Fourth Reich Dawning
by Magadh

Summary

Jessica Jones thought this would be a simple case: tail a cheating husband, make a few bucks. But when it turned out that her subject was having secret meetings with Matt Murdock's law partner Foggy Nelson things started to get complicated. And when Foggy got kidnapped by neonazis bent on using Kree technology to bring about the Fourth Reich they quickly spiralled out of control. Now Jessica and Matt Murdock are fighting against time to save Foggy and maybe the world from the dawning of a new order.
Chapter 1

Hanging out with Matt Murdock is a freaky experience. And not just because it tends to happen on the roof of a building in the small hours of the morning, like right now. Maybe it’s because, although he’s blind, he’s got this way of looking into you, of looking through you, that is really uncanny. Then there’s his whole Buddha thing. He can sit there for hours just listening to the city and its vibes, not saying a word. He’s good at being alone with his thoughts. Which I definitely am not. He’s the Daredevil, and that whole man-without-fear thing is not a joke.

Let me just say, too, that it has nothing, or very little, to do with his being some sort of hero. I’ve done the whole costumed hero gig myself. Spent some time as an Avenger before I decided that it just wasn’t my thing. For what it’s worth, those people are more “normal” than you’d expect. Steve Rogers is actually a pretty nice guy. You just have to get used to the fact that even when he burps it sounds like the Star Spangled Banner. As for Tony Stark, well, he’s just your garden variety egomaniacal narcissist. Carol Danvers once described his view of the universe to me as, “Tony Stark and then some other shit,” which, if anything, is a bit charitable. As for Thor, he’s so otherworldly that it’s like you don’t quite register as a being with him (unless you’re Loki, but that’s another story). So sitting up here with a guy dressed in a red leather and Kevlar devil suit is not what you’d call out of the ordinary.

Personally, I like Murdock. He always listens to what you’ve got to say. Maybe it’s from all the years he’s spent as a defense attorney. Plus he hears a lot more than just the your words. He’s all about redemption, or cultivating our better selves, or something like that, and he seems to think that I’m a project worth taking on. I’m not sure he’s right. What I am sure about is that he’s willing to give me paying gigs to do security and other things for him, sometimes with him, and all the good feelings in the world ain’t gonna pay the rent.

So here we are, hanging out at three in the morning in the freezing drizzle on top of a three story building in the old meatpacking district of Hell’s Kitchen. There is, apparently, a human trafficking ring working out of the dilapidated warehouse across the street. One of Matt’s clients dimed them out and, of course, Murdock being Murdock, he couldn’t resist the temptation to do a little pro bono work, so to speak.

“Tell me again,” I say after about a solid hour of silence, “why we don’t just go in there.”

“Because when they move the girls they’ll all be together. Easier to see what we’re up against and to make sure everyone gets out safely. And they’ve got a really high end security system in there. I could probably disable it, but that would take a lot of futzing around. It’s just simpler this way.”

Well, ok dude, you’re the boss. But if it was up to me I would just go in there and hand out a few asswhippings. Then again, if it was up to me I’d be back in my apartment with a fifth of Evan Williams. But here I am.

Murdock cocks an ear.

“Engines,” he says and steps over to the edge of the roof. Across the street a garage door opens. A black sedan pulls out, followed by an eighteen foot panel truck, then another sedan.

“Ok,” he says, “just hang here for a sec while I reconnoitre.” Then he dives headfirst off the edge. The building we’re on is three stories high and has a long, corrugated steel awning covering a
loading dock at street level, connected to the building by a series of diagonal supports. Murdock catches one of these on the way down, uses it to redirect his momentum across the street. It’s crazy to watch this. He moves like some sort of predatory cat, gracefully, with no wasted motion. I couldn’t do that on the best day of my life. Which I’m guessing was a long time ago.

He lands on the hood of the truck just as it turns out into the street and vaporizes the windshield with that baton of his. Then he pulls the driver out over the wheel and puts his lights out. Things start to happen fast now. The passenger in the truck starts to get out of his door, but before he hits the ground Murdock does some sort of crazy parkour move over the top of the cab and drives a knee into the back of his head. The dudes in the sedans have started to emerge, and now Murdock goes into serious kung fu mode. He hits one guy in the neck, then lays a spinning back kick on the guy behind him. Then an elbow the first guy’s head and he ragdolls. The next guy goes for his steel, but Murdock is on him too fast and breaks his arm. He barely has time to scream before he’s dropped with a right cross that’s so quick and compact that I nearly don’t see it.

The guys from the second car start to show up. One of them whips out a pair of nunchucks and I have to suppress a laugh. He starts going through some moves that he probably saw Bruce Lee do in Enter the Dragon, but before he can really get going Murdock clocks him upside the head with his baton and he goes all baby giraffe. Two more chumps get dropped before Murdock turns back around and kicks nunchuck guy into the middle of next week.

Things seem to be going to plan until the last guy gets out of car number two. He’s about 6’8” and bald. In the yellow glare of the streetlights he looks like some kind of Bond villain. Murdock drills him with an overhand right...and nothing happens. He does it twice more with the same result. Not good. Then the guy starts asserting himself, and what do you know, he’s got pretty good kung fu too. Things go on like this for about a minute before the guy catches Murdock with an elbow to the jaw that stagers him. Murdock can take a punch with the best of them, but that got his attention (and mine). The big dude follows it up with a standard karate-type front kick that shoots Murdock about ten feet through the air and smashes him against the brick wall of the warehouse. Murdock gets to his knees, but then the big dude gets to him, kicks him again, then grabs him by the collar and starts dropping jackhammer fists on his head. Alright, time to earn my money.

I jump high in the air, and land like ten feet behind the guy with a resounding CRUMP that buckles the asphalt beneath me. Then I introduce myself.

“Hey, asshole.”

He drops Murdock and turns to face me, then cracks his knuckles and smiles. I’m not a psychic, and I don’t have Murdock’s talent for seeing inside people, but I do know what this fool is thinking. He’s probably thought the same thing standing over every woman that he’s bullied or abused, secure in his physical strength and his power, feeling safe. I smile too, because one of us is about to learn something new.

He walks toward me slowly, still with that stupid smile on his face. He gets to within about three feet of me and then goes with what must be his stock move with the ladies: he tries to slap me. I sweep it away with my hand, not giving anything away just yet. Then he tries to punch me, and I think it’s time to use this as a teachable moment. I catch his fist with my left hand and stop it in mid-flight. I allow a second for the surprise to sink in. Then I start to squeeze. He emits a satisfying little squeak as all of his fingers and knuckles break. I wish I had a camera to record the look of shock on his face. I let him pull his hand back. He’s angry and confused.

“Fucking bitch!” Well, jeez dude, now that you put it that way, maybe I will do what you say.

Sadly, the lesson doesn’t seem to have sunk in. He tries to punch me a couple of times with his non-
broken hand, but doesn’t get anywhere close. I would very much like to kill this guy, and I could do it too. When I was a girl I got doused in some sort of secret government chemicals that made me strong. Maybe not quite Captain America strong, but strong enough to end this mope with one punch. He’s clearly a bad human being. The fact that he’s been involved in selling women into slavery makes that pretty clear. But Murdock isn’t paying me to pile up bodies, and anyway far too many people have gotten dead around me already. That doesn’t mean I can’t make this dude hurt.

Much as I’ve given him a few reasons to be cautious, he still doesn’t seem to get how overmatched he is. So he’s not sufficiently prepared when I drive my fist into his nose, popping it like an overripe tomato. I let up a little, so I don’t break every bone in his face, but the punch still drops him to his knees. I grab his wrist and smash my knee into his elbow. It reverses with a snap and now he screams for real. He’s about to pass out from the pain. I lean over and whisper into his ear, “If you ever hurt another woman, I will find out about it. When I find you, I will tear your arm off and beat you to death with it. Remember that.” Then I let him drop.

Well, that was satisfying, but now I need to see if Murdock is ok. And, actually, he’s fine. He’s busted the lock off the back of the truck and he’s busy trying to convince terrified Chinese teenagers to get out. This is not particularly easy for a guy in a devil costume, so I do what I can to smooth the transition.

He turns to me and says, “I called the cops. They’ll be here in about 90 seconds, so I’m gonna bounce. Come by the office tomorrow and I’ll cut you a check.” Then he sails off into the night.

I spend another minute or so trying to get these girls in order and making sure none of the guys that Murdock dealt with is stirring. Then I hear the sirens and it’s time to hit the road. Costumed heroes and PIs (which is technically what I am) are two groups that the cops don’t hold in very high regard. The last thing I want to do is spend the balance of the night in an NYPD interrogation room explaining how nine triad coffin salesmen got busted up in the street. I make my way around the corner so as not to show anyone anything they don’t need to see. Then I jump up to the rooftops and head for home.

Home is in the back of my office in a third floor walkup on West 36th. It’s not the Ritz Carlton, but the fridge and the john work, so there’s that. I don’t spend a whole lot of time hanging out. Mostly just meeting the occasional client in the office in front or sleeping, and given the hours that I have to keep, not a lot of that. It’s almost 4:00 by the time a get in. I need a shot and a smoke in that order. Murdock doesn’t let me smoke when we’re on the job, says it adds an unnecessary variable. Probably bad enough that I reek of cigarettes and liquor all the time, and Murdock is too much of a gentleman to mention it. But I’m sure he notices.

Five minutes later I’ve got bourbon and a cig and I’m leaning back in my office chair looking at what’s visible of the night sky over the tops of the buildings. I’m drinking straight from the bottle. I could get glass, but no reason to go classy when nobody else is around. I’m just about as comfortable as I ever get. It’s been eighteen months since I killed Killgrave, took back my life by snapping his stupid neck. That was cathartic, but somehow not as liberating as I’d hoped. I still dream about him, still find myself wondering if the next person who comes around the corner is going to say something cryptic to me, or try to stab me, or kill themselves. About once a month I wake up in a cold sweat tearing chunks out of the bed (nightmares and super strength are a lousy combination).

It’s been a year since Danielle, the baby that Luke Cage and I made, was born. Three months early. Painful as hell. It still hurts. I love her. But I can't be someone's mother. I can barely keep myself organized. Luke thought was going to settle down. But that's just not me. I'm a bad influence on myself, so I'd definitely be a bad influence on her. Now she's with Luke's family. She's safe, and that's about all that a can be said for the situation. Luke and I really aren't on speaking terms these
days. He think I let him down, let Danielle down worse. It tried to explain to him that it was for the best. But although Luke is a lot of things, a cold eyed realist isn't one of them. I try to believe that this will all get better, that at some point in the future everyone will understand that I'm making the right decision. For now there's just a dull ache that finds its way back into my chest if there's nothing else there to keep it out.

Bourbon helps. And working, working helps too. I've been doing a lot of contract jobs for Murdock. He seems to be trying to reset my moral compass or something like that. Once Murdock decides that you're a right person it's like you've qualified for some kind of...I don't know what. He understands broken people, which makes him a good attorney and a good friend. At least he puts up with my crap. We're so very different. I'm never sure I'm doing the right thing, or even what the right thing might be. He's always sure. It's as if the choice between right and wrong is as clear as the difference between night and day that Matt's blindness keeps him from seeing, and somehow makes up for that. Still, he's not nearly as squared away as people think. There are some demons in there behind the red mask and I know he fights them. Maybe that's why we get along.

Looking out the window at the grey night sky. Even at four in the morning there's too much light here to see the stars. So the grey night is like a roof, a comforting boundary that lets the people of this city forget the things that lurk beyond. People like the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. and whoever else can look beyond and keep an eye out for things that would frighten the average citizen out of their beds. People like me concern ourselves with the garden variety horrors that populate the everyday world.

The city is quiet now. The occasional car hums by in the street below and now and again a siren sounds in the distance. Between the exhaustion and the booze I'm starting to slip in and out of sleep. The windows across the street are dark, like slumbering eyes in the city night. For a brief second I think I see a twinkle in one of those eyes. But just as quickly it's gone and I tell myself not to be paranoid. Killgrave is dead. Dani is safe. And I'm not important enough to have enemies.
Chapter 2

Just after 11:00 someone starts banging on my door and I wake up with a taste in my mouth like I licked a dead squirrel. Fortunately I’m a low maintenance kind of girl. I’m still wearing my clothes from last night, jacket, shoes, and all. I just need a quick look in the mirror to make sure that my hair hasn’t gone all Morticia Adams and I’m good to go.

I open the door to find a shortish, housewifey-looking lady with short, dishwater blonde hair waiting impatiently.

“Jessica Jones?” she asks as she brushes by me into my office.

“That’s me.” I’ve known this chick for five seconds and already I’m pretty sure we’re never going to be besties.

“Jessica Jones, the private investigator?”

“That’s what it says on the door.” I’m actually feeling around for a more cutting response, but the longer I’m awake the more conscious I’m becoming of the gravity of my hangover, and my brain is just not producing like it should.

She plops down in a chair in front of my desk. I move around to the other side, sit down, and do my best to look professional and engaging.

“My name is Anne Ellsworth. I have a problem.”

“Well,” I tell her, “you’re in the right place, because I’m a problem solver. How can I help you, Mrs., Ms. Ellsworth?”

“Mrs. I think my husband Robert is having an affair.” My heart kind of sinks when I hear this. I mean, it’s not like I wasn’t expecting something along these lines. Truth to tell, I’ve done a lot of this kind of work, but it’s depressing as hell. The prospect of crouching outside windows watching strangers do the horizontal boogie (and snapping photos) is just not that appealing. Still, I’ve got to pay the rent, so…

“What makes you think that?”

“He’s been keeping odd hours. And he’s been…distant.” Garden variety middle-aged man stuff.

“Have you asked him about it?” This is the standard next question. I’d almost call it due diligence, except that the answer is pretty much always the same. Well, it’s a choice of two answers. Either “no” or…

“He said his work schedule changed. He was…evasive. He said he couldn’t talk about it. He’s started taking trips. Two or three days every month. Every time he comes back looking worse.” Yep, only heard that a few dozen times. Either this guy is telling the truth and it’s a job thing, or he’s gotten tired of years of home cooking (so to speak).

“Where does he work?”

“He’s a geological engineer for Presstex.”
“And they do what?”

“Consulting. On oil drilling projects, I think. I don’t know exactly. He’s never been very communicative about his working life, so I only have a general idea.” I’m tempted to ask what their domestic life is like, to see if there’s been any change, but I also want to keep this conversation as short as possible. This case has very familiar contours. Either he is or he isn’t. It will take me a few days to find out. There’s really only one issue to be settled.

“Ok, here’s the deal. My rate is $300 a day, plus expenses. You pay the first week up front. Is this going to work for you?”

“Money really isn’t an issue.” Well, that’s music to my ears. Back in the days when I first started in this gig, I might have felt a little bad about this. Either this lady is wasting her money, or she’s gonna get some really bad news. But month after month of trawling through the lower reaches of humanity has pretty much evaporated any trace of that sort of feeling. Now I just care about making rent. With her check and the stack of benjamins that I’m going to get from Murdock I might just be able to eat something this month that hasn’t spent any time frozen.

I pull out a copy of my standard form. Lots of hooah that Murdock wrote up for me indemnifying me against all kinds of stuff, including ruining this lady’s life (which I might have to do). She reads the contract cursorily, then signs it and writes out her phone number. She pulls a roll of $100 bills about the size of a baseball out of her purse, peels off ten, and puts that and a photograph of her husband on the desk in front of me.

“That’s my cell number. When will I hear from you?”

“As soon as I know something.”

She stands there for a minute. I think she’s waiting for me to say something comforting, or maybe to express some kind of woman solidarity because her husband is a jerk. But I’ve got nothing. There’s no point. I don’t know anything other than what she’s told me. I have no way of knowing whether her husband is busy, or fooling around, or having midlife crisis, or just an asshole. I don’t want to give her false hope, but I also don’t want to shitcan the guy either. Not until I know something concrete one way or the other. So we stand there in a silence so thick you could slice it with a chainsaw for about a minute. Then she turns on her heel and walks out the door.

The offices of Nelson and Murdock, Attorneys at Law are kind of not what you’d expect given that they are one of the highest profile firms in the city. They’re spartan to the point of being kind of, I don’t know, institutional. The front doors are painted solid green with “Nelson & Murdock Attorneys at Law” in gold lettering. They look cheap, but they feel oddly heavy as they swing open.

Their reception office features four plastic chairs and a desk for Karen Page, their secretary/office manager/Murdock’s girlfriend. She’s blonde, and blue-eyed, and looks like she grew up next door to Ward and June Cleaver. Of course, there’s not a lot of money in what they do, so they have to operate pretty lean. There are no windows in the reception area and the place reeks of stale cigarette smoke and feet. But their checks always clear, and that’s not true with everyone that I work for.

“No, he had to go to a thing,” she says with a wink, “uptown.” She’s worked for these guys for a long time and she’s good at information control. She knows who needs to know (or is allowed to know) what. She’s telling me that Murdock had intended to be here to talk to me but something came
up, but what that something is I don’t need to know. “He left this for you.” She hands me an envelope that contains a check for 800 bucks, my agreed fee for a night of security services.

“How did he look this morning?”

“Oh you know, like shit.” It’s always a little jarring to hear a girl who looks like a grown up version of Jan Brady swear, but I have to remember that a lot of Nelson and Murdock’s clients are real hard cases, so she’s been around the block, a couple of times at this point. There’s a note of pain in her voice though. It’s gotta be tough being involved with Matt Murdock, seeing him come in the door seriously busted up half the time, and knowing in your heart of hearts that he’d lay down his life to see justice done. This is why superheroes don’t have personal lives. Real normal people just can’t get with that psychology.

I head back to my office to do a little research on Presstex. I’d like to know what Robert Ellsworth is supposed to be doing. That way it will be easier to figure out if he’s doing something that he isn’t supposed to be. Presstex has a flashy website, the kind of thing mean to suggest high powered professionalism. According to their info section they do engineering consulting for big time drilling and mining concerns. A little more searching throws up this little tidbit: six months ago they were bought out by Roxxon Oil. Hmm, probably not relevant to this particular situation, but worth filing away. Roxxon is about the biggest player in the industry and they’ve got a lot of dirty fingers in a lot of dirty pies. Maybe Mr. Ellsworth is running training seminars, or attending them, or maybe he worried about getting downsized.

If this was the movies or TV I’d have access to some totally baller computer guy with no morals who would hack into this guy’s accounts and find me all the information I need on him. But it isn’t, and Alias Investigations has a staff of exactly one. This is one of those jobs that I’m going to have to do the old fashioned way. Basically it’s about following the guy, getting a baseline for his schedule and his habits, and then looking for deviations. Ideally you’d use two people for this and if it goes like I think it will I might bring in some low end talent as long as it doesn’t cut too deep into the bottom line. In any case, there really isn’t anything glamorous about it. If fact, there really isn’t much scope for me to use my, ahh, special skills. The power to sit around for eight or nine hours without going to the bathroom, that’s the superpower that I really need.

The first couple of days on a job like this is when you really earn your money. Lots of sitting around keeping an eye on things and drinking coffee (or whatever). But I’ve got to know what Robert Ellsworth does on a normal day. I find his address on the internet, which is no great shakes given what’s on the web these days, and head uptown just after 6:00 to get started. West End Avenue in the 70s. Jesus, no wonder his wife wasn’t worried about shelling out a few bucks. I get some coffee at the bodega across the street and settle in to wait for him. Just before 7:00 my guy comes walking briskly out his front door with a newspaper tucked under his arm. He crosses Westend then chugs up 72nd over to the subway station on Broadway. A man of the people. Nice. Down into the station and almost immediately onto the 2 train heading south. He’s got this wired, so I have to move quick to stay with him. But now I have a minute to breathe because it’s going to take nearly an hour to get down to Presstex’s offices in Tribeca.

It’s a little bit of a hassle keeping an eye on the guy from a car back, especially given the volume of people riding the subway at this time of day. Ellsworth just stands there, holding the strap. His eyes are closed, which makes him look like he’s asleep. His newspaper (a copy of the Financial Times) is still firmly tucked under his arm.

At Chambers Street he detrains, leaves the station, and makes the short walk up Warren Street to Presstex’s offices. I’m expecting all of this, since I’m not a complete idiot and can use Google Maps. It gives me the advantage of not having to follow him too closely. The one sort of drag about this
deal is that I can’t very well kick around on the street for eight hours or however long he’s going to
be at work. Even on the streets of Tribeca, which are pretty busy, I’d stand out if I waited around for
a long time. I figure I’ll check back in here around 11:00, just to see if he goes out for lunch, then
swing back around quitting time.

The lunch time thing proves to be a bust. Apparently he stays in, and there isn’t much traffic out of
Presstex generally (they’re the only occupants of the building). I’m assuming I’ll be able to catch him
coming out at around 5:00. I don’t think the consulting biz is one of those round the clock sorts of
things. It’s actually closer to six when he hits the street. Late enough that I was starting to get a little
concerned but not outside of what most people call normal. I follow him back along his route
uptown: walking the same blocks, riding the same subway lines. The only difference is that he stops
by a D’Agostino’s down the block from his place for a baguette and a jar of olives. Once again, a
man of the people. Then he heads back to his place and I tuck him in for the evening.

This goes on for the best part of a week. After the second day I work my man Tony into the mix.
Tony’s a homeless drunk, but not a bad guy on the whole. For $10 a day plus the price of a burner I
have him panhandling at the bodega down the street from Ellsworth’s crib. As soon as Ellsworth
passes by Tony buzzes me on the burner and I head to down to Tribeca to make sure that he ends up
where he’s supposed to be. The whole thing is turning into kind of a snore. He’s gone out for drinks
a couple of times, but nothing too crazy, no lampshades on the head or hookers, or anything really
out of the ordinary. On about day five I get a call from Mrs. Ellsworth wanting a sit rep. She doesn’t
seem that jazzed with what I’ve got to say, which seems a bit weird considering I’m basically telling
her that her husband isn’t screwing around. Anyway, I figure I’ll give this about three more days
before I give this guy a clean bill of health. Not that I mind sucking up the Ellsworth’s capital, but
stuff gets around and I don’t want to get a reputation for sandbagging clients.

It’s 6:30 on a rainy Friday evening and I’m really considering just blowing this thing off and trying to
catch the end of happy hour at the White Horse. Ellsworth is later than usual leaving Presstex and
there are limited places that I can hang around here where I can both stay dry and remain
unobtrusive. Finally he strolls out of the building, gets about halfway down the block, stops and
looks around. That’s new. But he seems to go back to his normal demeanor pretty quickly and starts
heading for the subway.

By this time the rush hour crush has slackened a bit so, as usual, I watch him from the next car back.
I’m tired, I haven’t been sleeping well. And I have the persistent feeling that I’m being ghosted. I’ve
been chalkling this up to the aftereffects of the lovely time that I spent with Killgrave and his various
minions but today I’m not so sure. There’s some sort of vibration that’s not right, some niggling thing
in the back of my head like something’s off. I scan the car as surreptitiously as possible while we’re
between stations, looking for...what? I don’t know. A face I’ve seen before, someone doing
something that doesn’t fit. The train rattles northward through the familiar stops in the Village:
Christopher Street, 14th Street, then up the west side past 23rd, 28th, 34th. I’m getting more and
more sprung about being followed so that I’m so busy looking around I nearly miss it when
Ellsworth jumps off between the closing doors at Times Square. I manage to catch doors, part them,
and slide into the crowd behind him.

He walks quickly up the platform, but doesn’t take the exit. Instead he heads for the platform for the
7 train. What the actual fuck, dude? Jackson Heights doesn’t seem like your scene and I don’t think
the Mets are in town right now. We roll through a couple of stops on the 7 then cross the East River.
I’m starting to get really curious where this is going when he jumps the train again at Courthouse
Square. Ok, point of order here. He’s clearly trying to drop some kind of tail. Is it me? If he’s made
me at some point in the last week without letting on then he has much more game than I thought he
did. But I don’t think he’s made me.
He takes a little walk across the way and hits the G train southbound just as the doors are closing. Yeah, he’s definitely trying to stay clean. The train rumbles south. I know this dead-ends somewhere south of Prospect Park. Smart. If you want to drop a tail it’s always a good idea to ride one of these lines to the end. This gets him there without having to travel all the way out to Brighton Beach. And it’s a neighborhood where anyone following him is likely to stand out. He’s either a pro or he’s had some very good coaching. I’m really going to have to earn my money when we hit Church Avenue.

I make my way to the last car in the train. When we pull into the station I hit the door quickly and move up the stairs. I want to be out on the street before he is. I’m betting he’s not just going to hop on the F train. No, I’m banking that he’s going somewhere around here. Or that he’s going to try to jump a cab. If he does that I’ve got problems because there aren’t a lot of taxis around here. When I hit the street I duck into a liquor store. I buy a pint of Evan Williams black, partly to justify my presence, partly to keep the chill away. As I’m paying, I see Ellsworth come up the stairs, open his umbrella, and hop off down the street, turning eastbound up Church Ave. It’s dark now. It’s raining, not hard, but steadily and the wind is whipping it around. I take a pull off the bottle, which warms me up a bit, then stick it in my pocket and head off after Ellsworth making sure to stay a block or so behind him.

He’s walking quickly now, like he’s got somewhere to be. But if he does it’s a ways away. We cross over Ocean Parkway and Coney Island Avenue. Block after block he just keeps motoring along. We’re in Flatbush now. Who the hell could he be visiting here? If it’s a woman it seems a little down market for this guy, but who am I to judge? It’s when we hit Ocean Avenue and he hangs a left that it all becomes clear to me: Prospect Park. It’s a perfect meeting place if what you want is privacy on a rainy Friday night. We’re just about to Parkside when he takes out his cell and makes a call that lasts about five seconds. Then he nonchalantly drops the phone down a sewer grate. The meet is on. It’s happening soon, and I’m pretty sure I haven’t been made, although the feeling that I haven’t met all the guests at this party is still lurking in the back of my head.

The park is dark and disorienting. Unlike on the street where cars and people move in predictable patterns, here the wind is in the trees and everything is swirling. The shadows twist and move eerily. There’s no one around, because who goes to the park on a piss pouring Friday night? Even the drug dealers seem to have cleared out. I really have to be careful now. There’s a lot of cover, but not a lot of people and if he sees me now all this hassle will have been for nothing. He follows a footpath down into the middle of the park. I hang back, letting the vegetation cover me. I’m soaked to the skin and another pull off that bottle would do me right, but I can’t risk it now.

Finally he reaches an underpass and stops. I duck into the bushes. He lights a cigarette. Thanks, bastard. I could really go for one right now but that would blow my cover for sure. After a minute or two I hear quick, quiet footsteps coming from beyond the overpass. Ellsworth steps back into the shadows. A guy carrying an umbrella enters from the far side. He’s heavyset, wearing a black overcoat. He looks somehow familiar, but the shadows around the overpass are heavy and his umbrella doesn’t help. Ellsworth steps out of the shadows and they shake hands. Ok, they know each other. But how? They seem to be chatting pretty freely. I don’t think this is a drug deal, and their body language doesn’t suggest anything ah, physical. So what, then?

The rain is really spitting now. These bushes are nasty and I think there’s a raccoon in here somewhere with me, but I need to get a little closer and see if I can figure this thing out. I get within about ten yards of them. I can hear their voices but I still can’t tell what they’re saying. I’ve seen the heavyset guy somewhere but I can’t place him and it’s driving me nuts. Then there’s a flash of lightning. They both turn with a start and I realize that the guy that Ellsworth is meeting is Foggy Nelson.

I’m not one of those people who doesn’t believe in coincidences. The universe is a big place and I’ve
seen more than my share of weird stuff. Still, what are the chances that I would end up sitting on a
meeting involving Matt Murdock’s law partner in the middle of Prospect Park? Unlikely in the
extreme. I’m in the process of mulling this over when several things happen in rapid succession.
Something, a bullet I’m guessing, hits the wall of the overpass with a thud, right next to Ellsworth’s
head. Ellsworth and Foggy bolt. I take a step to follow Ellsworth, but before I can someone bowls
right into me from behind and the two of us roll out onto the path.

I get to my feet and find myself facing a guy in grey and black camo. This night just gets weirder and
weirder. His hair is cropped but he has the whole Don Johnson unshaven look going on. I make a
move to go past him. He steps in my way and says, “Hold on a minute, I’m a friend.” He’s got a
British accent that’s so broad it sounds fake. But I don’t have time to screw around here. Someone
just tried to take Ellsworth out and I need to get with him before they finish job. I give the British guy
a forearm shiver that sends him into the bushes and start running in the direction that I saw Ellsworth
heading.

I get a few steps down the path before the British guy catches up with me. He’s staying, “Hold on,
hold on!” very urgently and trying to grab arm. I don’t know what side this guy is on, but for a
number of reasons I’d prefer not to kill him. But I do need him to get the fuck off me. I take a swing
at him, but this time he’s ready. He slips the punch and faces up on me. I throw a couple more, but
he’s quick and now he knows to stay out of my way.

“We don’t have to do this,” he says, “you need to stand down.” I throw an overhand right. He slips
it, but this time he catches me with a combination to the ribs that takes the wind out of me. Ok, this
dude has kung fu for real. I circle a bit just trying to see how me moves. He’s light on his feet,
always keeping me in front of him. I need to get moving and I don’t think I’m going to out box this
guy. So I move in a little bit closer, throw a punch that I know will miss and drop my left. He takes
the bait, throwing a right hook that catches me right in my grille. But I’m expecting it and he’s not
expecting what I do next, which is to barrel into him and keep running. He isn’t strong enough to
stop me. What is strong enough to stop me is the next tree that we meet, but I have his body to
cushion the blow. That knocks the wind right out of him. He stands there, looking stupid for a
second. I catch him with a hard right under his left eye that drops him. Sorry pal, but I’ve got stuff to
do.

I move off down that path again. With a bit of luck I can catch up with Ellsworth before he gets out
of the park. But then another figure steps out of the bushes in front of me. This must be British guy’s
partner because she’s dressed in black camo too. Do they know they’re in the middle of New York
City? She’s got long blonde hair tied back and looks like she should be hanging out with Goldfinger.
I haven’t got time for this shit so I go after her. She’s got serious kung fu too and I can’t lay a hand
on her.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she says. She’s definitely American but I can’t tell from where.

“Super.” I tell her and try the same move that put her partner down. But she sidesteps me and drives
her fist across my jaw. She packs a punch, I’ll give her that. I square up on her again, and it’s then
that she pulls out a pair of batons. Great, more kung fu stuff. I do know that all I have to do is get one
good shot in and I’ll drop her.

We’re circling each other now, each waiting on the other’s next move. I take a couple of swings just
to see what she’s got, but she’s quick and careful and stays out of range. She tries to whack me
upside the head with one of those batons. I duck it and charge into her midsection. Good night
blondie. Except that I only get about two steps before she jams the end of the other baton into my
ribcage and the world turns into silver lightning followed by the blackest night.
Chapter 3

I wake up under a bush, which is disorienting to say the least. It’s still dark, still raining. I’ve still got my clothes on, which is a relief. I also have my wallet, my watch, my bottle, and my smokes. In addition, I have a headache that feels like angry wasps stinging my brain and a feeling in my ribs like I’ve been kicked by a bull. My hair feels like it’s actually made of spiders.

How long have I been out? My watch is blinking like it’s been reset. Apparently whatever that chick poked me with had some serious electrical juice. It’s blinking 00:45. Three quarters of an hour. That kind of pop could have killed me. Blondie must have some serious 007 shit going on if she’s got that kind of hardware.

I step back out onto the path to find that I’m pretty much still where Blondie and I faced off. I start tracking back. I pass where I dropped her partner, but he’s gone. I head down into the underpass to have a look there and maybe get out of the rain for a couple of minutes. I take a pop from the bottle, which warms me up but makes my stomach churn. I light up a smoke and start checking where the bullet hit the wall. It’s taken a big old chunk out of the stonework. But I didn’t hear a bang, which means that either whoever shot was a long way away, or they had a serious silencer. Just given the lay of the land around here I can’t imagine there’d be a place for a long shot, so it’s probably the latter. But if that’s the case why did they miss?

A couple of possibilities come to mind. Maybe it was poor aim. But if you’re committed enough to have the kind of hardware we’re talking about here then presumably you’re good enough to use it effectively. Maybe they were just trying to send a message. Or maybe someone interrupted them. Maybe it was blondie. Seems like she had other fish to fry while I was throwing down with her partner. Of course, maybe blondie was the shooter. This whole thing has gotten severely weird.

I take the length of a cigarette to figure out my next move. I should probably call Ellsworth’s wife and see what she wants to do. I’m pretty sure he’s not sleeping around. Also, whack jobs in black camo plus sniper plus Foggy Nelson equals something that’s not really covered by the standard fee. First things first: I’ve got to get the hell out of Brooklyn.

It’s nearly midnight by the time I make it back to my place. Dry clothes and a cigarette later and I’m just about ready to...to what? The situation has gone from locked down to wide open in the space of a few hours. It’s probably too late to call Mrs. Ellsworth. It’s not too late to call Matt Murdock, so that’s what I do. His line rings to voicemail, and I say in as measured a voice as I can manage at this point, “Hi Matt, I need to talk to you right fucking now.”


“How you talked to Foggy lately?”

“How lately do you mean?”

“Like in the last two hours, please don’t screw with me right now.”

“I’m not trying to screw with you.” Now his tone is a little more engaged. “What’s going on?”

Ok, cards on table time. I tell him about Ellsworth and his deviation through Brooklyn and the thing in the park. There’s a long silence. Then Matt says, “Ok, I’m going to try to get in touch with Foggy.
Where are you now?"

“My place.”

“Hmm, might be a good idea to go somewhere else.”

“Why, exactly?”

“Because it’s possible that there could be some blowback from this whole thing and it would be best not to be easy to find.” Ok, now this is really starting to freak me out. Murdock is not the kind of guy who spooks easily, so if he says you want to make yourself scarce he’s got some serious concerns. “Yeah, actually, why don’t you get out of there right now. I’ll be in touch.” Then he hangs up.

Now I want to get out of here quick, and not just because Murdock thinks it’s a good idea. At least one of the parties to whatever is going on here is in possession of a high-powered sniper rifle, so I need to find a place where that won’t be in play. I’d also like to get out of here without being seen. I wasn’t particularly careful to make sure that I wasn’t followed on the subway ride back here. But now the “I’m being ghosted” feeling comes back with a vengeance.

I head for the roof. The access door is locked, but I made myself a key months ago for just such a situation. My plan is to do a little building hopping. There aren’t a lot of people on the streets right now, and everyone knows New Yorkers don’t look up anyway, so I should be able to put a few blocks between myself and anyone who’s looking for me. At least unless they’ve got some kind of powers too. In which case I have a whole other species of problem. I decide to take one thing at a time.

I can fly...sort of. That is to say I can jump a really really long way, and sometimes I even come down on my feet. Building hopping isn’t all that difficult, since generally I can measure the energy that it’s going to take me to get from place to place. It’s when things get imprecise that I tend to run into problems. There are people who do this a lot better than I do. Spiderman moves quick and tends to stay very high up. He’s also masked, so even if people get a look at him they’re not really going to learn much. I don’t wear a mask. But it’s dark and I’m small, so I’m flying below the radar, so to speak.

I hop over to the building catty corner from mine. Then I have a look down in the street, both to see if anyone saw me and to see if anyone is after me. It looks clear, so I head off eastward toward midtown. The rain has mostly stopped, but the city still shines, neon glare lighting up the windows and wet streets below. I drop down to street level on 40th just south of the Port Authority Bus Terminal. The sidewalk in front of the New York Department of Parole is not a bad place to drop. There’s no one there at night, and anyone who is probably doesn’t want to tell an authority figure that they saw some chick jump off the roof.

There’s a beer joint on the corner that I’ve never actually been inside of before. Seems like a good enough place to kill a little time until Murdock calls me back. Inside there’s a warm fug of cheap cologne and b.o. The remains of the Friday bro crowd are still trying to work their magic. I post up at a corner table, order a beer, and try to put on my best “I’m not interested” vibe. Strangely, although I’m doing everything short of flipping the bird to everyone who passes by, a couple of the indigenous dudes try to work their magic.

A guy in a sharkskin suit with enough mousse in his hair to mortar a brick wall goes with, “Hey beautiful, is this seat taken.”

I must admit I’m kind of taken aback. What a lame line. I try to think of something suitably cutting as a response, but I can’t and I just go with, “Sorry jack, I’m waiting for my lawyer.”
“I’m a lawyer,” the guy says with a smile, “maybe I can help you out with your case.”

“I doubt it. I’m up on capital murder.”

“Oh really,” he feigns concern, “who did you kill?”

“Some asshole in a bar who couldn’t take a fucking hint.” He looks hurt and slinks off, looking for some other action. I’m wondering if I need to do something like stab a fork into the table just get the point across when my phone starts vibrating. There’s a text from Murdock. “911 meet 20 min After.” Let me just explain a little Matt Murdock code to you. Emergency meeting in 20 minutes you could easily have figured out. But he wants to meet on top of the Chelsea Hotel, which is where Arthur Miller wrote After the Fall. Did I mention that Murdock has on oddly cultured streak for a blind guy? Well, he does.

Now I’ve got to bounce, literally, because Chelsea is a ways away from here. I head out the door and the first thing I see is the black camo couple. They’re in street clothes now, so they have at least some sense of proportion. British accent guy has a big old strawberry under his eye from where I popped him. They’re standing around with a balding guy in suit that looks like it was bought off the rack at Target. I’ve a sneaking suspicion that I’ve seen him somewhere before, but I can’t place him.

“Ms. Jones could I have a word with you?” He’s polite, and his voice seems friendly. But that’s not worth much and I’m in a hurry.

“Sorry, I’ve gotta be somewhere,” I say and push by him, hoping that British accent and blondie don’t decide to double team me here in the street.

“Ms. Jones, my name is Phil Coulson. I’m the director of S.H.I.E.L.D. I really think we need to talk.” Ok, that’s got my attention. I guess the rumors that I heard about Nick Fury being out of the picture are true. I never had much to do with S.H.I.E.L.D. in my Avenger days. They mostly dealt with Cap or Tony Stark, not with lesser figures (which I definitely was). I got the feeling they were kind of spooky, mostly on the right side, but not always. That’s the impression that I got from Cap anyway, and whatever else you can say about him he’s all about the right side. But now I remember that I saw this guy a lifetime ago trailing after Fury when he blew through the Avengers mansion.

Still, I’m in a bit of a rush and I don’t want to be standing around on the street with these people. “It’s gonna have to wait. I’ve gotta see a man about a dog.”

“My car’s around the corner, we can give you a ride.” Uh, no, I don’t think I’m going to be getting into a car with a bunch of strangers, S.H.I.E.L.D. or not. Oddly, Coulson is receptive to that idea. “Look,” he says, “I’ll give you my card. It’s got my direct line. Call me when you want to set up a meeting.” He gives me a card that has nothing but a phone number on it. “Do it soon,” he says, “there are some bigger things in play here than you know.”

I put the card in my pocket and make for the nearest alley, then head for the rooftops. Neither Coulson nor his minders make any attempt to stop me. Once I’m topside I start wondering how exactly it was that they found me. Maybe it’s time to stop and think for a minute. One more pull off the bottle of Evan Williams, which is almost empty at this point, but it chases the chill away. I pull out my pack of cigs and light one up. Then I pull the pack apart and find a small square chip which is, I’m assuming, the tracker that they put on me in the park. I drop it on the roof that I’m standing on and go on my merry way. I’m sure they’ll figure out that I’ve found it in a couple of minutes, and actually they probably assumed that I would. Slick nonetheless, because I’ve changed every piece of clothing that I was wearing in the park, but the smokes I kept with me.

Bouncing off across the rooftops now. Mostly I see no one. Occasionally I come down near an
actual person and I have to move quickly so they don’t get a good look at me. On the other hand, this
is New York and people have seen some pretty weird things here, like aliens coming out of the sky,
just to take an example. Tonight I’m all alone, just me with a lit cigarette in my hand, jumping like a
boss. Up here it’s actually kind of relaxing. It filters out a lot of the noise that you get at street level.
And the reek of piss is much less pronounced. Yeah, from here the city almost seems like a civilized
place. Almost.

I get to the roof of the Chelsea Hotel and find Matt crouched there in full Daredevil mode. “Were
you followed?” He seems a little on edge.

“I don’t think so,” but I’m not a sure as I might have been a few minutes ago.

“Foggy’s missing.” Matt has as much self-control as anyone I’ve ever met, but there’s a note in his
voice of real concern. Foggy and Matt go way back. I know their relationship kind of took a hit
when Matt finally fessed up a couple of years to actually being Daredevil, but they patched it up. I
also know that Matt is more protective of Foggy than of anyone else on earth. I would not want to be
the one who damaged Foggy in any way, because as nice as Matt is, he also really knows how to
make people hurt.

“Did you know why he was meeting with Robert Ellsworth.”

“I didn’t even know that he was meeting with Ellsworth, which is not like him.” No, it’s not. Foggy
isn’t generally the one to do the whole cloak and dagger thing. That’s Matt’s gig, although Foggy’s
worked with Matt long enough to know how to play the game. “He left some notes in the office.
Ellsworth knew something, something he wasn’t supposed to know.”

“About what?”

“About Roxxon.” My blood runs cold. Following some guy around to see if he’s chasing tail is one
thing. Corporate espionage is another. People get dead over that shit. “Do you know where
Ellsworth went?”

“Not a clue. Not back to his apartment if he’s got any brains. This must be some serious shit, though,
because those jokers in the park in black camo were S.H.I.E.L.D. operators.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D.? How do you know?”

“Because Phil Coulson tracked me back to Manhattan and offered me a sit down on my way over
here.”

“Are you sure it was him? What did you tell him?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen him before. It was him. And I didn’t tell him shit. I only talked to him for a second.
But he seemed like he really wanted to have a heart to heart.”

Matt thinks about this for a minute or so, then says, “The fact that S.H.I.E.L.D. are involved means
the scope of this thing is big. They don’t get interested in things unless they have global
implications.” This I know already. I’m getting a sort of dizzy feeling which is not due, or not solely
due, to the periodic shots of bourbon that I’ve had tonight. The thing I like about my life, maybe the
only thing, is that it tends to be pretty simple. The time I spent with Killgrave made me very
conscious of having control. And now I feel that slipping away. What Murdock says next doesn’t
help.

“I think Ellsworth was doing some consulting work for Roxxon. They’ve got some project going on
on North Brother Island.”
“North Brother Island? Who drills for oil in New York City?”

“I doubt that oil was what they were after. There was something in Foggy’s notes about ‘down below.’ I think Foggy was supposed to get the full scoop from Ellsworth when they met.”

We stand in silence for a could of minutes while this sinks in. Then Murdock says matter-of-factly, “You’re frightened, I can tell from your heartbeat.”

“You bet your ass I’m frightened. This looks a lot to me like Roxxon has a serious interest here. Those people have a long, long reach and, from what I’ve read, a real allergy to loose ends.” Then there’s silence again against the backdrop of the whoosh and whirr of the city after midnight.

“It’s alright to be afraid,” says Murdock. I think he’s trying to be reassuring. “But you can’t give in to it. That’s what goons like the people running Roxxon want. Here’s a secret: they’re the ones who should be afraid of us.” Coming from pretty much anyone else on earth that line would not be terribly convincing. But Murdock has a way of phrasing things which lets you believe that he’s speaking some kind of ineluctable truth. I really don’t think he is afraid. Maybe he’s not capable of it. Or maybe the anger that simmers just beneath his easygoing demeanor leaves no space for any other strong emotion. Whatever the case, his brief pep talk has the desired effect.

“Ok, what’s our next move? We’ve got to find Foggy and Ellsworth. And we’ve got to figure out who else is in play.”

“How did you get on to Ellsworth in the first place?”

“His wife hired me. She thought he was screwing around.”

“Have you told her anything yet?”

“No, I was was going to call her in the morning. But things have gotten kind of hairy. Maybe I should call her now.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea. I’m sure they’re up on her phone. We’d probably just be tipping our hand to whoever is trying to whack her husband. Call her in the morning, but don’t tell her anything over the phone. See if you can set up a meeting. We need to find out if she knows anything, but we should also see if we can get her out of harm’s way.”

“What about Coulson?”

“Maybe you should make that meeting he wants happen sooner rather than later. It’ll be interesting to see what he knows.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Find Foggy. He’s smart and he doesn’t panic easily. I’m hoping he’s just gone to ground somewhere.” Murdock heads over to the edge of the roof. “Be careful,” he says over his shoulder, and then he’s gone.
Chapter 4

I call Phil Coulson at the number he gave me. He picks up on the second ring, sounding tired but incongruously cheery. He asks if he can send a car for me, but there’s still no way I’m getting into a vehicle with him and his posse. “Ok,” he says, “how about Belvedere Castle in Central Park in half an hour? Does that work for you?”

“Aces,” I tell him, and hang up.

A hop, skip, and a jump later over the top of Hell’s Kitchen and a good chunk of the West Side and I drop down onto 80th by the Natural History Museum. I usually prefer to travel the streets like any other citizen, but I’m in a hurry and I’d like to make myself as difficult to follow as possible. The streets are pretty empty up here. It’s cold and damp and about 2:30 in the morning, and most sensible people are somewhere warm. I, on the other hand, and trudging into Central Park to meet with one of the leading spies on Earth. I’ve got to get into another line of work. If I survive this I’m definitely going to take that on as a project.

When I hit the park I walk down a path until I’m sure that no one is within sight of me, then head off overland. I’d prefer not to walk into another ambush, and I’d also like to get eyes on the meeting place without Coulson and his people getting eyes on me. They’re probably alright, but I’m not in a particularly trusting mood right now, and better safe than sorry.

Right on cue I see Coulson and the camo kids step out on top of the castle battlements. Without stepping out of the bushes I jump high, dropping down about five feet in front of them. They seem completely nonplussed by this.

“Hello Ms. Jones,” says Coulson, holding out a hand, “it’s nice to finally meet you properly.” I shake his hand, but I make sure to keep my eyes on Blondie and British Accent. The latter has what looks like a miniature version of a starlight scope with which he periodically scans the landscape. “These are agents Morse and Hunter.” Blondie (Morse) shakes my hand.

British Accent (Hunter) just says, “Enchanted” and keeps on scanning.

“I’ve heard some very good things about you Ms. Jones, especially from Steve Rogers.” Ok, couple of things here. He knows who I am. I wonder how? He’s also had time to contact Captain America between what went down in Prospect Park and now. That’s access. I wonder what he really had to say about me. It’s not like we were tight bros back in the day. On the one hand, he’s another one of these guys who’s all about finding the best in people. On the other, he wasn’t real happy the time he found me dead drunk and ranting in the study at the Avengers mansion. Anyway, I think we need to move this along.

“Maybe we could get to the point here.”

“Ok, what do you know about Robert Ellsworth?”

“I know he’s some sort of geophysicist and that his wife hired me to check up on him a week ago. I followed him to Prospect Park yesterday. Somebody tried to clip him, but before I could get to him I ran into the Bobbsey Twins here and I lost him. Now he’s in the wind.” You’ve probably watch enough detective shows to know that I am violating my client’s privacy. But right now I’m mainly focused on getting Foggy Nelson out of whatever jam he’s in so I’m not going to worry about the
finer points of PI ethics.

Morris smiles very slightly. Coulson says, “Yeah, sorry about that. You walked into the middle of a S.H.I.E.L.D. surveillance op. We didn’t really have time to introduce ourselves when the action started.”

“How were you guys on Ellsworth? And who tried to shoot him?”

“The answer to the first question is complicated. The answer to the second one is: not us.”

“Then who?”

“Well, that has to do with your first question. There’s a lot of backstory here which I can fill you in on later if need be. What do you know about Roxxon Energy?”

“I know they’re big and nasty. Don’t they build their arctic drilling rigs out of the corpses of baby seals?”

“Yeah,” says Coulson flashing a smile, “something like that. Six months ago we got some intel. They’ve been setting up drilling operations in places that didn’t seem to have any relationship to know pockets of oil or gas. Real expensive stuff, with a lot of geo-engineering consultants.”

“Like Ellsworth.”

“Exactly. Then about six weeks ago we learned that one of these sites was on North Brother Island. That really got our attention. We’ve been monitoring communications in and around Roxxon ever since, but we didn’t get anything useful until Ellsworth called Foggy Nelson. We were hoping to listen in on their conversation and maybe get ahead of the curve on this thing. From what we can tell, someone at Roxxon has put a plan in motion that could result in a disaster.”

“What kind of disaster?” My blood is really starting to run cold now.

“The biblical kind. I’m going to be blunt Ms. Jones. We have a situation here, one that’s developing quickly and in which millions of lives hang in the balance. We were hoping you’d be interested in collaborating with us.”

I have a very strong impulse to bug out of here right now. But instead I ask the obvious question, “So, isn’t this the kind of thing that S.H.I.E.L.D. usually handles on its own?”

“This isn’t the only iron in the fire for us right now. Most of our assets are engaged in other things, and we may have a very small window for getting ahead of this thing.”

“How about calling in the Avengers.”

“The Avengers are out of position. They’re dealing with another aspect of this problem.”

“Out of position? Like how far?”

“Like outer space,” says Hunter without putting down the starlight scope. Coulson sort of twitches, which is the only indication that Hunter probably said something he shouldn’t have.

“Anyway,” Coulson continues, “we have a situation that could mature in hours, days at the most. We need every asset can mobilize, and even that might not be enough.”

I’ve had a growing feeling vertigo about this whole thing which now opens up into a dark abyss that I’m staring into, and that stares back into me, threatening to consume me whole. My teeth have
started to chatter, and I’m hoping that it’s just because of the cold and not because I’m in the early stages of a panic attack, but the signs are not good.

“Look pal, I tried all that saving the world shit, and it really didn’t work for me. I’d love to help you out, but Foggy Nelson is missing and I promised a friend that I would do what I could to find him.”

“Your friend being the Daredevil? We’d like to get him on board with this thing too. I’ll be honest Ms. Jones. I’m a little dubious that either Mr. Ellsworth or Mr. Nelson are still alive. If Roxxon had one shooter there chances are they had at least a couple of others on scene. We might have helped them out, if we hadn’t been busy coping with you. I think that was probably part of their plan.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because Robert Ellsworth isn’t married.”

It takes a minute for the gravity of this point to sink in. When it does I come very close to passing out. Someone at Roxxon basically made a chump out of me, and there’s a very good chance that Foggy Nelson got clipped because of it.

“What is it that you think I can do for you?” I ask through clenched teeth. I’m trying very hard to keep my composure. And by “keep my composure” I mean resist the temptation to head straight over to Roxxon HQ and beat the living shit out of everyone I find there.

“You’re local here, we’re not. You know the ground, and you and your friend have local connections. Plus if we don’t work together we’re going to keep tripping over each other. Everything is connected here. If we can find Foggy Nelson, assuming he’s still alive, we’ll probably find Ellsworth too. We’re operating at a distinct disadvantage in terms of information here against an enemy that has practically unlimited resources and absolutely no moral qualms about erasing every man, woman, and child in this city. Ellsworth can help balance the scales, at least in terms of intel. From there we stand at least some chance of turning this thing around.”

My natural inclination is not to touch any of this with a ten foot pole. But now I’m obligated because Roxxon used me to set up Foggy. Rationally I know that it wasn’t my fault, but that doesn’t cut much ice here. Coulson’s not wrong about it all being connected. But it looks a whole lot like it’s going to be me and Matt and these three against Roxxon and those are very, very long odds. This is exactly why I quit the Avengers. Well, one reason, but probably the biggest one. I can barely be responsible for me. Having the fate of a lot of other people hanging over me is more than I can handle most days. But now I’m up to my ears in this thing. My head is spinning. I realize that I haven’t had anything to eat in hours and it’s deep into the wee hours of the morning.

Finally I realize I have to make a decision, and it has to be the one that has the greatest chance of getting Foggy back alive. I don’t know if Matt would ever forgive me if I was part of something that led to his death, and I’m sure I’d never forgive myself.

“Alright, Mr. Coulson, supposing we work together. what’s the next move?”

“Talk to your friend. See if he’s got any leads on Nelson. We’ll see if we can shake anything loose on Ellsworth. Contact me as soon as you know anything and we’ll go from there.”

“Fine,” I tell him, “I’ll be in touch.” And then I hop off into the night air.

I duck into my favorite 24 hour Chinese takeout place in the Village for some fried rice and a beer. Technically they’re not supposed to sell the latter to me at this hour of the morning, but that’s not one
of those rules that’s observed very often. Then I head up to the porch of St. Mark’s Church where I can scarf this down in peace. I make it there just in time to avoid another downpour, probably my one bit of decent timing for the evening. There are four or five homeless guys bedded down near the walls of the porch, but they’ve all had enough Mad Dog that they’re dead to the world, if they’re not actually dead. I finish my food then reach for a smoke, forgetting that I ditched the pack that the S.H.E.I.L.D. people used to track me. Awesome. Good luck finding an open bodega at this time of night. Well, I’ve got a pretty good jog back to my place, and I’m sure I’ll see something along the way.

I take a cab back to Hell’s Kitchen. No point in walking in the rain and the subways aren’t running yet. I roll by the corner store for some smokes and a bottle on the way up. When I get in I promptly fall asleep in my chair with a lit cigarette in my hand and I’m lucky I don’t burn the place down. I’m super strong, but I’m not fireproof.

I wake with a start after 10:00 and remember that Murdock told me that I shouldn’t be hanging around here. Well, I’m here now so I pour out a bowl of cornflakes and crack a beer. The breakfast of champions, I know, but I need to get my equilibrium back. In a minute here I’ll call Murdock and see if he’s been able to shake anything loose. It wouldn’t surprise me if he has. He’s got crazy connections, and he’s really motivated.

I’m just about through with my bowl when someone starts pounding on my door. God, I am really not in the mood for this. I’m obviously not taking any new cases right now, and I’m just not in the mood to talk to any randos. But the knocking continues, getting more urgent as the seconds pass. Finally I decide I’m going to have to go tell this person to screw off. As I’m walking toward the door it occurs to me that this could be someone from Roxxon come to give me a little tune up. But they wouldn’t bother to knock, right? I open the door and what do you know, it’s Robert Ellsworth, right here in the flesh.

He’s got a slightly panicked look in his eyes, and he starts to ask me if I’m Jessica Jones, but we really don’t have time for that crap. I yank him inside the door, taking a quick look down the hall to see if anyone has seen him. The hall looks empty as usual, so I slam the door and put him into a corner where he can’t be seen from any of the outside windows.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” This seems like the obvious first question.

“Foggy Nelson, he told me to find you. He gave me your address.” He’s sweating like hell and he looks like he expects some sort of alien creature to burst out of his chest at any minute.

“Where’s Foggy now?” I ask him. I must be seeming a bit intense, because he kind of flinches as I do.

“I don’t know. I was with him last night...in Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Someone shot at us. There were people, people watching us. They chased us. We made it to the Franklin Avenue subway station. He gave me your address and put me on the train.”

“Have you been back to your apartment?” I already know the answer to this question, because if he had he’d have a serious case of death by now.

“No, Mr. Nelson told me not to. I rode around in the trains until they stopped. I waited around in an all night coffee shop in Jackson Heights.” Smart. Foggy must have warned him against going to places he usually goes. But why send him here. Foggy and I know each other, but not like I know Matt. I get the impression he kind of disapproves of me, but either out of politeness or deference to his partner he never says anything. He knows about my “special skills” so to speak. Of course, he doesn’t know that I was watching in the park, or that Roxxon probably used me to run interference
for them.

Anyway, this can all get sorted out later, if we live. In my desk there’s a burner that Murdock gave me for occasions when we don’t want people listening. I pocket it and we head out the door. I’m not exactly sure where we’re going, but practically anywhere short of Roxxon HQ is better than where we are right now.

Out on the street there are a few people walking briskly along the sidewalks in the late morning sunshine. My plan is to head west toward Penn Station where it’s easier to catch a cab and then maybe we can get a little more anonymous. I don’t want to run, that attracts attention, but I do want Ellsworth, who seems a bit dazed, to move a bit faster than he is. So I grab him by the arm to hustle him up. He stumbles forward, and just as he does something buzzes by our heads and catches a woman in a blue track suit in the abdomen. She goes down with a grunt and it looks like there’s a red haze hanging in the air above her. That was a bullet and, pretty miraculously, a professional shooter has missed blowing Robert Ellsworth’s brains out for the second time.

Third time’s the charm and I know we’ve got to get out of here, so I tell him “Move!” and grab his arm while we run around the corner. People are running for cover. Someone is screaming. I hope to Christ that someone gets to the lady who caught that bullet quick because if not...well, she’s in bad trouble either way. And yet another red mark against my name in the the ledger. Can’t think about that now. We’re on 34th now, heading east, still in the general direction of Penn Station. I’m wondering why it is that we haven’t got more company here than we do. Roxxon is an outfit with global reach (to say the least), so why don’t they have more boots on the ground here? Yet another question that is going to have to wait for a calmer moment, assuming I ever have another one.

We’re getting close to the station now and we’ve slowed to a brisk walk. Ellsworth is looking seriously green around the gills. I really need him to hold it together because just about the last thing we need is for him to puke out here on the street. Better call Murdock now and see if I can get some back up.

He picks up on the first ring.

“Hi Jess.”

“Hi Matt, I’m here with Robert Ellsworth.”

“Where is ‘here’ exactly?”

“34th, right by Penn Station.”

“Where did you find him?”

“He showed up at my place.”

“What the hell were you doing there? It’s really not safe.”

“Yes, I know that. Someone took a shot at us on 36th street. Listen, I need to take this guy somewhere, and I’m guessing it’s not gonna be your office.”

Murdock says, “Hold on a sec,” but before he can finish the thought I hear a loud voice behind us.

“Police! Put the phone down and turn around slowly.” Wow, I didn’t think things could get much worse here, but there you go, I stand corrected.

“Matt, I’m pretty sure we’re being arrested.”
Chapter 5

I’m sitting alone in an interrogation room in the 14th Precinct and I’m pretty sure I’ve completely blown it. My best hope of keeping Ellsworth alive, of finding Foggy Nelson, and of keeping a large part of New York City from being wiped out was to keep us moving and anonymous. Now we’re being held very still, and any idiot with a working police scanner will know exactly where we are. They haven’t come in to ask me any questions yet, but the cops always like to sweat you like this for a while before they break out the rubber hoses. I’m guessing they want to ask me something about the nice lady who took a bullet in the gut on 36th Street. No problem there, since they’ve got nothing indicating either of us did it, but the longer we sit in this dump the greater the chance that Roxxon will be able to mobilize some assets in our direction and then we’ll have some serious problems.

They didn’t handcuff us when they put us in the car, which is weird because as I understand it that’s straight up police policy. But they did tell us that we were being held as material witnesses, which I think means that they can detain us indefinitely. I’m now wishing I’d paid more attention in civics class...or to the 200 or so episodes of Law & Order that I watched over the years. I’ve got a real itch to get out of here. Of course, I could just bust through that door (actually I’m not even sure that it’s locked) but that would just multiply the problems that I’ve already got. At least in the old days they used to let you smoke in these places. Now there are NO SMOKING signs everywhere, which seem really strange given that this room smells like nothing so much as stale cigarette smoke.

After about half an hour of sitting around a pair of detectives come in. One is younger and looks kind of like Judge Reinhold. The other one is older, hair cropped, scar under his left eye, looks very ex-military. I’m guessing he’s bad cop.

“This isn’t your first visit to this precinct, is it Miss Jones?” The younger guys says this trying to sound thoughtful while thumbing through the contents of a folder.

“Am I under arrest? Because if not my client and I have places to be.”

“No, you’re not under arrest,” he says with a smile, “but you did flee the scene of a homicide up on 36th street. We’d kind of like to know why.”

“Not wanting to get shot was top of the list.”

“Did you know who was shooting at you?”

“Not a clue, and for the record I don’t even know for sure that they were shooting at me or my client.”

“Your client, Mr. Ellsworth. Now what would a respectable gentlemen like that want with the services of a two-bit window peeper such as yourself?”

“You know I can’t tell you that. And, once again, I have no idea who was shooting at what on 36th. All I knew was that it wasn’t a real healthy place to stick around.”

Now Bad Cop pipes up. He gets right up in my grille and says, “Look Miss Jones, you know a lot more about this than you’re letting on. But that’s ok, because we can hold you for as long as we like. Eventually you’re gonna tell us.”

“You wanna pull back a couple of meters, Sarge, you’re fogging up my eyeballs.” Bad Cop doesn’t like this. I probably should at least be a little more agreeable, just in the name of getting out of this
shithole in a timely way, but his I’m-gonna-get-you-little-girl shtick is irritating.

“I think what my partner is trying to say is that if you’ll just give us a hand here we can all move on with our lives.”

“Sorry, all I know is that my client and I were headed out for a cuppa and someone started busting caps. Why and at who is a mystery to me.”

“Did you know Edith Williams?”

“Who’s Edith Williams?”

“The woman who was killed today. She had a husband and two children.”

“Look officer…”

“That’s detective.”

“Whatever. I didn’t know this person. Am I sad that she’s dead? Sure. Did I have anything to do with how she got that way? No, I didn’t. Do you have any evidence to the contrary?”

“You’re not a very healthy person to be around.”

“I don’t exactly live a holistic lifestyle. What’s your point?”

“Zebediah Killgrave. You broke his neck. You claimed had some kind of psychic mind-control powers. I’m really wondering how you beat that rap.”

“I had a really good attorney.”

“Apparently. Well, we might just have to call up the judge in that case to see if he can shed any light on this one.” I involuntarily put my head in my hands. These guys are just rope-a-doping me and this isn’t good. It’s possible that they’re killing time until someone further up the food chain (possibly much further) can get down here and sort us out.

I’m just about to ask for my phone call when the door opens and in walks Matt Murdock in full on lawyer mode.

“Ok detectives, I think we’re done here.”

“Hold on counsellor,” Judge Reinhold says officiously, “we still have some things to discuss with your client.”

“No, you don’t.”

“She was a material witness to a homicide,” hisses Bad Cop, “she’s stayin’ here.”

“Jess, do you know anything about a homicide?”

“Not a goddamn thing.”

“Alright, I think we’ve cleared that up. If you’ll just go get Mr. Ellsworth we’ll be leaving.”

“Are you some kind of smartass?” Bad Cop’s blood pressure is clearly on the rise.

“What I am is a person who can read the material witness statute, and this crap doesn’t pass the
chuckle test. But if you two and whoever else want to pile into your clown car and take this garbage in front of a judge, be my guest. I’ll just be writing out the brief for my lawsuit against the Department and you personally, which should be big enough to allow Ms. Jones and about 20 of her closest friends to retire to Barbados.”

Judge Reinhold and Bad Cop talk in each other’s ears for a minute. Then Judge Reinhold says, “Have it your way Mr. Murdock. We’ll bring your other client down to the first floor.”

“You’d better watch your step, Miss Jones,” Bad Cop growls at our backs as we’re leaving. About half a dozen very cutting responses come to mind, but I bite my lip. We need to get the hell out of here right now and I don’t want to give Bad Cop any excuse to sandbag us anymore.

We spend ten minutes in the lobby of the precinct waiting for Ellsworth. While we’re there Murdock calls someone who he doesn’t address by name and gives them a series of instructions that I don’t understand at all. They finally bring Ellsworth down. He looks like a guy who’s execution date has been set for this afternoon.

“What did they ask you?” Murdock says as we head out the front door.

“Nothing. They didn’t ask me anything. They just kept me sitting in a room that smelled like vomit. The detective with the scar under his eye came in and stared at me for a few minutes, but he didn’t say anything.”

Just as we get to the curb a black Audi S3 with tinted windows pulls up. The passenger door opens up and Karen Page motions for us to get in. I love that girl. Matt gets in the passenger seat. Ellsworth and I pile into the back. We just about get the door shut before Karen hits the accelerator and we are off like a shot. It's Saturday midday, so the streets are a bit crowded, but Karen is doing the downtown slalom like a boss. We hit the West Side Highway and then we really start to move.

“We’ve got a tail,” Murdock points out matter of factly, “I can hear their engine.” How he can do this over the noise that the Audi is making as Karen leadfoots down the road is anyone’s guess.

“Where are we going?” Ellsworth asks in a shaky voice, but no one answers.

As we get to the entrance to the Battery Tunnel, Matt turns to me and says, “That was close. Those guys knew the material witness thing was bull. They were just trying to hold you in place for someone else.”

“How do you know?” Ellsworth asks.

“Any first year law student would have known that the statute didn’t apply. Also, the detective knew my name without having to ask.”

“Maybe he knew who you were,” I offer, “you’ve been down to the one four plenty of times.”

“Yeah, I have,” Murdock says, “and I didn’t recognize either of those guys.”

We sit in silence while we negotiate the tunnel. Then Karen gets us up onto the BQE northbound.

“What did Coulson have to say for himself?” Matt asks. With all the craziness I’d completely forgotten about that.

“That this guy is in deep shit,” I say pointing to Ellsworth.

“So S.H.I.E.L.D. is on the case?”
“Not really. Coulson says their assets are out of position. Which is bad because someone at Roxxon has got some serious bad juju going on.”

“How bad are we talking?”

“Think of Manhattan. Now think of it as a smoking crater. Anyway, that’s the impression that I got from Coulson.”

“So what about the Avengers?”

“Not gonna happen. Actually, Coulson says he wants to team up with us.”

Murdock thinks about this for a minute. “I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I. But this is heavy duty corporate shit and I think we might be a little out of our league here. We need to get Foggy back.”

Murdock thinks for another couple of minutes. I know what’s going on in there. Murdock likes to operate alone, or at most with one other person. He’s not one of those guys who likes to trust other people, not unless he’s really sure they’re sound. But I know he’s worried about Foggy and he’s trying to figure out if there’s some way he can get him back without involving anyone else. I know what the answer has to be, because I’ve thought through it too, but he has to come to it on his own.

Finally Murdock says, “Fine. Give me your cell phone. The burner too.” He takes them, rolls down the window, and dumps them out onto the roadway. Then he hands me his phone. “Call Coulson. Tell him we need to meet.”

I call Coulson’s line. As usual he answers with an oddly sunny tone. “Mr. Murdock. What’s new?”

“Jessica Jones, actually. Matt’s here too and were spending some quality time with our new BFF Bob Ellsworth.”

“That’s good news. We should all meet up.”

“Well Phil (you don’t mind if I call you Phil do you?) that sounds swell. But I think we’ve picked up a tail, so we might be coming in a little hot.”

“What are we talking about here?”

“Oh I don’t know, one, maybe two cars, maybe 8 or 10 guys max.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. Where are you now?”

“Heading north on the BQE, just about to the LIE.”

“Ok, do you know where Pelham Bay Park is?” I have only the vaguest idea, but I ask Karen and she knows. “There’s a golf course on City Island Road. Pull into the parking lot there and then head east into the woods. We’ll meet you there.”

It’s a long way out to Pelham Bay Park, especially in weekend traffic. I don’t want to look back to see if we’re still being followed, but Murdock assures me that we are. “Two cars. For sure. The same two all the way.” He’s very tense right now. Murdock is normally a pretty laid back guy. But he has a seething rage that he tamps down far below his cool. I’ve only seen it come out a few times, but it’s awesome when it does, and not in a good way. Foggy is as close to him as anyone on earth. I sometimes wonder whether he’s bared more of his soul to Karen or Foggy. Probably a toss up.
Anyway, Foggy is his bro from way back and I really hope we find him in one piece because if not there will quite literally be hell to pay.

After a while the urban cityscape gives way to houses and yards. Each one is full of people not currently being tailed by a pack of goons intent on snuffing them. For once I envy these people. I have no idea what’s going to happen when we meet up with Coulson. I’ve heard a lot of conflicting things about S.H.I.E.L.D., but in any case they’ve taken a big hit in the last couple of years so who knows how good their operators are now. Hunter and Morse didn’t inspire a great deal of confidence, but it’s hard to say. Anyway, we’re going to find out pretty quick here what they’re all about and if they’re not up to snuff things are going to get very bad very fast.

Middle Rock Golf Course is closed, and it probably never had the greatest location to begin with. It’s right across the Hutchinson River from the Bronx-Pelham landfill. You can’t see it from the course itself because the bank of the river is covered with a stand of trees, but there is a wafting smell of decay that must be absolutely lovely on a hot day. The parking lot for the course sits next to the old clubhouse, separated from the road by a length of Jersey barrier. We pull in and head for the east end of the parking. Apart from a couple of rusting golf carts there’s nothing much here.

“Go on ahead,” says Murdock, “I’ve gotta grab something out of the trunk.” Karen, Ellsworth, and I head for the tree line about twenty yards away. We’ve only just cleared it when two sedans come screeching into the lot. I can see Murdock booking it toward us with a briefcase in his hand. Behind him, ten guys pile out of the sedans, pistols in hand. Murdock hits the trees just as they start blasting. We move as quickly as we can, given that Ellsworth’s a wreck and Karen is barefoot (gotta give her props for ditching her shoes which really weren’t right for this). The ground is covered with autumn leaves, and the tree cover is heavy, which makes us hard to see but also makes it hard to move.

We’ve gone about a quarter of a mile when Agent Morse steps out from behind a tree to our left and motions for us to follow her. We’re heading north now. I can hear the dudes from the cars swearing their way through the trees and they’re getting closer. We break into a clearing with a large lake on our right. A S.H.I.E.L.D. C-17 is parked at the other end of the clearing. Coulson is standing in front of it. Next to him is a girl with mousy brown shoulder length hair dressed all in black.

We’re about halfway across the clearing when I hear the guys chasing us break out of the trees and the gunshots start. Coulson shouts, “Everybody down!” and then shit gets weird (well, weirder). We all hit the deck. I see the girl raise her hands, slowly, fingers spread. The ground starts to ripple like the surface of a pond when you throw a rock into it. Something passes over us, invisible but...solid. There’s a sound like metal tearing and then wood splintering. I look back down to the other end of the clearing. The guys who were chasing us are nowhere to be seen. Neither are about the first five rows of trees. Now there are just ragged stumps and logs splayed out in a newly created open space. There’s a pungent smell in the air like a mix of ozone and burnt wood.

Coulson shouts, “time to go!” We’re all getting to our feet, dusting ourselves off and trying to figure out what the hell just happened. Ellsworth seriously looks like he’s about to chuck biscuits, and Karen Page looks like she’s seen a ghost. She’s met plenty of goons, thugs, and other assorted whack jobs, but serious telekinesis is just not the kind of thing you see every day. Murdock and I get them moving in the direction of the cargo door sitting open at the back of the plane. We’re just running up the ramp when ten or twelve more guys come running into the clearing and start busting caps in our direction. But they’re too late. The gate closes behind and Coulson leads us through the rear bay of the plane and up a short spiral staircase.

We pass through a short hall at the top of the stairs in a lounge that looks like the waiting room in a high end law firm. A voice comes over the intercom. “Takeoff in 20 seconds. Everybody strap in.” Coulson directs us to chairs that have seatbelts embedded in the cushions. The plane’s engines,
which have been at idle since we got on, now spin up to full power with a roaring whine. We’re all just about strapped in when the plane starts going up, straight up, and fast. I have a sensation like my stomach just got left on the ground. Coulson and Mousy Brown-Haired Girl look like this is just another day at the office.

Gradually, over the course of about three minutes our motion becomes more and more horizontal. Apparently we’ve hit cruising altitude, because Coulson and the girl unbuckle.

“Get the others together,” he says, “we’re going to have a briefing in five minutes.”

She says, “Copy that,” and heads off toward the front of the plane. Then Coulson turns to us.

“We’ve got a minutes here before things get going. Does anyone want anything to drink. Water? Coffee? Tea? I think we might even have a few Frescas in the fridge.” I have a strong desire to ask if they have a bar on board, and I’m guessing they probably do, but I figure that wouldn’t look good to our new pals here. Everyone else declines the offer, but Coulson brings a cup of water to Ellsworth who really must feel like he’s through the looking glass.

When everybody has had a minute to catch their breath, Coulson leads us back down the stairs and into a laboratory positioned just forward of the cargo hatch area. Morse and Hunter are three. They’re arguing about something but not loud enough for me to make out what. There’s also an Asian woman wearing black kevlar body armor. She has short hair and a look on her face that suggests that she would stab you as soon as look at you.

“Ok,” says Coulson, “introductions all round. These are agents Morse, Hunter, and May. For those of you who may not know,” he says turning to me, “this is Jessica Jones, former Avenger.”

“Why did you leave the Avengers?” asks Hunter.

“Thor kept eating my leftover pizza.”

Hunter laughs, “I like this bird already.” He’s actually a pretty good sport considering he’s still got a big strawberry on his face from when I decked him in Prospect Park last night.

Coulson continues, “Matt Murdock, alias the Daredevil if I’m not mistaken.” Murdock doesn’t say anything, but I can tell he’s not happy with this fact being mentioned out in the open. “Don’t worry Mr. Murdock, your secret is safe with us. What kind of spy agency would be be if we didn’t know things like that? I’m assuming your secretary and Ms. Jones already know, and Mr. Ellsworth here, well, he has much bigger problems.” Murdock is still clearly unamused, but Coulson is obviously used to running the show and moves on. “Alright ladies and gentlemen, we’ve got a very bad situation here and we need to get down to business. Agent Morse is going to give a short presentation just to get everyone up to speed. Then we’ll give Mr. Ellsworth here a chance to tell us what he knows. Agent Morse, you have the floor.”

Morse fires up a video screen that shows a picture of a very large, very old book. “In 1426 an English monk named Thomas Hallstead was doing research at a monastery near Licata on the south coast of Sicily when he came across this book which he called the Codex Obscurus. This isn’t the original. It’s the version that Hallstead painstakingly copied out over the course of the next six months.” Morse uses a clicker to spin through some images of pages from the book. They’re covered in writing that I don’t recognize and interspersed with images. Some of them look like maps. Others are pictures of animals, some recognizable, others weird hybrids of humans and...other things. The total effect is hypnotic and disturbing. I want to look away, but somehow I can’t. Morse continues, “On his way back to England, Hallstead stopped at Cluny and a couple of other places, and he must have showed his handiwork to someone, because by the time he got back to England the papal
authorities were waiting for him. They seized the book. They were going to burn Hallstead at the stake for disseminating heretical materials, but he seems to have contracted some sort of wasting sickness in his travels and beat them to the punch by dying from whatever it was.

“The Vatican sent that copy to their library of very dangerous stuff in Rome where it was promptly forgotten. They sent a mission down to Licata to sort them out, but there was an outbreak of plague in 1427 all along the south coast of Sicily and there’s no record of whether they got there or what else might have happened.”

“What language is that?” Karen Page manages to ask. I can see she’s transfixed by it too.

“That’s the thing,” says Morse, “it’s not any language, at least not that was ever spoken on Earth, so far as we can tell. Of course, we’d like to have a look at the original, but the monastery and pretty much everything else in the neighborhood of Licata was carpet bombed by the allies when they invaded Sicily in 1943. The copied version was rediscovered in the Vatican archives in 1952 by a German linguist named Alois Gehlen.” Morse flips to a black and white photo of a scholarly looking guy sitting at a desk, pipe in hand. “At the time he was a professor of theology at the University of Munich. But a few years earlier,” she flips to another picture of this same guy, but this time he’s younger and in a black uniform with a death’s head logo on the cap, “he was an SS Sturmbahnführer assigned to the Sonnenrad, an ultrasecret Nazi organization tasked with discovering sources of occult power to aid the Third Reich. After the war he was also active in the ODESSA network smuggling former Nazis out of Europe.”

Murdock, who’s clearly been stewing for the last few minutes, finally breaks in, “Can we get to the point here?”

“Of course. Gehlen spent the rest of his career trying to parse what was in the Codex. When he died, he left his research materials to his son Walter.” She flips to the next photo, which is of a younger version of the first guy. This one’s in color and you can see he’s a chip off the old Aryan block: hair the color of straw and ice blue eyes with all the warmth of a black hole. “The son was of a slightly more pragmatic cast of mind. He ended up going into business.”

“Into the energy business?” I venture.

“Precisely. He’s currently Director of Special Projects for our friends at Roxxon Energy. But it should be mentioned that, philosophically, the apple didn’t fall that far from the tree. Walter Gehlen has been under surveillance by the German government and by a number of other agencies, including us, because he has extensive connections in the neonazi underground. Last year we intercepted a communication between Gehlen and Witold Blobel, the head of a neonazi fringe group called the Thule Gesellschaft. Blobel’s grandfather, by the way, was the commander of a Nazi mobile killing squad during the Second World War and was responsible for 60,000 murders, give or take. Up to that point we thought Gehlen was just interested in using Blobel as a recruiter for a reconstituted version of the Sonnenrad. But while we were up on their communications Gehlen told Blobel that he had made a breakthrough in his father’s work and how they now had the power to realize great dream, etc. etc.

“By the time we figured out what Gehlen was doing he’d managed to create his own little subgroup within Roxxon, staffed with Sonnenrad operatives, and he was setting up drilling operations in various far-flung and not terribly oil rich areas of the globe. We had a team go to Rome to make a copy of the book and we’ve been struggling to try to decode it ourselves. Of course, Gehlen had about a 30 year head start on us, but we’ve been able to do a bit of working backward from following his movements. Also, we’ve had a little help from some outside consultants and this is what we’ve come up with. The original book was a technical manual of some kind composed by the
Kree, an alien race that visited Earth before the first mammals appeared. We think that this was a sort of guide book for a terraforming operation of sorts, that is, they were reconfiguring the planet to suit their own ends and this was the operator’s manual.”

Here Coulson breaks in, “I get the impression that Mr. Ellsworth here has something to add to this story. Would you care to enlighten us all?”

Ellsworth takes a deep breath. “I’ve been working for Presstex for ten years. Mostly I do geophysical consulting work for oil drilling operations, making sure the areas where the machinery will be is sound and that sort of thing. Six months ago we were bought by Roxxon. We all actually thought this was a good thing, guaranteed cash flow and such. The very next day their new management team showed up, led by that fellow Gehlen. After the normal introductions he pulled me aside and told me that he needed me for some special projects. Roxxon was going to be doing some experimental drilling operations and I would be needed to consult on safety and stability issues. I didn’t think much of it, although Gehlen has something, I don’t know, cold about him.

“A couple of weeks later they started flying me around to places, places where there isn’t any oil or gas. Madrid, some place near Ankara, an island off the coast of North Korea. They had tunnelling operations going on. It was all very strange. I tried to tell them that they’d be much better off engaging the services of a mining engineer, but they weren’t interested. They had me taking soil samples, temperatures, that sort of thing. They also let me know that I wasn’t to tell anybody what I was doing. They didn’t tell me what the consequences would be, but it didn’t take a lot of imagination to figure out that they wouldn’t be pleasant.

“One afternoon a couple of weeks ago Gehlen called me up and told me that we were to meet in his office at 10:00 that evening. When I showed up he took me to a waiting car. We drove to Randall Island. There was a motor launch waiting, down in the industrial area south of where the ballfields are.”

“Was there anyone else with you, besides Gehlen?” Coulson asks.

“Only a couple of what I assumed were Roxxon private security. They were wearing body armor, and sunglasses, which was strange because it was night time.”

“Probably cyborgs,” says Hunter.

“Cyborgs?” Karen Page asks.

“Augmented humans. They’ve probably had their optic networks jacked up with wetware.”

Karen shudders. “I don’t even want to know what that is.”

“Anyway,” Ellsworth continues, “we went over to North Brother Island. There’s an abandoned hospital there. They took me to the ruins and down into the basement. They’d tunnelled down below, another 30 feet or so. They were really nervous about how unstable the whole place was.”

“You mean the building itself?” Coulson asks.

“No, the ground underneath. There have been some serious changes of temperature there, far outside what you would expect for something so close to the surface of the earth. The ground there had become liquid at some point in the not too recent past. But the strangest thing was how cold it was. I mean, it was a cool night outside, and we were in a tunnel under an island in the East River, but there were icicles hanging from the support beams. It shouldn’t have been nearly that cold down there.”

Murdock has been sitting impassively up to this point, but now he leans forward and says, “But you
didn’t call Foggy Nelson just because it was cold, did you.”

“Of course not,” says Ellsworth. “Once I’d taken some measurements they set me up with a laptop in a workspace they’d set up in the basement of the hospital. Someone else had been working on it before me. There were specs on the screen, I’m assuming, whatever is down at the end of that tunnel, and radiation readings. It’s giving off waves of something I’ve never seen before and it’s very, very unstable. I managed to dump the file onto a flash drive and close it before Gehlen saw I’d seen it. But whatever is down there is dangerous.”

“How dangerous exactly?” Matt asks.

“It’s hard to say with precision. I didn’t have a chance to study it thoroughly. But something giving off that kind of energy would easily be capable of vaporizing an area a couple of miles across.”

“So, why did you call Foggy Nelson?” Karen presses. “There are government agencies that are supposed to handle things like this.”

“Well, once again, I had been warned in fairly dire terms about what would happen if I was found to have leaked any information about Roxxon operations. I thought if the information got out via the agency of the city’s highest profile legal crusaders.”

“Jesus, lucky us,” says Karen, sardonically.

“Agent Morse,” says Coulson turning back to her, “what can you tell us about whatever is down there?”

“Not a lot, unfortunately, except that Mr. Ellsworth is right. Whatever it is, it’s extremely powerful. We think that it is the control element for a network of nodes that the Kree used, or intended to use (it’s not totally clear) to reconfigure the Earth to some purpose of their own. From what we’ve been able to gather from reading the Codex, it works differently on animate and inanimate matter.”

“Meaning what?” Coulson asks, “You can make your own mountain range?”

“And the goats to go along with it, if you knew how to do the programming. Given time we could probably figure out how to do this ourselves. Gehlen and his people have a major head start on us. Now that the cat is out of the bag, so to speak, they’re probably going to be moving up the timetable for whatever it is they think they’re gonna do with this thing.”

“Hang on a minute,” Hunter breaks in, “I have a more...practical question.”

“Which is what?”

“Why is this geezer still breathing?” he asks, pointing to Ellsworth. “Roxxon Energy know a thing or two about eliminating problems. But they send a one man hit team to the park. And then they try to clip him out on the street in Manhattan. That’s strictly amateur hour. It doesn’t add up.”

“I don’t think,” Coulson says after a pause, “that Gehlen has access to the full range of Roxxon’s capacities. Or at least he hasn’t up until this point. Roxxon is a nasty outfit, but they’re much more about profit than any kind of ideology. Gehlen’s plan seems to be to bring about some version of the Fourth Reich. That might work with Roxxon’s business model, but then again it might not. Gehlen might have been trying to lowball this whole thing in order not to have to explain it to his bosses. There’s a lot about his relationship with Roxxon that we just don’t know at this point. If I had to guess, I’d say that Gehlen was trying to get things done with Sonnenrad people. The recruitment pool for groups like this tends to be...of varying quality. That would sort of explain the weak stuff that they’ve tried so far. But we don’t know if or when Gehlen might call in the first stringers, or
when Roxxon might decide to take matters more directly in hand. What we do know is that whatever Gehlen or Roxxon want to do with the Kree technology has the potential to put a lot of lives at risk.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s called in the bloody cavalry,” says Hunter, “there had to be twenty guys come out of those woods. Did you notice that they were all blonde?” I hadn’t noticed this, but then again I was busy trying to avoid getting shot.

“Roxxon will probably have boots on the ground sooner or later,” Coulson replies. “We don’t know whether Gehlen and Roxxon are working with unified purpose. But those guys in the woods looked like extras from The Odessa File. I think they were still the benchwarmers.”

Murdock breaks in again. “We also know that they know we’re working together, and that we have Ellsworth. They’re going to be as anxious to find Foggy Nelson as we are.”

“That’s for sure,” says Coulson. “They’ll want him as a bargaining chip for Mr. Ellsworth here, but they’ll also assume that he has dangerous information and that he’s a loose end. We really need to find him first. Mr. Murdock, can you offer any insight into where he might be?”

“I wish I could. Foggy’s always counted on the fact that he did everything in the open to protect him. He’s got a couple of safe places, but I checked them and he wasn’t there. He hasn’t called me. He was being very circumspect about the whole thing.”

“Meaning what?” asks Coulson.

“Meaning he didn’t tell me anything about it, which is unusual. I’m thinking I might want to go back and look in his office to see if he left any other clues there. I checked last night after Jessica called me, but not too carefully. I was really just trying to figure out what he was doing.”

Karen suggests we check his laptop. “He kept all his notes and research materials on it. That’s probably why Matt didn’t find anything when he searched Foggy’s office. It was in the wall safe in the office as yesterday afternoon. I didn’t think to grab it when I left the office this morning. But I did lock everything down.”

“We should assume that Gehlen and whoever else at Roxxon has also recognized the importance of searching Foggy’s office, whether they know where he is or not. By now they’ll have the building under surveillance. I doubt they’ll move until after dark, but when they do they’ll probably move in force.”

Murdock chuckles quietly. “Good luck to them if they try to get in there. We’ve made a few modifications to our office since we had some problems with the Kingpin a couple of years ago. Once the security system is set it would take a pretty good sized C-4 charge to get through the front door, if you didn’t have any other means of opening it.”

“What would those be?” Coulson asks.

“The security system is linked to our cell phones. Once the system is set two of the three of us have to be there with our phones in order to open it.”

“So there’s no way that Mr. Nelson could give up enough information to allow them to open the door, even under torture?” Coulson says this kind of matter of factly.

“Tough to say,” Murdock says quietly. I can tell the the mention of torture has ratcheted his level of intensity up a couple of notches. “Foggy himself probably couldn’t give up the information. But he might be able to tell them enough for them to hack the system. But that would take time.”
“How about the safe?”

“The safe is carbon steel, embedded in concrete studs. The amount of explosives you’d need to open it would cause half the building to collapse.”

“Is the front door the only point of access? What about windows?”

“The windows are carbon steel barred. They’d need a blowtorch and about half an hour to get in that way. But there’s also a trap door in the roof that leads straight down to my office.”

“Does Foggy Nelson know about it?”

“No. I had it installed a long time ago so I could leave the building without being seen. That was before Foggy knew about the whole Daredevil thing, so I did it under cover of having some HVAC work done. I’m the only one who knows it’s there.”

“Great,” says Coulson, “we’re catching up in the race for information now. We know that one of two things will be the case. Either they’re going to go in there blind. In which case they’re unlikely to get past the front door.”

“What’s the other possibility?” Karen asks in a way that suggests that she doesn’t entirely want to know the answer.

“They have Mr. Nelson and have managed to get him to reveal the specs of the security system and the combination to the safe.” No one has to guess what this would involve, but at least Coulson doesn’t use the t-word this time.

I’m getting antsy sitting here. This has been going for a while and I need a smoke or a drink or (preferably) both. Looking at that Kree writing left a nauseous aftertaste in my mouth. So I try to move things along. “Why don’t we go there right now?”

“Because,” Coulson explains, “there are going to be enemy personnel marking the place, and lots of civilians around too. Even if they know the specs for the security system it will take them a while to come up with a work around. If they don’t, well, they’ll probably be waiting for Mr. Murdock or Ms. Page to show up to try to piggyback their way in that way.

“We also don’t know what Gehlen has told the people running the show. If he’s told them anything it’s a pretty sure bet that he’s made them understand that there is something extremely valuable involved, so there might be Roxxon operators there as well. This could very easily get ugly and it would be best if we kept the potential for collateral damage to a minimum. We’ll go in at 7:00, that’s three hours from now. It will be dark then and there won’t be many people around. Mr. Murdock and Ms. Jones will search the office. Agents Morse and Hunter will secure the roof. Agent May will provide helicopter support for in- and exfiltration. Is everyone good with this?”

Everybody nods. But nobody is good with this. We’re going to try to beat a bunch of heavily armed psychopaths into a Manhattan office and get out without getting our asses shot off. We’ve never worked together in any capacity and this whole operation is going to depend on a lot of things going right.

“Ok,” Coulson says, “Agent Hunter make sure our guests have everything they need. Agents Morse and May will prepare load-outs and logistics. We’ll reconvene in two hours to make final preparations.”
Chapter 6

Murdock asks Hunter if there’s a private space he could make use of to get his gear sorted out. Hunter leads him off toward the back of the plane. Karen tags along behind. Coulson and the other two S.H.E.I.L.D. agents head toward the front with Ellsworth, who’s supposed to give them a more thorough briefing on what he saw on North Brother Island. I’m left here with my thoughts, which is not a place I like to be. Twenty four hours ago I was PI working a case. Now I’m back in the world of people in costumes and oh-my-god-the-world’s-going-to-end-right-now. I really do not need this.


“Not unless you’ve got a shot and a beer back somewhere around here.”

“Happy to oblige,” and gestures for me to follow him. We go back up to the lounge and, what do you know, there’s a nice little bar with three floor mounted stools in the forward left corner. I guess I hadn’t noticed it before because things we a little nuts when we first came on board. He uncaps a bottle of Kronenbourg and puts it on the bar next to two glasses. Then he pulls out a bottle of Gentleman Jack and doles out a couple of healthy shots.

“Classy.”

“Nothing but the best, since the apocalypse could happen as soon as this evening. Anyway, can’t let a lady drink alone,” he says and throws back one of the shots. I do likewise and take a gulp of beer just to wash it down. I’m pretty wired, what with all the excitement (and no cigarettes), but the booze makes me woozy, and it’s at that point that I remember that I haven’t eaten anything all day.

“You guys got any food around here?”

“I think there’s some pizza up in the galley. Like pepperoni?”

“Whatever is fine, I’m starving.”

Hunter disappears forward. He comes back a couple of minutes later carrying a grease-stained pizza box.

“Coulson gets takeout from Famous Original Ray’s whenever we’re in town.”

“Which Famous Original Ray’s”

“The one on 6th Avenue in the Village.” Ok, I give the guy props for authenticity. Hunter plops the box down on the bar in front of me and opens it to reveal three large, freshly nuked slices of pepperoni pizza. They don’t last long, even with a pause between slices two and three to requisition another beer.

“You pack a serious punch. So how’d you get so strong?” Hunter asks as I’m tucking away the last corner of the final piece.

“Clean living and fervent prayer.”

Hunter laughs. “I’m serious. I must have 70 pounds on you.”
“At least.” I really don’t want to be having this conversation. What happened to me involved my whole family dying. For nothing. I don’t like thinking about it. I don’t like talking about it. And I especially don’t want to discuss it with some dude I don’t know.

“I mean, I’ve taken a punch before, but you hit me like a freight train.”

“Are you saying you’re surprised that I didn’t hit you like a girl?”

“Well, er, ahh…”

“Hey Hunter,” says Morse, who’s been standing in the doorway for the last minute or so. I’m relieved to see her. Hunter seems like an ok guy, but that conversation was going nowhere fast. We need to stay on good terms, because in a couple of hours our lives could depend on one another.

“What rest? I’ve got some in my locker.”

“How much?”

“Dunno, twenty, thirty boxes.”

“Jesus, you’ve got 1200 rounds in your locker? Who hoards 9mm bullets?”

“I like to be prepared.”

“For what? The zombie apocalypse? Anyway, could you go shift some of it into the loadout in case we need to shoot some actual people tonight?”

Hunter’s clearly a bit annoyed. He gives Morse one of those British style salutes with the palm of the hand facing out, then goes off into the forward area of the plane.

“Don’t mind him,” she says, “he doesn’t quite know when to lay off.”

“Usually after I knock someone unconscious for the first time they get the message.”

“Well, that’s Hunter for you. If beating sense into him worked, it would have happened a long time ago.” Hah, I like this chick.

“Have you worked with him a lot?” Pizza and beer have put me on a more stable footing and I’m almost feeling chatty.

“Yeah, you could say that. Your file says you like to work alone. Is that why you left the Avengers?”

“Something like that. Got kind of tiring being a member of the Apocalypse of the Month Club. Now I only have myself to look out for.” She gives me kind of a weird look and I wonder exactly what she’s read in my file. Does she know about Luke, or Dani? There is literally nothing in the universe that I want to talk about...with anybody much less some S.H.I.E.L.D. operator who I only met two minutes ago.

“Having someone to watch your back isn’t the worst thing in the world.”

“Hunter has your back?”

“Yeah,” she says with a wry smile, “something like that.”
Morse heads back up toward the front of the plane. I start looking around for the can. It takes me a while to find it. This has got to be the biggest airplane I’ve ever been on. While I’m looking, I find Murdock and Karen sitting in what must be an interrogation room just staring at each other. Murdock is in his Daredevil gear but with his hood pulled back. Karen is sitting on a chair across from him, barefoot after abandoning her shoes in the woods. Once again I don’t need any special powers to know what’s on her mind. She’s wishing that Matt was the kind of person who would just hang back and let these S.H.I.E.L.D. yahoos sort this all out. But he’s not, and he’s never going to be. Especially not where Foggy is concerned.

I have a very bad feeling about all of this. I’m pretty sure that if Foggy was ok he would have found a way to contact someone by now. If he’s not, well, people are going to get hurt. Badly. I’m already getting nervous about how this is going to go. When I poked my head into the staging area a few minutes ago I saw Hunter prepping something that looked like an AK47 on steroids. Someone needs to tell him that this thing is going down in Manhattan and that a gun that will shoot through walls might not be the best idea for this environment.

It’s started to get dark even here about the clouds when Coulson calls us together for the final briefing.

“Ok, just to update everyone, we’ve had the offices of Nelson & Murdock under drone surveillance for the last few hours. Our crowd analysis algorithm suggest that it is currently being watched by two other teams on the ground. They might also have drone surveillance well. It’s 1800 hours now. We want to wait until a little later to minimize the chances of collateral damage. Even though it isn’t a weekday there still might be civilians in the building. I want to remind everyone that this is meant to be a quick insertion/extraction with the goal of gathering intel. What we don’t want is a straight up fight with Gehlen’s guys, or Roxxon, or whoever is watching the building now.”

Murdock is standing next to me. Usually he’s pretty mellow, even when he’s about to do a job. But now he’s tense, almost vibrating, he’s so wound up. He’s wearing his hood and he gives the very distinct impression of wanting to kick someone’s ass. Not good. We need to be cool here. When Murdock’s temper gets loose (and I’ve only seen this a couple of times) shit gets smashed. Even Karen isn’t standing next to him. It’s like he’s emitting a field of anger that’s literally pushing everyone away from him.

As we’re talking I can feel the plane slowing down, and then stopping. This is a very unsettling sensation, to be in something this big that’s just floating in the air. Soon I feel us start to descend, slowly, straight down, like the elevator in a skyscraper, just fast enough to make the food in my stomach want to plan its escape. We come down through the clouds and I look out one of the windows to see where we are. It looks like we’re coming down at an airfield somewhere in central Jersey. Away in the distance I can see Manhattan shining like a ball of fire on the horizon. The airfield below us is empty, so far as I can see. Just a couple of nondescript grey hangars and one or two other low slung buildings.

“Touchdown in two minutes,” Agent May tells us all, “Everyone please assemble in the rear bay. We’re going to need to move quickly to keep on schedule.” Murdock, Morse, Hunter, and I follow May in single file. Mousy-haired earthquake causing girl takes Karen away with her in a different direction.

I hear her tell Karen, “We can keep track of the whole thing from the command center.” Karen doesn’t say anything to Murdock as we go. I’m guessing they’ve said all they need to say already.

We touch down softly and the rear door opens. We walk out briskly into the cool evening air. Murdock and I follow May. Hunter and Morse bring up the rear, each lugging a heavy duffel bag
full of gear. This place seems deserted, and I’m half tempted to ask what the deal is, but it’s probably
some kind of secret S.H.I.E.L.D. voodoo and I figure I probably shouldn’t pry. We get to one of the
hangars, where May punches a long sequence of numbers into a keypad. A door slides open. Inside
it’s dark, except for a circle of light in the middle where what looks like a tricked out Blackhawk
helicopter is tied down. Its sides are black and angular, so I’m guessing it’s stealth to the max.

It’s at this point that I realize that I’ve neglected to ask how we’re going to to get into the building. I
ask May. “I’m going to drop you on the roof,” she says.

“‘Ahh, isn’t that going to attract a lot of attention?’

“They’ll never hear us coming, and we’re hoping to be in and out before they can develop a tactical
plan.’”

“A tactical plan?”

“Yeah, one that doesn’t involve shooting us down with an RPG launcher, or something of that
nature.”

“What happens if they decide to do that.”

“They’ll be stupid, since they’ll be attracting a whole lot of attention that they don’t need.”

“What if they are stupid?”

“Have you ever seen Blackhawk Down?”

“Umm, yeah…”

“That’s what will happen.” May says this with a sort of wry smile that suggests she thinks it’s
unlikely. But this chick is so cool I’m pretty sure that when she goes to sleep, sheep count her. I, on
the other hand, have long since developed a very bad feeling about this. Now it’s moving on to the
verge of panic. I am about 20,000 leagues outside my comfort zone. Now you’re probably thinking
that, having been with the Avengers I’d be used to stuff like this. Well, running around with Captain
America and Thor and those guys was a lot different. Cap has this aura I’d guess you’d call it. He
just feels indestructible, and it kind of rubs off on you when you’re around him. The S.H.I.E.L.D.
people are just spooks, maybe with better than average gear, but just covert action types and they
simply don’t inspire the same sort of confidence.

I must be looking worried, because after Morse stows her gear in the back of chopper she comes
over to me and says, “Don’t worry, we do this stuff all the time.”

“Do people ever get killed?” I ask her.

“Only people who deserved it.” Not that convincing I must say. I just have to keep focused on the
little things I need to do, because if I start thinking big picture shit starts to spiral.

May climbs up on top of the chopper and checks something in the front rotor assembly. When she’s
satisfied that whatever it is is ok she gets in the right side pilot hatch. “Ok,” Hunter tells us, “time to
go,” and leads us into the side hatch. We strap ourselves into the bank of forward-facing seats just
behind the cockpit. Morse gets into the co-pilot’s chair, while Hunter straps in beside us. He hands us
each an in-ear comm unit.

“These are sensitive,” he tells us, “don’t shout.” May flips a switch and there’s a loud hum from
directly above us. Through the side window I can just see the edge of a large hatch sliding back in
the roof over head. May and Morse run through a quick checklist, then May starts the rotors. I’m expecting some kind of roar, but instead there’s just a quiet, steady purr. This thing has stealth technology that puts the CIA’s to shame (how I know that is another long story).

We lift off into the dark night sky. It’s started to rain again. We bank hard to the left and accelerate toward the city at a velocity that makes my insides clench. Cigarette, cigarette, cigarette. I could really use a cigarette right now. I look over at Murdock. He’s got his arms crossed and his head back like he’s looking at the roof (if he was looking at anything, that is). I can see his jaw moving and he’s grinding his teeth so hard I’d swear I can hear it over the soft whirr of the engine.

Hunter is busily going through the duffel bags. From where I’m sitting I can see that they’ve got enough arms and ammo for the shootout at the OK Corral.

“Don’t you think that’s a little excessive?” I ask him over the comms.

“Better to have and not need, rather than the other way around.” He doesn’t even look up as he says this, and strangely this makes me feel better. Talking to him earlier he seemed a bit flaky. Now he’s focused and I get a much more professional vibe. That’s something to hold on to.

Within a few minutes we’re over the Hudson and May eases back off the throttle a bit. There’s a lot of air traffic over Manhattan, and we want don’t want to look any more out of the ordinary than we’re going to with all the stealth panels on the outside of this thing.

Morse comes back out of the cockpit area and squats down in front of us.

“Here’s the deal,” she says in a remarkably straightforward tone, “May’s going to drop on the roof of the building on 45th St., on the other side of the block from your office. Hopefully this is going to happen fast enough that Gehlen’s guys won’t have time to react effectively. The two of you will head down to the office. Hunter and I will make sure that our extraction point is secure. When you’re done you’ll come back up the hatch and May will drop back down for the exfil.”

“So what happens if they manage to get on the roof and rush you guys?” Murdock asks. “I’m assuming you don’t want to have a firefight on a Manhattan rooftop.”

“No, we don’t. We have icers which should just disable anyone who tries to interfere.”

“We’re assuming they’re smart enough not to want to shoot out out up there either” Hunter adds. “But if they do, things could go very pear shaped. So it would be best if you didn’t hang about down in the office.”

“Remember,” Morse tells us, “every minute we’re there is a minute that they’ve got to react. The less time we’re there, the better.”

I’m feeling more comfortable. It’s not like I haven’t been in some hairy ops before, and Hunter and Morse are acting as if this is just another day at the office.

We’re getting close now. Looking forward through the cockpit I can see the lights of the Javits Center at the edge of the Hudson. We’re riding low and as we pass over the traffic on the West Side Highway it reminds me that there are millions of people living lives nowhere near this bizarre.

“Heads up everyone,” May says through the com, “LZ in 90 seconds.”

Hunter and Morse are rummaging through their duffels, clipping various weapons to their combat suits, including a couple of guns that look like props from the first season of Star Trek. We’re slowing down now, sweeping over the rooftops. Morse and Hunter crouch together in front of the
right side door. Murdock and I unbelt and crouch just behind them. I see Hunter lean over to Morse’s ear. He covers his com with his hand, but I can read his lips as he whispers in her ear, “Don’t die.” Morse pats him on the shoulder as May drops the helicopter lightly on the rooftop.

The door opens and we all pile out into the cold night air. Murdock makes a beeline across the roof in the direction of the building on the other side of the block. I follow, while Morse and Hunter start checking out the angles of approach. The roof of Murdock’s building has a couple of large HVAC units on top of it and a ledge around the edge rising about three feet above the level of the roof itself. The form a sort of triangle, in the center of which is a small hatch with a keypad on it. Murdock kneels down and enters a five digit code. The hatch pops open.

“Ok,” Morse tells us (pretty unnecessarily), “try to make this quick. As little engagement as possible, hopefully none.” By the time she finishes, Murdock has already climbed down a few rungs. Then he drops out of view altogether. I start to climb down as well. Murdock was able to just slide down, but I don’t know where this thing bottoms out and I don’t want to come down on top of him. About halfway down I see a door open at the bottom and Murdock ghost through, and I know it’s safe to slide the rest of the way.

I step out into Murdock’s office. The lights are off, but the sodium blue light from the streetlights outside shines in through the barred windows, giving whole place a pallid, eerie look. Murdock doesn’t bother with the lights. He doesn’t need them, and there’s no point in alerting people to the fact that we’re here if they don’t already know.

But they do know. As we pass out of Murdock’s office into the reception area we can hear footsteps in the lobby outside, lots of them. Murdock isn’t waiting around. We’ve either got all the time in the world, or in thirty seconds we’re going to have a lot of company. We breeze into Foggy’s office. Like Murdock’s it’s pretty spartan. There’s a kind of institutional looking desk with books and papers piled high, and couple of overstuffed chairs sitting in front of it. On the wall behind the desk there’s a portrait of someone of a jowly old white guy that looks to be from the 19th century. He seems somehow familiar but I can’t place him.

“Who is that?” I ask as Murdock pulls the portrait off the wall.

“Millard Fillmore.”

“You mean like the president?”

“No, Millard Fillmore the rapper. Of course it’s Millard Fillmore the president.”

“Why does Foggy have a portrait of Millard Fillmore on his wall?”

“He needed something to cover the safe. I think he got it at a garage sale in Yonkers.” Then he holds his finger to his lips as he starts to spin the dial. It’s a this point that it occurs to me (strangely it never had before) that Matt Murdock could have been the greatest safecracker the world has ever known.

After a couple of spins he cocks his ear and says, “We’re about to have company.” I head over to the door, pull it closed and lock it. On the one hand, I’m feeling reasonably confident. There could be a lot of guys coming in here, but we’ve got them bottlenecked, so we have a good chance at keeping things manageable. On the other hand, they’ve managed to get through the front door without blowing it. Neither I nor Murdock need be told what that probably means.

I hear the front door bang open and the sound of lots of running feet in the outer office. Murdock pops the safe and pulls out a laptop and a sheaf of papers. He sticks them in the top drawer of Foggy’s desk, I’m assuming just to keep them out of the way. Just as he does this someone gives the
door a couple of good yanks. Clearly whoever it is is frustrated, because the next thing that happens is the doorknob explodes as a couple of silenced rounds pass through it.

I’m standing just to the left of the door as the first guy comes through, gun first. I grab his wrist with my right hand (so he can’t get off a shot at Murdock), then drive my left elbow into his jaw, hard enough to break it and hard enough to knock him unconscious, but not hard enough to kill him. I notice in passing that he’s got blonde hair the color of straw. I don’t get a chance to look at his eyes, since I’ve rung his bell pretty seriously and they’re rolled back into his head, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they were blue like limpid pools.

Before he can drop, I grab him by the collar and throw him back through the door. Hard. He piles into a crowd of guys behind him. They go down like a ten pin rack, and as they do I notice that they all have the same straw blonde look going on. Great, this is like bowling for nazis. They’re just starting to pick themselves up when I see Murdock go sailing through the door. Remember how I mentioned earlier that he seemed tense and angry? Well the boys from Brazil out there are about to find out just how bad a situation that is.

It’s darker in the outer office, so it’s hard to see what’s going on. But even from where I’m standing I can see that Murdock is laying some serious kung fu on these dudes. Bodies are flying everywhere, but even while Murdock is laying out the first wave more are coming in the door. Two of them make for the doorway where I’m standing.

Just then I hear Hunter in my ear. “Are you guys about done? We’ve got company up here.” I’m about to say something back when one of the nazi guys smacks me in the face. I’m disoriented for a second, but then so is he. He’s got six inches and (easily) 100 pounds on me, and his best shot didn’t even make me take a step back. But it did annoy me. He’s lucky I’m on my best behavior here. Getting popped in the nose makes me see red, and if circumstances were a little different I might really hurt this idiot.

As it is, I only kind of hurt him. I grab him by the shoulders and drive my knee up between his legs hard enough to lift him about six inches off the ground. He makes a loud “whuff” sound and his eyes bug out as he sinks to the floor. I’m guessing there’s not going to be another generation of little aryans, at least not for this guy.

His partner is in the process of leveling his gun at me, but he’s got a look in his eyes like he’s just seen a ghost. This is the kind of thing that will happen to a guy when he’s just seen his party bro get dropped by a 120 pound girl. I smack the gun out of his hand and it goes flying to the corner of the office. He’s frightened now. This definitely isn’t how he saw things working out. The little mean girl won’t obey and the Führer will not be pleased. Well Fritz, what are you gonna do?

Hesitate, that’s what he’s going to do. This gives me time to drive my forearm into his chest, knocking him backward into two more of his buddies right behind him. This is the quality of international terrorist these days? They just don’t seem to be learning from their mistakes.

The action in the middle of the room is slowing down somewhat. “Jess, grab the stuff and let’s get out of here!” he shouts to me over his shoulder. I grab the computer and the files out of the desk drawer.

“We’re coming up, you guys!” I tell Hunter and Morse.

“We know,” drawls Hunter, “you’re on a live channel. Stay low when you come out the hatch, things are a little hot up here.” Just as he finishes there’s a loud “Whump” sound somewhere in his vicinity and I hear him say, “Tangos, flanking left!” I’m assuming to Morse.
We scoot back to Murdock’s office through reception which is littered with bodies and broken furniture. Karen Page is going to take a crap when she sees what happened to her plant (which was clearly used to knock one of those jokers unconscious). Back in Murdock’s office I can see the door to the ladder standing open. It’s got what looks like an armoire attached to it, which is why I never noticed it before. Murdock heads up the ladder like a spider climbing its web. I shut and latch the door behind us, then head up the ladder. I move more slowly than Murdock, having one arm full of Foggy’s stuff, but I’m motivated by not wanting to get caught in here, so I still get up pretty quick.

I pop my head out the hatch, but as soon as I do Murdock grabs me under the arms, pulls me out and around behind an HVAC. Good thing too, because as soon as he does three bullets hit the back of the hatch in quick succession. They must have come from a silenced weapon, because I didn’t hear a thing.

“Fuck me! They’re using live ammo!” I say to no one in particular.

“That’s not our worst problem right now,” Morse tells me over her shoulder, “one of those Roxxon dudes has an RPG launcher. I saw it when he came up the ladder. She and Hunter are basically holding the bad guys off with icers. They make a kind of “whup” sound when they fire and shoot lightning fast blue blobs that incapacitate anyone they hit.

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“How many are there?” I ask no one in particular.

“Five,” says Hunter.

“Seven,” Murdock corrects. “There are two more behind the far HVAC unit over there.”

“What’s our play?” Hunter asks. “In about ten seconds they’re going to get serious about flanking us and then we’re going to have problem.”

“Call Agent May,” Murdock tells him. “Tell her we need extraction in 90 seconds. But first give me a little cover.” Murdock flips himself up on the HVAC unit and disappears while Hunter and Morse keep the Roxxon guys occupied. About two second later I hear shouting from the other side of the roof. There is fear, bordering on panic in their voices, but they’re not speaking English, so I can’t really tell what they’re saying. They’re definitely unhappy though, at least the ones that are still conscious.

Morse calls May, and we gather up all the gear and get ready to go. The sounds on the other end of the roof have died down by the time I hear the surprisingly soft murmur of the helicopter blades from the other side of the block. We hustle over to the edge just has May brings the Blackhawk to within about ten feet of the roof ledge. The side hatch is open. Hunter jumps across, catches one of the skids and climbs in. Morse starts tossing bags of gear over to him. She jumps across too, just as Murdock sidles up with an RPG launcher over one shoulder and an unconscious blonde Roxxon dude over the other.

“I didn’t want to leave this thing lying around,” he says. “Someone else might have come up the ladder and given us a parting gift.” I get ready to jump. I could probably go straight in the hatch, but I’d prefer not to get decapitated by the rotor blades if I get it wrong. Before I can jump Murdock puts his hand on my shoulder and say, “Hold on. I want to take this guy with us, but I need you to toss him over.”

He puts the Roxxon guy on the deck. I hand him Foggy’s computer and he jumps from the ledge, landing with two feet on the skid. He climbs in, stashes the laptop, then comes back to the hatch and says, “Ok Jess, lets go.” I pick the dude up. He feels light as a feather. I could easily chuck him about halfway across the street, so putting him into the hatch is not problem. Then I jump across and catch
the skid. In the background I can hear shouting and police sirens.

“We’ve got company, time to move,” I hear May say in my earpiece. Murdock is still in the process of hoisting me into the hatch when the Blackhawk veers hard to the left and starts to climb. Murdock sets me in one of the seats and gets buckled in while Hunter secures the hatch. Then he unzips one of his bags, and pulls out a black hood and some zip ties. He hog ties the Roxxon guy and puts the hood on him.

“What we gonna do with this bloke?” he asks Murdock.

“Find out what he knows.”

“I hope for his sake he knows something.”

“Yeah,” says Murdock, “so do I.”

We’re moving fast now, through a night so dark that it seems to suck the energy out of the city’s light. I’m so jacked up on adrenaline right now I could eat a bowl of nails. In a little while I’ll probably be afraid again. But right now I feel like I’m part of the baddest gang in town. I sit back in my seat and wait to find out where the night is taking us.
Chapter 7

It’s around 11:00 and we’re in a S.H.I.E.L.D. facility somewhere in Jersey (Bayonne I think, but one Jersey burg blends into another). We’re in a room that feels like it was lifted out of a 1960s police precinct. It’s got institutional tile, a couple of ancient looking file cabinets, a beat up naugahyde couch, and a two way glass looking into an interrogation room. That room continues theme: there’s a table bolted to the floor, two folding chairs, and a hanging lamp that probably hasn’t had a decent cleaning since the Kennedy administration. The only thing it’s missing is a length of rubber hose. Oh, and it’s got one sorry looking asshole sitting in it with a bag on his head and his hands zip-tied to the table top.

On the couch, Morse is tapping away furiously at a laptop. Coulson, Murdock, and I are standing at the window.

“I’m going to take the first crack at this guy,” Coulson says without looking at either one of us.

“That’s not going to happen,” Murdock says flatly. I’ve calmed down considerably in the last couple of hours, but he’s still wrapped very tight. We know (or we’re pretty sure we know) that Gehlen and his goons have Foggy Nelson somewhere, since they were able to breach the door at Nelson & Murdock without blowing it. Right now, this guy is in the position of being Murdock’s most direct connection to his best friend, and that is a bad place to be.

“Why do you want me to do it? Trust me, I can get what we need?”

“This is a S.H.I.E.L.D. operation.” Coulson says this in his sunny, avuncular way, like we’re talking about who’s going to take the first turn at Parcheesi. “You’re here as a courtesy.”

Murdock doesn’t say anything. I have a hard time believing that Coulson isn’t noticing that he’s radiating utter rage. Then again it’s possible that he does. He doesn’t know Murdock, and so doesn’t know what he’s capable of, or maybe he does and he fears it. He has good reason to. I know that Matt doesn’t really lose control, but Coulson doesn’t, and he can’t risk our one real informational asset getting broken.

“We’re gonna let this guy stew for a few minutes,” Coulson says. “He’s pretty low level and not really a pro. I’m sure we can get what we need from him without breaking out the rubber hoses. I have a few other things to take care. I’ll be back in a few.”

“We’re going to get Foggy back,” I tell Matt. He doesn’t say anything. Matt continues to stare at the guy. Standing next to Matt is like hanging out beside hand grenade that’s had the pin pulled. I wander over to the couch where Morse is working feverishly on a laptop. There’s a bunch of stuff that we took off the guy sitting on the floor in front of her. Right now she’s looking at something that appears to be a slightly oversized fountain pen, running what looks like (but can’t possibly be) a barcode scanner. She puts it on the couch beside her. More high speed typing.

“That’s some crazy pen,” I say rather pointlessly.

“The craziest. It’s definitely not Roxxon standard issue. Hold on a second.” She twists that cap this way and that, carefully, like she’s trying to do the combination on her high school gym locker. After a second a little port about the size of a cell phone charger opens in the side. She sticks one end of a cable into it and plugs the USB plug at the other end into her computer. The computer whirrs and
tings a couple of times and then Morse says, “Oh...my...god.”

“What is it?”

“Well among other things this little item here is some sort of GPS tracker. Apparently Gehlen is really interested in keeping track of the Boys from Brazil.”

“Can they locate our position here?”

“Not likely. We’re pretty heavily shielded here, in addition to being a couple of levels underground. But if Gehlen or one of his people were watching the response from this device they’ll have seen where it went dark. The good news is that I think I can back hack this thing, maybe get a data dump off their server.”

“Wouldn’t they be able to get a read on our position if you do that?”

“I’ve disabled the transponder, so it won’t be sending location data back to the server. They might be able to tell that I’ve pinged their system, but not from where. Come on, I’ve gotta go topside to do this.”

We head back to the elevator, stopping briefly to grab Hunter, who comes along toting an AR15 with a starlight scope mounted on it.

As we ride up the elevator Morse says, “There’s a small but non-zero chance that they’ve made our location. We’re going to have to get to do this at the edge of the airfield where the signal jammers don’t reach.”

We get to ground level and head for the door where we came in. Morse has her laptop in a case in one hand and a 9mm in the other. “Hang about here for a minute,” says Hunter, “I’ll make sure we don’t have company.” He heads off into the darkness in a crouch, rifle raised to his shoulder, looking through the scope. The outdoor lights have been shut off. After a few steps Hunter disappears like a ghost into the darkness.

A couple of minutes later he chirps the all clear over comms and I follow Morse across a wide open space in front of the hangars to a windowless shed by the cyclone fencing at the edge of the compound. There’s a doorway facing the fence. Hunter posts up there, looking around nervously through his scope. Morse sets up her laptop inside the door and plugs the Sonnenrad fountain pen via a USB cable. I feel kind of like a third wheel as I stand behind her watching windows open and close on her screen.

“I’m in,” she says distractedly after a couple of minutes. “Their anti-hacking code is a version of Roxxon standard. But it’s not up to date. Probably Gehlen and his people don’t want to give away what they’re doing to the boys up at the Roxxon home office.” More rapid-fire typing, then she says (in Darth Vader voice), “Sonnenrad, I have you now!”

“Anything good?” I venture.

“I managed to dump down the locations of all their personnel in the New York metro area. It’ll take me a few minutes to parse it. We need to get back downstairs on the double.”

“Do you think they know they’ve been hacked?”

“I doubt it. I was cautious and I wasn’t in there long. But as soon as somebody looks at their bandwidth stats they’re going to notice that someone’s had their hand in the cookie jar. We need to capitalize on this information as soon as possible.”
Back down in the office outside the interrogation room, Morse fills everybody in. Then she goes back to the couch and (I assume) starts going through the data she copped from the Sonnenrad server. After a couple of minutes of this, Murdock pulls out his cell, touches the screen and says, “No service here.” At this point it’s probably worth noting that Murdock has his phone set to talk to him at ultra low volume, so he doesn't look at it, he listens to it and feels the way it vibrates. Anyway...

“No,” says Morse, “the jammers shut down cell service. But there’s wifi connected to a cable antenna that runs outside the radius of the jammers.”

Murdock flicks his phone screen a couple of times. “It’s password protected.”

“Of course it is. We don’t want just anyone calling out of here. The password is ‘SteveRogers1945’.”

Murdock enters the code and his phone starts buzzing. “Missed calls, from Foggy, and a voicemail.” Murdock listens to the message and his jaw clenches (and it was already pretty clenched so I’m a little worried that his teeth are going to shatter). Then he puts the phone on speaker and plays the message again. The voice that comes out is distorted and has a ghostly sort of quality. But what it has to say is crystal clear.

“We have your friend, Mr. Nelson. In two hours you will meet us, under the bridge in the park. You will be bring Mr. Ellsworth, and our associate, and any materials that you took from Mr. Nelson’s office that relate to this project. You will not bring your new friends along with you. If you deviate from these instructions Mr. Nelson will be killed.” There’s a moment of silence. Then a voice that I immediately recognize as Foggy’s says, “Matt, don’t…” and the line goes dead.

“When was that message left?” Morse asks.

“An hour ago.”

She goes back to her computer for a minute. “Alright,” she says, “it seems like their GPS signatures are concentrated in two locations. One is somewhere on the upper east side. The other looks to be in Jersey City, not too far from here. If we can get this guy to give up the location we can take it to Coulson and see if he’ll green light a rescue operation.”

“We need to get eyes on both,” Hunter says, “because as soon as we hit one of them they’ll know they’re burned and the rest will leg it.”

“Foggy could be at either place. Can’t be sure which and we’ve got to get it right the first time. We need to get him out of their hands, if only so they won’t try to leverage him to get us to give up Ellsworth. We need to make this decision quick. Every minute we delay increases the chances that they’ll figure out that something’s up.”

“What do you mean when you say Coulson might give the green light?” I ask.

“There are a few different things in play here,” Morse says. “Getting your friend back is a priority. Keeping New York, or some other large population center, from getting vaporized is another one. We have to be careful about how we play our hand here.”

What needs to be done becomes crystal clear to me. I’m going to get what we need from this dude before Murdock gets in there and does something that’s going to leave a permanent mark on this guy. “Everyone hang loose,” I say, I head for the door to the interrogation room, patting Murdock on the shoulder as I go. In the room the air is stale. The guy can hear me as I come in and turns his head. I pull his hood off and he blinks stupidly. I smack him in the face, hard enough to get his attention, but
not hard enough to do real damage. He shakes his head and spits out a little blood.

“Guten Tag, Fräulein Jones.” I must look surprised because he says, “Yes, we know who you are. We have done our homework.”

I get possession of myself again. I need to play this cool, to stay in control and keep things on my agenda. “The you have some idea what I could do to you...if I was so inclined.”

“Yes, you are a mutant of some kind. You are very strong.”

“You don’t want to know how strong.”

“You are a freak,” he says contemptuously. “Your germ plasm has been damaged. You are a useless body, a cancer parasitically sucking the life out of the body of the master race.”

I give him another good whack. “I need you to focus here. Time is short. You’re associates are holding a friend of mine.”

“Yes, Fräulein, I know everything I need to know about you. You are a freak, and a race mixer in the bargain.” Ok, this guy has access to some great intel. I didn’t really spread the thing about me and Luke Cage around, and there just aren’t that many people in the world who know about it. “You have nothing to hold over me. I am willing to die for my cause, because my essence will live on in the new age to come.”

I slug him again. A harder this time. This guy is really starting to get to me. I hear Matt in my ear (I’m still wearing the S.H.I.E.L.D. comm device) telling me to stay calm. He can tell I’m getting agitated.

“Perhaps you are intending to play what I believe you Americans call good cop/bad cop? Perhaps in a few minutes your partner will come in and speak kind, reassuring words to me, to try to convince me that by giving up some information I can avoid your wrath. Well, I assure you it will not work. You and your mongrel friends can do what you like to me.”

“Well pal, I’ve got good new and bad news for you. The good news is, you’ve finally annoyed this mongrel so much that she’s going to get out of your face. Good luck with your new order, however much of you is left to see it.” I put my hand behind his neck and smash his face into the surface of the table hard enough to break his nose and probably loosen most of his teeth. He pulls his head up, leaning forward as globs of blood drip from what’s left of his nose.

“What’s the bad news?” he asks, spraying blood from bleeding lips..

I lean over to his ear. I can see the door opening and Murdock entering the room. “The bad news is: I was good cop.”

I walk out the door past Murdock. He’s smiling. He knows he’s going to get the information we need. I seriously don’t want to know what he’s going to do to get it.
Chapter 8

I’m in the elevator with Matt, heading up to the surface. We know where Foggy is being held. It’s not far from here, but we’ve got to move. It didn’t take Matt long to get what he needed from the Sonnenrad guy. For a minute I almost felt sorry for him. Then I remembered that he and his buddies are trying to bring about the Fourth Reich and I feel like he had it coming. Murdock didn’t kill the guy, which is what I was most worried he was going to do, but I will say that that dude will not look back on this day as one of the better ones in his life.

Morse and Hunter didn’t move to stop Murdock while it was happening. I was a little surprised, but given the gravity of the situation maybe they saw what needed to be done. When it was finished, Morse went off to find Coulson to see if he would act on the intel. As soon as she left, Murdock turned to me and said, “We’re going.”

“Oi,” said Hunter, “where do you think you’re going.”

“We’ve got things to do,” Murdock told him, “and you don’t want to try to stop us.”

“This is a bad idea,” he said. He’s probably right. But Murdock is a friend and he needs my help. Morse’s data dump suggested there might be thirty or more Sonnenrad operatives where we’re going and Murdock can’t take them alone. Matt didn’t answer. He pushed by Hunter, who started calling for Coulson on his comm while we headed for the elevator.

When we get topside, Murdock reaches into his pocket and pulls out something that looks like a miniaturized version of those electroshock units that people carry for personal defense. He touches it to the instrument panel of the elevator. It lights up like a Christmas tree, then goes dark.

“That won’t buy us much time,” he says, and runs for the hangar door. When we get outside I’m immediately blinded by a bright light. Someone is waiting about ten yards in front of us with a flashlight in one hand and a 9mm in the other.

“Stand down,” says Agent May’s voice, loudly, and it a way that suggests that she isn’t screwing around. I’m momentarily taken aback by the brightness of the light, but she must know that it won’t have that effect on Murdock.

“We’re leaving,” Murdock says, “and you’re not going to shoot us. Come on, Jess.” I’m glad he’s confident of that, because she really doesn’t seem like the kind of person who would point a weapon at someone that she wasn’t prepared to use.

We head for the front gate. May doesn’t shoot us. I think Murdock must have heard it in her voice (or read it in her heart rate or whatever). May follows us.

“This is a mistake,” she says. “You need to wait for us to organize things.” But she doesn’t have much conviction. Maybe she’s thinking about how she might react if her friend was being tortured. I don’t know. I don’t know her that well, but she seems like a pro, and for that reason she’s hard to read.

“Stay out of my way,” Murdock tells her, without stopping. She must have some serious cojones, because there’s a strong overtone of “don’t fuck with me” in his voice, but it doesn’t seem to phase her in the least.
“Look,” she says as we get to the fence, “you’ll be seriously overmatched and outgunned. And, hey, if you want to commit suicide that’s your business, but you’re also going to blow the other half of this mission and a lot of people are going to die. Is that what you want? Is that what your friend would want?” Matt stops for a minute. It’s not like she doesn’t have a point.

After a second Matt look at her. “Sorry,” he says, “I’ve got to do this,” and he vaults over the fence. I shrug at May and follow him (not quite so gracefully).

We head up the road a ways, looking for some transportation. Mostly it’s just chainlink fencing and quonset huts around here, but about a quarter of a mile down the road we find a lot with a bunch of delivery vans parked in it. Matt busts out a window with his baton and opens the driver’s side door.

“Can you start this thing?” he asks.

“You’re assuming I know how to hotwire a car? What kind of person do you think I am?”

“A resourceful one. Can you do it?”

“Yeah,” I concede, “I can.” While I’m getting the car started Matt plugs the info about our destination (gotten in fairly precise terms from our friend the mongrel hater) into his phone. In a matter of seconds we’re off. It’s after midnight and the air is cold, especially with the window busted out.

“You don’t have to do this,” he tells much unnecessarily as we speed up an access road that parallels the New Jersey Turnpike into Jersey City. There’s really nothing to say. Matt has stood by me when things got tough. He’s my friend. Whatever else that means, it means that I’m loyal when the road gets dark, because there really isn’t anything else in this life that matters.

It doesn’t take us long to find the building we’re looking for. It’s a newish, prefab sort of block that takes up the corner of Pacific Avenue and Craven point. We do a couple of quick driveys. This is one of those faceless industrial areas where a white delivery van just doesn’t look out of place. There’s no one outside, but we have to guess that there are security cameras. At little ways down Pacific there’s a construction site with a two storeys of girders build up as a frame for a building to come. We park on the street on the far side of the site, then hop the fence and climb to the top of the structure. We stand together in the shadows and look across the fifty yards or so to the building that is our target.

“You got a plan for this?” I ask Murdock. “Every street level approach has got to be covered by cameras, so we can’t just walk up to the doors.”

“Can you jump from here to the top of that building?”

“Yeah, I think so, but it’s not like I can carry you.”

“You won’t need to,” he says and starts looking around the site. Finally he finds what he’s looking for: a large coil of nylon rope. He ties one end to a girder and the other to one of my belt loops.

“I hope this stupid rope is long enough,” I tell him, “because if it isn’t it’s really gonna hurt.” I take a few steps back, then with a short run I jump across. The rope is just about long enough, except that when I hit the rooftop it pulls tight and rips my belt loop off. Ok, Matt, that’s a new pair of trousers you owe me (assuming we survive this). I manage to snag the end of the rope before it falls back over the edge. I tie it to an HVAC duct, but I’m not 100% that it will hold the weight of an adult, so I hold on to it and give Murdock a wave to let him know it’s ready. I’m sort of expecting that he’ll hang down, or shinny across, but he jumps up and runs across like one of the Flying Wallendas.
It’s about this point that we realize that we have another little problem: although we have a pretty good idea that Foggy is here, neither of us knows exactly where. Murdock’s efforts with our friend from the Sonnenrad yielded information of a more general nature. This building isn’t huge, only two storeys (above ground anyway) but we don’t have any idea how it’s laid out or who might be inside it.

“What now?” I ask.

“I think we’re going to just have to play it by ear.” I’m really wishing that we’d organized this thing with the good folks from S.H.I.E.L.D. rather than just heading off into the night. I’m sure they could have given us some better intel on this deal. But it is what it is. We’re here and we’ve just got to make the best of it.

Murdock finds a maintenance hatch close to one corner of the roof. It’s got a padlock on it which I rip off in short order. We climb down a short ladder into that looks to be the main stairwell. The lights are low, I suppose because we’re outside normal business hours and even the Fourth Reich needs to keep their energy bills manageable.

“There’s no one on this floor,” Murdock tells me after listening for a minute at the door at this landing. We head down the steps to what must be the ground level. Murdock stops. “There are people here, and on the floors below us. I can hear their hearts beating. They seem stressed out.”

“I can’t imagine why,” I tell him in a hoarse whisper.

The door opens onto a long, dimly lit corridor that T’s off about 30 meters. Murdock scoots down it, silent as a tomatc on the prowl. I follow a few feet behind, trying my best to be quiet and wondering exactly what we’re going to find here. At the corner, Murdock flashes hand signs to me: two guys, armed, coming along the hallway from the right. We flatten against the wall. After a couple of seconds two guys who look like goons sent from the Leni Riefenstahl casting agency (well, no Lederhosen or Tyrolean hats but you get my point). Murdock catches one from behind and uses his body as a sort of vaulting pole to drive his knee into the back of the other one’s head. The guy is still in the process of dropping as he swings around the front of the first guy and headbutts him into unconsciousness. I feel kind of useless here, but I do have time to wonder how it is that Murdock hasn’t actually killed anyone in the course of doing things like this. How, or maybe if. I don’t really know for sure, although I tend to think he’d have mentioned it. He’s one of these people who takes his moral obligations seriously. I take mine as seriously not getting my ass shot off allows.

The hallway that we’re in now has a series of doors on either side and a sign on the wall at the T junction that shows reception to be down the leftward end of the T.

“There’s no one else on this floor,” say Murdock. “We need to check the levels below.” We head back down the hall toward the stairs. All of a sudden, Murdock tries on the doors along the walls. It’s locked. “Open this now,” he says, “we’ve gotta get out of sight.”

I twist the knob off and we bundle into what seems to be some sort of maintenance closet.

“People coming,” Murdock whispers, looking out of the cracked door. “Lots of them.” I hear the stairwell door bang open and lots of running footsteps in the hall. “Ten or twelve guys. All packing heavy. I wonder what’s going on.”

“Where’d they go?”

“Up to reception I think.” Barely has he finished saying this when there are two loud bangs. Then it sounds like the shootout at the OK Corral has broken out.
“What the actual fuck is going on here?” I ask Murdock.

“No idea,” he says, “but I think we need to get down to the lower levels fast.” He bolts out the door. I follow, taking half a second to look over my shoulder at the flashes and splintering drywall behind us. Wherever we’re going, it’s pretty much got to be better when whatever is happening back there.

When we get back into the stairwell it becomes clear that there aren’t two sublevels, just one big one. The if the drop of the stairs is anything to go by the roof must be thirty feet high. At the bottom there is a double steel door. Murdock listens at it for a second. “There are a lot of guys in there. Twenty or more. I think Foggy is in there too.”

“How can you tell?”

“I think I can smell him.” For those of you in any doubt, this is really par for the Matt Murdock course. “I’m going to have a peek inside this door. It’s possible they’ll be marking it, given what’s going on upstairs. We’ll just have to see.” This doesn’t sound like a great plan, since the way we would discover that they were watching the door is by their busting caps at us. I guess I’ll let the guy in the Kevlar suit make that call.

Murdock cracks the door and looks inside. No bullets, that’s a good sign. He slides through the door, and a go after him. We’re in a large warehouse type room. It’s hard to tell, but it looks to be about the length of a football field. There are piles of crates stacked intermittently, and a follow Murdock behind one of these, just to the left of the door, so we can get our bearings. Guys in blue coveralls, many of them with guns, are running here and there, packing things into boxes. They seem very agitated. The place is only lit in spots. What is it about bad guy hideouts? They never seem to have proper lighting. Crime actually does pay. You’d think they could afford to get this joint properly lit. Whatever, it works for us now.

About two thirds of the way down the room there is a structure with wall of opaque plastic sheeting. “Think that’s where Foggy is?” I ask Murdock.

“Probably. We need to make a move down to that end.” Murdock pads off down the left side of the room, moving from box pile to box pile, and staying in the dark. I follow, but it’s not as easy as you might think. Murdock’s senses are so jacked up that he has a sort of sixth sense about who is where in his immediate environment. I’m jacked up too, on adrenaline, and sleep debt, and I would (literally) step over my own mother for a cigarette right now. So, long story short, I’m just barely keeping it together.

When we’re about even with the enclosure we post up behind some crates and take stock. Whatever is going on upstairs hasn’t made its way down here yet, but we need to move fast, because the gunfight could show up here at any minute. The coverall guys are busily staging stuff near a big contraption at the back wall of the room, about twenty yards behind the enclosure.

“I think that’s a freight elevator,” Murdock says. “We need some kind of diversion to get their attention down toward the other end of the room.” We’re still mulling this over when a bunch of their fellow nazis come booking through the door. In a moment the attention of everyone in the room is galvanized.

One of the coverall guys starts issuing orders. “All teams, all sections, prepare to repel intruders at the east door!” The coverall guys drop what they are doing and take up positions in a wide semicircle facing the doors. After minute (that feels more like an hour) the lights go out and the doors blow inward off their hinges. A series of smoke grenades and flashbangs get chucked in and then the fireworks start for real. Whoever is trying to get in here has sniper scopes. The red laser pinpoints flash crazily on the far wall. Up at the other end the only thing to be seen is muzzle flashes in veiled
by thick smoke.

“Stay here,” Murdock tells me, “I’m going to get Foggy before he catches a stray bullet.”

“Keep your head down,” I tell him (realizing simultaneously how pointless that is), “there is a lot of lead flying around.” Murdock sprints across the gap toward the enclosure. He’s about halfway there when what must be the emergency lights come on and the room is lit up in a dim sodium glow. I see Murdock reach the side of the enclosure. He doesn’t waste time looking for an entrance. He pulls something that turns out to be a switchblade out of his boot, flicks it open, and cuts his own entryway through the plastic sheeting. He comes out a couple of seconds later carrying someone (Foggy presumably) over his shoulder. He’s only made it a couple of steps when people up at the hoedown at the other end of the room notice what’s happening and then things get really crazy. Bullets are flying everywhere as Murdock makes it back to my position, smashing into the crates and thudding dully into the wall behind us.

Murdock sits Foggy up against one of the crates, out of the line of fire. It’s hard to tell in this light, but he doesn’t look good. He’s clearly unconscious and he’s sweating profusely. He’s got a pretty good shiner and his lips are discolored. More than that I can’t see in this light. In any case, we’ve got bigger problems now. There are lots of guys with guns in this room, and none of them seem particularly well disposed towards us. I think the only thing keeping the coverall guys from bum rushing us the need to keep the guys at the door from popping them. Not a good situation. They can reach us from distance (with bullets) but we can’t reach them. Eventually this thing is going to sort itself out, and one or another of the groups of armed guys are going to come down here and light us up.

“Can we use the freight elevator to get out of here?” I ask.

“Maybe,” he says, settling down next to me in a place where he can’t be shot. “The control switch is on that pillar there at the front of the shaft and it’s completely exposed. Also, it’s up on the ground level now, so they’d figure out what we were up to a long time before we could make our escape.” Ok, that’s not looking very hopeful, but we don’t have a lot of time or opportunity to make a better plan.

“I could try using one of these crates for cover, moving it with me as I go.” I don’t really want to do this, but we in a bad spot here and I’m spitballing.

“Could work. It would kind of depend on what was in the crates, and what they were shooting at you with. I guess they haven’t managed to shoot us so far. But you’d be out there for a long time before you’d be able to get to any other kind of cover.”

We’re still mulling this over when there’s a loud clank from the direction of the direction of the freight elevator and the platform starts descending. With the dim light and all the smoke it’s hard to tell who’s on it. There’s a stack of crates near the front edge, and as the platform moves downward I can see two figures behind them. I was expecting more of the guys who (apparently) came in through the front door. But I’d assume if they were coming in from the back side they would have brought a bigger crew.

The picture becomes clearer when one of the figures on the platform (it’s definitely a woman) raises up a snub-nosed weapon to her shoulder and, over the din of other gunfire I hear the subtle “plook” of a grenade launcher disgorging a round. It detonates with a tremendous bang among the combatants at the other end of the room. As that is happening, the other figure on the platform opens up with...a big ass gun: some kind of high caliber assault rifle on semiauto. Bambambambambambambambambambambambambambambambambambam! Everybody on the other end of the room is reassessing their positions now and real confusion reigns.
“That’s Hunter,” Murdock says, lifting Foggy to his feet.

“The one with the ‘nade launcher must be Morse.”

“Great, the cavalry is here. Give me a hand, we’ve gotta go now.”

Carrying Foggy between us, we make the dash diagonally toward the edge of the freight elevator. When we get within about twenty feet Hunter turn his gun towards us, but then realizes who it is and wave us in. The elevator platform is about 20x20, and completely open, but it’s got some crates and other stuff on it that we can use for cover. Murdock leaves me to carry Foggy the last few feet and heads over to the control panel. The people at the other end of the room are busily engaged in not getting shot by Hunter (or by each other), so the volume of fire coming our way has slackened. He skips onto the platform as it starts to rise.

Morse slings the grenade launcher over her shoulder and helps us get Foggy situated behind cover. As go up it seems that everybody down range from us has found common ground on the proposition that they don’t want us to get away. Morse dumps another grenade into their midst, just to keep them honest. I’m sitting next to when she’s crouching, facing the back wall. I really don’t need to see what’s going on. The bullets thudding everywhere make that plain. She drops the empty cartridge from the launcher between my feet, then inserts another and sends it on its way. Bullets are hitting the bottom of the elevator platform now. We’ve left the mess in the basement behind.

The elevator stops in a large garage with two flatbed trucks parked closely together and various crates and boxes lying around. The door is open and we head out into the cold night air. There are five commando looking guys lying around, incapacitated or dead (I can’t tell which).

“Who are those dudes?” I ask Hunter.

“Not sure, but I think the Roxxon first eleven might have just arrived. We did ’em on the way in.”

As we get out into the street I realize that we’ve come out of a different building. The one we entered is across the road. About halfway down the block a black van is parked with the engine running. In the sodium glare of the streetlights I can see Mousy Brown-Haired Girl standing by the rear doors. She pulls the side door open as we get close. We all bundle in, with Morse keeping watch out the back, 9mm in hand.

We’re just about settled when three bullets hit the side of the door. Another shatters the rear window and Morse drops. Hunter, who had just gotten into the front passenger seat, jumps out again and races around to where Morse is resting, half sitting up against the rear tire. I was the last one in, so I get out to see what I can do. I’m just in time to see Mousy Brown-Haired Girl set her feet, raise her hands in front of her, and reduce the fence, the trees, and the entire side of the building to a pile of rubble. There’s no more shooting.

Hunter crouches over Morse. Bullet hit her in the neck, just above the top of her Kevlar vest. There’s a lot of blood. Hunter has a first aid kit, I don’t know where he got it, but he’s got a gauze pad and he’s trying to staunch the bleeding.

Agent May leans out the driver’s side window and shouts, “We’ve got to move.” I pull the rear doors open. Mousy Brown-Haired Girl looks spent and climbs in which Hunter and I lift Morse gingerly in behind her. We’re moving before I even get the doors shut. Mousy Brown-Haired Girl is sprawled out along one of the wheel wells. Hunter has Morse across his lap. He’s holding the gauze pad on the wound, but there is still blood everywhere. She doesn’t look good. Hunter keeps saying, “Come on, Bobbi, just hang in there.”
Up toward the driver’s seats, Murdock has Foggy sitting against the side of the van covered in one of those silver temporary blankets that you find in first aid kits. Maybe Agent May brought it along. She seems like the “always prepared” type. I hear her talking on comes as we’re speeding along toward who knows where.

“We’re inbound. Two casualties. One GSW, one with unknown injuries. Have Simmons get ready. ETA is ten minutes.” I don’t really know what time it is (my phone having gotten destroyed earlier on) but it’s got to be after 1:00. Agent May has this thing really flying, but there aren’t that many people on the roads, so the ride is pretty smooth. The adrenaline is starting to wear off and I sit yawning among the injured and the dying, riding this strange wave through a night that never seems to end.
Chapter 9

We manage to make it back to the S.H.I.E.L.D. base without getting tailed. Maybe there was no one left to follow us. Or maybe they saw Mousy Brown-Haired Girl crush the entire side of a building and decided that they didn’t want any part of that. You couldn’t blame them. In any case, when we pull in the C-17 is sitting there, rear ramp down, with two gurneys awaiting. When we pull up the gurneys are pushed over two the van by a pair of S.H.I.E.L.D. Man that I don’t recognize. They’re wearing white lab coats. One is a guy, maybe 25, with short wavy brown hair and a Scottish that is completely impenetrable. The other looks like his sister, but she has the kind of upper crust British accent that makes you think she’s about to offer you a cucumber sandwich.

But she’s not. Actually she is all business. She tells Agent May and Mousy Brown-Haired Girl to get Foggy into the lab while she assesses Morse. She pulls the gauze padding off the wound. It’s thick with blood. Morse is not conscious. Even in the glare of the overhead lights I can see she’s really pale. Hunter stands on the other side of the gurney holding Morse’s hand and looking like he’s just this side of freaking the fuck out.

Coulson comes down to the end of the ramp. “How does she look, Agent Simmons?”

“She lost a lot of blood.” She pulls a pair of scissors out of one pocket and cuts away Morse’s sleeve up to the biceps. Then she produces a bag of blood and a length of tubing out of the other pocket, attaches the one to the other, and sticks the sharp end into the crick of Morse’s elbow. Handing the bag Hunter to hold she says, “We need to get her into the lab, now,” and starts pushing the gurney up the ramp. I lend a hand, since Hunter is otherwise engaged and Murdock already went in to look after Foggy.

The ramp goes up behind us and we find ourselves milling around in the lab while Agent Simmons and her colleague (Agent Fitz) work frantically on their new charges.

Hunter has stepped back from Morse so they can work on her, but he’s still pretty distraught. He turns to Murdock and says, “This is on you!”

“What do you mean?”

“This is on you! That operation was rubbish! If she dies it’s on you!”

“Sorry, I couldn’t wait for you guys to get your heads out of your asses.” They’re fronting up on each other pretty seriously now. “You need to think very carefully about the next thing you say to me,” Murdock tells him. His voice is cold as ice.

“Hey,” says Simmons, loud enough to get everyone’s attention, “anyone who’s not Agent Fitz or currently bleeding needs to get out. NOW!” I think for a moment about making the point that Foggy isn’t bleeding, but it wouldn’t help, so I just file up to the conference lounge with everyone else.

I arrive just in time to strap in for takeoff. Once we get to altitude an impromptu meeting happens where the atmosphere is tense, to put it mildly. Coulson is there, so are Hunter and Mousy Brown-Haired Girl (who looks a little less out of it than she did in the van). Karen Page has shown up (I’m not sure where they’ve had her stashed all this time but somewhere safe I hope) and she and Matt talk quietly in a corner of the lounge. I’m just about asleep on my feet and if I don’t get a cigarette soon there’s a good chance I’m gonna claw my own eyeballs out.

“You’ve put us in a very difficult position, Mr. Murdock,” Coulson starts in. Normally, Coulson is
pretty affable, but not now. He’s not really angry. He seems more exasperated than anything else.

“Look,” says Murdock, “I did what I had to do. If we’d waited around Foggy would be dead right now.”

“If you’d waited for five minutes we could have gone in there with a plan and proper intel. As it was we had to walk into a very fluid situation without the right operational preparation. We’re lucky things didn’t turn out worse.” Hunter snorts.

“Who were those commando dudes?” I ask, trying to get the conversation off topics that are likely to result in an immediate brawl.

“I don’t know,” Coulson says, “but if I had to guess I’d say that Gehlen’s bosses at Roxxon have probably figured out what was going on and were in the process of getting their house in order.”

“Apparently the Fourth Reich didn’t fit with their business model,” chimes in Mousy Brown-Haired girl, speaking for the first time.

“Could be,” says Coulson. “Once again we don’t know. I just got a report from the scout team that we sent over to the other location that we downloaded from the Sonnenrad device. All they found were bodies.”

“And Gehlen, and the Kree tech?” Murdock asks.

“Not there.”

“They’re ina fuckin’ wind, aren’t they?” Hunter snaps at Murdock. Pretty clearly they’re not going to be exchanging Christmas cards any time soon.

“Look,” says Coulson, “I think maybe this collaboration wasn’t a great idea. You’re used to working alone. That’s fine. You’re good at it and believe me when I tell you that I have a lot of respect for the work that you’ve done. But we’ve got to function as a team, or this just doesn’t work.”

“That’s fine with me,” Murdock replies. “You can just drop us off at the nearest hospital and we’ll be on our way.”

“You better hope we find Gehlen pretty quick after that,” snarks Hunter, “or it won’t matter where we drop you off.”

We’re all still mulling this exchange when Agent Simmons comes up into the lounge. “Bobbi is stable,” she says. “Fortunately it was a 9mm round. She was shocky and she lost a fair amount of blood, but the bullet didn’t hit her arteries or her spine. She’ll be right as rain...in time.” Everyone breathes a sigh of relief. “Your friend Mr. Nelson might be another matter.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Murdock asks.

“He’s running a fever of 104, he’s badly dehydrated. He’s been handled pretty roughly, but there’s something else going on with him, something viral, I think. We’ve got him in an isolation unit. We’re trying to cool him down and get some fluids into him.”

“Can we take him to a hospital?” asks Karen with a note of concern.

“Not until we know what we’re dealing with. These people have been fooling around with Kree technology. There’s no telling what they’ve exposed him to. For that matter, there’s no way of knowing if we’ve all been exposed. As of now this plane is under quarantine. No one gets on or off
until we know what we’re dealing with. Also, I’ll need to take blood samples from everyone.”

“Are there any cigarettes on this plane?” I ask.

“Of course not,” says Agent Simmons in a tone like I’d just suggested that we fire up a bowl and some pornos.

“That’s fucking great.”

Since they have everything else on this bird, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that they have bedrooms as well. Not really bedrooms, so much as bunks behind doors, but it’s a place that you can lie down in privacy, which is really what I need right now. I just about get my jacket and shoes off before I’m out like a light.

I wake up sometime later. There’s sunlight coming through the window. We’re up above the clouds, I have no idea where. I don’t exactly feel refreshed, but I’ve had a lot less bourbon in the last 24 than I usually do, so on the whole I feel pretty good. I could use a drink of water and maybe some information about where I am and what’s going on.

I head forward toward where I saw Hunter go up the previous evening when he brought me pizza. How long ago that seems now. I find my way to a small galley. There’s flat screen TV on one wall with a soccer match showing on it. Fitz is sitting on the counter. Hunter is leaning against it. Both have beers in their hands. Hunter has a look on his face like he’s just come from his dog’s funeral.

“How’s Morse doing?” I venture while I scan the fridge for something to drink. Hunter seems like a guy in need of commiseration.

“Huh?” he says with a quizzical look. “Oh, yeah, Bobbi’s doing good.”

That seems a bit odd...until Fitz says, “He’s not down because of Bobbi. He’s down because West Ham are getting mullered away to Stoke.” Ok, it still seems odd, but now in a different way, since I really have no idea what those words mean. Then there’s a roar from the TV and a bunch of guys in red and white jerseys are dancing around while their opponents in maroon and blue look despondent.

“Fuck me,” whispers Hunter, covering face with his palm. Fitz tries to stifle a laugh, and fails spectacularly.

“Laugh it up,” Hunter tells him, “but Hearts are away to Celtic tonight. We’ll see how that turns out.” I feel like I don’t really understand any of the nouns in this conversation. In any case, if Hunter’s intent is to tamp down Fitz’s mirth he is wholly unsuccessful. I still have no idea what they are talking about, but I am pretty sure that they’re both drunk. I snag a bottle of water from the fridge. It looks like the pizza’s all gone, and all the other food-type items in there need to actually be cooked so I guess I’ll let it ride.

The door to the cockpit is at the far end of the galley, so I head that way, hoping to find someone who can give me a some idea of the situation. I open it to find Agent May sitting cross legged just behind the seats, facing toward the back. On a towel in front of her there is an AR-15. I’m kind of at a loss to figure what’s going on here too, until I see her start field stripping the thing, then reassembling it at incredible speed.

“Don’t you think you should be watching where we’re going?” I ask her.
“Plane’s on autopilot,” she says, not stopping. She finishes reassembling the weapon, drops it in front of her, and taps the off button on a stopwatch that she’s got running on her phone (all still blindfolded). Then she pulls the blindfold off and looks at her time. “Damn,” she says quietly, through her teeth. Apparently even this feat was not up to her standard.

“Any news on...anything?”

“Not yet. Coulson will tell me when we know something. Then I’ll tell you.” She slides the blindfold back on and starts again. And you know, here in nutshell is why I’m not a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. I mean really. Who does this shit?

I head back to the lounge, which I find Mousy Brown-Haired Girl sprawled across a chair reading a book. She looks up at me and says, “So you’re Jessica Jones.”

“So I am. Have we met?”

“No, but I know who you are. It’s not like there are that many people who peace out of the Avengers. You’re kind of a legend.”

“To whom, the International Brotherhood of Underachievers?”

Mousy Brown-Haired Girl chuckles. “Look,” she says, “I’m not in S.H.I.E.L.D. because I’m obsessed with saving the world, or because I’m like some awesome team player. I’m here because...well, let’s just say it’s best for everyone, at least for the present. I’ve met lots of powered people. Most of them, I mean the ones that aren’t psychos, want to be part of a group, either for protection or because they’ve got some kind of boy scout complex. You were in the group of groups and you blew it off. That takes guts.”

“It takes something.” She laughs again. “What’s you’re name,” I ask her.

“I’m Daisy. Sometimes they call me Quake. I assume at this point I don’t have to explain why.”

“Because you’re some kind of FPS ninja?” I offer. She smiles at the my gag. I think I like her.

“You hungry”

“Starving,” I tell her.

“Hang here for a minute and I’ll throw something together.” She dog ears the page of her book, leaves it on the chair, and heads for the galley. While she’s gone I have a look at what she’s reading. It turns out to be a copy of The First Test by Tamora Pierce. I really loved that book when I was like 15. Her copy is worn almost to death. It used to belong to someone named Skye who wrote her name in a juvenile hand in the inside cover. I wonder what her story was. Anyway, there are definitely worse books to grow up with.

I loll around on one of the big, comfy lounge chairs for about ten minutes until Daisy comes back with two plates of waffles but butter, syrup, blueberries, the whole magilla. She hands it to me with fork and a paper napkin. Having a bit of water has reminded me how hungry I am and I don’t waste much time digging in. Neither does she, and we finish our task without any unnecessary chit chat.

“Man,” I tell her when we finish, “if I’ve got to die from some crazy Kree virus I want to do it while I’m full of waffles.

There’s another roar from the galley, followed by peals of Fitz’s laughter.
“What the hell is up with those guys?” I ask.

“Oh you know, dudes and sports. I don’t pretend to understand. Fitz is a good guy, he’s sweet. Hunter is too, even if he’s kind of a goof.”

“He doesn’t seem too concerned that his girlfriend just got shot.”

“Wife,” she corrects me. “Well, ex-wife but those two will never really separate. It’s a sort of ‘til-death-do-them-part’ kind of relationship, even though neither one of them would admit it. Trust me, the only reason he’s not down there with her is because Simmons convinced him Bobbi’s going to be ok, and because she told him to go away and let her rest.”

Not much goes on for the next few hours. The sun goes down. The lights come on. Eventually I figure out that we’re moving, although the ride in this plane is incredibly smooth. We’re far above the clouds, but eventually the cover clears and I can see the lights far below us. The lights of what I have not the faintest idea.

Coulson eventually sends word that we’re going to meet in the lounge, and within a few minutes everyone is gathered there. Well, everyone but Morse and Foggy, neither of whom is in any condition to join us. Coulson asks Simmons to give an update on their situation.

“Bobbi is coming along nicely. As for Mr. Nelson, his condition is mostly unchanged. His fever has come down a little, but not as much as we’d like. I’ve done some blood work and some other tests. He’s got antibodies in his blood that suggest a viral agent. It has some similarities to the kind of thing that we’ve seen in people exposed to Kree technology, but I can’t be sure. I’m still working through the samples I took from you lot, but so far it doesn’t look like anyone else has been exposed. The virus, or whatever it is, doesn’t appear to be airborne, but I won’t be able to get a complete picture of what this is until we get to a fully equipped medical facility.”

“When will that be?” asks Murdock.

“Soon,” says Coulson. “We’ll be landing near Dortmund in about an hour. There’s a S.H.I.E.L.D. facility there with the equipment we need.”

“Why are we going to Germany? Don’t you guys have plenty of facilities in the U.S.?”

“We’ve received intel that Gehlen and his crew have grabbed up the tech they were using and headed back to the Fatherland.”

“How do you know he’s not going to one of the other sites that Ellsworth told us about?”

“We managed to track the plane that they used, but only after the fact. It landed two hours ago at a private airfield outside of Düsseldorf.”

“I’m confused,” Karen Page says.

“I think we’re all a little confused right now, Ms. Page,” says Coulson, “but what about in particular?”

“Why do they need Ellsworth? Why were they so anxious to exchange him for Foggy?”

“Payback?” Hunter offers. “Can’t have people thinking you can just double cross the boss without some consequences.”

“Maybe,” says Agent May, “but that’s a little thin. Once he was gone the damage was done. He’s
already told us everything he knows. They’re expending an awful lot of resources for something that’s not an immediate operational necessity.”

“I’ve got another question,” I put in. Something’s just occurred to me and I wonder if it’s occurred to anyone else here. “Who shot at Ellsworth and Foggy in the park? I was thinking it was Gehlen’s guys. But they must have already been up on him if they had someone there ready to clip him. If that was the case, why hire me?”

“Ok,” Coulson says, “let’s see what we know here. Gehlen and his people have been running game inside of Roxxon. They know that Ellsworth saw something that he shouldn’t have, so they put a tail on him to make sure he doesn’t do anything about it. We’ve been assuming that Roxxon didn’t know what was going on.”

“If they had,” May says, “they’d have shut it down, or at the very least had boots on the ground long ago.”

Coulson sums up: “Maybe there’s another player that we’re not aware of. Or maybe Sonnenrad has some sort of internal leakage going on. Or maybe Roxxon has some other agenda in all of this. We can be sure that they’re set on getting ahold of that Kree technology. Even if they don’t want to use it, it’s a significant asset and if we know anything about Roxxon it’s that they are all about profit maximization.”

“In any case,” Simmons breaks in, “Mr. Nelson’s condition is still unstable. I’ve tried a couple of antibiotics to no effect. We need to try and find a sample of whatever it was that he was exposed to. And we need to find out if Ellsworth was exposed to it as well, and who he might have exposed to it in the hours between the incident in the park and when he showed up at Ms. Jones’s office.”

“I have some assets I can put on that,” says Coulson. “For the time being, job one is neutralizing that Kree technology before Gehlen can put whatever plan he has going into effect. We can assume Roxxon is now fully engaged and will be making every effort to acquire whatever this is for themselves. Gehlen has a copy of the Codex. But he must also have used it to create some kind of device capable of causing the effects and radiation that Ellsworth reported.”

“Do we have any idea where Gehlen and the Boys from Brazil went after they landed? Murdock asks.

“Not as yet,” Coulson admits.

“Germany’s an awful big place to just have a look around,” I say. My need for a cigarette is translating into despondency. “It’s gonna be like looking for a needle in a vat of sauerkraut.”

“Maybe not,” says Fitz. “I’ve been looking over some of the data that Ellsworth got from Gehlen’s people. That Kree whatever it is puts out a very specific type of radiation. I think I’ve got a search protocol set up that can detect it, assuming we can get a satellite tasked properly.”

You would think that this was a process that would move along pretty quickly. There are, Simmons informs me, not that many sources of Kree radiation on this planet, and a lot of them can be ruled out as known quantities (held by governments, non-governmental entities, Reed Richards, etc.), so you might convince yourself that a search limited to just Central Europe wouldn’t take that long. Well, you’d be wrong.

We spend the next few days hanging out on some S.H.I.E.L.D. enclosure in the middle of nowhere. Hunter, who barely speaks English, makes a run into town, returning with some liquor, about eight cases of beer (in liter bottles no less), enough bratwurst to feed a battalion of stormtroopers, and even
a couple of packs of smokes. He and Murdock seem to have buried the hatchet for now, and the
smokes have gotten him right up near the top of my Christmas card list.

I don’t see much of anybody for most of the time. Fitz and Simmons are busy in the lab. Coulson and
the other S.H.I.E.L.D. types seem otherwise engaged. I spend most of my time either standing
outside the plane smoking or hanging out with Daisy drinking peppermint schnapps (they don’t seem
to have bourbon in the stores nearby) and binge-watching Call the Midwife. I could really get to like
this girl. She can hold her liquor and she’s managed to keep things interesting with pretty limited
resources in the galley. Dinner on day two is nachos with cheese, bacon, and slices of bratwurst.
Yeah, I’m ok with that.

On day three I’m really dying to get out of here. Normally I’m not the sightseeing type, but I need to
get out and stretch my legs and I’m getting a little stir crazy on this plane. I ask Daisy if she’s
interested in going into town to have a look around.

“Dude, the closest town to our current location is Dortmund. It’d be like going sightseeing in Erie,
Pennsylvania. Lemme look into it though, maybe there’s something else nearby.” She heads back to
her cabin and comes back a few minutes later with a laptop. “Ok, check it out. About forty miles
west of here is the town of Wewelsburg. There’s a 17th century castle there that’s supposed to be the
most interesting thing in this part of the country.”

“That seems like a bit of a hike.”

“True, but we’re in like the heart of the most heavily industrialized region in Germany. There wasn’t
much here to begin with it, and the Allies bombed the crap out of everything around here during the
Second World War.”

“Couldn’t we just go to a bar instead?”

“We can do that too.”

Twenty minutes later we’re out in the compound trying to locate the keys to one of the row of Land
Rovers in the parking lot when Agent May comes striding up. Atypically, she’s not wearing body
armor, but black jeans, trainers, and a black harrington jacket over a polo shirt. If possible she looks
even more frightening than normal. It’s chilly, but I’m pretty sure she’s only wearing the jacket
because she’s packing and doesn’t want to be obvious about it. Which is probably for the best
because I think guns are kind of frowned on here.

“I’m driving,” she says, pulling out a set of keys.

“I wouldn’t have thought you were interested in sightseeing,” say Daisy.

“I’m not. Coulson told me to keep an eye on you two.” Daisy must have gotten clearance from
Coulson before we came out here. “Mount up,” she tells us. This is going to be fun, I just know it.

You really have not lived until you’ve driven with a covert operator in an environment in which,
practically speaking, there is no speed limit. At one point I look over at the instrument panel while
we’re overtaking a BMW and we’re doing 120 miles per hour. Daisy is in the back seat clutching the
handle above the window and wearing an expression like she’s watching open heart surgery. I spend
half the time wishing I had better health insurance, and the other half wishing I could switch powers
with Luke Cage. I look at May and she’s smiling. I think she just enjoys fucking with us.

We hit Wewelsburg after 30 hair-raising minutes and I am relieved that May has decided to dial it
back to slightly more moderate speeds. The town is smallish with narrow streets sitting on a hill with
the triangular castle at the crest. It’s what I’d guess would be a pretty typical German town. The streets are narrow and the houses on the tall side. It’s just after noon but there aren’t a lot of people around. I guess this place is probably pretty touristy when it’s warmer, but it’s cold and threatening to rain.

“We gotta get something to eat, I’m starving,” Daisy announces. May seems ok with this. We find a little place. It’s dark inside with old school decor and a fire in the fireplace. The waiter has a bit of English, and before too long we’re sitting in front of heaping plates of potatoes and pork chops, and a couple of liters of beer. May looks on disapprovingly, but I’m famished, I haven’t had a shower or a change of clothes in days, and I need a little comfort.

When May goes to the can, Daisy scoots off to the bar, returning with four shots of something and two more beers. I don’t know what the shots are, but they go down like butterscotch mixed with lighter fluid. After I’m sure they’re staying down I actually start to feel pretty good. Daisy ditches the evidence before May gets back. When she does return she seems really annoyed.

“Those drinks look like they’ve gotten fuller.”

“We got a second round,” says Daisy. “It’s nothing to worry about, we’re adults.”

“It’s not you guys I’m worried about,” May says with a scowl, “it’s the bystanders.”

We finish up and head for the castle. It’s gotten blustery outside, but the liquor is keeping me warm and I can actually smoke out here.”

“Those things will kill you,” May tells me out of the side of her mouth.

“There’s a lot of shit around likely to kill me a long time before these things do.”

A couple of blocks further on Daisy and I are goofing around and laughing when May says, “I think we’re being followed.”
Chapter 10

Agent May is a pretty serious ninja. I'll just get that out there in case you haven’t picked up on it. Clearly, picking out a tail on a relatively empty street is probably not the most difficult thing she has to do, but now she’s in a situation in a foreign country, (probably) packing a very illegal firearm, and with two buzzed amateurs, so she slips into lockdown mode quickly.

“Here’s how we’re going to play this,” she tells us without stopping. “Don’t look around. When we get to the next block I’m going check out one of the shops. We’ll have a little ‘see you later’ moment there and you guys will walk on. Stay nonchalant. I'll call you in five minutes and let you know where we’re going to rendezvous.”

“What if they try to grab us?” Daisy asks with a sunny, fake smile.

“Try not to kill anyone.”

About a block further on we come to a show that sells coffee beans and a seemingly unrelated collection of knick knacks. May gives us each a sort of girl hug (this is a very weird experience) and goes in, while Daisy and I go on our way. We try to make a show of talking and laughing, even while we’re discussing our situation.

“I wonder how May spotted the tail, ha ha ha?”

“I dunno, but she’s got skills, hee hee hee.”

“Anyone who tries to grab us is gonna get a fuckin’ face punch, hoo hoo hoo.”

You get the drill.

We noodle around in what passes for downtown in this place for a while, trying to look as carefree as possible. After a while Daisy’s phone buzzes. She answers, smiles, says, “Ok, got it,” and hangs up. She does a quick map search, then says, “Come on, we’re meeting May in a bar across the street from the castle.”

We stroll into the place, which is about as dark as kitschy as the place we had lunch in. May is posted up in a corner reading a copy of Der Spiegel.

“You speak German?” I ask as we sit down.

“Na klar,” she says, not looking up.

A waiter shows up with three large mugs of coffee. I take a big gulp. Turns out it’s espresso with a consistency halfway between coffee and 40 weight motor oil. There must be half a dozen shots in this thing. The whole lower half of my body tightens and I feel like my eyeballs are going to shoot out of my head.

Daisy is having about the same experience. She has a look on her face like she just swallowed a live hand grenade and manages to choke out, “Damn!”

“Sorry,” May says, “I need you guys as focused as possible.”

“Did you see who was tailing us?” Daisy asks.
“No,” May says, “they were too good. I only figured out that it was happening because I saw the same shoes on a guy wearing different clothes.” Ok, let’s pause here and take note of the fact that May is apparently walking down the street memorizing the shoes of all the people she sees. Anyway, then she says, “I think they must have put it together on very short notice. If they’d had the right number of people I probably wouldn’t have caught it.”

“Any idea who it is?”

“Dunno. Ordinarily I might have thought one of the German counterterrorist outfits, maybe KSK or GSG9. They like to keep an eye on powered people when they get in country. But they’re generally a bit less spur of the moment than these people are.”

“Where do we go from here?” I ask. The caffeine is making me edgy and I’m really in the mood to smack someone. I mean, all I’m trying to do is have a little “me” time here. How dare they get in the way of that (whoever the hell “they” are)?

“We’re going to go into the castle. It will be easier to get a handle on who else is there. Plus there is security around, so chances are they won’t try anything unless they’re really stupid.”

“Ok, I’m not a secret agent,” I point out unnecessarily, “but isn’t the point of castle that there’s only one way in and out.”

“There are lots of ways out, for us anyway. The two of you could jump us over the walls if need be.”

“Or break through them,” Daisy adds, helpfully.

“I think we can probably get through this without destroying any German cultural treasures.” Daisy seems a little crestfallen at this, but since she’s lit up on enough caffeine to jump start a locomotive this passes quickly. May surreptitiously hands us comm units under the table. I go to the can and put mine in the stall. Daisy follows suit when I get back.

“Do you think we should maybe call Coulson?” Daisy asks.

“Already did. I told him I didn’t think this was the kind of think where we’re going to need to call in backup.” Given what’s been going on lately this sounds a little optimistic, but May seems to know her stuff, so I defer to her judgment.

Five minutes later we’re strolling up to the front of the local castle. It’s got a long, grey stone front with circular towers at each end and a heavy bridge built over a ditch. The bridge leads to a sallyport, which lets out into a triangular courtyard with steep walls. It’s starting to rain again. May buys three entry tickets for us from the little kiosk near the gate. Daisy grabs a guidebook and we head inside a set of double wooden doors. We come into a long room with display cases and paintings on the walls, the kind where everyone one wearing armor and every child looks like a miniature adult. A scattering of other tourists are wandering around noncommittally.

“Keep your eyes open,” May says quietly, pretending to look at a case full of very old school looking short swords. Daisy is busily thumbing through the guide.

“Hey, check this out,” she says conversationally. “According to this, this castle was extensively renovated in 1934.” May looks up, right eyebrow cocked. “Yeah, it says here that it was considered to be the spiritual home of the SS.” May facepalms and that feeling of vertigo that I’ve been feeling on and off for the last few days returns with a vengeance.

“Ok,” May tells us, “the day trip is over. We’re getting out of here.” She says this in a tone that suggests we’re about to head off the nearest D’Agostino’s (or whatever they have around here) but
there is a note of anger that’s hard as steel underneath.

We head back to the door, but May pulls up short when we reach it. A crowd of people, twenty or more, is coming in through the gate. They’re dressed like tourists, but they all have the same straw colored hair. They fan out in the courtyard. Three or four of them start heading for the door. One has his hand inside his jacket in a way that usually means that there’s a strap in there somewhere.

May grabs the guide book from Daisy and flips to the floor plan. She changes our direction as nonchalantly as possible and moves us toward a door at the end of the room.

“I’m pretty sure we can take these guys,” Daisy offers as we stroll along. May doesn’t answer, and even I can see that that is a bad idea. I don’t know how good she is at modulating whatever it is that comes out of her. But I did see her knock over a whole stand of pine trees and I really don’t want to know how that stuff would work in a confined space. Also, although I don’t pretend to know much about German culture or international relations, I’m pretty certain that blowing a hole in the side of this joint would not go down well.

We follow May through the door at the end of the room. It leads to a long, wide hall with doors at the far end.

“What’s the plan here?” I ask.

“We’re going to get to an upper floor and jump one of the windows.”

“Why don’t we do it on the first floor?”

“Because they all have bars on them. Or the ones out front did, so I’m assuming the rest do.” Daisy starts to say something which I’m guessing is along the lines of how easy it would be for her to blast her way through. May puts a finger to her lips and leads us through the hall.

We’re heading for a door on the right side wall at the far end, and we’ve almost reached it when the door that we came in through bursts open and the boys from Brazil start pouring through. We make the door, then take a hard right into one of those stone spiral staircases that every castle in the movies seems to have. At the second floor we head down a wide hallway. May keeps trying the doors on the left hand side until she finds one that’s open. We pile through it. May closes it behind us and listens. I stay next to her. We can hear a large number of feet coming into the hallway outside.

“Uh guys,” Daisy says, “I think we’ve got a problem.” She’s pointing to the windows, and specifically the latticework of iron bars across them.

We all back up to the middle of the room. “The new play,” May tells us, “is we pound enough of these guys to make the rest back off, then make a break for the roof.” We don’t have to wait long. The door flies open and Nazis (well, that’s who I assume they are) come streaming in. There’s no chitchat at all. The fighting just starts and it goes from zero to crazy in less than five seconds. Some of them come at us with those sort of telescoping clubs that security people always seem to have. Others just go with good old fashioned fists.

I try to use the ones who come near me like bowling balls, knocking the others around like pins. May and Daisy have a more individualized approach. May has some serious kung fu going on. She’s smoother, more efficient than Murdock is. He fights like he’s full of pure, weaponized aggression. May fights like a concert pianist, gracefully and with no wasted motion or effort. She is so purely in control of her body and its actions, it’s kind of mesmerizing, and I have to keep reminding myself that I have my own business to take care of.

Daisy can really hold her own without using her mojo, which is probably for the best given where
we are. The action is pretty frenzied for...I don’t know how long. A couple of minutes? Half an hour? No telling, really. But after how ever long May manages to slam and wedge the door and we have a few seconds to think about our next move. There are unconscious Nazis lying all around the room amidst the wreckage of broken tables and chairs.

We all stand around looking at each other, checking to see if anyone is hurt and generally taking stock.

“Any idea how many more are out there?” Daisy asks.

“A dozen, maybe more,” says May, who’s got the beginnings of a pretty good shiner on her left eye. I’m really shocked that anyone got close enough to lay a glove on her.

“Where’d they all come from?”

“Um, this is like Nazi Disneyland here. Next time maybe Google your vacation spots before you go.”

The two of them start bickering, which is a little weird given our current circumstances. I’m standing next to May, and Daisy is standing in front of us with her back toward the door. I mention this because it makes the the next thing make a bit more sense. I’m trying to get the two of them back on task when Daisy pushes me to the side. I look around in time to see that one of the dudes who I thought was lying unconscious behind me has actually gotten up, grabbed a table leg, and is in the process of moving to smack me with it. I only really get a brief look at him. Daisy raises up her hand (in a way that makes me think of The Supremes doing “Stop in the Name of Love.”) The guy flies backward, fast. I expect that he’s going to hit the window, but then that disintegrates. As does the wall around it. The guy, the window, and about a 10x10 section of wall explode outward with a kind of a tearing sound. There’s an intense wave of force that goes through the room, then a smell like ozone.

We all stand looking at the gigantic hole in the wall for a minute. Little bits of masonry are falling off the edges of the hole and the room is full of dust or smoke or both.

Daisy gets a kind of a sheepish look on her face. “My bad,” she says and tries to stifle a laugh.

There’s a moment at which I think that May is actually literally going to burst into flame. Instead she just manages to say, “Oh...my...god!” through teeth clenched so hard I think they’re going to explode.

Then she gets herself together and says, “Time to go.” Daisy goes to the edge of the hole. We follow. We look down on the ditch, which now had the remains of wall lying in it. The guy is laying in a pile of debris a little further out. He seems to be moving around a little, so I don’t think he’s dead. Good thing he landed on a grassy slope, and that whatever it was that Daisy did to him didn’t smash every bone in his body. I mean, it would have served him right, but still.

May gets us going again. “I need you to jump me down there so we can get out of here before emergency services show up and we all get arrested.” I grab her by the waste and jump her down across the ditch. Daisy points her hands at the ground and pops herself down next to us. We’re on some waste ground and if we hurry we should be able to get back to our ride without too much hassle. There’s a stand of trees just in front of us, and once we hit it we bear right, back into the part of town where we parked. I can hear sirens in the distance.

“We were the victims here,” Daisy says plaintively as we walk along the street trying to look innocent.
“You better hope they don’t catch us,” May says quietly, “because if they do they’re going to put us in whatever the German version of Gitmo is, and I really don’t want to go there.” She doesn’t break her neutral expression as she says this.

We drive back to the S.H.I.E.L.D. station in silence. Daisy is in the back seat with her head in her hands. May drives a bit more moderately than she did on the way there. I think she wants to try to keep a low profile. But she is clearly hot. She’s got the look on her face of a mother who’s just had to pick her daughters up at the police station on a shoplifting beef. I can hear her teeth grinding.

An hour later we’re all sitting in Coulson’s office on the jet. Coulson is talking to someone in German, which I don’t speak, but the substance of the discussion is pretty clear. All the time he’s staring at us, so hard I keep expecting beams to shoot out of his eyes Scott Summers style. He hangs up and puts his phone down like it’s a live hand grenade.

“That was the Interior Minister. Of Germany. I’ve probably managed to keep the three of you out of a military prison. For now.” He says this in a tone that suggests rage contained by the slightest of margins.

Daisy starts to say something in response, but Coulson holds up a finger and she thinks better of it.

“In addition to blowing out a hundred square feet of wall, you structurally damaged both the ceiling and the floor OF A CASTLE BUILT IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY!” Coulson loses his cool for just a second, but then gets it together. “Ms. Jones, why does chaos seem to break out wherever you go?”

“Seriously? Two dozen neonazis decide they’re going to party tough on us and it’s my fault? I was just hanging out.”

“This is on me,” May says, “they should never have been in that position.”

“Agreed,” Coulson says. “We need to get you three out of the country before the Germans change their mind and want to charge you.”
Chapter 11

Coulson convenes another one of those meetings to let everyone know what’s going on.

“Some S.H.I.E.L.D. assets have come back online. I’m guessing that Mr. Murdock, Ms. Page, and Ms. Jones have affairs to take care of back in New York, and since Mr. Nelson’s condition seems to have stabilized I think it’s best if we get you back there. There’s a private jet waiting for you at an airfield near here. Agents May and Johnson will accompany you.”

“What’s going to happen to Foggy?” Karen Page asks.

“We’re going to get him into a S.H.I.E.L.D.-affiliated medical facility in Staten Island. It’s important to us that he gets right, but it’s also important that we keep an eye on whatever Kree pathogen he’s been exposed to.

“From here on in this is a S.H.I.E.L.D. matter. We thank you for your assistance.”

In pretty short order they get us loaded into a van. Foggy is on a gurney with Simmons at his side, monitoring his condition.

“His fever has come down a bit,” she says, “and his vitals are stable. But his still hasn’t regained consciousness, which is concerning.”

When Coulson said a jet what he meant was a Lear Jet, and I have to say that the accommodations are pretty sweet. No smoking (of course) but the minibar is very well supplied. May is in the cockpit. Daisy is in the back with her phone texting someone about every ten seconds. I really wonder who a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent is texting buddies with, but whatever. Murdock and Karen are sitting across from me. Karen is asleep. Murdock could be, but he’s wearing shades so it’s difficult to tell. Foggy is still on the gurney across the aisle. Simmons sits next to him, periodically checking his vitals and thumbing through papers that are covered with mathematical equations (I think anyway).

It’s an eight hour flight and there isn’t much chit chat. I drink until I sleep, wake up a few hours later feeling hung over, and spend the balance of the flight nursing a beer and a bottle of water. We touch down at Kennedy and taxi over to the private hangar where S.H.I.E.L.D. stores their fleet. I couple of S.H.I.E.L.D. guys come on board and help Simmons get Foggy down to a waiting ambulance.

“I’ll get him squared away,” she tells Murdock. “I’ve texted you the address of the facility, so if you want or need to come by, feel free. Otherwise I’ll call you as soon as I know anything.” Murdock thanks her. He seems like he’s looking off into the distance, even though I know that can’t be the case. I know he’s worried. I am too. But more than anything I want to get something to eat and lie in my own bed for a few hours. This whole thing has been like dipping back into a life I didn’t like much the first time around and I’m really relieved to be out of it.

Just outside the hangar I see Karen’s Audi, which they must have retrieved from the golf course parking lot. Say what you want about S.H.I.E.L.D., they are detail oriented.

“Come on,” Karen calls to me, “we’ll give you a lift into the city.” She’s wearing a tracksuit that the good folks at S.H.I.E.L.D. laid on her. Murdock is walking beside, already slipping back into his “I’m a blind guy” persona. Sometimes it’s easy to forget that he is actually blind. His other four senses are so jacked up that he responds to a lot of things in the same way that someone who can see would. Anyway, he can’t drive, so it’s for the best that Karen’s here.

An hour later I’m back at my place with a still warm container of kung pao, a bottle, and Netflix
streaming. I’ve also got a new phone, since I had to ditch my old one. Fortunately I have a cloned version of the sim card on my laptop, so I haven’t lost all that much, although for some reason my copy of Let Go won’t seem to pop up anymore. Oh well, just gonna sit here binge watching Don’t Trust the B*** in Apt. 23 until I fall asleep.

It doesn’t take me long to slip back into normal life. I spend the next couple of weeks doing little gigs: taking a few pictures here, tracking down a lost relative there, nothing too stressful. Probably drinking a little more than I should, but I’m drinking to forget, or something like that. The weather’s getting cold, but it seems like the city is getting colder. Each case that I touch seems to tap me a little further into the flow of human misery. While I’m sitting on a rooftop taking the umpteenth picture of the umpteenth sleazeball stepping out on his wife, or running numbers, or shaking someone down I’m really starting to feel like I’m covered in dirt and just can’t get clean.

For the first couple of weeks I kept waiting to see a mushroom cloud in the distance, or for CNN to report that there was now just a smoking crater where Munich used to be. I talk to Murdock a couple of times about Foggy. He seems to be a holding pattern: not getting worse, but not getting better. Murdock’s taking fewer clients, since there’s only one guy there to carry the load, so he doesn’t have a lot of jobs for me, which is having an unfortunate effect on my revenue stream. Still, I manage to get by.

I’m kicking around the office late one Friday afternoon when my phone buzzes. It’s Murdock’s office number, which means it’s Karen Page. That’s a little unusual, since Murdock usually gives me his jobs directly, but it’s not completely unheard of.

“Hi Jess, how’s it going?”

“Oh you know, teaching myself particle physics while I wait for my millions to start rolling in.”

“Are you doing anything right now?”

“I dunno, I was thinking about spinning up some episodes of Pawn Stars while I wait to see what the evening holds.”

“You feel like getting a drink?” Ok, that’s not what I expected. I’ve known Karen for a while now, but only through Murdock and we’ve never hung out on our own. But whatever. I’m not doing anything, and if she wants to hang who am I to say no?

“Sure, maybe a few. You got a place in mind?”

“How about Rudy’s on 9th Avenue?”

“Sounds good. We can probably still get a table there if we hurry.”

“And they’ve got free hot dogs.”

“Are you some kind of telepath? Because it’s like you’re reading my mind.”

Forty five minutes later I’ve posted up in a booth at Rudy’s looking at a paper plate that used to have two hotdogs on it and trying to decide whether to move from straight bourbon to something more complicated. Karen ordered us four dogs and four shots when we walked in, which gave me the impression she’s in this thing for the long haul. She orders up a couple more shots and a mug of Genesee to wash them down.

“Do you know how I met Matt?” she asks. I don’t. She’s been Murdock’s secretary for as long as I’ve known him. I assumed she just answered an ad like everyone else. “He saved my life. I didn’t
know him then, but someone tried to have me killed.”

“Who would want you dead?”

“Some people I worked for. I saw something I shouldn’t have. They tried to frame me for murder. Matt and Foggy got me off. Then they started trying to tie up all the loose ends. I was a loose end.”

“Must have been rough.”

“I was a lot softer then.” No doubt. Karen looks like a nice girl on the outside. Inside she’s tougher than a $2 steak. “Anyway, the first time I saw Matt as the other guy he was getting his ass kicked in my apartment in the middle of the night.

“It took me a long time before I made the connection between the two. Even when I’d been working for Matt and Foggy for a couple of years. Matt’s cagey about who he tells. He thinks knowing puts people in danger. He’s right too.”

This I know for a fact. I also know that one of Wilson Fisk’s guys jumped her at one point. She ended up grabbing the guy’s steel and popping him with it. I don’t know if she knows that I know, so I don’t bring it up.

There’s silence for a couple of minutes. The Karen asks, “How did you meet Matt?”

How much to tell her? Not everything by a long shot. But some things it’s worth her knowing.

“He saved my life too, in a manner of speaking. I was in a bad shape a couple of years ago. I’d had...a bad breakup. Really bad.”

“ Toxic relationship?”

“Like a Superfund site. He was controlling. Just couldn’t let go.”

“But you managed to get out of it?”

“I made a clean break. Anyway, I was a in a very bad place. A friend knew Murdock, professionally, if you get my drift. He reached out to him. Murdock helped me get back on my feet, helped me get my business going. But he was also someone to talk to, someone who I knew was on my side.” That friend, by the way, Carol Danvers. How she knew Murdock I do not know, but it’s a good thing she did.

“That’s Matt for you.” Karen sounds resigned.

“Yeah, I can imagine it’s not all upside.”

“Well, I know he can take care of himself. But I also know that he has a very dangerous part to his personality. You don’t end up charging around like that unless you’ve got some kind of big hole to fill. Sometimes it makes me sad that I can’t fill it myself.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. I don’t think there’s enough water in the ocean to fill it.”

“He’s a complicated guy. He can be so quiet, so in control. But there’s something smoldering in there. It never goes out. Sometimes it flares up, and then I really worry. I think it has something to do with his father.” Murdock’s father was a b-grade fighter who got clipped by the mob because he refused to take a dive. This much I know. And it explains a lot. He got a nose for injustice and goes after it like someone he hates from the old neighborhood. He walks a fine line, but he simply will not
deviate from doing right as he sees it (so to speak). He’s like Frank Castle in that respect, but also as
different from the Punisher as night is from day.

I would very much like to say something comforting at this point. But there is simply nothing to say.
This is Karen just saying some words that she needs to say, the kind that you can’t run out in front of
normal people. If you’re not in the life you just don’t know what’s going down. Honestly, I envy
people like that. I know too much. It’s already cost me big, and there’s a very good chance that
someday it will cost me everything.

We spend another couple of hours at Rudy’s, during which the conversation is a lot less heavy.
Karen Page has two things going for her. One is a wealth of hilarious stories about working for a
defense attorney. The other is a really startling tolerance for alcohol. Damn. This girl can put it away.

10:00 rolls around. Karen has been giving me a rundown of New York’s dumbest criminals (the
winner: the dude who wrote his bank robbery note on the back of a copy of his birth certificate).
Now we decide by mutual consent that we should call it a night. Probably for the best. I feel like
we’re friends now, but we’re not quite besties and we don’t need to be getting up in each other’s
binge drinking just yet.

I walk with her over to her place. Not because I think she needs it (she can really take care of herself)
but mostly just to get a little air. I’m wandering back toward my place on the side streets when a big
black car pulls up beside me. A window rolls down and a guy says, “Excuse me, Ms. Jones.”

I ignore him. Rando street encounters like this don’t usually end well. But he persists. “Jessica Jones,
private investigator. That’s you isn’t it?” Something about having a car roll up on you in an empty
street at night is inherently threatening. People who have legitimate business with me can call my
office, I’m in the yellow pages.

“Sorry pal,” I say without looking at him, “business hours are Monday through Friday, from 9:00 to
screw off.”

“Ms. Jones, I really think you’ll want to hear what I have to say.” I stop and look at him. Mostly I
can see his face: older guy, full head of grey hair, grey eyes, I can see the top of what looks to be an
expensive suit. What the hell does he want with me? Nothing good. The only question now is
whether the end of our brief encounter is pleasant or not.

“Look dude, you’ve got a straight nose, and a lot of teeth, but those things could change, you feel
me?”

“Ms. Jones,” he says, his tone darkening, “I have information about Foggy Nelson, his condition, do
you want to hear it?” Nope. At this my blood is running cold. If this dude has information about
Foggy it means he’s one of Gehlen’s people, or he’s hooked into Roxxon, or that he has some
connection to the whole Kree thing. None of those things have a very good long term outlook for
me. Time to make a move.

There is a three story red brick building right next to me. I’m going to head for the roof and blow out
of here. But I don’t want this guy (and whoever is with him) trying to follow me. I walk up to the
front of the car and smash my hand on the windshield, hard enough to shatter it, but not quite so hard
that it falls inward. Then I make a jump for the rooftop. I come up a couple of feet short, but I
manage grab the ledge and scrabble my way up on top. Real smooth. Still, now I’ve got a few
minutes to get away..

I hop a few buildings, mostly kind of aimlessly, hoping that my lack of direction will make me more
difficult to find. Eventually I end up on top of the New York Public Library. The roof is broad and
dark, and although it’s lower than a lot of the other buildings around here, it’s actually a pretty
unobtrusive place to hang out. I light a cigarette and sit down, listening to the late night city.

After about half an hour my phone buzzes. It’s Murdock.

“Hey Matt, funny thing, I was just thinking about you.”

“Really?” he says. “My bubbly insouciant personality does tend to cause excitement among the ladies.”

“Ahh, no, not with this one anyway.”

“Oh well,” he laughs, “can’t win ‘em all.”

“Anyway, I was just thinking about you because some jackass rolled up on me in the street claiming to have some information about Foggy.”

“What was it?”

“Don’t know. I feel like I’ve gotten jumped by Nazis and threatened with Kree stuff enough lately. If someone involved in that crap wants to get in touch with me they can email me.”

There’s a long pause, which portends a change in the tone of the conversation. “Maybe we should see what they have to say.”

“If you think I’m getting in a car with some random guy you’re nuts.”

“We can make the meeting on our terms. Look, Foggy’s not getting better. At all. They can just about prevent his organs from shutting down, but no one at that S.H.I.E.L.D. medical facility has any idea about how to reverse his condition.”

“OK, but what do you think it is that these guys are going to tell us? Or to offer us? And don’t you think that whatever it is is going to come with some very heavy duty strings?”

“Look Jess, I just don’t know what else to do. My hope is that we can turn these guys, use them to get what we want.”

This isn’t like Murdock. He’s not really a go out on a limb sort of guy. I mean, he is if the limb we’re talking about is trying to get justice for stray kittens, or giving a hard-drinking PI a second chance. But he generally doesn’t go into things without planning them through in a lot of detail. Maybe it has something to do with not being able to see (at least not like the rest of us do). Maybe he needs to factor out as many uncertainties as he can. Whatever. This is loose by his standards and it’s making me nervous. Still I’ve had a few and Murdock is a friend. In the cold light of day (so to speak) I might feel differently, but in this moment I’ll hang with him if he needs me. And if this thing breaks down like I’m pretty sure it’s going to, he’ll definitely need me.

Two days later I’m sitting in the reading room of the New York Public library thumbing through some really half-assed women’s magazine. I felt like I needed to be reading something if I was going to hang out here, but articles about Brazilian waxing and how to have better sex really make me want to barf. Hmm, five signs that you may be an alcoholic. That might have some interests…

Anyway, Murdock and I decided we were going to meet the Roxxon people. We wanted to make it somewhere safe, since they’re pretty well known for their institutional preference for grabbing people and leaning on them. The NYPL is a great place to have a meeting like this (for any of you out there who might be considering this line of work). There are cameras everywhere and every third person in there is some kind of security guard. No way to grab someone without making a big scene.
Murdock has me wired up on comms. He doesn’t want to come inside for this thing. He’s hanging out on the roof, keeping an eye out in case things get sideways.

The guy next to me, who is reading a copy of A Treatise on Human Nature by Who the Fuck Cares keeps giving me weird looks. I keep trying to give him a look that suggests my readiness to kick his ass. I need some space at this table and for some reason he came and sat down near me. After ten or fifteen minutes and a dozen dirty stares he finally gets the hint and takes a hike. A couple of minutes later the guy from the car from the other night shows up.

“This is a nice place,” he says sitting down, “come here often?”

“Yes, this is my spot. Listen, can we keep this brief, they’ve got the first Harry Potter book on hold for me and I need to good pick it up.”

He gives me a nonplussed sort of look, then says, “We need you to do something for us.”

“Who is ‘we,’ and why me?”

“We are Roxxon Energy, as I’m sure you knew before you asked. And why you? Maybe that will be clearer when I explain what we need done. We need to get in touch with Robert Ellsworth.”

“So let me get this straight: you want me to set him up so you can ice him?”

“No, Ms. Jones, we don’t want to kill him. Actually, my employers would very much like to offer him a job.”

“Really, because it seemed a lot like your buddy Gehlen was a lot more interested in burning him than in setting up his 401k.”

“Gehlen is a loose cannon, and not representative of Roxxon’s corporate policy or interests.”

“From what I understand about your ‘corporate policy,’ Gehlen doesn’t seem that far off the fairway.”

“Do you know what he was planning to do with the Kree device?”

“I have a pretty good idea, or at least the S.H.I.E.L.D. types do.”

“Well, I put it to you that killing off 98% of the Earth’s population is not what you’d call an optimum growth strategy for corporate development.”

“Ok, fair enough. So why do you want to talk to Ellsworth? I thought Gehlen just wanted to shut him up. Now that he’s told S.H.I.E.L.D. about the Kree tech it seems like the cat’s out of the bag.”

“How much do you know about Robert Ellsworth?”

“Seems like your average technician. Boring, married to his job. Am I missing something?”

“Did you know that he has an eidetic memory? When he saw the schematics for the Kree technology they imprinted on his brain. Mr. Ellsworth has the capacity to give us a lot of information about how the machine actually works. And let’s be clear Ms. Jones, we’re trying to stop Gehlen from bringing this thing on line. We stand to lose a lot of market share if he manages to make his idiotic Fourth Reich a reality.”

“Supposing I believe what you’re saying here, why not tell this story to the S.H.I.E.L.D. people?”

“We don’t have an especially positive relationship with S.H.I.E.L.D.”
“I’m completely shocked by that. I bet they wouldn’t be too stoked on the idea of giving you the blueprints for a Kree terraforming weapon.”

“No, they aren’t very open to that proposition. They view us purely as a threat, and they don’t really need anything from us. You, on the other hand, and your colleague Mr. Murdock, well that’s another story.”

I have to check back for a minute and remind myself that he doesn’t know that Murdock is the Daredevil (it’s really hard to keep track of who knows which secret identity these days). “What is it that we need from you? And why do you think that we’ve got any traction with S.H.I.E.L.D.?"

“For a start, you need the cure to what’s ailing Foggy Nelson. Within a couple of weeks his organs will shut down and there’s not much that human medical science can do about it. He’s been infected with a sort of Kree designer virus. We have the cure.

“As far as getting S.H.I.E.L.D.’s attention, we have video of the two of you and Robert Ellsworth boarding a S.H.I.E.L.D. C-130. Here, I’ll show you.” He pulls out his phone and spins up a video. Sure enough it’s us heading across a field toward Coulson’s C-130, then a wave of something hits the screen at it goes black. “I think you get the idea.”

“Look, Murdock and I have hung with the S.H.I.E.L.D., and they did get us out of the way of Gehlen’s goon squad. But Coulson came to us, not the other way around. What makes you think they’re going to give us access to an asset like Ellsworth? And even if they did, you think they’re going to let us drive him off to a sit down with you guys?”

“Well, Ms. Jones, you used to be an Avenger, so I’m sure you can be creative. You don’t need to take him anywhere. You just need to give him this.” He holds of a cheap burner. “Just let us make him an offer. He doesn’t need to leave where he is. I’m serious Ms. Jones, we just want to talk.”

“Suppose we make this happen. How do we know you even have the cure?”

“Tell you what. I’ll give you this as a down payment.” He holds out a small white packet. “Apply this to Mr. Nelson’s bare flesh. This will give you proof of what we’ve got. But make sure to do it quick. You have about five seconds after you break the seal to apply it before it evaporates. Wouldn’t want the lovely and talented Agent Simmons working her magic.”

“Fine,” I tell him, pocketing the phone and the packet, “I’ll take these to Murdock and we’ll see what we can do. But if you jam us you are going to have a bad problem. And if Foggy Nelson dies I guarantee you that there won’t be a place on this planet where you'll be safe.”

“It’s just that sort of dedication that we’re looking for, Ms. Jones. We’ll be in touch.” He gets up and walks out. And now I have a few more problems that I don’t quite know how to solve.

I buzz Murdock from the library steps and he meets me in a bar on 7th Avenue. It’s Murdock’s kind of place: a really seedy shithole. I guess being blind has its advantages, but given how good his sense of smell is, I can’t believe he can hang in this dump for more than ten minute. As for me, the drinks have alcohol in them and beyond that I don’t care that much.

“So did this guy seem like he was on the up and up?” Murdock asks.

“Well, I can’t read heartbeats, but he didn’t seem to be obviously lying. On the other hand, he’s some sort of upper level Roxxon corporate wonk, so I’m sure he crooked as a three dollar bill.”

“One thing he wasn’t lying about was Foggy. I talked to Agent Simmons the other day. She seems to think that even though his fever is under control whatever it is is damaging his organs. It didn’t seem
like they’d made any progress at all.”

“First things first. Let’s see if this pad or whatever it is actually works. If it does...then we move on to the next thing.”

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