

When my adrenaline finally settled, I double checked the bunker for Loki, confirming that he wasn't hiding in some random corner, snickering to himself while we looked like idiots. By the time I was done, far as I could tell, he had flown the coop. Doing my best to fight off the horrifying realization that Loki could be fucking ANYWHERE, I headed back to the main room, arriving just in time to watch Ema approach the last mind control victim with an anti mind control band.

“Hold on!” I called out, fast walking back to her, my helmet folding away as I walked. “Don't break him free yet.”

“Why not?” Steve asked, Ema already wordlessly following my instructions and stepping back.

“Because I want to run some scans first,” I said, gesturing to Clint. “We need some sort of proof that the anti mind control... the anti-cuffs work, and with no side effects.”

I flicked out my cabinet of tricks and pulled out both a medical scanner and a universal scanner, closing the cabinet doors but leaving it deployed for now. I stepped closer to the sleeping soldier, scanning him with the medical scanner.

“Interesting...” I said, reading the scanners screen. “The scanner registers that the person is being influenced, but not by what, or how it's influencing them...”

Steve stepped in behind me, reading the display over my shoulder as I paged through. I double checked that their mind wasn't being altered, and that they were not aware or being mentally tortured. Their mental state was happy and asleep.

With my medical scan complete I passed that scanner to Steve so he could continue reading, while I directed the universal scanner to the victim, running another scan and reading through the results.

“Okay, there doesn't appear to be any side effects from the scepter's influence, at least none that either of my scanners can find,” I said, still paging through the results. “This guy is a cop, how did he end up here?”

“He pulled over one of the trucks,” Clint explained, sitting on a crate nearby. “Loki zapped him so he would give the all clear and keep anyone from getting suspicious in the area.”

I nodded and kept scrolling through the cops information. Eventually I reached a page for status effects, clicking on it to expand. He was being affected by something the scanner called Mind Manipulation, which was twisting what his mind saw and how it interacted with the world, convincing the user into aiding and helping Loki. It was a pretty powerful effect.

“Damn, okay. So my universal scanner reads the mind control as some sort of mental shifting. It's not actually modifying your mind at all, just sort of twisting how it sees the world.”

“Well... that sounds horrifying” Clint asked. “But it doesn't leave any permanent damage, right?”

“It doesn't seem to...” I said, shaking my head and accepting my medical scanner back from Steve. “But let's make sure.”

I scanned and double checked Clint's status, confirming that there were no long term effects from the mind control and that he was currently being protected from mind control by the anti-cuff and that he was completely fine from the electrical explosion I had caught him in earlier. He passed me back my healing amulet when I mentioned the last bit, even when I tried to get him to keep it.

“That's one of your powerful ones right? The ones that mess with aging?” He said, shaking his head when I confirmed it. “Yeah I can't get any younger. But we need to talk soon.”

I raised an eyebrow before realizing he was talking about my offer to help him and his family.

“Alright, just let me know when you want me to stop by.” I said with a nod.

After confirming that all of our captured soldiers and scientists were fine, I made my way to Bucky, who was standing guard over the scepter. The mostly golden weapon, with its glowing heart and sharp blade, was laid out on a hip high crate, with the super soldier studiously watching over it. He eyed me as I got close, so I raised my hands.

“Just want to run a few scans,” I explained, Bucky nodding and turning to watch me, though he seemed to just be interested in what I was doing.

I pulled out the universal scanner, running its beam over the scepter and tabbing through the results. The information I saw was more or less what I expected. It was a scepter, which drew power from the blue chunk of crystal held in its end. It was capable of firing blasts of energy, mind manipulations and... exuded a constant aura to increase anger, the desire for power and ruthlessness.

“You feeling any different Bucky?” I asked, glancing at him.

“No, not particularly, why?”

“Good. The scepter is trying to mentally affect anyone in its radius by making them angrier, power hungry and more ruthless. No one without an anti-cuff should get within twenty feet.”

Bucky's eyes went wide, turning down as I showed him the information on the scanners screen.

"Yeah, alright. I'll make sure everyone knows that."

"Good. Now do me a favor, pick it up and shoot me with it a few times, I want to card a few blasts from it." I asked, my helmet re-deploying but the armor around my hand pulling back. "Aim for my hand."

"What?" He asked, looking shaken, shaking his head. "No way, it's gonna take your hand off."

"Then I'll just re-grow it," I explained with a shrug. "C'mon Bucky, consider this my payment for helping out. You know how much I love exotic energy samples..."

"It's alright Bucky," Steve said. "I'd say he earned it. Unless you would rather I do it?"

"No, I can do it," He assured his best friend, his hand reaching out to pick up the scepter. "I just don't want to hurt him."

"I'm almost positive I'll be fine," I assured him, walking to the left a bit to make sure there was nothing important behind me. "And if I'm not then I'll heal."

"Alright, alright. How do I fire this thing?"

I explained that the scepter was intent based for the most part, just point one end at your intended target and focus on firing blasts of energy. It took a few minutes of concentration, but eventually he managed to shoot a blast of blue energy out. I reached out and snagged it into a card, my enhanced durability and even more enhanced healing meant that all I got was a deep bruise and some basic burns, both of which almost immediately healed.

"See, completely fine," I said, waving my hand out. "Now hit me a few more times."

Bucky shook his head but obliged, shooting five more blasts of energy, four of which I caught, the last one slamming into the wall behind me. Bucky put the scepter down and shook his head, Steve joining him. I waved off the mistake before summoning one of the cards, examining its concepts. It had concepts of being a blast, of being weaponized energy, but overwhelmingly it was cosmic energy, flavored by something distinct. It was broad, and felt...logical, directed, almost...thinking?

"This... is incredibly similar to Tesseract energy," I explained to Ema, scratching my head. "I need to go topside, there isn't enough room for the storage shed down here. Keep an eye on things down here, will you?"

Ema nodded and I rushed through the bunker, climbing the stairs out two at a time. With a flick of my wrist I pushed out my storage shed, stepping in and grabbing a Tesseract energy storage cell, carding it and comparing the results to the blast of scepter energy. Ignoring the variation in what the energy was doing, the concepts were almost identical, they had the same exact feel of creation energy, of old cosmic energy. What set them apart was the flavor they carried. One felt... open and vast, while the other felt... almost like it was just short of thinking.

Remembering something that the scan of the Energy Cell had said, I rushed back down to the bunker, ignoring Steve and Bucking and scanning the scepter again, quickly paging through to its power source. It described the smooth blue gem as some kind of storage vessel for something incredibly powerful, just like how it had described the Tesseract.

Two sources of power, both of them giving off the same incredibly old, cosmic energy, but each of them having a slightly different flavor. I racked my brain, trying to come up with something from the comics that... would...

"Oh... fuck," I muttered, staring down at the card in my hand, my curse gettings Ema's attention. "Oh fuck."

"What is it?" My partner asked, taking a peak at the card around my shoulder.

"I... I think I figured out what the Tesseract is," I said, turning to make a beeline for Steve and Bucky, Ema following right behind me.

"Hey Maker, you figure out what was so familiar about the weapon's energy?" Steve asked, and I nodded.

"Yeah, I did," I admitted, stopping both of the soldiers. "So... how long until Shield gets here?"

"Fury sent out a few quinjets full of agents to lock this place down and scientists to analyze all the tech they dragged in," Steve explained. "They should be here in an hour or so."

"Right, okay, good, good..." I said, looking over my shoulder at the enhanced squad of soldiers keeping an eye on the sleeping, once thralls of Loki, as well as checking out the rest of the bunker. "Listen, you two trust me right?"

"Of course."

"Within reason." Bucky responded, getting an exasperated look from Steve, which he ignored. "Why?"

“Because I’m going to share some information that is a bit sensitive,” I explained before jumping right in. “That blue chunk of stone in the end? That is a containment vessel of some kind for an extremely dangerous stone. The kind of power that never ends well. The kind of thing that... that worlds burn for. I think the Tesseract is a containment vessel as well.”

“And now Loki has it,” Steve responded, looking very disturbed. “What could he do with it?”

“Basic level? Literal limitless teleportation. At more advanced levels we are talking real reality shaking stuff,” I explained, before pointing to the scepter. “But he lost this one in the process.”

“I’m afraid to ask, but what is this one capable of?” Steve asked.

“Mind control, various mind based powers like telekinesis and telepathy,” I explained. “It doesn't sound bad until you understand that the scale is horrifying, as are the implications when it comes to mental changes. We are very lucky that it didn't just wipe Clint's mind and install a loyal obedient slave mind in its place.”

“So... what do we do with it?” Steve asked, after a long moment of disgusted silence .

“I’m tempted to find a way to throw it into space,” I admitted. “But it wouldn't do much good. There is no way Loki, or whoever he stole it from or borrowed it from, is not going to come back and get it. And with the space stone, that's what's in the Tesseract, then there is nowhere we could put it that they won't be able to get to.”

“So what do we do?” Steve asked, looking down at the scepter.

“We prepare. I don't know if we have a few hours or a few days,” I explained with a shrug. “But we have an Infinity Stone, and someone is going to come looking for it, probably very soon.”

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Fury and a cadre of Shield agents and Scientists arrived around forty five minutes later, securing the location and beginning their investigation. I explained to Fury that the scepter should not under any circumstances be kept near any sort of population centers and that anyone studying it, guarding it or even just working in the vicinity of it should be wearing an Anti-cuff.

He demanded to know why, and I did my best to explain that it was made of a very rare material, and the chances of someone coming back to retrieve it were very high. He seemed to understand the seriousness of the situation, but I had no way of really knowing what he was

planning on doing. Which is why, before he had arrived, Steve and Bucky had allowed me to take several samples of the metal used to make the scepter, before using the repair tablet to fix the damage. I kept a small sliver of the metal for future experimenting, while the rest went into a tracking tablet. I could now locate the scepter anywhere on the planet.

This was also the moment that I realized that “Anywhere on the planet.” really wasn't all that good anymore, not with Loki teleporting to who knows where.

With Loki in the wind and Clint saved, we headed back to the Helicarrier, which was still moored in DC. Peggy greeted us as we stepped into the interior of the ship, leading us through the halls to a decent sized lab. Inside Tony tapped away at an advanced looking computer screen alongside another man. Sitting close by was Natasha, having a quiet conversation with Betty Ross of all people.

“Maker, Steve, Bucky, welcome back.” Natasha said, giving the three of us a smile. “Thank you for bringing him back.”

“No problem.” I answered seriously with a nod, before pointing to Tony. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“I’m here to keep you out of trouble,” Stark answered. “Which is a new, strange concept for me. I don’t like it.”

“His father created the original tech to track the Tesseract's energy signature,” Natasha explained, ignoring Tony’s response. “We are hoping he could recreate it.”

“Right, makes sense,” I nodded, turning to Betty Ross. “I recognize you, Betty Ross I believe?”

“Betty Banner now, actually,” She answered with a smile, before looking a bit curious.

I did my best to hide my surprise, though I could tell Natasha noticed. I covered my surprise with a smile of my own.

“Congratulations,” I said, before turning to the unfamiliar man who could really only be one person. “Then that must make you Bruce Banner? It’s nice to see you again.”

Bruce stepped forward, looking a bit confused before reaching out and shaking my hand.

“I’m sorry, do we know you from somewhere?” He asked, looking to his wife, who only shrugged

“We have, though I’m not surprised you don’t remember me.” I said with a smirk. “It was a bit hectic and we both look quite a bit different. I was wearing a hood, wielding a bow...?”

Both Betty and Bruce realized who I was at the same time, Bruce stepping forward to shake my hand again, this time with more energy.

"It is good to meet you again." He said, our handshake getting interrupted by a hug from Betty.

"Thank you." She said, "I don't know what you said to my father but... He has been different since Harlem. He stopped chasing Bruce."

"Seriously?" I responded, giving Natasha a shocked look, who only shrugged in response. "I... That is rather surprising. He has a reputation for being... Hard to dissuade."

"You mean being a stubborn bastard?" Betty corrected. "Harlem was a low point for him. He barely made it out without being court martialed. I think you caught him at just the right time to get something to stick. He refused to tell me what it was but... Thank you."

"If I'm honest I figured I was shouting into the void with that one but... I'm glad I could help." I admitted, genuinely happy that I could have helped give them both some peace.

"After I... came back down from the fight Betty convinced me to take her with me." Banner explained. "We were running at first but... Betty got a letter one day that explained he wasn't chasing us. I would have just assumed it was a trap but..."

"He swore on my mothers grave," Betty explained, her face solemn. "So our running turned into just traveling... and eventually into a honeymoon."

"Well congratulations, both of you," I said, smiling at them both. "And not to diminish the reunion, but what are you doing here in DC?"

"They are the second half of the back up plan," Natasha explained. "Dr. Banner the world's top expert on gamma radiation, which the Tesseract gives off in low amounts."

"Right, Makes sense. But have they gotten the news yet?" I asked, looking back to the redhead superspy.

"That you let Loki toss you around like a ragdoll, then let him get away with what I can only guess is the oldest magic trick in the book?" Tony asked. "Yeah, my ex assistant was keeping us up to date."

"Good. Well I have a bad feeling that Loki might not be on Earth anymore," I admitted, getting a few startled looks. "With the Tesseract he can pop in literally anywhere, and for him there are a lot better places to prepare for whatever is next than a gutter somewhere in New York or an empty abandoned building in Russia."

“You are correct, my friend!” A loud, boisterous voice said from behind me. “Loki has many hidden hideaways and boltholes in which he may lick his wounds and recover.”

I turned to find the fully armored Thor standing in the doorway, Mjolnir strapped to his hip. He stepped into the room with a wide grin, looking confident as he looked at me.

“Thor, it's good to see you again,” I said, reaching out a hand, which Thor accepted in a warriors handshake. “I assume you are here for Loki?”

“Indeed, as well as the Tesseract. Father wishes to use it to repair the Bifrost.” Thor admitted, before fixing me with a stare. “I am also here to discuss a few things with you as well. It seems you have been creating things with materials not your own, and dabbling in magic borrowed from Asgard.”

“Uh... Is this the kind of discussion that includes fists and a hammer?” I asked nervously.

“No, not unless you refuse to listen to my fathers words,” Thor said seriously, though it lacked heat. “Come, we shall find someplace private to discuss this.”

Thor turned and walked out of the room, clearly expecting me to follow him. I looked around the room, getting a few curious looks from most of the occupants. I let out a sigh and followed the Asgardian prince, with Ema right behind me.