level, sir.”

“Good – let’s vanish,” Fury ordered, a hand resting on each of the monitors at his side.

“Engage retro-reflection panels,” Hill commanded. Outside, several strategically placed lights appeared on the surface of the hull, their beams swivelling and shining on the panels of the ship’s covering. Gradually the panels began to reflect the colouring of the surrounding sky and clouds, the Helicarrier losing visibility to any who would look upon her as she flew through the air.

“Reflection panels engaged,” an agent notified over the speakers.

“That is astounding!” Thor praised, Tony preening as Agent Coulson allowed a small smile to express the pride he felt in the members of his agency. Loki inwardly agreed with the sentiment, narrowing his eyes in thought as to the advantages of obtaining the extent of knowledge that Stark had at his disposal.

The other Realms were of the belief that Midgard was too under-developed to bother associating with, the mortals having nothing to offer the realms that had been in existence for innumerable millennia before Midgard had even begun to sprout life. But if their innovations were in reality further than their own masses were aware of, having SHIELD and other surveillance organizations
solely owning such technology, then it allowed for a powerful defense against any other species that moved to take advantage of their ‘inferiority’.

It also would not do to ignore such continual exponential development. Each Realm differed in their progress and products; it is impossible to predict where the mortals’ science will take them.

“Gentlemen,” Fury greeted, having turned around and begun to approach where Steve and Bruce were hovering around the central table. Steve walked towards him, his gaze averted as he gaped towards the glass through which the edges of the aircraft were no longer detectable. He pulled a few folded bills out of his pocket and flipped one up, handing it to the Director, who received the ten dollars with a humoured quirk to his lips.

“That wasn’t a legit bet,” Tony scoffed with a roll of his eyes.

Steve lifted his chin and asserted, “I keep my word.”

Steve continued to drift forward further into the bridge, Agent Hill guardedly observing him.

“Doctor, thank you for coming,” Fury welcomed once he had moved around the table to Bruce, reaching out a hand.

After a second of hesitation he shook it, responding, “Thanks for asking nicely.” Bruce cast his eyes to the flooring before asking, “So, um… how long am I staying?”

“Once we have our hands on the Tesseract you’re in the wind.”

“Was that true?” Tony asked, glancing at Coulson. Bruce averted his eyes to the surface of the table.

Agent Coulson nodded. “Director Fury hoped, of course, that if we had to fight Loki and the Avengers were assembled that Dr. Banner would voluntarily join, but attempting to force him to stay for that purpose was never an option.”

Bruce’s breathing eased at that, taking comfort in the fact that they had made that cage for containment of him in case of emergency and not for holding him captive.

He nodded before questioning with more assurance, “Where are you with that?”

Fury gestured to the lower floor, Agent Coulson answering as he crossed his arms over his chest, “We’re sweeping every wirelessly accessible camera on the planet: cell phones, laptops… If it’s connected to a satellite, it’s eyes and ears for us.” Steve had walked to where Coulson stood, his brow furrowed at the concepts of information gathering that he had stated.

Natasha had crouched down to touch one of the monitors below, bringing up another table of data to the side of the screen that depicted Clint Barton’s personal information, another computer in the row in front demonstrating Erik Selvig’s. “It’s still not gonna find them in time,” Natasha commented.

“You have to narrow your field,” Bruce said. “How many spectrometers do you have access to?”

“How many are there?” Fury retorted as he leaned back to sit on one of the bars of the railing.

“Call every lab you know – tell them to put the spectrometers on the roof and calibrate them for gamma rays,” he ordered, revealing a dull purple shirt as he stripped off his worn jacket and bundled it between his hands. “I’ll rough out a tracking algorithm – basic cluster recognition. At
least we could rule out a few places.” Fury nodded, Bruce questioning as he rolled up the cuffs of his sleeves, “Do you have somewhere for me to work?”

“Agent Romanoff, would you show Dr. Banner to his laboratory, please?” he requested, Natasha nodding and stepping over to lead him out of the bridge.

“You’re gonna love it, Doc – we’ve got all the toys.”

“Really? You have a Commodore 64?” he asked in jest.

Tony cackled as Bruce smirked.

“I’m not sure…”

“Oh, you’re very young,” Bruce pronounced.

Natasha maintained her impassive expression though the joke was at her expense.

Once the hydraulic doors had slid shut behind them, Fury began making his way towards his position at the prow before pausing and calling, “Agent Hill.” She had previously been monitoring the information presented on the touchscreen in front of her and authorizing further directions for the Helicarrier, and notifying the appropriate agents of Dr. Banner’s suggestions as well as providing an update as to his location and work, but had turned at the address. He continued, “Did you tell the Council that Barton had been compromised?”

“What?” Steve interrogated with a frown, turning to Coulson.

“She wasn’t exactly supportive of the Avengers’ Initiative,” he responded. At their provoked countenances, he continued, “She is now.”

“Well of course she is now,” Loki replied with a roll of his eyes at the fickleness of humans as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Was that not procedure?” she questioned innocently, her gaze steady. He lifted his chin as he weighed her actions with a considering look before he moved on. She asked in disapproval, “Did you tell them who exactly is on your ‘response team’?” as she resumed her instructing of agents through the computer.

“Doesn’t appear that I have to,” he quipped. Hill pursed her lips and stared at his back.
Dealing

Chapter Summary

With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals. Taking a brief reprieve, the Avengers move to assimilate the difficult details revealed by Thor of Loki’s past.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Put it over there,” Selvig directed with a brief gesture of the screwdriver in hand, a couple of men in lab coats moving where ordered with armoured briefcases of equipment. He turned away from them and stepped from the intricate machine holding the Tesseract, the device holding her energy at steady levels while he devised a way to harness her power. Converted scientists and agents milled around outside of the isolated area going about their assignments as he asked from within the glass structure, “Where did you find all these people?” with a pleased smile and bright blue eyes as he walked over to a small worktable covered in miscellaneous metal parts.

Between the reinforced panes was an opening solely barred by hanging strips of clear plastic, Agent Barton searching through the information displayed on the computer between his hands on the other side. He answered, “SHIELD has no shortage of enemies, Doctor,”

While Tony, Bruce, and Coulson were intent on the process of innovation, the swift organization of commandeered forces, and the setting of the makeshift headquarters, Clint was in a state of mental agony; he did not know the extent that the disc would reveal of his interactions with Loki. And not only that, but he was about to watch the detailed brutality of his actions against innocents when he was still attempting to work on coming to terms with the opinion that he was a victim in the circumstances.

Loki eyed his hawk inconspicuously. If angered by these scenes, he would have to move with caution and orchestrate a method of release that didn’t necessitate harm to himself. However, if the archer exhibited distress and/or vulnerability then it would be an opportunity for him to offer comfort and to begin to make amends, drawing Clint’s loyalty onto himself once again.

-before flipping the object and showing him the screen. “Is this the stuff you need?” he asked, tone showcasing his disinterest in the topic as the monitor depicted a large piece of the dark mineral iridium alongside the identification of Dr. Heinrich Schifer.

“Yeah, iridium. It’s found in meteorites – it forms anti-protons,” he explained as he lifted a couple of flat metal parts from the table in front of him and carefully laid them on top of one another, screwdriver still in hand. “It’s very hard to get a hold of.”

“Especially if SHIELD knows you need it,” Clint commented wryly, turning the computer back around and casting his attention unto it.

“Well, I didn’t know,” Erik retorted before exuberantly greeting ‘Hey!’ as he observed Loki enter and approach them. “This is wonderful!” he imparted cheerfully, indicating the progress made
under his direction. “The Tesseract has shown me so much. It’s—It’s more than knowledge, it’s truth,” he confessed in awed gratitude.

“What does that mean?” Bruce asked, turning slightly towards Loki.

“It is the Mind Gem that he is speaking of,” he began. “It was assumed a part of the Cube due to her being its source of power as well as the similar colour and glow, I believe.

“Upon contact with the Scepter, his perception of events was altered. A constant dissatisfaction with SHIELD was fostered, as well as a gratitude to me for freeing him of them, and, at the touch of my magic when occasionally communicating with him mentally, his mind was opened to previously unthought-of paths that the technology he was working on could follow.”

The line of Clint’s shoulders was tense at the description of what, exactly, had happened to him. Loki’s interactions with each of them may have been different, but the Scepter, or the orb on it, has set powers that were employed the same on each of them. Had he felt that he wasn’t appreciated at SHIELD before, or was that something Loki had put in? It’s impossible to remember a prior opinion that was lacking knowledge now obtained.

“That doesn’t sound like… you were controlling them,” Bruce hesitantly commented, glancing towards Clint.

It doesn’t.

“If you mean that you were expecting all that governed them – experiences, emotions, thoughts – to be swept aside so their bodies were no more than puppets,” Loki started with an unimpressed raise of an eyebrow, “then no, that is not how it worked. Aspects of their bias onto events of their pasts were changed and some additional information was provided, manipulating each into revering me and the goal I represented.

“Though they retained their ‘selves’, this should not be construed as their retention of ‘free will’. Just as knowledge of another’s past, psychological weaknesses, and sympathies will allow one to manipulate another into a course of action, the Mind Gem allowed me the insight to force them in the direction I desired.”

Clint had learned enough psychological warfare from SHIELD to know that certain words can prompt expected reactions if you know your mark’s weaknesses, so this explanation didn’t worsen the guilt he’d felt when he had assumed the Scepter gave Loki complete control. Because though he could now recall all that had happened during the invasion while he’d been under the Blue, his perception of self and right and wrong had been so different he couldn’t tell if he’d been free and acting under different rules of if He had control over his actions.

Now though, Clint thought that, being the talented Trickster that Loki is, He could have manipulated any mortal with words just as easily as He could with the gem. But He’d been injured and pressed for time. This admittance comforted him somewhat – because it allowed the truth of Natasha’s words to seep into his consciousness. “This is monsters and magic, and everything we weren’t trained for.” The whole thing had been outside of his control.

In the strained silence that had settled over the room, Tony asked, sneering at the intangible concepts of magic that he could not grasp, “It doesn’t sound all that complicated – can you tweak memories on a whim without the thing?”

Clint’s veins seemed to be flash-flooded with ice water in shock, every inch of muscle on his body coiled as his gaze leapt to the god, awaiting his answer.
Loki’s sharp eyes unhurriedly dragged over his hawk’s tense posture before he answered firmly, “No,” turning to face Tony to elaborate on the topic. “The precision and power offered by the Gem are not ones to be found in natural study – that is what causes it to be sought after. Even if I were to specialize in mind-magic in my study of seidr, manipulating the point of view of memories is not something that can be accomplished. Inserting a foreign memory or supressing another would be possible, though difficult to maintain (the mind knows itself and detects intrusion quicker than one would think), but the realm of learning of the mind revolves around physical or psychological healing, or illusion, as I have covered before.”

Bruce hummed in interest, offering a small reassuring smile towards Clint, who, upon catching sight of it, nodded in thanks.

Having the concepts explained in the middle of this scene presented cushioning for Clint’s psyche for when his teammates observed the particulars of what he had taken part in. It provided the occupants of the room the reminder that the SHIELD assassin had been unwilling in this killing.

“I know,” Loki sympathized to the veneration of the cube, hands clasped behind his back. He lowered his gaze and tried to contain his amused smirk, elaborating, “It, ah... It touches everyone differently.” Erik nodded with a smile. He addressed Clint with a smirk and piercing eyes, asking, “What did it show you, Agent Barton?”

“My next target,” he stated as he turned to face his god, azure gaze determined.

Selvig chuckled and said, “Stick in the mud, he’s got no soul.” Clint turned to stare at him darkly as he continued, “No wonder you chose this-this tomb to work in!”

“Well the Radisson doesn’t have three levels of lead-lined flooring between SHIELD and that cube,” he justified heatedly, jerking his head in her direction when he referred to the Tesseract.

Selvig nodded, conceding, turning back to his work.

“I see why Fury chose you to guard it,” Loki praised, Clint’s eyes turning to him from where they had been irately watching Selvig walk away.

“You’re going to have to contend with him, sir,” Clint informed, walking alongside Loki as he led him away from the scientific instruments. “As long as he’s in the air, I can’t pin him down. And he’ll be putting together a team.”

“Are they a threat?”

“To each other more than likely-”

“Did we look that bad on paper?” Tony asked with a pout as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Well, you-” Coulson began, only to be cut off by Tony’s, ‘I said “we”’! He permitted a low chortle before responding, “There were a lot of people against the idea, yes.”

“But if Fury can get them on track – and he might – they could throw some noise our way.”

“You admire Fury,” Loki noted, facing him as they walked as he replied,

“He’s got a clear line of sight.”

“Is that why you failed to kill him?” he asked rhetorically, striding past though Clint had halted.
“It might be,” he confessed. He did not excuse himself, but attempted to placate his god by adding, “I was disoriented, and I’m not at my best with a gun.”

Loki ignored his defense and spun, raising a hand to point as he commanded of Clint, “I want to know everything you can tell me about this team of his.” His gaze grew unfocused as he announced insistently, “I would test their mettle.”

Clint nodded. Loki proclaimed, “I’m weary of scuttling in shadow. I mean to rule this world – not burrow in it.”

“That’s a risk,” Clint stated.

Loki allowed a huff of laughter to escape as a grin split his face, acknowledging, “Oh, yes.”

“If you’re set on making yourself known,” Clint started, bright blue glance shifting before becoming fixed on him with purpose, “Could be useful.”

Loki smirked and stepped closer, tilting his head and demanding, “Tell me what you need.”

The assassin turned and strode to one of the many tables where weaponry was laid, halting before a long thin case that he unlatched and opened. “I need a distraction,” he declared as he threw his arm out, collapsed bow in hand, the jerk of his musculature expanding her arms as he concluded over his shoulder in a tone full of delight, “And an eyeball.”

Natasha was monitoring Clint’s reaction, his service of Loki splayed on the screen for him to relive and for all of them to realize. His difficulty with the situation wouldn’t be eased by the contents of this disc. A glance towards Coulson conveyed the necessity of a brief respite.

“It’s getting late,” Agent Coulson announced. “There’s no point in continuing on when we have enough to think about.”

Steve nodded, adding, “The rest we’re all present for – the museum, the invasion – and it’ll move quickly, so this is probably the best point to stop for the night.”

There were murmurs of agreement as Jarvis powered down the system, Coulson standing and stating towards Loki, “I’ve a report to write on the workings of the Scepter’s control of Agent Barton and Doctor Selvig – would you be amiable to providing an explanation in layman’s terms for me?”

“Of course,” Loki responded, lifting himself from his seat and following the agent out into the common area of the floor.

As soon as the door had shut behind the two, Steve asked of Clint, “Are you alright?”

He released a lengthy exhale, but ultimately answered, “Yeah, I’m cool.”

Steve’s gaze met the archer’s for a few seconds before he accepted the response, nodding and diverting, “Well, now that we know Loki’s with Coulson we can talk about what we’re going to do about the Chitauri.”

Thor supported, “Yes, he is in grave danger of them.”

“We know Phil’s gonna tell Fury about Thanos tracking either the Scepter or Cube,” Tony began, “so they’ll be prepped for an attack – what we’ve got to consider is an attack here, and portals.”
Bruce nodded. “If Thanos or the Other can actually track Loki himself, then a force might appear here at any time-”

“-and if the portal they’re using is kept open, like at the invasion rather than when Loki appeared, we have to be prepared to deal with a few Chitauri popping in, grabbing him, then retreating,” Tony finished.

Steve frowned. “How can we possibly do that? If they grab him and the portal closes, we don’t have a way to track him.”

“Not yet we don’t,” Tony countered with a smirk.

Bruce raised an eyebrow, questioning, “We’ve just started looking at his magic – you don’t actually think we’ll be able to have enough knowledge to, not only identify him but, locate him if he’s in another dimension, do you?”

Tony shrugged, “Hey, we’re brilliant. And anyway, I was more hinging on Thanos being on one of Saturn’s moons – that’s in this realm.”

“We still can’t just fly over there,” Bruce argued.

“Yeah, yeah – we’d still have to create a bridge of some kind,” Tony allowed. “The key part is locating him though. If we can figure out a way to do that – which I think we totally can with enough access to his magical signature – then Thor can move us all with the Tesseract.”

Thor tilted his head in thought at the suggestion before responding, “That is true.”

“That’d bring it awfully close to Thanos though,” Clint commented.

“We can’t risk that,” Natasha proclaimed. “It and the Scepter have got to stay here.”

“It doesn’t have to be abandoned-”

“-a couple of us could stay here to guard it. And also make sure no one else comes back through the portal.”

“Loki was right in that there can’t be many Chitauri left,” Steve added. “And if he’s taken to wherever Thanos and the Other are, we’re just freeing him and getting out – we’re not looking to kill each of them. So we can afford one or two staying here just in case.”

“If we’re led to where all the remaining resistance is though…” Tony began.

“And we’ll be using the thing on the Helicarrier, probably,” Clint continued. “There’s a supply of agents right there.”

“Um, there’s one thing that’s slipped our minds,” Bruce interjected, removing his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. At his teammates’ attention he continued, “If they take him to Titan, we can’t follow – the atmosphere’s mostly nitrogen, nevermind the methane and ethane clouds.”

Various cussing followed that statement, Tony grumbling, “Wherever they are won’t have an atmosphere we can work with… With the differences in their chemical makeup, their native environment’s got to be substantially different than ours.”

“I don’t understand,” Thor admitted, his brows furrowed.
“The air surrounding each planet is a specific combination of substances,” Bruce explained. “We take in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide – any place where the concentration of oxygen is thinner will kill us.”

“Oh, you mortals are quite fragile, aren’t you?”

“Hey,” Tony whined in protest before his expression cleared and he interrogated, “Wait, what do you breathe?” Thor merely tilted his head to the side in confusion, so Tony summoned, “Jarvis?”

“According to the fluctuation of elemental concentrations in the immediate area of Mr. Odinson’s nose and mouth, sir, his body is processing oxygen the same as the rest of the occupants in this building,” the AI announced.

“So Asgard’s atmosphere’s similar enough to ours that you can just adapt?” Tony mused.

“I find that hard to believe,” Bruce retorted. “And even if it is, the likelihood of Jötunheim comprising of the same…”

Tony growled in frustration. “You aliens, I swear-”

“When we’re analyzing Loki’s magic we can ask him – he’ll probably have some details for us,” Bruce placated.

“Speaking of,” Natasha began, “what set him off earlier? Someone’s going to get killed if he keeps bringing up sore topics.”

“How was I supposed to know talking about his kids would hit a nerve?” Tony defended.

“We all have to be more careful with what we talk to him about,” Steve instructed. “If having him here’s taught us anything, it’s that he’s more powerful than we could have ever thought. We can’t afford to jeopardize his contract with SHIELD.” He received nods in support of his speech.

“So…” Bruce prompted, directing his eyes onto Thor.

“What’s up with his kids?” Tony asked.

The Thunderer winced before he hesitantly started, “You know already of Hela, Jörmungand, and Fenrir, by the giantess Angrboda, as well as Sleipnir, by the mighty stallion Svadilfari, but my brother has another two sons born to him by his wife Sigyn-”

He paused at the choking sounds and incredulous expressions that resulted, Tony managing, “That nut-job’s married?”

“He was very happily married for a number of centuries, yes,” Thor elaborated. “She’s known now as the Goddess of Fidelity, and was steadfastly loyal to my brother, standing by him even when…” he trailed off, abruptly clearing his throat before continuing, “-well, I’m about to tell you of the fate of their sons. My point is that Sigyn supported Loki, but their relationship was strained after the ordeal and their strong bond gradually diminished, and they officially separated a couple of decades before my brother faced the news of his adoption.”

“You’ve beat around the bush already – we’re dying in suspense. Tell us what happened with their kids,” Tony demanded.

The god took a second to compose himself before he began again, “Loki’s practice of seidr was looked down upon by the Æsir. The value of warriors is judged by their strength in battle, their
skills with weaponry. Very few were as powerful in sorcery as he (and there were none in the realms of Asgard), so the evidence of seidr was presented in healing and ceremony only. Most sorcerers were academics that had no desire to put their powers to the test on the field of battle, in fact.

“But not all were so blind to the usefulness of such command. When my brother’s sway over the elements and various illusions was displayed there were some who recognized the power he held over the outcome of battles. Children and young adults whose guardians weren’t so vocal in their displeasure of Loki’s art began to look up to him, and wished to begin to learn seidr. The Æsir were angered at this – they always seemed to be angry with Loki… However, one day their resentment could not be ignored.

“A youth had begun to study sorcery on his own. He had no teacher because I believe his parents wouldn’t allow him one, but he had bought some books on the subject. It is so very dangerous though, and without the proper instruction… He had moved to try a spell that was far beyond his understanding, and the effort had drained his core and killed him.

“When his body was found alongside the tome of sorcery, the Æsir’s fury was overwhelming. The Allfather was forced to take action, his people imploring him to punish Loki for his use of seidr and for corrupting their children – and taking one from them.

“Loki’s sons Vali and Nari were taken from him in recompense, Vali being turned into a wolf and in his madness ripping apart his brother. Nari’s insides were taken from his corpse and were used to tie Loki at his shoulders, waist, and shins, turning to iron. A serpent was then suspended above him, Sigyn choosing to sit by his side and catch the dripping venom in a bowl. But when she had to empty it, the poison fell onto his eyes, and his pained thrashing was the source of many earthquakes.”*

By the end of the explanation, Thor’s cheeks were streaked with tears once again at the cruelty inflicted upon his brother. His teammates were similarly lacking in composure, Steve gaping in horror while both Tony and Bruce’s shoulders shook with the restraint being enforced so to not lash out. Clint and Natasha were more practiced in supressing their opinions, but even their expressions depicted their shock.

“I-It’s no wonder…” Tony started, shaking his head and gathering himself before his eyes narrowed in rage and he shouted, “FUCK! I’d want to burn the world too – who cares?! How could they do that to his kids and just-

“And isn’t that amazing?” Bruce asked rhetorically in a soft voice, irises ringed in bright green. “He didn’t really strike out against them – he didn’t risk his other children. He attacked here ‘cause he was forced into it, and moved against Jötunheim before that – to vent his feelings at being adopted, sure, but for the good of Asgard as well.”

“That’s-I can’t-” Tony snarled, throwing his face into his hands.

“He loved his children, right?” Natasha questioned in order to cover all options, her mind reluctantly already made up in favour of Loki’s strength and pain. “It was a sacrifice for him to not attack the other gods?”

Thor blinked rapidly to clear his eyes somewhat, clearing the tears from his face with a hand before gazing at her in mystification. “Of course. He mourned his sons and, once he had freed himself, tracked down Vali in order to ensure his protection – though he had lost his mind – and visited Nari often in Helheim.
“And Fenrir… If you had seen Loki’s anger at the Allfather’s decision to bind Fenrir—” he abruptly halted his speech with a shake of his head, unwilling to revisit the memory.

“There was always something he could do,” Bruce started. “He could try to help his children, could see them, comfort them – but finding out he was adopted… That’s him. He couldn’t do anything – and it was the last straw.”

The six sat in silence for a few moments before Tony called, “J? Where’s Loki?”

“In his chambers, sir. Agent Coulson vacated the floor at the time Mr. Odinson was covering the topic of the goddess Sigyn, and, overhearing, the Sorcerer chose to retreat to his rooms.”

“Least he didn’t catch anything too bad,” Clint commented.

“He has the right idea,” Steve said. “We should all go to bed – we’re hopefully finishing the movie tomorrow.”

“I’m heading to the bar,” Tony mumbled as he stood with the others, the group exiting and making their way to the elevator to be dropped off at their respective floors.

Bruce carefully disembarked into his and Loki’s shared living room, but there was no sign of the god. The door to his half was shut, so Bruce assumed he was there. With a lingering glance at the surface of the door, Bruce turned and entered his own half, leaning against the door for a second before moving past the kitchenette and into his bedroom.

As he shucked off his pants and rifled through the closet that Tony had had filled with an array of new clothing, he mused absently, I’d expected living on the same floor as Loki to try my nerves, but more in a ‘I-might-transform-and-smash-him-through-a-wall’ way – not anger on his behalf. But it’s not like I’m the only one – everyone’s staggered at the injustice done to him by the Æsir.

At the thought of the torture done to his children, Bruce held his hands immobile where they were in the middle of shifting one of the covered hangers to prevent them from fisting in the material, taking the time to steady his breathing. The building hopelessness Loki must have felt, having his children taken away from him and hurt; the anger, the pain–

He rubbed his temples, eventually finding a pair of sweatpants to don and a soft t-shirt to replace the neat button-down he’d been wearing. He slid under the covers and, after a moment of staring at the ceiling, motionless, the lights shut off. Bruce sighed in exasperation at the recollection of the judgement he’d faced from General Ross and the army, and wondered if, after Loki had landed, he hadn’t fought as hard as he could against the Chitauri because he’d given up. Maybe he’d thought that being outright hated was preferable to the pretense of favour; than having everyone turn on him over and over again.

Tony walked instantly to the bar, as he had said he would, and poured himself a double shot of scotch that he threw back immediately with eyes squeezed shut. Exhaling heavily, a certain degree of calm afforded, he poured another share into the glass that he held gingerly, turning to lean back against the bar. His gaze drifted to the ceiling in thought as he sipped his drink, a frown darkening his features.

_Fucking Loki. Too similar with the fucking daddy-issues and being targeted when showing off smarts beyond his age, but I couldn’t imagine falling through that warp-hole and the strength and power and pull on his magic that was constant in order to survive – and now this? The fuck kind of
people would do that to someone – tie him up with his kid’s intestines?! Sick freaks.

How’d he deal with having been the cause of the deaths of his sons? And his other one – Fenrir – the wolf that’s chained in some corner of Asgard – and the Ouroboros that’s at the bottom of the oceans here – and his daughter, that’s apparently the goddess of the dead? How often’s he get to see them? How often was he allowed to check up on them, spend time with them? Take comfort from the ones that were healthy and unharmed?

“Fuck,” he cursed, swallowing the remaining alcohol and leaving the glass on the surface behind him as he stalked back over the flooring and to the elevator. “To my lab, J,” he requested curtly, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Yes, sir.”

The five floors passed by in seconds, then Tony was surrounded by his workbenches and tools, a long table supporting his interactive interface and a couple of monitors to one side while the Mark VI and VII were assembled along the adjacent wall.

He had only brought U with him to New York, and the bot emitted a series of beeps as it powered on at its creator’s entrance. “Hey,” Tony greeted with a smirk, striding to meet the machine as it rolled towards him, the two meeting for Tony to pat his more primitive AI at the end of its solitary arm.

“Sir, you should get some rest,” Jarvis suggested. “You only managed three hours of sleep last night in between approximating equations to compensate for Loki’s magic, and prior to that you had not slept for 57 hours.”

“Was sort of busy with an invasion, Jarv,” Tony responded, tapping U authoritatively before heading over to the small niche in the corner that offered a coffee maker and a plush armchair, the bot trailing behind him. He sprawled over the object sideways with his legs over an arm, his back and head supported by the other. “Here,” Tony beckoned, tugging the hovering bot around so it settled beside the chair and by his head. “Why don’t you call up the house, J?”

“Of course, sir.”

One of the panels that appeared to be a section of the wall swung out and was revealed to be a touchscreen secured by a mechanical arm that slowly unfolded, Jarvis manipulating the device until the monitor was held in front of Tony. There was a ringing that echoed through the space while the signal connected to one of the computers at the Malibu mansion, before it was answered.

The screen displayed three metal fingers that were attached to a stout mechanical arm, the bot chirping at the sight of its maker. “Hey, Dummy,” Tony met, U ‘peering’ over his shoulder and beeping in welcome as well.

Dum-E rotated its ‘head’ around and flexed its fingers, replying in a whir of gears.

“We miss you too,” he replied to the sentiment expressed. Jarvis may have been the only AI advanced enough to vocally articulate thoughts and opinions, but his other two bots still had the basis for emotion and creative thought; it was merely more difficult to interpret. “Are you taking care of the place there?”

Dum-E jerked up and downwards again in a semblance of a nod before releasing a low series of lingering beeps that lifted upward at the end.

“I don’t know how long it’ll be before I’m back there,” Tony responded with a shrug, “we’re all in
the middle of something here. But, tell you what, if it looks like we’re going to be bunking here for a while I’m going to come and get you too, alright?”

The bot chirruped cheerily and wholly spun around before spinning its ‘head’ and leaning closer to the screen, continuing to emit excited beeps.

Tony laughed elatedly.

Chapter End Notes

(*)& The punishment regarding Sigyn, Loki, Vali, and Nari is from the mythos, but I had to adjust the beginning of it due to the fact that this is actually instigated by Baldur’s death (and the Æsir attempting to resurrect him), which I stated in Inverted Perceptions hasn’t occurred.
With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers in explaining his magic, Clint struggles to deal with remaining close to Loki while he remains so indecisive regarding his feelings about the god.

“I can see why Fury chose you,” Loki praised, bright eyes assessing, “but you are mine now.” His frame was wreathed in bright blue as He stalked nearer to Clint’s prone figure. “I will not allow you to escape me so easily into hands that will not care for you properly.” He grasped the archer’s chin in one hand and forced him to crane his neck back so to draw their eyes closer. “Do you understand me, pet?”

“Yes, sir.”

Clint’s knees suddenly weakened and his God caught him, an arm wrapping around the small of his back. Where the two were pressed together there suddenly was a deep burn, and he could see the purple and orange and green flames licking from his God’s core and through him, the magic akin to the edges of fingernails scraping through his muscles and over his nerves. The assassin’s head tilted back as he struggled to breathe, gasping when the fingers under his jaw lengthened and warped into claws, sharpened nails digging into the skin under his ears and lower, at his side as well.

“You have heart,” He crooned, pulling him closer still. Disregarding anatomy and physics it seemed as though the possessive hold around his back sunk into his core as His mind and magic and thoughts seeped into his mind. The azure mist encircling them wafted downwards, thickening at their feet and draining into the ground below.

A smirk pulled at His lips at His hold on Clint, proclaiming, “My Hawk.”

“Master.”

Clint’s eyelids snapped open, his pupils dilated in shock as he sat up violently in the dark of his room. Jaw clenched and eyes narrowed, he attempted to steady his trembling breaths, his thoughts awhirl within his still sleep-fogged mind. He reclined to lean against the intricate headboard, rubbing the sleep from his eyes before resolutely tossing off his covers with a huff of frustration and easily navigating his way into the adjoining ensuite, reaching to drag the dimmer switch upwards slightly to gently illuminate the area.

He leaned his hands on the marble countertop and peered at his reflection, the perceptive storm-grey of his irises staring back at him instead of the bright azure he feared. He ruffled his hair with a sigh as he lowered the lights again and stepped back into his room, pausing by the edge of the mattress for a few minutes before a scowl twisted his lips and he continued on, past the remaining components of his section, to the door.

It swung open on soundless hinges and he stepped over the threshold, bare feet cushioned by the carpet of the floor’s common and the fabric of his plaid, cotton pajama pants not allowing a rustle
as he crossed the room and entered the elevator. There’s no point trying to avoid Stark’s AI’s watch, though there are probably no blind spots to make use of, the assassin thought as he pressed the button for the 92nd floor.

Arriving too soon for his liking, he cautiously moved into the common room presented to him. Halting, Clint cast his eyes from the door on one side of the space to that opposite it. Lingering for a few minutes more, he finally began to sidle towards the one on the right. Should just ask Jarvis, he thought, though having already dismissed the idea due to the hope that the computer’s attention was elsewhere, its attention only called if magic or intruders triggered its sensors.

Upon gingerly grasping the doorknob, a brief touch not unlike that of static-electricity traveled through him. He released the object instantly, guessing that Loki had erected some sort of spell over the door. He stood statuesque for a period of time afterwards, awaiting a violent defense or the noise of some movement from the other side. When neither were forthcoming, his eyes narrowed in suspicion before he decided to grab the handle again and enter without caution.

Again, there was no resultant retaliation, and Clint wondered whether he had imagined the sensation. He could still be in the wrong half. Taking care to step carefully so his footfalls were silent upon the hardwood flooring, he crept through the area until he neared the bed. Silky black hair revealed that the choice he’d made had been correct, but he didn’t know what to think of that. There’s no connection left – I wasn’t pulled to him. It was a fifty-fifty shot, that’s all.

The Trickster was facing away from him, lying on His side but with His chest twisted to face downwards so to bury both arms underneath the pillow and lay His head atop it all. Clint watched the constant rise and fall of the covered torso for a moment before relenting and announcing, “I know you’re awake.”

A smirk pulled at Loki’s mouth as his eyes opened and he leisurely rolled onto his back, greeting, “Good evening.”

“Didn’t think you were the type to nestle into a pillow,” Clint remarked, adding, “You got a knife under there?”

“Clever deduction, pet,” he praised, propping himself up on his elbows. A black t-shirt clung to him as the sheets fell to his waist, a contrast to Clint’s shirtless form.

He pursed his lips at the endearment, but didn’t voice an objection. After all, He’d only asserted His position and intentions last time in response.

“Was there something you needed?” Loki questioned.

“Just making sure you’re not up to anything.”

“Oh, really? That excuse may be able to persuade your fellows, but you have felt the extent of my knowledge of seidr and know that if I were up to something you wouldn’t be able to find any evidence of it, darling.”

Clint grit his teeth in aggravation and retorted, “Jarvis’ll have this recorded – Stark’ll crack down on your cloning so he knows when only half of you is here.”

“That presumes he can decipher it,” he pointed out. “But I’ve nothing to fear, since I’m not up to anything.”

“You just like pissing me off then – not that I’m surprised.”
“Mm, well your reactions are intriguing… But it’s more to keep you aware of my powers, as well
as train you so you know how to deal with anyone powerful and intelligent that opposes your little
group.”

“I don’t need you,” the archer spat somewhat ambiguously, collectively referring to the exercise as
well as the god’s intent on protection, even the Trickster in general.

“I think that’s a lie,” Loki answered promptly. “Why come to me now, hm? I assume I feature in
the dreams that caused you to awaken-”

“Don’t flatter yourself-”

“-and yet without my presence here you would be tormented further, wouldn’t you? Having the
opportunity to see my present state provides you with an anchor for the now, instead of the past.
There’s no point in denying it.”

Clint remained silent, index and middle fingers of his left hand twitching as he restrained the
impulse to tap his thigh to relieve the disquiet he felt. Loki observed him with his head tilted
slightly to one side before he asked, “Would you like to remain here?”

“No,” he countered instantly, glaring at the god before turning and striding from the room. He
wasn’t a child to be coddled after a nightmare. The suggestion wasn’t considered for even a
fraction of a second.

Loki’s piercing eyes rested on his hawk’s figure as he exited, his wards notifying him of the
assassin’s silent leave of the floor, before he settled back down onto the bed, smirk lingering on his
lips.

“Again,” he snarled, darkness cloaking the space; only the glint of the golden metal cage over his
jaw was discernible, the rest of his figure enshrouded in black. The Other stood over a wane form,
knelt on the sharp rock that made up the ground. With gritted teeth the diminished figure obeyed,
climbing slowly, silently, to his feet despite the cracked pieces of mineral that had gouged his bare
shins when he had fallen. The blood smeared from the myriad of cuts, drops falling to the stone
after trailing over one leg, pooling and spilling over the rim of a wide cuff on the ankle of the
other.

“You are weak,” the Other hissed, stepping around to the side of the hunched man and throwing
his arm out towards him. The whip held tightly in hand lashed out, nine barbed ends impaling and
dragging over his back where they met skin. The strikes tore through the congealing blood that
covered previous wounds, reopening them to the bitingly cold, stagnant air. The suppression of a
cry of pain was well conditioned.

“How are you to conquer anything when you’ve not yet figured how to maintain the portal?” the
Other derided in irritation. “For all the knowledge he’s given you, your practice of it remains
poor.

“Do it again!”

When his internal clock stirred him, Bruce awoke without delay. He sat up as his gaze roamed the
extent of his room, absorbing the fact that he’d been allowed a full night’s sleep without worry.
He’d been able to rest after the invasion on the Helicarrier, but with the multitude of agents also
encamped on the aircraft it had been a cautious relaxation. Shows how much I trust Tony’s
brilliance… His technology is the only security standing between me and the God of Chaos.

Cocking his head to the side, Bruce slowed his breathing and strained his ears to survey the floor for any sound that indicated that the aforementioned god was awake. He dismissed the test after a few seconds, figuring any movement would be muffled into nonexistence by the two walls that stood between them, and moved to stand from the mattress. He wandered over to the closet and drew out a plain pair of grey slacks and a pale blue shirt before proceeding to take advantage of the clean, warm water provided by the shower.

Only once his muscles were loosened by the heat of the steam that filled the stall did he relent and turn off the water, drying off and dressing. He worked to neatly roll up his sleeves as he strolled past his bed and over to the loosely termed ‘kitchenette’. Equipped with a fridge, stove, dishwasher, coffeemaker, and microwave, the only reason Bruce could think of for the identification of ‘kitchenette’ as opposed to ‘kitchen’ would be that it was of a size suitable for any moderately priced, urban apartment; undoubtedly a smaller scale than what Tony was accustomed to.

After searching through the cupboards and fridge to find that it seemed as though every component of every meal imaginable was somehow stocked within their confines, Bruce spent a moment noting how the foodstuffs were sorted, as well as the cookware, and then began to fry up a hearty breakfast. He had spent too much of his travels worrying about how he would manage to gather his next meal to not take advantage of the provisions offered.

After shredding the slices of roast beef he had found in the deli drawer of the fridge, while keeping an eye and ear on the colour and sizzling of the diced potatoes in the fry pan on one of the elements, Bruce paused in his motions and wondered at how Loki would manage with breakfast. Disregarding the fact that he was a prince and had servants do this sort of thing, the ingredients themselves might be different than what he’s used to. We don’t know the climate or elements in the soil on Asgard – what they would grow…

As he dwelled with a slight frown, he stepped over to the stove to toss the potatoes, deciding they could sit for a minute unsupervised. It wasn’t an inconvenience to check in on the god that shared his floor. Casting his eyes warily over the pan he was leaving before musing that Jarvis would alert him if it got out of control, he walked from his half, through the common room, and to the door barring the Trickster’s section. He knocked in courtesy before being beckoned in by a hurried ‘What? Come in – I’m busy’.

Bruce entered cautiously before raising his eyebrows at the sight of the God of Fire intent on fiddling with the heat of one of the elements on the stovetop. “I came to see if you needed any help with breakfast.”

“Perhaps you can answer for me how it is that I’m supposed to figure out the temperature of these surfaces?” he asked with a scowl as he hovered a hand over one as if to estimate the heat radiating off it.

“Those don’t correspond to intervals of temperature – not like the oven,” he replied. “The element emits heat at a steady rate, that rate increasing as you turn the dial to a higher setting. In a fry pan I’d cook eggs and soft vegetables at the lowest end, potatoes and denser vegetables around medium. I use the highest setting for boiling things in sauce pans.”

Loki hummed and set a large fry pan on the element he had been testing, turning the dial to one of the lower settings. “So if I were to cook potatoes and eggs in the same pan I would put it on the lower temperature and simply begin the potatoes ahead of time?”
“Yes,” Bruce answered with a smile, casting his eyes over the array of foods spread out on the counter. “You had no problem with ingredients, then?”

“Not with any of the raw materials, no – I have been to Midgard frequently, you know,” Loki answered as he chopped up a large potato and slid the pieces into the pan. “I’m determined to leave alone all of the artificial, processed, and unidentifiable items though,” he continued, glancing derisively towards the cupboards, “as I’ve no idea the effect the chemicals might have on me.”

Bruce laughed, Loki’s bustling while preparing his breakfast pausing as he raised an eyebrow in confusion. He explained, commiserating, “I try to keep from everything manufactured too, when I’m in cities. Even with all the chemicals in the fertilizers they use now to mass produce food, I figure it’s healthier than anything obviously processed.”

“Dr. Banner,” Jarvis called, “I would suggest that you check on your meal. It is likely to burn in another minute or so.”

“Right,” he answered, throwing a wave to the other as he hastily exited to return to his half.

Loki finished chopping a red pepper before adding it to the frying potatoes, shifting the mixture with eyes narrowed as he mulled over the scientist’s considerate behaviour in interest.

Clint had been restless for what was left of the pre-dawn hours after he had visited Loki, meticulously disassembling and examining the many parts of the different weapons he had brought; his focused attention on the repetitive motions distracted him from his agitation. Once he had whiled away the hours, his internal clock stirred his stomach to clench in hunger, and he moved into the kitchen to insert two slices of bread into the toaster. After a few minutes they revealed themselves as blistering pieces of toast that attempted to burn the tips of his fingers when he removed them from the appliance and threw them onto the counter, slathering them in butter.

He sunk his teeth into one before grabbing the other, now slightly cooler, returning to where his weaponry was strewn atop his made covers and casually tossing the piece in hand to join them. The assassin unceasingly finished eating the toast that had been held in his mouth as he systematically replaced the firearms to the positions he had arranged to stow them around his rooms before grabbing the second piece of toast, brushing crumbs off the mattress. He handled his signature bow and affects last, compressing her frame and shouldering his quiver, transferring the items into the closet whose door he kept ajar.

Having finished with his breakfast and restoring the room to its previous ordering, Clint strode out into the common room, across the carpet, and knocked on Natasha’s door. She opened it dressed in yoga pants and a tank top, not much more presentable than the pajama pants he had donned with the addition of a loose t-shirt, and raised an eyebrow, the smirk curling the corner of her lips upward indicating her knowledge of the purpose of his visit.

“Spar with me?”

“Of course.”

Neither moved to change out of their attire, an agreement having been struck unspoken between them that whenever one felt the need to train or vent they would not change out of the clothing they were in before fetching the other, the countless combinations of apparel preparing their precise attacks for any instance where hostilities are unexpected and they are not suitably dressed. The two rode the elevator to the 90th floor, entering the hallway and turning through the door on the right.
They separated slightly once through the door, Natasha performing a series of contorted stretches as Clint bounced on the balls of his feet on the dark padding that covered the floor, rolling his joints and casting his sharp eyes around the space so to memorize the measurements and angles of the area. “Ring or unbound?” he asked.

“We’re always confined when we spar at SHIELD – let’s use the whole room,” she replied.

He nodded, the two walking over to the sandbags piled along the side and carting them to scattered positions throughout the expanse of the room. When they had both halted their movements they automatically lowered each of their centers of gravity and watched the other for the start of any motion.

Clint stirred first.

He leapt towards her, throwing all of his weight with his upper body and aiming a strong jab to the side of her head. She easily shifted to avoid the strike, crouching her torso and turning away, bracing herself with her arms as she swept her left leg up, intending to catch him in the abdomen as he overbalanced forward. He had anticipated her dodge though, his weight calculatedly converting into a one armed handstand as he reached out with his left and grasped her ankle, movement continuing as he flipped into a bridge and then to his feet, her form thrown to the ground in front of him.

She allowed her body to follow the throw, upon landing casting out a leg as she rolled away and sweeping his legs from underneath him. She skid to her knees and propelled herself on top of him, driving a knee into the muscles lying above his kidney so to force him onto his stomach. He reflexively moved onto his side, but manoeuvered an arm under hers, as she leaned forward and elbowed him in the stomach so to force his roll, bracing his forearm across her shoulder blade and nape to pitch her over and away from him.

He stood as she rolled to her feet, tossing a punch towards her ribs that she avoided by falling low to the floor again and hooking her knee around his as she twisted, heaving him to the floor again to land harshly on his ribs. He winced as he landed, but swung his leg and in a powerful roundhouse slammed the top of his foot underneath one of the shoulders twisted to brace her weight, the pressure point at her armpit spasming as well as the joint jarring at the impact. Her position collapsed as he attempted to put some distance between them, but she had used the fall to the mats to roll towards him, sending her elbow into the center of his chest. He rolled to straddle her, her reaction predictable, Natasha arching her back and throwing a knee violently to the base of his spine to toss him over her head. He punched her in the stomach as he was thrown, rolling as he landed on the trapezius muscles that covered his neck and upper back to his feet as she spun and flipped to her feet as well, not a meter between them.

Though both of their skills had been honed by SHIELD’s advanced regime and by similar stealth work and targets out in the field, their initial instruction as well as weapons of choice differentiated their styles greatly. Natasha made excessive use of her surroundings and the weight of her body, always aware of the limited ammunition she could carry and the advantageous, creative uses of any object she could get her hands on as well as the increased force she can wield by simply vaulting herself off of a floor, wall, pillar, or person. On the other hand, Clint was always aware of the surfaces that shaped his surroundings so to make use of them in gaining an edge, his eyes the asset he relied upon to note patterns and weaknesses in his opponents’ motions from different perspectives, so to strike, with or without a weapon in hand. He also favoured contorting his body into unlikely supports based fundamentally on balance in order to attack and retreat, weaving around, over, or under so to unexpectedly hit a vulnerable point.
Between their knowledge of each other’s preferences, their reflexive defenses, and their innovation in movement, they both tended to call the session only once their skin was mottled with bruising just under the extent that they would be forced to perform their schedules for the remainder of the day with difficulty.

“Are you up, Science Bro?” Tony called as he strolled into Bruce and Loki’s common. The god was reclined on one of the couches and had been scrolling through the television guide, requesting information on each of the programs, and turned his head at Tony’s entrance, raising an eyebrow. “Not you, obviously,” Tony responded to the look, adding, “You’re the guinea pig.”

“Tony,” Bruce admonished as he arrived from his half.

“Brucie,” Tony mimicked before smirking and beckoning to the two. “We’ve got to get cracking – magic’s not gonna solve itself. I’ve prepped the lab for analysis.”

Bruce’s eyes widened in excitement as his grin grew to match the extent of Tony’s as he eagerly followed him into the elevator, Loki shutting off the TV before joining them with a baffled expression at their obvious interest.

“So I thought we could start you off with transforming into different animals – then we can hopefully identify where your magic originates from (should be constant no matter your shape), figure out what lenses can capture it best, then finally be able to watch how it works every time you use it. If its path and conductivity change with what you’re doing or-”

“You could just ask me, you know,” Loki drawled. “The evidence will be more apparent if you know what you’re looking for.”

“You can answer the questions he just said?” Bruce asked as the elevator came to a stop.

Loki did not answer immediately, interrogating instead, “Why are the doors not opening?”

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch,” Tony uttered with a roll of his eyes, a panel sliding to reveal a biometric scanner. Which he then proceeded to ignore. “J, you’re killing me with the security.”

“Indeed, sir.”

The elevator doors opened into his workshop, but Bruce questioned, “What was that about?” before permitting his attention to drift to the tools and projects that lay on several low tables.

“Security measures.”

“That you can bypass so easily?” Loki countered. Tony just raised an eyebrow. “Ah, the whole exercise was a show. I’m sure if I adopted your image while you were away and repeated your attitude and phrases it wouldn’t convince the computer to allow me entrance.”

“Yep – and I’m not stupid enough to tell you how J can tell it’s me,” Tony remarked. “He’ll let people in that I want in – and that’s it.”

Loki hummed in intrigue.

“Don’t challenge him,” Bruce sighed.

“Challenge’ is a bit of an overstatement,” Loki retorted, “as it’s obvious that there are phrases that were agreed upon or that provide sufficient evidence of your identity, as well as I’m assuming an
order or algorithm that they are delivered according to – else you would have had a way to conceal your words from me.”

“And the scanner?” Bruce asked.

“So J knows who to incinerate,” Tony admitted with a shrug.

“Sir would never allow his prints to be used so often,” the AI elaborated.

U emitted a curious beep at the two that had entered with its Creator, rolling up to settle in front of them as it spun its ‘head’ in dissection of them.

“Er, hello,” Bruce greeted awkwardly, the bot, though bent at the joint of its arm, gazing down at him.

“You, this is Bruce, and this is Loki. This is You, my second AI – first’s still in California,” Tony explained. “We’re just going to be scanning him-” he jerked a thumb towards Loki, “-so why don’t you grab a camera and cover an angle Jarvis doesn’t have?”

U whirred and spun to retrieve the requested object as Loki muttered, “You have servants.”

“He’s not a servant – he just doesn’t have the programming to do much other than help me out,” Tony protested. “Now you said you could answer some of the things I brought up?”

“You mentioned locating my core – it is here,” Loki stated, resting a hand over the base of his sternum.

“So you can describe how your magic behaves because you can feel it? Or can you see it?” Bruce wondered as Tony leaned close and peered at the center of Loki’s torso as if he would suddenly be able to see the god’s magical core.

“I can see it, faintly – as a layer of activity on an underlying plane,” he detailed, “but it is more the sensation. The question of being able to ‘feel’ it implies touch – one of the five senses. Magic and my control of her are something I can partly experience through the five, yes, but she is overwhelmingly felt through another that non-sorcerers don’t have access to.”

“Damn,” Tony whined, stepping back before turning to the couple of monitors suspended and powering up the long table that held his interactive, holographic interface. “Stand over there,” he ordered, pointing to a section of flooring on one side of the table as he circled around to the other, U rolling tentatively until it had situated itself by the adjacent wall, video camera clutched between its three fingers.

“Same conditions as last time?” Bruce queried.

Tony nodded. “Infrared, 500 thousand frames, J – right beside me.” The hologram was to-scale when projected to the space alongside him, Bruce joining him in his inspection of where Loki’s magical core should have been set, the inactivity making the magic indiscernible to the lens.

“If you’ve a camera that captures ultraviolet light, then the overlay of its image and that one would provide a bit of a better start,” Loki offered. As Jarvis created another hologram beside the first showing the shorter wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation, Loki continued, “I have to admit that your kind’s technology has developed adequately to compensate for your shortcomings.”

Tony smirked and responded, “That sounded like you were trying to give a compliment, but it got lost along the way.”
“Wait,” Bruce began, “are you saying that you can see thermal and UV?”

“In this form I have neither, but certain eyes are able to capture longer wavelengths of the spectrum of light than mortals, yes – however ultraviolet I only know to be possessed by some of the creatures of Múspelheim.”

“That’s cryptic,” Tony perceived with narrowed eyes.

“Oh,” Bruce discerned with hesitation, “Frost Giants can see infrared, then.”

“Don’t suppose you’d let us run some scans on those eyes-”

“No.”

“Fine, fine,” Tony conceded, asking, “So if you were to turn into one of the things on Múspelheim you’d be able to see UV?”

“Yes, but as it’s not within my normal spectrum of light it’s disorienting to try and adjust to. When in a battle, I shift into forms that I’m comfortable with so to use them effectively. There’s no point in shifting into a more advantageous form if I’m awkward in its use – that’s asking for injury.”

“Makes sense,” Bruce commented.

“Alright! Show us your stuff!” Tony exclaimed.

The god raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “You do realize I’ve an infinite array of species to choose from?”

“Something about the same size as you – and with four limbs,” Bruce suggested. “That way everything’s still to scale and roughly proportioned for our analysis.”

“As you wish.”

Once again the transformation was too quick for their eyes to dissect, but that was what the recording and slow motion capture was for. The tall, fair eyed, dark haired god had fallen to be replaced with a large and lithe, sharp eyed, black panther crouched to the tile, gaze unwavering as his tail swayed behind him.

The two scientists could only gape for a few minutes before Tony managed to gasp a ‘holy crap’ and clumsily turned to the holograms alongside, Jarvis displaying the magic at work. The infrared and ultraviolet depictions stood side by side, the former showing the same evidence as when Loki had teleported, except to a greater degree. At his core there was evidence of some change that mimicked the heat that signalled a change of blood flow, then a haze of energy emitted from all of the pores in his skin, though this time the strength of the action was exhibited in the altered heat signatures that branched out from his center to the edges of him, like streaks of fire.

The image that stood next to the oranges and reds seemed brighter, the contrast of the grey of most of Loki’s body emphasizing the false-colour violets and indigos that fluctuated at his core. The energy had sparked out like lightning towards his limbs, but thinned in so much that the pathways of evidence were undetectable before they breached the fringes of his torso. Now two holograms of the large male cat crouched before them, the heat readings slightly different for the muscle mass of the animal when compared to a human (or god) but the ultraviolet still indicating a concentration of energy beneath the base of his sternum.

“I think my mind is going to explode,” Tony mumbled. A rumble sounded from outside their
peripheral and both he and Bruce whipped their heads around to face the panther, who had sat back on his haunches and looked to be almost smirking at them. “Was that sound a purr?” Tony asked.

“I think he’s laughing at you,” Bruce pronounced.

“I just realized that I have Bagheera in my lab.”

Bruce rolled his eyes. “It’s not like he’s going to sharpen his claws on your tech.”

“Shh! Don’t give him ideas!”

The panther stood before rearing back slightly and shifting again. A raven with inky black plumage produced a deep, rasping call as he pumped his wings to remain aloft in the middle of the room before spiraling to perch on top of U’s arm. The bot released a low beep of confusion.

“Look!” Tony called, grabbing Bruce’s arm to turn him towards a clip that he had frozen of the raven with wings splayed in the air. “There’s less UV at his core.”

Said raven leapt from the metal under his clawed feet and shifted while airborne, the God of Mischief landing neatly. Ignoring Tony’s cry of ‘But we weren’t don’t playing with you!’, he answered, “A magical core is a conduit between the body and the limitless magic of Yggdrasil. Its access is one that is trained through exposure and control, and that proportion to the physical is maintained no matter the alterations made to the body.”

‘Ah,’ Bruce recognized as Tony said dismissively, “Cool, now shift into something else!”

Loki rolled his eyes in exasperation, but complied with a small smile.

Agent Coulson returned to the Tower just after ten in the morning, settling in the conference room as Jarvis alerted the others. Thor and Steve arrived first, the ends of the Thunderer’s hair singed; they were followed by Natasha and Clint, both of their hair damp from their showers, having changed into jeans with her donning a fitted t-shirt underneath a short leather jacket and him a casual long sleeve with the arms pushed up to his elbows.

“What happened to you?” Clint asked, gesturing to Thor’s charred hair.

He flushed as Steve sighed, explaining, “He had a bit of trouble with the toaster.”

“I thought Jarvis would have helped you with that,” Coulson thought aloud.

“My apologies, Mr. Odinson, Mr. Rogers, my attention was needed elsewhere,” the computer immediately responded. “I did neutralize the damage, and arrangements have been made for the repairs to the kitchen.”

“What were you doing?” Natasha asked.

“I was trying to prevent Sir from injuring himself,” Jarvis answered, his tone slightly agitated.

Just as Steve moved to question the AI as to the events that had occurred, Tony, Bruce, and Loki entered into the conference room. “Jarvis said you hurt yourself,” Steve directed onto Tony instead, eyes roving from head to toe to determine the damage himself.

“Ah, well what else is new?” he deflected as he sat, Bruce rolling his eyes. “Got to analyze some healing magic, anyways.”
“What happened, Stark?” Coulson interrogated.

“He’s never been around horses,” Bruce justified with a shrug.

Eyebrows raised and expressions communicated mystification at the response, before Steve repeated, “Horses?”

“We were looking at Loki’s shifting,” Tony clarified.

“You wounded him, brother?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” he defended. “If you circle around too close to the back of a horse, it’ll kick you – that’s all there is to it.”

“It’s true,” Bruce agreed. “It’s common sense.”

“It’s not like I chill around horses all the time,” Tony argued, “and you did it on purpose – I only made one comment about you getting it on with a giant horse and you crack a rib with your damn hoof.”

Loki merely smirked in response before his gaze caught the black darkening the ends of his not-brother’s blond locks. “And what happened to you?”

Thor blushed again under the scrutiny, stating, “The machine that warms bread exploded.”

The God of Fire quirked a brow and asked, “Did you try to speed it up with Mjolnir?”

Thor sunk down into his seat.

“Rest assured, Mr. Odinson,” Jarvis interjected, “I will help you whenever you are operating anything electronic. You again have my deepest apologies for not aiding you this morning.”

“You are forgiven, Ever-Present Jarvis,” Thor responded with a smile. “I understand that you were keeping watch over my brother and intended me no harm.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Agent Coulson cast his eyes around the room to take in its occupants, sighing, “This is going to end up as a lot of paperwork.”

Tony laughed and sent a wink to the agent, remarking, “You knew that before.

“Start her up, J.”

A female agent stepped up the stair to the uppermost level of the bridge, circling behind the curved row of seated agents and monitors. A bald agent having donned round, wire-framed glasses was sitting before a couple of screens, one isolating the unique sound signatures of Barton, Loki, and Selvig from the fragments of audio recovered from the NASA facility while the other rendered a three-dimensional image of the god from the video feed. The woman seated next to him ran the visuals of Barton and Selvig, the information being run through all of the resources at SHIELD’s disposal merely resulting in a red square flashing to alert the agents that there was currently ‘NO MATCH’.

On the lower floor, Agent Coulson stood beside Steve with his hands folded in front of him, continuing a previous request, “I mean, if it’s not too much trouble.”
“No, no – it’s fine,” Steve assented, observing the proceedings of the bridge with his arms crossed over his chest.

“It’s a vintage set,” he bragged, pride expressed in his voice at the trading cards he treasured. “It took me a couple of years to collect them all.” Coulson paused for a moment before detailing, “Near mint. Slight foxing around the edges, but-”

“You’re so cute, Phil,” Tony sung with a taunting smirk.

“We got a hit,” the male informed, spinning his chair around to state, “67 percent match.” Director Fury analyzed the data at his control panels as Agent Sitwell corrected, “Wait, cross-match: 79 percent.”

“Location?” Coulson interrogated as he marched to his seat to scrutinize the monitor over his shoulder.

“Stuttgart, Germany. 28 Königstrasse,” he answered, satellites relaying where street cameras had captured Loki in formal wear walking amidst the crowded sidewalks surrounding a large museum. “He’s not exactly hiding.”

“Captain,” Fury called, Steve turning from the agents to him, “you’re up.” Steve inhaled and set his shoulders, nodding.

On screen, the biometric analysis confirmed that it was a 100 percent match, Loki obliviously sidling out of the video frame.
Oscillation

Chapter Summary

With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals. Forced to relive the actions taken by the god during the invasion, the Avengers struggle to keep in mind the character presented.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The large clock situated above the arched entrance of the museum displayed the time as 10:38 in Germany, the night sky cloaking the low white building with carved ionic columns flanking the entrance in shadow. Trees were scattered on either side of the wide red carpet that numerous men and women wearing fitted formal ensembles sauntered over, having disembarked from vehicles waxed to a shine that were entrusted to valets before moving to the entrance.

The tiling that covered the expanse of the floor was patterned in white, beige, and grey, the soft colours contrasting elegantly with the dispersed, darker stands holding aesthetically pleasing flora, the black suits and floor-length dresses, and the wooden chairs that supported the string quartet playing Franz Schubert’s ‘Rosamunde’ on their violins. The crowd chatted idly with one another, champagne flutes in hand, around the magnificent carved statue in the center of the room, two bulls facing away from each other carved out of a pale mineral, a low, polished altar upon their backs. The curator hosting the benefit walked to the microphone set at one side of the room, tapping its head to test its reception.

“That’s one party…” Steve murmured in amazement, the organized functions in the forties not comparing to the luxury and elegance on display.

“We’re going to be forced to go to fundraisers that look like that, ‘cept with more cameras and paparazzi,” Tony remarked, before his eyes shined and his teeth flashed from a wide smirk. “Fury’s always complaining about how I handle public things – why don’t you take my place, Cap?”

Steve narrowed his eyes in suspicion, supressing his eagerness to instead linger on the grudging tone that the billionaire had adopted in the first statement.

“Any events scheduled will be entertained by all of you,” Agent Coulson interjected. Steve directed a small relieved smile towards him due to not having to make a decision on a topic he wasn’t sure he was fully informed of as Tony rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest.

On the Helicarrier, Steve strode purposefully into a vault that contained all of the uniforms and relics that were gathered from the fallen allies that had fought against HYDRA in WWII, his suit preserved in a glass display case above the identification of ‘CPT STEVE ROGERS’, his boots stored below. He stared at the silver star on navy, above the stripes below the chest and those around the shield behind, determined.

Outside a geometric structure composed of concrete labelled ‘Schäfer, sicherheitsdienst’, armed guards kept watch over the security center, scientists shown through the glass windows
meandering through the halls and steadily working. The guard on the ground collapsed to the sound of an arrow slicing through the air, the head embedded in his heart. The other guard readied his gun only for the whisper to echo again, another arrow driving deep into his chest, his limp body crumpling and falling off the edge of the roof.

Clint cast his eyes around to note the others’ resolute refusal to glance in his direction in blame of the actions displayed, observing also that Bruce and Steve’s furrowed brows were the only expressions that showed evident disconcentration at the loss of innocent life. For the others, it was either a part of the job description (Phil, Natasha) or war and death were so common that exposure had desensitized them (Thor, Loki). He suspected that Tony was affected, though he might also understand the numbered casualties, more than the two biogenetically engineered, due to his past.

He himself fell into the category of his fellow agents. It was a requirement that couldn’t be avoided in their line of work; citizens that were sometimes in the wrong place at the wrong time had to be silenced so to ensure the target was disposed of without alarming any possible allies. He was more affected by the kills he had gained while aboard the Helicarrier than these. Those men and women had been agents he had trained with and worked with on missions, and he knew that now that he had been compromised – no matter the circumstances surrounding – they would never trust him to lead or follow in a squad of theirs again. And he wouldn’t trust them if any showed such faith in him, that being either a mark of lackluster intelligence that shouldn’t be trusted to make quality decisions for him anyways or a ploy so to seek revenge of some sort.

Clint marched past the two corpses without a second glance, handing his bow to another member of his squad as he passed him to stand in front of the biometric scanner that prevented their access to the inside of the building. An agent shifted from in front of the device to kneel on the ground, computer plugged into the machine so to hack into the system and retrieve the passcode needed in addition. Clint glanced at his progress as he readied the silver and black object in his hands.

Coulson leaned forward slightly in attention to the breach in security, their manpower having been focused on preparing for the inevitable large scale attack rather than delving into the events surrounding the theft of iridium and gathering eyewitnesses to the incident that occurred in the museum.

Loki strolled past a colourful wall painted with religious and royal figures perusing documents and tomes on the upper level, scepter transformed into a golden cane with a blue orb set at the top gripped casually in hand. His black suit and tie, slicked back hair, and green scarf hanging from around his neck ensured his camouflage into the class of persons present, though he jauntily stepped down the spiral stair alone to join the mass on the main floor. A stain-glass window rose behind him as he descended the last few rows of steps, confident in his approach.

He flipped his cane to grasp its end as one of the security guards behind the curator turned towards him, swinging it to slam into the man’s skull and fling him away.

“You just can’t resist hitting someone when you enter, can you?” Tony deadpanned.

“It ensures an impression,” Loki replied with a smirk.

The crowd gasped and released exclamations of shock as Loki grabbed the German curator by the throat with bared teeth and dragged him to the statue, flipping him over the alter to pin him on his back on the priceless surface with the cane braced across his chest. He withdrew a silver and black object from the breast of his jacket, holding it firmly as he jerked his hand to set aglow with blue the three spikes as well as the central semi-sphere they were fixed around.

A hum resonated from the device, as well as through the one held in Clint’s hand, the archer
stationing it so the center was positioned over the scanner they were moving to bypass. With a thumb he pressed the button at the top, the other end flashing blue. Loki mimicked the action in the museum, the machine grasped in hand whirring as thin blades stood erect and spun speedily along the outer ring of the blue semi-sphere. There were gasps as the God of Chaos stabbed the device at the curator’s face, the three spikes anchoring the machine as the central mechanism analyzed the eye as it gouged it from the man’s skull. The room cleared rapidly as the crowd clamoured screaming from the sight, Loki maintaining his hold as the German thrashed.

“That’s awful,” Steve remarked with a frown twisting his lips. It seemed that this disc was constantly working to remind them that though they were now allied with Loki, it did not absolve him of his crimes. It was easier to push past the events of the invasion when the one individual that they had known personally was revealed to still be alive, but what of the casualties during the battle and those they were viewing now?

What was the sender trying to accomplish by delivering the first disc to make them sympathetic with the god and then the next to force on them the reality of the damage he had done most recently, that had affected them personally?

The god cast his wide eyes about the panic of the guests as he breathed heavily in exertion, a smirk twisting his lips as the device continued to scrape the orifice of the optical organ. The rays beaming from Clint’s machine replicated the three-dimensional eye, the scan of the iris providing an identification photo of the curator while proclaiming in text, ‘Netzhautscan-Kennzeichnung. Positive Erkennung: Dr. Heinrich Schlifer. ENTRIEGELN.’ The retinal scan accepted the hologram and unlocked the door. Clint entered into the confines of the building, directed to the stores of elements and drawing out a long strongbox labelled IR. The iridium was caged in the center of a cylindrical tube that he carefully lifted out, the light of the pressure pad underneath powering off at the loss of weight.

Panicked screams reverberated in the air as the patrons attending the benefit ran out into the streets, Loki indolently following. As he strolled out from the marble museum, the gem at the head of his cane shone bright azure, his formal suit transforming in a haze of gold to his traditional ensemble of leather and antiquated metal. His black pants and tunic wrapped around his body as the long tails of his leather overcoat swished around his legs, armguards, chest ornamentation, and horned helmet crafted in gold alighting on his form as a green cape trailed behind him. The humans ran from him in a clatter of heels and shrieks, his cane lengthening and sharpening into a scepter in his right hand as his boots moved soundlessly over the red carpet laid outside the entrance.

“Diva,” Tony muttered.

A police vehicle rounded the corner with a wail of its siren, Loki’s attention called to it for a brief moment even as he continued onwards, jabbing his scepter in its direction. A concussive blast of force flew from the gem like froth from an ocean, slamming into the car’s hood and forcing it to skid on its front bumper as the momentum carried it to flip onto its roof, the sparks of blue dissipating into smoke that wafted off of the remains of the wreck.

The crowd cried out when an image of Loki appeared in front of them, the people halting abruptly and turning to dash in another direction. “You will kneel before me,” he declared as more illusions were constructed to hem the group in. “I said, KNEEL!” he screamed in accordance with a flash of azure, the gleam of the scepter’s centerpiece echoed by the three copies of his form. With shocked expressions the assembly obeyed, shakily falling to their knees on the cold ground and bowing their heads.
“Is not this simpler?” the fallen god asked, his illusions flickering at their backs.

Thor’s eyes narrowed.

“Is this not your natural state?” He started through the crowd as he spoke, arms raised in address, the lowered peoples shifting out of his way. “It’s the unspoken truth of humanity, that you crave subjugation.” Their brows furrowed as their lips trembled at his speech, the illusions behind them flickering again.

“Brother,” Thor interrupted the scene, turning to face the other, “why are your illusions wavering? I have never seen them do such a thing since when you had just begun to learn their craft.”

“I was unaccustomed to channelling my magic through the scepter.”

“…why were you, then?” Bruce questioned.

Loki leaned back in his chair and casually rested his arms on the table, drumming his fingers in thought at the gazes abruptly riveted on his form. After a moment he relented, admitting, “At the time my magic was not available to me otherwise.”

“Explains why you didn’t use your magic against us,” Natasha responded. “Aside from you being unwilling through the whole thing.”

“Why didn’t you have your magic?” Tony probed. “How didn’t you have it? Isn’t it a part of you?”

“When you’re physically weakened,” Bruce began, asking, “is your magic weakened? So much so that you had to make use of the scepter to channel it?”

“The state of my body doesn’t affect my draw of seidr,” Loki answered. “The energy available to me is limited by the extent of the growth of my magical core – there’s a certain amount I can use over a continuous period of time before it tires and affects my physical form, but the reverse isn’t true, no.”

“Doesn’t really answer the question of why you didn’t have magic,” Steve commented, brow furrowed at the avoidance of the topic.

The dark god hummed before giving a slight shrug and replying dismissively, “My magic was suppressed.”

“Your powers were restrained?” Thor clarified with a glower.

“How?” Tony asked.

“I’m not about to explain it to you,” Loki snarled, casting eyes narrowed in a glare around at the occupants of the room. \textit{It would be beyond rash to detail a way of jailing me to these people, who are only grudgingly tolerating me as their ally.}

“This is starting to sound like you were the victim,” Tony discerned, “which doesn’t really mesh with what I know of you.”

“Your deductions are your own – it’s not my responsibility to limit your idiocy.” Though fully aware of the chance he had just allowed to fall through his fingers, Loki couldn’t find it in himself to emphasize his role, as the mortal had stated so demeaningly, as the victim. He was no such thing. He had been the target of unfortunate circumstance, but he hadn’t idly sat and permitted himself to be manipulated.
Had he not alerted SHIELD of upcoming events, worried and angered them sufficiently to draw them into preparations for battle? Had he not rallied each of the so-called ‘Avengers’, incensed them personally, driving them to fight against him regardless of any previous thoughts to the contrary? Even with severe limitations on his magic and being as weakened as he was, if he’d had half of his intellect he would still have been able to complete the task ordered of him if he’d desired to do so.

The mere mention of there having been a restraint on his magic would have to be enough to further reduce the animosity directed towards him, and to hopefully entice them to willingly fight in his defense when the time came.

“So,” Bruce started, clearing his throat at the thick atmosphere that sprung up at the revelation that Loki had been, in addition to physically, magically weakened and the god’s own refusal to elaborate, “you could only use magic through the scepter?”

His glare lessened as the god gazed at Bruce, having been willing to rebuff any pursuit but nevertheless relieved that the topic of ‘how’ had been dropped for the moment. “Yes. For these illusions in particular my magic was fortified by that of the Mind Gem – the lack of strength as well as my difficulty meshing the two are the cause of their flickering.”

“The bright lure of freedom diminishes your life’s joy in a mad scramble for power – for identity.”

It was disorienting, casting their attention from what they saw of Loki during the discs and then what the god was choosing to reveal of himself in their presence. How much of either was a façade adopted to accomplish his own ends?

“You were made to be ruled,” he stated, finishing with a wide grin, “In the end, you will always kneel.”

An old man in a brown, unbuttoned trench coat stood slowly before straightening his spine and facing the Trickster, who narrowed his eyes and lifted his chin in combat of the opposition. “Not to men like you,” he proclaimed.

Loki huffed out a laugh and replied mockingly, “There are no men like me.”

“There are always men like you.”

“Look to your elder, people,” Loki ordered, raising his scepter, the gem awash with power. “Let him be an example.”

The man’s eyes widened as the beam shot out, but then a figure dropped to the ground in front of him, crouched, and deflected the strong ray with a wide shield. The vibranium painted in red, white, and blue smoked at the impact, the attack ricocheting to crash into Loki’s midsection and knock him back to land on his chest with a grunt. He lifted himself onto his hands and knees as he tossed his helmeted head back to gaze upon Captain America; he was outfitted in blue with red and white stripes columning around his abdomen, a bright star upon his chest, and a cowl over his forehead and eyes, an A painted brightly on its front as the wings of freedom and victory graced its sides.

“That’s a pretty decent entrance too,” Tony confessed with a shrug. “Though more for the fact that you knocked him on his ass than you standing all proud in your spangly outfit.”

Steve’s mouth quirked upwards in a small smile at Tony’s shrouding of the offered compliment.

“You know, the last time I was in Germany,” Steve started as he picked his way through the
crowd, hands gloved in thick red leather as he hefted his shield with expertise, “and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing.”

“The soldier,” Loki greeted, bracing the scepter and using the support to steady himself as he climbed to his feet. “The man out of time.”

“I’m not the one who’s out of time,” he countered. A Quinjet soared through the sky to stall above the square before the museum, the crowd gathered on their knees below.

Natasha wore a slim headset as she piloted the aircraft, flipping a switch above her before returning her hands to the steering handles. The panels of the underside of the hull unfolded to lower a large mechanized gun as she locked onto his position, commanding, “Loki, drop the weapon and stand down.”

He exhaled at the request with chin uplifted before jerking the scepter in the jet’s direction and hurling a beam towards her, Natasha swiftly lurching the craft to one side to avoid the attack. Steve flung his shield immediately as he ran forwards, the crowd screaming as they raced from the fight, the disc’s blow rebounding into the Captain’s hands off of the armour of Loki’s right collarbone as the Trickster grunted in pain; he was sufficiently distracted for Steve to draw close enough to land a punch to his jaw. He glowered at the hit and swung his scepter with bared teeth to be blocked once, twice by the vibranium as Steve stumbled backwards to gain some room for offense.

On the third strike the end of the scepter smacked the bottom of the shield with enough force to throw him away. Steve working with the move to roll and swivel to face Loki on one knee. He exhaled heavily as he switched his shield to his right hand to throw again, this time the weapon tossed to the side by the god’s scepter instead of returning to his grip as Steve dashed forward, unarmed. His punch was dodged as Loki leaned to the side, taking the oppourtunity to swipe across where the Captain’s chest had been seconds before he had leaned back to brace himself with one hand on the ground behind. Another punch was avoided, Loki raising his scepter above his head to slam it down to shatter a crater in the brickwork laid in the square as Steve hastened to hop clear of the strike. He managed a solid jab to Loki’s side before he propelled his weapon upwards diagonally to catch the Captain across the back and throw him to the other side of the plaza to land on his stomach.

He moved onto his hands and knees with the intention to climb to his feet as the God of Chaos strode over and placed the blunt end of the scepter on the back of his head, forcing Steve to stay his position with his head bowed. “Kneel,” he commanded.

“Not today,” Steve retorted, reaching up to grab the end of the scepter and knocking it away as he got to his feet and spun, leaping to land an airborne roundhouse kick to the top of Loki’s chest.

The Quinjet hovering above drifted closer to the battle, Natasha announcing, “The guy’s all over the place,” as she tried to maintain an angle so to shoot the god without catching Steve in the crossfire.

Loki grabbed the Captain as he landed from his kick facing away from him slightly, wrapping an arm over his shoulder and across his chest to fling him away. Steve landed lightly on his side as he rolled horizontally across the square.

Through Natasha’s headset Tony’s voice questioned teasingly, “Agent Romanoff, you miss me?” as he remotely overrode the jet’s PA system to blast AC/DC’s ‘Shoot to Thrill’. She allowed a small upward quirk to her lips even as she sighed.
Steve gaped as he looked upwards in confusion to the addition of music from the aircraft’s speakers from his position on the ground, Loki’s gaze darting away from his opponent as well. A smoke trail streaked behind a small bright object in the distance that soared through the dark sky towards their position, Iron Man revealed as he flew past the jet to fire a double repulsor blast from the palms of his hands. The beams struck Loki in the chest and flung him backwards as his scepter flew from his hands, Tony’ suit landing with a clang as the metal impacted the brick patterning the ground as the fallen god’s back slammed into a low row of stairs.

Iron Man outstretched his arms as he stood, readying the repulsor on one hand as a variety of compact guns, missiles, and lasers revealed themselves from beneath panelling around his other wrist and along the ridge of his shoulders. “Make your move, Reindeer Games,” he goaded, all systems locked onto the Trickster’s injured form.

“Alright, my entrance is the best,” Tony concluded with a grin.

“I beg to differ,” Loki argued.

“We talking your stint at SHIELD, or the strutting just before this where you were all ‘Kneel, lowly mortals’?” he retorted.

“Both top yours.”

“Sauntering down the street *come una prima donna* doesn’t top me flying in – with a theme song – and winding you,” Tony remarked. “And didn’t you say before that the whole demolition at your arrival wasn’t your fault?”

“Doesn’t remove the impression.”

Tony gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes as he huffed in response.

With Captain America’s approach to stand beside Tony with shield in hand, and the Quinjet awaiting his decision in the background, Loki allowed his armour and helmet to fade away. The shine of gold blurred into nonexistence as he slowly raised his hands in surrender, leaning back slightly to further dissuade any impression of attack.

“Good move,” Tony appraised as he lowered his hands, weapons retracting back into his suit.

The jet began to descend behind the two, navigating into an appropriate space for landing as Steve greeted as he panted through the effects of the fist-fight beforehand, “Mr. Stark.”

“Captain,” Tony responded.

“That’s a bit of an anticlimactic meeting,” Coulson observed thoughtfully.

“Wasn’t really the right moment for a heart-to-heart,” Tony replied with a mock-sage nod.

The jet tore through the misty clouds as it soared over a snow-capped mountain range, the forests crawling up its sides black in the night.

“He saying anything?” Fury asked through Natasha’s headset.

“Not a word,” she drawled in reply. Loki sat securely strapped to one of the seats in the plane, quietly staring into the middle-distance, as Steve and Tony stood watching him from the entrance of the cockpit.
“Just get him here – we’re low on time.”

Tony had removed his helmet, and he kept his eyes on the seated god even as Steve, who had lifted his cowl, turned his back on him and confided, “I don’t like it.”

“What – Rock of Ages giving up so easily?” Tony remarked.

“I don’t remember it being that easy,” he commented, glancing over his shoulder at Loki as he continued with furrowed brows, “This guy packs a wallop.”

“Still, you are pretty spry… for an older fellow,” he responded with a sniff, Steve casting his eyes onto him incredulously as he turned towards him to ask idly, “What’s your thing, Pilates?”

“What?”

“It’s like calisthenics. You might’ve missed a couple things, you know-” his mouth twitched in the effort to suppress a smirk, “-doing time as a Capsicle.”

“Fury didn’t tell me he was calling you in,” Steve replied tersely.

“Yeah – there’s a lot of things Fury doesn’t tell you,” Tony warned, meeting his gaze.

Lightning flashed across the sky as thunder rumbled, dense clouds suddenly gathered around the aircraft. “Where’s this coming from?” Natasha wondered.

Steve and Tony tracked the blinding streaks with their eyes through the glass as the burgeoning storm continued, Steve’s brow furrowing further at having caught sight of Loki’s shifting gaze and apprehensive expression. “What’s the matter – scared of a little lightning?” he interrogated.

“I’m not overly fond of what follows,” Loki responded-

Thor pouted.

-casting his eyes upwards as his eyebrows raised at the constant turbulence. Steve and Tony exchanged a look as the Quinjet rocked.

Through the thick cloudcover there came the sound of a whirlwind, a figure soaring amidst the crashes of the storm to land heavily on the roof of the jet. At the jarring impact those inside jerked their heads upwards as if to see through the construct of the plane to the object that had caused the disturbance. Thor’s stony expression was illuminated by a streak of lightning, thunder booming as he rose to move from his kneeling, secured hold of the metal shell of the Quinjet.

Tony reached to grab the helmet he had removed, the head of the suit enclosing his skull as the eyes flickered to blue as his HUD activated. He strode to the back of the jet and touched one of the buttons on the panel on the wall to his left, the rear hatch opening in response to the electronic command. “What are you doing?” Steve asked, cowl raised as he observed.

The God of Thunder landed on the lowered hatch with the same clang of weight as he had on the roof, substantial armour shining in the dim light as his scarlet cape billowed behind him. He stood and marched forward as Loki watched with wide eyes and a worried expression, Iron Man lifting a hand to power up a repulsor. Thor punched Mjolnir into the suit’s gut before a shot could be fired, Tony flying backwards to slam into Steve with a grunt.

Thor immediately lunged for Loki and grabbed him by the chest of his overcoat, snapping the harness securing him as he hauled him to his feet with impatience. He steadied the Trickster with
fingers around his throat as he was manhandled, Loki exhaling sharply at the jostling. Thor pulled him to the opened hatch as Loki hurried to match the strides taken while dragged sideways, casting constant wide-eyed glances at the thunderous expression evident on the other’s face, and then he leapt into the skies with his captive.

Tony climbed to his feet with the aid of the craft’s siding before muttering, “And now there’s that guy.”

“Another Asgardian?” Natasha wondered, tone equal parts annoyed and exasperated.

“Think guy’s a friendly?” Steve questioned as he stood, panting.

“Doesn’t matter,” Tony replied. “If he frees Loki or kills him, the Tesseract’s lost.”

“Stark, we need a plan of attack!”

“I have a plan: attack,” he declared over his shoulder, thrusters and flight stabilizers instantly firing and sending him chasing after the two gods.

Steve huffed in response to the quip before determinedly unstrapping one of the black backpacks that held a parachute from the other side of the jet. “I’d sit this one out, Cap,” Natasha suggested as she noticed his actions, continuing to operate the plane.

“I don’t see how I can,” he remarked as he shouldered the bag and fastened the clip across his front.

“These guys come from legend – they’re basically gods.”

“There’s only one god, ma’am,” he tightened the straps hastily, “and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t dress like that.” He lifted his shield and braced it upon his left forearm as he walked to the still-open rear, his last few steps a trot before he purposefully threw himself out of the aircraft; he unfurled his limbs to slow his descent before punching his shield forward and snapping his legs together to dive down.

Chapter End Notes

(*)come una prima donna - cu-mey u-na priy-ma don-na
Italian: like a prima donna (opera/stage’s first, choice, primary lady of the stage)
Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals. Further prepared for their enemy, they work to protect Loki from the consequences of aiding SHIELD.

Thunder boomed as lightning streaked through the clouds, Thor’s flight carrying him and Loki to the crag of the mountainside below. The God of Thunder lifted Mjolnir overhead to slow his momentum as he threw the Trickster to the ground, stepping from air to rock as if there was no difference between their solidity. Loki let out an exclamation of pain as he landed harshly on his back, breathing laboured for a moment before he began to laugh weakly as he panted.

“Where is the Tesseract?” Thor asked stonily.

“Ah, ha, ha – I missed you too,” he responded with a grin, eyes on the sky above as he regained his breath.

“Point,” Tony acknowledged to Loki’s raised eyebrow.

“Didn’t you think he was dead?” Steve asked of Thor.

“Yes, and I say that,” he replied.

“But not first,” Tony stated, causing Thor to cast his eyes downward in shame.

While Agent Coulson and the two assassins were sending vaguely disproving looks towards Tony for his careless defense and sympathy while in Loki’s presence, Bruce noticed the god’s evident confusion at the reaction and explained, “This disc is really showing us how, well, injured you were-”

“So showing up, not only with the cliché of thunder and lightning but also without, like, hugging you and crying or something is frowned upon here,” Tony finished.

“He was trying to take over the world,” Natasha pointed out.

“I don’t think I’m going out on a limb here when I say he’s probably always got something going on that Jupiter here doesn’t like,” he countered.

Though Loki snorted at the naming of Thor as the Roman god of sky and thunder, he remained mystified at Stark, Rogers, and Dr. Banner’s thoughts during the shown interaction. In the previous scene, these were the same individuals who had abhorred his maiming of the curator and intimidation of the German crowd. He was accustomed to fickleness regarding people’s view of him, but usually it ranged from tolerance to loathing, not to the positive extreme of defense. With the exception of Thor, who seemed to profess unconditional love for him on occasion and then, on others, charge him with Mjolnir when differences in opinion were presented.

He found it fascinating that these mortals, who he had outright, personally opposed, could find it in
themselves to extend their scope of perception to that of the reality of guarding him against others’ slights. Although, he supposed it would take a while for the circumstances that inspired pity to abate from their minds and for them to remember all of the ruin he had brought. It had been the same with the Æsir; in the start his aspirations and disposition were overlooked in favour of (what he had been deluded to think of as) his birthright as second in line to the throne, but the range of opinions shifted into a more negative realm over time.

“Do I look to be in a gaming mood?!”

“You should thank me,” Loki huffed in reply as he lifted his head to finally speak towards his not-brother. “With the Bifrost gone, how much dark energy did the Allfather have to muster to conjure you here – to your precious Earth?” He braced his torso with difficulty as he shifted to stand, moving to his hands and knees before starting to push himself up.

Thor dropped Mjolnir to the dark sand at his feet before marching forward to grab Loki’s upper arm, hauling him to his feet as the god grunted at the pull upwards. Thor then reverently placed his other hand below his brother’s jaw and around his nape, drawing him closer and forcing him to meet his eyes, proclaiming softly, “I thought you dead.”

“Did you mourn?” he asked impassively, chin held defiantly high.

“We all did. Our father—”

“-your father,” Loki interrupted with a raised finger. He shrugged Thor’s hold off and began to step around him, cautious of the rocky environment. “He did tell you my true parentage, did he not?” As he gingerly walked away, he lifted his right hand to the curve of his lower back to provide steady support to his upper body.

“Seriously – seriously – could you just tell us how injured you were?” Tony whined. “I know it’s embarrassing, but it’ll spawn emotions that can only be used to your advantage. You’re walking like you’ve got back-labour, for fuck’s sake!”

“Just answer this,” Clint started, all of the occupants in the room knowing full-well that Loki would not divulge the information Tony was begging for. “Give us a number – what fraction of your normal strength were you working with? You don’t have to detail whatever shit happened. Just the percentage of physical strength when compared to normal, not looking at the magic that was restrained, which was probably a big part of your stumbling about.”

Loki’s gaze drifted to the upper corner of the room while he calculated how weak he had been during the invasion. The number was distressingly low, but when compared to the meager strength of mortals they would not know how embarrassing it was for him to admit to. And he doubted his not-brother had the wits to accurately mathematically measure his own level of power over that of the humans he surrounded himself with – nevermind comparing his muscle to that of Loki’s.

“I would estimate my strength to be equal to that of your Captain’s enhanced form,” he admitted with a nod of his head towards the soldier mentioned, thereby preventing the approximation of his normal strength as well as the extent of the drop. “I was unaccustomed to the difference, and with my magic’s restraint in addition to it I appear as diminished as I am during all of this.”

The avoidance of exact measure caused a frown to pull at Tony’s lips, but they did receive an answer that alluded, somewhat, to Loki’s strength and corresponding weakness.

“We were raised together,” Thor insisted. “We played together, we fought together! Do you remember none of that?”
“I remember a shadow. Living in the shade of your… greatness,” he answered sharply after he had turned to face the baffled, quiet Thunderer.

Tony breathed through the parallels.

“I remember you tossing me into an abyss – I, who was, and should be, king!”

“That seems like a… skewed version of events,” Steve commented.

“Your intelligence is severely lacking if you think my perception is altered in such a way,” Loki belittled.

When he refused to elaborate on his words further, Thor ventured cautiously, “I thought it was that you were looking at Father and I’s distance from you and the knowledge of your adoption that further estranged you from us. When we ignored the diplomacy of leadership you had, before all of this madness.”

Loki crossed his arms over his chest as he leaned back in his chair, pointedly redirecting his attention back to the screen.

“So you take the world I love as recompense for your imagined slights?” Loki reeled back as his eyes began to tear while he gaped at the response-

“Excuse me?” Tony snarled, whipping to face Thor. “‘Imagined slights’?”

Thor began to shrink down into his seat even as he protested, “I was angered with his attack upon this world and the destruction he had already caused – what more he was planning. I did not mean to harm him further.”

“Sure! Just ignore his reasons for it all! Even if he hadn’t been forced into it, he would’ve had motive after all the shit he’s had to deal with!”

“Tony, stop,” Steve ordered.

“Make me, Golden Boy,” he snarled in return. He had knocked his chair back when he had stood sometime previously, palms flat on the table as he leaned over its surface in challenge to the fair-haired, morally-upstanding jocks that outshone all others in any righteous competition. Tony had maintained his aloof, uncaring persona for long enough, and now his muscles were coiled for a fight as his brain surged with the memories of his childhood, of his father’s treatment of him.

Captain America was a hero, was good for the sake of good, and did it matter at all that Tony had built his first circuit board when he was four, an engine at six, while his dad had drunk himself under the table, searching and searching for perfect, golden, Steve Rogers?

There was a component in the Captain and Stark’s relationship that he was unaware of, Loki concluded. The two were at each other’s throats as he and Thor often were, feelings of inferiority glaringly obvious. This was a lack of knowledge that he would not tolerate and needed to mend as soon as possible, but first he deemed it prudent to dissolve the conflict arising in the room currently.

He leaned over the arm of his chair and asked of Clint, “Was there as much divergence from decorum during the first disc? Considering it is all in the past, you would think present priorities would impress upon everyone’s sensibilities sufficiently so to maintain their train of thought to finish the viewing.”
“Could you not speak like an 80 year old prof – spewing that many long words makes it feel like I’m being force-fed a dictionary,” Clint remarked. “And yeah – there was a lot of flailing and yelling and shit.”

The sound of their voices brought Tony out of his enraged and raw musings, and he settled back into his seat with the thought that, though reaming out the two would make him feel better, he couldn’t physically take on either one and he was also starting to show his heart and emotions and issues a bit, so he should reign himself in right now. Thor was not looking at him, evidently partially having agreed with his rant, but Steve was glaring. They had been progressing past their initial rough meeting, but he supposed his issues upon issues with the good Captain in particular would prevent that from developing even remotely quickly.

A glance around the room revealed a couple of unimpressed stares, but Loki met his eyes with a discerning gaze that Tony was regretting having drawn onto himself.

- Thor striding forward with an authoritative finger leveled at him as he stated, “No. The Earth is under my protection, Loki.”

He laughed as his expression reverted to showcase a gleeful, wide smile. “And you’re doing a marvelous job with that,” the dark god jeered. “The humans slaughter each other in droves while you idly threat. I mean to rule them! And why should I not-”

“You think yourself above them?”

“Well, yes,” Loki answered with furrowed brows.

“Then you miss the truth of ruling, brother-” Thor replied earnestly, “-a throne would suit you ill.”

Loki snarled as he shoved the blond out of his way with a covered forearm, passing him to make his way back to the edge of the cliff where they had landed as two ravens flew by emitting echoing caws.

Loki leaned forward sharply in his seat, narrowing his eyes as he asked incredulously, “Is that Hugin and Munin?”

Thor jolted and squinted at the screen that had been paused, announcing, “I had not noticed the two.”

“Who are Hugin and Munin?” Bruce wondered.

“Our father’s ravens, Thought and Memory,” Thor answered. “They soar over Midgard and bring news to him of important events.”

Loki scowled at the thought.

“I’ve seen worlds you’ve never known about! I have grown, Odinson,” he derided as he spun to address the god trailing behind him, “in my exile. I have seen the true power of the Tesseract, and when I wield it-”

“Who showed you this power?” Thor interrogated abruptly.


At Loki’s stunned hesitation he continued, “Who controls the would-be king?”
"I am a king!"

"Not here!" he yelled, fisting the leather drawn over biceps in his hands as he shook the God of Chaos. "You give up the Tesseract – you give up this poisonous dream!" Thor’s passion deflated as swiftly as it had raised, his bright eyes boring into Loki’s as he lifted a hand to grasp the side of his neck again, breathing heavily as he requested, "You come home."

His gaze darted over the sincere expression on the other’s face for a few seconds before his mouth stretched in a grin that was not reflected in his eyes as he shook his head and confessed his belief, "I don’t have it."

Thor recoiled in anger at the firm rebuttal of his appeal, crossing his arm in front of his body and drawing Mjolnir to his hand to raise threatening. Loki halted the other god’s movements as he responded, "You need the Cube to bring me home – but I’ve sent it off, I know not where."

"Bullshit," Clint coughed.

"He is named ‘Trickster’,” Natasha retorted.

"You listen well, brother-" he began menacingly with hammer-arm outstretched, before a blur of metal and light slammed into his side and pitched him from the area.

"I’m listening,” Loki retorted, tone taunting though his face remained deadpan.

The assassins traded amused glances as Tony crowed, “I’ve great timing.”

_Iron Man’s_ thrusters flared through the night sky as he slowed, passing treetops by as Thor was carried to the ground with the continued force, landing heavily in a sputter of dust as he grunted. Tony skid to a landing on his feet, helmet retracting from his face as he watched the god stumble to his own. “Do not touch me again,” Thor panted seriously, Mjolnir gripped tightly in hand.

"Then don’t take my stuff,” Tony replied.

Loki raised an eyebrow at the remark.

"You have no idea what you’re dealing with,” he said.

"Uh,” Tony swiveled around to take in the trees on either side of him as his suit whirred, answering rhetorically, “Shakespeare in the park?” While gesturing to Thor’s attire, he asked in exaggerated formality, “Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?”

Clint chortled at the response before beginning to cackle unrestrained, bowed over the surface of the table as he choked out, “Now I’m imagining Thor in a dress!”

That caused laughter to erupt throughout the room from the Avengers, with the exception of the God of Thunder whose expression filled with dread as he eyed Loki warily, whose eyes had begun to shine with mirth. “Please, Loki,” he begged quietly, the chuckles subsiding at the sound of his voice.

Tony looked between the terrified blond and the elated Trickster before praying, “Please, please, let there be a story here.”

Loki immediately answered, "Of course there is," overwhelming Thor's 'There is not.'

“I sense potential blackmail,” Tony sung gleefully.
“It all began one morning when Thor awoke to find that Mjolnir had been stolen—”

“—please, brother—”

“—naturally he was angered, and sought me out first in suspect,” Loki continued, smirking at Thor’s grudging acceptance of his telling of the tale and the mighty Thunderer’s cowering in his chair. “I knew nothing of the event, of course, and once I had convinced him of that fact I went to the goddess Freyja to borrow her feathered cloak and flew off to discover what had happened.

“I came upon the giant Thrym, who admitted to having taken the hammer and buried it. He conceded to its return only if he would have the hand of Freyja in marriage. A council meeting was called upon my return to resolve the issue, since Mjolnir’s theft could not go unanswered and yet the goddess of love, beauty, and fertility obviously could not be wed to such a being. Heimdall came up with a marvellous plan of cunning for Thor to fetch his hammer himself…” He trailed off to savour the mortification of the other god as well as the rapt attention of the room before finishing with relish, “by clothing himself in a bride’s dress and disguising himself as Freyja.”

Tony and Clint howled with laughter as the others sniggered, a flush spreading over Thor’s cheeks. “You were my bridesmaid,” he retorted weakly.

“Ah, but I changed my shape into a woman – it is not as amusing when compared to your massive frame stuffed into a dress of fine linen,” he replied.

“Give us a sec before you keep talking like that,” Tony gasped amidst his laughter, attempting to calm himself and regain his breath.

“I can’t- Fuck- Thor in a dress-” Clint managed as he giggled hysterically.

“Loki- Female- Holy shit-”

Bruce cast an amused glance at the two, as well as towards Thor’s embarrassed countenance, before speculating, “Switching genders must be easy compared to shifting into an animal.”

“Yes,” Loki answered. “It’s quite similar to my regular form, and there are no unruly instincts that I have to manage.”

“You sure about that?” Tony snorted, smirking in Natasha’s direction. She glared at him. “Why don’t you show us what you look like?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Coulson interjected with a shrewd glance in the playboy’s direction.

“Hey! It’s not like I’m going to hit on him- her,” he objected.

“What does that mean?” Thor asked with a frown.

“Nothing,” Tony instantly responded.

“It means-” Clint began, before being interrupted and verbally bowled over by Tony.

“I’ll just be appreciating her body. Respectfully, obviously.”

“Perhaps it would be interesting,” Loki mused, eyeing Thor and his glowering at the genius.

“Well, you know now I don’t think it’s such a good idea-”
“Come now, Stark,” Loki cajoled as some of his features altered and his hair grew longer, his voice rising to a higher pitch, “what harm will it do?” And Tony had a feeling that he knew exactly what harm it would do to what part of himself when Thor saw him ogling his little brother-sister. Playboy that he was, he could appreciate all types of beauty, and though Loki came here to enslave the human race he was one from the Realm Eternal and Tony had noticed his looks in passing. But now Loki was reclined in the chair with leather ensemble altered to hug her definitely female body: high-heeled leather boots reaching up the length of her calves and over her knees, tight pants stretching over the muscles of her thighs, belt slung low over her hips, dark tunic now a fitted corset that accentuated her chest and slim waist. Her bright eyes gleamed as her lips curved into a dangerous smirk, hair draping in waves around her face, over her shoulders, and down her back.

“Do not drool over her in such a way, Stark,” Thor growled. “And cease immediately the thoughts running through your head.” Mjolnir hung from his belt, and he gripped her handle as his muscles tensed in preparation to leap over the table and attack the playboy.

“I’m not drooling,” Tony responded before sending a charming smile towards Lady Loki. “And that looks to be an awfully tight outfit, darling – perhaps I could help you change into something more comfortable?”

Thor jumped the table with a yell as Tony laughed and slid from his seat, darting under the slab to reappear on the other side, keeping the piece of furniture between them. He raised his hands in a gesture of peace as he partially hid behind Bruce’s chair.

“Settle down,” Coulson ordered with a sigh. “And change back, Loki.”

The Trickster basked in the reaction caused for a second longer, absorbing Tony’s exaggerated leers, Thor’s enraged glares, Steve’s blush and his avoidance of eye contact, and the others’ amusement, before shifting back into his typical form. He winked at Clint who was seated beside him and he rolled his eyes in response to the chaos instigated, Tony dropping into the empty seat beside Steve as the tension bled out of Thor’s frame and he sat alongside the assassins, still watching Tony warily.

Steve cleared his throat before questioning, “So what happened after you two dressed up?”

“Well, we arrived and Thrym was fooled – there was a heavy veil over Thor’s face, else such an ugly maiden could never have been mistaken for the goddess of beauty,” Loki answered as Thor frowned, though he smiled after the thought occurred that of course he would never look as delicate as a woman. “The wedding was underway and we feasted, reminding the giant that Mjolnir was to be returned. When the hammer was placed on Thor’s lap to consecrate the marriage, he of course used her to demolish the place.”

“Now that that’s finished…” Coulson prompted before Tony interrupted.

“Wait, there was something about a ‘feathered cloak!’ What did that do?”

“It disguised my presence as well as enabled me to fly, thereby making it an ideal artifact for searching for information,” Loki answered. “Giants in general are rather accustomed to magic though, so Thrym was able to see through that defense.”

“Alright,” he nodded, permitting the disc to resume its play.

“This is beyond you, metal man. Loki will face Asgardian justice.”

“He gives up the Cube, he’s all yours. Until then,” the faceplate slid down, “stay out of the way.”
Thor cast his eyes to the ground in consideration as he panted, before Tony’s muttered ‘Tourist’ as he walked away urged him to hurl Mjolnir at his back with a yell.

Tony turned, but the hammer slammed into his chest piece before he could raise his arms and forced him backwards and through a tree. The impacted trunk shattered and the tall tree fell sideways, Tony lying on his back where he had been thrown with the debris of bark lying scattered around him. He shuffled as the HUD inside his helmet flickered, uttering, “Okay,” deceptively calm of the impending battle.

High above, Loki lowered himself to sit on the rock face. Thor met his gaze as he summoned his weapon back to his awaiting hand, the other smirking.

“He’s just sitting there – it’s obvious he wanted to be captured,” Steve sighed.

“The Director said as much the same,” Thor remarked.

Tony manoeuvred onto his hands and knees as the blond began to twirl Mjolnir by her strap, but before he could fly to Loki’s side again Tony fired a repulsor blast from his position. Thor was knocked into a tree that held strong at his back before Iron Man flew forward and landed before him as he was gaining his bearings, landing a kick to his chest with the momentum and sending the god through the trunk. Thor lifted his head slowly after he had slid to a stop down on one knee, calling Mjolnir back to his hand from where she had been flung and punching his dominant arm into the sky. Lightning crackled and gathered in the clouds above to streak down to the hammer’s head, the power collecting within her before Thor thrust his arm forward and she released the electricity at Tony.

The sizzling beam landed on the suit to additional rays that sparked out upon impact, Tony bracing himself against the onslaught as he grunted. The attack finished as he gasped, suit smoking as a crack glowing molten now stretched alongside the reinforced glass covering his arc reactor. Inside the helmet Tony winced at the surge his suit experienced, HUD brightly flickering over his eyes. “Power at four hundred percent capacity,” Jarvis intoned as the power reading for the arc soared to finally rest at 475%.

“How about that?” he mused, planting his feet firmly and firing repulsor blasts from both of his palms as well as his chest.

Sparks erupted in the wake of the rays as Thor was thrown backwards with a shout, once again flipping to land on one knee so to halt his movement. Iron Man crouched in anticipation, Thor flying forward with Mjolnir outstretched for Tony to meet him in the air with a blast of his thrusters, catching the god in the torso and forcing them through the branches that blocked the skies above. He punched the blond in the side and then the head as they sailed through the air before arching his flight pattern as they approached a mountainside, dragging him up the stone face with a screech of metal. The Thunderer threw off a part of his hold as he turned to face the mountain, Tony maintaining his grip on one of his arms as the god got his feet under him and ran up the rock, vaulting them off its surface and pulling the suit along as he altered their trajectory back to the forest.

They spun as they flew, grappling as they crashed through treetops before hurtling through the base of a tree and tumbling over the ground. The two scrambled to their feet facing one another, Thor swinging a punch across the suit’s ‘jaw’ before Tony reeled back and aimed one in retaliation that was caught about the wrist. He tried to throw the grip off for only a second before striking out with his other hand, that fist caught as well. Their muscles strained as they tried to gain some sort of leverage over one another, before Thor bared his teeth and squeezed the metal in his grip. The material over Tony’s forearm crumpled at the pressure as sensors beeped in response.
to the damage the suit was sustaining, displaying the schematics to Tony who was grunting at the pain before he managed to swivel his hand and fire a repulsor blast to the side of Thor’s face.

At the withdrawal, Tony surged forward and slammed his helmet into the other’s forehead. Thor released him as he stumbled back a step and stared at him for his audacity before coiling his muscles and returning the attack, Tony thrown backwards at the force before flipping and landing on one knee. He immediately blasted forward, grabbing the god as he landed beside him and swinging him around to toss him a fair distance behind him. Thor was stopped by a fallen tree as his back crashed into it, landing hard on his front before climbing to his feet and charging Tony.

Tony threw a punch that was ducked under before Thor landed one to the waist of his suit, causing him to turn to the side with a grunt as the God of Thunder took the opportunity to land a blow across his shoulders and nape before his fingers dug under the metal plating of the top of his back. He swung him around and over his head before finally throwing him to the dirt at his feet, Tony landing heavily with a groan. As Thor reached back and called Mjolnir to him, raising her above him to slam into the fallen suit, Tony directed power to his thrusters and blasted along the ground, knocking Thor’s legs from under him to send him crashing down.

As Thor was moving to stand Tony soared back and landed a punch to the back of his head as he fell to one knee beside him, the two bounding to their feet to attack one another once again. A yelled ‘Hey!’ interrupted them, a bright shield thrown to clip Thor’s temple and the side of Tony’s helmeted head before rebounding back into the hands of her owner. Their attention was pulled to Steve’s stand on top of one of the ruined and slanted trees as he fastened his shield onto his left forearm without taking his eyes off of them as he said harshly, “That’s enough.”

He leapt to the rocky ground where the two were facing off and began towards Thor, “Now I don’t know what you plan on doing here-”

“I’ve come here to put an end to Loki’s schemes,” the god asserted.

“Then prove it,” Steve dared. “Put that hammer down.”

“Uh yeah – no, bad call. He loves his ham-” Thor viciously slung Mjolnir into Tony’s chest to send him flipping helmet over thrusters through the trees to land against a stone with a groan.

“You want me to put the hammer down?!?” he boomed, leaping through the air between them and swinging Mjolnir over his head. Steve braced himself and crouched low, holding his shield above his head and body as the hammer slammed into the vibranium.

A blinding light signaled the impact as the sound of the shield’s reverberations echoed through the space, an immense shockwave blasting the trees in its path backwards as it expanded to cover the area, Thor thrown away with Mjolnir in hand. The three men stumbled to their feet slowly, panting and gazing around at the debris as Steve asked, “Are we done here?”

Thor’s silence was evidence of his acquiesce, eyes realizing the destruction they had wrought.

“That’s truly an enlightening first meeting,” Loki commented.

“That’s what happens when alphas meet,” Bruce remarked. “There has to be at least a rough agreement of hierarchy, or they’ll keep fighting.”

The Helicarrier soared through the night sky that was littered with puffs of grey cloud, an entourage of a couple of jets maintaining a perimeter around the ship. Loki strode through the lower halls with a guard of sixteen armed soldiers, his posture confident. The group passed the
laboratory Bruce was stationed in simulating the gamma signature of the Tesseract, the dark god meeting his eyes as the doctor removed his glasses and smirking at him as he walked. Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose before blinking purposefully.

“Up to something – right there,” Tony sung.

Loki observed the fortified cage he had been placed in with curiosity as the door slid shut behind him, Director Fury stepping around to the control panel at the front of the room. “In case it’s unclear,” he started as he typed a sequence into a couple of areas on the panel, “if you try to escape – you so much as scratch that glass-” The layered floor beneath the suspended cell slid outwards from the center, the hole allowing rushing air into the room from its passage to the sky surrounding the colossal aircraft. Loki stepped to the wall of the glass enclosure to peer down before directing his gaze onto Fury as he continued, “-it’s thirty thousand feet straight down in a steel trap. You get how that works?”

He closed the flooring before gesturing to the fallen god, pronouncing, “Ant,” and then indicating the controls and stating, “Boot.”

“Nice,” Clint nodded.

Loki chuckled lightly, stepping casually back to speak from the center of the floor space with arms held wide. “It’s an impressive cage – not built, I think, for me,” he finished with both of his hands pointing to himself.

“Built for something a lot stronger than you,” Fury responded.

“Oh, I’ve heard,” he commented, turning to stare into one of the cameras secured to the ceiling above. “A mindless beast.”

The Avengers were stationed around a wide round table with an interactive interface that displayed the security footage of the room the two were speaking in; Natasha, sitting with her arms crossed and laid on the surface of the table, lifted her eyes to meet Bruce’s gaze. His arms were crossed over his chest and he stood with his weight resting on one leg and wire frames resting low on his nose as Loki’s voice sounded through the room, declaring mockingly, “Makes play he’s still a man.” Thor worried his fingers as he stood listening to his brother’s taunts, back turned on the table the others were viewing at.

“How desperate are you that you call on such lost creatures to defend you?”

“How desperate am I?” Fury repeated, walking closer to the glass that separated him from the god. “You threaten my world with war, you steal a force you can’t hope to control, you talk about peace, and you kill ‘cause it’s fun. You have made me very desperate. You might not be glad that you did.”

“Ooh, it burns you to have come so close,” Loki uttered, the Director’s jaw shifting in response. “To have the Tesseract, to have power – unlimited power. And for what?” He smiled and directed a knowing expression up at the camera, stating in derision, “A warm light for all mankind to share.”

Agent Hill clenched her jaw at the statement and stare from her position on the bridge where she was watching the proceedings.

“And then to be reminded what real power is.”

Fury’s mouth pulled up at one corner before he turned away to exit, commenting, “Well, let me
“know if ‘real power’ wants a magazine or something.”

Loki arranged himself to calmly gaze up at the watching cameras before the video feed was shut off.
Happenings

Chapter Summary

With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“He really grows on you, doesn’t he?” Bruce remarked with a small smile.

“Loki’s going to drag this out,” Steve concluded from his seat. “So, Thor, what’s his play?”

“He has an army called the Chitauri,” he began, turning to step towards the table the others were gathered at. “They are not of Asgard, nor any world known. He means to lead them against your people.” Agent Hill walked up a row of stairs to join them on the upper level of the bridge, coming to stand behind the god’s cape-less form. “They will win him the Earth – in return, I suspect, for the Tesseract.”

“So what does Thanos want with the Cube anyways?” Tony asked, turning towards Loki.

“I assume he desires its power – but that cannot be all,” he replied. “It would have been simple for him to have me fetch it, instead of allying himself with the Other and concocting this war.”

“If he wanted to rule the world, then why did he keep himself so distant?” Bruce questioned. “It doesn’t seem like that’s his goal, and it wasn’t your goal. The Other seems to have wanted it, but if Thanos didn’t then why would he bring the Chitauri into it at all?”

“I do not know.”

The occupants of the room frowned in vexation at the absence of answers to the cause of the invasion.

“An army,” Steve echoed, trading an incredulous glance with Natasha as he finished, “from outer space.”

“So he’s building another portal,” Bruce deduced as he removed his glasses, gesticulating vaguely with the frames as he added, “That’s what he needs Erik Selvig for.”

“Selvig?” Thor questioned.

“He’s an astrophysicist,” Bruce clarified.

“He’s a friend,” the blond corrected, shifting his weight as a concerned expression adorned his features.

“Loki has him under some kind of spell,” Natasha explained, adding, “along with one of ours.”
"I want to know why Loki let us take him," Steve prompted. "He’s not leading an army from here."

"I don’t think we should be focusing on Loki," Bruce inserted, gesturing to the surface of the table that had held the dark god’s image with sceptically furrowed brows. "That guy’s brain is a bag full of cats – you can smell crazy on him."

Loki raised a brow at the scientist, and Bruce cleared his throat in embarrassment of his judgement.

"Have care how you speak," Thor warned, advancing closer to the table in intimidation of the scientist. "Loki is beyond reason but he is of Asgard. And he is my brother."

Natasha recalled the defense of hers that followed his comment, and felt a sense of dread at the god’s unavoidable rebuttal afterwards.

"He killed 80 people in two days," Natasha proclaimed, unimpressed.

"He’s adopted," he justified.

Thor flinched at the remark, casting an apologetic gaze towards Loki.

"Interesting, the perspectives voiced about an individual when he isn’t present," the God of Fire commented softly, unwavering stare merciless in its piercing of the blond’s regret.

"Brother-" he began to reason before he was cut off by the adamant hiss,

"I am not your brother."

The atmosphere was tense as Thor tried to convey his regret through his gaze alone as Loki remained lounged in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest, muscles coiled though he kept his eyes from narrowing into a glower. He shouldn’t have been surprised at the comment. It was before the first disc the others had seen, that had caused Thor’s initial speaking with him and declarations of forgiveness and affection, so viewing his contempt now was no surprise.

It wasn’t.

He had known that attacking Midgard would garner his not-brother’s animosity.

Tony waved a hand to signal his AI to continue the viewing. Though Thor’s treatment of his brother was something he couldn’t help but oppose, he felt slightly disheartened at the apparent progress that had been made between the two being swept away so easily.

"I think it’s about the mechanics," Bruce mused. "Iridium – what do they need the iridium for?"

"It’s a stabilizing agent," Tony answered as he was led into the area by Coulson, finishing the conversation with the agent with an insistent ‘I’m just saying, take a weekend – I’ll fly you to Portland.’ Phil nodded with a smile, but pointed towards the group assembled and ushered the billionaire in. “Keep love alive,” Tony advised as they separated, finally turning his attention to the current conversation.

He sauntered around the table with his hands in his pockets, clarifying his initial comment, "Means, the portal won’t collapse on itself like it did at SHIELD." He paused as he circled around Thor, saying, ‘No hard feelings, Point Break – you’ve got a mean swing,’ as he patted the defined muscles of Thor’s upper arm as he passed. “Also,” he continued, "means the portal can open as wide, and stay open as long, as Loki wants."
Hill rolled her eyes and turned away at his elucidation, Tony continuing on to pause at the end of the raised platform with control panels at either side. “Uh, raise the mizzenmast,” he commanded of the bridge. “Jib the topsails.”

Clint snorted, and Tony defended, “Hey! That was some quality play on them being the crew of the ship!”

“How do you even know those terms?” he questioned.

“Maybe I want to be a pirate.”

Coulson sighed before remarking, “It should be worrisome, how easily I can picture it.”

The agents seated at the monitors below halted their work and turned to direct cautioning looks towards him at his orders. “That man is playing Galaga!” he abruptly accused, spinning and pointing at one of the agents, Steve and several others following the motion. “He thought we wouldn’t notice, but we did.”

“Did you ever look into that one?” Natasha asked of Coulson. “Why is he playing a videogame when he has something assigned to him?”

“Once the vessel is in the air there isn’t as much maintenance as you would think,” he answered. “If I’m not mistaken, during their down time I recall a certain couple of agents constructing an intricate system of clues for some of the higher-ups to find where their mail had been hidden.”

The two assassins smirked before Clint justified, “But we’re not on the bridge – we’re not part of the image.”

“You don’t think having Sitwell break into Hill’s office affects our image?” Coulson asked rhetorically, though the corner of his mouth twiching upward betrayed his amusement.

“That’s hilarious,” Tony commended with a smirk.

Tony returned his attention to the Director’s monitors, a puzzled frown pulling at his mouth as he fleetingly raised a hand to cover his eye in a mimicry of Fury’s eye patch before gesturing to the panels on the left and asking, “How does Fury even see these?”

“He turns,” Hill answered, arms crossed.

“Sounds exhausting,” he responded. He turned back to the suspended screens on the right and began to casually move through the schematics of the ship already depicted, rotating through the use of each interface as he spoke, “The rest of the raw materials, Agent Barton can get his hands on pretty easily. Only major component he needs is a power source, of high-energy density.” He nonchalantly attached a small round device to the underside of one of the monitors before turning to face his fellows’ inquiring expressions, beginning, “Something to…” before drawing their attention with a snap of his fingers and a clap as he finished, “kick-start the Cube.”

“This makes it seem so obvious what you were doing,” Steve commented, maintaining a slight disapproving tone even though Tony’s hacking of SHIELD’s mainframe had provided them with the information Fury had deemed to keep secret.

“You just came aboard, sent a jeer towards the crew, and planted a bug to break into their system,” Bruce reviewed with a sigh at his daring.

“It does provide some aspects as to the powers of the one sending these discs, though,” Loki
voiced. “How were they to know that that motion would become significant – to capture it from such an angle? Moreover, what events were foreseen so to prompt the need to interfere with the provision of these images?

“For that’s the only answer – some degree of foresight is afforded to the individual. All of these events were captured as they occurred. To reach into the past and accumulate all of these perspectives would require access to some of the peoples involved after the events – which we would have noticed.”

“So you’re saying… that someone knew the events of the invasion before anything started, and that the consequences afterward were seen as unacceptable – so they recorded the different views of the invasion, and then sent it to us to alter the results they had seen?” Natasha restated sceptically.

“That seems to fit the details we’ve come to know,” Loki replied.

“But that’s not possible,” Steve proclaimed with worried brow. “Right?”

Loki merely raised an eyebrow as Thor’s two furrowed in a conveyance of confusion. “What do you mean, that it’s ‘not possible’?” Thor asked.

“Seeing into the future.”

“Heimdall possesses the ability,” the God of Thunder replied, “as well as most of the Vanir – our mother being one which we have had the most explanation from. There’s also the Norns and their ways.”

“We’re not speaking of the prophesizing when one is born, nor the Gatekeeper’s all-seeing abilities…” Loki pensively dismissed, two of the three options rejected indifferently. “Who of the Vanir, or one related, close to, or with influence over one of similar ability, is involved with us so to be concerned with the futures we reap?”

“Can you discern nothing from the items themselves?” Thor asked.

“I’ve not been able to examine them yet,” Loki responded. “We’ll have the answers we seek once this showing has reached its conclusion.”

Coulson frowned, but nodded his assent to the proposal.

“When did you become an expert in thermonuclear astrophysics?” Hill interrogated of the genius.

“Last night,” he replied. When she tilted her head and narrowed her eyes in disbelief, he added, “The packet – Selvig’s notes, the extraction theory papers.” After an evident realization, he questioned in wonder with arms spread wide as if to hope for a contradiction to his thoughts, “Am I the only one who did the reading?”

“Does Loki need any particular kind of power source?” Steve interrupted.

Bruce bared his teeth in contemplation as he shook his head, pacing back towards Steve as he outlined, “He would have to heat the Cube to 120-million Kelvin just to break through the Coulomb barrier.”

“Unless,” Tony drawled, walking towards the scientist as he proposed, “Selvig has figured out how to stabilize the quantum tunneling effect.”
“Well, if he could do that he could achieve heavy-ion fusion at any reactor on the planet.”

“Finally – someone who speaks English,” Tony commended with a survey of the others as he drew closer to Bruce.

“Was that what just happened?” Steve remarked in question.

“Don’t go feeling too inadequate, Cap,” Tony remarked with a wink, “we can’t all be super soldiers. Me and Bruce are the brains of this brood.”

“It’s good to meet you, Dr. Banner,” Tony said as they shook hands firmly, Bruce nodding in agreement. “Your work, on anti-electron collisions, is unparalleled.” He released him before finishing, “And I’m a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage monster.”

Clint rolled his eyes.

He cast his eyes away and pursed his mouth before answering ‘Thanks.’

“Dr. Banner is only here to track the Cube,” Director Fury argued, suggesting, “I was hoping you might join him.”

“Let’s start with that stick of his,” Steve advocated. “It may be magical, but it works an awful lot like a HYDRA weapon.”

“I don’t know about that,” Fury countered, “but it is powered by the Cube. And I’d like to know how Loki used it to turn two of the sharpest men I know into his personal flying monkeys.”

Loki tilted his head slightly, but otherwise did not express his confusion.

“Monkeys?” Thor repeated. “I do not understand—”

“I do!” Steve inserted with a point to oppose the god’s confusion. Bruce raised his eyebrows as he wore an expression that was partly of ridicule as Tony rolled his eyes in blatant derision, Steve explaining proudly, “I-I understood that reference.”

“It was never explained to me what that meant,” Thor interjected.

“It’s a reference from the movie ‘The Wizard of Oz’,” Natasha clarified.

“There’s an evil witch that has a bunch of flying monkeys as her servants,” Tony finished.

“Are all beings of magic villainized so?”

“Course not – there’s a good witch in there,” Tony defended with a wave. Then he suddenly snapped his fingers and leaned forward in his chair, suggesting, “We should watch ‘Harry Potter’.”

Natasha shook her head in exasperation.

Tony turned to Bruce and put forward, “Shall we play, Doctor?”

Bruce nodded before waving him down the adjoining hall, “This way, sir.”

One of the agents below cast his eyes over his shoulder as they exited, shifting his chair over to one of the screens he was monitoring and switching the display back to the game that had been hidden, resuming his play.
“Again, choice dedication, right there,” Tony teased.

Bruce held a scanner in hand that he drew over the length of the scepter, its image being relayed to the screen he attempted to maintain view of as he operated the device, adjusting the drape of the cord that connected it to the computer that rested on the surface of the bench he was working on so that it did not hang off the blade of the weapon. “The gamma readings are definitely consistent with Selvig’s reports of the Tesseract.” The clear display depicted the scan beneath an expanded view of the gem set at its head as well as the Cube, two gamma signatures recorded above that mirrored each other. “But it’s going to take weeks to process.”

“If we bypass their mainframe and direct route to the Homer cluster,” Tony began from across the space, the corner holding three computers that were analyzing the data provided as well as the touchscreen that he was working with. It had a large base that was connected with three thick cords to SHIELD’s mainframe, its background sporting the ‘Stark Industries’ logo as Tony entered the desired specifications and ran the computation, informing, “we can clock this at around 600 teraflops.”

Bruce chuckled at the technology he had brought with him, remarking, “All I packed was a toothbrush.”

Tony laughed as he crossed the area, offering, “You know, you should come by Stark Tower sometime.” He unconcernedly lifted a slim prod from one of the tables he passed to fiddle with as he coaxed, “Top ten floors, all R&D. You’d love it – it’s candy land.”

“Thanks, but the last time I was in New York I kind of broke… Harlem,” Bruce declined with a glance down as Tony circled around to his side before the two focused on the display of readings.

“Well, I promise a stress-free environment,” he continued, moving behind Bruce to his other side. “No tension, no surprises.” He suddenly jabbed him in the side, the zap of the electric discharge sounding briefly as Bruce yelled, ‘Ow!’ Tony narrowed his eyes and leaned closer as Bruce met his gaze while holding his side.

Loki raised his eyebrows in shock as Thor tilted his head, Clint, Natasha, and Coulson’s eyes widening at Tony’s reckless provoking of the Hulk.

“Hey!” Steve called as he entered, the billionaire wondering, ‘Nothing?’ at the lack of any shade of green in the other’s irises. “Are you nuts?”

“Jury’s out,” he quipped towards the Captain to Bruce’s laughter as the other turned back to the computer.

The agents’ postures relaxed at Bruce’s reception of the action, though remained bewildered as to the reasoning both behind the move and the response.

Tony turned back to him and questioned in admiration, “You really have got a lid on it, haven’t you? What’s your secret? Mellow jazz, bongo drums, huge bag of weed?”

Clint sniggered at the ideas.

“Is everything a joke to you?” Steve asked angrily.

“Funny things are,” he replied with a gesture of the prod.

“Threatening the safety of everyone on this ship isn’t funny.” He cast a glance towards Bruce before adding, “No offense, Doc.”
“A-Ah, it’s alright. I wouldn’t have come aboard if I couldn’t handle,” he looked at the eccentric billionaire at his side, “pointy things.”

Tony smirked and breathed out a chuckle as he stepped away, stating, “You’re tip-toeing, big man – you need to strut.”

“And you need to focus on the problem, Mr. Stark,” Steve inserted.

“You think I’m not?” he questioned. He turned to pose to him, bag of blueberries in hand, “Why did Fury call us in? Why now – why not before? What isn’t he telling us?” At both gazes fixed on him he finished logically, “I can’t do the equation unless I have all the variables.”

Steve’s brow furrowed as he voiced the thought, “You think Fury’s hiding something?”

“He’s a spy. Captain, he’s THE spy. His secrets have secrets,” he declared as he tossed a couple berries into his mouth. “It’s bugging him too, isn’t it?” he asked, turning to face the doctor who had resumed working.

“Aah,” he dithered, glancing between them with wide eyes before looking down again, “I just want to finish my work here, and-”

“Doctor?” Steve prompted.

He cast his eyes to Tony before sighing, sending a glance towards Steve before removing his glasses and starting, “‘A-a warm light for all mankind’ – Loki’s jab at Fury about the Cube-”

“I heard it.”

“Well, I think that was meant for you,” he said with a point at Tony as he turned his head to face him. Tony turned his head away and offered him the blueberries, Bruce reaching into the bag to grab a few. “Even if Barton didn’t tell Loki about the Tower, it was still all over the news.”

“The Stark Tower? That big ugly-” Tony sent him a challenging look and Steve paused in his insult, relayed in the presence of the tower’s designer, finishing, “-building in New York?”

“It’s powered by an arc reactor – it’s a self-sustaining energy source,” Bruce explained as he unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt sleeves, clarifying as he rolled them up, “That building will run itself for, what, a year?”

“It’s just the prototype,” Tony excused, elaborating to the soldier, “I’m kind of the only name in clean energy right now – that’s what he’s getting at.”

“So, why didn’t SHIELD bring him in on the Tesseract project? I mean, what are they doing in the energy business in the first place?” Bruce wondered.

“I should probably look into that,” Tony began as he circled around Bruce again, checking his phone, “once my decryption program finishes breaking into all of SHIELD’s secure files.”

Steve gaped, dazed, before objecting, “I’m sorry, did you say-”

“Jarvis has been running it since I hit the bridge,” he said, returning his cellphone to his back pocket. “In a few hours I’ll know every dirty secret SHIELD has ever tried to hide. Blueberry?”

“Yet you’re confused about why they didn’t want you around,” Steve derided.

“An intelligence organization that fears intelligence?” he presented, drawing his blueberries back
to himself. “Historically, not awesome.”

“I think Loki’s trying to wind us up,” he announced to the two. “This is a man who means to start a war, and, if we don’t stay focused, he’ll succeed.” He met both of their gazes again, asserting, “We have orders – we should follow them.”

“Following’s not really my style,” Tony retorted as he tossed several berries into his mouth.

Steve adopted a longsuffering expression as he remarked, “And you’re all about style, aren’t you?”

“Of the people in this room, which one is, a) wearing a spangly outfit, and, b) not of use?”

Loki considered the turbulent relationship between the two once again, wondering if it was just their personalities that caused the clash of views so often or if there was an interaction that he wasn’t privy to that instigated the constant, underlying animosity.

“Steve,” Bruce beckoned, “tell me none of this smells a little funky to you.”

He turned his gaze back to Tony and swept his eyes down the length of him before returning them to his face with a dissatisfied expression, ordering, “Just find the Cube,” as he turned to march out of the lab.

Tony maintained an impassive stare at the familiar disappointed look, exhaling once the Captain exited.

Steve stepped through the door as a couple of agents speaking indistinctly passed by, turning towards the left before looking down the hall in the opposite direction, setting his jaw and turning resolutely to march through the latter passage.

“That’s the guy my dad never shut up about?” Tony scoffed, manipulating the data on the screen astride the scepter-

Loki’s eyes widened at the revelation of the issue between the two, evidently a more similar parallel to he and Thor than he had had cause to believe. He would still need to confirm the details somehow, but it seemed plain that Stark’s father had thought highly of the Captain. He knew that the soldier had been frozen for 70 years, so the two must have interacted when Stark’s father was quite young, for him to have lived to have a son of Anthony’s age. An only child had when he was around 50, too old to devote much care to and still enamoured enough after thirty years had passed since the Captain disappeared with him to tell tales of his exploits? That was certainly an establishment of an unattainable standard, one that Anthony had evidently grown to resent.

He hadn’t asked Clint about the shaping of the individuals now surrounding him, only the events regarding their development into the threats he would have to face. Now that he was working to maintain the forging bonds between them all, he would need access to these details. Actually, it might be beneficial for each of them to have knowledge of the sensitive information regarding the others… He doubted any would speak to him of these personal matters though, but when the Trickster reviewed the changes that had come about due to the first disc, which he still hadn’t seen but could confidently assume held details of his and Thor’s most recent pasts, his mind began to consider the options available to him.

Steve had absorbed Tony’s words with a degree of amazement as well. It shouldn’t come as a surprise to him that Howard had spoken of him – especially since he had interacted with the man quite a bit, considering the length of time after the effects of the serum that he had lived in the
period – particularly as others had spread various propaganda and had commissioned *trading cards* of all things advertising him as well. And he wondered if Tony’s barbed remarks were as unjustified as they had seemed to him at first.

Because he didn’t know Howard’s son (and what he knew of Howard wasn’t very in-depth either), and Tony had no right to verbally attack him when he didn’t know a thing about him. But, if he had been raised with the conflicting tales of Captain America with that of Howard’s portrayal of Steve, then he had every right to judge him, didn’t he? He may not have first-hand information, but Howard had met him and he was sure that his recounting of his actions held more truth than the cards and comics and everything else, especially since he’d had the same brutally-honest snark as his son. So if Steve didn’t hold a candle to what others thought of him as Captain America, if Tony was simply voicing his thoughts on Steve’s inadequacy when a subject triggered his anger, then he couldn’t blame him his opinion.

He would still stand for what he thought was the right course of action, but Tony had proved himself valuable and willing to work with the team in defense of the people, so Steve wouldn’t let the other’s personal thoughts of him affect his view of Tony and the fact that his priorities were aligned with his own.

-as Bruce adjusted his glasses as he read the information on the small screen he was carrying as he crossed the room to another large suspended interface. “Wondering if they should’ve kept him on ice.”

“The guy’s not wrong about Loki,” he remarked as he modified the view of the strands of the radiation signatures. “He does have the jump on us.”

“What he’s got is an Acme dynamite kit – it’s gonna blow up in his face,” Tony predicted as he passed where Bruce was working and analyzed the touchscreen he had set up before. “And I’m gonna be there when it does.”

“I’ll read all about it,” Bruce said, sliding a compressed file to the edge of his screen, the data transferring to the one Tony was working at.

“Uh huh – or you’ll be suiting up with the rest of us,” he responded as he examined the information.

Bruce permitted an incredulous scoff before enlightening, “Ah, you see, I don’t get a suit of armour. I’m exposed… Like a nerve. It’s a nightmare.”

Considerate glances were cast towards the scientist at his perpetual predicament.

“You know, I’ve got a cluster of shrapnel trying every second to crawl its way into my heart,” Tony shared, abandoning his monitor and advancing towards the other as he tapped his arc reactor in indication as he explained, “This stops it – this little circle of light.”

Tony’s muscles tensed as he forced himself to maintain his steady breathing. He’d forgotten the fact that he’d shared that tidbit of sensitive information with Bruce, and though it was probably beneficial for the rest of the team to know, no matter that it’s a vulnerability, in case something happened, having the God of Chaos know was another matter entirely.

Steve and Thor were the two who had not been made aware of the details of the functioning of the arc reactor, only knowing so much that it played some sort of role in Tony’s health and powered the suit, and that obviously having the light go dark was not to be desired. Faced with the fact that there were pieces of harmful material that were in his chest and that the device was the only thing
preventing them from tearing through his heart, leant the reactor a weighty vitality as well as impressive evidence of Tony’s intelligence and what he had endured.

The explanation allowed for wonder in response to the technology the genius was able to innovate, but Loki also considered the glaring weakness. Though it was true that mortals were fragile and it would be easier to stab the man clean through the chest than attempt to damage the reactor, it was a piece of machinery and so was therefore open to other avenues of attack. Was the invention vulnerable to an electromagnetic pulse? Or an even simpler option, if the arc reactor is damaged does Anthony have easy access to spares or repair parts and tools wherever he may be? Aid seems to be always readily available for wounds of the flesh, but not so easily for technology that Loki was sure only the billionaire understood the workings of.

Another topic that he would have to investigate so to ensure the reliability of his defense... The Trickster was beginning to think that the group was more of a burden than beneficial.

He halted facing him through the clear screen, Bruce meeting his gaze though he worried his hands over one another. “It’s a part of me now, not just armour. It’s a terrible... privilege.”

“But you can control it,” Bruce countered.

“Because I learned how.”

“It’s different,” he objected as he shook his head, resuming his work.

“Hey,” Tony interjected, dragging his hand along the bottom of the touchscreen on Bruce’s side to minimize all of the data, “I read all about your ‘accident’. That much gamma exposure... should’ve killed you.”

“So you’re saying that the Hulk-” he cut himself off and averted his gaze with a smirk at his adoption of the name before correcting, “-the Other Guy... saved my life?” Tony’s silence reinforced the point. “That’s nice – it’s a nice sentiment. Saved it for... what?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” he mused.

“You may not enjoy that.”

“And you just might.”

Steve felt an onset of guilt at viewing the easy interaction between the two. He may have not been worried about the Hulk, even from the point when he had met the doctor, but he hadn’t been accepting of the other half until he was faced with the creature that had joined their team in the battle during the invasion. Tony had not avoided the topic of the Hulk and had had confidence that there was more than senseless rage and destruction to him, and had tried to share that with Bruce. Had been the only one to try and help him – the brilliant man who had been persecuted and on the run from the military due to one accident.

The grey door read ‘SECURE STORAGE: 10-C’ in dull yellow lettering, the metal creaking as its structure was disturbed. Steve was shown through the narrow window, expression twisted into a grimace of strain as he managed to force the automatic obstruction into the wall from which it electronically slid after a moment. He paused as he silently stepped over the threshold, glancing back from the direction he came to ensure no agent was in the area to report his breach of security, before walking into the large chamber.

His eyes observed the rows of thick metal containers lining the room before a label caught his attention on the floor above. He slunk to the side of the aisle before leaping to grasp the rail
bordering the area above, climbing over the guard to land on the grating that made up the narrow walkways.

“Naughty Captain,” Tony teased with a smirk.

A dark truck drove through a well-lit underground tunnel, Selvig and another scientist standing inside the large closed box with an array of machinery neatly filling all of the available space. Erik was handed a pair of tongs that he used to gingerly clasp the compact cylinder of iridium that rested on a scale, weighing 0.38 kg, and deftly carried it over the opened briefcase that held the Tesseract and to the device he had created so to stabilize the anticipated portal. The element was accepted with a hiss as the mechanism began to glow a soft red, Erik allowing a pleased smile at the sight.

“SHIELD confiscated all of Dr. Selvig’s work, right?” Bruce asked of Coulson.

“Of course.”

“I bet they couldn’t keep their sticky paws off it though – the thing’s probably in pieces,” Tony commented. “We’ll have access to what’s left of it, and any of the good doctor’s notes. Or we could just chat with him – I’m sure he was ‘confiscated’ too.”

“Is Erik aboard the Helicarrier?” Thor questioned.

“He’s recovering from the events of the invasion in our facilities, yes,” the agent replied.

“Alright – that’ll make our comparing of his knowledge of the Tesseract and the scepter and our scans of magic a lot easier than flying him back over here from Timbuktu.”

“As soon as Loki took the doctor, we moved Jane Foster,” Agent Coulson assured, the screen before him displaying a gathered surveillance photo of her. “We’ve got an excellent observatory in Tromso – she was asked to consult there very suddenly yesterday. Handsome fee, private plane, very remote. She’ll be safe.”

“Thank you,” Thor replied as he gazed at her image. He glanced at the agent before suggesting, “It’s no accident, Loki taking Érik Selvig. I dread what he plans for him once he’s done. Erik is a good man.”

“He talks about you a lot,” Phil remarked as he stood, circling around the broad god. “You changed his life.” Thor joined him as he walked further into the bridge. “You changed everything around here.”

“Things were better as they were,” he believed. “We pretend on Asgard that we’re more advanced, but we-we come here battling like bilgesnipe.”

Loki thought with derision that most of the warriors of Asgard fought recklessly as such, and if he had come to this realm with the intention of conquering he would have approached more like a smilodon*.

“Like what?” Phil asked, pausing.

“Bilgesnipe,” Thor repeated. At the agent’s uncomprehending expression he elaborated, “You know, huge, scaly, big antlers,” raising his hands to demonstrate the branching antlers of a stag at the end. “You don’t have those?”

“Don’t think so,” he answered.
“They are repulsive,” the god detailed. “And they trample everything in their path.”

With the exception of the agents in the group, Steve mused on the fact that they all fought like that. How much damage had Iron Man and the God of Thunder done to that forest when they had first met?

He stepped to the outermost edge of the area, long panes of glass stretching before him as the blond gazed out into the skies the immense aircraft soared through. “When I first came to Earth, Loki’s rage followed me here and your people paid the price – and now, again.

“In my youth, I courted war,” he added regretfully.

“War hasn’t started yet,” Fury pronounced. Thor glanced up at his stance on the upper level before turning away again as the Director asked, “You think you could make Loki tell us where the Tesseract is?”

“I do not know,” he answered, “Loki’s mind is far-afield. It’s not just power he craves – it’s vengeance, upon me. There’s no pain would prise his need from him.”

“A lot of guys think that, until the pain starts,” Fury argued, descending a few steps.

The comment, where before would have been dismissively agreed with, resulted in several internal cringes at the recollection of the few tortures that Loki had been put through recorded in the myths they had available, nevermind the pain he could endure conditioned through constant battle with the other gods.

“What are you asking me to do?”

“I’m asking what are you prepared to do?” he retorted, leaning over the handrail to level his one-eyed gaze at the Thunderer.

“Loki is a prisoner-”

“Then why do I feel like he’s the only person on this boat that wants to be here?”

The theory caused Thor to shift his stare and furrow his brow.

Chapter End Notes

(*) A smilodon is the formal term for the saber-toothed cat.
Chapter Summary

With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals. During the scenes displayed, tensions run high that not only cause Clint to struggle with his memories while under the Mind Gem’s control but also cause Loki to question the amount of free will involved in his own.

Loki stalked from one side of his cell to the other, lips pursed in thought, before he paused and suddenly smirked, commending, “There’s not many people who can sneak up on me,” as he turned to face Natasha. She stood alone in the room, by the control panel, stance relaxed and purposeful as she faced him prepared for combat in her leather suit.

“Bet you figured I’d come.”

“After,” Loki conceded. “After whatever tortures Fury can concoct, you would appear as a friend, as a balm. And I would cooperate.”

“I want to know what you’ve done to Agent Barton,” she announced.

“I’d say I’ve expanded his mind,” the Trickster replied innocently.

Natasha permitted a glance towards the aforementioned archer, but the only reaction to the conversation was an appreciative gaze towards her for her questioning.

Natasha tilted her head slightly in absorbance and dismissal of his comment, retorting as she strode cautiously closer to his cage, “And once you’ve won, once you’re king of the mountain, what happens to his mind?” She crossed her arms over her chest as she interrogated him through the reinforced glass.

“Oh,” Loki crooned mockingly, “is this love, Agent Romanoff?”

Tony waggled his eyebrows towards the two, receiving identical raises of an eyebrow in response.

“Love is for children – I owe him a debt.”

He held his arms out and stepped backwards, inviting, “Tell me,” as he spun to settle himself on the bench on the far side of the cage.

Her lips parted in consideration of sharing the sensitive information before she breathed deeply and glanced to the floor for a second, beginning her tale gingerly, “Before I worked for SHIELD, I, uh... Well, I made a name for myself.” She sat in one of the chairs placed for the regular guards to rest in, facing Loki. “I have a very specific skill set – I didn’t care who I used it for, or on. I got on SHIELD’s radar in a bad way. Agent Barton was sent to kill me.

“He made a different call.”

“Nice first meeting,” Tony nodded in approval.
“First impressions between us all are a bit distorted, aren’t they?” Bruce remarked.

Loki nodded, eyes on the hands resting in his lap as he asked, “And what will you do if I vow to spare him?”

“Not let you out-” she responded instantly with a smirk.

“No, but I like this,” he countered, leaning forward with a grin full of teeth. “Your world in the balance, and you bargain for one man?”

“Regimes fall every day,” she argued with a quirked brow. “I tend not to weep over that – I’m Russian, or I was.”

“And what are you now?”

“It’s really not that complicated,” she inserted, standing and crossing her arms over her chest again as she proclaimed, “I’ve got red in my leger, I’d like to wipe it out.”


Clint’s posture abruptly tightened as he closed his eyes for a moment and exhaled lengthily. “I’ve been compromised,” echoed in his mind. Loki had asked him to tell Him everything, and he had. The Trickster had used the information He had gained to get under her skin, to expose the vulnerabilities she’d entrusted to him.

Natasha gave a slight shake of her head in disapproval when he glanced at her, which, though he knew to interpret as ‘It’s not your fault’, didn’t relieve his guilt any at the emotional scarring that had likely been torn open during the interaction.

Natasha’s muscles abruptly tensed, her eyes widening slightly as she swallowed, Loki continuing mercilessly, “-Sao Paulo, the hospital fire?”

The tension in the room was thick along one corner, the two assassins, Loki, and Coulson alone aware of the events that were alluded to. And though the others were not lacking in tact so much so that they would question about either of the agents’ pasts, it was evident from the expressions onscreen that the experiences were painful to remember for Natasha. The revelation that the dark god had had Clint share her weaknesses with him to use against her would likely increase the rift that had barely begun to be worked over between Master and servant.

“Barton told me everything,” he said as he stood, sauntering closer. “Your leger is dripping- it’s gushing red, and you think saving a man no more virtuous than yourself will change anything?”

She stared off to the side as he came to stand just on the other side of the glass, her eyes gathering moisture. “This is the basest sentimentality – this is a child, a prayer! Pathetic!”

“You lie, and kill,” Tony and Bruce were surveying the lists of SHIELD’s secure files, the genius’ AI having broken through the layers of firewalls. An ‘ACCESS DENIED’ alert flashed on the large screen, and Tony swiped it off the edge, “in the service of liars, and killers.” Agent Hill circled the bridge to an agent who had called her over, the screens before the two displaying a wide alert that read ‘VIRUS DETECTED: UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS’. Director Fury looked down at the alarm and sighed. “You pretend to be separate, to have your own code – something that makes up for the horrors,” Steve opened one of the deep containers that had caught his eye in the storage area, a frown pulling at his lips as his eyebrows turned downward in discontent as he glanced back in the general direction of the officials presumably on the bridge. Grey masks and weaponry with the
HYDRA insignia embossed on the side lay neatly in straw cushioning, “but they are part of you. And they will never go away.”

Loki slammed his forearm against the surface barring them from one another and Natasha jerked back a step as he promised, “I won’t touch Barton, not until I make him kill you – slowly, intimately, in every way he knows you fear. And then he’ll wake just long enough to see his good work,” she gasped and turned, “and when he screams I’ll split his skull!”

Clint instantly flung himself out of his seat and at the god beside him, Loki vanishing and causing the archer to careen onto the edge of the chair and send it toppling. The Trickster appeared behind him as he crashed to the floor, Agent Coulson and Natasha drawing their guns as Loki swiftly moved to straddle Clint’s back and pin his arms behind him. Phil raised a hand to halt the rest of the room’s occupants, as they had all leapt to their feet and prepared themselves for battle, when Loki made no move to perform any actions aside from restraint.

There was no way to overpower the weight settled on Clint’s back and the strength holding him in position, but he continued to writhe and wriggle in a desire to gain some form of advantage. His mind churned with injured thoughts, How DARE He?! How dare He come to me and say shit like others abuse me when He’s using the information I gave Him to knife my closest friend – probably the only one I’d trust with my life – in all the places she’s been hurt and worked for years to recover from?! How dare He… And to say He cares at all, when the bastard’s SILVER-TONGUE details exactly how He’s going to kill me!

The fucking son of a bitch! It’s not like I’ve been caving into whatever shit He’s concocting in His twisted little head, but we’ve all been forced into an alliance with Him! He’s been saying He’s been forced into working with the shit ton of aliens that attacked, but I remember Him orchestrating the whole thing and He’s there explaining the personal war He’ll wage against Natasha and me! The loathsome, vile-

He twisted his wrists in the one-handed hold and attempted to straighten his arms to lower the placement of his hands, but Loki adjusted his grip to cross his wrists horizontally and lever them higher in opposition. The god then shifted backwards slightly and used his free hand to quickly tug the bottom of Clint’s shirt from his jeans to remove the gun secured at the small of his back.

Clint growled as the firearm was vanished, wishing, however unrealistically, that the Trickster hadn’t noticed the weapon He was sitting on and had loosened His hold enough so to allow him to shoot Him. Phil wouldn’t let him kill Him, but bullets didn’t do the same damage to the gods as to humans, so Clint should be permitted a few close-range shots in retribution for everything.

Loki cast an assessing gaze over those still standing, justifiably cautious of what their actions would be considering the emotional outburst of the assassin pinned beneath him. Natasha lowered her gun but maintained her steady grasp of it as she stepped closer to crouch alongside her partner. “It’s over, Clint-” she coaxed firmly, “-and we got some useful information from the questioning.”

“Do I look like I care?” he responded, craning his head to direct to the god he could partially view in his peripheral, “I’m going to cut your tongue out.” So all your poisoned words are kept inside your blackened heart. So you can’t force others to dance to your pulls of string.

Loki pressed himself over the length of his back and the arms He held crossed, advising, “Be more creative, pet,” to Clint’s renewed struggles.

‘Pet’?! Again with the ‘pet’! I’m not your pet – you monster! And with that last enraged thought, he stilled. Against his will, the vigour of his argument was swept from him by the images triggered by that word.
“Because I’m the monster that parents tell their children about at night?” Loki asked, tears shining on his eyelashes and trailing down over the skin of his cheeks. He held his hand up and looked at his cobalt skin, breath heavy and eyes wide as he turned it over, its fair tone returning.

“Is it madness? Is it?” Loki shakily asked. “Is it?!” He panted as his eyelids lifted, his stare troubled as he pursed his lips and began to slow his trembling, the pain of the Other’s touch lingering. “I remember a shadow.”

He exhaled slowly, summoning the cruelty He had shown.

The God of Chaos stabbed the device at the curator’s face, the three spikes anchoring the machine as the central mechanism analyzed the eye as it gouged it from the man’s skull. The crowd clamoured screaming from the sight, Loki maintaining his hold as the German thrashed. He breathed heavily in exertion, a smirk twisting his lips at the panic of the guests as the device continued to scrape the orifice of the optical organ. “KNEEL!” he shrieked.

“And then he’ll wake just long enough to see his good work, and when he screams I’ll split his skull!”

With all of the injustices He had faced throughout His millennia of life, Clint knew that not one person in the room would blame Him for His actions – but that didn’t make them right, or justified. The innocents that were injured or killed during the invasion that was led by the Trickster shouldn’t be forgotten because He’d had a fit of insanity regarding His adoption and He’d been forced into commanding the Chitauri.

And yet…

“Sir?” Clint called warily as he entered the dim room. “The Doc says Stark Tower’s arc’ll work for the portal.”

In the damp, underground labyrinth of stone that they had settled in to work, some of the smaller sections had been cordoned off for storing food supplies and for rest, the scientists rotating their work schedules and the agents their guards so to maintain a group that was progressing as expected as well as being well-rested and prepared for action. His god had been overseeing their advances until most of the arrangements had plateaued, then had beckoned the archer to Him to detail the strengths and weaknesses of the team Clint had expected was being gathered.

He had left when he had been dismissed, but at the conclusion of Selvig’s equations had been offered an excuse to check on his god, who had not reappeared since then. Loki sat at the base of one of the walls of the empty space, legs stretched out on the grime covered tile underneath Him and crossed at the ankles and His arms crossed over His chest. He lifted His head at the report, responding distractedly, “That’s good.”

Clint could make out a smeared path on the other side of the small room, the tracks revealing to him that his god had been pacing in thought sometime beforehand. Though likely in absorbance of the information Clint had shared about the prospective Avengers and the plans for the invasion, he stepped closer and asked with a concerned frown, “Is everything alright?”

Loki’s attention was drawn fully onto the archer at the inquiry, gazing thoughtfully at him before answering with a small smirk, “Yes.” When the other made no move to exit, He questioned, “Was there anything else?”

“No, sir,” he answered, though he walked closer. The assassin’s sharp vision grasped his god’s refusal to stand, even when the distance between them was reduced so much so that He had to look
up at him to meet his eyes properly. Clint crouched beside Him instead, finding it to be inappropriate for him to be looking down at his god, and continued to cast his gaze over Him.

“You hurt?”

“I’m weakened, but not injured, no,” Loki replied.

Clint knew that He hadn’t been wounded in the fight at SHIELD, but He had been stumbling, so he’d asked. Working to relieve at least some of the burden he could see present in the tense lines of His shoulders, Clint assured, “We’re going to win. Your plans are in motion, and mine’re foolproof.”

He chuckled, leaning His head back against the stone wall that braced Him and unfolding His arms as He breathed, “We’ll see, Hawk,” briefly brushing His fingers through Clint’s hair.

At the touch he permitted a smile, though the two were in the midst of a takeover, because it was evidence of His acceptance of him — that He saw him as an asset. His god had chosen him first to follow Him, and had praised his selection and organization of their hideout. He’d had to fight for upgrades to his bow and specialty arrows at SHIELD, but Loki had just accepted his skillset. Had even digested his excuse of wielding a gun for his failure to kill Fury, and hadn’t blinked at his choosing of high perches for the ordering of the agents to their positions in the main chamber they were working in.

There seemed to be so much that his god had done for him, in excess of giving him his freedom, and so Clint desired to put at ease His mind while they were in the only foreseeable lull until everything was over.

He shifted to lift himself up slightly, turning and slinging a leg over Loki’s so to straddle His lap before asking, “Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?”

His god blinked for a moment at the proposition, hands hovering uncertainly as His stare searched Clint’s own bright blue eyes. The archer was unsure of what He was seeking, but knew of the earnest devotion he felt towards Him. His mind was filled with his service to his god, to the one who had saved him when he hadn’t known he’d needed saving from the harmful underappreciation of SHIELD. His contentedness in His presence and with His goals filled him, and he could even feel the faint connection at the back of his mind to the unbelievable core of power in Him. The link strengthened at certain times — when they’d met, when he had been speaking of the Avengers. He hoped that it would again. Their relationship felt as though it intensified in those moments, him touching His magic and being tethered more securely to Him.

Loki sighed softly before gently laying a hand on one of the thighs astride Him, giving a quirked smile as He shook His head. He cooed, “You’re not thinking clearly, pet,” as He lifted His free hand to run His fingers through Clint’s hair once again.

He furrowed his brows in confusion as he slightly tilted his head, asking doubtfully, “What do you mean?” He was always aware and always isolated a target to pursue — he was always thinking clearly. “I know the average human’s not anything to you, but I’d be able to entertain you for a bit—”

“Oh, darling,” He swiftly interrupted, gripping his jaw with both hands and bowing his head to place a kiss on his forehead. It felt like a blessing from his god. “I can’t allow myself to become distracted — and you would definitely cause me distraction if I could have you.”

Clint narrowed his eyes in disbelief of the excuse, but accepted it with a ‘Yes, sir’. He was reluctant to move from his position, the contact with his god comforting, and so decided to remain
until Loki expressed an opposing want.

“Have you rested at all?” He asked with a raised eyebrow as Clint’s muscles unwound, His hands lowering to lightly rest at his waist.

“I’ve been keeping an eye out,” he rationalized. “The guys have access to a lot of weaponry – have to make sure they’re loyal to you.”

Loki hummed in acquiesce before circling His hold to the small of his back, pressing his body forward until he lay against His chest. “Sleep,” He commanded. “Your strength’s needed for my plans.”

Clint thought to object, his god likely needing more rest than him as he was at full strength, but it was not in him to defy a direct order from Him. He worked his arms between the wall and around Loki’s back and tucked his face into the side of His neck, drifting off to the comforting thought that if any threat did appear before Him before he could move, his back guarded his god’s torso.

He didn’t know what to do, what to think about the conflicting views he’d gotten of the Trickster. He stilled his thrashing and closed his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply, steadying his emotions as he thought, There’s no point in me doing anything now – we’re in the middle of something. We need these discs, and Him, to know what we’re up against. I’ll just keep an eye on Him.

“Get off me,” he growled with a glare over his shoulder, and, though Loki raised an eyebrow at his cessation of aggression, he lifted himself from his back and released his hold on his arms.

Clint pushed himself to his feet and scowled at the other for a moment, and then Natasha rested a hand on his shoulder and pushed him towards one of the chairs. He sat with her on his left now, her having placed herself between him and the dark god, as Loki righted his fallen seat and their teammates gingerly settled. Phil’s expression was one of reproach at the archer’s violent interruption, but he was resigned to the tempestuous interactions between the two.

“This is my bargain, you mewling quim.”

“You’re a monster,” she declared from her position, having fled to put some distance between them, her back turned to him as she breathed haltingly.

He chuckled darkly with a wide smile, murmuring, “Oh, no,” as he lowered his arm and splayed his hand against the glass. “You brought the monster.”

Natasha once again revised the conclusion she had drawn from his statement. With his personal thoughts on the term ‘monster’ and his connotations of it, he might have been referring to himself rather than Bruce. After all, their work on the Tesseract had brought him here, and the challenge they posed seemed to bring out the worst in him.

Her head raised and she spun to face him again, eyes clear and expression composed as she concluded, “So, Banner.” His confidence faltered as he stared at her in silence as she elaborated, “That’s your play.”

“What?” he muttered.

“Loki means to unleash the Hulk,” she immediately reported into her earpiece, striding towards the exit. “Keep Banner in the lab, I’m on my way – send Thor as well.” Loki followed her progress with furrowed brows, moving back to the center of the cell as she turned and acknowledged with a smirk, “Thank you, for your cooperation.”
“She totally beat you there, wannabe Trickster,” Tony taunted.

“My thoughts on him don’t really effect his shifting, do they?” Loki replied superiorly.

Tony stuck out his tongue in response, to the god’s bewilderment.

_Fury strode into the lab that the two scientists were occupied in as he asked accusingly, “What are you doing, Mr. Stark?”_

“Uh, kind of been wondering the same thing about you,” he responded from his seat on a worktable, one leg crossed in front of him whose ankle he rested his hands on as the other hung off the edge of the surface.

“You’re supposed to be locating the Tesseract,” he said, having come to stand before the billionaire.

“We are,” Bruce retorted, Tony idly tapping his phone against his knee as a smirk pulled at his mouth. “The model’s locked and we’re sweeping for the signature now. When we get a hit—” he pointed to one of the monitors behind the Director that he turned to observe, hands on his hips, “—we’ll have the location within half a mile.” The screen rotated a model of the globe on one side as the analysis of the Tesseract and its gamma signature were shown on the other, an alert in the center notifying them that the search process for the signature’s location was at 46%.

“Yeah, then you get your cube back. No muss, no fuss,” Tony reassured before his attention was called to the monitor in front of him when it beeped. A file had been highlighted in red, prompting him to ask, “What is ‘Phase 2’?”

_One of the HYDRA guns was placed down with a clank on another table by Steve as he entered, proclaiming, “Phase 2 is SHIELD uses the Cube to make weapons,” to Bruce’s slight gaping towards Fury. “Sorry, computer was moving a little slow for me,” he remarked in apology towards Tony._

“Rogers, we gathered everything related to the Tesseract,” Fury justified, hand raised in placation as he approached the soldier, “This does not mean that we—”

“I’m sorry, Nick,” Tony interrupted, standing as he swivelled the screen around to display the schematics he had accessed for the development of said weaponry. “What were you lying?”

“I was wrong, Director – the world hasn’t changed a bit,” Steve commented disapprovingly.

“Our start with SHIELD was really bad,” Steve observed.

“Relationship was only so-so with me before,” Tony commented with a shrug, “and was pretty bad with the Rage Machine over here,” he added with a jerk of his thumb towards Bruce.

“My first relations weren’t very amiable either,” Thor mentioned.

“And I think we’re all a bit iffy with them still, because of a certain someone’s ‘death’,;” Tony remarked to Phil’s small smile.

“The behaviour you find so offensive is in the nature of an overruling organization such as this,” Loki explained.

“Yeah, yeah – we heard your speech about liars and killers,” Tony dismissed.
At Thor and Natasha’s wary entrance, Bruce turned to the agent and asked her with a point of his folded wire frames, “Did you know about this?”

“You want to think about removing yourself from this environment, Doctor?” she suggested firmly.

“Ah ha, I was in Kolkata – I was pretty well removed.”

“Loki is manipulating you,” she insisted as she stepped closer.

“And you’ve been doing what, exactly?”

“Nice,” Tony praised of the comeback.

“You didn’t come here because I bat my eyelashes at you.”

“Listen, I’m not leaving because suddenly you get a little twitchy,” he responded. He walked over to the monitor and pulled it closer by its corner, indicating with his glasses the plans for use of the Cube as he queried, “I’d like to know why SHIELD is using the Tesseract to build weapons of mass destruction.”

Fury answered, “Because of him,” with a point, the singled-out God of Thunder furrowing his brow in confusion as he indicated himself for clarification, ‘Me?’.

Tony’s expression displayed his confusion as he shifted, and the Director elaborated, “Last year, Earth had a visitor from another planet who had a grudge match that levelled a small town.”

Bruce released the screen and cast his eyes to Thor in amazement. “We learned that not only are we not alone, but we are hopelessly, hilariously, outgunned.”

“My people want nothing but peace with your planet,” Thor proclaimed.

“But you’re not the only people out there, are you?” he argued. “And you’re not the only threat.

“The world’s filling up with people who can’t be matched, who can’t be controlled.”

“Like you controlled the Cube?” Steve inserted.

“Your work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to it, and his allies,” Thor asserted. “It is a signal to all the realms that the earth is ready for a higher form of war.”

“-a higher form?” Steve asked.

“What did you mean by that?” the soldier reiterated, casting his gaze onto Thor.

‘Well…’ he began haltingly before Loki detailed unconcernedly, “Without the Tesseract acting as a beacon of power for Earth, the other Realms didn’t bother with your world. Limited lifespans, strength, and knowledge of much of anything, you were left to your devices and not sought out for alliances or even trade. I don’t agree to the thought to that extent, exactly, as I’ve visited here many times and have seen your progress, but without much contact with the others and no knowledge of them to display your power through combat, the assumption held.

“The revelation that you had possession of the Tesseract and were able to work with her so much so that her signature had awakened would have caused some alarm for those that heard of it. And would have brought war to your doorstep in fear of what other forces you possessed.”

“Is it to our advantage, or not, that we were able to defeat the Chitauri sent here?” Phil interrogated.
“I don’t know,” Thor answered. “The display may have indicated that your strength will only be used here, in defense if others trouble you, or it may be interpreted as a show of power and that you have something to prove. Peaceful or ambitious, the other Realms will be watching your actions closely.”

“Is there any way to contact representatives?” Steve asked. “To tell them our intentions and start negotiations?”

“Not currently,” Loki answered. “But no formal action will be taken by any of them until Asgard declares her aims.”

“Yes, the Allfather’s ruling of in need of guard, ally, disinteresting, or hostile will affect the others’ thoughts,” Thor concurred. “They may not all agree, but the choice will alter any courses of action.”

“And what are Asgard’s thoughts on us?” Natasha asked.

The gods shared a glance before Thor began, “I’m not certain. Our father was considering announcing Midgard as the Æsir’s charge after my exile last year, but with Loki appearing here…”

“It will also make a difference now that Earth’s revealed herself to hold decent warriors,” Loki added.

“Yes – if you weren’t here then the status would have been announced as an ally of Asgard, I think.”

“But now that he is here?” Bruce questioned. “Have we been harbouring a fugitive since SHIELD signed that contract?”

Loki raised an eyebrow at Thor, awaiting his reply. “I don’t know,” the Thunderer admitted. “As I was leaving, the courts were gathering to argue over the issue. With the revelation of him being alive they needed to debate everything that happened so to arrive at a ruling for when he returned – but I don’t know what they decided. Nor do I know how his actions here would have effected that decision.”

“So we might end up fighting everyone for you?” Tony snorted before drawling a ‘great’ to Loki’s smirk.

“You forced our hand,” Fury defended. “We had to come up with something.”

“A nuclear deterrent,” Tony surmised with his hands in his pockets, adding deridingly, “‘Cause that always calms everything right down.”

“Remind me again how you made your fortune, Stark?”

“I’m sure if he still made weapons Stark would be neck-deep in it—” Steve commented.

“Wait- Hold on – how is this now about me?”

“I’m sorry, isn’t everything?” the Captain retorted.

Loki titled his head at the immediate confrontation, narrowing his eyes.

“I thought humans were more evolved than this,” Thor remarked chidingly.

“Excuse me, do we come to your planet and blow stuff up?” Fury objected as he whirled to face
the god.

“You treat your champions with such mistrust-”

“They’re not my champions!”

“Are you boys really that naïve? S.H.I.E.L.D. monitors potential threats,” Natasha enlightened, Tony egging the Captain on in the background with a ‘What is it about me that bothers you so much? I’m curious.’

“And Captain America’s on a threat watch?” Bruce asked skeptically.

“He’s not your concern, Doctor,” Fury interjected as Thor began, ‘You should have let me take the Tesseract-’

“We all are,” Natasha announced.

The slim gem set in the scepter glowed azure as their voices continued on angrily against each other-

“Wait, you’re on that list? Are you above or below angry bees?” Tony taunted.

“Stark, so help me God, if you make one more wisecrack…” Steve snapped.

“Threat – verbal threat! I feel threatened!”

“Show some respect.”

“Respect what?”

Thor muttered towards the Director, “If I need to put you down, I will.”

-the long weapon held on the surface of one of the worktables. From the other side of the room, the scepter’s length ran to seemingly capture the arguing individuals, ethereal blue glow instigating the animosity thick in the air.

“Okay, I know we figured out afterwards that the thing was screwing with us, but this makes it seem so obvious the scepter’s the cause of everything,” Tony stated in aggravation.

“You can’t expect to know everything,” Clint started.

“I can so,” he objected. “Everything important that’s actually in the realm of knowledge I’m used to – magic and mystic gems are new. But mark my words, I’ll know it all,” he finished with a determined nod.

A depiction of the weapon was shown on a small screen in the middle of the controls of an aircraft, the signature of the gem resonating and displaying its location to be to one side of the corresponding image of the Helicarrier.

“Transport six-six-Bravo, please relay confirm codes,” a female agent requested as the real craft appeared through the cloud cover in front of them, one of the pilots flipping a switch above in response. “I’ve got you on the computer but not on the day log. What is your haul? Over.”

“Arms and ammunition. Over,” the other pilot replied.

In the back of the jet, six men were seated working to finish garbing themselves in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s
armed agents’ apparel and readying their firearms. Clint opened a case, sling full of specialty arrows across his back, and lifted his signature bow to extend her arms.

Clint focused on his breathing in preparation for the attack he was about to watch himself lead, dread filling him at the thought of the agents he was going to harm.

Inside the larger aircraft, Thor directed towards Fury, “You speak of control, yet you court chaos.”

“Oh hey, what’s with you saying people court things like ‘war’ and ‘chaos’?” Tony interjected, turning towards Thor.

“Each of the Æsir hold an affinity for certain elements of life,” he began with a slight shrug. “Expressing joy in or outwardly pursuing a specific element of nature tends to generate a close relationship with the one known to represent such things.”

“As in a romantic relationship?” Bruce questioned. “You use the word ‘court’.”

“Not always. I believe the expression came about due to those who became particularly gripped by a certain element and then pursued he or she who embodied it.”

“So when you mentioned courting war in your youth…?” Natasha asked.

“Freyja is one who understands many things, love, beauty, fertility, and gold, as well as war and death. She is very fascinating,” he explained. “But another understanding of it would be due to my admiration of my father – one aspect that he looks over is war, the instigation as well as a successful victory.”

“That’s interesting,” Bruce mused.

“You know what’d be interesting?” Tony began with a smirk that threatened to stretch into a grin. “If we told Fury that him ‘courting chaos’ means that he's interested in Loki.”

Phil choked on a laugh before managing to control himself though the others in the room were overwhelmed with hysterical laughter, in combination to some appalled and horrified expressions at the thought.

After a few minutes of amusement the chuckles tapered off, Bruce wondering, “Is it easy to gain a god’s (or goddess’) favour, then? Expressing interest in what they look after?”

“It is the same as expressing interest in another’s trade, or their strengths or hobbies,” Loki replied. “Yes, it is an earnest desire to become more familiar with the other,” Thor added.

“Cool,” Tony determined.

“That’s his M.O., isn’t it?” Bruce remarked. “I mean, what are we – a team? No, no no – we’re a chemical mixture that makes chaos. We’re… We’re a time bomb.”

“You need to step away,” Fury ordered.

“Why shouldn’t the guy let off a little steam?” Tony asked with an open hand, laying it on Steve’s shoulder.

“You know damn well why – back off,” the Captain yelled, backhanding the limb away.
The cheerful mood had evaporated quickly at the interactions shown on screen, the tension between Steve and Tony in particular rising as they watched their dispute.

“He’s starting to want you to make me,” he challenged.

“Yeah,” Steve smirked in taunt of the concept, circling the other, “Big man in a suit of armour.” He halted on his other side and asked sharply of Tony, who was staring forward with tensed jaw, “Take that off, what are you?”

“Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist,” he answered promptly, Natasha jerking her head with an eyebrow raise in concession of the points raised.

“I know guys with none of that worth ten of you.” Tony’s eyes pinched at the corners at the soldier’s declarations. “And I’ve seen the footage – the only thing you really fight for is yourself.” Fury’s eye lowered in unvoiced disagreement. “You’re not the guy to make the sacrifice play – to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you-”

“I think I would just cut the wire,” he said tersely.

“Always a way out.” Steve remarked with a mocking grin, casting his eyes to meet Bruce’s for a second, who shifted uneasily. “You know, you may not be a threat but you better stop pretending to be a hero.”

“A hero? Like you?” Tony questioned incredulously as he stepped closer. “You’re a laboratory experiment, Rogers – everything special about you came out of a bottle.”

Loki suppressed a sigh as he observed the reactions of the two men to those particular lines. They were spearing each other at their foundations, and apologies wouldn’t reverse their own thoughts on the comments voiced.

Steve opened his mouth to apologize for what he had said, but Tony waved the impending words away. He had his own regrets about what he had voiced, but wouldn’t speak them as outright as he was sure the Captain would move to, nevermind in front of such a crowd. They had both been proved wrong of their initial assumptions based on indirect information. It was a topic that would have to be covered, but wasn’t a priority in the midst of their assignment.

In the hull of the jet soaring through the clear skies, Clint pressed the button to open the hatch with firm azure eyes. He steadied his stance in the howling wind of the opening as the plane circled the Helicarrier, left arm reaching over his shoulder to draw an arrow and knock it on his extended bow. He pulled back and aimed towards his target before swinging his weapon to the left slightly to compensate for the high winds he would be shooting into, glancing back at his objective before releasing. The arrow flew wide of the massive craft before the wind caught it and curved its trajectory, the shaft piercing through the air to attach itself to the side of the Helicarrier by four wires that shot out of the sides of its blunt end. The small, round glass coverings near the bottom of the specialty arrow began blinking red.

“Amazing shot,” Tony applauded. “Would’ve been even better if it hadn’t been to blow us up.”

Clint clenched his jaw.

“Put on the suit,” Steve dared of Tony, whose teeth were grit and eyes were wide, “let’s go a few rounds.”

“You people are so petty,” Thor jeered after laughing, “and tiny.”
Steve cast his eyes to the others in the area as Tony closed his eyes and pressed the back of his wrist to his forehead to gather himself, Bruce remarking, ‘Yeah, this is a team,’ as Fury ordered, “Agent Romanoff, would you escort Doctor Banner back to his-

“Where?” the scientist asked in aggravation. “You rented my room.”

“The cell was just in case-” he attempted to justify before being interrupted.

“-in case you needed to kill me – but you can’t. I know – I tried.”

Loki’s muscles went rigid at the admission.

The noise and tension in the space was abruptly dissolved at the yelled admission, all gazes fixed on Bruce. He averted his eyes from the stares and uncomfortably explained, arms crossed over his chest, “I got low, I didn’t see an end. So, I put a bullet in my mouth, and the other guy spit it out.”

The fallen god thought it dishearteningly ironic that the motivation for the act had been what had saved the doctor. Tony, filled with the same empathy as he had been then, rolled his chair closer to Bruce and nudged his arm slightly with a small smile to prompt an uncomfortable shrug from the other.

“So I moved on, I focused on helping other people – I was good. Until you dragged me back into this freak show-” his shoulders shifted as he moved backwards a step, Thor balancing his stance and expression showing his internal preparation for combat, “-and put everyone here at risk.” Bruce shifted forwards again as he growled, “You want to know my secret, Agent Romanoff? You want to know how I stay calm?”

Fury cast his widened eye to one of the Doctor’s hands as he placed his own on the gun strapped to his thigh, slowly moving the fastening forward so to allow him to draw the weapon as Natasha prepared to draw her own firearm at his side.

“Doctor Banner,” Steve called, Bruce’s wild attention drawn onto him, “put down the scepter.”

He stiffened before turning his gaze down to his left hand, searching the long weapon in confusion as to when he had lifted it from its stand on the table behind him. The gem shone steadily.

“How was it angering them all, really?” Clint asked.

Loki hummed before speculating, “It’s not in the gem’s nature to cause aggression steadily… Perhaps, since its ownership was bound to me, it was channelling my subconscious emotions.”

“And you were angry?”

“Of course I was angry,” Loki responded with an eyebrow raise. “My magic was restrained and I was in a cell.”

“There goes the theory of the scepter influencing you, then,” Tony commented.

The Trickster’s eyebrows furrowed at the thought, questioning immediately, “What?”

Tony blinked at the intensity suddenly directed at him, Bruce answering cautiously, “Well, we noticed its effects on us and thought that you might have been affected in the same way due to your constant contact with it.”

“You were sort of crazed in Germany, asking those people to kneel,” Tony added. “And the gem
flashed blue."

“Your behaviour now, and even on the Helicarrier when you grabbed Clint after that interrogation, is more contained and controlled than during the invasion,” Bruce finished. When Loki’s only reaction to their theories was to lean back in his seat and shift his eyes in thought, he asked, “Was it affecting you?”

The answer ‘no’ was on the tip of his tongue, but he stilled himself. He had been thinking clearly enough through the suppression of his magic to create a plan that followed Thanos’ orders as well as ensuring his failure, but had it been included for him to appear delusional? Because when reflecting on his actions, they were very out of character and passionate and displayed his emotional injuries so obviously… Was it the absence of his magic and the pressure of the circumstances that had caused him to act in that way, or was it as they thought?

It was possible for his estimation about the gem to be correct and for it to have still affected him. At the mental disadvantage he was at with his disorientation, his control of the gem wasn’t absolute. It may have channelled his anger and wish to lash out at everything back onto him in a cyclic relation, causing him to spiral worse into his vulnerabilities until, when released of it, it was obvious to even these mortals that he hadn’t been himself. That was the danger of such powerful artefacts, nevermind one with such an integral connection to the mind. Their powers were often too overwhelming to be tamed without destroying he who holds them.

He crossed his arms over his chest and confessed, “I don’t know.”

His mystification was interrupted by a trilling beep emitting from the monitor across the room, the depiction expanding the image of the world to a precise location, an alert flashing to signal ‘ENERGY SIGNATURE MATCH: 95%’.

The occupants of the room all turned towards the sound, Natasha swiftly returning her gaze onto Bruce as he returned the scepter to the surface of the worktable. “Got it,” the Director announced in response to the alarm.

“Sorry, kids,” Bruce started as he walked the length of the lab to analyze the screen. “You don’t get to see my party trick after all.”

“You located the Tesseract?” Thor asked.

‘I could get there faster,’ Tony inserted as Thor insisted, “The Tesseract belongs on Asgard – no human is a match for it.”

“You’re not going alone,” Steve asserted as Tony turned to exit, grabbing the man’s upper arm.

“You gonna stop me?” he retorted, slapping the hold off.

“Put on the suit, let’s find out,” the Captain countered, stepping closer so the two were facing off chest to chest as Fury warily watched their confrontation.

“You two honestly go at it at the most inconvenient times,” Phil was obligated to note.

“We just can’t help but sink our teeth into each other,” Tony defended with a lewd smirk as Steve squawked and flushed in indignation at the implication.

“I’m not afraid to hit an old man.”

“Put on the suit.”
Bruce removed his glasses as he surveyed the screen in front of him, the section of the Cube’s gamma signature that was recognized highlighted in red in one of the lower corners as the alert percentage increased from 98 to 99, and then 100%. “Oh my god…” he muttered at the location displayed.

On the open aircraft, Clint sunk to one knee as he pressed the second of four buttons on the grip of his bow. A bright blast resonated from where the explosive arrow had affixed itself, the flames ripping through the engine alongside and up through the center of the floor of the room where the Director and Avengers were gathered. They were all thrown away, Natasha and Bruce flung through the glass separating the upper area from the space below.
Estrangement

Chapter Summary

With Loki now living in Stark Tower and working with the Avengers and SHIELD in explaining his magic, another mysterious disc arrives so to clarify the Other’s actions and Thanos’ goals. When Tony crosses a line while bearing witness to one of the more sensitive scenes displayed, the consequences are more severe than anticipated.

Plumes of smoke wafted outside the craft as large pieces of debris fell from where the Helicarrier’s hull had been damaged, the haze spreading from the hole they had been blasted from inside as well. Steve and Tony stared at each other in shock from where they lay on the floor, the Captain on his stomach and the billionaire on his side, before they scrambled to their feet, Steve ordering, “Put on the suit,” to an answering ‘Yeah’. The soldier reached for Tony’s arm as they stood but stumbled, before steadying himself and grasping the other about the waist as Tony fell, disoriented, into the door frame, helping him from the room.

The agents on the bridge were hastily analyzing the damage, switching seats with others to scrutinize their monitors in the accumulation of data. ‘All agents to stations,’ echoed over the P.A. system as other agents armed themselves from the rows of automatic firearms in the armoury, unarmed others dashing through the halls to aid in manual reparations to the aircraft.

Fury gathered himself and shook his head at the resultant ringing in his ears from the explosion, barking, “Hill!” with a hand pressed to his earpiece.

“External detonation,” she answered promptly. Amidst the disarray of the bridge she glanced over the footage of the blast on one screen and the schematics of the Helicarrier’s structure on another, announcing, “Number three engine is down!” as a female agent confirmed, ‘We’ve been hit.’

“Can we get it running?” Hill interrogated as another agent reported, ‘We’ve got a fire on engine three.’ “Talk to me,” she commanded as she strode through the space, circling to one of the male agents who was analyzing the workings of the engine.

“Turbine looks mostly intact, but it’s impossible to get out there to make repairs while we’re in the air,” he concluded, gesturing to the evidence on the monitor.

“We lose one more engine we won’t be,” she stated. “Somebody’s got to get outside and patch that engine,” she reiterated to the Director.

“Stark, you copy that?” he relayed.

“I’m on it,” Tony responded.

“Coulson, initiate defensive lockdown in the detention section, then get to the armoury,” Fury ordered, said agent exiting the bridge. “Romanoff?”

Natasha grit her teeth, lying on her front on the glass covered ground and propping herself up to crane her neck to look over her shoulder, one leg revealed to be pinned underneath a wide pipe that had crashed down with the explosion. She glanced over at Bruce, whose form was free of
debris, and gasped, “We’re okay.” Bruce panted and huffed, clenching his fists as he shook his head, and she repeated uncertainly, “We’re okay, right?”

Bruce’s lips pursed as he crossed his arms over his chest, his shame cloaking his form like a cloud in a warped mirror of Clint’s defensive and repulsed posture in regards to his own actions. The occupants of the room were all tense at the expected battles.

The jet had landed on the external tarmac, Clint leading his team over the surface and to a raised grate. He indicated one to break through the barrier while the others surrounded them and guarded their backs with guns readied. The grating was kicked into the unoccupied area below with a spray of dust, one agent jumping down while the others rappelled to the floor, Clint arriving last.

“Keep that engine down,” he commanded to a ‘Yes, sir,’ as the agents followed the point of his left hand, his right pulling his bow from where it was slung across his torso as he directed to another couple, “Detention, wait for cameras to go dark.” ‘Got it,’ they replied as he turned and marched to another exit, ordering, “Stay close,” to the three agents remaining.

Phil internally reflected on the assets the agent brought to the field in terms of skillset and command, Clint’s firm instruction and planning of the attack immaculate.

‘Let’s go, Level 4,’ an agent rallied as Steve and Tony ran through the halls. “Engine three – I’ll meet you there,” Tony stated with a point, Steve nodding as Tony walked into a wide hanger while pulling his phone out of his back pocket. With a touch to the screen the doors opened at the far end, his Iron Man suit standing assembled and HUD lighting the eyes as it powered up with another touch to his cell.

“Oh yeah, I’ve a bone to pick,” Tony interrupted. “Why’s Steve with me?” At the soldier’s frown he corrected casually, “Not that his brawn wasn’t sorta helpful, but I am going to fix an engine – with a man who wasn’t there for the invention of the cellphone.”

“The few who might have been a help in the situation were otherwise occupied,” Phil replied, the Director’s duties to the ship taking priority as well as Natasha and Bruce’s fall incapacitating them.

“Doctor?” Natasha called as he lay breathing heavily and groaning in exertion at keeping the Hulk within him. “Bruce,” she tried again as she attempted to jerk her leg free from its entrapment. “You got to fight it – this is just what Loki wants.” He heaved on his hands and knees, trembling as she panted, “We’re going to be okay. Listen to me-” A couple of men ran into the area, one asking, ‘Are you hurt?’ She waved them furiously from their approach and they stopped to grab each other and force themselves from the space. “We’re going to be okay, alright?”

He bowed his head to the ground as he growled and panted, and she pounded a fist on the metal flooring as she vowed, “I swear, on my life, I will get you out of this. You will walk away and never, ever-”

“Your life?!” he shouted hoarsely, turning to face her to display his now bright irises and mottled green skin. He groaned as he threw his head back and arched his spine, teeth grit and fingers clenched as his bones grew and his muscle mass pulsed over his body, shirt beginning to rip over his chest and arms. She gasped as she worked to free herself, the partially transformed Bruce landing on his hands and knees again to scuttle backwards and fall off the platform, landing on the floor below and roaring as his body strengthened.

Bruce sunk lower into his chair at the sight, the revelation that he was about to see the Other Guy hurt Natasha – and who knows how many others – adding to the burning coil of guilt in his
stomach at having lost control at all while aboard the aircraft.

He thrashed and writhed before glancing back at her with an apologetic gaze, Natasha gaping as sweat dampened her face and she pleaded, “Bruce.” He was forced to turn from her as his transformation continued, muscles growing as he shifted and purple shirt finally torn to pieces and falling from him as the Hulk reared back on his knees to release a bellow. He stumbled to his feet and threw an arm into a standing metal container, denting the material as he howled.

Clint cast his eyes to his partner to assess her response to reliving the transformation, and she quirked her lips upward in a smirk that seemed to depict her mere acquisition of the interaction into her extensive repertoire of experience.

Natasha managed to release her leg in her desperation, climbing to her feet and gazing at the back of the colossal creature that turned to face her, emitting a resounding growl.

Bruce winced at the sight, rolling his seat inconspicuously backwards slightly to dissuade the approach he anticipated from the genius beside him, who was eyeing his reactions. He didn’t desire proximity at the moment.

She gasped and spun to run, the Hulk leaping after her fleeing form. She hurriedly scaled the stair before halting with the knowledge that he was too close and jumping to grab a hold of the railing that bordered the level above as he tore the stairway from its braces and threw it behind him. She flipped through the rails and gazed down at him for a second as he glowered at her, Natasha then flipping to the adjacent grating and landing with a grunt on one knee.

He roared and reached up to pull the grate beneath out from under her as she stretched to grasp one of the pipes secured to the ceiling above, swinging from the loss to another section of support. She leapt to a slightly lower level before bracing her arms on the rails of the stairs to swing over the steps and descend a level further. She fell forward and landed on her hands as well as her feet, scrambling away from the Hulk’s hollering behind her.

In his cell, Loki lifted his eyes from the floor at the sound, grinning widely.

Glares were directed towards him to his amused, “Come now, you can hardly blame me for that.”

“Au contraire,” Tony countered as he shifted his attention from Bruce, “you’ll find we can blame you for a ton of shit.”

“Stark,” Phil chided, indicating the large monitor resume play.

“Bring the carrier about to a 1-8-0, heading south!” Fury yelled as he dashed into the bridge. “Take us to the water!”

“We’re flying blind,” an agent responded. “Navigation’s recalibrating after the engine failure.”

“Is the sun coming up?” the Director questioned incredulously.

He averted his gaze in confusion before answering, “Yes, sir.”

“Then put it on the left,” he ordered in exasperation. “Get us over water.” The agent hurriedly moved to obey. “One more turbine goes down and we drop.”

Loki smirked as he rolled his eyes at the ineptitude of the Director’s crew.

Steve ran through the clouded halls, coming to a door that barred his path. Agents were yelling on
the other side, and he worked open the heavy door to one’s ‘Thanks’. The man moved back to help another, the two manoeuvring a third agent from the area who had been injured in the explosion. “Stark!” Steve shouted into the open air as he held onto the metal ladder beside him, the damaged engine adjacent to the ruin he was standing in the midst of. “Stark, I’m here!”

“Good.” Tony replied as he soared into the space. “Let’s see what we’ve got.” He slowed his thrusters and hovered closer to the turbine, HUD providing holograms detailing the engine’s workings inside his helmet as he muttered in scheduling, “I’ve got to get the super-conducting cooling system back online before I can access the routers and work on dislodging the debris.” A large piece of the hull of the craft was depicted in red in his images, wedged between the engine’s turbines and preventing any movement.

He flew closer and pushed at a piece of the cooling system, shifting it back into position before instructing, “I need you to get to that engine control panel and tell me which relays are in overload position.” Steve nodded as Tony drifted further away and to another point, the Captain taking a step back before leaping forward with a grunt to grab a hold of an outlying piece of secured metal and swinging up to another level on the opposite side of the demolished section. Tony yanked a large piece of obstructing sheet metal out of the way before flying into the engine itself.

Steve exhaled as he landed and faced the small door on his left, opening it and drawing out the long control panel that slid from the deep space. An intricate array of orange and red wiring and bright yellow depictions of voltage pathways were arranged around white monitoring dials and gold action switches. He stared open-mouthed as his eyes roved over the expanse of technology and Tony asked, “What’s it look like in there?”

Steve shook his head and allowed a self-depreciating smile as he answered with a helpless gesture, “It seems to run on some form of electricity.”

“Well, you’re not wrong,” he commented.

Tony gestured wordlessly to the remark to Phil’s reprimanding narrowing of eyes.

Natasha crouched in the dark of the piping and machinery, casting her eyes around her as she crept forward. A sheen of sweat shone on the skin of her face as she paused, body twitching as she heard the sound of a series of metal impacts not caused by her. She worked to quiet her breathing as she looked behind herself, mapping a pathway she could utilize to move to a more advantageous position as her eyes shifted while she tracked the noises of the Hulk’s movements. He grunted as he searched, Natasha’s calculating gaze taking in the behemoth form that stooped under the low ceiling as he swiveled to locate her.

The loud crash of bullets caused her to whip her head around, a couple of agents having appeared and holding their handguns to open fire on the Hulk, to little effect. He roared in anger and hurled a large piece of machinery at them, the tall construction skidding across the floor and slamming into one of the men while the other dived clear of the impact. At the distraction Natasha moved to another area, firearm readied in her hands and held to one side of her chest as she knelt with her back against a partition. Abruptly the metal behind her was ripped from above her head with a flurry of sparks from the now-exposed wires, and she hurriedly spun to sidle into another section as the creature continued his search with a huff of dissatisfaction at not capturing sight of her.

Bruce flinched at the close-call.

She glided carefully through the chamber, forced into an open area by the other’s position before the Hulk was beside her, barred only by the rows of piping as he bellowed in intimidation at her armed form. She quickly fired a shot into the pipe above his head, the oxygen misting down in his
eyes to his annoyance. As he thundered and looked up to simultaneously punch and head-butt the offending container of the stream she dashed away.

She limped as she ran, holstering her weapon to her thigh as she focused on compelling her injured limb to cooperate as she darted through a narrow passageway. The Hulk tore the edges of the isle with the sides of his figure with his momentum as he chased after her, Natasha glancing back only once to take notice of his approach before attempting to hasten her movements. He roared in pursuit as his head crashed through the glass above and his arms easily severed the piping and equipment creating the sides of the passage, bright flashes thrown from the ruined devices and glinting off all of the metal debris left in his wake.

Natasha used the frame in front of her to propel herself forward, but the Hulk’s massive stride gained on her in an explosion of sparks and crashing wreckage that echoed his heavy footfalls. He drew behind her and managed to catch her side with the swing of an arm as he ran, her body thrown from the narrow channel and across the revealed space into the middle of a wall.

“Sorry,” Bruce responded immediately, Natasha’s gaze discerning before she dismissed him with a wave.

She crashed to the ground with a cry, his motion carrying him into the wall in front of him as he grunted, immediately recovering with a growl as he clenched his fists and flexed the pectorals across his chest, snarling down at her. She gasped and groaned as she moved herself to sit up with widened eyes as he stepped forward, rumbling with eyebrows furrowed as he raised a hand to hit her.

Suddenly, a figure flew into the Hulk’s side and threw the two through the metal panelling separating the Helicarrier’s internal systems from the space for vehicle holdings. A dozen mechanics were stunned at the ensuing roll by both Thor and the Hulk across the area before they began to frantically exit. The god’s hair was damp with sweat and beginning to curl as he started to lift himself from the tarmac coating the floor, his motions slowing in caution when he lifted his head and absorbed the fully illuminated sight of the creature that had climbed to its feet before him. Natasha breathed heavily from her distant position on the floor as she blinked in disbelief.

“Good timing,” Clint commended to Thor’s strained smile at the nerve-wracking conflicts shown on screen.

The Hulk clenched his fists and sidestepped heavily in the beginnings of circling his new opponent before glowering and roaring down at the blond. Thor settled his weight and curled his hands into fists as well as he shifted in preparation of the brawl, swiftly dodging the wild punch the other swung at his head. He ducked beneath the backhanded swing also as the Hulk righted himself, landing a strong punch to the creature’s jaw that flung him around in a spin. The Hulk growled as he threw another punch that was avoided before decisively slamming his fist downward onto the god.

Thor held the force of the arm suspended above him with his own forearm as his torso craned backwards at the effort, his other arm joining the defense as the Hulk grit his teeth and deepened his lunge so to increase the downward force of his strike. “We’re not your enemies, Banner,” Thor managed before imploring, “Try to think.”

Loki raised his eyebrows slightly at the command, his own words of counsel echoing in his head: “Thor, stop and think.” And the reply: “Know your place, brother.”

The Hulk raised his arm to the other’s following of the contact as he stood under the limb, and then he punched Thor in the face and sent him flying across the room and through a couple containers
of spare parts.

Yes, the fallen god thought the parallel accurate.

A long metal beam was blasted from the smoldering side of the aircraft, another piece of the framework peeking from the hole before that too was thrown with the whir of a repulsor. Iron Man soared through the opening to land at the edge of the damaged turbines to Steve’s ‘Okay, the relays are intact!’ echoing through his earpiece as he examined the metal obstructing the engine’s workings. “What’s our next move?” the soldier asked.

“Even if I clear the rotors, this thing won’t reengage without a jump,” Tony explained at the analysis inside his helmet. “I’m gonna have to get in there and push.”

“Well if that thing gets up to speed you’ll get shredded,” Steve warned.

“That stator control unit can reverse the polarity long enough to disengage maglev and-”

“Speak English!”

Tony tilted his head in exasperation before he started, “You see that red lever?” Steve turned to the wall he had entered through and spotted the object as Tony informed, “It’ll slow the rotors down long enough for me to get out. Stand by it – wait for my word.” Steve leaped to the lever’s side obediently to await the order.

“So you two can work together,” Phil remarked.

“What- no,” Tony instantly argued. “Don’t start pairing us up for anything.”

Thor tumbled to the ground to the reverberation of the Hulk’s yells, lifting himself to one knee as he panted. He raised a hand to catch the drop of blood that began to fall from one of his nostrils, gaping at the smear on his finger before he savagely grinned-

“That’s the ‘It’s on!’ face,” Tony deduced with a nod.

-and outstretched his arm to the side. He remained in silence as the creature’s wordless exclamations drew closer, and then Mjolnir flew through the wall and crates at his side to be grasped firmly by his hand just as the Hulk leapt to the space behind him.

He jumped to his feet with hammer in hand as the Hulk started to throw a punch that was dismissed as Mjolnir solidly slammed into his jaw. He crashed into the plane behind him and the aircraft skid across the area, the Hulk lifting himself from the bent metal at his back with a shake of his head. His tense muscles then began to tremble as he flexed and growled, turning to rip the wing off the craft and hurl it towards the god who immediately slid on his knees to lean backwards and slip under the makeshift projectile. He then regained his feet and threw Mjolnir with a yell, the Hulk catching it in hand and being pulled backwards with the throw as the hammer soared through the air.

The Hulk lay on his back and moved to roll to his feet before the action was forcefully aborted by the arm pinned under Mjolnir.

“Useful,” Bruce murmured.

He jerked the arm again to no movement and growled as he stood over it and tugged with his full strength. His feet cracked the material of the flooring beneath him as he strained his muscles with a roar, then his head turned to the side at the other’s approach for Thor to kick him in the face and
cause him to stumble back. The god easily grasped Mjolnir’s handle and swung himself onto the
Hulk’s back, his hammer held between his hands in front of his neck so to anchor him as the
creature bellowed and thrashed.

“How big are the things you normally fight?” Tony questioned. “I only ask ’cause you’re taking on
Jolly Green easily.”

“Many of the beasts of the Realms are as large as he, or greater,” Thor answered. “And truthfully I
would rather face any one of them than something smaller.”

“Yeah? Adrenaline rush?”

Loki rolled his eyes at the blond’s confusion and commented idly, “Most of the smaller animals
are lethally poisonous.”

“We need full evac on the lower hanger bay.” Fury instructed as he analyzed an image of the
aircraft on one of his control panels. Hill nodded and strode to exit the bridge, motioning others to
follow her before pausing at a small cylindrical device thrown to roll towards her and shouting in
alarm, ‘Grenade!’ It exploded just as she turned and leapt away, another agent lifting her to hurl
her over the rail and further from the explosion as the blast destroyed a section of the control
center.

Hill landed roughly on the lower level as Fury aimed his handgun, moving swiftly to the side so as
to not be in the direct line of fire of those entering. Two armed ‘agents’ walked cautiously through
the haze of smoke, the Director allowing the first past his unseen position by the door before
grabbing the barrel of the gun of the second with his free hand and hitting him across the face
with his own firearm before shooting the other in the chest, who had turned at the sound.

He intended to throw the first to the floor but the man maintained his hold on his weapon as the
other approached, so he hit the second across the face with his gun as well, sending him the
ground, before kicking the first in the chest and forcing him to the floor. A third entered the space
to Fury’s ducking of expected fire, but the male was shot by Hill, who had regained her feet and
drawn her weapon. A gash was present above one of her eyebrows, the blood smeared and
trickling thickly over her temple as she exhaled.

“We’ve got a perimeter breech,” an agent reported over the PA system as Phil marched to the
armoury. “Hostiles are in SHIELD gear.” He approached the door to press his thumb into the
print scanner before leaning forward slightly to allow the retinal scanner a reading of his iris.
“Call-outs at every junction.” The lower light of the panel flashed green as the door unlocked and
slid open.

Mobile shelving was thrown and tiling splintered as the Hulk burst through a floor, Thor flung
from his back at the eruption through the level above. He landed on his back empty handed as he
winced from the throw, before the Hulk grabbed him by the shoulders and wrenched him up.

“We have the Hulk and Thor on Research Level 4,” the PA system announced as Fury and Hill
knelt and fired bullets at those encroaching on the bridge. “Levels 2 and 3 are dark.”

“Sir, the Hulk will tear this place apart!” Hill shouted as she turned to face the Director for a
moment before returning her attention onto her targets.

“Get his attention,” he commanded as he felled an opponent.

She slung herself from the line of fire as she turned from the fight and crouched, relaying through
her headset, “Escort 6-0, proceed to Wishbone and engage hostile.”

Outside the Helicarrier a jet circled the larger aircraft to Hill’s suggestion of ‘Don’t get too close.’ “Copy,” the pilot responded as he steered the plane around a protrusion in order to hover between it and another and draw closer to the glass panelling through which displayed three of the floors. He flipped the visor of his helmet upwards to view more clearly the view of the Hulk, having lifted him over his head, slamming Thor into the ground. “Target acquired.”

The Hulk encircled the god’s torso with the fingers of one hand to throw him across the room with a yell, Thor crashing past a monitor before landing on his back with a pained wince on the various debris and shattered glass. The Hulk idly shoved a piece of machinery from his path as he stomped towards his fallen form. The pilot declared, “Target engaged,” from his position and held down the red trigger of the controlling joystick.

At the flurry of bullets impacting his back, the Hulk paused in his forward movement and turned with a confused grunt; the glass of the window pane through which the barrage entered fell to pieces at the onslaught as he lifted a hand to shield his face from the small projectiles. Thor manoeuvred himself into a crouch behind the large piece of debris that was protecting him before vaulting to the other side of the room and lying on the floor beside his hammer, curling his legs to his chest and guarding his head with his arms as bullets flew over him.

The shots emitted flashes of light as they impacted the Hulk’s skin, some of the repeated hits charring the green into smears of brown as he roared in anger. He ran to the open space that had been a window and leapt over the air separating him from his opponent as the pilot panicked, ‘Target angry, target angry!’ The Hulk soared before landing heavily on the nose of the jet, the agent’s eyes wide as the creature dented the metal with his fingers as he moved towards him before his grip slid over the glass of the cockpit and he landed on the back. The male craned his head over his shoulder to watch as the Hulk began to reach into the plane and rip out handfuls of the wiring and piping that kept the machine airborne.

Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose as he steadied his breathing, petrified gaze drawn inescapably to the scene presented before him: the Other Guy’s actions.

Streaks of smoke fell with the torn parts as sparks danced in the midst of the rent metal panelling, the jet spiralling downward as it lost connections between functions and a wing flew off. The Hulk grunted as he worked, the pilot pulling the lever between his legs and ejecting his seat from the damaged craft. As the glass covering was blown away the Hulk raised an arm and caught the back of the chair as it was thrown upward-

Bruce held his breath-

-swinging the object around with a scream before hurling it away. The parachute released in the distance-

-and released it slowly.

-as the plane continued to fall through the air before finally exploding, the Hulk’s wounded groan echoing as he was flung through the sky.

His posture gradually loosened at the end of his alter ego’s interactions, his memories of the rest of his actions cohesive within his mind.

Tony stood in the suit with an arm outstretched, the bright red laser emitting from the back of his fist slicing through the piece of wreckage that was obstructing the turbines. When the beam ended
he discharged the small device from his hand and jumped forward, thrusters activating to carry him above the debris before he dropped and slammed his boots onto the metal. The two segments he had made snapped apart and fell through the engine to fall away and separate as they fluttered through the air, his thrusters reengaging to lift him back to the turbines.

Two armed ‘agents’ strode through the doorway to the engine, Steve watching them in puzzlement at their ready weaponry from above. One pulled out a grenade and threw it towards the engine to the Captain’s instant leap across the space to bat the object below the Helicarrier, where it exploded in midair to the other’s gaze. Steve jumped briefly onto a few metal bars before swinging down to punch the man in the head as the other aimed his weapon only to have it kicked into the air and himself thrown backwards as the weapon landed on the level above.

The first leapt to his feet to throw a punch that was ducked under before Steve grabbed him by the nape of the neck and hurled him off the edge of the craft to scream as he fell through the clouds. He turned back to find that the other male had found another automatic gun and had returned to open fire at him. He crouched and grasped a piece of metal to whip at the other to his dodge back into the hallway before he jumped up to leap over the rail of the upper level and grab the abandoned gun.

The two shot at each other sporadically as the man used the sides of the hall to hide behind and Steve manoeuvered himself along the upper grating to stand beside the red lever he had initially been at.

Fury shot another ‘agent’ to his pained yell and fall as he muttered, “They’re not getting through here, so what the hell-” His wondering was cut off by Clint firing an explosive arrow from his perched position-

Clint pursed his lips and clenched his fists from where his arms were crossed over his chest. -the blast to one side of the bridge throwing agents over the rails to land hard on the floor. Another explosion tore through the far side of the bridge as Clint readied a third arrow, Fury turning and shooting at the assassin as the specialty shaft flew to the controlling consoles and Clint ducked away from the area. The arrowhead stretched into three divisions and long pins struck from each to connect to one of the monitor’s outlets.

All of the computer screens of the row streaked and produced static before powering down, one of the Director’s control panels beeping as the green image of the Helicarrier rotated to alert in red that there was a malfunction, ‘ENGINE 1 POWER LOSS’. The colossal craft began to tilt as the turbines slowed and halted, Fury holding his lowered firearm in both hands as he gazed with open mouth out the windows. “Engine one is now in shut-down,” an agent reported over the PA.

The ship creaked as her balance was upset, unsecured articles tumbling to fall from the exposed tarmac as inside agents were clamouring to right themselves and pull themselves in front of their monitors. ‘We are in an uncontrolled descent,’ was announced over the speakers as another agent proclaimed, “Sir, we’ve lost all power to engine one.”

Natasha sat with her injured leg pulled to her chest as she trembled, Fury’s voice reporting through her earpiece, “It’s Barton – he took out our systems. He’s headed for the detention level.” She composed her unease as he asked, “Does anybody copy?”

“This is Agent Romanoff,” she answered as she panted softly, her fingers on the communication device. “I copy.” She bit her lip as she scrambled to her feet.

Clint exchanged a glance with her at the thought of the ensuing encounter.
Iron Man flew between the long wings of the engine and placed the palms of his hands against one as Fury informed, “Stark, we’re losing altitude.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” he grunted as he increased the power diverted to his thrusters. The turbine began to move accordingly, the damaged end grating along the concave side to shots of sparks and tearing metal. All of the attached wings began to turn in tandem at Tony’s flight.

Steve continued to fire shots at the ‘agent’ opposing him, the man throwing himself to the wall beside and concealing himself from the Captain’s sight periodically. He returned fire that Steve was forced to raise an arm to shield his face from as the bullets impacted the metal behind his head, his steps stumbling backwards until the end of the grating under his feet weakened and he fell from the platform, dropping his gun. He struggled to hastily grab onto one of the pipes beside him as he was falling, but ultimately was only able to grasp hold of a long wire that stretched taut in the fingers of the red glove of his uniform. Steve dangled in the air with grit teeth and furrowed brow as he cast his eyes up to the platform he had fallen from.

Tony cast his eyes briefly to the supersoldier in recognition of the reasoning for the resultant experienced delay.

Thor ran through a hall and turned in front of a corpse of a SHIELD agent lying on the floor, bracing himself against the open doorway that should have been secured by the panel attached to its side, Mjolnir in hand. At the sight of the door enclosing Loki’s cage siding open, he thundered, “No!” as he charged forward. He leapt at Loki as his form crouched in anticipation of the impact only for the dark god’s figure to shimmer as Thor flew through it to land on his front in the cell and fade as the glass shut behind him. He clambered to his feet to wildly gaze at his surroundings with a wide stance as Loki observed him from the outside, hands behind his back and head tilted in consideration.

“Are you ever not going to fall for that?” the Trickster asked rhetorically, an agent of his moving from the control panel to exit the chamber.

Clint ducked under a support beam as he marched through the depths of the aircraft, boots dully sounding at his purposeful stride over the metal flooring, bow gripped in his right hand and soft quiver full of arrows slung across his back. An echo began to sound the shadow of another pair of footsteps, and he spun around as he drew a shaft, knocked it, and pulled taut the drawstring only for Natasha to grasp the arms of the bow with both of her hands and halt the weapon’s swing. The arrow fired over her shoulder as she twisted the bow so to force Clint to turn away and his arm behind his back, but he did not release his hold on the weapon and threw out his left elbow to uppercut her jaw as he whirled around to face her, gripping his bow in both hands and swiping downwards as she leapt back.

She braced her hands on the flooring as she threw a leg upwards to kick him in the chest, his steps backward allowing her to grip the low rail and slide underneath it and to the other side of the large cylindrical containers flanking the isle Clint stood upon. He leaned down to track her movements for her to slide back onto the path behind him, kicking him with a grunt at a collar bone as he turned. He drew another arrow as he slid back to knock and fire, the shot missing again as she grabbed a pole with both hands and swung herself into the air and onto the adjacent flooring. He leapt in front of her and swung his bow twice at her head to her avoidance before the next swing was blocked by her forearm and the last by both drawn in front of her face. He attempted to force the weapon forward with a yell only for her to maintain her guard, and then tried to move away to her resistance as Natasha had grabbed onto the bowstring. He used the momentum to draw himself back to her and her fists slammed into her forehead as she grunted at the hit. They
struggled with the weapon before Clint managed to shove her against the railing to her back arching in pain, before she grit her teeth, thrust a knee up into his gut, and backhanded his jaw with a fist.

She spun away with his bow held across her shoulders as he knelt on one knee and drew a knife from his boot, twirling it comfortably in hand before grasping the handle firmly.

Thor slammed Mjolnir into the fortified glass of the cage with a yell, the glass cracking and causing bulky hydraulic arms to grasp onto the sides of the enclosure. He panted as he glanced from side to side at the reaction, Loki’s eyes wide and mouth open as his hands hovered away from his sides in surprise.

A grin stretched his mouth abruptly in revelation as he laughed, turning and beginning to giddily saunter closer to the control panel. “The humans think us immortal,” Loki stated. “Should we test that?”

He leaned over the buttons before pausing at a grunt, his agent falling forward onto the floor to reveal Phil with a hefty gun in hand. “Move away please,” he commanded.

The atmosphere of the room was tense in trepidation, introduced by the agent’s entrance and the dreaded outcome; said agent’s presence amongst them didn’t lessen the concern.

Loki stepped back from the board with his hands hesitantly raised, Thor casting his eyes between the two as Phil began to walk closer as he asked, “You like this?” gesturing with the device held in hand. “We started working on the prototype after you sent the Destroyer. Even I don’t know what it does.” He flipped a switch on the side and a hum emitted from the machine as an orange glow began to climb from the depths of its barrel. “You wanna find out?”

The tip of a blade suddenly pierced through his chest, Loki revealed behind him with the scepter in hand having gored the agent’s torso as Thor shrieked, “No!” as he pounded a palm against the glass that quickly turned into a fist. Phil groaned as he slipped from the end of the weapon to the floor, the image of the dark god that had been in front of him disintegrating. Thor breathed heavily as he stared, Phil panting as he sat slouched against the wall, legs spread and gun fallen across his lap as blood seeped through the material of his shirt.

Loki walked past, lips quirked to edge an open-mouthed smile as he breathed laboriously while gesturing weakly to the bloodied end of his scepter.

“You know what- No,” Clint growled as he sprang in the Trickster’s direction once again, Natasha’s stand before him bodily preventing his attack.

Loki hummed in interest as to the effect of the lone agent’s supposed demise on the team, leaning back nonchalantly in his seat as he clearly isolated five individuals closely connected to the unassuming man.

“Just let me shoot him,” Clint beseeched. “You know he deserves it.”

“He’s a resource-” Natasha countered.

“Honestly,” Loki interrupted with a roll of his eyes, “weren’t you all aware of these events?”

“Sorry we have feelings, your Highness,” Tony snarled.

“What were you expecting from this scene?” Loki retorted. “You knew it was imminent. And besides, he is alive and well right there.” He pointed at the agent.
“I am,” Phil confirmed needlessly. “We’re watching this for additional insight, which we’re receiving. You were all fully aware of Loki’s actions during the invasion – we’re working past that, now that he is officially affiliated with SHIELD.”

“But he just stabbed you,” Tony argued. “With a smile.”

“Did you expect me to weep?”

“Maybe I expected something while you were watching it.”

“What, pray tell? Regret? Sentiment?” Loki sneered. “It was a war.”

“That you claim to have been forced into.”

“What effect does that have on this? I was in the middle of something, and he was in my way.”

“Your defense isn’t helping.”

“What need have I to justify my actions to you?”

“What’s that mean?” Tony snarled as he clenched his fists under the surface of the table. “You don’t feel you’re accountable to anyone?”

“Not to any mortal,” he respondedbitingly. “Nevermind one so damaged.”

Tony glowered for a moment in silence, before he slowly drawled in rebuttal, “You’re a callous monster.”

All sound and minute motion was swept from the room at the utterance, forms immobilized, breath held, and eyes widened at the jab. Loki’s expression had instantaneously closed off as he suppressed any reaction to the term, standing carefully and turning to exit the room, door shutting softly behind him.

“Tony!” Steve instantly admonished, appalled, as Phil massaged his temples.

“I know,” he sighed as he let his head fall to the table, the uncompromising knowledge of having crossed a line settling across his shoulders.

“He’s an ally,” Phil reiterated. “Can’t you weigh the benefits over his actions enough to at least keep your thoughts to yourself and not alienate him?”

“You don’t get it – how it was when you died,” Tony muttered in excuse.

“It’s what drew us together,” Steve explained as he cast his eyes to the ground. “The loss.”

Phil took a second to compose himself at the confession from the Captain before beginning, “Though I’m flattered-”

“Play nice,” Natasha finished, nodding.

“I think it would be much easier if my brother were forthright about how he was treated at the Chitauri’s hands,” Thor admitted with a regretful sigh.

“Yeah, he’s not fighting for his case at all,” Clint inserted.

“The lack of manipulation worries me,” Thor added. “That he is either too weak or too distracted to
make any attempt at controlling our relations with him shows clearly his fear and uncertainty in all
of this-"

Suddenly a blaring alarm resonated throughout the floor, Jarvis relating hastily, “There are Chitauri
on the 92nd floor, sir.”

“Shit!” Tony yelled as they all leapt from their positions and out of the space, Thor spinning
Mjolnir in hand and tearing straight through the ceiling to the floors above. “Kill them!” he ordered
as the remaining six ran through the rooms and into the elevator, Bruce hesitating outside the doors
with his pupils ringed in green. Tony yanked him bodily into the lift as Natasha and Phil drew their
firearms, Clint drawing a couple of knives from his boots.

“I have taken the liberty, sir,” the AI reported, “but I’m afraid-”

“You’re afraid of nothing!” Tony snapped as he received a gun from Natasha. “Damn it, we leave
him for a second…” At Bruce’s gritted teeth he assured, “This ride’ll be like two seconds, then
you can explode, alright?”

“Sir-” Jarvis tried again only to abort his statement as the six arrived at Bruce and Loki’s floor.

They found Thor staring listlessly at his surroundings, a charred Chitauri body and three others
sprawled brokenly and riddled with holes at his feet. A wide drag of crimson blood stained the
beige carpet, the trail abruptly ending unnaturally straight.

“And that blood’s from…?” Phil asked, rather unnecessarily, as they stepped into the common.

“The Sorcerer, Agent.”

“Fuck,” Tony cursed.
Chapter Summary

Regretting their lapse in judgement, the Avengers work to rescue Loki from the Other and the consequences of his failure during the invasion. Loki vows that this encounter won’t be a repeat of his past suffering.

“What the hell happened?” Tony interrogated with a frustrated gesticulation of the firearm still in hand, Phil casually confiscating the small weapon from his hold. Clint and Natasha had warily crept closer to the alien bodies strewn across the floor as Steve moved to Thor’s side with a frown in support of the god’s feelings of helplessness. Bruce closed his eyes and focused on monitoring his breathing, calming the firm pressure at the edge of his consciousness that was envisioned in a rolling tide of green.

“They took him,” Thor muttered in devastation, before thundering, “We were supposed to protect him!” He spun to face Phil and demanded, “He was an ally comforted with secure refuge by you – how could this have happened?!”

“We let our guards down,” Clint answered as he crouched beside the broad smear of darkening blood, staring for a moment at the thought of the obligatory injury that had to have delivered it before averting his gaze to the end of the trail. He traced the line of termination with a middle finger and a perplexed frown.

“We got distracted,” Natasha continued, eyes on the back of her partner.

“Surveillance footage,” Tony ordered to Jarvis’ ‘Yes, sir,’ as he strode to stand in front of the large television, Phil ushering the others without objection to the same area. None seized the seats available, remaining on their feet in front of the luxurious furniture as they affixed their attention to the screen. The AI took the liberty of choosing one camera lens instead of displaying the footage of the several that covered the space, enlarging and enhancing the video for their scrutiny.

Loki was shown exiting the elevator unhurriedly, a furious scowl twisting his mouth at the thoughts triggered by the hostile interaction he had escaped from as well as directed at one of the unobtrusive cameras in the ceiling at the notion of being constantly watched. He paused in the common before moving to his half of the floor, brows furrowed as he halted once again before the entrance.

Abruptly he spun, bright flames leaping from his palms as he flung out his arms and lashing towards the grey-skinned figure that had stepped through the rift in space in the center of the room. The first of the Chitauri screeched at the fire that clung to him and burned through his flesh, the metal incorporated into his body searing and warping at the heat of the magical fire. Sleek machine guns slid out from underneath the panelling of the ceiling to swivel and open fire on the intruder even as he thrashed and was shoved to the side to the influx of three other aliens through the portal. Loki darted forward in avoidance of the beams shot from their staves and grabbed one of them by the throat to bodily throw him across the room to the rain of one of Jarvis’ automatic weapon’s rounds.

The god ducked under the swing of a metal shaft as the other moved to shoot him, twisting to kick
the weapon from his hands before using his position to propel his other leg’s shin to catch the alien in the jaw, the body tossed backwards to lie crumpled on the floor with his head unnaturally forced to the side. Loki rolled to his feet from the last opponent as he sprang forward, dodging the array of shots fired by the supervising AI as he strove to spear Loki with his weapon. The god weaved to avoid the jabs before ducking under an arm and grasping a wrist to twist it sharply with a crack, the alien releasing his staff with a squeal as Loki grabbed his other hand, placed a foot on the center of his back, and wrenched his two arms back and up behind his head. Jarvis’s decisive bullets killed him and silenced the shrill cries prompted by his limbs’ dislocation before his corpse was thrown to the floor.

Realizing his back was to the portal, Loki whirled around with widened eyes to the tip of a staff slicing forward and through the side of his head. He pitched back at the blow, feet thrown over the threshold of the tear in space as he stared, dazed, up at the ceiling, blood pouring over his right temple and through his hair along the depth of the wound. The persistent AI fired into the fissure of swirling black, navy, and indigo to distant screeching, yet the fallen god was nonetheless seized by an ankle and dragged through the portal to its closure following the passage of his upturned hands.

“Run an analysis on that injury, J,” Tony requested softly.

“And bring up all of our data on his magical core,” Bruce added.

Thor’s wretched voice rumbled, ‘I’ve failed him – again,’ to Steve’s insistent, ‘Not yet we haven’t.’ He rested a hand on the other blond’s shoulder as his resolute gaze turned to Phil. “Make it all mobile,” the agent commanded of the two scientists, pulling his cellphone out of his pocket. “This is SHIELD’s concern also – we’re taking this to Director Fury.”

There were streaks- stretched stars – colours that spun and smeared and swirled until separated by darkness. Tears that showed the inky void of nothing – lacking in substance even as it surrounded and suffocated and drew- took- stole everything and anything. Who was he? What was he? He had no ears for sound, no eyes for sight – did he have a body? Was he different- no, he was just another colour- star- magic. Pulled and whipped around… around… around…

Wind – a hurricane, stealing all sense of touch as he grappled because- Magic. He was magic, wasn’t he? He remembered warmth- Fire. He was fire. Magic. Chaos? No, disorder – a realm-spectrum. Chaos, order; luck, chance, fortune… Magic. Change- shift? Shifter – and fire. He remembered fire…

And thunder? Bright, loud… Falling, falling, falling…

He was not colour, he was shadow- Cast by what? Blinding branches stretched above and through and were everything. Who he was, where he had been – where he was going? He reached- he had no arms, hands, or fingers. But still he was drawn, and he pushed, and pulled – he should have arms! Paws, claws, wings… He wound and weaved and finally, blindly swam between and through the branches. All was colour and dark and sound and silence as they carried him, animals and plants and instinct and peace – everything and nothing.

As his eyes fluttered open he wondered how much time had passed. How long had he been separated from sensation – he had a body now. He’d had one before, too – for centuries. Growing, training, fighting – interacting with others. A brother, and a mother and father. A father – no, a liar. A brother… Loud, strong. Cruel.

Cracked rocks scraped through the material over his knees and the tops of his boots as he was
hauled over the rough ground, upper body suspended by the hold of his arms on either side. He blinked slowly to clear his vision, the fringe of his peripheral capturing a monolithic curved ship docked at the dark asteroid whose sharp protrusions he was being dragged around. He was tossed to the ground to his carriers’ hissing and clicking, another voice responding, “He will do nicely.”

Lifted unceremoniously and hung over a shoulder inset with fragments of metal, he blinked in confusion at the distance between his consciousness and his body. He attempted to rub his fingers together, and though with concentrated effort and several tries he managed to, his impression of the touch was faint. Magic – he was magic, but he was weak. His core anchored him to this form, and was working to become immersed again. He recalled sharp sight and the branches of Yggdrasil, incantations and runes, auras and the innate magic of the earth and air and elements. That was who he was.

He was flipped onto the ground once again, and as he stared up at the stars he wondered at his slowly recovering magic. He had never had such a regression of power through all of his studying, and he had pushed the boundaries of his magical exhaustion to its limit a few times. This was different. Being submerged in the plane between realms, of magic and the threads of the universe, forced his mind and core to act independent of any physical attachment. Whereas while channeling magic through his body, afterwards his body has to cope with the strain of the actions, now his mind and magic have to assimilate to the body after having tired themselves independently.

He was violently pulled from his thoughts after the snapping of a restraint around his ankle, howling in pain as his idle mind was slammed into his body. Every bone was splintered and each muscle torn, and his magic was no comfort. He felt it confined to his core and his limbs ached in agony as he screamed at the absence of power he was accustomed to feel flowing through his veins. Senseless in his anguish he sobbed as he was grabbed and once again dragged over the coarse terrain, gasping as he was thrown into an enclosed space and locked in the dark.

As Loki gazed up at the sprinkling of stars in the expanse of space overhead, feeling the trail of his back over familiar shards of mineral, he suppressed the throbbing emitting from his head and lashed out with the foot not grasped to kick the alien towing him off the edge of the asteroid. He swiftly scrambled to his feet and turned to spring in the direction of the portal that no longer existed only for the surrounding Chitauri to leap and seize him, binding his arms tightly behind his back and tying his ankles together with a thick rope. He furrowed his brows and growled, but otherwise did not struggle, his hasty action from the ground causing nausea that he resisted with grit teeth.

He breathed deeply through his nose and closed his eyes for a moment as he was cast to the ground and dragged, opening his eyes again to glower as he withstood the urge to free himself from the weak bonds. His veins and core thrummed with magic, and he directed a trickle to heal his head injury as he waited to slaughter he who had sought to break him.

“I hadn’t thought we’d be fighting for him so soon,” Hill remarked with her arms crossed over her chest as Fury rubbed his temples.

“Is he even alive?” the irritated Director asked.

The Avengers were suited up and gathered in one of the Helicarrier’s labs, Tony and Bruce compiling and sifting through data while the others tried not to shift restlessly in wait. Thor replied, “That wound alone would not have finished him – even without the aid of his magic, however weak it may still be.” He continued in distress, “I fear what plans they have for him.”
“Do you have a way to find him?”

“Sir, would the Council approve of immediate action?” she doubted.

“We’re acting under the terms of the contract,” Fury insisted, his firm gaze focused on Thor’s coiled musculature, “we’ll be able to defend it after. But we need to move now for any chance of saving him.”

“Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner have done a few scans of Loki’s magic, and believe they have a rough signature they’ll be able to follow,” Phil answered.

“Once I have an essence to follow I will be able to find my brother and transport to him,” Thor vowed.

“-with us,” Clint amended.

“Wouldn’t that depend on where he is?” Steve inquired.

“Yes,” Bruce answered. “If he was taken into space then it’d be quicker to just send Thor than to gear up in space suits and practice fighting with a different gravitational pull. We’d be more of a hindrance than a help.”

“I’m going too,” Tony inserted, faceplate upturned. “First thing I did with repairs on the suit was vacuum seal it and make room for some oxygen tanks. And gravity’s got nothing on me – just have to adjust the power levels of the thrusters once I’m there,” he asserted, tapping the heavy toe of one of his boots on the flooring.

“We don’t know how many Chitauri survived and are holding him,” Steve said with furrowed brows, “or if the Other, or Thanos, is there too. Sending only the two of you doesn’t seem too smart.”

“We’re like, the powerhouses of the team,” Tony retorted, “aside from Big Green.”

“If there are numerous enemies that it appears we cannot win against, then I would not risk my brother or Friend Tony’s wellbeing,” Thor asserted. “We would be able to escape quickly with the Tesseract.”

Tony rolled his eyes but agreed.

“What are you going to use to pull you back?” Selvig questioned as he gingerly lifted the Cube with a pair of metal tongs and inserted her into the wide glass cylinder lain on one of the worktables. On either end was an intricate handle, one cocked perpendicular to the other that, when righted, would initiate the power required for travel. He had been assigned to direct the scientists with the task of harnessing the Tesseract’s power, in order to return the gods to their realm, by S.H.I.E.L.D as soon as the battle had ended. With his previous work on the subject and the knowledge that had been granted to him by the Cube herself, he had completed the device within two days.

“We can use the scepter,” Tony responded.

“Yes, the gem radiates sufficient power for me to locate and for us to return,” Thor confirmed.

“Here,” Bruce called. “I think we’ve got it. Everyone move to one side.”

Once the center of the space was cleared, Tony and Bruce projected a translucent hologram of Loki into the area and configured the settings of the weaponry and security features of the room to aim
at the image. They repeatedly fired specific beams and lasers at their lowest powers to collide within the copy for a few moments, on angles that minimized the backlash, before pausing to monitor the results. The thermal and ultraviolet readings of the heat signature they had manufactured were slightly stronger than Loki’s magical signature, but it was fading quickly.

“Alright – Thor, does this work?” Bruce asked.

The Thunderer stepped closer to the projection that visually appeared to not have been affected by the assault of artillery, and tilted his head in consideration with Mjolnir hefted at his side. Erik Selvig handed the Tesseract’s vessel to Tony as his faceplate secured itself at the front of his helmet and he marched around to the god, and Thor incorporated the imprint of his brother’s magical signature into his mind.

“Do you remember, Asgardian, how I said you would wish for something as sweet as pain?” the Other hissed as he glared down at the Trickster forced to kneel in front of him.

“I recall something regarding Thanos’ vengeance upon me,” Loki replied casually.

He snarled and twisted his six fingers into the god’s dark hair to wrench his head back, rasping, “He has other goals to accomplish, heedless of all that I’ve sacrificed...”

“...you should confront him then-” He was flung to the ground at the Other’s ire.

“That would gain me nothing. It was you who failed – you who allowed my armies to be destroyed…” He paced slowly from side to side in front of him as he righted himself back to his knees. “With your magic locked within you, you have no defence against us – and those mortals would never volunteer to save you.”

Loki was not relying on any rescue attempt, even with the bind of the contract laid on SHIELD. He had possession of his magic for this confrontation; he would not lose. He remained silent at the Other’s assumptions.

“It was very fortunate when a pathway was opened to your location. Not for the… pity evoked at your fall, but for the oppourtunity presented.” Loki narrowed his eyes as he gloated, “How simple it was to copy their intent and send information on the invasion. I had been connected to you throughout the whole thing, after all.”

I had thought the results seemed to be radically different from revisiting the events compared to whatever previous images they had viewed... “You sought to reverse the effects of the first disc,” Loki concluded.

“It was an unwanted development,” the Other sneered. “This allowed for strife to breed and for you to be separated from them for long enough to bring you back.”

“Quite a bit of chance involved,” the god remarked. “Ample reason for your plans collapsing around you.”

“And what has failed here?” he humoured as he bared his teeth.

“You’ve once again underestimated the power of circumstance, of change-” The bonds at his joints vaporized as Loki lunged forward and to his feet, a long, slim, curved sword materializing and grasped in hand so to gore through the Other’s abdomen. His scream was high-pitched and enraged before it was cut off with a choke to the Trickster’s free hand gripping his throat as he finished with a snarl, “-of me.”
He allowed his magic to seep from his pores and into the Other’s muscles as a paralytic to halt the arising struggle as the surrounding Chitauri moved to leap at him, releasing his grasp on his throat as he wrenched his blade from him and allowing his rigid body to fall to the ground. Loki swiftly swung his weapon down to the surface at his feet, the ground cracking as his magic sliced along the length of the blade and caused the earth to spear outwards. The asteroid rocked as the spiked projections shot out from underground to either side of him and slammed into the advancing forces, a bright flash of azure flaring in the distance in his peripheral to light the faces of the stilled rocks and the Chitauri bodies that were being flung away.

Recognizing the signature of Mjolnir and her wielder, as well as that of the Tesseract, the dark god did not pause in his movements as he pressed the advantage of the expected recovery time from his widespread attack and the momentary distraction of the arrival of his ‘rescue’ to seize the Other by his throat once again and haul him to his feet before him. The God of Fire spun the magic of his core to reign in the blaze of power he urged, inhaling deeply as he concentrated the force and urged fumes to blossom within his lungs before he opened his mouth wide and spewed flames over his tongue. The fire tore through the skin and tendons of the Other’s face, his agonized shrieking muffled quickly by the force of the element before silenced as both his throat and the entirety of his skull were incinerated.

The whir of repulsor blasts sounded through the outraged squeals of the remaining Chitauri, Iron Man using the stabilizing agents of his palms to knock them from the asteroid as Thor used his hammer to the same effect. Loki dropped the charred, headless grey corpse as his sword vanished from the grip of his fingers, panting as smoke issued from his mouth and nose. He wiped ineffectively at the dried blood along the side of his right eye and jaw from his healed head wound and began picking his way through the alien bodies and fractured slabs of rock to the other two fighters.

As Tony knocked out the last opponent with a punch and Thor called Mjolnir back from a throw, Loki arrived at their position to the blond’s distressed, “I’m so sorry, brother – we should have been there for you,” with a regretful gaze at the evidence of injury.

“It’s healed – don’t concern yourself,” he remarked dismissively. He glanced pointedly at the Tesseract’s container in hand and stated disbelievingly, “It doesn’t seem likely for the Director to permit her use. I hope you didn’t do anything rash to jeopardise my contract with SHIELD.”

A snort emitted through Tony’s helmet as he scoffed, “And risk being scolded by the Shadow Council? Nah – we’ll leave that for Fury. Besides, it was in the damn thing that we’ve got to protect you, so taking off before asking the entitled higher ups was really to maintain the sanctity of the agreement.”

“Oh of course,” Loki responded with a smirk.

“They are not all dead,” Thor observed as a few moved to stumble to their feet. Loki nodded in concurrence as he swivelled his stare to note the wounded and stirring bodies, stepping to the other god’s side and grasping the opposite handle of the device.

“How’s this going to work with three?” Tony wondered.

“Grab hold of both our wrists,” Loki instructed hurriedly, “thumb at the base of the palm.”

After he had complied, Thor twisted his end and the power of the Cube filled the cylinder. Waves of azure flooded through the glass and the limbs in contact before streaking to the ground below, swirling before moving upwards, absorbing their bodies, and rushing into the starred heavens with a bright flash.
When the three rematerialized in the Helicarrier’s lab, alongside a worktable that held the glowing scepter, the first utterance was Clint’s ‘That was fast.’ Steve approached and queried, “Did you get injured?” as Erik drew the Tesseract from them, the Captain guiding Loki by the upper arm to Bruce, who started to gently part the locks of hair before him to investigate the bloodied side of his head.

“I healed it,” Loki protested in confusion, stunned at the immediate attention. The scientist continued his examination of the petrified god until he had ascertained the fact for himself before noting the other’s widened eyes and taking a step back with a mumbled apology. Bruce flushed and rubbed his hands together, averting his eyes at the thought of scaring the god with his proximity after his ordeal. Loki furrowed his brows further in bewilderment.

“We are unharmed, my friends,” Thor announced with a triumphant grin.

“Yep,” Tony confirmed, the panels of his suit opening at the front for him to step out of the gold-titanium alloy encasing.

“Seemed easy enough,” Fury mused.


“Well, we didn’t really do much but chauffeur him,” Tony responded, explaining with bright eyes, “We landed to badass earthquakes that were throwing the Chitauri all over the place and our resident wiz-kid breathing fire into some guy’s face.”

All occupants of the room turned amazed stares onto Loki, who merely quirked an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest. Bruce asked in awe, “You can breathe fire?”

“Of course,” he replied. “Did you think I received the title ‘God of Fire’ for something other than my manipulation of the element?”

“It’s one thing to, like, move fire,” Tony countered, “which we haven’t covered and totally will, but another to BREATHE it. Did you have to heal the burnt tissue of your lungs and trachea?”

“No, there was no damage to me,” he answered. “Flame is my primary element, one that I have been training with for millennia – it’s instinctual now for the magic of my body to always warp the substance’s heat so to cause no damage to myself. But the coating of the interior of my lungs and throat is automatic to the production of fumes within and their prospective harm to me. They are then invulnerable to the flammable gases created, the plume igniting while exiting my mouth.”

“Show us!” Tony demanded. “No, wait- I want samples. We’ll do it back in my lab with J tracking everything-”

“Stark,” Fury interrupted with a glare before turning to address Loki. “We’ll need you to explain everything that happened.” With a jerk of his head he exited the room, the god, Agent Hill, and Phil following.

“So we’re just left here?” Tony asked incredulously, gaze searching for commiseration from his teammates before he pulled out his cellphone and muttered, “Screw that.”

“Tony,” Steve sighed as Erik departed from the space as well, with the Cube and the scepter, “Agent Coulson will fill us in.”

“Or we could listen in,” he retorted, hopping up onto one of the surfaces and pulling one of the
suspended monitors by the corner to hang in front of him.
Chapter Summary

After clarifying the Other’s actions and musing upon Thanos’ goals, the Avengers stumble upon additional footage surrounding the events that took place in New Mexico the previous year. Afterwards, Loki is returned to Stark Tower and the disc continues to play to subsequent revelations and magical queries.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Sit,” Fury ordered of the god once they had arrived in a small conference room. Loki seated himself in the chair indicated, the Director circling the length of the oval table to set himself across from him, Phil standing on his left and Hill on his right. “How did they grab you?”

“The Other had a connection to me through the scepter.”

“You weren’t even near it,” Hill interjected.

“The link can’t be severed that easily,” Loki responded. “He used it to watch the events of the invasion, as well as, he indicated, our actions afterwards. I assume the connection was much fainter, as I could no longer sense or access it. It was a mistake of mine, not to make use of my freed magic to explore the depths of my mind and ensure the lack of it.

“That was how he was able to open a portal to my location. He’s not powerful – there was only one oppourtunity to make use of the lingering echoes of the Tesseract that he still clung to. He sent the disc to serve as a distraction so to separate me from all others. Only then would my signature have been clear enough to pinpoint so he could make an effort to snatch me.”

“The Other sent the discs?” Phil questioned with a raised brow.

“Just the one regarding the invasion,” Loki clarified. “He said that the effects of the first, the contract with you as well as my proximity to the Avengers in Stark’s tower, were undesired developments to his wanted revenge upon me.”

“Is he still watching you?” Fury asked.

“No, I killed him,” he responded blithely. “A number of the Chitauri were also destroyed – the remaining few have no means to travel to attack here. The only outstanding foe connected to the events is Thanos.”

“Was he there?” Hill queried.

“No, he was not,” Loki answered with furrowed brows. “I fear what plans he has in motion – the Other mentioned that he had ‘other goals to accomplish’, which was why he wasn’t concerning himself with me.”

Fury hummed in absorption of the information as he leaned forward and propped his elbows up on the surface of the table, folding his hands under his chin in thought. His one eye glanced up after a
moment as he dismissed, “I expect a report on the whole thing – Agent Coulson will instruct you on the formatting. You can go.”

Loki nodded and stood, exiting the room to three watchful gazes. Agent Hill observed, “His temperament is different.”

Phil nodded in agreement and stated, “It was clear in the video that when the Avengers were gathered in the Helicarrier and started to argue, their dispositions were due to the orb in the scepter. Stark said that constant contact with the weapon might have affected Loki the same way.”

“Has it been confirmed that his magic was restrained during the invasion?” the Director questioned.

“Aside from his mentioning of it vaguely, no,” Phil admitted. “He’s also been purposefully avoiding or glossing over the details of his decrease in strength and progress of recovery.”

“If it was minor he seems the type to bluff being at full strength,” Hill commented.

“Exactly,” he concurred. “His determination to avoid it altogether shows his view of it as a weakness we can exploit – which indicates to me the severity of it.”

Fury nodded in agreement as he stood. “Well, I’ve got to deal with the Council. As you were.”

Loki took the time to locate an unoccupied, furnished bedroom and its adjoining bath to wash off the blood on his skin and in his hair before returning to the lab he had originally arrived in. He was unsure whether to transport himself directly back to the Tower or if the team had remained for Agent Coulson. At the sight of the six gathered around one of the computer screens, he raised an eyebrow and elected to enter soundlessly, sidling around behind them and peering over Clint’s shoulder with his head tilted.

He smirked at the group’s scrutiny of the footage of the room he had been questioned in, the Director dismissing the other two to speak to his superiors about the incident. Anthony closed the camera’s live feed and scrolled through the vast array of thumbnail depictions of the numerous surveillance measures of the airship as he remarked, “Maybe they keep records of his reporting to them. All we’ve got of the Council is what we were shown by the disc-”

“You didn’t think to investigate them before?” Loki asked, Clint flinching significantly at the nearness of his voice before he whirled around to face him. Thor had only turned his head, but the rest of the team had sharply turned bodily at the sound of his voice, Tony careening backwards off of his position on the worktable as he flailed.

He crashed into Bruce and they both landed on their backs on the floor, Tony propping his torso up on his elbows as he chastised, “Man with a heart condition here! And what if Bruce had gone all green, or Miss Trigger-Happy had shot you in the face?”

Bruce sighed and kicked Tony’s lower legs off his own as he climbed to his feet, assuring, “I’m fine,” automatically to the room at large as he grasped Tony’s outstretched hand and lifted him to his feet.

“Such instinctual hostility within your organization’s craft is foolish,” the Trickster countered, “though… preferable to your floundering and falling to the ground.”

“Maybe I used the shock as an excuse to pin Bruce to the floor,” Tony defended with a smirk.
Bruce rolled his eyes as Natasha stated, “You landed beside him – quite the unsuccessful pin from a playboy.”

“How about you help me practice then?” he suggested with a raised eyebrow.

Steve cleared his throat in discomfort at the innuendoes before interrupting, “The screen’s different,” with a finger pointed at the offset monitor.

Tony righted the touchscreen as he stated, ‘Must have touched something,’ studying the archives of video displayed before announcing, “It’s just the records.”

“Of me!” Thor exclaimed, several of the motionless clips depicting the blond god.

“They’ve got us all in neat little folders,” Tony perceived as he expanded the list of files and subfiles along the left of the screen before collapsing it again and returning his attention to scouring through the evidence of the Thunderer’s previous visit to Earth. “Copies of videos from a hospital in Puente Antiguo, satellite feeds, a gas station outside of Gallup, SHIELD surveillance cameras, other cameras inside and outside of buildings in Puente Antiguo… I bet their database on me’s huge – from all over the world. You’re just in New Mexico.”

“That’s not footage of him,” Clint declared, tapping one of the videos. It expanded and began to play, Tony increasing the volume. “I was there – didn’t stray from town ‘cept for his landing in the dessert and attacking us for his hammer. He was never near Albuquerque, nevermind Gallup.”

A black car rolled to a stop alongside one of the pumps of a gas station, the heavy dim of the night weighing on the surroundings contrasting the bright fluorescents that shone down from overhead lights onto the vehicle and the other unoccupied fuel dispensers. A man garbed in a dark suit stepped out of the driver’s seat and shut the door behind him, rounding the car to grasp the nozzle, press the button marked for a high grade fuel (minimum octane rating 91), insert the appliance into the opening for the gas tank, and then enter into the small convenience store adjacent.

The woman staffing the cashier was dressed in a loose plaid shirt whose sleeves were rolled up to her elbows as she wearily rolled a small scrap of paper between her thumb and index finger. Phil crouched in one of the aisles-

“They have a video of him getting gas?” Steve asked with raised brows.

“It was on the way to Thor’s hammer,” Natasha defended consideringly.

“Thorough,” Tony snickered.

-and observed the rows of packaged miniature doughnuts before him, ‘Unwrap a Smile in the Morning!’ emblazoned on the rim of the shelf beneath them. He grasped a set of six doughnuts in each hand and leaned back slightly to consider them, debating between the powdered sugar or the chocolate frosted.

The sound of the door opening as well as the cocking of firearms sounded as a couple of men pointed shotguns at the brunette cashier to her widened eyes and instantly raised hands as one shouted, “Hands up! Don’t move!” the other echoing, ‘Don’t move or I’ll blow your head off.’

“Well shit,” Tony muttered. “What are the chances?”

“How else is here? Who owns that car outside?!” he demanded, jerking his gun forcefully as incentive as she winced and shut her eyes.
“I do,” Phil answered calmly as he stood behind the aisles’ divider at the other end of the store. The one man turned his head sharply as he kept his gun trained on the woman, the other whirling around and aiming at Phil over the shelves. “But it’s really more like a lease,” he continued.

Natasha smirked as Clint snorted at their handler’s attitude, the two agents sharing a glance at the expected advance of the event.

“Toss the keys over here,” the first ordered to Phil’s ‘Okay,’ as he insisted, “Come on!” ‘Okay,’ he repeated, removing the car keys from his pants’ pocket and lobbing them into his hands.

The two returned their attention to the brunette, the second instructing, “Empty the cash register, start filling this bag—” as he pulled a material bag from his back pocket and threw it onto the counter before hastily returning his hand onto the gun, “—with cigarettes, p—”

“Excuse me!” Phil called, interjecting, “I also have this gun.” He held the grip in two fingers as it hung unthreateningly in front of him as he mused, “You’ll probably be needing that—”

The two men spun around and pointed their long firearms at him, shouting over each other, “Put it down!” ‘Put it down now!’ “Right now!”

“Okay – don’t want any trouble,” he assured, raising his other hand to display his lack of additional weaponry.

The group, with the exception of the two assassins and Loki, watched the scene apprehensively, anxiously hopeful that Phil escaped the ordeal unharmed. The dark god awaited the agent’s action, observing his purposeful hold of the gun so as to project unfamiliarity with its handling as well as the display of obedience to their commands though his countenance showed confidence; the farce was meant to dissuade the two men as to the threat he posed.

There was a moment of stillness as the two waited for him to make another move, and when he did not, one of them coaxed carefully, “Toss the pistol over here then.”

“I’d prefer not to throw it... Risk the gun accidentally going off,” Phil countered with a wary stare towards the weapon. The two shared a glance before he proposed, “Maybe I could slide it over?”

At the cautiousness surrounding the suggestion, Tony smirked and Bruce and Steve’s foreheads smoothed at the revelation of Phil having a plan that required the disarming of the two robbers through exaggerated deference to them.

“Yeah – slide it over to my feet. Don’t try anything,” he agreed.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m just gonna move over to this aisle,” he explained as he motioned slowly with his free hand the action he was going to take. The male stepped to the side to center himself in the indicated aisle as Phil reiterated, “I’m going to slide it over to you.” He cast a lingering glance at the other man before sinking to the floor with an ‘Okay,’ as he slid the firearm across the tile.

As the man crouched to retrieve the gun, Phil grabbed a bag of flour from the low row beside him and stood to quickly fling it into the other’s face. He lowered his weapon as he was blinded as Phil ran to place one foot on one of the shelves and vault himself up into a jump as the man before him was standing and raising his shotgun, managing to step down on the gun and causing him to shoot himself in the foot with a yell. Phil landed and grabbed the long gun as the man bent to hold his lower leg, slamming the end of the weapon into the other’s face before turning back to jerk the barrel up underneath the first’s jaw and send him onto his back on the floor.
“Holy shit,” Tony cursed in amazement as Steve gaped, Clint and Natasha smirked proudly, and Loki narrowed his eyes in contemplation.

“Phil, Son of Coul, is quite the warrior!” Thor congratulated. “I have never seen him in battle.”

“Yeah – damn.” Tony shook his head. “Those threats of tasing me were legit.”

The cashier stared immobile with her hands still raised as she breathed heavily as Phil bent to retrieve and reholster his own firearm, placing the two unconscious men’s shotguns on the counter as he uttered impassively, “Sorry for the mess.” Then he pulled the two packages of mini-doughnuts from his pockets and laid them on the surface as well, explaining, “I couldn’t decide,” as he reached into his pocket again to place a bill gently before her.

At her frozen and stunned form he permitted, “Keep the change,” as he grasped his snacks.

“Wait,” she called as he moved to turn away. “What should I tell the police?”

“Tell them those Tae Bo tapes really paid off,” he replied, exiting. He strode to his car and removed the nozzle from the side once it had filled the tank, stopping its stream with a ‘click’ just under 19 gallons. He replaced the appliance and paid, proceeding into the vehicle and returning to the highway.

“This makes him scarier,” Tony concluded with a nod.

“We shouldn’t have thought he was anything less than a SHIELD agent,” Bruce thought aloud. “You don’t get to be trusted by Director Fury in an organization like this by not being able to take care of things.”

“Yep – so everyone remember to not piss him off,” Tony retorted. “Actually, nobody piss anybody off – my tower just got repaired,” he amended as he tapped the corners of the windows open on the screen and exited everything.

“You aren’t going to pry a little more?” Natasha asked with a raised eyebrow.

“J’s already got all this,” Tony smirked. “I’ve just only picked through the relevant bits so far.”

“Can we leave?” Steve questioned as Tony moved to exit. He turned to question Loki, “Is the Director finished asking you everything?”

“He dismissed me,” he answered with a slight shrug. “I’m to turn in a report, but there was no mention of remaining for any particular reason.”

“Alright then,” Tony finished with a clap of his hands. “Let’s grab Secret Agent Man and move out.”

“Ugh, you guys are killing me,” Tony whined as the Quinjet landed at the side of the Tower, the aircraft powering off as the floor slid into the hanger of the 94th floor. He jumped out from the side of the slowly opening hatch as he continued, “Paperwork, rules, blegh.”

“Don’t be such a child,” Natasha chided to Tony, who turned to stick his tongue out to her disbelievingly raised eyebrow.

“If I don’t write up reports then I don’t need to know how to,” he retorted.

“Your refusal to submit earnest accounts of your activities often causes us to scramble to do
damage control,” Phil sighed.

“Which is why I’ve a department for PR,” Tony nodded.

“It will be beneficial for SHIELD to have Loki report anything he’s involved in,” Phil explained. “His perception of events as well as understanding of any magical involvement will be informative.”

“Barely allied for a couple of days and you’re a favourite,” Tony mumbled.

“Who was the one to break into his rooms before anything was finalized to beg him to explain his magic?” Phil remarked with a raised eyebrow.

“Hey – I wasn’t begging!” Tony countered. “And I was inquiring for the good of the organization.”

Bruce bit his lip as he choked on a chuckle, shaking his head at the suggestion of the genius being without personal motivation as they all moved into the elevator.

“Back to the 90th, J,” Tony ordered as the doors slid shut.

“I think I’ll depart to my rooms, if you would, Jarvis,” Loki requested as he indolently flipped through the sheaf of papers in hand, having previously been handed into his possession by Phil and detailing the requirements of the reports to be admitted into SHIELD’s systems. “After all, I do have a statement to submit.”

As both Steve and Thor frowned and the others exchanged contrite glances at their hostile reactions towards Loki during the last scenes they viewed, Tony inserted the question, “But what if we need clarification on magicky things? That’s what we’re supposed to be doing.”

“I believe the next occurrences are self-explanatory,” the god rebutted. “I’m sure you’ll be able to absorb more during such emotional scenes without my presence anyways. I’ll rejoin you once I’ve finished my report.”

“The 92nd floor, Sorcerer,” Jarvis announced as the elevator doors opened.

“Thank you,” he responded absentmindedly as he stepped out.

As the doors slid shut behind him, Tony hissed, “Jarvis!”

“Sir, it seemed unwise to attempt to contain him against his will,” the AI defended. “I also found his reasoning sound for excusing himself – the topics of argument that arose before don’t need revisiting unless your want is to further weaken your alliance with him.”

“We realize our comments were uncalled for,” Steve declared as they arrived on their intended floor.

“Yeah – even if there’s a bit more with Phil, we’re able to behave,” Tony agreed.

“He’s too observant for that,” Natasha opposed.

“He’d notice any careful suppression of reaction, reading our emotions in the atmosphere,” Bruce added as they strode into the conference room.

“It’s better for him to skip out on these scenes,” Clint concluded, collapsing into his seat with a glance at the empty chair beside him. As the remaining six followed to take their seats, many
gazes lingered on the vacant chair belonging to the absent dark god.

“We need to talk anyways,” Phil began.

‘Aw shit,’ Tony muttered as he slumped further into his chair, Steve nodding in agreement as he fully turned to face the agent and asked, “What about?”

“First, the fact that the Other was the one to send this disc – for the purpose of segregating Loki from us.”

The Captain nodded again and crossed his arms over his chest, noting, “Continuing to watch it may heighten our opposition to him.”

“I don’t think we can risk allowing the scenes to be left unwatched, though,” Natasha countered. “What if it shows the Other talking to Thanos – revealing something of his plans?”

“Yes,” Thor supported. “The Other may be dead, and the Chitauri too few to threaten this world even if they could act, but we do not know what the Titan is devising. If his goal is intimately related to Midgard, then we need to be aware of it.”

Phil nodded. “Keep in mind then, while watching, that Loki was to some degree forced into his actions and that anything negative you see can’t be allowed to interfere with our future with him.”

Expressions of assent were directed towards him before their attention was turned to the large screen at the end of the long room.

Loki walked past Phil’s fallen form, lips quirked to edge an open-mouthed smile as he breathed laboriously while gesturing weakly to the bloodied end of his scepter. He turned away and flipped open the covering to the red button as Thor watched helplessly, pressing another to slide open the panels of flooring beneath the cell. The wind of the aircraft’s descent tore through the space as Loki held his hand over the button, Thor stepping back from the edge of the cage to cast his eyes to the tiling he stood upon as if to see beneath to the drop he would be falling before returning his eyes to his brother’s stare. With a decisive tap, Loki pressed the button and the long mechanical arms anchoring the cell to the room released. It dropped through the chute with the screech of metal sounding as the siding grated down the edges, sparking as it slid, before falling from the Helicarrier and into the open air to tumble through the clouds to the earth far below.

Steve frowned and turned to survey the other blond for injuries, questioning aloud, “How injured were you before the battle?”

“Not very much so, Captain,” Thor assured with a smile. “I was able to escape the confines of the falling vessel before it landed.”

In the dark of the interior Clint aimed a jab to the side of Natasha’s head that she blocked with a raised forearm, forcing the offending arm away and kicking him in the side of the knee to delay his successive attack. His following stab with the small knife was easily blocked as well as she grabbed his wrist firmly as she punched him at the join of his other shoulder, grasping his forearm with her other hand also so to twist the armed limb up behind his back to his pained gasp. He grit his teeth with a groan before huffing and forcing himself to lever higher and turn back towards her, tossing the knife to his left palm and cutting across where her chest had been before she had ducked under the attack.

“Did I ever apologize for trying to kill you?” Clint uttered, projecting being flippant with his arms crossed over his chest.
“Must not have been time for it,” Natasha commented while casting a discerning gaze over his careful breathing and tensed muscles. “Besides, what else is new?”

He chuckled and loosened his posture slightly, remarking, “Mind control’s a new twist though.”

“Depends on the definition you’re using,” she retorted, the two assassins sharing a glance as the other occupants of the room noted the undercurrent of comfort offered.

She rose to lock an arm around his and direct the blade from her as he strained to turn it against her, both grunting in exertion and breathing heavily with their arms tangled between their chests. Clint pushed her closer to the rails before she moved him back, the two spinning as they struggled before he reached forward and grasped the scarlet locks of hair at the back of her neck to wrench her head back and bare her throat to the knife. She panted harshly through her nose before twisting her head to bite his forearm, Clint’s teeth gritted as he groaned a yell of pain while forced to drop the knife at the teeth in the pressure point. She used the strength of his tensed arm to swiftly flip over the appendage, the movement and weight sending him careening forwards as she landed on her feet to throw him to the side.

His forehead slammed into the rail as he fell to his knees, a hand rising to grasp the bar as he squeezed his eyes shut before he fell to grab onto the wire nearer to the ground as he groaned at the impact. He fumbled to affix his grip onto the wire for a second before the flailing sent him fully onto his stomach, and he clambered onto all fours as he gasped in disorientation. Natasha stared down at him as he struggled, a sheen of sweat coating her face as she breathed through her mouth. Clint shook his head as he managed to push himself onto his knees, swaying as he blinked, asking, “Natasha?” in confusion at her figure before him.

She surged forward with a snarl and punched him across the face, standing erect as he fell back onto the grating with splayed limbs, knocked unconscious.

“So just hitting his head fixed it?” Tony asked incredulously.

“I think we may need Loki down here,” Bruce murmured. “That’s something we need to know – more glimpses of Phil or not.”

“Jarvis?” Tony wordlessly requested.

After reading through the papers detailing the necessities of the report he would have to submit, Loki copied the composition of the pages and constructed a blank sheaf so to work on, drawing the minerals of the ink used as well into another supply and into a quill. Seated at the desk, he started with writing out the formalities of his name and affiliation with SHIELD before beginning to outline the incident he had partaken in. Vaguely detailing that the cause of his separation from the Avengers was a disagreement prompted by the viewing of Agent Coulson’s ‘death’, the god reflected on the team’s ever-changing thoughts of him.

I had assumed that after such an argument they would only be forced to come to my aid due to the inconvenient timing of the Other’s taking of me because of the contract established with SHIELD – that is, grudgingly. After all, why would they voluntarily move to rescue a ‘callous monster’ who had supposedly killed someone close to them? Yet they had acted swiftly, and upon my return the Captain and the Doctor were obviously concerned about my well-being. It’s true that they were not the ones to vocally quarrel with me, but the atmosphere had suggested that they all agreed with the accusations of Anthony.
And HE was one of the ones to physically move to my side in order to provide help. Such fickle natures cannot be puzzled through without the reasoning that had been present.

Their ever-changing view of me is also partly due to their lack of understanding of the influences I was operating under during the invasion. Explaining to them the extent of my injuries would allow them to more easily comprehend the state of my mind, body, and magic, but why should I open myself to them? What have they offered to me?

I’m only here to provide a service to them – to offer the knowledge that they cannot gain by any other accessible means – and only cooperate and linger due to the plans that I’m sure the Æsir have for me. It’s a business relationship – forging deeper bonds with them wouldn’t be beneficial. The masses of Midgard have been irreparably poisoned against me. When SHIELD tires of my intellect’s input and moves to take me apart to see for themselves just how my magic works, then I will have to flee.

But to where? With Asgard hunting me as well-

“Sorcerer?” Jarvis intoned over the speaker system. “Sir requests your presence with them in the conference room.”

He raised an eyebrow and turned to ask of the closest lens, “What is it they need of me? I don’t think the disc could have moved past their mourning of Agent Coulson yet.”

“It has not, sir; however, when they agreed to allow you your distance from them I don’t believe they anticipated how frequently they would need to ask questions of you for clarification of magical concepts.”

He hummed in consideration before standing, turning from the surface he had been working on before pausing to debate bringing the in-progress statement with him. Deciding that he could summon the papers if he found a spare moment to work on them, he continued out of his rooms and into the elevator to travel down two floors.

“You have requested my presence…?” he encouraged as he entered the conference room.

The seven turned at his arrival and observed as he took his chair, Bruce explaining, “We just watched Natasha seemingly knock the scepter’s control out of Agent Barton – is it really that simple?”

“Yeah,” Tony nodded. “Basically just slammed his head against a metal bar and he came back to himself.”

Loki frowned and propped an elbow onto the surface of the table, tapping his lips with a finger as he reasoned aloud, “The Mind Gem’s control was a sudden, all-consuming alteration of perception with Clinton – a concussion may have jarred his recall of memory so to reinstate his original, uninfluenced thoughts of his life and surroundings.”

“But it might not have?” Phil interrogated.

“So he might go all bright blue-eyed again and try to kill us all?” Tony asked, though he leaned back in his chair and swung back and forth unconcernedly.

“No, whatever was cast off cannot be restored without the direction of the scepter,” Loki countered. “But there may still be some lingering influence on his view of the Tesseract or of the mission he was to accomplish.”
Or of you, Clint thought with narrowed eyes at the god.

At his frown, Loki offered, “I can examine the makeup of your mind for the gem’s alterations, if you wish.”

He glanced at Natasha in deliberation of the proposal. On the one hand, living with the possibility of being easily manipulated by use of the Tesseract’s security or having triggers that cause him to lash out against his teammates in favour of the goal Loki had given him, yet on the other allowing that same god access to his mind to do what he will. The contract with SHIELD provided reasoning for the Trickster to not act against them, but did not prevent anything.

“What does that entail?” Natasha questioned in his stead.

“I will not even have to draw any closer,” he answered in amusement, “it is a visual survey. Though if there are traces left, I will have to act with my magic to remove them.”

Clint tapped his fingers in discomfort on the side of his thigh before consenting, “Alright.”

The god’s fair eyes shone faintly with emerald and indigo as he held his chin on the curled knuckles of his hand, peering intently at the archer. After several seconds Loki blinked and leaned back in his chair, the glow of magic fading from his irises. “There isn’t any touch of the gem’s control remaining on your mind. It must have been a severe and thorough impact to your head.”

“Is there any way to confirm that without your magic?” Natasha asked.

“Would the gamma signature of the scepter be present on him?” Bruce inquired.

“It was slight,” Loki replied. “Your ultraviolet sensors can pick up the magic, but it would be of the same intricacy and amount of magic in my hands while my core is dormant – which your devices couldn’t detect before.”

“All signs of manipulation are absent,” Phil interjected. “We believed Clint to be free of the control before, so if we’re to trust your elaboration then we’ll also accept your finding of him to be uncontrolled.”

“Cool,” Tony concluded. “I think the Helicarrier’s still falling, so let’s get back to that.”

Through the pale blue of the sky the fortified cage fell through the air, Thor within grunting as he tumbled along the sides of the cell with Mjolnir banging heftily after him. The wind howled outside of the enclosure as the god slammed into the glass through which he could see dizzying glimpses of the speedily encroaching ground, with a yell swinging his hammer at the wall only for the weapon to swipe harmlessly through the space before it as the area inverted and he was flung backwards and away from the sides once again.

He rolled across the floor before bouncing against the pane of glass that he had cracked before, the mark splintering further at the impact. Tossed to the opposite side, he used the sparse moment of unwavering gravity to brace his feet against the glass and crouch in preparation just as the shore of an ocean, a natural harbour, a narrow, pale beach, a forest, and a deep lake became clear below. He bared his teeth and sunk further to his heels before pursing his lips and pushing forward, flying with a scream forward with Mjolnir outstretched to crash through the fractured glass he had been facing just as the cage slammed into the rocks of the harbour in a plume of sand. He was thrown to the ground with a grunt to send dirt upwards before he skipped to another area and rolled along the ground, his hammer spiralling through the air as she rang at the tumble.

“Cutting it close,” Bruce muttered.
Loki gazed with distant eyes into the space the cell had been as he absentmindedly allowed the covering of the large button to fall closed on the control panel. He turned to exit the area as a voice stated, ‘You’re going to lose.’ He halted before turning, asking, “Am I?”

Phil sat on the ground gazing up at him with jaw slackened slightly as blood tricked from the corner of his mouth, large gun lying in his lap as he slumped against the wall. “It’s in your nature,” he elaborated, eyelids drooping as he blinked slowly.

Phil cast narrowed eyes around the room to keep the team’s expressions controlled at the scene, noting, as well as Loki was, the tensed muscles and heavy atmosphere.

“Your heroes are scattered,” the dark god began as he stepped closer, gloating with arms outstretched to encompass the Helicarrier as he added, “your floating fortress falls from the sky – where is my disadvantage?” he asked with head tilted in mock bemusement.

“You lack conviction,” Phil proclaimed.

“True that,” Tony nodded.

Loki’s brow smoothed as his eyes widened, expression losing the display of pleasure as he began to sneer, “I don’t think I’m-”

The trigger was suddenly pulled on the gun modelled after the Destroyer, an orange beam spiraling out to hurl into Loki’s torso and blast him backwards, across the room and through the wall separating the area from the next. He landed on his back to spewing flames from the impact to roll onto his stomach, smoke wafting from his frame as he moved onto his knees.

“So that’s what it does,” the agent surmised.

“Such badassery.”

On the bridge, SHIELD agents were clamouring to remotely fix the damage to the workings of the aircraft as Fury analyzed the warning of pressure destabilization and the altimeter’s constant drop from over eighteen thousand to seventeen, and lower, on his screens with a frown twisting his lips. The agent on the PA system ordered, “All hands to crash stations immediately.”

The ship continued to plummet through the cloud cover with containers and equipment crashing into each other and toppling off the edges of the tarmac as the damaged engine spewed thick plumes of black fumes into the air. Tony pushed against a wing of the turbine as he flew his suit around the circuit, screaming in exertion as he increased his power and the consequent speed of the engine’s motor. The smoke was drawn in and dispersed at the rate, Tony gritting his teeth at the effort as the motions began to stabilize the Helicarrier’s flight, his suit’s thrusters appearing to leave a glowing trail as he flew.

“Cap hit the lever,” he commanded, the monolithic aircraft now flying level.

“I need a minute here!” Steve yelled as he hung from the exposed wire he had grabbed, climbing upwards and back towards the space adjacent to the engine.

“Lever – now!” Tony insisted.

The Captain dragged himself onto the grating to the remaining ‘agent’s shots, crawling along the surface to the area, and lever, he had stood by before.

The turbine in front of him distanced itself from Tony’s armoured hands to his uneasy glancing,
eyes widening within his helmet as the speed of the wings threw him flat onto the one behind him. “Uh oh,” he muttered as his boots were jerked under the metal pane. He was dragged underneath the turbines with a ‘Help!’ as they spun, his suit clanging and him issuing grunts as he was thrown around the narrow space, alloy scraping and sparking at the battering.

“Sorry,” Steve earnestly apologized as he winced at the harm.

“No worries – that’s what the suit’s for,” Tony dismissed with a wave of his hand, Loki frowning in mystification at the response.

Steve reached up to drag the red lever down, slowing the momentum of the engine for the second needed for Tony to be freed from its hold and tumble out the bottom with a yell. He hovered his damaged suit with his thrusters and the repulsors at his palms, the power flickering before firmly establishing. He tilted his head upwards to the hull of the passing ship before soaring after it, flying around the engine to Steve’s climbing onto all fours and the ‘agent’ shooting up at him.

He crashed into the imposter’s midsection and knocked him to the ground before rolling to the side and lying on his back with a sigh as the power to the suit flickered again and the blue of his HUD extinguished. Steve panted from where he sat, dropping his head forward.

A jet rose from the tarmac with opened hatch, Loki stepping into the back and collapsing into a seat as it shut behind him. He held the scepter in hand, azure orb glowing as he smirked through his staggered breathing.

Chapter End Notes

The short can be found on YouTube! It's titled 'MARVEL One-Shot: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Thor's Hammer'
Chapter Summary

The Avengers continue to watch the events of the disc, the scenes building to the finale that is the invasion.

Director Fury rushed into the detainment center to Phil’s form slumped against the wall, pausing above him before dropping to one knee. “Sorry, boss,” he apologized weakly to him as he panted, “the god rabbited.”

Phil’s gaze was intent at the portrayal of his ‘death’, now seeing the appeal of observing events as a third party. The atmosphere created sets the tone for how each person’s actions are perceived, and through this mood he is able to better understand how the team was affected during the time of his injury. Motivation is always an important aspect of character, and so to be able to see himself as the instigator of their rallying against Loki augmented his respect for them all.

“No,” Fury responded, lifting the large gun from his lap and setting it aside before returning his attention onto him and insisting, ‘Eyes on me,’ as he grasped his chin.

“Just stay awake,” Fury responded, lifting the large gun from his lap and setting it aside before returning his attention onto him and insisting, ‘Eyes on me,’ as he grasped his chin.

“No,” Phil mumbled as his eyelids drooped, “I’m clocking out here.”

“Not an option.”

The Avengers had neglected the fact that the Director had been the only one present that had been close to Phil, in light of his manipulation of the events, and so moved to assimilate his emotional response. None of them had ever seen Fury express any emotion aside from annoyance, determination, calm battle-readiness, or amusement at another’s expense. This was the fierce refusal to allow his agent to give up and die.

“It’s okay, boss,” he reassured. “This was never gonna work…if they didn’t have something…to…”

Phil’s heavy breathing faltered before stopping, his eyes glazing over and falling to stare listlessly off to the side as his body grew limp.

Fury’s jaw tensed as he blinked hard at the sight of his agent’s prone form, gaze unwavering before he lowered it to the grating. He stood slowly as a couple of medical personnel in white coats arrived and sunk to Phil’s sides with defibrillators in hand, his stare turning thoughtful as his eye wandered into the middle distance.

Gritted teeth and averted eyes were reiterated around the table, excess moisture gathering as tears furiously blinked away by a couple before the team was offered a distraction.

“Was it your idea, then?” Steve asked with narrowed eyes, crossing his arms over his chest as he turned to face Phil. “To tell us you were dead – to give us something to fight for?”

“It was just a statement of fact,” Loki interjected dismissively. “It was clear that you wouldn’t be able to accomplish anything without a proper motive – I’m sure Agent Coulson presumed to die in the upcoming invasion anyways, without you six united. However, the Director took from his
words the thought of him as a rousing force.”

Steve’s coiled muscles relaxed at the reasoning, he, Tony, Bruce, and Thor nodding in agreement to the proposal. Alternatively, Clint, Natasha, and Phil met the God of Chaos’ gaze with masked confusion. They could identify his knowledge of Phil’s intent of suggestion to Fury by their stares’ reception by his sharp eyes, and were left wondering why the Trickster would chose to intervene and cover for the agent.

Loki did not think it beneficial for mistrust to continue to foster between the Avengers and SHIELD. Fury’s deception was an act that had been unveiled and slowly bypassed; to involve the sole individual that bridged the rift between the team and the agency would likely result in their commitment to the cause to dissipate. What reason would they have, besides the fragile bonds between them, to continue to defend the Earth together if the only man they trusted and respected within SHIELD’s resources had worked to coerce them into complying with the organization’s wishes?

The six had not had the time yet to adjust to one another. Those immersed in the ideal of the moral high-ground have not yet come to understand the sacrifices of the battles they have agreed to undertake; those used to setting aside their actions in favour of the end results of their accomplishments have not had the time to familiarize themselves with the thought-processes and reasoning of those free of the burdens they have shouldered for years. Without something, or someone, to bind them together for the time being, the six Avengers would return to how they operated before.

And Loki thought that that diminished his integration as a consultant significantly.

On the bridge, Hill’s minor head wound was being treated before Fury’s voice transmitted through her earpiece. “Agent Coulson is down,” he intoned to her pushing the medic’s hands away, raising her fingers to lightly press on the device as she focused on the report with furrowed brows.

“A medical team is on its way to your location,” an agent replied, Natasha’s gaze distant as she listened in while behind her two agents grabbed Clint’s arms and dragged his unconscious body away.

“They’re here – they called it.”

Steve and Tony stood immobile by the third engine in their suits, cowl and helmet off, averting their stares to the grating of the flooring at the response. Tony exhaled lengthily as a frown twisted his lips, shoulders slumping.

Their reactions reminded them all that the grief of losing a loved one never dampens, no matter how many times it occurs. There is no desensitization to the feeling, once you have allowed or failed to prevent a person’s involvement into your life and considerations. They had been lucky that they had lost as few as they had, with their connections. That does not mean each was worth less, but they had to learn to appreciate the time with those currently surrounding them before they were gone. Especially considering now that the six that were living together for the foreseeable future had all decided to provide a defense against the threats the militaries of the world could not handle.

Steve and Tony were seated side by side at the hexagonal glass table of the upper level of the bridge; the Captain had removed the top half of his outfit, gloves, and belt to leave him in a blue, long-sleeved, cotton shirt over his uniform’s pants and boots while Tony had stepped out of his suit to slouch in his chair in a Black Sabbath shirt and dark pants. Director Fury stood across from them in his official leather ensemble, focusing on shuffling through a number of small items in his
hands for a few moments of silence.

“These were in Phil Coulson’s jacket,” he remarked, Agent Hill standing with her hands behind her back behind him, gaze on the floor until her eyes flicked up to him at his comment. “I guess he never did get you to sign them.” Fury forcefully spun the trading cards onto the table, some of the wet blood splattering from where it had smeared over the glossy surfaces onto the glass.

Phil’s back abruptly straightened as his eyes widened. “Those were in my locker,” he softly mumbled, dazed. His years of collecting each card and preserving their pictures lost under the smeared fingerprints of blood.

“I think he’s gonna faint,” Tony warned, half-jokingly.

“I’m sure the Captain would be happy to sign anything of yours,” Natasha assured, eyes sweeping over Phil’s shocked form.

“And you actually get to chill with him, whenever you want,” Clint added. “He’s worth more than those cards.”

“I’m fine,” Phil said impassively, having breathed in and composed himself.

“I bet Fury won’t be,” Tony stage-whispered to Bruce.

“I can still sign those, or help you collect new ones to sign,” Steve appealed.

“Or pose for originals to sign,” Tony quipped.

Steve flushed in embarrassment at the fascination with him, but nodded and hesitantly agreed, “Sure. You said you still had the old uniform, right?”

Phil restrained himself to a small smile as his eyes lit in wonder at possessing one-of-a-kind photos of the Captain. That would be signed.

Tony rolled his eyes, but grinned indulgently at Phil’s fanboying.

Steve sighed as he reached forward, Fury explaining, “We’re dead in the air up here,” as he pinched a corner of one of the cards and flipped it up to face him. “Our communications, the location of the Cube—” Captain America wore his old uniform, saluting as he held his old shield, crimson smudged in impressions of fingerprints along one side. “-Banner, Thor… I’ve got nothing for you.”

“Good thing it was the durable ones that fell twenty thousand feet,” Tony commented.

Tony’s eyes remained downcast until they drifted upward to stare into the middle distance, Fury continuing, “Lost my one good eye.” The Director braced his palms on the surface of the table as he shook his head, saying, “Maybe I had that coming.”

He refocused his gaze onto the two before him, Steve laying the card back onto the glass. “Yes,” Fury admitted as he began to circle the table, “we were going to build an arsenal with the Tesseract.” He paused by one of the seats, resting his hands on top of the backrest as he elucidated, “I never put all my chips on that number though, because I was playing something even riskier.” Tony cast his eyes down to his lap as Steve’s head tilted towards Fury in attention

“There was an idea – Stark knows this,” the Director started as he resumed walking, Steve turning his head slightly to note Tony’s seat as the billionaire lifted his head minutely, “called the
Avengers’ Initiative.”

Fury halted at the chair behind the back of Tony’s seat, between the two, meeting the Captain’s gaze as he elaborated, “The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, to see if they could become something more.” Steve’s brow furrowed, averting his contemplative stare as Fury persisted, “To see if they could work together when we needed them to – to fight the battles that we never could.”

Tony turned his head to observe Fury in his peripheral as he turned his thumbs over one another in his lap, turning away when the Director focused on him to insist, “Phil Coulson died still believing in that idea.” Tony tensed in his chair at the declaration, and upon Fury finishing, ‘in heroes,’ he stood from his seat.

His gaze shifted from the distance and his thoughts to his surroundings, cast to the side as if to the two behind him before he strode out of the bridge.

“Well,” Fury mused as he watched Tony’s exit, folding his hands behind his back, “it’s an old-fashioned notion.”

Fury’s speech was well constructed, but for the mention of heroes. Tony was sure the Director had meant to draw them both in, but in highlighting Phil’s idolization of heroes it became about Captain America. Iron Man wasn’t a hero. Tony would fight, but in the end he fought for himself and those he cared about – not like Steve. The Captain fought for right and justice and all that was good in America.

And Tony didn’t know if Steve just hadn’t suffered enough so to be filled with that all-consuming rage, lashing out and killing the people responsible for the injustice and hurt experienced, or if he had and simply willed the strength to stick to his principles. Except Tony realized he did know the answer, that it was the latter, and that reasoning was why Steve had been chosen for the serum. Why he was not only the first, but the only, superhero.

Thor marched wearily through the long grass and tall weeds of the wide meadow he had been thrown across, blond hair matted as it curled gently around his ears and dirt smeared over his face, arms, and hands. He trudged through the brush to where Mjolnir had fallen, the hammer’s grip tilted heavenwards. He outstretched his hand as he panted, fingers splayed and awaiting her handle to settle into his palm, but she remained on the ground.

After a moment his brow furrowed and he clenched his hand into a fist, before relaxing his fingers and staring past the environment, immersed in his thoughts.

“Woah, what?” Tony questioned with a point to the scene depicted. “Why isn’t it flying to you?”

“She fell to Midgard again,” Thor explained. “I had doubted my worth, my ability to stop the madness of the Chitauri and that of Loki… the brother whom had tried to kill me again.” Loki cast his eyes to the side of the room as he fisted his hands from where his arms were crossed over his chest, the team straining to avoid judging him through their glances.

“You flew to meet us in New York,” Steve stated in confusion to the god’s elucidation.

“Yes, I did not lose sight of all that I had learned here – and so remained worthy of her,” he clarified. “I simply had to take hold of the power she offered once again.”

“Man, that hammer’s complicated…” Tony moaned.

“Maybe we could look at her in the lab sometime,” Bruce advocated to the other genius’ sudden
alert countenance and bright eyes.

“I would be honoured!” Thor answered with a beaming smile.

“You fell out of the sky,” a man’s voice announced as Bruce stirred. He awakened with squinted eyes taking in the broken stone, rent metal, various debris he was lying in and surrounded by, as well as his naked state, hands hovering in confusion. He sat up in the pile of dust and bricks and looked over his shoulder, peering up at the elderly janitor bracing himself on a couple of beams of metal above him.

“We’ve got to make you some stretchy pants,” Tony nodded. Bruce shook his head and declined, ‘You don’t have to-’ to the engineer’s trivializing wave of a hand and gesturing for Jarvis to continue playing the disc.

Bruce exhaled and groaned in exhaustion as his head fell to his hand, before he swiftly shifted to turn back to the man and ask, “Did I hurt anybody?”

“There’s nobody around here to get hurt,” he comforted dismissively with a wave to the large empty warehouse the two were in. “You did scare the hell out of some pigeons though.”

Clint and Tony snorted chuckles in amusement.

He weakly nodded, leaning an arm on one of his bent knees as he remarked, “Lucky,” briefly rubbing his forehead and face with a palm.

“Or just good aim,” the janitor countered. “You were awake when you fell.”

“Ha! Proof,” Tony gloated with a nudge to Bruce’s elbow. “You’re not that bad when you’re all mean and green.”

He shook his head in resignation to the other’s thoughts.

Bruce froze, twisted to stare at him, before averting his eyes and questioning, “You saw?”

“The whole thing,” he drawled, pointing upwards, “Right through the ceiling. Big and green, and buck-ass nude.”

Tony emitted a bark of laughter before Steve turned to direct an impatient stare onto him.

He bent down to grasp a pile of cloth at his feet as Bruce hunched in on himself from where he sat, torso curved over his knees and head hung. “Here,” the man said as he tossed the clothing down to him. “Didn’t think those would fit you until you shrunk down to a regular-size fella.”

He grabbed the pants with belt threaded through the loops and unfolded them with a jerk, sticking a leg through one side before pausing to utter a ‘Thank you,’ before working to insert the other leg.

“Are you an alien?”

“What?” Bruce asked as he stood, straightening his pants as he fastened them.

Tony broke out in laughter once again to Phil’s sigh, the billionaire managing a defense of ‘Come on – that’s hilarious!’

“It does make sense when you consider how the media has shown aliens. You certainly don’t think ‘alien’ when seeing tall and built men with European accents,” Bruce justified with a motion to
indicate the two gods opposite him.

“From outer space – an alien,” the man elaborated.

“No,” he answered with a shake of his head as he cast his eyes to the ground, buckling his belt.

“Well then, son, you’ve got a condition,” he declared.

“Sums it up nicely,” Clint muttered with a smirk.

One of Bruce’s eyebrows quirked up at the pronouncement before he wobbled his head in a nod of agreement. He looked around at the metal supports of the ruined building before gazing up to the hole he had ripped through the roof as he pulled his arms through the borrowed shirt he had bent to shirk on. He rearranged the limp collar around the nape of his neck with a sigh as he picked his way through the bricks and beams piled under his bare feet.

“So, which one is it?” the janitor asked.

“Sorry?” he questioned, shaking his head as he buttoned up the shirt and rolled up the cuffs of the sleeves.

“Are you a big guy that gets all little? Or a little guy that, uh, sometimes blows up large?” he clarified, motioning with his hands the size change.

“You know,” Bruce answered, averting his gaze before meeting the other’s eyes, “I’m not even sure.”

“Some spontaneous introspection here,” Tony mumbled with crossed arms.

The small room was shrouded in azure as Clint sat upright, the fluorescent lights shining from above tinged magenta through the haze. He shook his head violently as he moaned, sweat glistening along his forehead as his brow furrowed and he bit his lips, Natasha’s hair bright copper curls around her face as she sat at his bedside. He grunted as he squinted his eyes shut, fingers clenching into fists as his arms twisted and pulled at the thick leather restraints binding his wrists to the sides of the mattress.

“Clint,” she called, hair and lips and dark eyes a contrast to her skin, tinged bright blue. “You’re going to be alright.”

His eyes opened as he continued to struggle, interrogating disbelievingly, “You know that?” with a wheezing chuckle. “Is that what you know?”

A tense silence permeated the conference room as the topic of the control over Clint came up once again, his recovery suspicious in light of the azure staining the perspective before them. The involuntary doubting of his loyalty was brushed aside though, in favour of attentiveness to the glimpse of the perspective while influenced (or before it had faded completely).

He breathed heavily as the room’s tone sunk to bland greys, slumping onto the reclined bed as she stood to walk to the small table behind him. “I-I’ve got no window,” he panted as he gazed up at the ceiling, azure absent, Natasha pouring some water into a cup. “I have to flush him out.”

“You’ve got to level out – it’s gonna take time,” she comforted. They were inside a medical holding cell, a small window in the door leading to one of the halls of the Helicarrier, an iris and thumbprint scanner on the outside barring access to the room.
The exchange between the two while isolated was an unmistakeable display of the bond formed between them. Phil allowed a small smile at the two’s devotion to each other, and at the promise of the same unwavering loyalty developing for the entire team.

“You don’t understand, I-” he started before interrupting his words with laboured panting. “Have you ever had someone take your brain and play? They pull you out, and stuff something else in?”

One of Clint’s blinks slowed before he resolutely affixed his gaze onto the screen, not permitting his eyes to close under the influx of emotional thoughts consequent from the echo of his words.

*He craned his head to stare up at her beseechingly. “Do you know what it’s like to be unmade?”*

*She turned to him, responding, “You know that I do.”*

He knew that she did; his partner could empathize on a level that many others couldn’t, but he still couldn’t help feeling as though this was a unique incident that no one, save him, could fully understand.

*It’s different – of course it is. Manipulation is one thing, I’ve been steered towards decisions by the strings others have had on me too – but this? This is forcing you to act with the firm belief that you want to, and to not be sure afterwards if you really did or not. This was changing a part of me with that Scepter, dogging Loki’s steps, and developing something that I’m starting to think is Stockholm syndrome.*

*How can I not sympathize with Him, though? Even Fury was able to convince the Council of using Him as a consultant after watching the events that led Him to His actions, nevermind the team’s response to seeing it all and hearing Thor’s accounts of what He went through before – what happened to His children.*

And it may seem to them that I should be less likely to move towards working with Him after the whole invasion, but I was working with Him then. And I could feel His core, His mind linked to mine. They can’t comprehend what I felt when connected to Him. They don’t fully understand yet what it means that these gods are immortal – have lived to see civilizations rise and fall, and will be here long after our grandchildren’s children are nothing more than bones buried in the ground. They can’t understand the amount of experience and intelligence and power that I’d felt in Him.

*I still can’t grasp it. And the sensation is fading the longer I distance myself from Him and His magic, he admitted to himself with his hands clenched into fists on top of his thighs.*

*“Being undone helps you to find definition, doesn’t it?” Loki commented idly, his chin propped on his knuckles.*

It was a simply voiced sentiment, one that was sobering to all of the occupants of the room. Their pasts forged their characters; the events they have persevered through have proved their strengths.

Clint might muse on what his life might’ve been like if his parents hadn’t died when he was young, if the Swordsman hadn’t left him for dead, if him and Barney had stayed in touch – but then who would he be? Would he be able to recognize himself, be able to be proud of all that he’d accomplished? Would he have even met Natasha, or would she have been killed by an agent of SHIELD when she’d caught their attention?

He has never been able to look on his past with regret, because it was *his*. And that had to be true of all that had happened during the invasion too. Surfacing out of the Scepter’s control had forced
him to question who he really was, had forced him to dismiss all delusions he had held about himself. At his core, he simply follows the orders of others – always has. He needs a purpose to drive him. Nothing so upstanding as a code he set for himself or a belief in something – he just defends and fights for someone.


And Loki.

*He continued to breathe heavily as he hung his head and cast his eyes to the floor, shifting his gaze as his eyebrows furrowed. He questioned in confusion, “Why am I back?” turning to face her, “How’d you get him out?”*

Suddenly thrust out of the azure that had stained his point of view, Clint had easily adhered to the belief that all of his actions were out of his control. With all the time that he’d had to reflect though, and the explanation Loki had given as to how the scepter worked to manipulate, he knew that that had been him, only working under different incentive.

*Under different circumstances, if I’d thought to become a freelance killer instead of taking SHIELD up on their offer, I would’ve had no qualms about working for a newly arrived alien (in appearance) bent on mass genocide and world takeover. It’d have been just a job.*

*My employ now is only an illusion of taking the moral high ground. If SHIELD had sent me to Germany to break into a secure facility and appropriate some iridium, or to lead a squad into an enemy’s headquarters and take down everyone, would I even question the orders? I don’t ask for reasoning, if they’re threatening innocents or the integrity of humanity – I’m given a mission, say ‘yes, sir’, and move out.*

*The Scepter, or Gem or whatever, may have forced the situation, but in the end how’s Loki different from anyone else I’ve followed? His past shaped Him into who He is today – and He may not’ve earned my loyalty through exposure and familiarity, but does that mean He’s undeserving of it?*

Clint didn’t know what to do, who to follow.

*“Cognitive recalibration,” she answered, circling him. “I hit you really hard in the head,” she clarified with a smirk as she sat on the edge of the mattress.*

*“Thanks,” he gasped in gratitude. Natasha surveyed his widened eyes and shaken expression before leaning over him to undo one of the restraints on his wrists. “Natasha,” he started, “how many agents did I-”*

*“Don’t,” she cut off. “Don’t do that to yourself, Clint.” She met his imploring gaze with her unwavering one, defending, “This is Loki. This is…monsters and magic, and nothing we were ever trained for.”*

Natasha glanced at Loki as some of the other occupants of the room suppressed flinches at her choice of words. The god remained impassive, though she detected the slight pursing of his lips.

He noted their reactions as well, and though they all surmised the reasoning for his feelings regarding the term, he could not fathom why they felt the need to shy away from the word due to the connotations he attributed to it. *Why should they think of the effect on me?* the God of Fire wondered. *Our alliance hasn’t developed to such a degree that there’s the emotion of camaraderie or comfort with one another, nor does the term or any of their opinions of me affect my work with*
“Loki – he get away?” Clint asked immediately, expression stern.

“Yeah,” she replied. “Don’t suppose you know where?”

“Didn’t need to know-” he responded as she hummed in discontent and stood, “-didn’t ask.” He levered his legs over the edge of the bed as she moved towards the door, hands on her hips and staring into the distance. “He’s gonna make his play soon, though,” Clint remarked, grasping the cup off to the side that she had filled with water. “Today.”

“We got to stop him,” she said resolutely as she turned to him, having lowered her arms.

“Yeah?” he doubted after a swallow of water. “Who’s we?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Whoever’s left.”

He nodded. “Well, I… If I put an arrow through Loki’s eye socket I’d sleep better, I suppose.” He faltered as he nodded again, jaw tensing before he cast his eyes to the ground with a huff of laughter.

Loki was careful to suppress his delight at Clint’s answer. His almost reluctant countenance to move against him was encouraging, hesitance and uncertainty balancing out his anger, his partnership perhaps not as unwilling as Loki had originally presumed it to be. Also, the archer’s determination to venture into combat immediately after the ordeal he was coping with, and one with an abundance of expectant triggers, proved to the god the worth of guaranteeing his loyalty.

She stepped to sit beside him, commenting with a small smile, “Now you sound like you.”

His grin faded as he turned to her, uttering, “But you don’t.” She lowered her eyes. “You’re a spy, not a soldier. Now you want to wade into a war. Why – what did Loki do to you?”

“He didn’t- I just…” she began as she looked into his eyes, before pursing her lips and turning to avert her gaze down into her lap. At his coaxing ‘Natasha,’ and lowered stare so to listen intently, her eyes flicked upwards and she confessed, “I’ve been compromised.” He nodded. “I got red in my ledger, I’d like to wipe it out.”

Loki’s eyes darted to the red-head, his lips quirking upwards in a small smirk with the knowledge that he had compromised her, despite her perceived management of the interrogation.

“You got somewhere to go?” the janitor asked of Bruce as he came to stand by his side.

“Stark Tower,” he said immediately-

“How did you know where to go?” Steve asked the scientist.

“Before the lab was blown up,” Bruce began, “the Cube’s signature had been tracked to the Tower.”

“Lucky you were the one to see it,” Tony quipped.

-his right hand rising awkwardly before finding and settling in his pants pocket. “I… No.” The old man folded his hands behind his back and tilted his head, waiting. Bruce paused before nodding and asserting, “Yes.”

He huffed and then drew closer, saying, “I’d expect some confusion of the mind since your body’s
kind of...all over the place.” He gestured for him to follow. “But, it has to be one or the other.”

“I like this guy – I should hire him,” Tony remarked.

“We should,” Phil defied. “Technically he’s a security risk.”

“Come on – thousands of people saw Bruce Hulk-out into Jolly Green,” Tony protested. “Don’t pick on the janitor.”

“Did you just morph the Hulk into a verb?” Bruce asked incredulously with raised eyebrows. The billionaire grinned.

Bruce looked at him before facing forwards and admitting, “I know where I can do the most good, but it’s where I can do the most harm,” as he tucked the tails of his shirt into his pants.

“Well, that’s no different than anybody else,” he stated as they stepped into the open air. “Me? I’m here in Jersey where I can’t do much of either,” he said regretfully. “And, since I’m not likely to move on from this placement, you might as well pilfer my ride.” He pointed over to a rusted motorbike that had the seat secured with duct tape, leaning heavily on its kickstand.

“I, uh... I don’t know which way to go,” Bruce confessed with a scowl and shake of his head.

The man observed him for a moment before slowly pulling off his cap and saying, “Your mind’s already made up, son.” He tossed him the keys. “The rest of you will follow.”

“It’s because of that man that you came back to help,” Steve pointed out.

“It was a very fortunate encounter,” Loki remarked. “Had he responded negatively to the display, or had he not the calm to offer aid to you and reassurance about your decisions, you would not have returned to fight.”

“Definitely hire the guy,” Tony proposed with a nod. “As a shrink! That’ll work.”

“You all need one,” Phil replied, raising an eyebrow at Tony’s disgruntled expression.

The panelling of the floor fitted together over the hole through which the glass cell had fallen, Tony staring into the middle-distance as he stood on the edge with his hands clasped behind his back. Footsteps echoed through the room as Steve entered, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning on the railing adjacent to the other. “Was he married?” the Captain asked.

“No,” he answered. “There was a- a cellist, I think,” he added in afterthought.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “He seemed like a good man.”

Phil’s posture straightened at the praise from Steve.

Tony huffed in aborted, mocking laughter, turning to him and stating, “He was an idiot.”

Phil raised an eyebrow.

“Why – for believing?” Steve asked with frustrated brow.

“For taking on Loki alone,” he reasoned, allowing his arms to fall to his sides as he stepped back from the slight drop.
“He was doing his job—”

He scoffed as he moved down the stairs. “He was out of his league – he should have waited. He should have…”

“Sometimes there isn’t a way out, Tony,” Steve consoled, having lowered his arms and walked down the steps as well.

The SHIELD agent was moved by the genius’ distress at his death, the glimpse of sincere emotion a contrast to the blasé front he most often adopted. The knowledge was comforting to Phil due to him having appeared intermittently from the start of Tony’s career as Iron Man but until this point had only been received outwardly positively by Pepper.

“Right, I’ve heard that before,” he responded with his mouth twisted in a sour smirk as he moved past him.

“Is this the first time you’ve lost a soldier?”

“We are not soldiers,” Tony insisted as he whirled around to face him, eyes slightly widened.

Steve pursed his lips at the recurring hostility between the two, thinking that it was fortunate they were able to accomplish all that they did during the invasion without any foundation for harmony. The two would have to have a lengthy conversation about their perspectives and how the team was going to be organized in combat as well as interacting within one living space, so that there were fewer disputes over basics.

Steve sighed at the argument, watching as his gaze drifted past him. “I’m not marching to Fury’s fife,” the billionaire declared.

“Neither am I – he’s got the same blood on his hands that Loki does,” the Captain said.

Loki raised a brow at the observation.

“But right now, we’ve got to put that behind us and get this done.” Tony turned and noted the blood stain on the concrete wall. “Now, Loki needs a power source. If we can put together a list—”

“He made it personal,” the genius proclaimed.

“That’s not the point—”

“That is the point- That’s Loki’s point,” he asserted. “He hit us all right where we live – why?”

“To tear us apart,” Steve speculated.

“Yeah, divide and conquer is…great,” he agreed with one arm propping up the elbow of the other and his finger worrying his mouth in thought, “but... He knows he has to take us out to win, right? That’s what he wants,” he concluded. “He wants to beat us, he wants to be seen doing it- He wants an audience.” He stepped around him in vigour, stare determined at his deductions.


“Yeah, that’s just previews-” Tony surmised with a point as he continued past. “-this is- this is opening night and Loki, he’s a full-tilt diva.”

The aforementioned god hid a small smirk behind curled fingers as he blocked his lips from view, the impression gained from Tony an amusing, thought-provoking notion of his perceived person.
Dramatic entrances were never ones that Loki favoured, generally. He desired to be known for his accomplishments, but he found no worth in excessive gloating or large displays of unnecessary power. Imposing, stealthy feats of value that achieved his goals satisfied him so that his enemies did not comprehend his capabilities.

This was often an ironic system of action, though, because those close to him typically did not pay attention and therefore thought him lesser and incompetent, not realizing the extent of his ever-present machinations. It was the reasoning for the occasional bout of lashing out.

And yet, even distraught, the God of Chaos did not unleash his magic against Thor, the Warriors Three and Sif, or Jötunheim the previous year. Subconsciously he had realized that they were not the source of his consternation, that their relation to the fact of his adoption and difference was ultimately inconsequential, and that obliterating them immediately would solve nothing.

Perhaps he would need to teach the Avengers and SHIELD that whenever he was revelling in attention he was masking something more important behind the scenes.

He turned to him on the raised steps and gesticulated, “He wants flowers, he wants parades. He wants a- a monument built to the skies with his name plastered-”

He halted in his description, arms outstretched, immobile, as Steve raised his eyebrows at the character, and location, depicted.

“Son of a bitch,” Tony cursed as he trotted down the stairs.

“An accurate parallel,” Natasha remarked to Tony’s nonchalant ‘meh’.

“Was disturbing before, but now all that means is I could totally be the God of Chaos,” he retorted with a smirk as he laced his fingers behind his head, purposefully avoiding dwelling on the more sensitive parallels he had realized.

Loki blinked in mild surprise at the lack of reaction resultant from the spy’s comment.

Erik moved from the controlling monitor raised on a dais and the open, empty, armoured briefcase set on the ground to the large intricate machine connected by dark wiring to the computer, several thick wires trailing off the edge of the roof into the floor and power below. He circled the device to survey the energy input and progress of commencement as the protrusions attached to the raised spherical element holding the Tesseract began to spin.

The metal contraption was arranged on the roof on top of the topmost five floors above the Iron Man suit’s dismantling catwalk and the helipad that capped Stark Tower.

“My pad’s the best for dramatic camera shots,” Tony bragged.

“And for opening a portal to another universe,” Clint added.

“Well, obviously,” he replied with a roll of his eyes. “I’d be offended if it’d been anywhere else.”

The hydraulics slid open the door impeding the entrance into the medical cell, Steve standing in the frame in his uniform informing Natasha, “Time to go.”

“Go where?” she asked, twisted to face him with her hands on her hips.

“I’ll tell you on the way,” he answered. “Can you fly one of those jets?”
The door leading into the attached bathroom opened to reveal Clint, who declared, “I can,” as he dried his hands on a towel.

Steve’s eyes widened at the prospect of the archer’s involvement, casting a glance towards Natasha and receiving a purposeful nod. He returned his attention onto Clint and questioned, “You got a suit?”

“Yes,” he replied with a nod as he continued to wring the towel between his fingers.

“Then suit up,” the Captain ordered as he stepped out.

“The Director simply released him into active combat?” Phil questioned.

“I was fine,” Clint argued.

“You still should have been released by medical,” he countered. “There was no testing done to confirm that the scepter’s influence had abated.”

“Natasha had shown that she trusted him to be stable,” Steve justified in answer, crossing his arms over his chest.

The Captain’s reasoning for his decision displayed a level of trust in his teammates that Loki thought to be reckless considering the timeframe he had had to familiarize himself with them. There was also the fact that all he had known of Clint had been his actions against SHIELD. That he would simply accept her recommendation was a great risk, though it had paid off in the end.

Only time would tell whether his faith in the assassin would turn against him. The Black Widow, after all, had alternate loyalties over him and the interests of the team.

The sun shone unyieldingly down onto Thor as he bent to lift his hammer, Mjolnir rising without resistance to be grasped by his fingers.

“There we go,” Tony pointed out in triumph.

A gloved hand reached to grab a broad shield, red and white stripes painted onto the vibranium around a bright star on navy; a quiver of arrows with interchangeable trick-heads was secured onto a leather vested back; a bracelet was affixed around a leather-encased wrist, electrostatic charge prepared for battle. Tony wore protective goggles as he stood behind a metal desk cluttered with precise tools and repair equipment, soldering iron emitting sparks as he adjusted the interior of his Iron Man helmet, the blue of his HUD flickering into a glow through the eyes.

The God of Thunder raised Mjolnir heavenwards, dark clouds swirling to gather above and striking lightning down onto her head. Blades of grass and leaves were drawn up to blow around as the streaks of static branched from the hammer to impact the ground.

Tony had donned his helmet, the HUD powering on with holographic displays of the arc reactor, his location, and the lack of armed opponents surrounding while Captain America strode with Hawkeye and Black Widow through the crowded hanger of the Helicarrier.

The lightning reached down along the shaft of Mjolnir to follow Thor’s limb, intricate metal armour piecing together in its wake.

A mechanic looked up with furrowed brows at Steve, Clint, and Natasha’s armed entrance through the hatch of the Quinjet, hesitantly protesting, “H- Hey, you guys aren’t authorized to be in here.”
“Son,” the Captain said with a stern gaze, “just don’t.”

“Busting out the age play,” Tony commented with a smirk.

“Tony,” Steve sighed in exasperation.

“Don’t try to use that tone on me, gramps.”

Fury stood on the reinforced glass of the flooring that headed the bridge, slowly shuffling through the bloodied trading cards in thought as Hill approached his side.

“Sir,” she addressed, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Agent Hill,” he replied, his eye unwavering from the items held between his fingers.

“Those cards…” she began as Fury cast his gaze in her direction, “they were in Coulson’s locker, not in his jacket.”

“That’s right,” Phil muttered, eyes narrowed as he recollected the depth of loss at the ruin of his collection.

He returned his attention to the cards with a huff of a sigh, fanning them out gingerly in his hands before exhaling heavily. “They needed the push,” he answered simply with twisted mouth. Hill narrowed her eyes at the side of his head.

In the pale sky below, the Iron Man suit soared past, his thrusters leaving a thin trail that was swiftly overtaken by the flight of a Quinjet. An agent reported over the PA, “We have an unauthorized departure from Base Six.”

“They found him,” Fury announced as Hill’s brow smoothed and eyes widened at the sight of the airborne exits. He abruptly commanded, “Get our communications back up – whatever you have to do. I want eyes on everything.”

“Yes, sir.”
The Avengers continue to watch the events of the disc, the finale of the invasion arriving alongside evidence of the Other’s control.

The thrusters and steadying repulsors of the Iron Man suit sputtered as Tony flew over the East River and Brooklyn Bridge, flight unstable in the air from the damage done in battle as he made his way through the skyscrapers of the large city.

On top of his tower in the distance, the Tesseract crackled with energy as she rose and began to revolve, glowing brightly as the machine around her unfolded to better encircle the hovering cube. Radiation streaked around and up into the semi-circular dome above, the mechanism starting to rotate.

“Sir, I’ve turned off the arc reactor,” Jarvis reported as Tony lifted his palms to slow his flight as he approached, “but the device is already self-sustaining.”

“Shut it down, Dr. Selvig,” he ordered as he hung in the air above the surface of the roof, Erik spinning to look up at him.

“It’s too late,” he shouted in glee, turning back to the Cube, “she can’t stop now.” He stepped around in awe of the energy before enlightening, azure shining through his eyes, “She wants to show us something! A new universe.”

“I didn’t sound that crazed about the thing,” Clint said, tone questioning.

“Erik is a devoted astrophysicist,” Loki answered, propping his chin up on a curled fist and elaborating, “The appeal that the Mind Gem exploited was that yearning in him to understand the workings of the universe. The Tesseract is the epitome of not only power but unity throughout the cosmos, as is obvious in how she is able to enforce the conditions she desires as well as forge connections between people and places.”

“What about all those grunts you took from SHIELD?” Tony asked with arms crossed over his chest.

“Most were driven by simple things,” he retorted. “The promise of power was enough, once their loyalty was severed from the organization. Very few individuals were… complex.” He pointedly directed a glance at Clint, who narrowed his eyes and turned away, the others following his example instead of callously interrogating about what motivated him.

“Okay,” Tony conceded, raising his arms and firing a repulor blast at the machine. A translucent sphere materialized to absorb the impact of the attack, ripples moving outwards as the energy ricocheted to throw the engineer head over heels through the sky in a flurry of sparks. Erik was tossed backwards as well, flung to knock his head on the corner of a piece of equipment and fall unconscious.

“That was lucky,” Natasha remarked with a raised eyebrow.
“I don’t think so,” Bruce muttered. “Whenever there are a lot of pieces of equipment around there’s chance of injury.”

“Especially when you’re testing out something,” Tony interjected. “I know I’ve flung myself over tables and into walls because something reacted in a way I didn’t expect.”

“The control seems to be thrown off easily, though,” Steve commented, “with a knock to the head, at least.”

“The gem doesn’t act on its own,” Loki explained, “it has to be urged. If I had thought of all those under my control as more than tools to be used and discarded, then it would have been more difficult to release them.”

“So they were only able to be freed because you let them be?” Bruce asked.

“It could be seen that way, yes,” Loki replied, an eyebrow raised at the question posed. It seems as though the Other did me a favour in assembling this disc, he thought, else my arrangement for Midgard’s ultimate victory would not have been made all too clear to their changeable perspectives.

The scientist hummed in understanding.

The seated customers and serving staff on the patio of the café below emitted exclamations of shock at the blast from above, their heads craning to observe the disturbance and finding Iron Man suspended in the air.

“The barrier is pure energy – it’s unbreachable,” the AI discouragingly intoned within Tony’s helmet to his reply of, ‘Yeah, I got that.’

He turned his eyes onto the landing pad below, muttering, “Plan B,” at the sight of the watching God of Chaos. Loki permitted a small smile at the sight of the helpless billionaire.


“Did you approach Loki without reinforcement?” Phil questioned in addition.

“It’s my tower! Jarvis was keeping an eye on me,” Tony justified, affronted.

“It’s reckless decision-making,” the agent countered.

“It pays off,” he concluded, before mumbling, “most of the time.”

“Sir, the Mark VII is not ready for deployment—” Jarvis contended.

“Then skip the spinning rims, we’re on the clock,” he insisted, hologram lingering on his left of the tower and the offline reactor and an image of his arc opposite, a flashing warning underneath that RT output was at 16%. He lowered to the curving catwalk into the building and landed with a clang as he powered off his thrusters, beginning to stride along the pathway.

The metal ring he had stood in the middle of rose behind him and separated as he walked, the mechanical arms removing the scratched and dented segments of armour on him. He descended the row of steps as they worked, neck twisted to keep the other brunet within his range of vision. Loki gave a slight nod at his unvoiced proposition, suggested by his disarming before him, and turned to circle around the far side of the balcony and into the suite of the tower adjacent for a conversation. Their gazes were fixed on each other as they moved, expressions cautious, but
determined on Tony’s face and interested on Loki’s.

The genius averted his eyes as he entered into the space, an incredulous huff escaping at the other’s audacity to make use of his tower. The aforementioned dark god sauntered across the tiled floor with scepter in hand, gem gleaming, humouring the philanthropist with amusement in his tone, “Please tell me you’re going to appeal to my humanity.”

“Uh, actually I’m planning to threaten you,” Tony answered, hands behind his back as he shifted to walk down the stairs to the same level Loki was on.

“You should have left your armour on for that,” he chuckled.

“Yeah,” he granted before justifying, “It’s seen a bit of mileage, and you’ve got the, uh- Glow Stick of Destiny.” The god smiled admiringly as he cast his eyes onto the weapon in hand.

“That’s sorta how I look when someone compliments J,” Tony remarked with a smirk.

“The gem is remarkably intricate in her workings and power,” Loki nodded.

Thor narrowed his eyes, observing, “Your banter is the same now as it was on the SHIELD vessel, in Loki’s rooms.”

“And here, before things got a little too hot,” Tony attached. “I’m just that magnetic a personality.”

“You always come to me,” Loki interjected. “Obviously it is my genius that is irresistible.”

“How did SHIELD manage to round up two of you?” Natasha wondered. “You were in the middle of a battle.”

“Technically, we weren’t yet,” Tony amended.

Tony offered, “Would you like a drink?”

Phil sighed.

“Stalling me won’t change anything,” Loki laughed, grinning assuredly as he handed the scepter into the grip of his left hand.

“Nonono – threatening,” he protested nonchalantly as he circled behind the bar, pointing to the selection of liquor behind the counter. “No drink – you sure? I’m having one.”

Loki turned away with bared teeth to view the city through the floor to ceiling windows that formed the wall beside him-

“Man, I could’ve gotten a shot in about all that gel in your hair,” Tony muttered.

“You have always combed your hair from your face, but it looks different here, somehow,” Thor commented, tilting his head slightly to the side at the image displayed.

“It’s grease,” Loki drawled dismissively. “It wasn’t as though I was afforded the luxury of washing my hair correctly.”

“Ah,” Tony uttered in unease as Thor furrowed his brows in discontent at the thought of his brother being denied the simple convenience of properly bathing himself.

-breathing hard as he stated, “The Chitauri are coming – nothing will change that.” He spun back
with impassive face to lift his chin and declare, “What have I to fear?”

“The Avengers,” Tony countered as he unstoppered the glass vial of scotch in hand. He paused and glanced up to see Loki’s furrowed brow and slow approach, acknowledging the ludicrousness with a raise of an eyebrow and rolled eyes as he explained while pouring the whiskey into a tumbler, “It’s what we call ourselves, sort of like a team. Earth’s Mightiest Heroes-type thing.”

“Yes,” he said with a mocking smile, “I’ve met them.”

“Yeah,” he laughed, “it takes us a while to get any traction, I’ll give you that one – but, let’s do a headcount here: your brother, the demigod-” Loki snarled and tightened his grip on the scepter as he turned away-

Thor attempted to contain his unhappiness at the reaction.

-Tony watching carefully the other’s turned back as he continued while reaching under the ridge of the bar counter, “-a super-soldier, living legend – who kind of lives up to the legend-”

Steve cast a grateful glance out of the corner of his eye towards the billionaire beside him, posture straightening slightly at the defense of his abilities.

He twisted the slim metal bracelet he had grabbed around his wrist and clicked it closed.

Thor tilted his head slightly and asked, “Didn’t you hear the sound of the clasp?”

Loki smirked, haughtiness rising at the indignant expression on Tony’s face, answering, “Of course.”

“No way, I totally got that by you!” the billionaire insisted.

The dark god rolled his eyes and elucidated, “A mortal would’ve heard the sound, nevermind my superior hearing.”

“Nope – you wouldn’t have let it go.”

“That’s the aspect of the irrationalness of my state of mind coming into play,” Loki countered.

“Wouldn’t that be reasoning for immediately reacting to the sound of Tony devising something then?” Bruce suggested.

“Perhaps under different circumstances,” he conceded. “With the scepter’s influence upon me and the Other’s expectations, the machinations against their holds were construed deep within my subconscious – where the majority of my mind dwelled. It’s definitely not a mindscape healthy to remain in, but users of seidr are able to experience it with less damage than others forced into a lengthy dreamstate.

“That is why you may have noticed a difference in behaviour between then and now – a fraction of my conscious self is less able to resist the gem’s influence. And yet, it was through this division that I was able to manipulate events to some degree so to ensure those plans were ruined. I recognized that you had a plan underway – which was a relief, because if you had honestly stripped out of your sole functional armour so to converse with me I would have simply killed you to spare myself exposure to your stupidity.”

Bruce spoke over Tony’s argument of ‘I’ve always a plan of some kind,’ to state, “We’re going to come back to the split-consciousness aspect – it’s come up before,” mindful of Phil’s
dissatisfaction with interruption of the disc.

“-a man with breath-taking anger-management issues-” Loki looked over his shoulder to smirk at the list and ‘intimidation’, turning to pace back towards the bar. “-a couple of master assassins…” Tony finished as he snapped the other bracelet on, pointing to add, “And you, big fella, you’ve managed to piss off every single one of them.”

“That was the plan.”

He had allowed himself a sip of his drink, retorting, “Not a great plan,” with a patronising twist of his lips. “When they come – and they will – they’ll come for you.”

“I have an army.”

“We have a Hulk.”

Bruce shook his head slightly at Tony’s elevation of the Other Guy’s use.

“Oh, I thought the beast had wandered off?” he questioned with a gesticulation of his scepter.

“You’re missing the point,” Tony said as he moved closer. “There is no throne, there is no version of this where you come out on top. Maybe your army comes, and maybe it’s too much for us – but it’s all on you. Because if we can’t protect the Earth you can be damn well sure we’ll avenge it.”

Tony took the liberty of drinking a portion of his scotch again as Loki prowled over the few steps separating them. “How will your friends have time for me,” he growled, “when they are so busy fighting you?” The whir of the scepter’s power sounded in the room as Tony’s eyes widened, the gem shining bright azure as its energy flowed over the tip of the blade and it touched the center of his chest.

The occupants of the room tensed at the revelation of Tony having faced the control of the scepter, with the exception of the engineer and Loki. Said sorcerer’s eyes were drawn to the center of the man’s chest once again in interest of its necessity, not having been satisfied with the brief description of its workings provided earlier to Bruce upon the Helicarrier.

With the faint ring of metal the gem’s power dissipated, the two left staring at the end of the scepter.

Several exhales were released at the tableau.

Loki breathed through his confusion with parted lips, having lowered the weapon and raising it again to Tony’s held breath, and the same cling upon contact with the face of the arc reactor.

“This usually works,” he said in mystification.

“Well, performance issues, you know,” Tony replied with a mock-sympathetic expression. “It’s not uncommon – one out of five, I’m told-” His jibe was cut off by Loki abruptly seizing him by the throat, his eyes widening in panic as he was tossed to the floor. He uttered as he climbed to his feet, “Jarvis, anytime now.”

Loki had moved swiftly to his side and grabbed him by the jaw, drawing him nearer to his face as Tony clutched the arm holding him. “You will all. Fall. Before me,” he pronounced furiously, Tony choking out a ‘Deploy!’ to the AI who began to slide open a panelled section of the wall on the other side of the room. ‘Deploy!’ he choked out again as he was lifted from the ground and hurled bodily through a window.
The glass pane shattered upon impact as Tony crashed through it, emitting a scream as he toppled head over heels down past the windows of the dozens of floors of his tower. The wind whistled around him as he managed to steady the freefall by facing his torso to the distant ground and bending his arms into right angles, slightly spreading his legs and bending his knees to parachute against the force of buffeting air.

Above, Loki spun around at the sound of a mechanical whirl to face the ejection of a shiny metal capsule from its hidden space in the wall, the machine punching into his side as it passed him to smash through a window and follow the descent of its Creator. Hot-rod red and gold flaps spread out along its back as tracking lasers unfolded from the shoulders of the chest-piece imbedded with an arc reactor that lead the suit, scanning and locking onto the backs of the bracelets Tony had adorned with a series of bright beeps. The suit stretched to secure itself around his wrists as the engineer splayed his limbs, the extent of the appliance pressed up along his back as it unravelled to encircle him. Compact gears expanded to surround the lengths of his arms and legs, hips and back, as the large chest-piece flipped over his head to fasten itself. The placement of his repulsors was followed by the intricate panelling of his fingers, and then around his neck before his helmet slid down and the HUD established itself.

Tony fired his repulsors to halt his fall just as he approached the face of the concrete sidewalk beneath him, where citizens gasped in surprise as he quickly turned around and soared back up the length of the tower.

Gazes were directed between the two at the illumination of the extent of their confrontation, Clint noting, “That was close.”

Tony shrugged. “What else is new? And I was bugged about my tower being too tall! Can never have too many floors – you know, in case you’re thrown off the top of it.”

Loki hummed in absorption of Tony’s nonchalance as, in contrast, the members of his team directed assessing stares onto him. The five refrained from commenting on his lack of regret this time around, though. He rubbed a finger along his lower lip in thought.

Loki looked down at him with a closed-mouthed sneer as he rose to hover before him, announcing heatedly, “And there’s one other person you pissed off.

His name was Phil.”

Phil allowed a small smile.

Loki raised his scepter with a grin however Tony raised a hand, his palm whirring as he fired a repulsor blast and knocked the god backwards. He landed on his back with a yell as his scepter clattered beside him, but before Tony could move further into the floor the spinning device on top of the tower abruptly increased in speed and shot a blinding beam into the sky. He turned his helmet upwards to find the ray terminating at a fixed point in mid-air above, the energy blossoming outwards in waves to form a dark circle that shone with the stars behind a point in space. On the other side, the glowing blue eyes of legions of armoured Chitauri turned to the daylight shining through the gradually growing portal, and in pairs they directed flying boards down into Earth’s atmosphere.

“Right,” Tony recognized in shock, HUD alighting with red as it catalogued his weapons’ stock and tracked the incoming opponents. “Army.”

His thrusters blasted him skyward to contend with the grey aliens as they screeched, one attached to the steering mechanism of each hovering vehicle while another stood armed with a large gun.
behind. The weapons shot a blue laser from their tips, many beginning to fire at Tony’s approaching form as he started decimating the present ranks with his repulors while swerving to avoid their shots. One of the boards clipped him on its flight past, the suit rolling in the air as Tony groaned, quickly righting himself and arming the array of missiles imbedded above his right shoulder. The panel flipped open to fire the first bank of twenty at the aliens, the rounds spiraling to annihilate each pair as the genius soared through the explosions.

“How many weapons do you have on you at any given time in the suit?” Natasha wondered.

Tony smirked. “A lot – and I keep changing things up, so don’t bother asking for a number. Came in handy here though, I’m always prepared.” Phil raised an eyebrow. “-for alien invasions and genocidal megalomaniacs and terrorists and things.”

The Tesseract’s beam streaked brightly up to the portal high above the city, the infantry of the Chitauri army flying down to spread out in squadrons to the surrounding areas. All traffic on the streets below halted; businessmen, students, all the civilians bearing witness to the event wandering out onto the streets or stepping out of their cars or cabs to stare up in horrified awe. At the swift descent of the aliens the crowd began screaming and clamouring for shelter, the rays fired into the streets throwing cars, blasting through the paved roads, and launching fires. Sparks showered the spaces between buildings as flames erupted as a result of the Chitauri’s attacks, New Yorkers chaotic in their attempts to flee the destruction. The wait-staff of the small café below the tower scrambled to usher their patrons into the building before contributing to the cacophony of screams of terror in the air as several boards flew over them, shooting freely. A waiter and two waitresses were the last to dash into the attached building, one, Beth, the blonde who had served the Captain the day before. They panted in relief when afforded a temporary shield from the attack, gaping out the window at the sight of the invasion.

Steve pursed his lips at the sight of her caught in the crossfire, a reminder of all the innocents who were endangered.

Loki strode out along the length of Tony’s dismantling catwalk high above in a shimmer of gold, armour now constructed upon him gleaming in the sunlight as the scepter lengthened in hand, azure gem vivid. His green cape flapped in the faint breeze stirred by the soaring vehicles, and he raised his hands in a show of his initiation of chaos. He closed his eyes and inhaled, the Other raising his covered eyes upon his dark asteroid at the mental communication.

“My time has come,” Loki stated with a small smile as he gazed down at the city, skyscrapers ablaze and topped with plumes of smoke.

“Resistance?” the grey-skinned being drawled in question.

“From a few,” he acknowledged. “We’ll pick them apart.”

“And the rest, come par?”

Loki’s brow furrowed as his eyes shifted focus, before he uttered, “Mow them down,” to the Other’s bloodied smirk.

“You can’t rule without people,” Tony pointed out.

Loki rolled his eyes in exasperation and admitted, “I wasn’t exactly at my most rational by this point.”

“Loki!” Thor called in anger, landing on the balcony below with Mjolnir in hand. The God of
Chaos turned to the other with a sneer as he raised his hammer and demanded, “Turn off the Tesseract or I’ll destroy it.”

“You can’t,” he shouted, pointing his scepter down at him. “There is no stopping it – there is only The War.”

“So be it.”

Loki leapt down with a yell and stab of the scepter, Thor grunting as he dodged to the side and swung Mjolnir for Loki to move behind his long weapon and the hammer to impact the vertical length. He was thrown back with a clang as Loki jerked the tip of the scepter from the flooring and sliced it in an arc around him to Thor’s hasty crouching beneath the swing. The momentum brought the weapon up along the back of Loki’s shoulders, and he fired an azure beam from the tip to Mjolnir deflecting the attack. Loki brought the scepter into the grasp of both of his hands to repeat the action and Thor redirected the concussive blast with his hammer’s head again, the wreck of the ‘R’ and ‘K’ of the emblazoned ‘Stark’ on the tower shot through and its charred remains sent tumbling to the ground below.

Tony allowed a melodramatic groan of dismay at the sight.

Men and women screamed at the onslaught of the Chitauri’s shots fired from their vehicles above, running through the streets in search of shelter as sirens called through the air. The white and blue NYPD cars screeched to a stop at the end of one of the main streets the aliens were attacking, a cop stepping out to stare wide-eyed at the invasion as Iron Man soared overhead with four pairs of Chitauri trailing after him.

The Quinjet flew over the edge of the city towards where the bright azure of the Tesseract’s power beamed upwards, Natasha radioing, “Stark, we’re on your 3 headed north-east.”

“What – did you stop for drive-through?” he remarked tensely at the video of her communication displayed in the bottom corner of his helmet.

Steve crossed his arms over his chest in irritation at himself for permitting Tony’s confrontation of Loki and sole defense by their delay in arriving, though he knew they had not dawdled in their speed of pursuit.

“Swing up Park, I’m gonna lay ‘em out for you.”

He darted through the clear sky followed closely by eight flying boards, circling his tower to Loki and Thor exchanging blows on the balcony while he swerved to dodge the flurry of rays fired at him. He turned sharply to a couple of the aliens crashing into the side of a building as the Quinjet sailed down a perpendicular street, Natasha unveiling a large mechanized gun from the hull. Clint flew between the columns of high-rises as Tony soared through the intersection in front of him, Natasha firing the rail gun at the aliens that tailed him before they crashed through one as Clint tilted the plane upwards to fly over the building facing them.

“Sir, we have more incoming,” Jarvis warned.

“My?” Tony said briskly in recognition, replying with determination, “Let’s keep them occupied.”

The Quinjet circled up around Stark Tower as she shot down the Chitauri that flew to engage her, above, Thor swinging Mjolnir with a grunt and bared teeth while Loki arched backwards to allow her to sail over his head. The latter surged forward with a snarl to grab Thor by the nape of the
neck and crash his head through the glass panes that rose waist high to serve as railings.

Clint and Natasha watched with furrowed brows the battle between the two for a second as they hovered higher, Clint inviting ‘Nat?’ with a brief turn of his head towards her to her answering, “I see him.” He steered the jet around so to face the gods below, Loki baring his teeth at the sight. He threw Thor to the floor and raised the long scepter as he balanced himself amidst Natasha’s shooting, and then he fired a beam of blue at the plane.

The left wing was impacted with a plume of flame that rocked the jet, Clint and Natasha flinching as Thor’s face shadowed at the spectacle. He tackled Loki with a roar as fire spread through the turbine of the plane, smoke coating the underside and wafting through the air in a thick stream as she swung unsteadily. She toppled and began to fall to the ground to Steve’s frantic grasp of the secured metal bars above him in the back area. The flaps on top of her body tilted in order to try and direct her descent as Thor punched while Loki lifted his forearms to defend, the two locked close together in combat.

The Quinjet plummeted in a dark cloud, Steve tossed with the motions as he scrambled to regain his hold with his left hand, the grip having been lost with his thrown balance, his legs splayed and kicking in suspension. Natasha gripped the protrusions along her sides as Clint strained to maintain control of the wrecked airplane, lips pursed and brow furrowed. She whirled around a corner of the tower, right side skimming the tops of two buildings she passed, Clint baring his teeth as he forced her along a street; a couple of business persons left gaping out their windows at the nearness of flight. They fell to the expanse of a paved square whose concrete was broken and forced to part as the jet slid forward.

Driven to a halt by the base of the building opposite, Clint and Natasha panted as they whipped off their headsets and unbuckled their seat harnesses to the becoming ever-present sound of civilians screaming. Steve attached his shield to his left arm as he strode out of the opening hatch, Natasha and Clint following. They darted glances up to the top of the tower in the distance as they skipped around the abandoned cars in the middle of the road, Steve stating, “We got to get back up there.”

“On foot, in a warzone?” Bruce asked worriedly. “I’m sorry I took so long.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony comforted with a smirk and nudge of his elbow. “We had it under control for a while – and then you showed up in the nick of time.”

“You were thrown out a window.”

Some dates just end with a side of crazy.”

They ran between pieces of debris and flipped vehicles whose engines still flamed before coming to a stop before Grand Central, a loud mechanical growl sounding from above. All three craned their necks so to gape at the portal, Clint sinking into a defensive stance as the fingers of his right hand tightened their grip on his bow.

The white of the faint clouds contrasted with the deep, dark space shown through the portal, a shadow moving towards the opening. A round head with shining blue eyes opened its maw to allow another reverberating roar through the stunned air as it arrived, back ridged with layers of thick shell and as the fins at its sides propelled it through the sky. Tall spines ran up its length as it flew down along Stark Tower before arching up and swerving through the street to the decimation of the statue crowning the terminal they stood in front of.

Steve, Natasha, and Clint all turned to follow its progression as it passed overhead and continued on, legions of Chitauri rappelling from where they had been hanging from its sides onto the
buildings it was weaving between. They emitted sparks as they slid down as their claws secured a hold, one jumping through a window to land on all fours while those inside screamed and ran from their desks as it removed the gun from its back and stood to fire towards them.

“Stark, are you seeing this?” Steve asked apprehensively.

“Seeing – still…working on believing.” he admitted in awe.
Hostility

Chapter Summary

The group continues to watch the disc as previously unknown aspects of each other’s battles during the invasion are witnessed.

_He questioned, “Where’s Banner – has he shown up yet?”_

Bruce shook his head at Tony’s unfounded belief in him, after the destruction he had wrought on the Helicarrier. His unfounded trust as well, that enabled him to feel confident in his survival of poking and prodding him while aboard the aircraft in testing his level of control over the Other Guy.

_“Banner?”_

_“Just keep me posted.” Tony insisted. “Jarvis, find me a soft spot,” he bade in eagerness as he soared parallel to the creature slashing through high-rises with its fins._

_“You would move straight to attacking the largest adversary,” Phil remarked exasperatedly to Tony’s cocky smirk._

_“Look at this!” Thor yelled, Mjolnir caught between the gods’ bodies as the blond held the other close and shook him fiercely. “Look around you!” Loki’s eyes were wide as he panted, noting the invading Chitauri and burning buildings spread out below. “You think this madness will end with your rule?” he snarled._

_Loki stared at him with fearful gravity, saying, “I-It’s too late.” He breathed hard as he looked towards the violence surrounding. “It’s too late to stop it.”_

Assessing glances were cast towards Loki at his words, glances that he dismissed in favour of addressing after the possessors’ reactions to his subsequent action.

_“No – we can, together,” Thor asserted softly._

_Loki allowed his panting mouth to curl upwards at the corners in response, before he inserted a small knife between the fingers of his right hand and stabbed Thor between the ribs. He gasped as he instinctively hunched forward, dropping his hammer as Loki grasped the scepter he had left propped between their bodies. Thor stumbled back and fell to one knee, bracing himself with his right hand on the flooring as Loki stood over him and chided, “Sentiment,” a tear gathering in the corner of his eye and falling onto his cheek as he smiled widely._

_“Every time,” Tony muttered._

_“Was it the truth though?” Steve asked, elaborating, “If you thought there was no way to stop it but didn’t want it for the world, then why didn’t you do more about it? You could have asked Thor for help – he kept offering it!”_

Loki narrowed his eyes before venomously stating, _“What part of my magic being bound and having limited consciousness available to aid you do you not understand?” I will say no more! You_
deserve to know no more. I am healing and working past those months of torture, I will not reveal them to any of you. “It’s evident in my trickery here that I’m not of sound mind.

“In convincing another of one character, interchanging the opposite persona repeatedly only works against anything accomplished and fosters doubt. If I wanted Thor to believe my actions stemming from ‘misplaced’ betrayal then I wouldn’t continually turn around to injure him. How would that inspire pity or softened blows from him? It would not. Projecting reluctance in violence against Midgard would be much more beneficial in manipulating him.

“It’s lucky indeed that one part of me was able to be deluded into thinking this trickery was working to win the world while the other noted the frailty of my handling of the situation and was able to enforce a certain direction so to motivate you all to work united against me.”

“Finding a way to undermine them in your condition…” Bruce muttered in amazed incredulity.

“Or finding a way to take advantage of the situation afterwards,” Natasha contended. They could not all afford to be carried away by the Trickster’s defenses when he had brought about so much harm. He vaguely repeated how he was able to get around the scepter’s influence and his physical, psychological, weaknesses to manipulate them all into winning, but he did not offer anything concrete.

The Other came after Loki for failing, but that wasn’t proof of him being forced into his actions. And all of the potential information they could have gleaned from the being happened to be destroyed when the god had killed him.

The story was intricate, and truthful aspects might have been incorporated, but Natasha thought it more likely for Loki to have thought to work this angle having been defeated and having access to no allies. She had thought a cautious level of skepticism would remain, but it appeared as though it was being overcome quickly by all. At least one of them had to remain unaffected, to protect them all.

Loki was drawing Clint to him – unnaturally so after what had happened. She did not know all of the details of their interactions during the invasion, but would have to persuade her partner to share with her so she could understand his thoughts on the silver-tongued god. Why he was growing to tolerate him at the same rate as the others.

This newly forged team would not be able to sustain any more fractures between them.

“Agent Romanoff,” Phil chastised, and she quieted, having contributed her warning.

Thor surged to his feet and yanked Loki by the shoulder with an enraged shout, twisting him and kicking him down to crash through the short glass boundary to his releasing of the scepter. Then he crouched to grab him by the neck and waist and hoist him above his head to slam him down to the ground, Loki groaning at the impact. He remained still for a second before rolling away from the Thunderer and dropping off the edge of the balcony. Thor stepped forward quickly to watch as Loki caught one of the Chitauri soaring past, grabbing onto the metal casting of the flying vehicle. Five pairs of the aliens swerved to follow his flight through the skyscrapers, Thor breathing hard as they swung out of sight while pulling out the bloodied throwing knife and tossing it to the floor.

“Drama, drama, drama,” Tony clucked.

Steve darted around an abandoned taxi to where Natasha and Clint crouched behind another, throwing his back against the body as Natasha whipped her head around for a moment as he joined them. “We’ve got civilians trapped here,” Clint informed, knelt on one knee.
Blue beams fired from above as several Chitauri flew past. “Loki,” Steve conveyed as the god overtook them. The blasts tore through windows and concrete, overturning cars and buses with explosions as innocents tried to escape the street he sailed over, cape flapping behind him. “They’re fish in a barrel down there,” he grimly realized at the scene before ducking further behind the car as a ray hit the corner.

Natasha stood and fired her two handguns at the Chitauri on the ground in front of her, Clint crouching low to the ground as he ran to the side of an upturned taxi to see two more aliens land to crush a black car and aim their guns at them. “We got this. It’s good – go,” she urged the Captain.

“Do you think you can hold them off?” he asked.

“Not a problem,” Phil instantly guaranteed.

“Captain,” Clint started as he tapped three buttons on the grip of his bow and his quiver rotated to insert a shaft into the specified arrowhead, “it would be my genuine pleasure.” He reached over his left shoulder to grab the arrow and stood without hesitation, spinning as he knocked it to stand fully, pull back, and fire. The projectile hit the closest grey-skinned being in the center of the forehead, the creature falling backwards as the tip fired miniature rounds and killed another two.

Steve rounded the taxi as Natasha covered him, leaping up to vault off the intricate railing of the bridge they were on. He flailed in the air as he flew down amidst the beams of the Chitauri’s weapons, landing roughly on the roof of the bus abandoned below and rolling to avoid further attacks and the sprouting flames before running its length and leaping from it. The long vehicle was riddled with explosions as he landed on the van in front, the blast tipping the car over its front to the Captain being flung through the air. He used the momentum to tuck into a roll in midair so to control the landing, stumbling at the high fall once on the ground but scrambling to continue darting forward at the rays directed at his heels.

“I thought the ad said, ‘Super-soldier,’ not ‘Super-gymnast’,,” Tony remarked at the leaps through the air to Steve’s restraint of rolling his eyes at the other’s quips.

Natasha shot her twin pistols as behind her Clint helped trapped civilians out through a window in the damaged streetcar that was angled across the width of the bridge. He grabbed a young boy handed to him from above and set his feet on the ground as a woman worked open another window and climbed through. Clint manually pulled apart the doors along the side of the vehicle as she sustained her defense and the rest of the passengers rushed out.

An alien grunted as a round charred the center of its forehead, Clint stepping up to Natasha’s side while he knocked an arrow, drawing back and firing as she remarked, “Just like Budapest all over again.”

“You and I remember Budapest very differently,” he replied with bemused brow as he continued shooting, gaze drawn up above intermittently.

“I was going to say, what drugs were you on in Budapest?”

“There were definitely some SHIELD trials that had hallucinogenic side effects,” she replied. ‘Really?’ Tony questioned, eyes shining with interest, as Bruce’s gaze focused on the superior agent to his right, asking, “What sort of trials?” Loki’s stare was rapt upon Clint’s form.

“Allergy tests, drug resistance – standard procedure,” Phil defended, to thoughtful hums.

Steve dashed over the hood of a ruined car with his shield braced on his right forearm, cutting in
front of a pair of policemen as he hopped onto the front of another forsaken automobile and vaulted over the taxi beside. He ran from the blue rays dogging his steps with long strides, moving up the underside of an overturned taxi blocking his path.

“How long are we going to be watching you running, seriously?”

“Tony,” Bruce hushed quietly.

Thor had flown further upwards to find Erik lying amidst the machinery’s cables, crouching and laying a hand on the scientist to ascertain that he was merely unconscious. The blond god turned with determined brow to the Tesseract, standing and adjusting his heft of Mjolnir while stepping closer. He reeled back and swung the hammer down onto the device only for a translucent sphere to once again materialize to protect the surrounding mechanics as well as the Cube. The energy ricocheted outwards to toss Thor away to roll through the gravel of the roof in a spray of dirt.

“Ha!” Tony jeered in commiseration while Loki smirked in amusement.

Teenagers were huddling under toppled cars as men and women risked the open street to seek shelter in the buildings on either side, a fleet of police officers standing astride their vehicles attempting to shoot down the aliens that soared by overhead.

One officer hurriedly weaved through the white and blue cars to one of the others standing up front, informing, “It’s going to be an hour before they can scramble the National Guard.”

“National Guard?” he repeated before the two ducked under a blast that impacted the windshield behind them. “Does the army know what’s happening here?!”

“Do we?” he questioned, overwhelmed.

“There are probably some new courses in the academy now, that’s for sure,” Clint snorted.

They turned abruptly as Steve landed in a crouch on the car before them, aiming their guns at him before lowering them in bewilderment as he began, “You need men in these buildings,” with a gloved hand indicating those alongside the wide street. “There are people inside and they’re going to be running right into the line of fire. You take them to the basement or to the subway – you keep them off the streets.” The two gaped with wide eyes as he continued authoritatively, “I need a perimeter as far back as 39th-”

“Why the hell should I take orders from you?” the elder demanded to Steve’s pause. Suddenly a couple of hover boards swung around the corner and fired shots at one of the cars nearby to the two policemen lurching backwards and Steve spinning and standing in defense, an explosion flipping the remains of the vehicle.

He deflected a beam with his shield now on his left arm as two Chitauri landed on either side of him, bashing the one on his left in the head before darting around and smoothly handing his shield over to his other hand to slice down and deflect the close-range ray fired from the gun mounted on the other’s arm before reeling back and punching it in the head. The first moved to reengage him to two guards with the shield before it was tossed to the ground with a guttural squeal. Steve spun back to the second and severed the gun, and lower arm, from the alien’s body with the edge of his shield while taking hold of the weapon as the limb fell to the ground, bashing the weakened body from his stand.

“Proof of dominance and capability of leadership,” Bruce noted.

“I need men in those buildings,” the officer repeated as he turned and addressed his squad, jerking
his thumb over his shoulder in directive as he explained, “lead the people down and away from the streets.” ‘You got it,’ he received in obedience as he angled his chin down and lifted the radio slightly from his shoulder to affirm in addition, “We’re going to set up a perimeter all the way down to 39th street.”

“See what you can do with this,” Steve instructed as he panted, idly tossing the extraterrestrial gun forward. The younger officer that had remained fumblingly caught it in his arms as the Captain turned away and began to return to his team. He gazed after the other before returning his attention onto the new weapon.

He timidly crept through the flaming, overturned cars buried in debris, analyzing the alien technology now held in hand before his head snapped up at the snarl of one of the Chitauri. He instinctually fired a blast before it could, pausing in the silence after to kneel and radio, “If you find enemies down get the guns – the guns are very good.”

“Yep – got to love that advanced alien tech,” Tony nodded before swivelling to face Phil. “You gathered all of the remains in the streets, right? I want to play with some of them.”

“Our analysts are sorting, recording, and analyzing all of the technology salvaged-”

“I can turn out more and you know it-”

“-you won’t share,” Phil interrupted with raised eyebrows, daring the billionaire to deny it. Tony did not though he crossed his arms over his chest and vowed to acquire the information from SHIELD’s servers later, for their own benefit.

Flaming pieces of debris fell from the tops of the tall buildings lining the streets at the Chitauri attacks, the concrete landing to spray dust and fire onto the cluttered surface below. A young boy clutched onto the seatbelt tight across his chest as he panicked at the screaming outside of the car, his mother leaning back from the passenger seat in front to usher him to curl across the seat, his form covered with her arms and torso. The father in the driver’s seat flinched and yelled at the reducing skyline that crashed around the vehicle before turning to view his threatened family cowering behind him.

The occupants of the room winced at the innocents caught in the cross-fire and their obvious terror.

He forced the car into Drive and propelled it forward, tires screeching as he swerved around the debris and fleeing civilians, hood demolished and engine topped with bright fire. He managed to bank into a wide alleyway while up above, overlooking their fleeing from the edge of a high-rise’s roof, a Chitauri aimed its staff at the vehicle.

Captain America tackled the alien as it fired the beam, the shot arching wide as the two fell down to land on the pavement below. Steve glanced over his right shoulder as the car neared, frantically pushing himself from all fours into the air, spreading his limbs wide and rolling clear over the roof as it sped over the grey-skinned creature. He landed hard on his side as the vehicle continued on, the Chitauri having latched onto the rear bumper and managing to maintain its hold. The young boy and mother were twisted around to peer, gaping, out the rear windshield for a moment before the alien growled and smashed an arm through the pane.

The father yelled in fury as the mother screamed, reaching back to push her son down onto the seat and cover as much of him as she was capable of from the grasping grey claws. Steve swiftly climbed to his feet at the sight and grabbed his shield from where it lay, instantly whipping it to smash into the distancing nape of the alien’s neck as the car crashed into the dumpster at the end of the alley. The Captain darted to haul the corpse from the back of the vehicle and toss it to the
ground, breathing heavily as he turned to stare at the boy who offered his shield back to him.

He received it with a thankful nod as the parents rushed out of their front seats, securing it onto his forearm before instructing, “Get underground.”

“Yes, sir,” the father responded as he reached into the back seat and hoisted his son into his arms.

“Nice timing there, Cap,” Tony commended.

“We couldn’t save everyone though,” he stated grimly, brows furrowed.

“You did your best,” Phil reassured.

In the window of Central Café, Beth stood with her coworkers gazing in awe out at the destruction in the streets before a series of blasts were directed their way. They screamed as they flinched back and covered their heads as the windows shattered upon impact, crouching defensively closer to the floor before she pushed open the door and led them out into the streets. A woman huddled behind a pillar of the building before sinking to the ground as she panicked, whimpering in distress and covering her eyes.

A grey-skinned being observed those now littering the area of the street it was fixated on, firing a ray that killed the man moving in front of Beth. She reeled back with a horrified gasp as other civilians passed her before gathering herself and running around the debris in search of shelter. She slowed when she began to pant, the air permeated with dust, searching the sides of the street for a place to hide. An explosion rocked the building to her right and she threw herself onto all-fours to crawl around the vehicle on its side in front of her to shield herself. She curled into a ball and covered her head as a plume of powdered concrete sprayed out and pieces of the building tumbled over the car.

She lifted herself from the ground a few minutes later, gazing around at the others that ran screaming in every direction before picking herself up. She trotted through the taxis that lined the street, breathing heavily as she frantically searched through the pollution for some salvation while ducking whenever the sound of ruin reached her. She came to an arch that had been ripped from the side of a building and gingerly made her way through, slowing, panting, as she saw a Chitauri corpse on the ground and its still hovercraft.

She stepped warily closer before her eyes were drawn skyward, a figure caped in scarlet streaking past. The young policeman was making his way over the cars that blocked the street with alien gun in hand when he spotted her, her gaze returning to the direction she had been heading and noticing him as well. He beckoned her to move to him to her shock, gesturing again before a beam struck him in the back. She gasped and placed a hand over her mouth before a Chitauri lunged from her side and grabbed her about the arms from behind.

Steve’s eyes widened in realization as to the fates of the two he had interacted with, gritting his teeth in suppression of any irrational blame directed onto the dark god.

Tony flew around the tall buildings that littered the city to come to face the head of the goliath shelled creature gliding through the air. He sailed past while firing dozens of missiles from the panels above his shoulders, the explosions detonating along its maw and along the joins of its fins to its body. It groaned while snapping its teeth in the direction he had flown, turning tightly to follow his path, tail cutting through the corner of a high-rise behind it and sending bricks of debris crashing to the street below in a plume of dust.

“Well, we got its attention,” Tony stated as he hovered to note the creature’s pursuit, it having
turned from the established perimeter. “What the hell was step two?” he anxiously muttered, eyes wide as he hastily spun to dart in the opposite direction.

“Don’t even say anything about my planning,” Tony interjected, elaborating in defense, “I always figure it out on the fly – and I did what you wanted me to anyways!”

“Who are you trying to convince here?” Natasha asked.

“So maybe sometimes there’s some damage to something, but really, I’m tired of you guys harping on me.”

“The property damage under your name, even before you built the suit, was extensive,” Phil reminded.

“Jolly Green here wrecks more than me! No offense.”

“It’s a statement of fact, why would I-”

“Yes, but SHIELD expects that.”

“You don’t expect it from him?” Clint snorted.

“Says the man who blew up the Helicarrier.”

“Didn’t you blow up your own mansion?”

‘I was dying – I’m allowed to do whatever I want with my house-’ Tony argued while Loki followed the banter between the two in bewilderment. How is it that they are able to communicate to one another the acceptability of these comments? What understanding was reached unspoken between them? When?

“We are nearing the end, my friends,” Thor intruded, his implicit desire to continue the disc reinforcement by Phil casting his narrowed eyes onto them. Both Clint and Tony appeared disgruntled at the disturbance, but complied.

And for their barbs to equally have such little seriousness, Loki thought, to be abandoned so easily. Already the god could note the changes in the dynamic of the group, brought about by the discs, the events provoked, and their time spent together. He did not understand, yet, what changed so to bind them or how the gradual shift had come to be.

On the ground, Clint deflected a jab of a Chitauri staff with his bow before he swept the feet out from underneath it with her as well to throw it onto its back before him, standing above to spin the length of an arrow with a flourish before stabbing it forcefully through its chest to its shrieking and curling upwards. Natasha balanced on the back of another with one leg hoisted over a shoulder and the other twisted around its torso, sending the strong electrostatic charge of her bracelet into the exposed muscle of the alien’s neck.

She flipped from its falling corpse to engage those moving to surround her, skidding on her knees under a ray fired before spinning and leaping to smash her gun across the alien’s head. Clint sidestepped a close-ranged attack to hit a grey-skinned being on the thigh with his bow, whipping it across its back as its legs buckled to send it rolling onto its back. He fell to one knee to shoot an arrow into its chest before he drew again and knocked an arrow to fire at an enemy that he could see in a reflective surface lunging to attack his back. He stood as another swung its staff at his neck and blocked the strike with his bow.
Natasha grasped the staff knocked to the ground and twisted to spear the alien on her other side in the gut as Clint gored his opponent through the throat with an arrow before withdrawing the shaft. She spun to dodge a lunging blow and swung her acquired weapon into its back, hitting another across the head as it came at her before it grabbed the end of her staff. She pushed forward a couple of steps before she forced the end in front of its midsection and shot a beam from the tip.

Clint crouched low as he circled a trashed taxi with it is rear windshield shattered, but upon rising out from his cover a Chitauri dove to tackle him about the thighs and slam him into the ground with a snarl.

“Smooth.”

“Shut it. Let’s see how many you can kill without your suit.”

“Even with yours without your bow.”

“No way.”

“Guys,” Steve sighed.

Clint groaned as he quickly drew from the quiver he had landed on to stab the arrow into the heart of the alien above him, grabbing it by the nape of its neck to roll the prone form off of him. When he stood another marched to his side and kicked him in the chest, sending him tumbling over the hood of a taxi to land on the ground roughly on his upper back and shoulders that he used to continue rolling to land on his side. Bracing his forearms and heaving himself to his feet, he was attacked from behind and slammed into the side of a taxi with an extraterrestrial being pinning him. He managed to elbow the alien in the face before he was grabbed by the hair and had his head slammed onto the roof of the car. Clint was thrown to the ground to roll and land on his stomach, eyes alert as he paused to wait for the Chitauri to begin driving its staff downwards before rolling to the side in avoidance.

Natasha deflected a grey-skinned creature’s swipe with her own staff before swinging at another, blocking its attack before bracing the shaft across her chest to resist a strong downward swipe. The other’s swift blow threw her back onto the hood of another abandoned and wrecked taxi, gasping as she swung upwards to knock the encroaching Chitauri away. She braced her staff with both hands and surged upwards, getting to her feet while holding the other’s weapon at bay before the alien twisted to bring its shaft skyward and she was heaved into the air and over its head.

She managed to spin and angle her front away before she landed harshly on the side of a dust-covered SUV, breathing heavily. Clint ducked under a successive strike while drawing another arrow, knocking, drawing back, and shooting his opponent in the chest as she rolled to gather her firm stance and reengage.

“How were you two released from medical before me?” Tony whined.

“We’ve had training sessions with more damage,” Natasha remarked blithely.

Natasha stood between two of the infantry, swinging her staff to parry the offense of the one on her right, then her left, before returning to fire a beam at the first to fling it backwards. She spun around to land on one knee and laid the weapon over her shoulder, firing another ray at the other who had moved to attack. Natasha spun the weapon in her hands to block the grey-skinned being on either side of her. Several more Chitauri approached, two leaping over one of the cars blocking the edge of the bridge where they fought and firing blue beams from the guns on their arms.
Clint noted the additions and threw himself under the rays streaking across the area, sliding over the debris riddled ground to the outside of the ring of Chitauri that had gathered. He drew and knocked an arrow before raising onto a knee and twisting back to shoot the one closest, firing another into the alien that had stood on top of a dark car. It rolled from its highpoint onto the ground, Clint shooting another before kicking the gut of one who had approached, whipping it across the face with his bow before drawing and firing at it.

Steve ran over the large pieces of concrete building that were blocking the archer’s left side to aid the two agents, slamming his shield into an alien that had rushed to attack Clint before jabbing another and whipping another backwards. Clint stood and fired at those at a distance approaching their position before those that had gained ground gurgled abruptly as bright lines of lightening bolted down from the sky and coursed through them. Thor landed swiftly among their crumpled forms though fell unsteadily into a crouch as he braced himself on the overturned vehicle beside, climbing to his feet and stalking forward with teeth gritted in resistance to the pain of the stab wound in his side.

“What’s the story upstairs?” Steve asked as he removed his shield, adjusted her hold, and then slipped her onto his left forearm.

“The power surrounding the Cube is impenetrable,” Thor answered solemnly.

“Thor’s right, we’ve got to deal with these guys,” Tony contributed into their earpieces as he soared past overhead, their gazes following him.

“How do we do this?” Natasha asked, turning to the Captain as behind her Clint gathered in his hands the shafts of the arrows he had been able to recover.

“As a team.”

“I have unfinished business with Loki,” Thor asserted.

“Yeah? Well get in line,” Clint drawled, stare firm as he inspected the arrowheads in hand by touch.

Loki allowed a small smirk at such petty revenge momentarily overruling the scope of the invasion.

“Save it,” Steve ordered sharply, striding between the two’s eye contact. “Loki’s going to keep this fight focused on us and that’s what we need – without him these things could run wild. We’ve got Stark up top, he’s gonna need us to-” His arms that were raised in indication of the genius’ position abruptly dropped as he turned from the other three at Natasha and Thor’s gazes over his shoulder and the sound of an engine.

His incredulous stare settled onto the slowly approaching form of Bruce, riding haltingly through the ruined street accompanied by the stuttering rumble of the borrowed motorcycle he sat on top of. They moved towards him, Clint inserting arrows into the hold of his quiver, as Bruce disembarked and met them halfway.

“The prodigal son returns,” Tony sung.

“So,” he greeted hesitantly with spread hands before dropping them to rest alongside his thighs, “this all seems horrible.”

“I’ve seen worse,” Natasha commented with a brief glance over his form.
Loki raised a brow at the irrelevance to the immediate threats.

“Sorry,” he replied.

“No, we could…use a little worse,” she admitted to his quirked eyebrow and nervous nod.

“Stark, we got him,” Steve relayed.

“Banner?”

“Just like you said.”

“Then tell him to suit up,” he responded, their positions minute dots of scarlet on Park Avenue on his map of the city. “I’m bringing the party to you.” The suit flew around the corner to the following of the enormous, soaring, shelled creature, its fins slicing through the windows and supports of the corner of the tall building it banked around.

It groaned as Thor snarled and readied Mjolnir, Natasha shaking her head and remarking in argument, “I-I don’t see how that’s a party.”

It roared as it trailed after Tony’s fleeing flight, lowering to crash through the streetlights and abandoned vehicles lining the street. Iron Man whipped past as Bruce loosened his jaw and slowly turned to face the creature.

“Dr. Banner,” Steve called, having taken a few steps as if to follow, advising, “Now might be a really good time for you to get angry.”

“That’s my secret, Captain,” he led over his shoulder as he walked before pausing and revealing, “I’m always angry.”

He turned back to their foe while growing in size, lips twisting in anger as muscles smoothly bulged in transition, his skin darkening to green and fists clenching in anticipation. The Hulk stood three feet taller with jaw tensed in anger, throwing his fist forward to smash into the goliath beast’s front teeth. The muzzle crumpled at the ferocity though the Hulk’s low stance was pushed back through the concrete as it slid forward, finally forcefully halted with his increased efforts and ensuing roar. The momentum continued to propel the rest of the finned body up and over, its length gradually teetering to a vertical height that challenged that of the buildings on either side, and an imminent crash onto the Avengers gathered before it.

“Hold on!” Tony shouted as he flew back to hover before the tail arching upwards. He fired a missile into a bit of exposed flesh in front of him, the explosion tearing through the creature as Clint knelt behind a car, Thor sunk lower and covered his head with an arm, and Steve crouched alongside Natasha and held his shield over their heads. The flames ripped the beast to pieces, metal and alien flesh raining down as its head was lobbed onto a lower road.

The Chitauri screeched from their perches clinging to the sides of the high-rises they were attacking, twisting to brandish their weapons and remove their metallic face guards so to bare their teeth amidst their shrieking. The Hulk flexed the muscles along his arms and torso as he roared skyward in response, Iron Man spinning to hover closer to the ground behind as Hawkeye drew and knocked an arrow, Thor at his side twirling Mjolnir in hand while Black Widow flanked him, reloading her gun. The Captain adjusted his shield as he observed the number of extraterrestrials he and his team were facing, Tony settling beside him.

“We look good,” Tony appraised. “Could sell posters of that shot.”
“I doubt SHIELD would approve of you marketing merchandise of us,” Natasha responded.

“How not? Some extra funding in their pockets…” Tony pointed out before a sharp smirk stretched his mouth and he finished, “Besides, I’ve already had Jarvis draw up the specs for action figures.”

_—

Wrecked vehicles, taxis, and police cars were strewn about the streets as sirens and screams filled the air. Loki looked down from above in the intricate control seat of the hovercraft he had appropriated, commanding dispassionately, “Send the rest.”_
The invasion continues to both the influence of the Avengers in the prevention of casualties as well as the resultant desperation as the battle draws ever on.

Colossal shelled creatures streamed out of the portal above amidst more infantry, Natasha warning with widened eyes as she caught sight of them: “Guys.”

“Call it, Captain,” Tony said as all six tilted their heads back to view the additions.

“Alright, listen up,” he began, “until we can close that portal our priority is containment. Barton, I want you on that roof – eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays. Stark, you’ve got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out you turn it back or you turn it to ash.”

“Wanna give me a lift?” Clint proposed as he turned to Tony.

“Right,” he agreed with a nod, marching to the archer’s side. “Better clench up, Legolas.” He grasped the fastening of the quiver that lay across his shoulders and blasted into the air, hauling Clint up to the edges of the high-rises.

“Thor,” Steve called to the god’s determined attention, “you’ve got to try and bottle-neck that portal. Slow ‘em down. You’ve got the lightning – light the bastards up.” He nodded and spun Mjolnir by her strap, leaping into the air with her energy.

“You and me, we stay here on the ground,” he commanded of Natasha, “keep the fighting here.” He turned to face the final member of their team and called, “And Hulk.” His head whipped around to focus on the Captain as he waited-

Bruce furrowed his brow in consideration of the Other Guy’s attentiveness, at the awareness he could discern in his stare. He had never been able to view him before they were sent this disc, and he had assumed the monster to be nothing but anger and violence. This had been supported by the events on the Helicarrier. But now, the Other Guy was waiting, not tearing through everyone and everything but recognizing that the team that had stood around him were not the enemies; he acknowledged Steve at the leader, and was waiting for instruction.

Why? How? What intrinsic quality is he sensing that differentiates the Captain and the other four from all the other casualties he caused in his rampaging? Why is he singularly recognizing the Chitauri as the opponents?

He supposed the Other Guy had shown this single-mindedness previously, when facing the Abomination. He had also protected Betty. But it was my thoughts of her that leaked over into his behaviour, wasn’t it? I’ve only known these people for days, this team I’ve been thrown together with – what bond is there between us that the Other Guy can feel? It didn’t make sense to Bruce, his other half’s motives.

-Steve allowing a small smirk as he pointed up at the Chitauri clinging onto the buildings lining the street, finishing, “Smash.”
“Eloquent,” Natasha remarked with a roll of her eyes.

A feral grin stretched the Hulk’s lips as he sunk down to propel himself into the air with a grunt, tearing through the space between him and his foes in mere seconds before he slammed into one of the aliensanchored to a window and crushed it into the concrete, grabbing its corpse as he jumped to the high-rises across the road and repeated the demolition of an extraterrestrial. Another hanging beside his new position fired its gun at him, the Hulk turning his back to the building to smash the back of his fist into it before flipping again to kill the Chitauri beside, leaping around the corner and snagging another alien to carry and throw through the window of the next building he moved to with a crash and screech. He dragged through the stone work of the building before vaulting into the air to attack a group of Chitauri crafts that were soaring past, ruining one before he swung to annihilate another in a spray of sparks and plume of smoke.

Thor’s cape flapped behind him as he flew skywards, angling toward the tip of the Chrysler Building before landing to stand on the edge of the metal detailing arching up along the sides. He set his stare to the clouds above and raised his hammer, the masses darkening, rumbling, and gathering towards her as electricity crackled along her head. The materials of the building drew the lightning onto it, the bright streaks climbing down its four sides blindingly, shattering the windows and exposed cables that were touched. With a yell Thor swung Mjolnir towards where, in the distance, the open portal permitted the Chitauri through.

The two immense shelled creatures that were making their way into the sky creaked and groaned as their bodies were charred by Mjolnir’s energy, flinching backwards and blocking the entrance to the others in their attempts to break away from the wracking pain. Thor grit his teeth and sustained the flow of power, finally tearing through the first finned beast in an explosion of orange flames.

“Now that’s how you use a hammer,” Tony nodded.

“Can you control lightning without Mjolnir?” Bruce asked the blond god.

“No, it is through her that lightning strikes—”

“And thunder from your goat-driven chariot rolling across the skies,” Loki interjected, chin propped on a curled fist. Thor crossed his arms over his chest and grumbled, ‘I was explaining it, brother.’

“You have a chariot…pulled by goats?” Clint asked. “What part of that should we focus on?”

“The goats,” Tony whispered behind the back of his hand.

“They are named Tanngrisnir and Tanngnjóstr,” the Thunderer responded proudly.

“Are they…magical goats?” Steve questioned haltingly.

Loki tilted his head and tapped his lower lip in thought as Thor drew himself up in his chair and asserted, “The mighty creatures have no need of enhancement.”

“That isn’t what they asked,” Loki began. “Their view of magic isn’t the same as ours.”

“What? Magic is magic – it does not change.”

“Mortals confuse themselves.”

When Thor nodded in acceptance of this Tony scrunched up his nose and interrupted loudly,
“We’re in the room! And we beat your ass,” he started with a point at Loki before swivelling and dramatically indicating the other god, “And my brain can run circles around yours anytime, L’Oréal.”

“Alright,” Steve uttered determinedly, Tony crossing his arms and Thor restraining himself from the rebuttal he was about to shout at the offense, though his eyes remained narrowed on the billionaire. “Loki, why don’t you explain.”

He raised an eyebrow but consented, supporting first his comment to Thor: “You utilize the label of ‘magic’ when something doesn’t appear to conform to the rules you have established and experienced in your daily lives. On the one hand, it is used as a synonym for science; if I were to teleport to the other side of the room you would call it magic, until I explained the theorems supporting it, then it would be recognized as science. On the other hand, if an animal you recognize can perform acts which you deem impossible based your studies of that animal, it is also called magic. This is different in that the plants, animals, and beings of other Realms have evolved capabilities beyond those of their Midgard counterparts.

“So, the Captain’s query was not only applying to magical aid but also any qualities outside of the norm for a goat here to be able to accomplish. To which the answer is yes – they can stride through the skies as well as be resurrected so long as their hides and bones are preserved.”

“That…answers some questions?” Natasha commented in hesitation, having to grasp the bombardment of differences between the two Realms a challenge.

“We need to compile a list of all these species, and their abilities,” Tony advocated.

“If they have as much variation as Earth then that will take a while,” Bruce cautioned, though he didn’t object to the idea.

Aboard the Helicarrier, multiple news feeds were displayed on the control panels central to the bridge, their reports overlapping in an array of indiscernible voiceover as Fury stood with his hands behind his back. He observed the varied coverage as Agent Hill hurried to him.

“Sir,” she greeted in fretfulness, “the Council is on.”

The Director sighed before glancing down at his monitors, dragging a finger down the surface and minimizing one of the videos.

“We’re going to see their reasoning…” Steve muttered indignantly.

Hawkeye knelt on the corner of the roof of a building, felling a Chitauri as it flew past as he called out, “Stark,” drawing from his quiver as he stood, turning to shoot an arrow at another pair as he remarked, “you’ve got a lot of strays sniffing your tail.”

Tony whipped high above a street from the buildings on one side to the other, the aliens close in pursuit. “Just trying to- keep them off the streets,” he answered tensely, darting a quick glance at the number of heat signatures following as he steered.

“Well, they can’t bank worth a damn,” Clint noted, swiftly drawing as a hover board flew past him and shooting to his right outside of his peripheral to annihilate the following craft as he continued to eye Iron Man. He suggested, “Find a tight corner.”

“I will roger that,” he responded, swinging tightly around a corner.

Clint dropped to one knee once again as he held an arrow knocked, tracking the group of Chitauri
through the air with its tip before releasing. The shaft struck the center of one of the crafts, end
glowing, and the metal impacted quickly turned molten and spread upwards to liquefy the entire
joint section. The board fell into two pieces that flung the extraterrestrials through the air to crash
into the side of a high-rise as Tony leapt to blast the other leading couple with a repulsor. He
veered to avoid the collision with the ground as well as the pursuing aliens’ beams blasting the
abandoned vehicles in lines below before directing the suit into the low entrance of an above
ground parking garage.

He soared through the confined passageway to emerge over the surface of the parallel street,
banking sharply in a turn to dart the opposite way and leading one of the crafts to crash into the
building in front before falling to the ground in an explosion with thick smoke pluming upwards.
“Oh boy,” he gritted at the display depicting the nearness of the final two and his chosen flight
into a tight hallway of a concrete building. The closest instantly crashed into the side as the second
flew through the wreckage shooting. Tony scraped along the opposite side as he weaved from the
blasts before righting himself in the center just as his pursuer clipped the ceiling and tumbled
behind him in an explosion that shot the remains of the craft out of the tunnel and into the front of
another building.

Tony soared away with a trembling recognition of, “Nice call,” before steadying his suit and
asking, “What else you got?”

“Well, Thor’s taking on a squadron down on 6th,” Clint reported.

“And he didn’t invite me,” he rebuked, scanning the area of the city and tracking the seventeen
enemy ships around the god.

Loki approved of the positioning instructed by the Captain, Clint’s talents made clear and his
directives providing an abundance of aid during combat. Though the archer’s easy repartee with the
genius irked him, the banter familiar to that between himself and the man as well as himself and
Clinton. The parallels drawn from his perspective weren’t an issue, what was was the interaction
between the other two. He narrowed his eyes at the grateful smirk Tony sent towards his archer.

As he sailed away one of the gigantic shelled extraterrestrials propelled itself above the street,
groaning as it gradually turned towards the windowed side of a high-rise whose occupants gaped
in terror. Those on the archival floor level with the great maw of the beast screamed and began to
run from the side about to be impacted, though paused and threw themselves to the ground on
either side of the isle smashed through by the Hulk, who had leapt through and shattered one of
the panes on the other side of the building and roared as he ran towards the creature. He jumped
and grabbed a hold of the metal lining the alien’s jaw, hanging off of the protrusion and pulling
the head away from the full building. It snapped its teeth together as the Hulk continued to yank on
its mouth, turning towards him to try and dislodge him and thereby swinging back to carry on
down the street. The fin along its left side cut through one of the lower floors of the structure which
caused the businessmen and women inside to yell and recoil from the glass shards as it persisted in
a turn around the corner with the Hulk attached to it.

On the ground, Natasha was thrown onto her back on the hood of a car by a Chitauri before it
moved to spear her with its staff. She jerked her torso out of the way to leave the weapon impaled
in the metal as she heaved a leg over its shoulder to draw it closer, grasping her ankle with a grunt
to maintain her hold and drawing herself up to tase its neck with the bracelet on her right wrist.
She fell back and released it as it swayed, stunned, before ripping the staff beside her out of the
vehicle and flipping it around to shoot the alien in the chest with a gasp. She swung around with
the weapon readied to face Steve having leapt over a low wall.
He held his shield up before she righted the shaft, panting with blood trickling from her temple and smearing her bottom lip, then he lowered her as he approached with a glance at their momentarily safe surroundings. “Captain, none of this is going to mean a damn thing if we don’t close that portal,” she remarked, turning to gaze up at it.

“Our biggest guns couldn’t touch it,” he responded as he followed her stare.

“Well maybe it’s not about guns.”

He darted a glance at her before noting a passing hover craft and the two opponents it dropped, as well as the several having started to advance over the debris. “If you want to get up there you’re going to need a ride.”

Her eyes hardened as she tossed the Chitauri staff away, answering, “I got a ride.” He looked up as she stepped away with determination, noting the alien crafts constantly sailing over their heads. “Could use a boost though,” she suggested over her shoulder, and he stepped back to maximize the distance between them.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked, deepening his stance and bracing his shield in front of him.

“Yeah,” she relayed in hesitation, voice cracking slightly as she glanced upwards for timing. “It’s going to be fun.”

“That’s a girl,” Tony cheered to her quirked eyebrow.

She abruptly ran forward with long strides to vault off the hood of the car beside the Captain as he sunk into a lunge, before tucking into a ball and planting both feet solidly on the shield being raised. He drove her into the air to her straightening and grabbing hold of the underside of a passing craft, soaring away as a blue ray charred the face of his shield, his attention turning to a group of adversaries as he lowered his guard and weapon to confront them.

Natasha’s legs kicked without purchase as she heaved herself over the back rim of the Chitauri board, crawling forward against the wind resistance to secure a hold before drawing a knife from her belt and slicing through the tether fastening the alien upright upon the back half. She whirled around to drive a kick to its chest and send it careening to the ground below before continuing forward to the pilot whose head and upper torso were connected to the steering mechanism of the craft. She struggled to pull herself across the meagre distance, then grabbed a hold of the raised sides on either side of her and threw herself forward onto the Chitauri’s back. She stabbed knives through the muscle and into the organs below, heels hooked on its hips and crouching over it as it keened and shrieked.

“Turn, turn, turn!” she screamed as the alien’s body grew limp and she jerked the corpse so to steer, hastily managing to swing left, skimming the side of a building, before she muttered, “Less, less,” as she began to overcompensate and head towards the buildings on the other side of the street. She steadied her flight as another craft came up behind her, the enemies’ beams dodged before they were shot through by Tony’s passing.

Others’ rays impacted the side of his breast plate as Iron Man turned back as he flew before he fired twin repulsor blasts at the aircraft pursuing him, turning back and diverting more power to his thrusters afterwards to lower to street level. He wound around large pieces of debris and toppled, abandoned vehicles as he crashed through the infantry on the ground before skidding on his feet in landing behind Steve and shooting an alien away. The Captain had been airborne from a jump before landing to his left as he caught his shield, leaping to kick another away as Tony turned to fire at one approaching them from the side. Their stares locked and Steve braced his
shield as Tony fired his repulsor blasts directly at him, the beam ricocheting at an angle the Captain controlled and devastating the Chitauri nearest to them as the ray was swung around.

“Should always use that in battle,” Tony remarked with an entreatying wink sent towards Phil.

Tony left the ground in an instant and shot up the side of the adjacent high-rise, firing again and knocking down one of the aliens climbing up the side, manually throwing down another three as he soared before arching away from the surface and over the roof where Clint knelt upon the edge. Hawkeye had an arrow drawn and shot one of the few extra-terrestrials left clinging to the side of the building before he fell forward to lay lower to the concrete as blue rays sailed over his head. He followed their trajectory with his eyes as he turned to plant his feet and reach over his left shoulder to draw an arrow, knocking, aiming, and shooting.

The pilot of one of the crafts was struck through the nape of the neck, the glider careering towards the buildings alongside while on the back an alien that had been shooting grabbed the other infantryman and hurled them both off the side to the ground before impact. A large creature flew over them as they fell, the Hulk along its shelled back tearing pieces from it while Chitauri leapt from high-rises to bombard his efforts. He ripped them from his back with his hands and kept moving to toss them off his body, roaring as he indented the metal beneath him with his fists and feet. Thor landed with a clang in front of him and smashed the encroaching aliens away with Mjolnir, breaking their arms and severing their guns from their grasps with blows before he knocked them off the edge of the beast with fierce swings.

The Hulk punched and jumped to crush the extra-terrestrials before pausing to rend a strip of metal from the creature’s side with a bellow and stab it into its back. As he spun back to lash out at the infantry around him, Thor observed the protrusion and spun the handle in his grasp as he sprang forward to drive it deeper with the hammer, lightning descending from the sky as he yelled and conducting through her head into the beast. It shrieked and croaked as it fell abruptly to street level, crashing through the glass and bars of the center window of Grand Central Terminal’s Main Concourse, sliding through the stonework of the floor before halting limply with electricity sparking through its maw and eyes. The Hulk and Thor stood on the upper floor it had skated over, torsos heaving with laboured breaths, before the Hulk threw his left arm out and punched the god from his side. He snorted as he stood alone over the wreckage.

Tony choked out a guffaw as Bruce flushed in mortification, apologizing fervently to the god.

“It is a show of camaraderie, my friend! We triumphed together.”

Tony exchanged a sceptical glance with Clint and Natasha as he continued to chuckle.

Erik Selvig propped himself up on an elbow as he lifted his front from the gravel of the Tower’s roof. Pebbles fell from the side of his face as blood trickled from his forehead, his eyes shifting to take in his surroundings in confusion before he began to gape in awe of the stream leading up to the portal and the aircrafts soaring past. He gaped with furrowed brow as he panted, leaning back heavily on the wall along the edge of the building.

Below, dark green tanks began to roll through the streets with soldiers mounted behind machine guns at the turrets, some stopping to allow those inside to disembark and battle on foot while others aimed upwards and shot down the Chitauri crafts that attempted to soar past. ‘This way, this way!’ a soldier shouted, screaming citizens being ushered out of the warzone. Steve lay on his back on the road while a Chitauri stood over him with staff directed down, the Captain holding the sharp tip at bay over his neck before he managed to roll partially onto his side and free an arm to jab up with a grunt. He swung his fist back before he punched the alien off him, it gurgling a scream as a small round mirror knocked from a vehicle captured him climbing to his feet.
“Captain, the bank on 42nd, past Madison,” Clint reported. “They’ve cornered a lot of civilians in there.”

“I’m on it.”

Beth found herself within a crowd of people, dozens gathered inside a dim building fretting and panicking over their fate as Chitauri guards screeched in aggravation from their stations on the upper level, directing their staves down onto the mass.

Steve sat up in his chair at the realization that she was still alive, having presumed the worst from earlier scenes.

She began to weave through the group towards the edge before a crack sounded from her feet. She looked down to see the floor coated in ash, crouching to lift the pair of glasses she had stepped on and, after a pause, the watch lying beside it. She turned the items over in her hands for a couple of seconds before she looked up, petrified, at the thought of the live cremation they would all face.

The expressions of the occupants of the room grew dark at the thought of all those lost during the invasion, and then the multitudes of people who were left crippled and maimed, or even without places to work or homes to live in. The aftershocks of that day would resonate throughout the world.

One of the aliens above lowered its gun and lifted a device from the back of its belt, pressing a button on its side with a tilt of its head and holding it as the bottom portion slid down and a steady beep began to resonate as it activated. Steve dove through one of the frames on the upper level that used to hold a window pane to land in a roll before kneeling, throwing his shield out to the Chitauri and hitting it in the neck. The mechanism was dropped as the other two spun to aim their staves at him, the Captain diving forward to lie sheltered behind a toppled desk as they fired blue beams. The constant beeping echoed as Steve turned to kick the desk beside him and send it skidding across the space to knock into his two opponents, one flipping over it and the other tossed back.

He ran forward and leapt over the desk to punch the latter in the stomach as it stood, wrapping his right arm around its neck in a headlock before reeling his arm away and breaking its neck. The crowd below gasped as he hurled the form over the rail and down into the area cleared by their sidestepping, Steve managing, “Everyone, clear out!” before the first alien grabbed him from behind with a grunt.

He groaned in exertion as he tried to remove the forearm under his chin, elbowing the grey-skinned creature in the ribs to little effect as it drew his cowl back over his head. Another appeared from around the corner and fired at Steve just as he hefted himself up and over the head and shoulders of the alien holding him. The rays impacted its chest before it collapsed, the Captain revealed breathing heavily behind with tousled hair. The Chitauri discarded its weapon and lunged for the device that began beeping more incessantly as Steve rolled to the side and grabbed his shield from where she lay.

The mechanism was thrown as it shone bright blue, Steve jumping into the air and curling himself as small as possible behind his shield as it detonated. The blast demolished the floor where he had been standing and the rail barring it from the expanse of the room, the Captain thrown through the window behind him in a splintering of glass shards to land roughly on his stomach on the roof of a car below. Those inside dawdled in shock before beginning to move, Beth hurrying through the crowd insistently as Steve began to move gingerly, wincing, outside. She came to a door and threw herself against it when it was revealed to be locked, others gathering and attempting to aid her.

Steve slunk sideways off the dented vehicle as soldiers crouched behind vehicles and opened fire.
on the invading aliens. He breathed heavily as he stood off to the side, sirens wailing from emergency vehicles as firemen ushered those that had been trapped inside ruined buildings to more stable defenses. Beth made her way out of the bank with the aid of a couple of soldiers, her gaze caught as she made her way over debris to the Captain’s form. She stared as she was guided by firemen and then grasped by the upper arm by a policeman, recognizing Steve’s profile from the morning he had visited the café. She finally turned away; he cast his eyes around in distress, noting those fleeing with their arms covering their heads, the firemen and policemen, the soldiers, and the injured bodies of innocents strewn on the ground.

“She made it out then,” Tony stated with a light punch to Steve’s shoulder, the Captain nodding weakly at the continued destruction.

“Director Fury,” a councilwoman stated in vexation, “the Council has made a decision.”

“Here we go,” Clint said in dread.

“I recognize the Council has made a decision,” he drawled with his hands on his hips as he stared with his wide right eye down at the shadowed forms displayed on his control panels, “but given that it’s a stupid-ass decision I’ve elected to ignore it.”

“Director, you’re closer than any of ourselves,” the elder member said, ordering, “You scramble that jet-”

“That is the island of Manhattan, Councilman,” Fury defended firmly, Hill standing nearby with her expression frozen. “Until I’m certain my team can’t hold it, I will not order a nuclear strike against a civilian population.”

“If we don’t hold them here we lose everything,” he implored.

“I send that bird out we already have,” the Director replied before he closed the connection, turning away.
Insight

Chapter Summary

Revelations about each other’s injuries and increasingly relevant mortality occur as the nuclear missile sails towards the city, Tony forced to separate from the group at the scene.

Chapter Notes

The effects on Tony's psyche correspond with what was revealed in Iron Man 3, a surprisingly accurate display of anxiety attacks shown in the movie. I've a friend who has experience with the surges of panic as well, so the emotional turmoil written is well-sourced.

Loki winced suddenly as his eyes cinched shut, his head reeling back in a flinch in the midst of his controlling of the Chitauri hover board as the Other intoned irately to him, “This is a little resistance?”

“Your force lacks... finesse,” he countered angrily.

“Our warriors are fearless,” he proclaimed. “They welcome a glorious death.”

The god shut his eyes and softly sighed, replying delicately, “That may actually be the problem.”

Tony chuckled in approval of the defiance, to a quizzical glance from Loki. Phil, on the other hand, noted the supervision present as additional support to the god’s tale of enslavement, though not elucidated through such a word.

“Then lead them, King,” the Other shouted, derisively. “You wield the scepter, do you not?”

His eyes widened and his breath paused as he glanced from side to side, realizing his lack of the weapon. “The scepter.” Loki swerved the aircraft down an adjacent street immediately, firing at those sailing in front of him.

“Just forget about the all-powerful weapon that projects a concussive blast of force, in the middle of a fight,” Tony remarked with a roll of his eyes. “Though, you’re not doing much fighting.”

“I apologize,” Loki began, “but it seemed as though you could hold off against no further resistance. I shall endeavor to orchestrate something for you.”

“We can take you anytime.”

“Brother,” Thor started with a strange smirk gracing his lips, “perhaps you should spar with each of us in a test of strength.”

“No magic!” Tony countered instantly. “Not if it’s one on one.”
“My bare hands against whatever weapons you specialize in?” Loki proposed, suppressing a smirk of endorsement at his not-brother’s suggestion to prove himself through the humiliation of the others. “One on one would hardly be fair – perhaps all four at once. Then your other half separately,” he recommended, nodding towards Bruce.

“I could take you in my suit!”

“Tony,” Steve chided, the billionaire’s ego overshadowing his judgement. He gazed at the Trickster for a moment in consideration of the Asgardian strength he had witnessed of Thor before countering, “Maybe two against one – in close quarters we’re likely to get into each other’s way if it’s all four of us.”

“You have a deal,” Loki agreed with an anticipatory smile.

Natasha glanced over her shoulder at her glider’s avoidance of the beam, muttering, “Oh, you,” at the sight of the dark god’s pursuit. She weaved as he followed, shooting, calling out, “Hawkeye!”

“Nat, what’re you doing?” Clint answered in bewilderment from atop the roof at the spectacle.

“Uh, a little help!” she cried in distress as a ray skimed the side of her board.

He pressed the top button that lay under his right index finger on the grip of his bow before drawing, pulling back the arrow so the end lay at his chin as he tracked Loki. “I got him,” he assured with a smirk before releasing.

The shaft sped through the air above his upright stance on the corner, tearing over the distance until its middle was caught abruptly by Loki’s fingers curled around it. The god remained lax and dismissive until he cocked his head to direct a derisive gaze onto the projectile, turning to stare in amusement back at Clint at his attempt. Swiftly the miniscule panels that composed the silver tip folded open and with a chirp the arrowhead exploded. Loki was thrown head over heels from the ruined aircraft that tumbled down to knock the ‘T’ from the remaining letters labelling Stark Tower, he sent to roll with a sharp groan across the balcony as his helmet was flung from his head.

Tony laughed as Clint and Natasha smirked smugly, Loki aiming a commending expression towards the archer.

Natasha leapt from her hover board to flip forward in the air, landing roughly on the roof of the tower in a dusty couple of rolls before she halted her momentum on all fours and flipped her hair away from her face to consider the mechanisms surrounding the Tesseract before her. Below, Loki flicked his hair back in the same manner-

“Such fabulous hair,” Tony sung, whipping his head in mimicry to the lack of substantial movement from his shorter locks.

-as he levered himself up, one leg outstretched inelegantly as he rested on his right knee as the Hulk flew towards him from another building. The green goliath crashed into him with a roar, the large window splintering upon impact and Loki thrown with a grunt into the opposite wall. He threw his cape back over his shoulder as he braced himself on his elbows as the Hulk pounded his fists on the tiled floor twice with a huff and toss of his head before charging.

Bruce winced at the inevitable confrontation, and the fact that he had come back to himself on the Tower’s floor pictured to Loki’s form lying in a crater. He disliked any damage caused, but he did have to acknowledge that this conflict between the two had kept the god from further interference.
in and support of the invasion.

“Enough!” Loki screamed as he vaulted to his feet. “You are all of you beneath me.” The Hulk paused and tilted his head at the other as he continued decisively, “I am a god, you dull creature, and I will not be bullied by- Ah!”

The Hulk had resolutely leaned forward and snatched Loki’s left lower leg, slamming him into the floor on his other side before shattering the tile at his feet with two more collisions with the flooring. He held the limp, stunned Trickster upside down above his shoulder for a second before smashing him down once more in front of him and then throwing him to the side. Loki stared at the ceiling with glazed, wide eyes as he lay panting in the crater his body had been used to create, the Hulk stomping away with a parting rumble over his shoulder: “Puny god.”

He whined in pain as he remained still.

Half of the group burst out in guffaws and the others startled laughter, unable to resist reacting at the abrupt occurrence. Tony’s laughter lingered longer than the others’ as he wheezed, ‘Did you see his face?’ as they quieted. “Sorry,” Bruce apologized, though a wry smirk was trying to twist his lips.

Loki’s conceding smirk egged on the scientist’s, and then he remarked, “It would be unproductive to hold a grudge when the act was considerably helpful.”

“Did it knock some sense into you?” Natasha questioned mockingly.

“Did it affect the split-consciousness thing you haven’t explained?” Tony asked, leaning forward in eagerness in addition to Bruce’s increased intrigue.

“Something simpler,” he responded to the genius’ query, elaborating, “The grabbed leg included a grip on the ankle where the restraint on my magic was affixed – and it was broken.”

There was a moment of silence as that fact was digested, before Phil summarized, “So it was the Hulk that freed your magic?”

“Yes,” he answered with a grin.

“And you just lied there? Could’ve healed yourself, escaped…” Tony prompted, supplementing within his thoughts, Or joined the fight. You could’ve done a lot of damage if you’d lashed out with magic…

“The condition of my powers when returned to me is complicated, but I was also rather stunned at the abrupt reconnection with them as well as the loss of the link to the Other and those under the control of the Mind Gem.”

“It was a physical constraint, then?” Phil asked.

“Yes.”

“Are its pieces somewhere in the trucks of debris from my tower?” Tony questioned shrewdly.

“That’s a problem,” Clint remarked.

“It was still on me afterwards – I destroyed it days ago,” Loki assured, also halting any thought of recreating the limitation for him.
On the roof, Natasha stepped cautiously towards the intricate device sustaining the portal high above, though her head turned at the uttered, ‘The scepter.’ “Doctor,” she addressed in sympathy, Erik propped up on one elbow on the lip of the tower.

“Loki’s scepter,” he repeated, looking down over the edge, “the energy. The Tesseract can’t fight-you can’t protect against yourself.”

Bruce furrowed his brows.

She approached and crouched at his side, reaching out to offer a brief comforting touch as she reassured, “It’s not your fault – you didn’t know what you were doing.”

“Well actually I think I did,” he argued haltingly to her furrowed brows. “I built in a safety to cut the power source,” he explained.

Clint stiffened.

Her eyes widened slightly and her mouth gaped before she realized, “Loki’s scepter.”

“It may be able to close the portal,” he confirmed, turning to stare down at the referenced weapon lying abandoned on the balcony below, “And I’m looking right at it.”

“How was he able to get around it?” Clint demanded, turning fully to Loki and catching the concerned scan Natasha was casting over his tense disposition.

“He didn’t.”

“He did – he built a safety-”

“It’s an illusion of free will so to distance himself from the part he played in these events,” Loki soothed. “Every piece of scientific equipment is constructed with a failsafe or emergency switch to power it down – what if something needed to be adjusted, or something went wrong? It’s common sense to include ways to get around a machine’s workings.”

“He was able to make use of it-”

“Did you not also?” the god challenged. “You shot the Director in the chest when you could have sent the bullet through his brain.” Clint blinked at the reassurance offered though the act was in defiance to Loki’s orders. He applauded, “You mortals have become so inventive in circumventing direct orders.”

Loki was quick to praise the evasion of another’s commands, the mischief and cunning he himself was known for exemplified in the mortals’ development, and their rebellion through the millennia against whatever system was in government. It seemed to Loki as though sometimes he was the patron of Midgard’s progress, their transition into the information age embodying more of his core than any other of the Æsir.

Chitauri gliders flew through the streets, one’s infantry being destroyed by Thor standing in the back swinging Mjolnir with a grunt to knock off first one and then the other with a yell before marching forward to attack the pilot. The aircraft swerved sharply around a corner to Thor’s scarlet cape whipped through the air behind him before they were intercepted by a colossal creature crashing through the building before them, knocking him aside. The long beast tore through the middle floors of the high-rise, debris tumbling from its hardened back as the top half of the structure collapsed down and began to tilt sideways.
Tony soared under the dissolution and followed alongside its flight, holding out his left fist and firing a steady tri-beamed laser from the panelling of his forearm at its considerable length. “Sir, we will lose power before we penetrate that shell,” Jarvis informed pragmatically, the lasers powered down and the suit streaking ahead.

The creature bent lower as it flew to crash through the roof of a lower building as it trailed Iron Man, Tony proposing hesitantly as he distanced himself, turning, “Jarvis… You ever hear the tale of Jonah?”

Eyebrows were raised by the occupants of the room in incredulity.

“I wouldn’t consider him a role-model,” the AI replied in disinclination.

The panels over his thighs repositioned to display a row of four miniature missiles on each leg as Tony sailed towards the creature, its maw opening wide as it groaned while the suit flew into it. The genius yelled as he travelled through the alien’s innards, projectiles shooting outwards and wracking the beast’s frame with explosions that ripped through its flesh and mangled its shelled, metal casing. Tony was thrown outwards as the tail end was severed from the rest of the body, the suit tumbling through the air to crash through a bus stop before halting with the impact to an abandoned taxi, rolling to lie on his stomach on the concrete. He squinted his eyes as his HUD graphics recalibrated and he climbed to his feet in front of Farmers Insurance Group, advertising, ‘We are insurance, we are Farmers’, and Shawarma Palace. He flinched at a beam fired at this chest before raising his arms and attempting to guard himself as another two shots were fired to throw him back into Southwest Airlines and Metro advertisements, a Chitauri squadron advancing.

Thor frowned at the damage Tony was receiving, despite his armour. It’s very different, fighting alongside these men and women, he concluded. Though in heart they are as fierce as any Æsir I have done battle with, they require protection and a level of immeasurable talent to survive the degree of ferocious combat I view as commonplace.

“If a very smooth landing,” Natasha remarked.

“It worked out – or else I would never have noticed that little shawarma place!” Tony responded.

Up above, Hawkeye drew an arrow and turned to shoot the growling, grey-skinned being that had been behind him, the shaft piercing down into the chest from the collar as another approached, Clint reaching back to an empty quiver.

“That’s an issue we need to address,” Phil commented.

“Not much to do about it,” Clint argued with a shrug. “Can only carry so many.”

“Not if the quiver is charmed,” Loki suggested, a finger tapping his lip in thought.

“What, like the arrows keep resupplying?” Tony asked.

“Yes – it could be linked to a reserve hoard or reconstruct an infinite number, or the arrows themselves could be spelled to return to the quiver after a certain time period of separation or on command.”

“You could reinforce all of our weaponry,” Phil pronounced with a weighty stare.

“I could,” Loki confirmed without intent.

Clint was torn between shrinking imperceptibly into his seat or straightening and smirking at being
He glanced over his shoulder in alarm before facing his opponent with recurve bow gripped in both hands, whipping its weapon out of its fingers before knocking its head in the opposite direction, landing a kick to the center of its chest to topple the alien over the edge of the structure. He spun with wide, low stance braced for combat to the sight of dozens of alien crafts soaring down to his position.

He darted a glance to the lip of the building before stepping over to the corpse crumpled nearby and retrieving the used arrow from its neck, inserting it into his quiver before pressing the third and then second buttons on the grip of his bow. The bottom of the quiver rotated to attach a specialized tip to the sole shaft as the extraterrestrials neared and shot rays of blue to tear through the perch, Clint running to jump over the edge and contort to reach over his left shoulder as he fell. He drew the arrow, knocked it, and pulled back as he swivelled around to aim further up the construction, shooting the arrow whose tip had fanned into three arms that secured onto the side of the building. The cable stretched between it and the bowstring pulled taut as the latter scraped along Clint’s arm guard, his fall arrested to swing him fiercely towards the window panes along the side of the high-rise.

He smashed through the glass as he released the line, losing the grip on his bow as he landed awkwardly on his left leg before he stumbled into a roll down onto the floor. He fell onto his back with a cry of pain as shards of glass rained over him, arching his back and gasping as he lay on the floor.

The gods displayed twin expressions of dismay at the archer’s evident pain.

The Hulk smashed two aliens into the ground with a growl before kicking another away, a fourth charging him only to be grabbed by the head and thrown. A beam hit the back of the Hulk’s shoulder to a flurry of sparks, him turning to snarl up at the fleet of over twenty Chitauri aircrafts that hovered above. The closest raised a hand to bring it down decisively in direction, those assembled opening fire on the lone being below. Fire and plumes of smoke billowed out at the constant impact, the Hulk raising his hand in protection against the assault as his skin was charred and all movement hindered. He bellowed aloud in vain.

Steve and Tony grimaced at the Hulk being cornered and harmed, the injuries sustained by each of them apparent and contributing to the unlikelihood of any similar battle being won without the casualty of one of the members of the team.

“Director Fury is no longer in command,” the sole woman of the World Security Council informed through the darkly shielded helmet of an agent in the hanger of the Helicarrier. “Override order 7-Alpha-1-1.” An oxygen mask was secured over his jaw as he sat harnessed in the cockpit of an airplane.

“7-Alpha-1-1 confirmed,” he repeated, the craft jostling as the panelling above him slid apart and the plane was raised. “We’re go for takeoff.”

“Sir, we have a bird in motion!” Agent Hill called out in alarm, turning to address Fury before she turned back. He spun to jog from the bridge as her fingers furiously screened through the information on display on the panels in front of her, informing, “Anyone on the deck? We have a rogue bird. We need to shut it down!” She locked onto the visuals of the hanger the airplane was rising from and the deck as she echoed, “Repeat: takeoff is not authorized.”

The Director strode unwaveringly with a missile launcher in hand through a door that slid open into the open air before him, firming his stance and resting the gun on his shoulder as the jet
began to takeoff along the runway in front of him. He aimed as it swung past him and fired, the shot decimating the right wing and wheel in a mild explosion. The craft skid amidst flames and sparks to a halt with her nose and mangled front wheel hanging over the edge, Fury lowering the gun as he darted his stare over his surroundings. Another plane whipped along the deck past him to his hurried draw of the firearm on his thigh, though the aircraft had taken off and was out of range before action could be taken.

He lowered his handgun as he watched the jet arch further upwards into the sky, folding her wheels into her underbelly as faint trails traced the tips of her fixed wings’ paths.

Steve glared at the thought of the Council’s decision; his disapproval was worsened by the hope that had foolishly appeared when the Director had shot down a jet, as if the destructive events being shown had not already occurred and could be prevented.

He moved back into the Helicarrier’s passageways to pause just inside an exit, relaying through his Bluetooth, “Stark, do you hear me? You have a missile headed straight for the city.”

“How long?” Tony asked in fright as he tried to lift himself onto all fours, one of the aliens surrounding him knocking his head into the ground with the butt of its staff.

“Three minutes, max. The payload will wipe out Midtown,” he explained as Tony’s HUD flickered.

He shot repulsor blasts haphazardly at the numbers around him, managing to raise himself onto one knee as he commanded, “Jarvis put everything we got into the thrusters,”

“I just did.”

The suit blasted out from under an alien who threw itself on top of him in attack, Iron Man’s twin thrusters on the bottoms of his boots and on his back propelling him away from the street to the loss of the Chitauri hanging onto his leg. With a tail of sparks, he swung around the corner of a building.

The jet sailed over the sea to the sight of the city topped in azure in the distance; the pilot pressed the small red button on the head of his joystick. A round white nuclear missile with six fins dropped from her hull before it shot forward. “Package is sent,” he reported as he veered away. “Detonation in 2 minutes, 30 seconds, mark.”

In the flaming ruins of the city’s roads Thor and Steve fought the persistent infantry, the Captain catching his shield from a throw and the god on one knee calling Mjolnir back to his palm. An alien raised its staff at their backs to Steve whirling around as he handed his shield to his left to hit the being, Thor leaping forward to guard his back from the other two extraterrestrials that moved to attack. As the god smacked them out of range with his hammer Steve was hit in the abdomen with a blue ray that had been fired. He was thrown to the ground with a grunt of pain as he dropped his shield to cover the wound before he landed on his front.

Six Chitauri stood behind and on a couple of vehicles as they continued to shoot, Thor deflecting the beams with Mjolnir’s head as the Captain gingerly manoeuvered onto all fours. The Thunderer swiftly charged forward and swung his hammer at the white car that had been partially shielding them, the vehicle forcefully flipped away to roll over the first and then the following two aliens before crushing the last three into the car they had jumped down from. He turned to hurl Mjolnir to impact those advancing on the other side, and then held out a hand to the fallen Captain. Steve winced as he allowed himself to be pulled up from his knees with shield secured on his left arm, gritting his teeth and squeezing his eyes shut as he turned his head as if to distance himself from the pain of his injury. The side of his stomach was charred and bloodied when he removed his
gloved hand from applying pressure, Thor asking, “You ready for another bout?”

He panted as he set his expression, questioning in jest, “What, you getting sleepy?”

The god smirked weakly as he breathed heavily, summoning Mjolnir to him again.

Tony thought with a frown, Even the god with superior alien physiology and the super-soldier with advanced resistance and healing are being beat down by this. How is this even real life? An alien invasion fought by five men, one woman, and whatever fraction of the army could arrive on time? If everything hadn’t played out exactly as it did, we would have lost.

“Did you get that wrapped? I didn’t see you in the healing bay,” Bruce interrogated of Steve.

“It healed.”

That’s not what I asked, Bruce thought as he frowned, noting that if their Captain was going to make a habit of not seeing to his admittedly swift-healing wounds then he would have to make a habit of interfering.

On the roof of the Tower, Erik righted a fallen control pedestal, the monitor of the connected laptop topping it lifted to display some aspects of the device before them. He leaned around the machine to indicate a direction to Natasha with an index finger, demanding, “Right at the crown.”

She held the scepter firmly as she started it forward, the blade at the tip breaching the translucent sphere that formed in defense. The gem imbedded in its head glowed brightly as wisps of dark smoke breezed from the point of entry, Natasha gasping as she held the weapon steadfast, “I can close it. Can anybody copy? I can shut the portal down.”

“Do it!” Steve answered, a hand raised to the communications device in his ear.

“No, wait,” Tony protested.

“Stark, these things are still coming,” the Captain argued as he gazed up, incredulous.

“I got a nuke coming in,” he answered, holograms within his helmet analyzing the incoming missile on one side and the levels of power driving his suit on the other. “It’s gonna blow in less than a minute.” Iron Man sailed beneath the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge to abruptly raise his hands and use the repulsors to halt his momentum over the water in a spray of the substance, the missile soaring overhead to his flying up and curving over the crossing to trail it.

“And I know just where to put it,” he declared. He gained on its journey before sweeping underneath to lift his hands and grasp a hold of it, bracing the canister with his back.

“Stark,” the Captain began solemnly as Tony flew with the missile towards the city, “You know that’s a one-way trip.”

Grave glances were sent towards the engineer to his yelling, “If you’re going to be all distraught every time this thing is brought up then honestly, we’re not going to get anywhere!” He suddenly was awash with cold fury, limbs cool and pulse thrumming. He grit his teeth and stood, waving his hands in dismissal and striding out as he said, “I need a drink – why aren’t we drinking with this? Keep going without me, I know what happens.”

After the door shut behind him, Steve asked in concern, “Is he alright?”

Phil answered with a sigh, “He’s never sought out or accepted any psychological help in dealing
with these sorts of things.” Loki gazed at the closed door thoughtfully as the agent continued, “We’ve been keeping an eye on him for any signs of distress or instability, but his drinking hasn’t increased dramatically. He seems to have always used it as a coping mechanism, so for now he’s able to deal on his own.”

“You can’t… help him more?” Steve probed.

“We can’t force him to talk if he doesn’t want to,” Natasha explained. “And any pressure will just cause him to go on the defensive.”

Jarvis brusquely resumed play of the disc.

“Save the rest for the turn, J,” he instructed of the AI.

“Sir,” Jarvis responded tentatively, “shall I try Miss Potts?”

He stared at the display picture of her as the AI brought his cellphone capabilities up on the HUD inside his helmet, replying, “Might as well.” The status of the connection switched to ‘Calling’.

A white jet with Stark Industries emblazoned on the side soared through the scattered white clouds tens of miles away. Pepper seated inside with two coworkers turned in their chairs and a third standing behind her. All attention was riveted on a television screen, a female reporter announcing, “The streets of New York City have become a battleground,” as Station 21 broadcast across the bottom of the video captured of the invasion, ‘Breaking News: Attack in Midtown Manhattan’. “The army is here trying to contain the violence but clearly it is outmatched.” Her cell was lying on the wooden lip along the side of the interior under the windows, an incoming call displaying a picture of Tony as the phone vibrated. “And I have to say, in all my years of reporting, I have never seen anything like this.” Pepper watched, transfixed, the events unfolding down in the city.

Tony shut the door behind him, immediately hearing the initiated discussion about him. I don’t have a problem with anything – I’m fine. If I don’t want to watch myself fly into space with a nuke that’s my choice- There had been no other option; he had to fly through that portal.

But if I hadn’t made it back what would have happened? The suit would’ve floated in that place forever, eventually opened only to dust. Leaving Pepper with nothing to bury. I’d be dead, floating there. She wouldn’t ever get me back.

I can’t just leave and hurt her. Not after everything.

I have to get back. But there’s no gravity. No power. No lights from the suit. Can’t turn around, can’t move- There’s no air to breathe. But I have to say goodbye- No signal. What do I do? I have to get back to her-

His breathing quickened as the cold intensified in his limbs, his fingers becoming clammy. As he tried to make his way across the room he gasped in a shallow imitation of breath because there was no air and it was dark, the only brightness the stars light-years away before the explosion, rocketing towards him. The darkness closed in around him as the arc went out, dying alone far away without giving Pepper anything-

His heart pumped erratically as his knees suddenly buckled, his form falling awkwardly as he shakily pawed at the air in an attempt to brace himself. He landed against the end of the long couch nearby with his knees loosely drawn to his chest, Jarvis calling worriedly as he scanned his Creator’s vitals, “Sir, should I call-”
“N-No,” he managed though his mouth was dry, a clear thought permeating the panic and heightening the rush all at once. *Can’t let them see… this- me like this-

Letting them down too- They’d have nothing, just like Pepper. Met them and dying- they’re going to be left without anything of me- Have to give them something- Have to get back- Should be together-

His body lay limp as the chill faded into prickles, the sensation from his fingers and toes hazing into a numbing weight as his vision whited around the edges. The force of his pulse filled him with further panic, his hands shaking as he choked out in distress, “The arc- The heart-” He whined weakly in helplessness at the darkness creeping in as his heart beat wildly *trying to get away from the shrapnel as the magnet failed and the shards ripped through the valves*—before his AI responded,

“There is no sign of cardiac arrest – the arc reactor is fully functional.”

*Jarvis can’t lie,* he thought as he bowed his head, raising a trembling hand to the glowing blue implant. He clutched the casing firmly as he noticed, *Jarvis is here.* He blinked to take in the marble counter and pristine white wood of the kitchen island across from him, black stools raised on slim silver supports focusing after a couple of seconds as the shadows dwindled.

He breathed slowly as he absorbed his surroundings, inhaling and exhaling for several seconds before Jarvis intoned from above, “I believe you have just experienced a severe anxiety attack, sir.”

“What – me?” he questioned. He flexed his fingers as he lowered his knees to laxly cross his legs over the cream carpet, leaning his head back to mutter a sarcastic ‘Great’. He stood cautiously while he sighed, hovering unsteadily as he momentarily swayed with light-headedness before thrusting his hands into his pants’ pockets.

He exited into the hall and then the elevator, ordering, “My lab, J – we’ve footage of Loki being thrown around right? There’s got to be some trace evidence of that restraint…”
Inevitable

Chapter Summary

The reactions over the globe affect all before the Avengers, now aware of the plans of their enemy, take action.

“We have limited information on the team,” the reporter continued, Agent Hill aboard the bridge of the Helicarrier observing the same coverage, the myriad of agents in the control room seated and standing frozen as they were forced to helplessly view the events, “but we do know that billionaire Tony Stark’s Iron Man…” Director Fury gazed intently at the philanthropist’s journey.

Smoke trailed the canister and Iron Man’s thrusters’ path, the call to Pepper continuing to try and connect in the corner of the HUD as Tony focused on directing the nuke between the high-rises and towards his tower in the distance. Steve and Thor looked upwards as he passed over them, increasing the arch upwards with a grunt as additional thrusters were revealed below the pectorals of the armour. The Hulk lifted his upper body out of the pile of rubble he had been buried in to follow the suit’s passage overhead as well, the missile barely forced over the remaining ‘S’ and ‘A’ of ‘STARK’ and the top five floors of the structure, Tony scraping up the side as he flew to clear it.

Natasha and Erik whipped their heads up as he clipped the edge of the building to continue on, his flight following the beam emitted by the Cube as Chitauri ships streaked downwards. He neared the gathered clouds and excess energy created by the portal before finally passing over the threshold with the missile.

The SHIELD agents aboard the bridge clapped and cheered in celebration, Hill allowing her eyes to close for a moment as she sighed in relief. Fury nodded slightly and permitted a smirk, but lowered his head and gaze in bereavement at the sacrifice of the genius.

All of the occupants of the room were filled with equal parts eagerness and dread, the opportunity to view the magnitude of the expanse of space on the other side of the portal tampered by the cost of Tony’s feat.

On the other side of the portal, bright daylight shone in a perfect circle behind Iron Man as deep, dark space surrounded him, faint pinpricks of the gas of stars the only light permeating. The light of the arc reactor died out as Tony was left gasping within his helmet at the sudden lack of oxygen. Jarvis powered off to the ‘Call Failed’ notice typed above Pepper’s smiling picture, the man’s stare wide as the glow of the eyes, repulsors, and thrusters of the suit faded. He fell limply away from the missile that continued to propel itself forward, and he watched as it sailed straight into the large Chitauri spaceship that was sending out infantry and leviathans.

The nuclear canister impacted off center to gradually consume the entirety of the vessel in a violent explosion of bold orange and dazzling yellow, the aliens in the streets of New York abruptly crumpling as the components sustaining them in Earth’s atmosphere powered down. Steve and Thor noted those collapsing around them with a considering glance skyward, as stories above a long creature jerked before diving into the side of a building, its body flipped over onto its shelled back as it died.
Tony’s eyes were lit by the flames of the explosion blossoming outward as he stared at the sight, before forced to close his eyes at the stifling lack of breath. The suit was pushed back by the shockwave as, on the road below, Steve watched the portal, Natasha staring upwards as well and beckoning, “Come on, Stark.”

The echoes of the muffled explosion sounded through the gateway, Thor averting his stare to the ground before casting his eyes onto the Captain beside him. Steve gazed up at the nearing blast, finally ordering, “Close it.”

Steve winced as he absorbed the reality of his decision. If he hadn’t made it through he would have been left for dead out there. He would’ve died for the cause, and that was something I was willing to accept. He was selfishly glad that Tony had left the room.

Natasha turned to the device before her and forced the scepter further with a grunt, the tip and gem sparking as they touched the top surface of the Tesseract and impressed upon her the command. The ray disconnected from the machinery on the roof and streaked heavenward before joining with the remaining energy of the portal, the entrance into space beginning to shrink. It collapsed inwards to Steve bowing his head, wisps of dark blue and azure crashing together and rolling in like the tide to close as Iron Man was thrust towards it.

The suit fell through as stars and space were reunited on the far side, molten light and flecks of stars rushing in to surround before Tony emerged from the pale blue of the sky.

Natasha released trembling breaths as Steve uttered in relief, “Son of a gun.”

He plunged without resistance through the still air, drawing closer and closer to the roofs of structures below before Thor realized, “He’s not slowing down.” He started to spin Mjolnir by the strap of her handle as the two stared upwards, before the Hulk hurled himself across the space between the buildings and caught Tony with an arm around his torso.

Bruce recoiled slightly in shock, glad, but baffled, at the Other Guy’s proactive actions. He recognized the danger, and moved to protect him? Tony’s dismissal of me as a threat on the Helicarrier and bluntly showing his interest in my work and the Other Guy must have worked him closer to me in those few hours than I realized… he thought in astonishment.

He slid down the side of the opposite high-rise with his other hand slowing them by the drag through the concrete and glass of its makeup, before he launched them to the street. He spun so to land on his back on a taxi and then through the rubble coating the surface of the road, clasping Tony to his chest.

He grunted as he lifted his head to note the suit he was holding, and then flipped Tony off of him to the ground beside. Thor and Steve jogged around vehicles to the landing, the god handing his hammer into his left hand as he crouched at his side and rolled him over, the Hulk tense with his fists down across Tony’s prone form. “Is he breathing?” Steve asked in panic, the Thunderer hurriedly ripping the faceplate from the helmet and throwing it away.

The god stood helplessly as the Captain bent over to hold his ear over Tony’s mouth, leaning back at the lack of inhalation as the Hulk raised a fist in yearning of a solution that he could achieve. Steve’s gloved hand lowered slightly down the chestplate in consideration of their options, suddenly realizing the absence of light emitting from the arc reactor in his chest cavity.

Loki tilted his head slightly in thought as the three SHIELD agents furrowed their brows in confusion, unaware of the exact happenings during this instance.
Tony’s expression was serene as he lay quietly in his suit, the blonds remaining motionless at his side at the facts presented. The Hulk stood panting in aggravation, eyes shifting from side to side in thought as he glanced at the other two before observing their surrender and turning back to Tony to unexpectedly roar down at the martyr’s prone form.

Tony gasped into consciousness-

Bruce dazedly blinked at the outcome as a collective sigh of relief pervaded the air, exhaled from Steve and Thor at the reiteration of Tony’s awakening. This is a little too much direct saving being thrown at me at once, he thought as he worked to conform his thoughts on the Other Guy to all of the new information being shown.

-the Hulk bellowing his triumph to the skies as Steve’s eyes widened and he leaned closer in disbelief. The arc glowed blue.

“Do you even possess the knowledge to provide aid to him if that device is damaged?” Loki asked.

“SHIELD has access to most of the designs, but making sense of the miniaturized, high-energy, subcritical nuclear event is something else,” Phil responded, adding, “Not taking into account the improvements Mr. Stark is constantly making to the arc in his chest.”

Bruce hummed in thought, the genius’ having begun to confide in him on the Helicarrier regarding the advanced technology indicating the voluntary seeking of another who would be able to understand and lend help when required.

The genius asked, “What the hell?” Thor gazing down with furrowed brows before he smirked in relief. “What just happened?” he reiterated before fully taking in the three surrounding him and imploring, “Please tell me nobody kissed me.”

Natasha smirked at the momentary alarm at resuscitation through CPR from the then-strangers.

The Captain breathed heavily as he lifted his stare to the middle-distance and the smoking wreck of cars and buildings, and the limp corpses of grey-skinned beings and leviathans. He nodded his head a few times before asserting the situation with a decisive version of the motion, stating, “We won.”

Tony sighed before acknowledging, “Alright, yay,” praising weakly, “Hurray! Good job guys. Uh, let’s just not come in tomorrow. Let’s just... take a day,” he suggested as he shifted gingerly. “You ever tried shawarma?” he asked to Steve’s indulgent smile and charmed shake of his head.

“There’s a shawarma joint about two blocks from here – I don’t know what it is but I want to try it.”

“We’re not finished yet,” Thor interjected, Steve turning to glance up at him as Tony’s expression shifted into one of concession, though he insisted hopefully,

“And then shawarma after.”

“Damn, I can’t see anything,” Tony muttered to himself as he expanded the frozen depiction of Loki’s form on the holographic representation of the security footage of the tower, peering intently at the covered ankle where Jarvis’ scans could outline the shape of a thick presumably-metal cuff.

He resumed the play of the footage he had already seen, the god grabbed by the leg and slammed into the tile of the floor by the Hulk before left lying in the space. Another analysis revealed that the contours of the material of the boot had changed and that there was a split in the restraint
beneath, along with a fraction of a second’s sharp emission of radiation when the fracture had occurred. He sped through the following minutes until Loki was removed from the tower, the remains of the cuff staying within his boot.

When Tony decided to switch over to the available SHIELD footage and track him, he found that after Loki had been bound and gagged he had leaned against one of the sides of the enclosure and appeared to have slid to sit on the floor in exhaustion. His left hand came to rest on his left ankle and then, inexplicably, all evidence of the restraint disappeared. The engineer recoiled and rewound the images, watching the event through infrared, then ultraviolet, then the two through slowed speeds as well as differing angles before he threw his hands in the air and strode over to the adjacent wall.

*His core doesn’t even flicker at vanishing or transporting or whatever-ing the material of that cuff,* he thought in frustration, *and I’ve nothing left of it to tinker with.* He pressed a corner of one of the tiles of the wall and the panel slid out, a hydraulics system revealing in suspension a selection of whiskeys and short glasses. After he poured himself a couple of fingers from one of the containers and raised the liquid to his lips for a generous sip, he asked Jarvis, “What’s my posse up to?”

“They are still viewing the disc, sir – Dr. Banner’s alter ego having just leapt through the air to catch your falling form,” the AI replied.

*Good – have a look at that, Brucie,* he thought with a smirk as he took another sip of his drink. “What happened there before I came to, anyways?” he questioned, stepping over to the plush armchair in the corner.

“I was not functional so was not privy to the events, sir,” Jarvis reported remorsefully before he added, “But according to the images recorded you were not breathing and the glow of the arc reactor had failed. Dr. Banner’s other half then shouted and you awakened, the arc operational again.”

“That… is hilarious,” Tony pronounced at the scene conjured in his mind as he halted, beginning to muse on the mechanics of the occurrence as he spun on his heel to exit the lab.

*So, what- the magnitude of his sound waves shocked me in place of a defibrillator, and the laser was able to pick up its effect on the Vibranium and everything was fine? No, the decreasing reaction of the isotope was caused by my draining of the arc’s power during the battle and the radiation of the nuke,* so then how-

His contemplation was stalled as he arrived at the door to the conference room of the 90th floor, hesitating for only a second before he entered quietly.

*Loki’s breathing was laboured as he dragged himself up the few steps covered in glittering glass, groaning in pain as he braced his torso above the surface with his elbows. He lifted his head with a sigh at the attempted transition to seated before pausing, his eyes shifting from side to side as he panted while twisting to view the area behind him.*

*Tony stood on the far left with his chin lifted, armour dented and scratched with his helmet absent while the arc reactor shone brightly in the center of his chest, the Hulk primed for battle with eyes dark behind him, the Captain deprived of cowl staring down at the God of Chaos with shield held in his right hand at the center. Clint knelt close as he raised his bow crosswise and pulled back a knocked arrow, Thor behind him with blood-spattered Mjolnir in hand, Natasha on the far right with scepter grasped firmly.*

*Loki gaped at the sight with cuts on his forehead, brow, bridge of his nose, and chin and armour
covered in dust before lowering his head. “If it’s all the same to you,” he began as he delicately
turned so to use his arms on the row of stairs behind to brace himself as he sighed, proposing
beseechingly, “I’ll have that drink now.”

“Was a one-time offer, then,” Tony remarked to the attention of the occupants of the room,
indicating the alcohol he held with a raise of the glass in hand before he moved to his seat. “Now,
however… Does control over your magic change when you’re drunk?”

Permitting the diversion while all but Thor eyed the liquor in discernment, Loki answered, “My
control isn’t affected significantly, but when intoxicated I’m more likely to use my magic
frivolously, or to lash out with it.

“You should abandon the thought-process though – I doubt you possess the percentage and amount
of alcohol needed to overcome the tolerance I’ve developed to the more potent brews of Asgard.”

“You underestimate me,” he retorted with a smirk.

The windows of the many skyscrapers of New York City glinted in the dim light shining through the
blanket of smoke that had risen to shade the buildings under the pretense of an overcast sky. The
citizens were overwhelmed by the events they found themselves in the aftermath of, overturned
vehicles littering the streets scattered with burning craters; the heavy fog of charred remains
wafted continuously upward to the sound of wailing sirens. Officers radioed medics as they
questioned innocents about their injuries, firefighters dashing around ruins to reach flaming
buildings and search for survivors.

The strip of Manhattan where the grand expanse of Central Park lay remained undisturbed, the
clear waters still and the brush and trees a healthy green, though the atmosphere of the city
surrounding it was greatly changed. “Despite the devastation of what has been confirmed as an
extraterrestrial attack, the extraordinary heroics of the group known as The Avengers has been to
many a cause not only for comfort, but for celebration,” an announcer reported live on MSNBC’s
Breaking News, the banner fixed along the bottom broadcasting ‘BREAKING NEWS Aftermath:
The World Responds to Alien Attack’.

On the available space of the SHIELD control panel two other channels were streamed, the higher
displaying first a Chitauri gun and the rubble emergency services were sifting through before it
captured the volunteers working to clear the streets of ruin. In addition it depicted the many
candles offered in memory of those lost in the invasion, the images below showing a wall of letters
that a family was adding to that praised the aid of the Avengers as well as mourned those whose
souls had departed, the picture transitioning to that of those grieving, holding candles, and then
the colourful fireworks sent up in celebration around the Eiffel Tower in Paris at the successful
evasion of extraterrestrial tyranny.

“It’s just really great knowing they’re out there,” a man stated on the top-left report on the
adjacent control screen, wearing a pale blue sweater emblazoned with the Captain’s shield.

Steve flushed in surprise at the sight of the motif.

“-that someone’s watching over us,” his friend added, the notice beneath them advertising, ‘New
Yorkers Celebrate Victory’. A woman forced her way between them to declare to the camera, ‘I
love you Thor!’ before mouthing the statement again breathlessly in reiteration.

The god chuckled as he grinned at the announcement.

The transmission moved to cover a woman sweeping the area outside her storefront and then able
to display an ‘Open’ sign before that of CSPAN2 Live, an address regarding ‘Invasion: A Global Catastrophe’ given by a representative of The White House in Washington.

On Channel 6 the caption was ‘Avengers Assemble to Save New York City’, a young boy illustrating, “And then these guys were like-” as he embellished the tale with the sound of a laser, “-and then the air goes-” and that of an explosion as he gestured widely, continuing “-and this green guy walks up and goes-” He roared in imitation-

Bruce blinked furiously in confusion at the idolization of the child.

-before the image switched to the street artists creating works of art portraying Iron Man in bold reds, Hawkeye’s façade darkened by a purple cowl and sunglasses protecting against the glare of daylight, and Captain America throwing his shield, or the Captain proudly standing tall with the American flag in hand.

“Look at those!” Tony crowed in appreciation of the fanart. “We should get some for the tower – make a mural.”

“Don’t you already have an Iron Man poster?” Phil commented with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes, but now I have a selection to pick and choose from,” he explained.

Below, a man was captured at a hairdresser’s, posters of Tony hung behind him and the beard on his jaw being shaved in mimicry of the man’s-

“I’m so awesome.”

-before a crowd gathered in front of a painted banner saluting the Avengers.

A parade marched through the streets in honour of the soldiers who lost their lives, banners of Iron Man carried alongside in show of their lives not being given in vain, for a solution had been found in the time provided and he was able to complete their goal. “I don’t know,” a male began from the side of his wife, ‘Victims of NY Affected Respond’, “I don’t exactly feel safer with those things out there.”

“It just seems that there’s a lot they’re not telling us,” she commented in unease.


“Media,” Tony snorted in derision.

HULK = HERO was proclaimed on a large green sign held by a male-

Bruce stifled an obvious reaction to the proclamation, Tony smirking and rolling his chair closer to nudge his shoulder in support of the claim.

-as a blonde woman wore a hooded sweatshirt with the Captain’s shield on it-

Steve shook his head in discomfort.

-a group of supporters walking through the streets declaring their praise through cheering and megaphones. ‘Thank you Avengers’ was shown graffitied in black on a bare wall.

“I’d better not be getting charged for all that vandalism,” Tony said in jest.
“These so called ‘heroes’ have to be held responsible for the destruction to the city. This was their fight – where are they now?” ‘New York Senator Questions Avengers’, NY Crisis UPDATE, Channel 5.

Clint raised an eyebrow. “Like it’s our responsibility to ward off all aliens that attack?”

“Ungrateful,” Tony agreed.

A boy had been made an Iron Man helmet that he wore with a smile, a girl running over deserted train tracks with a rectangular hammer thrust into the air determinedly. A boy held a shield in hand as he sat atop his father’s shoulders-

“Look at the wonderful influence we have on the children!” Thor proclaimed with a grin as Loki rolled his eyes.

-while in the corner below a rendition of Tony with a suit soaring away on either side was painted in India.

“Tough questions are being asked about the Avengers themselves, their sudden appearance and their equally sudden disappearance…”

“What- that this is all somehow their fault?” Breaking News: New York Crisis, Disaster Averted. Live on CNN: Avengers – Friend or Foe? “Captain America saved my life,” Beth asserted-

Tony nudged a wheel of Steve’s chair with his foot as he waggled his eyebrows to the Captain’s frown.

-breathing heavily, incredulous and in relief, adding, “Wherever he is, and wherever any of them are, I would just… I would want to say thank you.”

“And scene!”

“It’s still playing,” Phil announced.

“But nothing else happened.”

A woman worked on sweeping the dust and debris from the floor as a sign along the back wall boasted, ‘Shawarma Palace, Voted Best Shawarma in New York City’, a man behind the counter frying the pieces of meat that had been sliced from the spit that stood rotating beside him. The Avengers were crammed around a long table in the front half of the store: Thor leant over his plate taking a bite of his wrap before wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand; Tony slumped back in his seat chewing; Bruce on one end hunched over his basket and placing the last bite of the assembly into his mouth; Clint seated with his left leg raised to rest across the back corner of Natasha’s chair as he picked from the container in his lap; she sat with her hands braced above her knees as she chewed; Steve at the other end with his cheek propped up on a fist, eyes fluttering closed every couple of seconds.

Glances were cast onto one another as they sat drooped in their seats, exhausted as they gingerly shifted to slowly consume their meals in each other’s company.

“This thing’s really covering everything – was delicious though. We should order in shawarma every week.”

“That would open us up to unnecessary risk of poisoning,” Natasha countered.
“Seriously,” Tony stated dryly with a quirked eyebrow. “You can test your food all you like.”

“You don’t?” Clint questioned.

“That seems reckless,” Loki contributed.

“Alright, that whole corner,” he said emphatically, gesturing to the three opposite him, “is paranoid.”

“Perhaps I should enroll you in one of the new-recruits’ precautionary habits sessions,” Phil mused.

“What? No- No organized lectures where I’ll be surrounded by creepy agents, no way.”

“Are we in serious danger of being targeted for our actions?” Steve asked.

“It appeared as though we were being celebrated,” Thor added in confusion.

“We don’t know,” Phil answered. “It will take a while for the shock to fade and for individuals to form arguments and group together if there is any opposition.”

**SHIELD Interrogation: Agent Maria Hill**

48 hours after Tesseract event

“You want to know what went wrong?” she asked, gaze distant. “How this… horror, this… catastrophe could have been averted?” She was seated in a plush chair on one side of a wide conference table, the World Security Council’s shadowed members displayed across from her.

“A lot of people are dead, Agent Hill,” one of the males stated. “Somebody has to answer for that.”

Frowns and brows furrowed in displeasure distorted expressions at the inquisition.

“A lot of people have to answer for that,” she remarked.

“Nick Fury?” a female questioned.

Hill scoffed and shook her head. “That man-”

“You filed several reports criticizing Director Fury’s actions since you joined SHIELD-”

“-because he’s reckless,” she justified.

“I thought you said she came around?” Bruce asked of Phil, who merely indicated the screen.

“We’re at war, and he thinks about superheroes.”

“The Avengers?”

“God,” she huffed, “who would bring those people together and not expect what happened…”

“You have to understand there are aspects of this incident that are difficult for most people to accept,” a councilman reassured as she shifted her position.

“-those creatures…” the female added.

“Fury said to me once, ‘In the time of gods and monsters what is the worth of a man?’”
Steve winced at the truth of the statement, the battle spoken of bringing to light more than any he had fought in just how mediocre his efforts were in the grand scheme of things. He could lead the team and fight as hard as he could, for as long as he was able to, but compared to Thor or Tony’s suit and technology, Loki’s magic or Bruce’s transformation, what use was he?

*Her gaze stared into the middle-distance, remembering the battle. “I don’t know what he means,” she admitted with a shake of her head. “And then men are dying all around. Good men – friends.*

“Even some heroes.”

“So it’s safe to say mistakes were made in the handling of the incident?” the female council member intoned.

“Mistakes?” she repeated incredulously, shaking her head again. “God, that’s all there was – a series of astonishing mistakes. And the worst of all…” she trailed off, eyes wandering from her surroundings and to her memories of the invasion again.

“Agent Hill?” the female prompted her to continue. “Agent Hill? Agent Hill – you were saying?”

“Sorry, yes?” she said, shifting in her chair once her attention returned to the questioning.

“You said, ‘The worst mistake…’? ”

“Well,” she chuckled, “I think we all know who made that. You thought they were a threat, I thought they were a joke. Nick Fury only ever saw them as the Avengers. No matter what he said… If he hadn’t seen that, well, Midtown Manhattan would be a smoking crater, for one thing.”

“That’s right!”

“That issue is not in question at this time.”

“What? Puh-lease.”

*She chose to abandon the issue for the moment, explaining, “It was absolutely a bad idea. The wrong people, the wrong time – and it worked. They came together and they saved us.*

“It’s infuriating. We’re trained to believe in a system – not to gamble, not to hope. Nick Fury saw something running under the system – a current, a connection of truth… about what we can do. What they would become.” She declared clearly, “The Avengers were the mistake that saved the world. That’s my official statement.”

“I would have had her as my deputy after this, not before,” Clint remarked.

“Director Fury sees the potential in people,” Phil responded. “Anyway, there’s no benefit to surrounding yourself with only those who agree with you.”

“I see,” one of the men murmured in disappointment.

“Oh and, um, as for the matter that’s not in question-” she added as she stood, fisting her hands on her hips, “-where you morons tried to nuke New York?”

Tony snorted a chuckle.

“Well, that’s on the record. As in, we recorded it.”

“Yes! Blackmail,” he crowed.
“We do that, we’re SHIELD. So if you’re thinking about coming after Nick Fury – ever – think really, really hard.”

She severed the connection to the Council and exited the secure room, arriving at the control panels of the bridge as Fury approached her.

“How’d that go?”

“Sold you down the river, sir,” she responded. “Should have your job within the month.”

“Good work,” he said drying, suggesting, “You should maybe ask for a chair.”

“I will keep that in mind,” she replied with a small smile.

Tony chortled as Bruce mused, “I did not imagine them interacting that way.”

“The two operate more as co-directors now, rather than him holding superiority to over her,” Phil clarified.

“I don’t think you understand what you’ve started,” the councilwoman decreed, “letting the Avengers loose on this world. They’re dangerous.”

“They surely are, and the whole world knows it,” Fury stated. “Every world knows it.”

“Was that the point of all this? A statement?”

“A promise,” he confirmed.

Loki accepted the rationale, but the Director couldn’t have anticipated the intricate politics at play behind everything surrounding Midgard’s relationship to the other Realms. The Chitauri were a non-entity compared to the Nine, and the Avengers’ victory over the creatures doesn’t necessarily demand the respect or peaceful terms with the others. And that would be discounting the Trickster’s own allegiance and Asgard’s status of him.

Tony unrolled a computerized, interactive blueprint of his properties and browsed through the floor plans to the Tower, Pepper holding a palm over the two-dimensional ground space and raising the dozens of floors of its construction. The billionaire stepped to her from the bar as he took of sip of a drink he had prepared, setting it off to the side as he idly spun the hologram, pressing a finger thoughtfully to his mouth before he rested the hand on his hip. She swept the top half of it off to his additional removal of some of the bracing architecture of the side before dismissing the entirety of the original design, the two left to share a kiss amidst the plastic tarps, spotlights, paint cans, and ladders of the rebuild.

Only the ‘A’ was left emblazoned the outside of the tower.

“Okay, so now we’re officially up to date,” Tony nodded.

“There are a few seconds left of footage, sir,” Jarvis contradicted.

“Man...”

“Do you have someplace to be?” Steve asked with his arms crossed over his chest.

“I have things to do,” Tony retorted. “There’s magic to play with!”

A pale moon unmarred by depressions of impact spun near to a star, its blinding pinprick of
gaslight illuminating the debris of asteroids within proximity. Within the gloom of mist and shadow, one formed a rocky basin that held a seat with glowing base, a trail of floating platforms winding up to reach it.

The occupants of the room tensed at revisiting the Other, the imminent revelation of some crucial information evidently on the verge of explanation.

“Humans,” the Other drawled in distaste. “They are not the cowering wretches we were promised. They stand.” He knelt behind the intricate throne, declaring, “They are unruly, and therefore cannot be ruled.”

The figure in the chair placed hands on the armrests and stood, the Other flinching and bowing his head lower. Though he concluded, “To challenge them… is to court death.”

The metal covering the shoulders and helmet gleamed in the faint light as the being turned, deep plum skin misshapen as his eyes shined blue over a wide, slow smile.

“Thanos,” Thor declared at the sight, his teammates nodding in absorption of the reality of him being the grand orchestrator of the invasion.

“Wait…” Loki murmured, eyes narrowed in the middle distance before him. “…why would he smile?”

“Because he’s insane,” Tony quipped.

“He thinks we’re a challenge,” Steve inserted. “When he comes at us with whatever he’s arranging right now, we’ll be ready. He’s underestimating us.”

“No,” Loki thought aloud again. Brows furrowed at his contest while Clint surveyed his contemplative expression in trepidation.

“She’s interfering,” she muttered, voice smooth as velvet sharp as her tongue wrapped the words in disapproval and a frown twisted her lips.

“Who?” Loki asked, feeling the change in the Laws of the Universe as her dissatisfaction permeated the Realms. She didn’t speak to him often.

“Life’s other half,” she answered. She streaked from his core to surround him, distancing his perception from his chambers in Asgard and drawing him through the blinding branches of the World Tree to the void where she dwelled. Wires of copper, purples, greens, and all manner of hues pulsed through the fog black as ebony, long formulae of symbols twisting and rewriting as she explored the extent of herself, governing the physics of the Nine and those beyond. “We cannot interfere, but through the agents we have chosen,” she explained. “But she is manipulating purposefully… to gain power.”

“What do you want from me?” he questioned.

Her eyes flashed onto him, and she said, “Nothing — you can do nothing now.” Then she chuckled. “But you will be involved — I’ll see to it.”

He had known for some time that Death was moving behind the scenes, but how did this grant her power? He laid his palms flat on the table and stated, “He means to court Death — that’s why he
grinned at the Other’s turn of phrase.”

“There were rumours of the Mad Titan being enamoured with her,” Thor mused.

“She must have approached him.”

“But she cannot be courted,” he argued, “it’s impossible. She’s one of the forces that holds everything in balance – she’s not a being to interact with on any level of equality. She is like Fate, Chaos, Ice, or Fire – everywhere. And Death can’t be pleased but by the souls that pass over. What does he hope-”

“Exactly,” Loki gasped as he stood. His eyes flicked to the blond, “That’s it – her power grows as the Realms are unbalanced. The more that are massacred the more weight she has over Life. Thanos meant to gift all the souls of Midgard onto her to gain her favour.”

A long pause followed his words at the thought of the billions of humans meant to be sacrificed, before Tony managed a ‘That’s sick.’

Steve struggled to speak for several seconds before he pondered, “But… If he was really going to do that, then why not attack with the Chitauri himself.”

“He wanted the Tesseract as well – but there’s no reason for him to not have simply come here to fetch it…” Loki said, beginning to pace.

“If we’re going with all of this,” Clint started, “then he would be planning on killing everything to ‘please’ death. Is there a more powerful weapon he was looking for while he sent you to get the Cube?” he asked as he stood and faced him, crossing his arms over his chest.

“There is not-” Thor alleged as he stood as well before Loki interrupted him.

“There are, but none so easily accessible – most are in the Weapons’ Vault-” He comically froze, abruptly immobilized before he reeled forward and grasped Thor’s upper arms. “The Weapons’ Vault. The Tesseract and Mind Gem are here, and he would have them both – but the greatest force would be given to him if he gathered all the Gems. But those are still separate – unless he has-”

“The Infinity Gauntlet,” they chorused.

“But father has it well protected, Loki,” Thor protested.

“You and I are here, his eyes are on us and the progression we’re making in this Realm,” he contradicted.

“Then you must go to him and warn him!” the blond insisted. Loki staggered back a step before Thor followed, now grasping a hold of him. “You can appear by his side quicker than my transport with the Cube! Brother, you must – we do not know if Thanos is in Asgard right now!”

“I-” he started before halting, eyes caught by the stare affixed on him before he darted his gaze around the room. He closed his eyes and moved back, and Thor released him.

He nodded and disappeared.
Disquiet

Chapter Summary

Uncertain of what they should be expecting, the Avengers and SHIELD prepare to aid Asgard, though the happenings of the Realm far exceed what they anticipated.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thor stared at the empty space before him for a second in overwhelmed relief as his teammates gaped, stunned, at the Trickster’s acquiesce. The god collected himself and then turned to stride from the room, the others leaping out of their chairs to follow him.

“I’m not sure you will be allowed the Tesseract so suddenly again,” Phil remarked in warning as they boarded the elevator, Thor’s muscles tensed and Mjolnir in hand.

“I need her,” he responded firmly. “I must shadow my brother.”

“Yeah, about that,” Tony began as they arrived in the aircraft hangar, “what’s an Infinity Gauntlet?”

‘I’ll fly her,’ Clint commented as the hatch to the Quinjet opened and they boarded, Thor pausing to furrow his brow and clench the handle of his hammer tighter as he glanced to the wall that was revealing the expanse of sky over the city. He turned to trail after the others as he answered, “It’s a powerful artifact that is able to harness the powers of all of the Infinity Gems.”

“Those have been mentioned by Loki,” Bruce said as Natasha joined Clint in the cockpit, Phil phoning ahead. “One is the stone in the scepter – how many are there?”

“Six,” he declared gravely as they lifted into the air. “I didn’t think the Tesseract was one due to her shape, but Loki seemed to include it as one. The Cube must be of Space.”

“Again, you’re going to have to slow down a bit, buddy,” Tony retorted. “And you’d better be recording all of this, J.”

“Indeed I am, sir.”

“Can he hack into everything?” Clint interrogated after swearing at the sudden contribution over the speakers.

“Everything I make,” Tony replied with a smirk. He turned back to Thor and ordered, “Six – each of what – something about shape, then back to the gauntlet.”

“Each governs an aspect of the Reams: mind, soul, time, space, power, and the fabric of reality. The Gem in the scepter is of Mind®, and the Tesseract, I assume, of Space,” the god explained. “It is difficult to grasp the extent of their powers and so I thought it implicit that each would appear to be the size of a small stone – there are hollows in the Gauntlet for them – instead of thinking that their powers could be applied onto themselves when gathered to be manipulated into the artifact’s hold.
“I know one can change the shape of things, and another is capable of warping reality, so it seems possible that they can be affixed to the Gauntlet without fitting the contours exactly. My mother used to read me stories of the battle between the Dark Elves and my grandfather ages past, and the Gem of Power fought over fluctuated through various forms of a fluid, liquid and gaseous at the same time.”

“Okay then…” Steve uttered uncertainly. “So Thanos wants all of these, and the gauntlet to control them, to murder everyone on Earth?”

“Midgard isn’t his only target,” he countered. “It was oppourtune and easy, but in the end he simply desires to please Death.”

“About that…” Tony interjects, “What’s up there? You said there were people that held everything together-”

“That hold everything together – yes, they do,” Thor corrected and confirmed. “They are not people, but concepts and forces of the Realms of immeasurable power, inaccessible but by those chosen to represent them. The Norns, for example, are females who rule over the destiny of gods and men – chosen by Fate and guided by her. My brother is also one – he would not be able to claim ‘Agent of Chaos’ otherwise.”

“So Loki embodies Chaos, and Thanos, Death?” Bruce clarified. “But I thought Loki’s daughter ruled over the realm of the dead – is she involved?”

“I don’t believe so,” he answered thoughtfully. “Hela guards over the souls of the dead in Helheim, but she was placed there in order that she rule over the Realm. She has a unique relationship with Death, as do the Valkyries – the women who spirit away the most honourable who die in battle, to prepare for Ragnarök in Valhalla – but they are not of Death.

“Just as we all live presently, surrounded by the play of hot and cold in this vessel, we are touched by Life, Fire, and Ice. They are always everywhere. Just as those in battle are closer to Strife or those aged closer to Death, but a very select few are approached and tested to be given a measure of power so to represent them, physically, in the Realms.”

“So it’s a big thing then,” Phil ascertained.

“Yes. As is Death’s champion moving on her orders to try and overtake Life.”

They arrived on the Helicarrier to Agent Hill’s presence. She immediately questioned them as they disembarked, “What’s happened now?”

“I must utilize the power of the Tesseract,” Thor proclaimed.

Her brows furrowed as she wordlessly trailed the group as the blond led from the landing strip and through numerous halls, stating, “That’s not an explanation – and where is Loki?”

“It’s complicated,” Phil refuted. “Both you and Director Fury need to be informed of the situation.”

“I just finished calming the Council down after the last stunt you guys pulled,” Fury greeted in exasperation with his arms crossed over his chest as they entered one of the secure labs, the Tesseract shining from within her container as Erik and a couple of other scientists continued to assess her and the Scepter. “What is it this time?”

“I must aid my brother,” Thor insisted, striding towards the Cube.
The Director firmly stepped in front of him to halt his progress. “I don’t think so. What the hell is going on?”

“There is an immensely powerful artifact that’s being held in the Weapons’ Vault that Thanos desires and could be moving to take right now!” the Thunderer shouted. “Loki has teleported to Asgard to warn our father and I must follow him.”

He narrowed his eye at the god’s clenched fists and shifted to allow him past, commiserating the necessity of the action with Hill through a glance. At the remaining Avengers’ movement to join him though, Fury cursed, “Hell no.”

“We’re just enforcing the contract,” Tony justified with a smirk. “‘The Contractor will be compensated through the defense of his person against any and all beings that would remove him from the obligations of this Agreement, i.e. the extraterrestrials known as the Æsir, the Chitauri, and/or any individuals that associate themselves with the two threats aforementioned.’ Thanos falls under that last category nicely.”

“This isn’t only about the contract,” Hill interjected. “Thor and Loki don’t represent the entirety of Asgard’s interests. We can’t send you through the Realms to fight with them – we don’t know your status.”

“Come on-”

“No,” Fury interrupted. “This can’t be brushed off. You said-” he indicated Thor, “-that Earth’s alliance with your people rested on how everything with Loki played out. We can’t impose you on them because it might not be interpreted as ‘help’. You’re one of our most powerful defenses here – if you’re locked up somewhere you’re as good as dead and we’re as good as toast against Asgard.”

“We’re not their enemies-” Steve objected.

“We don’t know if we’ve been labelled as such yet,” Phil reluctantly countered.

“And,” Fury continued, “even if we’re recognized as allies, I can’t make the call to send you there. It’s the Council’s decision.”

“F**k the Council-”

“Barton, we’re talking about an official alliance between Earth and Asgard. Until they elect me to deal with it, it’s on their shoulders.”

A thick silence permeated the air at the situation before Thor reassured, “It’s alright, my friends,” as he grasped one side of the case the Cube was held in. “I will come back for you.”

He twisted the opposite handle and the azure streaks of radiation blossomed out to encompass his form, streaking upwards and briefly through the ceiling before dissipating completely.

“You have to talk to them right now,” Tony insisted instantly. “You know we’ve got to get up there.”

“There’s no way for you to, without Loki or the Tesseract,” Hill declared.

“Just get ready,” Fury countered. “I’ll have it worked out for when he gets back. You won’t be going without contact though – not for an alliance our world’s future hinges on. Find a way to sustain communication, even if it’s just one-way so we can prepare damage control.”
Tony raised an eyebrow. “Sure – sounds like a piece of cake.”

“Work it out.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“Now get the hell out of here.”

The rest of the day passed slowly, in a haze of anxious anticipation and hurried preparation as the sun set. When word still had not been heard of Thor’s reappearance as the hours passed, it became apparent that the occupants rooming in the topmost floors of Stark Tower had no intention to rest even as midnight rolled around. Steve’s brow was perpetually furrowed as he pounded the sandbag he had attached to the ceiling of the training area on the 90th floor, knuckles wrapped as he worked for an hour before pausing and pacing in thought at the possible circumstances on Asgard, before returning his attentions to the bag to distract himself.

Clint and Natasha sat on the couch in their common three floors above, the former on the arm with his feet on the cushion as the latter reclined against the opposite arm with one leg crossed over the other. “You’re worried,” she broached.

“Not sure if I’d call it that, but yeah,” he answered. “The deal between Loki and SHIELD was tricky before, but now with Asgard dragged in- We don’t know their view of us, their view of Loki, their view of our deal with Loki-”

“We don’t know how they are going to react to the threat of Thanos.”

“Or to having Loki gifted to them on a silver platter,” he added. Natasha’s gaze sharpened on his disturbed expression and he defended in response, “SHIELD thinks of him as a valuable asset, and we’re under contract to defend him so he can keep supplying us with information. We saw what he did there, last year – but even with the first disc we don’t know how they would have judged him for it.”

“And that doesn’t even take into account the invasion,” she said in concession to the complicated nature of the circumstances, but chose not to relent on his evident concern. “We both know that you should have to be dragged to his aid, even if he’s a vital consultant. What do you really feel for him, that you’ve forgiven him so quickly?”

“Who says I’ve-”

“I expected this from Thor, he’s been compromised from the beginning, and Stark and Banner because of what he offers them, but you – after what he did to you… I saw your fear and anger when he’d been taken by the Chitauri,” she confronted bluntly, before continuing, “I know he’s approached you on your own. You don’t seem to be coerced, but I want you to tell me, right now, if he’s threatened you with anything-”

“He hasn’t,” Clint gritted, thinking in irritation, *Get brainwashed once and all of a sudden none of your actions are your own. I got this speech from Cap a while back too.* "I can take care of myself!"

“Then explain what’s happening between you two.”

“What do you think he did to me?” he countered abruptly. She narrowed her eyes at the query, and he breathed deeply to calm himself before assuring, “It’s not a trick question.”
She remained unconvinced, but answered, “He used the Mind Gem to control you. He twisted the thoughts on your memories and fed you the information needed so you would willingly work for him.”

“Yeah, he did,” he accepted. “But I’m not under that control anymore. And how pissed can I be, when the missions I took in his name are the same as what I’m expected of under SHIELD?” She quirked an eyebrow at the truth of that realization. “No questions, right? Just do as you’re told – trust the system. You get what your clearance level allows you. If I fear that, what, he’s going to brainwash me again – what will that get me?

“I’ll be as distrustful of him as I’ve a right to be, but as it is he’s a consultant who, for his own interests, has to play nice.” *I can trust Him to be self-serving, I’m pretty sure.* “I’m just as worried of him attacking me as I am of Thor flipping out over an insult and taking my head off with that hammer of his. They have about the same ties to Earth – with Loki though, SHIELD actually has something to hold over his head.”

“There’s a difference,” she argued.

“Sure, there’s a difference – but in power.” *If there’s one thing we’ve learned with all of this, it’s that Loki’s a lot more powerful than we’ve seen glimpses of.*

“And in motivation.”

“When Thor was here the first time he wrecked a shit ton and only started to play nice when he realized he’d been exiled for good, and with the invasion he just wanted to get the Cube back,” he argued. “He grew up in a different place, with different values – when his views clash with ours, it’ll be a storm.”

She hummed in thought as she digested his reasoning. “Fine, but I can tell you’re more attached than justified through that.”

“I am,” he admitted. “I know I shouldn’t be, and I know all my first impressions are warped, but I’m not under his control anymore – magic or otherwise.” *I can choose to feel if I want to.*

“Can you be sure of that?”

“No, but we’re being thrown into some crazy shit, so I’m pretty sure we’re not going to be sure of much for a while.” He grinned mockingly.

She smirked at that and nodded, remarking, “Just making sure you’re on top of your game.”

He shrugged. “All I know is that everything he’s done he’s had a reason to, and right now he’s an ally, not trying to kill me, and keeps pesterling me with his interest–” he listed with a frustrated wave of his hand, “–expecting more before starting to care for people, in our profession, is stupid.”

“It’ll keep you safer though,” she contradicted. “And what kind of ‘interest’ is he expressing?” she interrogated as she leaned closer.

*The thing is, I’m not even sure,* he thought. He shrugged. “He’s an alien Norse god, how should I know?”

She narrowed her eyes on him again, and he didn’t want to know what conclusions she was drawing about how attached he already was to Him, and the idea of anything between them progressing further. “Look,” he started, “he was in my mind – he saw everything. I *remembered*… everything.” Her eyes softened as she nodded again. “And do you know what he thinks? He thinks
I’m worth something – worth trying to gain the loyalty of.

“And that’s different than wanting to use me for whatever skills I have – he’s willing to put in the effort to try and get me to fight for him,” he strained to convey, raking a hand through his short hair. “I don’t know,” he finished with a sigh.

“Alright,” she granted. “You’re at least thinking it all through.”

“Surprise, surprise, right?” he laughed.

Natasha allowed the comfortable silence for a few moments before she restated, “You’re really worried about him.”

He shifted to the higher perch offered by the back of the couch, his left foot on the cushions as he faced her with the other leg curled up to his chest. “A couple times I could feel him, in my head,” he started, “when he was looking at the thoughts I had hovering around the information I was giving him. And on one hand he was obsessed with opening the portal and ruling and the Cube, you know, but sometimes I got a read on some of the things underneath.

“I could feel how his magic was always fighting. The rest was all instinct and emotion – wanting to protect himself, fear of a lot of things that I still don’t get. There was a dark, deformed thing that I’m sure was Thanos, but there was also a lot of gold.” His eyes flashed onto her.

“The thing is,” he continued, “there’s a reason he made a point to include defense from Asgard in the contract. He’s terrified of something they’ll call there. And there’s no way to know why- And we can’t be there when it’ll happen.”

“Just make something to enable communication between dimensions, Tony,” the engineer muttered to himself. “Not like it’s all that complicated.”

Bruce rolled his eyes from where he stood, conscribing a set of equations onto the suspended screen in front of him with a stylus. “That he made the request of you instead of his own agents says something.”

“Yeah, that they know I can do a whole lot more than those grunts,” he retorted with a snort. “Why they can’t cave and ask me for things more often I don’t know – pride’s such a sin.”

Bruce choked on a laugh at the irony of the statement coming from the man, and he glanced over to Tony grinning at him before he directed a wink at the scientist. He shook his head and adjusted the formulae under his fingers as at a low table alongside him the genius carefully twisted a couple of wires of what was the beginnings of a miniature communications device.

Without word the night transitioned into the dawn of the next day, and before long another day had passed, and then another. The Avengers were left uninformed of the happenings occurring on Asgard, whiling away their time under the guise of refining their preparations when the reality was that they could have left less than an hour after Thor’s departure.

Phil had informed Pepper of Tony and the group’s imminent leave and the increased number of responsibilities she would have to acquaint herself with, all of Stark Industries’ movements necessitating observation by SHIELD without the billionaire inserting himself as an intermediary. She had expected the team to be swept away while she was still reorganizing how she was managing the company, but when she checked in with Jarvis she was told otherwise.
“What are they waiting for?” she asked as she entered the foyer of the tower. “It seemed important to Phil that they resolve everything.”

“They require the Tesseract for travel, Miss Potts,” the AI answered her, elaborating, “Their aid relies on Thor’s swift return to fetch them.”

_Clearly I wasn’t given the specifics_, she thought with a roll of her eyes. At her request, Jarvis debriefed her of the series of events that had taken place that led to the current state of apprehensive suspension. “Where’s Tony now?” she questioned as she approached the top levels.

“In the lab with Dr. Banner.”

“And how long has it been since they’ve eaten something or slept?”

“Dr. Banner prepared a couple of sandwiches that were eaten approximately 58 hours ago by the two of them, but REM sleep has not been achieved by him for 74 hours and Sir for almost 100. They have been sustained by caffeine as well as increasingly frequent naps taken collapsed over the surfaces of the workspace.”

She narrowed her eyes and jabbed the button for the 89th floor, stepping into the lab to the sight of Tony having donned thick safety goggles and jerking his hand back abruptly from a series of sparks that emitted from the small device in his hand. Bruce, who was seated on the floor with his eyes shut, mouth gaping open, and back against the armchair with his head craned back to rest on the cushion, jolted into consciousness at the other’s sudden cursing.

“That’s it you two!” she yelled as she entered. “You’re eating and then passing out on either a couch or a bed, if I have to drag you out by the ears!”

“Oh hey,” Tony greeted as he lifted the protective eyewear from his head. “Would love to, but I’ve got to finish this.”

“You can finish it later.”

“Thor could be back any second,” Bruce added, though at her fierce glare cleared his throat and stood, “but eating again would probably be good.”

Tony grumbled and moved to pick up one of the soldering irons before forced to flail away from the table and tools in avoidance of Pepper’s lunge and grasp for his ear. “Alright!” he conceded. “But only ’cause I managed to work recording and a live audio feed and only have to figure out a way for us to hear SHIELD spewing orders. You know what? I’ll just leave it – we can totally handle ourselves-”

“You can revisit it once you’ve slept,” Pepper allowed with a sigh, herding the two into the elevator.

“We’ve been sleeping.”

“Not often or long enough for a REM cycle in a few days.”

“Jarvis!” Tony hissed in betrayal.

“What has everyone else been doing?” Bruce asked with furrowed brows as they exited onto the 95th floor.

“Agents Barton and Romanov have been prepared for departure since the night you all returned,
have been eating and sleeping regularly, and occupy themselves talking or sparring with one 
another,” Jarvis relayed. “Mr. Rogers has eaten little though his sleeping patterns have not deviated 
from what I’ve calculated to be the norm since he’s lived here, and is almost always to be found 
working out on the 90th floor.”

“Invite him up for dinner, please, Jarvis,” Pepper ordered as she opened one of the drawers of the 
 kitchen and fanned out an array of take-out menus. “It’s not the healthiest, but you need the 
calories and you need them before you fall over.”

“Pizza!” Tony voted as he hurriedly picked out the lists from pizza places and shoved the others 
back towards her. She shook her head but replaced the rejected slips into the drawer.

After a few moments of Tony arguing with himself over what they should order, the elevator 
arrived and Steve entered. He smiled bashfully and gestured at his sweat-soaked tee and loose 
track pants, excusing, “I’m sorry, Miss Potts, but Jarvis wouldn’t let me get off at my own floor to 
change.”

“Call me Pepper, Steve,” she corrected, before proclaiming, ‘Good’ at the justification. “You need 
to eat, then you can shower and sleep.”

“Just barged in and set herself up as queen,” Tony muttered in warning from behind a menu. 
“Run!”

Steve stared at him in amusement before Pepper walked up to him and steered him to a seat at the 
table. Upon a closer inspection of the two scientists he interrogated in concern, “How long have 
you two not slept?”

“-or eaten,” Pepper inserted.

“I get caught up like that all the time,” Tony said as he waved a hand dismissively.

Bruce guiltily shrugged as he justified, “I can manage – I’m used to it, really.”

Tony blinked in realization and scowled, narrowing his eyes at the other. “You’re not going to be 
starving in my tower like it’s a third world country you can’t pronounce. No way, no how.”

Pepper smiled at the declaration and adjustment of habit that would cause if Bruce remained with 
Tony in the lab as the scientist attempted to refuse the alterations the billionaire was proposing. 
Her attention was drawn to Steve as he asked, “What about Clint and Natasha?”

“They’ve been taking care of themselves,” she explained as she took a seat.

‘Ah,’ he uttered softly. “We’ve actually been working on things!” Tony objected.

“We’re all distracted though,” Steve interjected.

“We don’t know what’s happening,” Bruce agreed with a shrug.

“You expected for him to be back for you by now – but, well, did he give you a timeframe at all?” 
Pepper questioned. “What if it’s more weeks than days?”

“Seemed to be an immediate thing,” Tony mused. “And- hey, wait – what do you mean ‘you’? 
You mean ‘we’,” he hastily corrected. “You’re coming.”

She raised an eyebrow. “No I’m not. I’m taking care of everything while you’re gone – we can’t
both be on vacation.”

“It’s Asgard!” Tony retorted. “Fury’ll love having his grunts watch over the company – you’re coming.”

“I can’t just-”

“Yes, you can.”

She cast her eyes to the ceiling with a heavy sigh before lowering her gaze to glower at Tony’s grin. “Just order some pizza.”

Late the following morning, Tony had a lengthy argument with the Director that eventually settled on Phil being assigned as Pepper’s proxy while she and Tony were both unavailable to govern the company, SHIELD keeping a close eye on the movements of the board of directors. The billionaire was told also that the benefits of a truce with Asgard could not be denied, and that the Council stated that if possible the subject was to be broached and further negotiations arranged at a later date between representatives of both Realms. The Avengers were charged with this as well as taking action to ensure that the contract with Loki was not breeched, his alliance invaluable unless Asgard offered a sorcerer of equal power to them. Tony sneered at the mention of the condition, but Thor, Loki, and all the mythological sources he’d read so far ascertained he was the most skilled Asgard had, so he wasn’t too worried.

Phil visited to read over all the documents Pepper had for him, and then all three signed where needed. Tony presented the earpiece he had finished to the agent that was one of two, the first in his own ear that would relay all heard to the latter, both prearranged to automatically record. He and Bruce were still working out a way to sustain communication with all the foreign energy interfering between the Realms, but this version would serve its purpose if Thor arrived before they were able to solve it. Phil and Pepper departed so that she could introduce him to the superiors as the two scientists resumed their work.

At almost a quarter after nine that night, the electronics still operating on the top levels of the tower began to sporadically fail. Tony and Bruce exchanged a questioning glance before Jarvis reported, “There’s an unprecedented collection of storm clouds directly overhead, sir, and my scanners are beginning to read the radiation signature of the Tesseract just above the surface of the roof.”

“Finally,” Tony proclaimed as he grabbed the modified Mark V, the suitcase armour now equipped with an independent power source that used Vibranium in the reactor. He and Bruce moved to the elevator as he commanded, “Tell everyone to grab their shit and meet on the roof.”

Pausing on the 92nd floor for Bruce’s bag and the topmost for Pepper, who had her and Tony’s suitcase, they arrived at the roof. Tumultuous winds grasped at their clothes as their eyes adjusted to the darkness of the sky, the stars obscured though the infinite lights of the city lit the buildings below. Clint and Natasha appeared from the door leading to the stairs as Steve reached them by elevator, all three carrying duffle bags, as azure coalesced in waves in the air before them. Thor appeared with the Cube as the heavy clouds above abruptly unleashed a hefty downpour.

They strode to his side, Natasha asking, “Is this you?” with a gesture to the rain.

“I’m sorry,” he articulated superficially, beckoning them closer. “We must move quickly. Clinton, take the other handle,” he instructed as he released one end. “Lady Natasha, take his wrist; Lady Pepper, take mine, on the other side; Anthony and Bruce stand along this side, a hand on each rim; Captain, the same opposite.”
They scrambled to obey under the shade of the tempest and anxious stare of the Thunderer, the god twisting the handle clutched in his fingers the second they were arranged.

Bright blue swirled from the container to their feet before whipping around them, their eyes blinded suddenly by the influx of energy as they were wrenched from the ground. A moment of weightlessness was spent in the soft streaks of the atmosphere and the sharp sting of the limitless energy they were propelled by before their feet landed.

They stepped away from the close-knit gathering they had formed around the Tesseract to observe the immeasurably tall golden dome that stretched up into the night sky speckled with stars, pastel galaxies, and the curve of a moon and a nearby planet. The cross-hatched, shimmering semi-sphere encased a wide series of gold plated columns that the group knew made up the palace, the innermost buildings of the city of Asgard sprawled at its roots guarded by the massive shield as well. Outside the safeguard, Heimdall stood with his broadsword held pointed downwards in his hands.

“Any sign of the titan?” Thor asked instantly as he approached the Gatekeeper.

“None yet,” he replied. “Your journey was swift – circle west and enter through the stables.”

“Yes, thank you,” he acknowledged with a nod.

Under the gleam of the fully body armour and piercing eyes the rest of the team followed silently as Thor circled around the colossal man, stepping up to the dome of light and lightly resting his palm on the surface. He paused for a moment before assuring, “It’s safe to pass through, my friends – directly under my hand.” They walked gingerly through the translucent casing, stooping under the bend of his elbow, before he trailed after them.

Thor moved to the left as Tony asked, “What’s up with the shield? How’d you let us through? I knew Heimdall was tall but he’s really, really tall-”

“Speak softer, Anthony,” the blond ordered firmly.

“Why do we have to make our way to the stables?” Steve whispered.

“Are we supposed to be here?” Natasha interrogated.

“You are, the Allfather requested it,” Thor replied as they skirted between the houses lit by the dome and those further inward, travelling as close to the fringe of the protected city as the shadows reached. “But there is war amongst my people, and they fight with passion. There are factions that would not want to see you here, nor myself.”

‘War?’ Steve hissed as Clint growled, ‘What happened?’ Tony immediately matching his stride with Pepper’s and darting his eyes over their surroundings.

Bruce questioned, “They see us and you as enemies?”

“There will be better explanations than I can give once we’re inside the palace,” he excused, choosing instead to answer Tony’s original queries. “The magic surrounding the palace is a defense when we’re alerted of danger before it’s upon us,” he started. “Nothing can pass through, except those permitted willingly by either Heimdall or one of the royal family. I cannot provide any specifics, but we can place our right hand on the screen and will the passage of certain others that we deem to be of no threat to Asgard or her peoples.”

The explanation seemed of lesser value now that the reality of civil war was exposed. The answers
provided only strengthened the dangers of the circumstances, not only that Thanos was threat
enough to impose a quarantine on the palace, but that within that very enclosure were citizens
fighting against one another and their monarchs.

While they passed through the darkened alleys and courtyards, it became apparent to his team that
Thor was Loki’s brother despite their apparent differences in approach. They had spent centuries
alongside each other, and knew how to make use of the habits they picked up from the other when
convenient. The blond god’s figure flit stealthily from shade to shade near silently, his torso garbed
in a thick cloth vest devoid of bright armour and cape and Mjolnir hung on his hip, near
imperceptible compared to the power exuded from the weapon when in hand. It was effortless to
think of Thor as powerful due to his hammer and himself as an unstoppable force because of his
stubborn willpower, but the incorporation of the years of training under the best Asgard had to
offer her princes and familiarizing himself with Loki’s arsenal of tricks… Even without magic,
Thor encompassed more than a surface glance could presume.

They meandered closer to the palace until they entered through a stone court and entryway, Thor
straightening in ease and smiling as they entered the stables. They walked through the rows of
stalls of horses towards the double doors at the end, though Thor turned just before and knocked
before swinging open the single door on the right.

“Good evening,” he greeted to the men and women hastily standing to receive him. “Where is my
mother?”

“The Queen is with the remaining healers in their common, my prince,” one of the men answered.

“Thank you,” he replied to bows before he spun on his heel and closed the door behind him. He
opened the doors into the palace as he illuminated, “The servants are aware of more of the going-
onis in the Realms than the kings.”

“I’ve read that,” Bruce said in agreement and Pepper nodded.

“It’s more obvious you’re royalty, here,” Clint contributed. “Easy to forget in New York.”

“Are we going to have to call you ‘Your Highness’?” Tony asked, half-teasingly.

“Not unless ceremony calls for it, friend,” Thor laughed. “You would do well to address my
parents formally though, until Mother insists you don’t.”

“We’re not idiots,” Tony remarked with a roll of his eyes.

They traversed the gilded halls until they reached a wide row of stairs, ascending several floors
until Thor veered right, then left into a wide foyer. The far end was exposed to the open air,
columns stretching to the ceiling while bookcases and cabinets created a maze between, benches
and tables, chairs and desks, set over the tile.

“Mother!” Thor hailed, leading the group to one side where Frigga stood arguing with some
distress with several women. She turned at the call and a relieved smile brightened her face as she
stepped to meet him in an embrace.

“Thank goodness you’re alright,” she welcomed before gazing at the six mortals that had trailed
behind him. “And thank you all for coming.”

“No need to thank us, ma’am,” Steve replied awkwardly.

“They know not the details of why they’ve come,” Thor clarified for her.
“Solely on your plea, then,” she accepted with a soft smile. “Come with me, and I will explain.”

Chapter End Notes

(*) The Mind Gem I've been assuming all along is the stone in the scepter. It seems so obvious, yet in the Avengers and Thor: The Dark World the scepter seems to have dropped off the map and isn't mentioned. In the latter it actually states that the Tesseract is an Infinity Stone, as is the Aether.

I've incorporated these aspects into my theories, as have I for quite a few revelations of Asgard and the characters from the new film, but the scepter having the Mind Gem might apparently be head-canon.
Chapter Summary

Coming to know the opinions clashing in Asgard, the Avengers prepare their defense of Loki.

Chapter Notes

(*) Syn is the goddess of defensive refusal, regarding legal matters and debate. Directly related to the noun ‘denial’, she is commonly associated with the saying, “A denial is made when one says no.”

She led them out of the large common and through the halls once more, descending a floor until she pushed through a pair of double doors that opened into a study. The large window pane that almost comprised the entirety of one wall displayed a view of the open courtyard stories below, a loom with baskets of yarn and a taut canvas on an easel with an array of thread clustered to one side around a stool, a long chaise and several armchairs gathered around a low table, and an intricate desk and chair sat on the other side with bookshelves teeming above along the walls.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” she said as she settled onto the chair at the desk. Thor claimed the armchair by her side as Steve and Clint took the others, Tony, Pepper, and Bruce sitting side by side along the length of the chaise as Natasha sat on the stool as naturally as if it was any other seat. “I’m sorry there aren’t more chairs,” she apologized with a smile at their obedience regardless of the arrangement, “I don’t usually have so many in my study at once.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Tony dismissed graciously, to the restrained flabbergasted expressions of most of the others.

“What is it that we can help you with, ma’am?” Steve questioned.

“Thor mentioned a war,” Bruce prompted.

“Yes, but civil war, though rare, can be managed,” Frigga replied. “What I wish from you is aid in solving what caused the dissatisfaction of the people in the first place.”

“They will, of course!” Thor interrupted. “They have come to know Loki.”

“I’m sure, Thor,” she answered with an indulgent smile, “but they must be told what’s happened first.”

“What happened?” Pepper asked.

“My husband made a very impulsive judgment of him,” she surmised. “Upon his return he warned Odin of Thanos’ intentions to infiltrate Asgard, and though this was heeded, the Allfather didn’t think to consult anyone before condemning Loki for the crimes he perceived him guilty of.”
“What was he charged with?” Steve questioned as Clint interrogated, “What did he do to him?” Thor inhaled deeply as Tony grit his teeth at the thought of the past sentences Odin had decreed.

“For devastating the truce with Laufey, killing the Jötun king, attempting the genocide of all his kin and their Realm, killing Thor, destroying the Bifrost, leading a force to Midgard and harming the inhabitants there…” She shook her head. “If the trial was open to the public and my youngest’s defense heard, he would not have been rebuked at all.

“This is why the Æsir fight amongst each other – those justifying Loki’s actions and agreeing with his reasoning, seeing him as a victim of the Chitauri afterwards against those vilifying him and pronouncing him the orchestrator of the invasion. Those horrified at what has been done to him rallied in protest against those who want him executed.”

“It’s tearing the city apart,” Thor announced, “when we need to be united against Death’s plans.”

“What can we do?” Natasha queried with a raised eyebrow.

“Speak with the king,” Frigga remarked simply.

“How would that make a difference, if he’s already heard the arguments from the people?” Steve asked.

“You are of Midgard,” Thor answered. “It was your people that he waged war against. If you are able to describe what you’ve come to believe of his motivations and what you think of his actions last year, then he may listen to the cries of his own people instead of dismissing them in favour of defending the rights of those rebuilding on Midgard and Jötunheim.”

“What’s happened to Loki?” Pepper prompted again.

Frigga closed her eyes for a moment before she stood, declaring, “I will take you to him.”

They moved down the central staircase to the ground floor they had entered onto, then followed the queen as she wound through the golden plated corridors to another stairway. They descended further, into the depths of the ground beneath the palace, before she reluctantly pushed through another pair of doors.

They passed a pair of armed guards to rows of cells whose walls shined with the strength of the magic containing the warriors, the Dungeons brightly lit to showcase those captured. “Just a glance – we will talk elsewhere,” she directed to Thor’s agreeing, ‘Yes, mother.’ She led them around the central containers, dismissive of those aligned along the fringes who watched their progress with interest, until she circled around the side of the one she desired.

The corners were a stark white against the colours of the floor and other cells seen through the transparent barriers, the edges a lacework of gold-leaf rune work. On the floor lay Loki, unmoving, and at his stillness the group’s movement came to a halt.

He lay with his hips on their side and long legs sprawled over the floor, right knee bent further than the left and foot canted behind while his torso lay partially twisted, left shoulder crushed and armed pinned underneath him while his right pulled forward, its arm outstretched. He had been stripped of his layers of clothing with the exception of his pants, though the ends of the leather that had been tucked into his boots showed shredding and tear that had previously been hidden. On his left ankle there was dark bruising the imprint of a manacle, the marks above and below the edges sliced at presumably struggling within the restraint, as well as a deep riddling of burn scars that encircled the bone and tore up the skin of his lower leg. The fraction of his exposed back angled
forward displayed an alarming number of ends of silver as well as pale pink and scabbed streaked lines, the jagged marks of whippings not fresh but obviously not yet healed. Even these did not draw as much attention, though, as the cracks that split his skin.

They covered the balls of his feet to their arches and up over his ankles to his calves, reached ragged as lightning from the tips of his fingers and the separation of flesh from bright distal phalanges over the muscles of his palms to his forearms, splitting over the blunt tops of his ulnas to follow the rifts between the muscles of his upper arms. Stretching over his heart and sternum was gouged a concentration of rips that etched through his pectorals and abdominals to the front of his ribcage, like the center of the emission. There was no blood spilling from any of the wounds, no inflammation from the gashed muscles. Loki lay prone with vacant eyes that stared sightlessly towards them.

Clint’s breathing became harsher at the state of Him, his inhales increasing in frequency as he began to instantly deny the circumstances he was presented with. This can’t be Loki because He came here to warn Odin of Thanos and protect Asgard because Thor asked him to. Thor followed after Him and Thor wouldn’t allow this to happen to his brother – he’s always standing between Loki and harm no matter what He’s doing and Thor wouldn’t send Loki here if this was going to happen. Loki wouldn’t have come if He’d known, and He always knows, so this can’t be- He’s not bleeding- because it’s not Him. It’s a doll or a clone or some other magical mindfuck because Loki wouldn’t come here if this was going to happen and Thor wouldn’t have let it and it can’t be Him because it would mean He’s dead.

“He’s not-” he began to question, before Frigga repeated firmly in promise, ‘He’s not.’

He thinly released a long exhale from behind clenched teeth, the revelation insufficient to ease his concerns regarding what the hell had happened. He’s so still, how can you be sure? he wanted to ask. I’ve seen death, a lot of death, and glazed eyes and no blood being pumped are signs of it- her, he corrected, expression contorting into a sneer at the thought of the cause of all the distress of recent events. Death, herself, ordering Thanos to sacrifice all of them. Forcing Loki to travel by Himself to Asgard where He knew they hated Him-

Why? Why did You agree when You knew? You could have waited for Thor, could have taken him with You! Could have tried to explain-

“We cannot voice our thoughts freely here,” she continued, wrapping an arm around Tony’s shoulders and resting her other hand lightly on his stomach to his lessened grey pallor, gently steering him from the display.

His eyes fell to the center of her back as she led them from the chambers, his gaze glancing backwards for a second before being forcefully pulled away and onto her again. What exactly is going on here that in the palace –the depths of the dungeons – the Queen’s edgy? The people are fighting over this and are also preparing for what they were told of Thanos, but this means that on the king’s turf people are at odds too. Thor was relieved once we’d reached the stables, but if Frigga won’t let us freak out here… She knows more of what’s happening than he does.

They exited, moving up the stairs to the floor they had been led from, but continued on instead of returning to Frigga’s study. Several levels further, they came to another series of lavishly decorated passageways and were guided into an open lounge on the left. The group arranged themselves quickly on the benches, though Thor, Clint, and Steve elected to stand, their arms crossed over their chests.

“What caused the scarring?” Natasha asked with furrowed brow, Frigga patting one of Tony’s
hands at his unsettlement while Pepper sat on his other side and fiercely gripped the other.

“And why isn’t he bleeding all over the tile if he’s alive?” Clint interjected.

“As I told you before, my husband judged him impulsively,” Frigga started. “The ever sensible Allfather thoughtlessly stripped him of his magic.”

She intoned the statement with displeasure and the utmost severity, but the mortals in her audience were given pause in thought at what the perceived ramifications were to Loki as well as the reasoning by the Æsir for their actions. Bruce asked leadingly, “And what did that do to him?”

“Taking from him his magic is not like removing from his possession his swords, or even from me, Mjolnir,” Thor explained, “it is similar to tortuously blinding him, or depriving him of another all-pervading sense – it is a loss more of limb-”

“A sorceress’ magic is an aspect of her self,” Frigga elaborated, “an extension and yet integral to her being. Forcefully tearing it from her is akin to tearing out an organ whose place is at the core of the body, and every sense that was touched by its influence is dulled – speech, sight, hearing, touch, and the connection non-magic users have no way of experiencing with the universe, and the branches of Yggdrasil.

“My beloved son is left senseless in an abyss with the link to his body tenuous, terribly pained and without all passion, individuality, and sense of self.

“He will last maybe two days more, before he is broken and succumbs to death,” she admitted. “He has only survived this long because the amount of power he possessed was infinitely greater than any other and persevered to remain with him.”

A startled silence allowed for a deception of calm before,

‘What the FUCK-’ ‘No way in hell-’ ‘How could he do such a thing when-’ ‘No- No, no- Fuck no, you can’t be serious-’ ‘That can’t be right! How did that even-’

‘How does that come up as an option in someone’s head?!’ ‘Weren’t there witnesses – where were you?’ ‘We’ve got to reverse it somehow-’

“It’s just- just not right-”

“I know,” she agreed, “that is why you are here.”

“What can we do?” Steve asked.

“If Odin sentenced him to death then what do you think we can change about it?” Natasha questioned shrewdly. “And it’s not only that – what will the effect be on Loki?” Many agents of SHIELD were no strangers to sensory deprivation, but the circumstances must be radically different for the state to be lethal in such a short timeframe; the origin and integration of magic prevents any non-magic user from fully comprehending the extent of brutality of the sentence that Frigga and Thor’s devastated expressions conveyed.

“Any lingering harm to him will be dealt with after – what’s important is that we act,” Frigga proclaimed.

“Of course,” Pepper settled. “Can we talk to the Allfather now?”

Her lips pursed before she answered, “No, he’s decided to see you tomorrow afternoon.”
“He can’t just not see us when Loki’s wasting away-” Tony shouted.

“You need more time to understand what’s happening,” she reassured. “If you fail to convince him and he insists you leave, it is over.”

“You are safe within these walls, but word of your arrival and intent has no doubt spread,” Thor continued. “Those of good-will will ‘find’ a way past the servants to speak with you.”

“It was the healers of the palace that began the revolt,” Frigga detailed. “When the servants saw the state of one of their princes they began asking questions of those who are amiable to answering them, and the healers moved to see what punishment had been dealt. Even if not permitted to administer aid, their concern is the health of all who reside in Asgard. At the realization of what Odin had done, though, most could not bear to reside here and serve him any longer.

“The Allfather’s decisions are not ones to be questioned, ever – it is his right as king to journey paths that accomplish ends he sees fit for the Realm and her people. Very rarely is something so horrendous that he is out-rightly opposed from within the city. And even then, there must be many with the courage else the few that contest him can be silenced.

“But, for all his powers, he is not one that uses seidr naturally – it was earned through his rule. He did not know of the surety of death that would result, what torture the act would bring.

“So when the palace healers discovered that their king would choose to perform this on one of his sons, what is he standing for and what worth do they have – do any of the citizens have – to him? It is not like being branded a traitor and choosing to fall upon your sword, or imprisonment and isolation being too wasteful on a condemned criminal and being executed. This is the stripping of your sense and self and person and left to rot in suspended pieces of magic, mind, and body until a way is found to one of the Realms of the Dead – something kept from you even then in an afterlife of eternal torment.

“This action that disregards magic and the forces that rule the Realms was taken without thought, and yet it cannot strive to be undone without taking counsel from others in reparation for the rejection of it beforehand.”

“That’s awful,” Bruce acknowledged, the complexity to be resolved within the pressing timeframe demanding of them, as Tony muttered through clenched teeth, ‘That’s ridiculous.’

There was a respite as each internalized the situation and the wait before they could speak to Odin, before Frigga began to excuse herself. “I’m sorry, but I must visit the healers again – Thor will show each of you to your rooms. I don’t suppose you’ll get much rest here, but I wish you all the best efforts.” As she stood Thor rose as well, and she kissed him on the cheek with a ‘good night’.

“Why does she have to see the healers?” Pepper asked curiously.

“The few that remain in the palace would not outwardly disprove of my father’s actions because they could not support themselves separate from their service here to the king.” Thor began. “My mother is the only protection they have against any of the Allfather’s thoughts on their allegiance.

“The sorceresses are the ones at the front of this war – it would be safer for Odin to turn them out onto the streets than to risk harm from within this place with Thanos on his mind. Those fighting are trying to gain the support of all of the magic-users, especially since there are fewer now. Combat has claimed several, and even those neutral were targeted and killed in the assumption that they were in opposition to the faction that supports the king.”
“How many casualties?” Steve questioned.

“Of the sorceresses, there were but eighteen healers and five are dead. Four and my mother remain here, five still fight, and three have fled the city. I know not of how many are dead of the other citizens – the first two days bodies were strewn in the streets in the carnage.”

“So your magic-users have been almost halved?” Tony clarified in revulsion.

“There are some that are underaged that were apprentices or had showed potential,” Thor inserted, “and they were instructed by my mother to seek sanctuary with more distant relatives for safety.”

‘Still…’ Tony trailed off in objection before Steve dismissed the thread of conversation and declared, “We need a plan of action.”

Natasha nodded, stating, “It’s good that our arrival will have people seeking us out to provide us with arguments, but we can’t rely on the chance of whoever manages to break in. We need to go out and hear both sides of the fight so that we’ll be able to face anything Odin counters with.”

“Yes,” Bruce agreed. “There’s more risk in it, but we won’t be able to win if we don’t know the public’s views. The first disc showed us the events, but without the context of what the king is basing his decisions on, we won’t get anywhere.”

“It will be difficult to navigate through the city-” Thor started before he was cut off.

“We can wear disguises,” Clint suggested.

“There is much magic being used in these battles, so the side under the king has become highly sensitive to its use. The only way to have altered your appearance such that your mortality wasn’t obvious would have been through it – but now it gives you away more than anything else.” He informed, “We must simply move carefully to where known supporters of our cause reside or have built fortifications.”

“Fortifications?” Pepper wondered.

“They are outside Heimdall’s guard,” Thor explained. “There are many buildings ruined and walls erected from them – it doesn’t take long to align debris into a defense.”

“Alright,” Steve called, “Thor will be with me, Bruce, and Clint out in the city. If we run into trouble we’ll be the most effective against Asgardian strength, and we’ll need your eyes to guide us, Hawkeye. Natasha, Tony, and Pepper will stay here, Natasha valuable in close quarters if anything happens, Tony able to make the most sense out of the explanations of the healers, and Pepper most likely to gain the honest thoughts of the Queen, guards, and servants.

“We need to make the most of the day before we meet with Odin,” he continued. “At noon we reconvene here to structure Loki’s defense.”

The queen was correct in her deduction that the group would not find it easy to sleep, but most had only had a couple of nights of rest since the days of the invasion, so their bodies forced a certain amount on them. The meager measure was immeasurable in its effects though, each Avenger’s body and mind revitalized and prepared to remedy the failing state of affairs on Asgard. “What should we tell Frigga?” Natasha questioned as she, Tony, and Pepper gathered in Steve’s chambers, he, Thor, Bruce, and Clint organizing themselves before their departure.

“She will have been told of our plans, either last night through eavesdropping or this morning by
our readying by the servants,” Thor illuminated.

“Yeah, they’re everywhere,” Tony contributed. “Had to insist I could dress myself. Though being brought food was nice.”

“You’re always brought food, or else you wouldn’t eat,” Pepper remarked with a roll of her eyes.

“I’m not so sure I’m with the right party,” Bruce said. “I don’t know how the Other Guy will react to the new surroundings if he’s forced out.”

“We’re hoping not to run into any trouble,” Steve replied, slinging his shield onto his back. Thor had had some servants fetch some clothing from other rooms and equipment from the armoury when their party had congregated, the bold red and white stripes and star on navy obscured with a dark, round, cloth shield cover. There were many patterns for camouflage when stealth was required of Asgard’s warriors, coverings hiding the gleam of weaponry and armour from notice. The black did not advertise the shield, the Captain wearing a sleeveless black leather tunic over a dark blue shirt, and dark pants and boots.

Clint’s leather ensemble was close enough to the Æsir’s daily wear that he did not have to change, his bow and quiver across his back further assimilating him into the majority of the looks of the crowds. Thor had donned the vest he had worn the night before over a sleeveless, short red tunic, Mjolnir in a dark bag slung across his torso, and Bruce an outfit similar to Steve’s, in browns. He had proposed something entirely of cheap cloth, but Clint had objected to the discernable difference of it when beside them. Thor had assured him the thicker material was not worth much more than the other in the end, especially not to the few members of the royal family, if it did get destroyed.

“We will not fail in this, my friends,” Thor pledged with a smile. “Follow me closely.” The four moved swiftly from the room and out into the halls, the remaining few’s gazes trailing them before they turned out of sight.

“Alright, ladies,” Tony beckoned, “we have a mission too.”

“Should we wait here?” Pepper wondered. “If healers are going to try to talk to us, then they’ll ask the servants where our rooms are.”

“Yes, but there’s also the possibility that enemies will find a way in,” Natasha contested. “We should question the healers here – they can help with defense if anything happens.”

“The servants will know where we are no matter what,” Tony agreed with a shrug. “It’s sort of creepy.”

They swiftly walked through the gilded passageways and down to the common they had been led from the night before, the Queen absent from the space but a couple of women conversing in whispers over one of the desks. “Good morning,” Pepper greeted as they entered, calling notice onto the three as they approached. ‘Hello,’ one responded while the other offered a welcoming smile, though both of their expressions were faintly apprehensive.

“Mind if we join you?” Tony asked to an echo of ‘of course not’ and the movement of the two to where several benches and chairs were arranged to one side as an open discussion area. They sat and he questioned candidly, “So, are you both sorceresses?”

The taller brunette on the left answered, “Yes,” with a smile, explaining, “Unless visiting or serving, only practisers of seidr enter into our spaces.”
“Do you find Asgard to be much different than your home?” the woman beside her questioned curiously.

“It’s a bit difficult to move through,” Pepper admitted. “There are more people governing our world, so we don’t have one palace to be careful in but have to watch what we say in a few places.”

“That is odd… But then can’t your warriors be heard?”

“The numbers of them are smaller, that actually have a say,” Natasha clarified. “Where you have a large amount of fighters and a few ordering, we have many ordering, many following, and only a few fighters that can influence the changes made.”

An eyebrow was raised while the other’s furrowed in perplexity. “That doesn’t make much sense.”

“It takes a lot to change the higher-ups’ minds – doesn’t matter where you are,” Tony remarked airily. He received nods. “Seems like there’s a revolution going on here,” he prompted.

The female on their right dropped her gaze in a sudden contrast to her inquisitiveness previously while the other set her mouth. “Yes, a wrong was done to the very spirit of Yggdrasil by the king’s actions,” she pronounced.

“Then why aren’t you helping with the fight?” Natasha interrogated.

“I have a younger sister who has begun showing signs of magic,” she responded. “He knows of her, and all my relations. She is not safe if my loyalty isn’t to the Allfather.”

Pepper recoiled. “That’s awful! He threatened you with her?”

“It wasn’t brought up, but it was understood,” she stated. “There are rules that are inherently known and that permeate through our society – the benefits of certain paths, and the limitations and consequences of others.”

“We have always been a select group, those who know magic,” the shorter brunette finally contributed, “a minority for the advantage of healing, but it was unspoken that any exploration of our powers was not to be advertised, and any accepted uses were not to be exercised unless specifically called for.”

“We were satisfied, before – we had each other and were allowed to know ourselves,” the other inserted, “but this? This is the outright statement that the king thinks we do not deserve even that. That we are lesser, not permitted to speak at our own trial or be consulted in our area of expertise – that it’s not seen as a true power.”

“That even a foreign culture such as yours can see what’s wrong here, shows how very terrible it is,” another interjected, strong feminine voice drifting on the air.

Natasha, Tony, and Pepper swiveled their heads to overlook the room again at the comment, but the two goddesses remained still, recognizing the vocal charm. “Syn*,” the taller greeted, “how do you fare?”

“Not many of the king are willing to listen,” she said. “But I heard of the mortals that are questioning matters and wished to impart something.”

“Thank you,” Pepper offered to the proposal, in thought of the consideration.

“You are here to apply your ways upon this,” she began. “It is of some importance what we think,
but justice and morality are shaped by the Realm we grow in. It is more essential for you to stand by what you believe – if you fight impassioned for Loki, than your emotion will fuel your words and free him.

“Though not on this scale, efforts have been made before to strengthen the acknowledgement of magic within the city. What is needed is for you to cause doubt in the right of the Allfather’s decision, to show the equality of Loki with any other one of us. He has been thought of as different for far too long. That is why the king thinks the punishment justified.”

A lack of presence was felt as the declaration concluded, and it was recognized that she had returned her attention to her physical surroundings. It was also perceived that she perceptibly withdrew purposefully, because there was no distinguishable sensation when she had to have listened in before starting to speak.

“She is right – you will make the difference in this.”

“The Queen said that too,” Natasha retorted.

“That’s because I know you have been forced to see my son as very few others have bothered to,” Frigga interrupted. The two sorceresses stood immediately at her approach while the other three hastily copied, seats resumed when she had joined them.

“Well timed entrance,” Tony commended.

Frigga offered him a smile, though her visage was strained. “It is more appropriate to linger until there is an acceptable break so to enter into a conversation,” she explained, illuminating Syn’s unnaturally elegantly-timed contribution as well as Loki’s habitual eavesdropping.

“It was unusual circumstances that drove us to understand some of his reasoning,” Natasha replied with slightly narrowed eyes.

“I know,” she answered, “it was I who thought that if you saw the distressing events of last year you would not blame him so harshly.”

“What?” Pepper gasped as Tony gaped slightly in surprise, Natasha narrowing her eyes further.

“Did you know he hadn’t been willing?” she interrogated.

“I knew there were pressing forces, but not the details,” Frigga confessed. “But I knew his pride would not allow him to offer anything unless he was given some time to heal.”

“How did you do it?” Tony questioned.

“I went to ask a favour of the Norns. Some fates are unavoidable, but some are not. They are, above all, protective spirits that rule the destinies of gods and men,” she detailed. “My youngest’s future has always been a tumultuous thing, like Chaos, whom he represents. He is a product, as we all are, of our surroundings, and the Three understood more than anyone else how, when Ragnarök comes, it was brought onto our heads by our actions.

“So they helped me to gather the memories of what happened here, and it was sent to you, those who had fought alongside my other beloved son in his time of need to protect your world.”

Her devotion to Loki and Thor brought to mind in all the unstoppable force that was the love of a mother; the constant unearthing of tales of the adrenaline rush that enabled them to lift vehicles off of their children, or the countless documented sacrifices one always makes for the benefit of their loved ones.
“There isn’t much time left before lunch – your food will be brought to your rooms,” she hinted as she abruptly stood, the two brunettes standing on formality as well as she ushered Natasha, Tony, and Pepper out into the hallway. “There is another who has arrived to speak with you,” she murmured. “She found her way to Thor’s chambers.”

“Thanks.”

“Be warned that her disposition is not like those you have interacted with so far,” she warned. “She fights for the cause, but isn’t fond of your presence here.”

“We’ll handle it,” Natasha promised.

“And we’ll save Loki from all this,” Pepper added, daringly reaching out to grasp her upper arm in assurance.

“Thank you,” she responded with an honest smile.

Thor led Clint, Steve, and Bruce down through the palace and out through the stables, though the bright sunlight of the morning glinting off the metal ornamentation of the buildings and the glittering dome of the palace district’s protection offered them much less shelter than the darkness of the night before. Clint held his bow in hand as they strode purposefully through the narrow streets, wide, public courts passed over by the prince, who had pulled the scarlet hood of the shirt he wore under his vest up over his head. All four pairs of eyes were alert and darted constantly over their surroundings, Thor and Clint heading, Bruce in the middle with hood up as well, and Steve behind.

“Most of the people here suppress their opinions, fearing being sent outside the guard,” Thor enlightened softly, explaining the tense movements of those crossing over the streets for daily chores.

“So for the largest amount of information to be gathered the quickest, we have to go out where they’re shouting it for all to hear,” Steve surmised.

Bruce leveled his breathing as they drew nearer to where the dome touched the ground.

There was no ceremony to exiting the isolated area, Thor simply stepping through the concave side of the barrier and motioning for the others to follow. Once they had joined him, they moved out further into the city.

People were sparse at the border, but as they advanced crowds began to thicken in the lengths of the streets. Sturdy carts piled with foodstuffs and textiles were pulled by pairs of horses as mounted warriors returned from an early hunt with elk and larger prey slung at their backs. Panting hounds followed their masters with sharp eyes and noses lingering on the sights and scents around them, a couple of youths off to one side coyly plotting over the head of a falcon who perched on a gloved forearm.

Yet the air seemed charged with energy, the hair at the backs of the necks of the party of Avengers standing on end ominously. There were no stores open in advertisement, only travelling merchants or citizens returning from a private deal in another part of the city, now returning with various goods. Clint kept his eyes moving from the alleyways they passed to the edges of rooftops above, stare only delaying in its undertaking on those of the multitude whose gazes they themselves had caught. Steve made use of the reflective surfaces that were abundant to ensure they were not being shadowed, guarding their backs.
Eventually, Thor steered them into a tavern.

He was unable to convey his reasoning when there were so many around to eavesdrop, but some measure of understanding was figured out regardless. Bruce twisted his lips at the dramatic increase in volume as they entered, the benches and tables crammed with broad shouldered men, uproariously giggling females, and mugs of ale to sustain the shouted conversations. With so many involved in their own talks and the general noise in the atmosphere, they would be able to ask questions without gaining the attention of many others. Also, though brawls are common over disagreements in such an environment, they are familiar and confined to the building rather than spreading out in the street and inviting allies upon allies in more organized combat.

The people who frequent such a place also expect not to leave unharmed, no matter the time of day or how long or short the visit. There were no children or defenseless individuals in the establishment in case a fight did break out.

And though precautions had been taken, Thor knew precisely how high-strung his people were.

“Well hello there,” Tony greeted charmingly as he pushed open the double doors of Thor’s rooms to find a blonde seated on the edge of the god’s bed, one leg crossed primly over the other. Her youthful face distorted into an unpleasant sneer at the sight of the three, but she exerted some composure almost immediately for the sake of civility as she brushed a lock of her hair behind an ear.

“I’ve more important tasks that need accomplishing, so ask what questions you have so to help the prince,” she ordered impatiently.

“If you don’t care about him then why are you here?” Pepper questioned, arms crossing over her chest.

The sorceress’ eyes flashed onto her and for a moment static electricity charged her skin and her hair lifted from her shoulders, before she gained control of her magic with a derisive chuckle. “I forget how ignorant your kind is,” she began, explaining before any offended protests could be voiced, “All those of _seidr_ care for him – love him. He is a symbol of power and cunning and the pure untameable nature of the forces that permit us function day to day. This crime of the so-called king’s is an insult to the heart and soul of every living creature and element in the Realms.

“But I am not so foolish as to believe Loki can ever be what he once was, after what was done to him,” she confessed, gaze falling in grief onto the floor before raising sharply onto them again. “What can be done is keeping the next generations free from all of this oppression – that is what I need to return to. So ask your questions, and try not to assume you know anything of the matters in which you’re dealing.”

A stunned silence halted any instantaneous queries at the digestion of her proclamation, before Pepper latched onto one of her statements. “Why do you think he won’t be able to recover?”

She blinked for a few seconds before she asked, “The Queen has told you of what has been done to him, hasn’t she?” At their nods she continued with a raised brow, “There is no way his sanity will remain intact. Having his magic torn from him should have killed him, only by the vast array of gifts and training of his talents was his mind and spirit suspended instead of sent to the Realm of the Dead. But that is in a torturous place of Nothing now, until he passes – there is no way to reunite it with his magic and body, no way to undo what has been done. He will die in but a day.”

“If no one’s ever survived you don’t know if it can all be called back into his body,” Tony refuted.
“I know more of magic than you,” she countered, “and obviously more than the Allfather, if he thought this was to spare Loki from the finality of an execution.”

“He didn’t know what he was doing?” Natasha prodded.

“Of course not!” she snapped. “None of us were consulted, no opinions of ours asked for. We found out about the tragedy when it was already too late to save him.”

“What’s the point in fetching us then?” Pepper wondered. “The Queen is a sorceress, isn’t she? She must know something you don’t.”

“I won’t insult the Queen, for all she has done for us,” she began gingerly, “the only reason the prince and the rest of us were not treated worse is because of her, but if she thinks the act can be reversed she is incorrect. A ritual can be created, yes, but it will not be effective.”

“She hasn’t given up,” Tony retorted.

“None of us have – that is why I am here, that is why we fight in Loki’s name. But too much hope can be just as devastating as too little.”

The four darted glances at one another and Steve silently instructed them to stay close to each other in a group. Clint kept his eyes on the masses as Thor guided them to one of the tables in a corner, where the men seemed to have been drinking throughout the night and were chanting a rhythmic song. ‘-raise a glass and toast to life!’ they chorused as one laughed riotously and slumped back against the wall to conduct with the motions of his mug, ‘Wherever it may lead!’

They began stomping and trilling out a series of ‘tra-la-la’s before Thor chimed in as they finished, “A friend is fine indeed!” The men cheered and slapped him on the shoulder, making room on the benches for the three as Clint leaned unobtrusively on the wall beside.

“Good pair of pipes you’ve there!” one extolled as another ordered of a serving woman, ‘Another dozen!’

“Thank you, good man!” he laughed as the ales arrived and were grabbed rapidly, Thor managing to pull two from the fray and hand one to Steve. A jerk of his head advised the Captain not to comment and follow the Thunderer’s lead, and they drank with the others.

“Bad time to be passing through,” one uttered from the far end, a chorus of agreement emitting from the throats of his companions.

Thor shrugged and said, “There’s no way to know on the road if there’s trouble – besides, we’re just passing through. Only a war could have turned us!” He allowed his chuckle to tamper into one of awkwardness in the shifting that he received in reply, Steve inserting in a hushed tone, ‘Who are you at war with?’

“Each other, though there is word of some other danger.”

“Yeah, someone trying to get into the Vault again-”

“You heard that from that servant girl you’re sleeping with!” ‘Oi!’

“We didn’t notice anything.” Steve goaded again.

“Must’ve came from the East then – North’s up in smoke-”
“Great wall of toppled houses as a barricade for those against the king.”

“The king’s done no good to them! If the women are sharpening their blades then the prince isn’t just imprisoned-”

“His magic was stripped,” a man from the next table informed. “Didn’t you notice all the kids with magic going into hiding? The sorceresses are pissed.”

“Good riddance – cowardly minxes, the lot!” another shot.

“Is this how you speak of your own?!” Thor shouted as he stood and faced the man to Steve’s shifting of the shield on his back. A man at the other end admonished, ‘One of them is your prince, you son of a serpent!’

“He went on a rampage and destroyed the bridge! The Realms are laughing at us!”

‘He was king-’ “-almost wiped out those Jӧtunns, freeing us from that farce of a truce! They tried to kill Odin, and Loki’s thanks for saving his life? This!”

“He killed Thor!” ‘-sent the Destroyer to Midgard.’

“What do you care of the mortals? Wished he’d killed more of them last week-”

‘Have you no honour?!’ ‘You’ve gone soft!’ ‘He should be welcomed back!’

“He should be dead-”

Steve had lunged to lock his arms around Thor’s torso to prevent him from tacking the ignorant Æsir, but what arrested his teammate was another warrior leaping to crash into the prejudiced man’s midsection. They tipped the table behind them amidst punches as two others tried to separate them, the one moving to physically intervene drawn into the fight while the other’s vocalizations of compromise of opinion were loudly disputed by others.

Clint had an arrow knocked and was edging out of the building, a trail opened for a wide-eyed Bruce in his wake as the arguments surged around them. ‘He’s always been a useless, spineless-’ ‘-prince, you swine!’

Unfortunately, the four made their way onto the street just as the throw of a man tossed him out the door behind them. “Loki’s a fame-hoarding, heartless, killer of thousands!” he screeched in rebuttal, and Thor’s shoulders tensed.

‘We need to move,’ he lowly whispered as a woman grasped her daughter about the waist and strode off to a man’s calm countering, “The prince protected us from the Jӧtunns’ wrath last year-”

An ally of the first helped him to his feet once he had exited the clash of the tavern, interrupting, “Scheming demon probably planned it all, then ran to Midgard where the pickings were easier.”

A hand rested on the hilt of a sword. “My sister saw him amid grey-skinned beasts that forced his path on him.”

“You’re a fool to think he’s ever helpless-”

“You approve of what’s been done to him?” another questioned slowly, lowered head darkening the eyes fixated on the opposing two, and those in agreement that were shifting to them. “Of the cruelty of ripped him apart so there’s nothing left for the Valkyries to look over?” ‘Nothing left for
his children to mourn?’ a woman added, perched on the edge of a roof overhead.

Weapons were drawn and abandoned wood lifted as shields at the sight of the sorceress’ intervention, the faction in contrast responding in kind.

“I think,” one finally said, “that he’s caused enough damage, and he needs more than his mouth sewn shut this time.”

The men charged at one another to Clint’s instant firing at the two from the tavern that had turned towards their group in recognition of their side. Steve dropped his shield into his hands to slam her into the chest of another that had come at his side, not sparing a thought to taking the time to remove the covering before he was forced to toss her through the air to intercept a short spear hurled at the sorceress.

Bruce ducked out of the fray with the ease of one used to weaving through the swarms of third-world countries and avoiding unwanted attention, Clint keeping to his side and covering him as well as Thor, Steve, the sorceress, and all of the men he noted as of their opinion. The Thunderer fought with knuckles to the jaw and kicks to the knees of those in his path, brashly pushing through to the fringes though some swipes of swords and daggers nicked his arms. He grabbed the Captain’s shoulder and shoved him out of the fray to scrambling steps that transitioned into a trot to Bruce and Clint, and then a run from the area among the others fleeing.
Natasha, Tony, and Pepper returned to the lounge to the left of their guest rooms to find Steve and Thor collapsed on the benches, the Captain measuring his breathing and the god flexing his fingers, bruises beginning to mar his knuckles. Bruce sat with his elbows on his knees and hands folded under his chin, gazing into the middle distance, as Clint paced the length of the room. Behind the columns separating the space from the open air, the sun was high in the sky.

“What happened?” Natasha interrogated at their appearances.

“We started a fight,” Clint answered, crossing his arms over his chest as he paused in his movements.

“The brawl would have been initiated by another if not for us,” Thor excused. “There are bouts no matter the area of the city.”

“The whole place is high strung,” Tony replied.

“The sorceresses were helpful,” Pepper began, “but the guards and servants weren’t, without you to tell them to talk.”

Thor nodded with a frown as a knock sounded on the wall to the side of the open entrance, a servant standing beyond the threshold with a covered platter held propped on her hip. Thor beckoned her inside and she moved forward, followed by several others who elegantly arranged dishware, utensils, and serving trays on the long table off to the side before removing the covers and revealing the array of food prepared for them. Thor dismissed the group from their settling along the sides to serve them, and they neatly bowed and curtseyed in deference before exiting.

“I know we dealt away with slavery a while ago,” Tony started as they walked to the table, “but you can see the appeal.”

“Tony,” Steve admonished as they sat on the benches across from one another. “We need a plan.”

“Thanos is intending to break into the Weapons’ Vault.”

Odin paused in his foray through the courtyard as the sun hung in its descent after noon, turning to face Loki. His outline was still unclear, wisps of black misting the edges of his outfit before he solidified, having spoken before he had fully appeared before him. He hastily continued, “He intends to steal the Infinity Gauntlet, and collect the Stones so to sacrifice the species of the Realms to Death.”

“I see,” he answered. Odin stood uncertain, scanning the other for a tense moment before he
declared, “You look well – your mother will be glad to see it.”

A sneer began to twist Loki’s lips before he grit his teeth at the constraints of his situation, unable to restrain replying sharply, “Does it matter?”

The king’s eyes narrowed. “It does when you force her to mourn only to show yourself after a year with an army intent on Midgard’s slaughter.”

“Do you think the threat of Thanos is sudden and I just happened upon it?” he bit out.

“It tries on her heart not knowing of your motivations until years – decades – afterward!” he pronounced. “How many times over the millennia have you not told anyone of your planning? What you intend to accomplish? I have issues with all you did last year.”

“I was only trying to make you proud!”

“With the extinction of another race?”

“The Jötnuns are monsters!”

“You yourself are one!”

“Maybe that’s why I let go!”

“Loki,” Odin started deliberately, “that wasn’t the reason.”

“Or do you not want it to be the reason?” he countered. “The infallible Allfather… What would your people say if they heard of your taking in a Jötnun to raise in the palace – and failing to correct its ways? They wouldn’t be surprised at my being one of them, would they?

“You rule by having some justification for your actions – something that makes it palatable to the dull drones of the masses. There is nothing they would approve of. If this comes to light, they would call for my head. They have before, and that was without this added incentive,” he finished.

“We are not talking of them – to them, or before them – we are here alone conferring your thoughts of rule! You are impulsive and give your emotions too much sway over your actions! Do you understand the ramifications of laying waste to Jötnheim?”

“What do you know of me? NOTHING.”

“I know the same as everyone else – what you allow,” he retorted. “None can defend you because none know you!”

“You know why no one defends me,” Loki hissed. “Tell me, O Wise King, what do you expect them to think of me – a dark haired shapeshifter, a sorcerer of Fire and Chaos – when all you stand for is golden and unchangeable, fixed and concerned with brawn over any scrap exerted by the mind.”

“You are not the only academic here!” Odin interjected. “The other healers manage-”

“Because they would not risk the tortures I have – do not possess the willingness to study seidr beyond what you permit, no matter the penalties. They have not the allowance to wander outside the norms set down without certain death.”

“Perhaps you have been given too much freedom.”
“Too much?” he whispered before snapping, “You say you treat me like the son you would have had second, but you have always thought of me as nothing more than the Jӧtun runt you scavenged from the snow.”

“That’s not-”

“STOP DENYING IT!” Loki screamed. “This is the truth:

“Golden Thor can venture to any land he pleases with his friends and hunt creatures to their destruction, poisoning alliances with the natives with his arrogance, dismissive of the consequences. No matter the discontent he’s spreading throughout Yggdrasil it takes Laufey’s affirmation of war to get you to punish him!

“But me? Deceiver, Liesmith, Silver-Tongue, Sly One, Trickster. It’s deemed of no importance what I say – what’s focused on is what you and others believe. My word is not to be trusted, no matter the evidence in my defense-”

“Because we are not blind,” he excused. “Your power over words christened you with those names – you can move around any charge easily-”

“Some of them I was not guilty of!”

“That would be simpler to determine if you did not make a habit of bending others to your will – moving your brother around like a piece on a board with allies and opponents that change day to day-”

“He’s not my brother,” he managed before declaring, “nor you my father.”

Odin sighed in frustration before challenging, “And if not dealt with father over son, what would a king’s judgment be over a subject that orchestrated the assassination of him before breaking even that oath of betrayal? One who killed the ruler of a Realm a truce had been established with, killed and intended to kill the weakened form of his brother and his friends by misuse of a defense, the Destroyer, moved to annihilate an entire race and center of a Realm? Laid waste to a powerful magical artifact that served as link between the Nine before, rather than face a sentence, he cowardly chose suicide-”

“SHUT UP!” he shrieked, lunging forward in rage and thoughtlessly hurling a conjured flame from his palm forward towards the king’s remaining eye. In a blur of movement Odin deflected the element with the head of Gungnir, swinging the spear up again to hold the tip of the blade to Loki’s neck in threat. He exhaled heavily through his nose in displeasure before he stated, “Once you realized I couldn’t be molded into the cast of the Æsir, your goal was ever to supress the talents I did display.”

“You are Æsir!” Odin asserted. “And you fall under my rule!” He paused for a moment before his gaze sharpened down onto the other. “It was your choices and actions that led you here, to this place where you are more menace than benign enough to overlook.

“It is your magic that empowers you, the amount natural in your core enabling this rebellion.

“Loki, self-professed son of No One,” he started, “you have conspired to kill your king, have killed the Jӧtun King Laufey, attacked Prince Thor of Asgard and his companions while they were vulnerable upon Midgard, and employed the Bifrost as a weapon of destruction onto the Realm of Jӧtunheim before forcing its ruin. Through these acts of close-mindedness and obsession with yourself instead of the good of the Realm, you would have compromised the succession of
inheritance of the ruling of Asgard and the negotiations in the aftermath.

“Oppositely, you have warned your king of an imminent and great danger to the Realm and her charges, which would not have been discovered if not for this sequence of events.” Loki furrowed his brow in confusion, having prepared himself for execution the second he had consented to travelling to the side of the king. “I, Odin Allfather, pronounce your difficulty and danger to those around you to be caused by your inherent gift of seidr and Chaos’ preference of you. I, by the unopposed influence of the command of Gungnir, hereby condemn you to live the remainder of your life without your magic.”

‘No!’ Loki screeched as he leapt backwards and gathered his magic to hastily transport himself away, across as many Realms as he was able, before the final word of the sentence had been fully uttered; however, his seidr was the focus of the spear’s intent. The composition of Gungnir began to glow and vibrate with the interaction of the raw constituents of the Realms, the dark god wrenched back to Asgard in the fraction of a second before he had even left it fully. He gasped as he was immobilized on his feet, his core localized and the strands that wove together his mind, center, and Yggdrasil unwound and severed.

His eyes rolled back into his head as he abruptly collapsed to the ground, the energy emitting from the act tearing out through muscle and skin like scars of lightning, evaporating the material covering them in an instant. From the arches of his feet and his calves onto his boots, across his arms, shoulders, and chest onto the layers over his torso, he lay blind, mute, and comatose.

The Allfather closed his bright eye briefly against the glare of afternoon sun, the angle the same for the appeal as it was for the verdict he had made four days ago. He sat on his throne cast out of gold at the head of the open court outside of the palace, some of the influential of the sect supporting the judgment of Loki along the side to his left and those maintaining his virtues along the right. Moderate conversation regarding the imminent clash of wills spanned those assembled, until the Queen entered the area.

Frigga strode resolutely to stand at the Allfather’s right hand, the healers that had remained in the palace behind her to observe, pointedly not participating. Thor arrived moments after, leading Steve, Tony, Bruce, Pepper, Clint, and Natasha down the aisle to align before the king. Odin began,

“We are here at the inherent request of not only your Queen and the heir to the throne, Thor Odinson, but the people. There is disagreement between you on the ruling I found appropriate.” His gaze scanned the congregation, one half, smug and the other, abashed, though still irate. “The details of the beliefs of the Æsir and Vanir have been ones exposed to each of us repeatedly – what I am willing to listen to as additions to Loki’s appeal are Midgardian thoughts.

“Their Realm has been affected by my youngest’s deeds just as Jötunheim, though these mortals have been subjected to his presence in some way that urges a defense of him as well. I will hear your speech on his behalf at the bid of Prince Thor.”

The named blond god bowed in gratitude before leaving the side of his friends to stand with the faction collected for Loki.

Steve met the Allfather’s stare squarely and resisted crossing his arms over his chest, settling his stance. “Thank you for agreeing to hear us.

“We’ve spent some time with Loki, and even though a few days from your side of things barely counts as any notable length of time, we’ve come to understand some of his motivations for what
happened here last year in asking him about the invasion. After realizing what he went through, we’ve redirected our blame from him to the one that forced his hand.”

“Now we’re not saying it’s exactly the same,” Tony continued, “but you and the rest of Asgard have to take some responsibility for him.”

“What he means is that,” Pepper interjected, “the way our system works is by not just looking at the actions and consequences, but also the reasoning for it. We’ve taken the time to study behaviour and the societal forces that shape each individual, and acknowledge the vitality of knowing those roots.”

“When you have a person,” Bruce contributed, “who has been ostracized his entire life, acting out is a way to call attention to himself. It doesn’t matter if it’s good or bad attention, any recognition is a relief when compared to being ignored. All sentient beings operate through social interaction, and depriving someone of that through neglect is harmful to their mind.”

“We’ve heard about your prophecies and what you think of magic-users,” Tony said, “and you really need to start thinking though what you’re doing. If you believe that something is going to happen, your behaviour around it changes to anticipate it, and you become the reason it happens! Take Fenrir, destined to kill you. Would he have a reason to if you hadn’t chained him up? Probably not.

“And why would you restrict your knowledge of magic to healing, when you respect the weapons forged by magic? You even respect the elves and dwarves who work through it, so why, in your city, here, do you see it as cowardly and not worth studying further? Sure, you might think it’s risky and a threat, an ‘if there are more studying it, then there’s more danger if they turn against us’ hypothetical thing – but that’s the same fraction that’s going to be pissed if stuck healing, anyway! Think of the benefits if you encouraged training under controlled conditions!

“Don’t you think it’s obvious your Realm is sort of in a plateau in development? Magically-enhanced weapons, protective spells over diplomats or spies caught in battle, furthering your defenses against outsiders – not to mention what could be accomplished if a team of sorcerers/sorceresses worked together on something. How can you ignore the advantages?”

“One of the points we’re making, is that if Loki meant you or anyone harm, they would be dead,” Natasha stated bluntly. “He’s powerful. What’s evident is that he’s always holding back, and if he isn’t, then he’s protecting something or someone he thinks is worth it.

“Killing Laufey when you had a truce in place, and then trying to destroy all of Jötunheim, might not have been the wisest decision, but he was king at the time – it was his right to eliminate perceived threats to the Realm–”

“He orchestrated Laufey’s attack on me,” Odin reminded, finally interrupting.

“If Laufey was invested in the truce, he wouldn’t have accepted,” Steve countered. “His support of a seemingly ambitious proxy shows how he would have used any oppourtunity to benefit himself and avoid conditions agreed to.”

“What’s in question here – what we, and some of your people are opposing – is the eternal torture you’ve inflicted on him,” Tony declared. “This is too extreme for his crimes, when you look at his reasons.”

“You didn’t execute him because you knew that,” Clint stressed. “Loki’s been the cause of a lot of pain, for a lot of people, but letting him die like this isn’t how it should go.”
“It doesn’t benefit anyone,” Natasha added.

Odin narrowed his eye. “Be clear about what you are proposing.”

“This has caused a lot of problems when your attention should be on current threats, not the past,” Steve proclaimed. “If you return Loki’s magic to him, then the sorceresses would lose most of their fight, and if he talked to them he could calm them further.”

Those on the left shifted in agitation at the suggestion, before Bruce contributed, “Regarding the damage he’s caused, his powers would make a substantial difference in repairs. His knowledge of magic with the Bifrost, and his strength and actual magic with the reconstruction we’re working on in our Realm.”

“If you stand by the decision you’ve made, this war will continue to divide and reduce the Æsir, you will lose the devotion of the magic-users in your service and any future, positive negotiation with us through the disregard of both opinions, and you might bring upon you further danger, once Loki has died and the forces supporting him find out,” the Captain concluded, “whereas reversing his punishment brings unity to Asgard before Thanos, reformations and aid from your sorceresses and the powers our realm has to offer, and Loki’s talents can be put to use restoring all that has been affected.”

The Allfather hummed in thought while surveying the others present. Expressions on both sides of the argument displayed overt astonishment at the explanations provided by the Midgardians. This appeal had been thought of as formality due to the request of the Prince and the most recent relations of the mortals with Loki, and the effect the sequence of events had on their Realm, while the resolution was physically fought for and forced by one party. But the details and recommendations presented had a base in logic that was so uncommon in Æsir ways. It followed through to an obvious verdict that settled in a compromise; Loki’s life was to be spared and his magic recognized, while the Bifrost was repaired and the god was literally distanced to restore and sustain Asgard’s relationship with Midgard.

Emotions typically overruled the Æsir’s actions and formed the base of their opinions, however, though it might be the time allowed to the several humans that permitted their calm deliverance of view, Midgardians seemed to approach their construction of problem-solving differently. Time had clearly been assigned in their history to the priority of debate and cooperation, before other movements were taken.

Admitting my oversight here doesn’t hold the costs I imagined it would, Odin thought in deliberation, only the clarity of the choice giving him pause. So simply choosing the resolution outlined by the mortals fostered suspicion in his mind, but he elected to keep the emotion close to his chest for consideration in later dealings.

“I declare there to be a reassessment of the condemned sorcerer, Loki’s, punishment, action to be taken immediately to reinstate his magic so to bind other conditions of reprimand onto him.”

‘Ha ha – yes!’ Tony cried as Pepper laughed in relief, onlookers beginning to converse about the proceedings as smiles graced the Avengers’ features, Frigga releasing a sigh as well as the tension in her musculature. Thor rushed to his teammates with a grin and seized Steve in a hug, before thanking each of the others in the same manner as Frigga approached the group as well to express gratitude.

The Allfather descended from his throne to move to the side of the elite guards flanking the dais, commanding, “Those of seidr are to gather in the Healers’ Practice Room – Loki to be brought there as well.” As they swiftly followed his orders, he turned to enter the palace, Frigga ushering,
‘Come, come,’ of the Avengers before gliding to his side.

Once in the stronghold again and beginning the journey up the stairs to the higher levels, Tony questioned Thor, “So we’re going to see a ritual that gives Loki back his magic, right? One of the sorceresses we talked to seemed pessimistic about that working.”

“Did you notice his wording?” Natasha whispered, more mouthing the words for all the sound that emitted, from between the two, a step behind. “‘Action to be taken immediately’… He wasn’t willing to vow Loki’s magic returned to him – doesn’t think it a guarantee.”

“It’ll work,” Clint professed.

“It has to,” Pepper echoed.

They elapsed into silence as they climbed, turning from the staircase with footsteps resonating on the tiled floors to pass the study the Queen had claimed hers in favour of a larger, barer room. The vaulted ceiling hung over no furniture, floor stretching only to two open rooms on the right: another hallway branching into store rooms, a wide lounge with wooden seats and tables, plush chairs and beds. Frigga hurriedly departed, enlightening, “The healers will have worked on the ritual in the library above – they would gather there first before venturing here.”

“What are these rooms for?” Bruce asked.

“The healers’ practice of spells they have to train the precision of,” Thor described. He was distracted from further explanation by the entrance of a couple of guards, Loki’s body suspended between them by an arm held over both pairs of shoulders. He ran to him as Odin stepped forwards also, Thor inserting himself in place of a guard before bending to lift an arm under Loki’s knees and swing him into his arms.

Odin searched the vacant-eyed god for a moment before raising his stare to the Thunderer, who stated earnestly, “Thank you.”

He nodded before moving away, anticipating the arrival of the magic-users that remained in the Realm.

The group rushed to Thor and Loki as soon as they were allowed the space, Bruce instantly feeling the latter’s neck for the carotid artery. “It’s as if he’s in a coma,” he said upon finding a slow, faint pulse.

“How long does he have?” Clint interrogated.

“Another day, seems to be the consensus,” Tony replied.

Frigga returned with eight women behind her, six darting into the stores for supplies, two arguing over pages of notes and a tome, and the Queen laying a hand on Odin’s arm before returning to their side. “Some had worked out a process the night he had been sentenced,” she confided to the group. “Some details have been improved, but any further adjustment would be ruined by the time taken. We must act now for the greatest chance of success.”

“He’s going to be fine,” Steve announced.

She smiled softly, and swore ‘yes’ with resolve.

“Lay him here, my Prince,” one of the sorceresses called, one of the brunettes Natasha, Tony, and Pepper had spoken to. Thor carried Loki to the area indicated and laid him on his back, adhering to
the instructions of the blonde that had appeared on the roof in the city earlier that day.

Circles were drawn with salt and ash around the body, series of runes inscribed on charred pieces of wood arranged above his head as his hands were placed over his sternum and the worst of the jagged cuts on his form. An orb of amber was placed in his grasp and held on the damage, bunches of deep magenta amaranth laid in the center of the rings by his hips. Frigga strode to the Allfather’s side and guided him to stand at Loki’s feet, Gungnir held aloft and poised with its head a few feet over Loki’s midsection.

“For the link between his magic and his body,” she clarified, “the spear and your wielding of it left a trace.”

She stepped back to the abrupt cessation of speech from the others. She stood opposite her husband with a sorceress on either side halfway between the two, knelt with their palms on the edges of the organization on the surface of the floor in the center. She breathed slowly before enunciating clearly a long arrangement of words, the language lilting, raising the hair and prickling the skin of all those exposed to it.

It was short compared to the complications the Avengers envisioned associated with the ritual, but when Frigga finished the salt and ash glistened and a hoarse roar began to reverberate through the air. The amaranth dissolved, spread, and seeped to cover the floor bound by the outer circle; the amber shattered and whirled as dust as Gungnir shone before shaking and then suddenly stilling, Odin forced to step back as the spear was thrust from the space over the circles.

Bright emerald light streamed from sparks as deep violet pulsed from the tile. Oranges, reds, blues, and black coalesced to snap in the confined area, bounding over the salt, ash, wood, and body.

The three sorceresses moved away from the display as the static, tearing sound grew louder, Frigga relaying, “Something’s wrong,” as the magic-users furrowed their brows and started hastily examining the resources at hand in panic.

Loki wearily opened his eyes to the end of the high ceiling of a desolate throne room, the pulsing ache at his core felt as a weight in the marrow of each of his bones and overwhelming any desire to move. Thin arms braced his scarred torso over a knelt pose, his head cushioned on a stomach. He tilted his head back to raise his gaze to a familiar face, fatigued eyes regarding him over a slight smile. Her long hair was lank and white, stands caught overhead by the gnarled antlers protruding from her temples, and while the right half of her face was pale and gaunt as a corpse, the left half was charred black and exposing bone.

“Hello, father.”

Chapter End Notes

(*) The concentric circles are to denote the boundaries connected to the aspects of the body and those between the Realms, the salt and ash enforcers of protection and the circumstantial allowance of passing through the borders of the worlds. The runes are for summoning, identifying Loki, and outlining the specifics of his situation and the sorceresses’ requests demanded through the ritual. The charred wood is to signify the cremation of warriors and the passage into the Realms of the Dead, the journey over boundaries definite and sought to be paralleled in the direct return of Loki’s magic to
his body from the unknown darkness between the branches of Yggdrasil. Amber protects from harm, outside influence, and psychic attacks; serves as a guide; used for mental clarity and focus; transforms negative energy into positive energy. Amaranth is used for healing and summoning spirits.

(**) There’s a lot of variance on Hela’s appearance. I’ve seen white hair and dark, antlers, body half bone, half black, and half (from the waist down) rotting. There’s only a consensus on a sullen appearance, and generally appearing as a corpse (all of this in Norse mythology, obviously – I’m not going to go near the comic books on this one). I’ve combined the half bone-half black body for her left side, the charred remains of cremation a more accurate portrayal of death in this instance than the rot of a buried corpse, and the antlers stem in my mind from the bone there as well as the stag being a symbol of wilderness, magic, and forests (the first two applicable).
Unprecedented

Chapter Summary

Offers are made, some people die, and some lives are renewed by others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What’s happening?” Bruce asked worriedly as the sorceresses argued with each other, two blondes scrambling to flip through the chapters of a tome.

“I don’t know,” Thor whispered hoarsely, the time elapsing pressing on the hope he held of Loki’s recovery as worry spread.

The streaks of colour vaulted from circle to circle, melding into one another and blurring Loki’s form though nothing touched him.

‘He’s not here!’ ‘The connection to his body is too weak,’ ‘We knew he was fading-’ ‘Reversing damage is always complicated-’ ‘We don’t have enough knowledge of runes,’ the magic-users justified. “We need to strengthen the link,” ‘Or find a way to talk to him.’

“What isn’t working?” Odin questioned.

“He can’t be pulled back into his body without the force of his seidr to call to him,” Frigga explained, “but his magic has always been bound to him and not his physical body, so does not recognize this form without his spirit and mind.”

“Hela,” Loki replied slowly, “I thought I’d have seen you sooner.”

“You actually would have suffered another day,” she said. “I’m sorry the peace offered here can’t undo what’s been done.”

His lips managed a wry smirk. “I’ve suffered much, my dear – this isn’t so bad, now. Your home numbs the pain.”

“The pain that forced you from your body, but not the pain of separation from your magic,” she surmised. “Let me help you up.”

“So his mind needs his magic and body, but his magic needs his mind and body for everything to combine?” Steve clarified.

“Is there any other way to call his spirit back?” Thor interrogated.

“No,” Frigga answered, returning her focus to the adjustments being attempted by the others. Thor pursed his lips and fixed his stare onto the area of the ritual, his helplessness wrenching as if something gnawed within his stomach. He resolutely stepped back and met the gaze of each of his teammates, nodding towards the exit.
They followed him out and then down the staircase to the ground floor, his excuse: “We are no use there, but there might be another way.”

“Frigga said there wasn’t,” Tony retorted before speculating aloud, “Are we breaking out a magical weapon that can help? Or does Loki have some secret magical thing you know of that’ll make a difference?”

“No.”

“What about the Tesseract?” Pepper suggested.

“He is not corporeal for us to find and bring here,” the god explained. “Even if he was within some Realm where we could go to him and explain what’s happening, his travel to his body would be independent and just as unmanageable as following the link currently present.”

“If we let him know, he might become more aware of his body – and could find it easier,” Clint proposed.

“We need to locate him first.”

They stepped out into the stables to the greeting of ‘my prince’ and bows from the stablehands brushing down and feeding the horses, the closest asking if there was anything they required. “Just my father’s horse,” Thor informed.

She gently helped him into a sitting position before crouching by his side, pulling an arm over her shoulders, and wrapping an arm around his waist, lifting him as she rose until they stood side by side. Loki loosened his muscles and tried to dispel the ache he knew would be an eternal misery before gathering himself and drawing more weight to balance on his own as they walked.

“It has been some time since you’ve visited, father,” Hela began, his efforts to make his way to her home when something managed to distress him lacking questionably, “though I have felt your heartache.” As one of those most imbued with his magic, her core resonated as Loki demonstrated his power, empathizing. “What has been troubling you?” she asked.

“Nothing you need concern yourself with,” he responded. “Why I expected Odin to have ever been truthful to me was a folly I let cause many mistakes.”

Her distaste for the Allfather manifested through the right side of her mouth pulling back to bare teeth similar to those exposed on the left in her skull, before she observed, “By none of us has he done right– this has always shown disregard of you.

“But you are here now – I will care for you.”

He weakly squeezed her shoulders.

“The eight-legged one?” Natasha asked warily as Bruce queried quietly, ‘Isn’t it one of Loki’s children?’

“Yes,” Thor answered as those grooming the aforementioned steed cleared the stall for their prince’s use. He refused the proffered bridle, reins, and saddle as he undid the halter and handed it off, leading the horse out of the stables by a hand on his neck.

“Careful-” Tony warned as he divided the group in two to walk on either side of the animal, “if
he’s anything like his father he’ll kick you in the ribs.”

Sleipnir huffed and glanced back at the man, flicking his tail in his direction to Tony’s surprise.

“He can understand you, friends,” Thor chuckled.

“What are we, um, going to do with him?” Steve speculated carefully while darting his eyes up to the horse’s. “Can he help?”

“We will see.”

They traversed the empty heart of the mansion before the rooms began to be filled with those lodging. The perpetually sick and aged, wounded and poisoned, though all with the discomfort of their deaths and ailments relieved. They laughed feebly and spoke with one another, greeting Loki and Hela as they passed; the Ruler always recognized, but the two, for this wing, a familiar sight.

They stepped out of the house to separate, the interior of the tall walls confining the dwelling rising up before them. ‘Sister- Father!’ a male voice called, and Hela turned with a gentle smile as Loki’s expression softened.

Nari had run towards them at their exit from the lodging and quickly kissed Hela on the bone of her left cheek before seizing Loki in a firm embrace. His shoulders loosened at the hold, returning it as best he was able, before they were parted by the shove of a wolf’s muzzle between their midsections.

“Vali, come on!” Nari whined as he was forced to move back, fair hair tossed as he shook his head in amusement. Loki raked his fingers through his fur in welcome, dismissive of the jaw darkened by dried blood. As Vali’s pelt mirrored the light colouring of his brother’s locks, Nari’s abdomen reflected the dark stain as his torn shirt gaped open to show the cavernous space left below ribs, absent of intestines, beneath the arms he crossed over his chest at the other’s behaviour. He dropped them to his sides shortly in delight, though, as he said, “It’s wonderful to see you, father.”

“To see you two – three – as well,” Loki returned as Nari linked their arms, Vali brushing his flank against Hela’s hip in reception.

Once circled away from the eyes and ears of the stable, Thor came to a stop and stood before Sleipnir.

“Do you know where Loki is?”

He nodded before jerking his head down to himself, then towards Natasha, as the group had gathered at Thor’s sides.

‘Uh, what?’ Tony muttered as Thor interpreted, “He’s with Hela?”

At the others’ confusion, Thor elaborated in distance from the answer, “My brother is able to communicate easily with him due to the related frequency of their thoughts, but with any other it is more a matter of his willingness to reply and understanding his gestures.”

“So, like charades.”

“He said ‘yes’, then indicated himself and implied a female,” Pepper surmised.
“And you got Hela from her being his sister, another child of Loki’s,” Bruce concluded.

“The only female one.”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t she… rule the dead?” Steve questioned.

“Yes,” the god answered morosely, falling into thought for a moment before he asked, “Can you carry me to them?”

“What?” Steve reproached flatly, Sleipnir shifting before giving a shake of his head.

Thor furrowed his brow in puzzlement, but responded to the Captain. “Sleipnir is the only steed that can cross into the Realm of the Dead and return safely. The Allfather has journeyed to Helheim to speak with Hela. I would be able to speak with Loki.”

“But you can’t?” Tony made clear.

“Why?” the blond thundered.

Sleipnir tossed his head over his shoulder back towards the palace before shaking it again.

“Because you are my father’s?” Thor guessed. “Please – this is to save a parent of yours! I can’t abandon Loki when all of this is because of me and Odin and everyone here-”

“Thor,” Pepper chastised gently, “this isn’t your fault-”

Sleipnir whinnied to call attention onto himself before he trotted forward a couple of steps from Thor and bumped his nose against Clint’s chest.

“That had better be you using me to point to something that totally isn’t me,” he remarked.

“I can’t go, but Clinton can?” Thor interrogated.

He received a nod.

“How’s that going to work, exactly?” Natasha asked.

“And why?” Bruce added.

“I don’t know why,” Thor replied, “but there is the same risk as if I were to go – it is Sleipnir leading.”

“But you’ve more of a chance to talk Loki into getting a move on back here,” Tony countered.

“I don’t know if I do…” he muttered.

“You’re telling me to just sit on the horse, let it walk to the Realm of the Dead, somehow convince Loki’s spirit or whatever to come back to his body, then ride back?” Clint reiterated.

“Absolutely not,” Steve interjected. “I wouldn’t have let Thor go – but the rest of us don’t know anything about any of the realms. No.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“This is the only way we can do something, Steven,” Thor insisted.

“Look – it’s really about me, here,” Clint intruded. Even if there’s the risk of me getting lost and
dying somewhere, we have to do something. Thor thought of this and was prepared to take off—and I don’t know anything about Asgardian beliefs, but he didn’t see it as a trade. He trusted he’d return. If he was going to trade himself for Loki then I would think there would be an easier way to get to the Realm of the Dead than by horse.

What seems trickiest to me is the turnaround. If Thor says Sleipnir can get me to Loki, I do believe that—but it’s the Realm of the Dead. I’ve watched enough supernatural shit that only the dead are supposed to be there. Super special steed or not, I don’t know if Hela’s going to let me go.

Nevermind Loki.

He’s her father, and if Thor’s thoughts on His love are shared by her to Him, then will she even let Him go?

It’s either this, or go back up and sit around while His body’s avoided by His magic like the corpse it is.

“We’ve got to try,” he said.

“Clint,” Natasha cautioned, while Thor echoed the name in gratitude and clasped his shoulder.

“We don’t really have time,” he countered with a shrug, Sleipnir folding his eight legs under him and lowering his body to the ground.

“As more elapses, the connection grows weaker,” Thor confirmed.

“Just be careful,” Pepper voiced as Steve frowned in disapproval, Natasha’s stare conveying the same sentiment.

“When am I not?” he asked with a smirk, throwing a leg over Sleipnir’s back. He was lifted as the animal stood, grasping onto the long hairs at the base of his neck for stability. “Why didn’t you grab the reins and saddle if you were planning on riding him?” he asked astride the large horse he was now forced to ride bareback.

“The servants will be less likely to inform my parents of us taking him if it only appears as though we are speaking with him, and not intending to travel anywhere,” the god explained.

“Great.” The circus is coming back to me, he thought as he bent his knees further to strengthen his hold on the breadth of the animal’s ribs, deprived of stirrups.

Thor stepped forward and gently lowered Sleipnir’s head, cradling it in his hands as he ordered, “Take care of him, and bring him safely back—along with Loki.”

He nodded before shoving at the prince’s chest, Thor running a hand over his nose before backing away.

Sleipnir pawed at the ground with a front hoof as the space around him grew distorted, Clint tightening his hold as he felt his muscles tense. He launched into a trot and then swiftly began cantering, the two phasing out of the streets of the Realm as the group behind stood watching on.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” Bruce sighed in regret.

Clint strained to keep his eyes open and alert, taking in the colours that tore through the deep shadows that pressed in all around them. Sleipnir was the only solid object he could grasp, the
surroundings seemingly seeping with a nothingness that threatened to suffocate them both before they managed to wade through even a fraction of it. It was as though they were suspended and Sleipnir’s muscles were pumping his legs to try and find some friction to push off of.

Time was in flux as they travelled, but abruptly between one second and the next hooves touched ground and the dry air of the dusty ground was inhaled through their noses. Sleipnir tossed his head and began to trot over the landscape, a wide path to a large pair of gates in front of them flanked by immense guard walls and breaking the stream of the swift-flowing river below. When they paused before the doors, Clint shifted and thought briefly about dismounting before dismissing it on the obvious risk of touching anything of the Realm of the Dead.

The doors creaked open and Sleipnir walked in, the paneling of the mansion extended in front of the two. But the horse immediately turned from the entrance and journeyed along the grounds confined by the fortifications, faint voices heard conversing. Clint saw a group gathered close to a withered yew tree as Sleipnir’s ears perked.

“How long will you stay?” the voice of the blond asked excitedly.

“Nothing is certain yet,” the sole woman answered, antlers curling up over her head from her temples as hair pale as moonlight fell over her shoulders. She tilted her head towards him inconspicuously and met his stare, the fraction of her left side shown to be blackened and charred bone instead of the corpselike flesh of her right profile.

“What’s happened?” the young man questioned again, pulling the group over to the base of the tree. He sat cross-legged, pulling Loki to settle beside him- Loki!

Though worn and tired, cracked scars of lightning still ripping through his skin, the dark god’s muscles were relaxed and his expression content.

A wolf curled around behind the blond with his head between him and Loki as the female knelt in front of the three, and Clint, noting the evident abdominal wounds of one, the blood on another, and the appearance of the third, gathered that these were Loki’s children.

Hela beckoned him suddenly. “Come join us.”

Clint suppressed a wince at having to intrude on the congregation, though Sleipnir happily trotted forward.

“Clinton,” Loki identified in surprise, appearing to want to greet him though immobilized with shock.

“Hey,” he said awkwardly, sliding off Sleipnir’s back to the ground once he had folded his legs under him to lower himself. Loki rose slowly to his feet and gazed at him for a moment, before he took a hold of his wrist and sat again, drawing him down to settle himself as well.

“It’s rude to stand when you’re to speak with those who are seated,” he explained. “These are my sons Nari, and Vali, and my eldest, Hela – who rules over this Realm.” He indicated each with a motion of his right hand, his left still clasped around Clint’s wrist.

“It’s a pleasure to finally have you here,” Hela greeted him with a small smile, absentmindedly combing through Sleipnir’s front locks.

“Why have you come?” Loki questioned immediately as Nari repeated, ‘What’s happened?’

“His magic was taken from him unjustly, by Odin of course,” she answered the latter.
Vali growled as he shifted to lie behind Loki possessively, his head nosing Clint’s side in secondary concern and curiosity; Nari’s lips frowned in dismay at the statement and he leaned over to embrace the injured god. “I am sorry, father – mother always spoke of how much seidr was a part of those chosen.”

“Thor came back for all of us after though, and we fought with Odin until he agreed to give your magic back,” Clint interjected, to an eyebrow raise of Loki’s.

“That’s absurd – the Allfather can’t revoke his decision,” he argued.

“There’s a lot going down,” he justified with a shrug. “He shouldn’t be making more enemies.”

“What do you mean?” Loki redirected. “My death doesn’t affect the defense of Thanos,” he commented blithely, though his fingers combed through Nari’s hair as he shifted to lie his head in his lap.

“Uh yeah, it does,” Clint returned.

“They must need you for something,” Nari interjected.

“The Æsir have only recognized you when it benefits them,” Hela confirmed.

“No – though it’s stupid for Odin to think you couldn’t make a difference,” Clint muttered. “When the healers heard about what happened to you they rioted. There’s a civil war that’s tearing the place apart.”

Loki recoiled, releasing his hold on him and ceasing his contact with Nari, though the movement pressed him firmer into Vali’s side. “What?”

“How interesting,” Hela drawled. “They have finally reacted to the tortures you’ve endured.”

“Well, that’s certainly unexpected,” he said slowly, “but I can’t leave here.”

“Why not – you’re not dead!” Clint objected.

“You are not yet fully dead, no – but you have been suspended from your body for days,” she declared. “I can’t release you without something in recompense – not when you’re so close to me.”

“That’s bullshit,” Clint growled.

“They always hurt him in Asgard,” Nari contributed. “He might be happier here.”

“We’re here for you now though – we know Asgard’s fucked up with you, but you’re not staying there. You’re coming back to Earth with us. You’re ours,” the archer pronounced. Please.

“Haven’t you been pestering me to leave you alone?” Loki queried, staring up from under his lowered brow. “Why are you even here? SHIELD needs me for experimentation and for improving the offense of Midgard, but I’m not worth the risk of war between Asgard and her. You must be worth even less to them to be forced to come here to fetch me.”

“I volunteered,” he combatted blandly to the narrowing of the other’s eyes. “Your magic’s not going into your body, and there’s nothing we could do – so Thor thought up this to get your attention and get your ass moving back to your body, but Sleipnir said he could only carry me. So I came.

“And sorry that you don’t feel wanted by SHIELD or whatever, but you know you’ve been having
fun with Tony and Bruce, and we need you back even if you return to the cranky, crazy, son of a bitch that fights with Thor and kills people and just uses those around you like puppets—” I don’t care if You don’t show any more interest in me – that’s not what this is about-

You have to come back to us. It’s like You wormed Your way into all of our lives by being just as broken and emotionally screwed up as all of us. But You’re also brilliant and cunning and powerful and oh-so-fucking amazing that You can’t just leave me like this!

“Clinton!”

“What?” he muttered, but there was a numbness that was seeping into his fingers and toes, and he blinked to the realization he had slumped forward and was staring more at the ground than those around him. His thoughts began to circle around Loki and, if not a threat, how His presence always called his eyes to Him anyway. And if he wasn’t looking at Him, in an argument with Him, then there was something off.

“Clint!” Loki repeated, Nari having sat up and Vali on his feet beside him, Sleipnir huffing as Hela’s gaze was cast away. The archer blinked languidly without focus, though the god had him grasped by the upper arms. “Hela,” he growled swiftly, turning his head towards his daughter, “release your hold on his soul, now.”

“It’s not within my control, father, you know that,” she said. “He has been here too long.”

“Why did you bring him? You know how mortals’ are affected here,” he interrogated of Sleipnir, whose thoughts drifted to him easily in the high concentration of magic and relation of the environment.

There were enchantments binding him to the Allfather, the animal’s unique powers something to be protected. Only those with the permission of the king could make use of his ability to cross the borders of the Realms. Loki is an exception to this because of his parentage and strong magical signature, but there was no other. There would have been no way for the group to have ventured into Helheim if it had not been for Clint.

The remnants of the connection of the Mind Gem caused an imprint on the archer’s soul of that of Loki’s mind and core. A parallel of the same yoke forged when a magic-user vows to take another as their permanent partner or spouse, thereby allowing him the same exception to Sleipnir’s capabilities. It was also something his child had viewed as the importance of him to the archer, and therefore took it upon himself to allow Clint his perceived place at Loki’s side, whether inevitably on Asgard, or in Helheim.

“Hela,” Loki addressed again, “what would it take for you to release him?”

“The same as to release you. He cannot depart on his own, his soul is too anchored to this place – you need to accompany him back.”

“I am sorry, my darlings,” he said, bracing Clint against Sleipnir’s side as he hugged Nari, then Vali, before turning back to raise him to his feet. “It seems there’s something I have to do.”

“Visit us again soon,” Nari said, “and tell us about all these Midgardian friends.”

“And either destroy or fulfill the bond between you and the archer,” Hela added, helping Loki stand and supporting Clint’s increasingly limp body as his eyes slipped shut. “It’s an undeserved protection for him and a danger for you.”
Clint was placed astride Sleipnir, Loki getting into place behind him on the steed’s back as he fell to lean against his chest, head lolling back against his collarbone. Sleipnir stood to Loki wrapping an arm around Clint’s waist to secure him as he shifted on his eight legs.

“What do you propose in trade?” Hela asked.

Sleipnir landed as though from a jump on the street he had departed from on Asgard due to the speed which he was spurred to travel at, the side of the palace outside the stables empty as his hooves clattered on the ground. Loki’s hold on Clint loosened as the environment of the Realm seeped into his pores and began to revive him, the god himself grimacing as his image quickly withered and faded.

“If we live through this, we will speak,” the god whispered as his shade flit into the air, Clint stirring at the sound, and then jostling as the horse walked on solid land.

His awareness returned slowly, but when Sleipnir approached the entrance to the stables he snapped to attention in recall of events and threw his eyes around in search of Loki. Where- When did I- What happened? Loki where the fuck are you?!

“Clint!” Thor called, him and Steve having caught sight of him and rushing to his side, the rest of the group following.

“Are you alright?” Natasha asked as he dismounted, Thor snapping his fingers authoritatively and passing Sleipnir to a stablehand to return to his stall with a firm pat to his flank.

“What happened?” Tony questioned.

“I don’t know- Give me a sec-” he answered, gaze never ceasing scouring his surroundings as he carelessly pushed through his teammates into the stable. They followed to his grabbing of Sleipnir’s face and interrogating, “Where is he?!"

“Clinton,” Thor chastised, pulling him away from the horse. “You are distressed.”

“Hell yeah I am – Sleipnir!”

The animal huffed before jerking his head in a high nod. Clint’s sharp eyes followed the motion up before freezing, his arms abruptly elbowing the group from his sides again as he sprinted into the palace.

The dim light shining through the main isle of the Weapons’ Vault illuminated ten of Odin’s guards aligned with the pillars, powerful artefacts displayed unconcernedly on pedestals between them as they held their spears, eyes alert. The intricate design of the wall at the far end was brightened from behind, the energy of the reconstructed Destroyer emanating from the machine. A golden web shone underfoot above the tile whenever a guard shifted, the alert connected to the dome above surrounding the heart of the city lying in wait for the anticipated attempts of an intruder.

Despite the warning and obvious preparations, a shape appeared in the shadows of the fringes of the quarantined room. The large form hovered above the ground, indiscernible, allowing not a whisper of sound. Suddenly, the four guards closest released their spears and threw their hands up to claw at their heads before collapsing, the weapons shooting unnaturally to pierce the torsos of two others. The hulking form of Thanos lifted his hands from the arms of his poised chair to hurl gatherings of energy from his palms to slice through the air and the bodies of the remaining guards
as the far wall shone and dissolved.

His cape hung to the floor as he stepped boldly to face the Destroyer’s stance with a grin, the magic of the wards beneath him glowing dazzlingly. The metal slid from the machine’s face to the sides of its head and a ray darted towards him, but he leapt forward at the last possible second and dove into the goliath’s legs. The strength of Thanos’ impact unbalanced it and the titan gathered energy in his hands and eyes while the machine turned, and their blasts met in the middle.

They were both thrown to crash into pillars; the mineral crumbled at their backs as the top halves of both toppled to fall into the center. The Destroyer fired another beam while Thanos stood and began rushing towards him, the laser eating through his skin and muscles as he planted his feet before he brought up his forearms in defense. The attack ceased to the titan’s dart forward, the surface of his body maimed but enough regenerated for life and a hold around the Destroyer’s head. He hauled it up to throw over his shoulder and across the room, wrecking a pedestal and tossing the bright green and yellow eye following the fight into the wall behind. The titan paused as the artefact framed in obsidian disappeared upon impact, his eyes flashing to the other end of the space as he ran from the bout.

He lunged to clutch the showcased Infinity Gauntlet only for the image to dissipate upon contact.

Thanos released a roar and launched energy from his eyes and hands at the Destroyer again, running up the stairs to the doors out of the vault before a numbing spread through his torso as ephemeral arms encircled his shoulders and halted his movement. White hair fell forward onto him as antlers stretched into his peripheral vision, the side of a smooth skull pressed against the right side of his face.

“The concentration of magic above clouded your view of the essences gathered here,” Hela explained as magic coalesced in front of them, pulsing in a vague humanoid form.

“You’ve nothing to barter with to escape death’s arms,” a male voice whispered from the shape.

“I don’t need to – She knows me,” Thanos countered, attempting to wrench himself out of Hela’s grip. He was unable to do so as he weakened further.

“She’s become full of herself, to keep you from passing on,” Hela contested. “There are some related to her element that can revoke this. I am one.”

“How dare you desecrate Her name-”

“I am Hela, ruler of the Realm of the Dead. Daughter of Loki, whom you have wronged,” she proclaimed, tightening her hold. “And fortunately for the heart in me overtaken by the thought of vengeance for what you have done to my father, I am one of Death, and I can twist the meaning of her will when I wish to exert power to oppose it.”*

She dragged Thanos’ spirit, powers, and essence from his body without the ease of most passings, ripping him from Asgard as he screamed to the depths beneath her home and imprisoning him in Niffleheim.

The figure left in the room dissipated, the Allfather entering with Gungnir held aloft to a room devoid of life.

The group ran up several flights of stairs following him, before he led them to skid into the room of the ritual. The magic contained within the circles thickened in wisps and waves of colour before diving into Loki’s body.
His back arched in a high bow as an earth-rending scream erupted from his throat, the energy of the recombination hazing his body as all the facets of his magic slammed into his crippled core and fragile psyche. His shrieking pierced eardrums and his thrashing shook the floor as Frigga fell to her knees weeping, the sorceresses assembled immobilized in sympathy. Odin returned to the scene, Thor holding his mother’s shoulders as he shed tears for his brother’s pain as well, the gathered mortals just enduring as the seconds dragged on without an end to the happening.

Finally the air cleared, the deep amaranth, amber, ash, salt, and wood spent and consumed by the merge to leave only Loki. He lay limp with scars of lightning shimmering with green and purple emission, blood leaking from his ears and nose, the corners of his eyes and mouth, as he stared blankly at the ceiling.

His parents and the Avengers surged towards him as some of the sorceresses shouted, ‘No!’, ‘Don’t!’ A ring of sparking energy shot up from Loki’s core to lash out as a whip, Odin managing to grab Frigga’s arm and pull her back as the others stopped and hopped away from the volatile attack.

It dissipated as suddenly as it appeared to a healer theorizing, “His magic’s at the surface somewhat healing but more aggressively defending him – until the light fades, his subconscious is dominant. Keep your distance.”

“He doesn’t recognize our intent?” Bruce queried.

“His magic usually does when he’s unconscious,” Thor responded hesitantly, “but this is different. His elements are angry.”

Loki’s eyes shined as they regained focus, magic permeating the irises as well as gathering in his mouth and on his palms. He pushed himself to sit up before slumping forward, not gracing a glance to any of those around him.

“No, we can’t just-” Thor started before insistently moving forward, another assault of magic slicing towards him to the god throwing himself to the ground to duck under it as he grasped his hammer. Steve, Clint, and Natasha surged forward too, Pepper stepping further back though she watched each carefully and Tony putting his hands on Bruce’s shoulders and turning him to the side to face him instead of the spectacle.

The doctor’s irises were green as the screams from moments before echoed in his head, the helplessness prolonged and heightened through the distance of Loki from himself, and the reality that this might not work. The fact that the God of Mischief he had come to empathize and get along with would probably never return to how he was before, broken as he had been, but would instead be this empty shell that didn’t even have the benefit of rage as he did-

“Bruce, calm down, focus on me,” Tony coaxed. “Cap and Thor and our two favourite assassins are going to snap him out of it – then we’re going to give him a group hug, alright? Don’t you worry about a thing. This’ll work. Don’t doubt me now.”

As rings of magic flew to meet those insistent on drawing closer without any acknowledgement from Loki, Steve and Thor deflected the energy when they could while Clint and Natasha dodged and weaved. Noting the obstacles, an increased flux was directed towards the blonds, allowing the nimble agents to gain ground while the sorceresses on the sidelines tittered and tried to convince them to keep their distance.

“Loki,” Natasha called, without response, “we’re not going to hurt you – but you need to be looked over as soon as possible.”
“Don’t attack him!” a healer interjected. “His magic will become more destructive if you harm him, and knocking him out won’t make a difference to the strength of his attacks.”

Deprived of the semblance of a plan they had each constructed, when Clint realized an opening he lunged for Loki and simply clutched at his shoulders, landing before him on his knees. His eyes imbued with magic locked onto the archer as flames lit along his fingers, Steve, Thor, and Natasha darting forward immediately only to be thrown away when they impacted a curved wall of magic that had shot up from the floor. Flashes of energy rippled over the surface at the contact to reveal a defensive dome around the two, the evidence disappearing but the barrier remaining when Thor hurled Mjolnir at it only for her to ricochet backwards.

Loki uttered a word in a harmonic language as his core sustained the guard, the concentration of power arresting any movement Clint might have attempted. The magic-users recognized the word as a general inquiry, ‘Why?’, but without the context of the god’s thoughts they were just as devoid of answer as the archer. Clint met Loki’s stare even as he raised his hands to secure a hold on the angling of his head, thumbs under his jaw and long fingers wrapped around to span behind his ears and around his neck with magic searing his skin.

Loki repeated the question, but the raw energy that pervaded his eyes and mouth and aura visibly fell from him without wait to sink into Clint’s eyes and forehead as the god tightened his grasp of him. ‘Loki, please,’ Thor begged as Natasha pulled out her two hand guns and shot all of their rounds at the shield separating her from her partner.

After a moment, the glow faded from where it had gathered in Clint’s eyes and he blinked, the temperature lessening from Loki’s hands and the god’s posture sagging. All his magic seemingly drew back into himself, and he hastily fell unconscious to Clint’s scrambling to support him, breathing hard.

Natasha, Thor, and Frigga were the first to them, Natasha checking both of their pulses before Thor was lifting Loki into his arms to Frigga’s diagnostic spells. The healers swarmed with directives, ‘The level below-’, ‘Watch the energy on his hands!’, ‘The damage to his core might be worse-’, ‘Mind his vitals-’

Tony dragged Bruce to follow the mass, Pepper trailing, while Steve helped Clint to his feet.

“You need to be looked over,” he commanded.

“I’m fine,” he assured. “Come on.”

Chapter End Notes

(* ) Marvel.com states that Thanos has a hovering chair with offensive weapons and the ability to teleport galaxy-wide distances, which is how he arrived here.

He can also project psionic blasts of energy (psychic attacks including telekinesis, pyrokinesis, electrokinesis, etc.) so, he mentally attacked the first guards and caused their brains to rupture before mentally lobbing their spears at two others, killing six. As well as those abilities, he can blast plasma/cosmic energy from his eyes and hands, which is how he killed the others and fought with the Destroyer.

Death is also said to have made him immortal. The Destroyer’s beam impacted him,
and incinerated enough to kill him – but then he regenerated enough to survive due to this ‘curse’ (and wasn’t healed any further). This is why, really, any attempt on his life would have failed, with the exception of Hela, who has a strong relationship with Death herself as well as being powerful in her own right.
Loki’s recovery leads to dropped guards and revelations.

The Avengers were forced to keep their distance from the group of healers bustling around Loki’s unconscious form, even the Allfather and Thor pressed up against the edge of the bed beside so to not impede their movement. The sorceresses darted from the infirmary they all occupied to the storerooms, and then back again in a cacophonous clash of suggestions, debate, and requests of each other, Frigga foremost.

Once the haste lessened to a certain degree a few hours later, the Queen separated from the group with another sorceress and described gently to her husband and son, “We just have to wait for him to wake up.”

“Is he alright?” Thor interrogated.

“We can’t be certain,” the other conceded, expounding, “His essence has returned to his body, and so has his magic. But his core is so damaged that he has fallen into a coma to allow distance and time to heal – which is not rare in itself, but when looking at all that has happened-”

“When he wakes,” Frigga interrupted, “we don’t know what he’ll remember of the last few days, if he’ll be aware or if his magic will be at the surface for a while, or if there are any changes to him.”

After a moment of absorption, Odin commanded, “Clear out those unneeded,” before he departed.

Frigga watched him exit before instructing the woman at her side, “Only two visitors at a time – I want all of you here monitoring him. Alert me of any change.” ‘Yes, my queen,’ she replied before walking back to Loki, Frigga turning to Thor and beginning to lead him to his teammates and out of the infirmary.

“I want to stay at his side,” he protested.

“There is nothing for you to do here,” she countered. “He won’t wake for a while, and, at least for right now, they need room to keep watch over him.” The queen suggested, addressing the group, “Go up to your quarters and don’t worry – Loki is back with us, it’s just a matter of patience as he heals.” She ushered them from the space, then began to descend the stairs as they slowly climbed upwards.

After several levels, they veered left and uneasily settled in the lounge on the floor they had been assigned rooms to stay in.

“We can check up on him though, can’t we?” Pepper asked, Frigga’s mention of visitors implying the allowance to them later.

“Yes,” Thor answered. “It is only now that the healers need use of the room without distraction.”

“This wait isn’t going to be fun…” Tony mumbled.
“Do you have anything for this?” Natasha asked from Clint’s side, her hands gingerly rotating his head so the skin of his neck was directed towards the light. First-degree burns had inflamed the skin to a dark pink the shadow of long fingers along the sides of his neck.

“I’ll summon a servant for something,” Thor said in apology, stepping to the hall to call out to one.

“Are you alright?” Pepper questioned.

“Barely stings,” he responded.

“Magical burns become worse over time if not treated,” Thor commented when he returned, “though I’m not sure these are… It may just be the Midgardian reaction to raw magic – it’s harmful to all if not controlled.”

“What do you think snapped him out of it?” Bruce posed.

“I don’t know,” he retorted, receiving a small cylindrical container from the servant that had stepped in before being dismissed. “It may have been my voice, or Lady Natasha’s shots, or even the mounting anxiety in us at the circumstances.”

“Yeah, yeah- okay. We’re not going to be getting any answers out of you – what else is new,” Tony retorted sharply.

“We’re all worried,” Pepper calmed as Natasha took the container from Thor, “but we need to take it easy. There’s nothing we can do now but wait.”

“Wait for Loki to wake up, people to keep killing each other, Thanos to attack – great,” Clint muttered as Natasha angled his head and smeared a layer of the balm over his burns.

They were refused entry to the infirmary for the following two days, encouraged by Frigga to rest and thereby confined to their quarters by the servants. They learned of the events that had occurred in the Weapons’ Vault: the removal of the Infinity Gauntlet and illusion of artifacts by Odin, the battle with the Destroyer, the deaths of the guards, and the disappearance of Thanos. The details of why the titan had not continued his search through the palace were lost to even the Allfather for the moment, the excess of Loki’s magic called into presence through the ritual obscuring Heimdall’s view of happenings.

They also heard that the civil war that had been fervent when they arrived had shifted in its motivations and targets upon the completion of Loki’s appeal. The faction in support of the punishment was incensed at the extent of power and attention directed onto him to reverse it in a time of, from their view, a more immediate threat and concern. The lack of answer as to Thanos’ whereabouts encouraged them, their understanding of the priorities of the royal family not aligning as they would prefer it with their own. The sorceresses and those in defense of the Allfather’s decision now fought against the lingering bias of the others in an effort to establish a future of equality for them and those of their talents. A lessened amount of bloodshed was resultant, the immediacy of the issue lessened in both parties though frustration persisted, an impersonal projection of the issue present in the Æsir mindset.

With the reduction of discord, the Avengers were unrestricted in their concern for Loki’s wellbeing in contrast to their contribution to the administration of Asgard. The Allfather worked to govern his people, the Queen managed the Healers and oversaw the reparation of relations between the Realms on Asgard’s peripheral that had been involved in the dispute, and Thor waited at Loki’s bedside for him to awaken while his teammates loitered in their chambers. They wanted to stay by the injured god as well, but allowing the blond to be the one present when he finally stirred would
be more appropriate. They alternated shifts at his side in support of Thor while he was so obviously distressed. Not much restful sleep was had by any of the palace.

On the fourth day after the ritual and of their stay in the Æsir capital, Loki awakened.

By noon of the day because of his constant vigil, Thor had fallen into the habit of gradually sinking further into his seat and briefly falling asleep before starting awake, Natasha’s still presence by his side replaced by Steve’s support when a servant came to offer him the midday meal.

“Have the healers noticed any change?” Steve asked gently, forcing one of the platters into the other’s hands.

“His vital signs have improved, and he is strengthening,” he answered, resignedly picking at the food. He gave up the pretense and affixed his stare onto his brother again, admitting softly, “I just wish for him to wake… Until then, I have no comfort for all that has been done.”

“He’ll be fine,” the Captain asserted. “You pulled through and stood by him, against Odin. We’re all here to help him through this.”

The shift of material sounding almost imperceptibly called their gazes to the figure on the bed, and Loki’s heavily lidded scrutiny of them. “The oaths you mortals swear are so quaint,” he murmured in response to Steve’s statement, blinks increasing in frequency as he disentangled from the confusion of waking.

‘Brother,’ Thor whispered in awe before he placed the plate on his lap onto Loki’s, the brunet immersed in bewilderment at the bestowal of fare that intensified in his expression when Thor gently moved to embrace him tightly. Loki’s brows furrowed but he could not protest to the grip in the state he was in, only savouring the moment before glancing to Steve and requesting, “Context?”

“What do you remember?” he questioned in return as Thor interjected, ‘Do you need me to fetch you a healer?’ as he pulled back slightly.

“All I need is food and rest – not fuss from you or anyone else,” he answered the latter, attempting to shove the blond further from him. “And I remember clearly being with my children in Helheim.” Thor pulled his chair so its side was flush against the bed frame before retaking his seat to a brief look of consideration from Loki, before he turned his attention to the foodstuffs he had been given.

“Thor came to us when he couldn’t convince Odin to return your magic,” Steve began, “so we came here and got him to agree after we made clear Earth’s stance on your alliance with us, and how your knowledge and powers could repair the bridge your fight damaged last year and everything in New York.”

“First, who is ‘we’, and second, what, exactly, have you bound me to expend my magic on?” he interrogated immediately.

“You are not sworn onto anything.” Thor combatted. “The main reason you were permitted to return was that your sentence was not meant to inflict the pain it did.”

“And ‘we’ are Tony, Pepper, Bruce, Clint, Natasha, and I.” Steve added.

“Loki!” Frigga called as she abruptly rushed into the area, swiftly enfolding him in her arms.

‘Did you have a ward set to alert you when I woke?’ he retorted, muffled, though he returned her embrace. Steve stood and slipped away as she fret, healers already moving into the space to survey
Loki’s improvement.

He climbed past the levels to the guest floor he had become familiar with, entering the occupied lounge to announce to the group, “He’s awake.”

“That’s great,” Bruce responded as Tony uttered, ‘Finally!’ “How is he?” Pepper asked.

“He seems to be okay,” he replied. “He said all he needs is some rest and food to regain his strength, but I didn’t get to question him for long because of the healers wanting to look him over.”

“Any changes to behaviour- memory loss?” Bruce questioned.

“Not that I could see, and he said he remembered being in Helheim, but I didn’t ask him about anything that happened after that,” Steve answered.

“I guess we’ll see then,” Clint concluded.

They were able to slip into the infirmary to check on Loki for barely a minute of subtle, probing conversation and well-wishing, to his mystification, before they were forced from the room and prevented ‘crowding’ the area by the healers. Thor assured that they would be updated regularly on the going-ons, but after two messages sent via slave filled with vague proceedings of magical restoratives Thor did not even understand himself, they confirmed Loki’s stable and positive potential and retired for the night with the Queen’s promise of visitation the following day.

The green, purple, orange- light and dark magic thickened in wisps and waves of colour to dive into Loki’s body, His back arching in a high bow as He screamed. His shrieking was piercing as He thrashed, the room shaking. Clint chanted, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ immobilized on his knees as his god’s torment ripped through his ears before abruptly He lay limp, scars of lightning streaming with blood that smeared His limbs and leaked from His ears and nose, the corners of His eyes and mouth. He stared blankly at the ceiling before Clint shifted forward, then His pale, blind eyes darted to him.

He pushed Himself slowly to sit up, the motions enrapturing as he stared. The perseverance through the pain in His movements choked him as he repeated to Him, “I’m sorry - please.” Stop moving, just- Get better. I’m sorry.

Twin rings of sparking energy shot out from His core to lash out as whips, Clint falling to all-fours as they tore through the air over his head. “Are you?” Loki whispered hoarsely. “My very being was stripped from me – for you.”

“I didn’t know he’d hurt you,” he appealed. He crawled warily over the short space separating them under Loki’s watchful gaze before reaching out to clutch at His shoulders. “I came for you.”

“You did,” He conceded, eyes flooding with magic and locking onto the archer on his knees. “Why?” He questioned, flames lighting along his fingers as a curved wall of magic shot up from the floor to trap them. “Why?!” He grabbed his head, thumbs under his jaw and long fingers wrapped to span behind his ears and around his neck for the magic to sear his skin, the raw energy pervading His eyes and mouth and aura visibly falling from Him. His god tightened His grasp of him and sunk the sharp, blinding, ethereal element into Clint’s eyes and forehead.

‘Why, why, why…’ echoed in the confines of his mind, psyche lost amidst Him and His core and the language of the forces of the universe.

“Because you weren’t here!” he yelled in the expanse of entwined threads, overwhelmed. “You
were dying! And then when I thought you were back, you weren’t!

“You weren’t yourself.”

The magic retracted at the lost contact, Loki falling away from him as the absence engulfed Clint in emptiness and night devoid of light as he scrambled to find Him again-

‘No!’ Clint mouthed as he jack-knifed upright in bed, prayer soundless as he gasped for breath. Moonlight and starlight fell through the openings along the wall to his left, but bereft of company the lack of presence within his mind pulsed as if in invitation.

No- This is fucking ridiculous, he snarled to himself, throwing his legs over the side of the bed and cradling his head in his hands. He ruffled his short hair and sighed heavily, rolling his eyes as he long-sufferingly stood and wound through the chambers he had been given out into the hall.

The last time I dreamt of Him (one that wasn’t a nightmarish PTSD thing) it was because we were living together and everything He was saying to me was biasing everything we were putting together from that disc of New York – so being torn over what the fuck He was really thinking and sort of leaning towards the pros of being under His control while He’s not influenced by anything, having Him choose me- Yeah, okay, pathetic but I get it.

Going to the underworld with Sleipnir to get Him back, and throwing myself against His magic was, well, stupid. I can’t regret it (never can with these things, my instinct’s pulled me forward more than it’s done anything to pull me back), but why did I? Why do I need Him?

I guess I wasn’t answering Loki, really, in the dream… I went after Him because I’ve gotten used to Him. I like His interest in me, I like listening to Him when He’s talking about His magic like we’re puny insects – He’s a god, and I guess I like that, while forced to be with us, He’s indulging me as more entertaining than the others.

He walked out to the stairs and froze at the fair eyes blinking in disbelief back at him. Loki tilted his head and greeted, “Good evening. And where are you off to?”

“Uh,” he stumbled in shock at the irony, “just thinking.” Loki hummed in response. “Why are you out and about?” He composed himself and examined him, a seemingly soft, short, sleeveless green tunic obscuring the worst of his wounds, dark, loose pants cut off at the knees hanging from his hips as he wandered barefoot. His weight was evenly held, though gingerly, and his countenance tired.

“All the infirmary provides is bustle and noise,” he declared. “They are just monitoring me, I only need to rest – so I’m heading to my chambers.”

“Unknown to them, I take it?” the archer asked rhetorically. At the amused smirk he received, he impulsively proposed, “Need any help? I mean, how many stairs have you climbed?”

That the suggestion barely garnered a curious stare notified Clint the extent of damage Loki must have been feeling the aftereffects of. He strode to his side and lifted an arm over his shoulders, wrapping an arm around his waist and beginning to climb the steps. “I don’t know where we’re going, by the way,” he muttered.

Loki chuckled weakly. “The next floor.”

“You were so close.”

They continued in silence until they reached the desired level, Loki tugging slightly to lead them to
the left and then the door far down the right side. He pressed his palm to the surface of the door before it swung open, Loki pausing to say, “They should recognize you too – it’s your right.”

“What?” he questioned when he would not move forward.

“Place your hand on the door.”

He obeyed without further question, though grew tense at the opportunity he had allowed to harm him. Loki might be weak, but it was a mistake to think he was ever helpless. There could be magic pulsing in his rooms waiting for his orders.

He felt nothing but the gilded metal under his skin though, and after a second where Loki had obviously confirmed something, he was guided to help him inside.

There were thick curtains drawn across what seemed to be a large doorway to the outside air, faint illumination seeping through the material from the night sky. The deep shadows of the room cloaked the furniture, but from the adjustment achieved by his eyes Clint could make out a desk, bookcases, and shelves, as well as objects strewn over the flooring. Loki steered them to the right and they walked forward until their knees hit the side of a raised mattress.

“There you go,” he offered awkwardly.

“Thank you,” Loki replied, shifting out of his grasp and onto the bed.

The archer dithered before moving closer to the headboard, asking once Loki had settled on his back in exhaustion, “Do you remember what happened in Helheim?”

He thought Loki might have blinked, but it was too dark to tell. “You were there.”

“Yeah.”

“Sleipnir shouldn’t have brought you,” he pronounced. “You were almost lost to Hela as well.”

“You got me out,” he stated.

“You should die in battle, not trying to save me,” Loki said.

Clint stared at him in the dim, willing his eyes to acquire nocturnal capabilities so he could read what the god meant beyond the words spoken. Eventually, he uttered a ‘goodnight.’ He turned and walked carefully out of the space, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Thor darted into their company to a more relaxed atmosphere than when he had last been with them as a complete party, the news of Loki’s recovery creating an amiable mood amongst his friends. This was altered upon his frantic appearance.

“What’s up?” Tony asked.

“Is Loki here?” he responded.

‘No,’ Natasha stated with a raised eyebrow as Clint remarked with a smirk, “Did you lose him?”

“Though it is unlikely, check your rooms,” he instructed in reply.

When each member returned without any change in information, Thor sighed with a fond smile, “My brother is not fond of being coddled while injured, much preferring to heal in privacy. He
tolerated the healers for a few hours, but as soon as Mother left he managed to sneak out under
cover of night.”

“No one was watching him?” Steve asked as they joined the god out in the hall.

“Having eyes upon him has never stopped his mischief,” he answered with a shrug. “I’ve checked
the kitchens, so it is likely he has merely retreated to his chambers, but if he truly didn’t want to be
bothered I thought he might have hidden away in one of the rooms here to avoid detection.”

“Nice,” Tony said to Pepper’s narrowed eyes.

“This is in-character for him though?” Bruce interrogated.

“Yes – so far he appears to be himself.”

They climbed the stairs to the floor above, Thor leading left before halting in front of the door on
the right. He softly pushed the double doors open and motioned for the team to be silent. Natasha
narrowed her eyes and voiced, “With a group this size we won’t be able to sneak up on him, and if
he has any reflexive action we’re going to be attacked.”

Thor waved away her concerns and levered the doors open wide, the shine of the hall brightening
the room. Dark curtains hung over a doorway in the adjacent wall blocking the daylight outside, a
large desk along the left heaped with books, sheaves of paper and scrolls, and writing utensils. Two
bookcases flanked the workspace filled with tomes, and on the shelves staggered on the walls and
in precarious piles on the wooden flooring other texts were stacked. Miscellaneous objects littered
the space as well, bits of carved wood, stone, and mineral and also flasks and containers of
compounds and animal matter.

Bruce and Tony’s eyes brightened at the reveal, but Thor glared warningly at them and Steve
positioned himself between the eager scientists and their marks. It was Clint’s blithe comment of,
’Could be booby-trapped,’ though that had them reconsidering their course of action.

Thor resumed his trek and led them to the bed, where they found Loki. He had the sheets, blankets,
and fur covers twisted around his legs while he lay on his stomach, an arm bent under his head,
both under a pillow, while his other arm was flung out.

“Must be worn out,” Pepper cooed to Tony rolling his eyes.

“He’s always been one to sleep in,” Thor informed. “I rise with the sun, but Loki is more active at
night so tends to not awaken until noon if given the choice.”

“Why are we here then?” Steve asked. “He needs his rest.”

“He also needs to eat,” the god countered. “Rest does not compare to sustenance.”

“So are we going to jump on the bed?” Tony asked.

“No, that wouldn’t be a good idea,” Thor replied.

“Loki,” Pepper tried calling to Bruce’s remarking, ‘If our conversation hasn’t woken him by now,
that won’t do it.’

“I got it,” Tony said excitedly, snatching his cell from his pocket and swiftly whipping it at Loki’s
back to Clint and Natasha’s winces. Their fears were baseless though, as the phone was suspended
in the air a foot from impact for a moment before being hurled away to skim Tony’s ear and hit the
wall before falling to the floor.

“Hey! You could’ve killed me!” he declared as he rubbed his ear.

“If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead,” Loki muttered from underneath his pillow.

“Come and dine with us, brother!” Thor beckoned.

“Have a servant bring me food,” he replied.

“And miss the pleasure of our company?” Bruce chimed.

Loki groaned and pushed the pillow from him to lever himself into a sitting position, raking a hand through his hair before glancing at those assembled in his room. “I used to have knives in this headboard,” he muttered. “Thor, what did you do with my knives?”

He shrugged. “I think they are in my room – I had a bet with Hogun about the craftsmanship.”

“Is your magic back then?” Tony asked as he picked up his phone and inspected it for damage as Loki stood, the others starting to file out.

“If pressed I could perform something in defense if I needed to,” he responded, “but no – I have many wards in these chambers to prevent people from meddling.”

“I thought you had magic that kept most others from your rooms?” Thor questioned in confusion.

“Yes, but as you can see you can lead in a bunch of ragamuffins without any trouble,” Loki countered around a yawn.

“I’m a studmuffin, I’ll have you know,” Tony retorted, “and there’s nothing raggedy about any of us – except for the scruff-doctor here,” he added with reconsideration of Bruce.

Thor and Loki headed the company absentmindedly, their dwelling on the floor for millennia having carved the layout and details of it into their minds centuries earlier. They entered into a dining and kitchen area, the few servants cooking greeting them before others were called in to help with the preparations for the unexpected group. The eight arranged themselves around the table without quarrel, though the mortals constantly directed their gazes at those working to serve them.

“Can we help at all?” Steve offered after a minute.

Thor and Loki stared at him in puzzlement before the brunet explained, “Helping them complete their daily tasks would indicate that they are not fit to do so on their own, thereby undermining their worth and jeopardizing their station here.”

“It’s not like we were expected company though,” Pepper challenged.

“Those servicing this floor are used to guests,” Loki expounded with an indication to Thor. “Obviously we wouldn’t expect those who take care of the libraries to suddenly cook for us, but it is expected of those in the kitchens – no matter where the cooking area.”

“So you two don’t know how to cook then?” Natasha presumed.

“We can forage, fish, and hunt, and skin and prepare what we find,” Thor defended.

“That’s… sort of awesome,” Tony responded.
“We learn that at SHIELD,” Clint remarked with a shrug.

“I can cook, actually,” Loki interjected. “I think I’ve visited and lived on Midgard more than any other, so it was necessary that I learn.”

“I helped cook when I was exiled last year,” Thor added. “I brewed coffee, and made toast.”

“That’s a start – good for you,” Pepper commended as Tony agreed, ‘Great, I practically live off that!’

Servants set the table while they conversed, arranging utensils, dishes, and glasses before carrying platters over the short distance to begin the spread on the table. A variety of fruit and nuts were organized artistically before them, and their goblets filled.

Tony sipped at his drink while observing the others eat, humming and asking, “What is this? It’s smooth and has a bit of a kick – do you always drink this in the morning?”

“It’s a sweet ale from Alfheim,” Loki answered as he sectioned what appeared to be a blood orange with the skin of a dragonfruit. “They pair it with their mid-afternoon meal, but yes, we’ve adopted it as a breakfast beverage – it’s one of the weakest drinks available.”

“Damn, parties here must be great.”

A course of hard-boiled eggs, slow-cooked meats, and roasted potatoes was served next, then a variety of cheeses, and then an array of sliced meats and vegetables. Only the two gods and Steve made it to the last, though the others had eaten sparingly so to taste everything. But there were so many components to each course they could not resist trying each aspect.

“How mad,” Thor replied, “energy is needed throughout the day. All four meals of ours are of the same amount.”

“You eat like this four times a day?” Bruce questioned.

“If it provides any ease, we have thirty hours a day – fifteen of daylight,” Loki countered.

“I knew the days were longer,” Tony said in triumph, pointing at Pepper and accusing, “You said they only felt longer, but I knew!”

“How did you not notice the amount of food, friends?” Thor interrogated. “Are you not being fed?”

“The food just stopped coming when we told them we were full,” Clint answered.

‘Ah,’ he uttered in acquiesce, returning his attention to the desserts. When Thor and Loki deemed themselves finished, they exited back into the halls of the floor.

“I’ll leave you here then,” Loki announced when they came to a pair of double doors they had passed on the way to the kitchens.

“Are you sure you’re fine on your own?” Thor asked.

“I’ll be sleeping most of the day,” he replied.
“I’m totally into watching you sleep,” Tony declared immediately, nudging Bruce, who muttered with a humiliated flush, ‘Me too.’

Loki merely raised an eyebrow before turning his querying expression onto Thor. He answered, “They were interested in the books and other things in your room.”

“When I can remain awake for more than a few hours I’ll explain things to you,” he granted with a careless shrug, his fatigue skipping over caution and the subtext of what he was willing to permit them.

“What’s this one?” Natasha asked, specifying the doors.

“This is my room,” Thor proclaimed with a smile.

“Should we really be spending this much time unaware?” Steve prodded. “The war hasn’t fully settled down, and we still don’t know what happened to Thanos.”

Loki paused from where he had been moving away, furrowing his brow and turning slightly back towards them. “Isn’t Thanos dead?” he questioned.

A chorus of ‘what’s sounded before Thor inquired, “Why would you think him dead?”

He blinked furiously for a few seconds before he glanced to them and articulated, “Hela could not release me without a trade – before I returned to my body, I remember standing by Thanos while she pulled him down to Niffleheim.”

Recoils and baffled silence met the description, and Loki smirked before giving a jaunty wave and continuing his trek to his rooms.

“Well,” Clint began, pausing, before Bruce asked,

“What do we do now?”
Chapter Summary

Terms are approximated for the future, and the Avengers return home.

With the threat of Thanos rather anticlimactically removed from the picture, the Avengers could only imagine what direction SHIELD would want them to move in. Though, once Odin was informed of the titan’s fate, the group was called into an audience with him and the Queen, the matter taken out of their hands.

They stood in a line before him just as they had for Loki’s appeal; one modification was that they were gathered in the throne room of the first floor and not the open court below, the other that no spectators had collected along the sides to consider the decision that would be resultant. The Allfather sat in front of them on a raised pedestal base, Frigga just slightly behind on his right, and Thor halfway between his parents and his teammates.

“I speak on behalf of Asgard in these matters of discussion,” the king began, “with the interest of furthering the peace of the Nine through cooperation with Midgard. You six represent the views of your people, being of superior strength and fortitude, and having had my heir, Thor, exposed to you.

“He will act as intermediary due to this relation to you, and, because of the targeted petition you made, Loki will hereby be acknowledged as your subject and therefore responsibility.

“You proposed that he be used in service of this Realm and yours to repair the damage he has wrought. Yet you also offered him as appeasement for the healers, who are not of concern now, and against Thanos, whom we have confirmed is dead.”

“That’s true,” Steve conceded, “but Loki’s magic is still a force that can reverse a lot of what has happened.”

“-and ensures negotiation with Earth,” Natasha interjected. “We can speak for the organization we’re a part of in dealing with Loki, but – in terms of truce, aid, and trade between the two Realms – talks can now be organized with our superiors concerning the future.”

“His healing has to be taken into consideration as well,” Bruce added.

“The Bifrost takes precedence,” Odin countered. “Its loss has severed much of our connection to news of others of the World Tree. He will remain here until it is functional again.”

“He’s our information and defense,” Clint upheld, “and, as you said, our responsibility. We can’t leave him here, but we’re our world’s only guard – we need to get back. Along with him.”

“How long will the bridge take to repair?” Thor asked.

“Some progress has been made in its theoretical reconstruction,” Frigga started, “and some of the designs for its framework, but it would take another year to complete.”

‘Yeah- no,’ Tony snorted as Steve counter-proposed, “Loki’s input will shorten that time, but you
don’t need him the entire length – building the machine will take just as long with him than without him, with the engineers you have here-” ‘You only need him for conceptualizing the thing,’ Tony remarked.

“We’ve been here a week already for his healing,” Bruce added, suggesting, “Another week, two at the most, seems fair.”

“The roots may be established for the Bifrost within that time, but nothing that ensures travel,” Odin retorted. “Since the Tesseract was meant to be returned to our possession, in exchange for this leave-taking, we will keep it here and Loki can transport you back to Midgard.”

‘What?’ ‘Can he do that normally?’ ‘He’s still healing!’ they objected, but the Allfather raised his hand to silence them. “As of now, Loki is hereby a charge of Midgard and, at the end of the terms agreed and once upon said Realm, free from further obligation and punishment. Heimdall will be watching, but unless an intervening threat of sufficient magnitude attacks you, negotiations will resume once the Bifrost is rebuilt.

“Dismissed.”

Compelled from the room, the group gathered to climb the stairs to return to Thor’s chambers in dissatisfied, tense silence amidst their footsteps until Tony questioned,

“Is he honestly expecting Loki to teleport eight of us from one Realm to another while he’s healing?”

“There isn’t a choice, unless we’re willing to stay here for the months it will take to fix the bridge,” Steve responded.

“Even if we were, SHIELD sure as hell wouldn’t be,” Clint added.

“It’s unreasonable, my father knows this,” Thor said. “His repossession of the Tesseract and sending us from Asgard by my brother is the quickest and simplest way to be rid of us all, after challenging Loki’s sentence as we did.”

“It’s his own fault for almost killing him and riling everyone up,” Tony muttered.

Pepper chastised, ‘Tony,’ as they arrived at the desired floor and moved to the double doors of the blond god’s rooms. They filed into the large open space, their time in the area before evident in the chairs that had been called for and arranged in an irregular circular formation before the far wall, the high light of early afternoon streaming through the large, open windows. Cuirasses, forearm guards, shoulder pads, and greaves shone from their hung positions on the walls alongside a couple of swords or, as with some of the smaller pieces, on the long table that served as a desk. Maps and scrolls were lain overtop whet stones, vials of oil, and rags on the surface for the care of the equipment, some writing utensils atop a stack of texts beside.

“I meant to ask earlier,” Bruce began as they seated themselves comfortably, “why your desks – yours and Loki’s – are so untidy when you have servants waiting on you.”

“It was insisted long ago that they not disturb the organization of the work usually left unfinished on desks,” Thor explained, “unless it’s a work table in a public room. However Loki cleans his own room, wards keeping servants from the area unless specifically called. His experiments and studies are almost never limited to the desk space.”

“I can see that,” Natasha remarked with a glance at Tony, Pepper allowing a smirk of agreement and commiseration.
“Don’t judge!” Tony answered at the look. “With Loki, me, and Brucie here all being minds of inspired genius, we’re gaining numbers in this clique.”

“That just means we’re going to have to separate you regularly,” Pepper commented, “to make sure you don’t all get carried away and don’t eat or sleep for days.”

“Speaking of,” Steve opened, “I know we agreed to only two weeks, but we can’t push Loki beyond his limits. We need to talk to him and see if it’s feasible to deliver something workable within that timeframe, while he also takes time to heal.”

“Fun times,” Tony said sarcastically before pronouncing, “When we’re back, Fury’s going to lecture us on how we lost the Cube.”

“It’s likely my father would have had it returned no matter the circumstances,” Thor illuminated with a shrug. “It brought much ruin to Midgard because of your hold of it, so he would lock it away.”

“In the vault with all the other powerful artifacts, right?” Clint simplified with a snort.

“Keeping them all in one room, no matter how it’s locked up, isn’t the best choice,” Natasha agreed.

“The enchantments upon the Vault are not easily replicated onto other places,” he defended.

“But Loki knows how to bypass them,” Pepper remarked, with Bruce contributing, ‘And so does Thanos.’

“They are both uniquely powerful and specialize in obscure talents,” Thor stated before pausing.

“What is it?” Steve prompted at the other’s thoughtful frown.

“I just…” he started before he sighed with a self-depreciating smile, “I suppose I never gave thought to all my brother was capable of, the force that he is.”

They sat in a moment of silent contemplation before a knock sounded at the door and it was pushed open assertively. Frigga entered with a smile, shutting the door softly behind her and moving to them to sit on the edge of the bed at the side of their gathering. “How are all of you? What did you think of my husband’s terms?”

“Fair, but difficult,” Steve answered honestly. “We know we can’t stay, but we’d rather Loki have time to heal.”

“He is strong,” she comforted. “He will pull through this, and then you will have time to heal his mind and body on Midgard.”

“How is he?” Bruce asked.

“He is asleep now,” she answered, “but you should wake him soon for supper and speak with him of your future.”

Tony physically grimaced at the spread of food arranged on the table before the group once again by the servants for the evening meal, Frigga having lingered with them before taking leave to resume her duties as queen. “You know, I think I’ve eaten more here than I do in a month,” he said, pushing his plate away with a shake of his head and instead focusing on the drink that was
much heavier in alcoholic content than the ones offered earlier in the day. “This on the other hand, is great – I think I’ve been buzzed since I got here.”

“We are accustomed to it, but it affects you all more than intended,” Thor surmised. “It can be mixed with water that way you taste it as we do, if that’s acceptable?”

“I’m good,” Tony replied to Pepper rolling her eyes, but the others consented to the idea.

Loki sat with his chin propped up on his palm as he yawned before blinking, visibly waking himself further while he reached to amass food on the dish in front of him. Thor grinned with unabashed adoration at the sight before remarking. “This reminds me of when you were poisoned as a child.”

“And that’s a fond memory for you, is it?” Loki muttered drowsily in reply.

“We missed the harvest festival,” he continued. “You were bedridden and half-asleep the whole time while I refused to leave your bed and my watch over you, ordering the servants around.”

“I remember that, vaguely – you were screeching every hour.”

“I was young,” he conceded, “every time I thought your fever had worsened I panicked and thought you were dying.”

“I’m getting a cavity listening to this,’ Tony said as Natasha asked, “How did you get poisoned?”

“An unwise venture into the armoury,” Loki explained with a slight shrug. “We weren’t supposed to have been in there at all, but we snuck in when the guards changed shifts. My magic was erratic then, but I managed to cloak us for the few seconds we needed running from the corner through the doors behind them.”

“I think you threw camouflage over the doors too, since the guards suspected nothing,” Thor added. “If Heimdall’s gaze hadn’t been caught by that then the healers wouldn’t have been there as quickly.”

“They would have arrived soon enough, given how you dragged my body from the place bellowing that it was cursed and evil spirits were out to devour us.”

“What was I supposed to think when you merely touched a spear tip to fall unconscious?”

“You just passed out?” Clint questioned skeptically.

“I was drawn to the enchanted weapons kept along one side,” Loki described as he tore the meat from the small bones of a pheasant wing. “Some magically-enhanced poisons move swiftly through contact rather than any physical cut.”

“The view on magic here doesn’t make sense,” Bruce interjected. “How can these powerful weapons be kept out of use?”

“Weapons are different,” Loki began. “If there is the potential to be useful in war, then it is trained with for future conflict – but in terms of poisons, physical aids, and other magicks, they are seen as ‘cheating’ in a ‘fair, honourable’ bout in the training yards.”

“But in war, anything goes?” Clint clarified.

“You would think so,” Loki retorted, “but because of the connotations of this preparation, most are
loath to pick up a magical weapon for fear of being thought of as too weak to achieve anything without it.”

“What about Myl-Mjolnir then?” Steve asked, stumbling over her pronunciation.

“Thor’s heir – he can do whatever he likes,” Loki said.

“The King is responsible for magical charges and creatures as well,” Thor illuminated. “Mjolnir could be seen as training for my eventual hold of Gungnir,” he suggested to Loki’s agreeing, ‘True,’ around a sip of his ale.

“You’re seen as weak then?” Tony probed brazenly of Loki.

“That’s always been the case when next to Thor,” he answered, “as I’m slighter, have a more effective and restrained – rather than wasteful – fighting style, and yes, because I’m a sorcerer. But it’s always easier to get the best of others when you’re underestimated.”

Clint and Natasha nodded in agreement as Tony smirked in concurrence as well. “Can’t wait till we have that fight back home.”

“How long do you think it’ll take until you’ve fully recovered use of your magic?” Bruce asked.

“I’m not sure, it’s quite reliant on a number of other factors,” Loki replied before his eyes flicked up onto him. “Why?”

“We have about two weeks here,” Steve stated.

“Do you?”

“Us as well,” Thor commented. “They don’t believe SHIELD will allow a lapse in defense for any longer.”

“And how are we returning?” he interrogated shrewdly.

“Though your magic,” Natasha responded.

“Of course,” he uttered as he picked at the remains on his plate. “And what else have I apparently volunteered for?”

“Fixing the Bifrost,” Bruce admitted.

“In a fortnight?” he snapped with a raised brow.

“Not all of it-” Tony interrupted, “just helping out with the blueprints so the guys here can build it.”

“We can help,” Pepper offered.

“You can’t, really,” Loki objected as he stood, stepping away from the table and exiting the room to return to his own.

Steve sighed and proclaimed with furrowed brows, “He’s not going to get any better this way.”

There was no way to prove Loki was concentrating on the Bifrost more than his own healing, as neither the Avengers nor any of the servants saw anything of him in the days that followed, but
from what they had grasped of his knowledge of how long it would take to fix it and his horror at it being broken in the first place it seemed obvious what he would spend his time on. There was also the deadline they had impressed upon him, and, as Thor had explained, his own eagerness to distance himself from the palace walls.

Though having done nothing but heal over the past several days, Loki had behaved somewhat differently, and it was noticed by his brother. Or, Thor was beginning to think, he had come to realize a change in behaviour that had existed for many years. Whereas he could remember the Trickster dashing through the halls away from those he had harassed, cloaking himself in corners with a smirk as shrieks sounded in the halls as a result of something he had planned, eagerly demonstrating his newest achievement in magic, speaking with the healers, sparring with the guards, or keenly proposing quests to distant lands, there had been an absence of his presence that Thor had not thought of until faced with it again. Before his exile to Midgard, Loki had often not been by his side, a rarity that had been overlooked in his carelessness. He would ensconce himself in his chambers to study, would eat alone, and sometimes mentioned in passing ventures to Realms to which Thor had not been invited.

It seemed clear now that Loki’s self-imposed isolation was in a desire to remain detached from the other Æsir – those that had repeatedly mocked his studies, neglected, hurt, and used him. And Thor had gradually become one of them in his arrogance, taking advantage of Loki’s powers when it was beneficial and spurning them when in the company of his friends. The events of the last year would only have worsened the connotations of their home in Loki’s mind, and after having had his brother vulnerable on Midgard and gradually becoming more amiable with the company he was forced to keep, the distance now was all the more palpable.

After a week of no contact because of one of the defensive wards on Loki’s doors being activated and sealing them shut, among his troubled teammates, Thor advocated attempting to contact him again. Though the suggestion did not hold promise in any of their minds, they sent him from the lounge on the guest floor they had usurped to Loki’s chambers with some measure of faith. He knocked upon the surface of the wall beside the doorframe, calling out, ‘Brother.’

At the lack of reply, he struck a series of knocks again, beseeching, “Brother please, not even the servants have seen you – you need to eat and rest! Take a reprieve of some kind-”

“Shut up,” Loki hissed, the rebuke heard distantly through the barrier before he continued, snapping, “I’ve work to do and you’re. Not. Helping! Leave off!”

“Please- You’re still healing,” Thor tried again, but there was no other response. He remained at the barred entrance for a few minutes more summoning him, but still no answer arose.

Two nights before the Avengers would be faced with the day they returned to Earth, and likely a lecture from SHIELD on everything they could have handled better, Clint gave up on restraining his frustration and internal fretting over Loki and separated from the team after dinner to threaten him himself. The couple of weeks had been filled with each exploring the resources in the lounges and libraries of their floor and that above, the air charged with apprehension and discomfiture as they whiled away the time, so the parting was not unusual.

He climbed the stairs to slink through the silent halls to the doors that obstructed his intrusion, the sheen of magic glimmering when his hand neared the surface telling of the residual wards. He fleetingly considered knocking before his mind recalled the memory of his first visit, and, though it would be taking advantage of Loki’s weary state at the time, laid his palm on the metal.

The doors creaked open.
I may know squat about magic, but there wasn’t a reason for me to put my hand on the door once He’d opened it last time, Clint thought as he slipped inside and shut it behind him, He had to have been doing something with the magic and me. Which I’m not going to ask about.

I can’t force Him to eat, but I can sure as hell knock Him out.

He paused for a minute and scowled at the sight before him. Loki was curled cross-legged on his seat, back bowed over the desk, with dark circles around his eyes and muttering under his breath as he wrote on the scroll laid before him. There were large texts open on his right, another on his left the pages of which he tore through in reference of something before roughly shoving it off the edge to fall to his feet and deftly grasping another from one of the stacks on the floor. From the middle, those above swaying, some of the unstable piles of tomes seen before toppled. He stepped closer through the disarray and saw Loki note a long string of runes around a sketch that might have depicted the curves of the Bifrost, but there were too many energy signatures and equations over it for him to tell.

“Hey,” he called, the short sound ringing through the still air of the space. Loki blinked as if rising out of a stupor, glancing towards him in the illumination cast from a suspended light before returning his attention to his work.

“Taking advantage of an error in judgment, are you?” he commented.

“We all figured you’d be working yourself to death,” Clint retorted.

“That’s obviously what you were aiming for when you decided on these ridiculous terms,” Loki murmured.

“How much have you done, do you think?” he queried.

Loki pushed his chair back as he stood and threw his hands in the air, answering tersely, “I don’t know because I think I have enough here for them to build most all of it and extrapolate from the design to finish – but it will probably take them weeks to sift through and understand the information before they touch anything!” He crossed his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes at the material before darting his gaze onto him.

“So you’re done?”

“No I’m not done,” he said, moving to stand in front of him and towering over the shorter archer, “because now everything I have I have to supplement with commentary because ’we’re not telepathic, Loki,’ ‘show your work, Loki,’ ‘no one can follow this, Loki.’”

“Have you slept at all these two weeks?” Clint asked warily, the god having tilted with his final gesture of mocking as he quoted the memory of others before correcting his balance.

“It’s for you- all of you, so what does it matter? I’m not yours to look after!” he responded. Then his eyes dulled in sober thought and he pulled back slightly, articulating, “And you’re not mine.”

“You’re tired – sleep,” Clint urged, gingerly reaching out to take his arm and point him towards the bed. “You need your strength.” He froze as Loki collapsed onto the mattress, and, realizing that he was paraphrasing some of the god’s words to him during the invasion, hurriedly added, “Wouldn’t want you to lose any of us between the Realms.”

“If I feel it’s possible I’m sure your stay can be extended,” he replied.

“Yeah, some of us are valuable to Fury,” he said.
The round, self-contained orb that served as a lamp over the desk glided through the air to attach itself to the ceiling above them, shedding light to see by as Loki lifted himself upright on the bed. “Self-reproach doesn’t become you.”

“Look,” Clint started, “I’m still not sure what you see in me that has you all…” possessive, controlling, clingy, wanting- he gestured at Loki to encompass his behaviour, “but after these discs threw off everything I thought I knew and then having to get you from Hel I’m not going to let you waste away ’cause you’re working yourself to death because no one loves you or whatever.”

That didn’t really come out right, he thought. Doesn’t seem very encouraging- “I mean, yes I know Odin did this to you and is forcing you to ferry us all back, and you’re going to be on Earth in another contract with SHIELD that exploits you, but they’re, like, the faceless overlords no one cares about. It’s me and Natasha and Tony and Bruce, Steve and Thor, and Pepper, who you’re living with that you should be thinking about.”

“And they, what, care for me?” Loki asked, an eyebrow raised.

“Did you miss the part where we sort of came to Asgard to put your magic back in your body so you wouldn’t die?” he questioned sarcastically. “You would’ve been cackling in a corner if you’d seen us freaking out over if you were dead or not, half of us getting into a bar fight trying to get information so we had the upper hand on Odin – and, right now, biting our nails, not sleeping, and turning on each other ‘cause we’re so worried you killed yourself from overwork in here and are just rotting.”

“You’re worked up-”

“Hell yeah I am-”

“Clint,” he called, and the archer crossed his arms over his chest. “Sit here.”

He narrowed his eyes at him before sitting cautiously on the edge of the mattress.

“It seems to me you’re embellishing things-” ‘I’m not you blind son-of-a-’ “but the truth of that will come when I see them the day after next.”

“If you’re not too sleep-deprived to-”

“What I want to know is why you’re seeking me out now, and why you ventured to Helheim for me.”

It was easier when You weren’t wounded and weak and just told me what I was thinking, Clint considered. “I told you, Sleipnir would only let me go.”

“You wouldn’t have been blamed if you returned without me – it was a precarious plan,” ‘I probably would’ve been.’ “Yet you seemed rather… impassioned when you fetched me.”

Clint conceded, “I’ve gotten used to you – we all have.”

“And now?”

“With all your stalking I figured you’d sleep better with me here – I’m egotistical that way,” he answered quickly. “My other plan was to knock you out.”

Loki smirked at the quip before dimming the faint light and sending it back to his desk to darken completely, settling down on his side. “Stay with me then,” he cajoled, encircling the other’s wrist.
with his fingers and pulling him closer.

Clint tensed, but closed his eyes and admitted to himself that he would rather not sleep here than leave with the knowledge that Loki was going to continue working. He laid on his back and tried to become less aware of the god’s gaze on him, until it was abruptly absent. He glanced to the side to find the other’s eyes closed, which makes sense – even if He wanted to keep an eye on me, He’s been up for over a week.

*If I move now I’ll wake Him, He still has my wrist. I’ll work it off during the night and slip away before He’s up so the others don’t notice I’m gone-* He rolled his eyes at the situation that paralleled a one-night stand and attempted to suppress the connotations that arose with the comparison.

As the minutes slowly passed, whether by the certainty Loki was finally resting or the amount of concentrated ambient magic, Clint fell asleep.

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When the agent’s pulse steadied and his breathing calmed, Loki opened his eyes. His vision in the dark was practiced enough that he could see the outline and starker contrasts of the other’s form. He carefully shifted closer and released Clint’s wrist, laying the hand on his chest instead.

*Always justifying your actions through the emotions of the group, Loki asserted, indicates that you’re struggling to agree with your acceptance of me.* He smiled. *At least vocally.*

He closed his eyes and focused on the crippled magic thrashing through his veins, the bonds to the wards of the room clear. The connection to Clint was weaker, but he found the connecting threads after a moment.

He coaxed them nearer to his core, strengthening the measure of it and the roots on either end.

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Clint woke just as the sun was rising, though no daylight managed to work into the room. He remained immobilized with the understanding he had actually slept, eyes widened. After he managed to motivate himself into moving, his eyes had adjusted and he identified the trivial weight across his chest as an arm. He gently lifted the limb and slid from the bed, lingering at the side of it for a moment.

*He’s a lot skinnier,* Clint thought as his sharp eyes noted the decrease in weight, from when Loki had been in a coma for a few days nonetheless. He shook his head and turned away. *One more day, then we’re back on Earth.*

He exited, Loki’s eyes opening as the doors shut. The Trickster moved back to his desk.

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Combatting her incessant anxiousness as the second week passed without word, Pepper had displayed persistent optimism such as suggesting that, in the later days, they might be approached by Loki or see him dining having finished the plans for the Bifrost earlier than expected. On the day of the deadline, she proposed that Loki might not have emerged from his rooms because he had fallen unconscious after finishing what was requested and was sleeping it off. What the group was torn between was their familiarity with behaviour exactly like what she was describing and the knowledge that the magical reparations Loki was tackling were entirely beyond their comprehension.

Just as early afternoon passed and the Avengers took to loitering in Thor’s rooms, their attempts to access Loki’s chambers continually thwarted by the wards and lack of response, a servant knocked
hastily on the doors. She was beckoned inside and reported, “Prince Loki has moved to the
Queen’s study.”

‘What?’ the varied tones of expression questioned immediately, the number clambering to their
feet as they poured into the hall. “When?” Thor asked.

“Not five minutes ago, my prince.”

She was dismissed as they dashed down the grand staircase, entering onto the fourth floor below
and pausing before the closed pair of double doors. Thor laid his hands on the handles for a ward
to be illuminated over the surface.

“Goddamn it!” Tony cursed. “These wards… You know what I’m going to do? I’m going to
replicate this tech, then put it on things that will piss people off – like chocolate bars, and tea, and
rolls of toilet paper.”

Bruce sighed at the man’s mutinous muttering, crossing his arms over his chest as he prepared to
patiently wait for permission to enter.

“Couldn’t we try knocking?” Steve queried.

“The intellect and ancient knowledge displayed through the reparations of the Bifrost isn’t
something that can be accessible to the masses,” Thor explained. “My mother will hide and protect
the plans for the duration they are worked from.”

“It’s not like we can do anything with them,” the Captain countered.

“Speak for yourself,” Tony interrupted.

“It’s valuable information,” the god opposed, “it is more the matter of drugs or spellwork that
could retrieve it from our minds. The lesser number involved, the better. It is easier to seal the
chambers than try to protect all who would enter.”

“So what are we waiting for? What are they doing?” Pepper asked.

“Loki’s probably explaining them,” Clint proposed.

“And Frigga has to judge whether what he provided is enough,” Natasha added.

They had arranged themselves standing in front of the doors, but as the hour passed Clint and
Natasha leaned back against the wall, and Tony and Pepper sat off to one side, Bruce joining them
after he had ceased incessantly shifting his weight and acquiesced to Tony’s gesturing. Thor stood
resolutely, Steve at his side with his arms crossed over his chest, the two indifferent to the strain of
maintaining the stance.

At length the doors opened, Frigga stepping out and cutting short Thor’s ‘Mother,’ embracing him.
Loki leant against the doorframe as she held her eldest’s hands in hers and wished, “Have a safe
journey. I hope to see you soon.”

She moved to bid farewells to the rest of the group as they gathered themselves, Thor stepping
towards Loki, and suggesting, “We can take the night to rest and leave in the morn – you should
eat something.”

“We’re leaving now,” he countered, though he did not move from where his weight was braced.
Then he unexpectedly whistled, and a couple of servants speedily appeared from around the corner.
“Fetch all they brought,” he commanded to their. ‘Yes, my prince.’

“It feels like we’re fleeing,” Natasha stated with narrowed eyes, the servants scurrying from them and the Queen pulling the Captain aside.

“Obviously we’re not,” Loki replied.

Frigga spent several minutes communicating something to Steve in quiet tones before she returned him to the group, offering a final parting before a lingering gaze onto Loki as she left. Pepper tested, “She didn’t say goodbye to you?”

“We took our leave of each other earlier,” he answered, eyes fixed on her back until she disappeared from sight before he turned his attention to those before him. “What?”

Barely standing with dulled eyes bruised from lack of sleep, long hair lank about his shoulders, and layers of heavy material hanging from him instead of shifting with him, Loki’s weary and wraithlike appearance was not encouraging. Steve affirmed, “We don’t have to leave this second-”

“Well I want to, so we’re going to,” Loki stated, the servants arriving with each individual’s bags. They were searched through briefly for the elements deemed of importance – weaponry, uniforms – before the team amassed in resignation.

“Where do you want us?” Bruce asked.

“Thor, behind me – the rest of you, closer, in a semi-circle facing me,” he instructed, stepping into the center of the hallway.

“Do you need us touching you?” the blond god questioned as he obeyed.

“No, it’s actually better if you don’t,” he responded. “Though gather tightly next to one other – Anthony, in the center there, Clinton, beside.”

With their packs slung across their backs and elbows jabbed into each other’s sides after arranging themselves, Loki held his hands out palms down with Thor at his back. He closed his eyes and centered himself, his core bright, though uncomfortably uncontained, extending his raw senses to the essences of those around him. The miniaturized reactor in the engineer’s chest across from him drew attention immediately, as did the archer beside him whose mind was familiar, Thor’s expected power accustomed to behind. Loki cast his magic around to catch the others along his sides, and then swiftly tugged to drag them with him through the dark paths between Realms.

They appeared in the center of the common on the 90th floor of Stark Tower after, to all but one of them, an instant of weightless breathlessness with flashes of light and tears of the abyss consuming their retinas. They blinked in disorientation at the suddenly apparent Earthly surroundings while Thor was forced to scramble to catch Loki as he crumpled to the floor.

The blond grabbed his brother about the torso as his legs sprawled forward, kneeling in support beneath him as his teammates let out exclamations of shock and interrogations regarding the wellbeing of the god. “You expected that,” Thor surmised to the lessened din of the others’ clamour.

“Practical placement for you,” he replied with an attempt at a shrug as his eyelids drooped. “Don’t be alarmed if I fall into a coma.”

“Home sweet home,” Tony sighed with a chuckle.
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