

# Marvel Manifestor

Chapter 181 - 181 – Interrogation

"Why do you call me Atreus?"

Loki looked at Karl, curiosity filling his eyes. For someone who prided himself on intellect, curiosity and a thirst for knowledge were always stronger than in most others.

"That name was personally given to you by your illiterate old father," Karl replied casually.

"?"

Loki was completely baffled. Whether it was Odin, or his biological father Laufey of the Frost Giants, neither could possibly be described as illiterate. In

fact, both were wise rulers. Even someone as thickheaded as Thor wasn't illiterate. So where exactly did this illiterate father come from?

"None of that matters," Karl said indifferently. "You'll be coming with us. A lot of people are waiting for you."

With that, Karl notified Natasha to come pick him up.

Inside the Quinjet, Skye was visibly surprised by Karl's appearance. After all, he had said earlier that he wouldn't be coming.

The flight passed in silence. With Thor watching over him, Loki behaved himself the entire way and didn't try any tricks.

Soon, the Quinjet landed on the Helicarrier. Surrounded by fully armed S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, Loki was escorted toward his holding cell.

As they passed Bruce's laboratory, Loki suddenly stopped and looked inside at Bruce.

Almost as if sensing something, Bruce lifted his head and met Loki's gaze.

Loki gave him a mysterious smile, then continued on toward his cell.

Inside the lab, Bruce was utterly confused. He didn't know that man at all—why was he smiling at him?

Rubbing his aching eyes, Bruce dismissed the strange encounter and returned to his work, continuing his search for the Tesseract.

Loki, meanwhile, was brought into a circular, suspended prison cell. Thick glass surrounded the cell on all sides, and massive mechanical arms held it aloft. Beneath it was nothing but ten thousand meters of open air.

At that moment, Nick Fury stepped forward and stopped at a nearby control console.

"All it takes is for you to try to escape," Fury said calmly, "even something as small as tapping on the glass."

As he spoke, Fury pressed a button. Instantly, the mechanical arms loosened, and the entire cell dropped slightly.

"Do you understand now?"

Fury looked at Loki. The meaning couldn't have been clearer—any movement from Loki, and the cell would plunge from the sky, ending in total annihilation.

Instead of being intimidated, Loki nodded with satisfaction.

"I have to admit, I'm quite pleased with this cage. Though I assume it wasn't built for me, was it?"

"Of course not," Fury replied. "It was built for someone even stronger than you."

Fury didn't bother hiding it. The cell had been designed for the Hulk from the beginning—after all, among everyone present, the Hulk was the most uncontrollable.

"Oh, I've heard about him," Loki said lightly. "A beast that does nothing but destroy."

He glanced up at the camera above him. On the other side of that feed, everyone was watching—including Bruce himself.

Bruce looked awkward. Loki was clearly talking about him. It seemed S.H.I.E.L.D. had indeed taken precautions against him. Still, Bruce didn't resent it. He didn't want the Hulk to hurt anyone either. Having something that could restrain the Hulk wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"How little confidence do you have in yourselves," Loki continued, "to build something like this to guard against your own teammates?"

He was deliberately sowing discord, especially between Fury and Bruce. That alone would serve his purpose.

"Confidence?" Fury stepped closer, his expression darkening. "You provoke war. You steal something capable of destroying the Earth—something you can't control. You'd even destroy this planet just to enslave humanity. And you talk to me about confidence? Every shred of security I've lost is because of you. You forced this!"

Fury stopped directly in front of the cell.

"You will pay for this, Loki."

"Pay?" Loki burst out laughing, tears nearly forming in his eyes. "Don't give me that sanctimonious nonsense. All I did was take something from you. And you? You wanted the energy inside the Tesseract—limitless energy—to solidify your own rule."

His laughter echoed through the cell.

"And what would you do once you had that energy? Let me guess... build weapons? Slaughter others? Maintain your dominance over humanity? Do you really think you'd use it to make lightbulbs? Don't be ridiculous. You and I both know the power of the Tesseract is immeasurable. You just want to keep it firmly in your own hands."

"You're not much nobler than I am," Loki continued coldly. "The difference is, I don't hide what I am. Unlike you—wrapping yourselves in righteousness while rotting on the inside."

Loki dropped to the floor, lounging casually as he examined his surroundings, saying nothing more.

Fury's face was pitch-black. Loki had struck straight at the heart of it, exposing the true purpose behind their research. Just as Loki said, they wanted control over the Tesseract—nothing more.

With nothing left to say, Fury turned and left. He had come to extract information, only to have certain ugly truths laid bare.

On the other side of the camera, everyone's expressions were grim. Some of them knew Loki was absolutely right—but no one was willing to say it aloud.

"Haha... Atreus really is an interesting guy. I'd love to be friends with him."

Karl laughed openly. Seeing the dirty tactics of the American government torn apart so mercilessly by Loki was exactly what Karl enjoyed watching. Loki, at least, was brutally honest.

Steve glanced at Karl. His expression was so dark it seemed ready to drip. Seventy years ago, he had been willing to give his life fighting Red Skull over the Tesseract. And now, the country he had sworn loyalty to had become another Red Skull. He couldn't accept it.

Under everyone's gaze, Steve left the conference room alone, while Karl continued laughing.

"Loki is just trying to stall for time," Natasha spoke up, smoothing things over. The atmosphere had already begun spiraling out of control because of Loki's words.

"Thor," she continued, "you know Loki better than anyone here. What do you think he's planning?"

Thor looked at Natasha and replied, "According to Asgardian intelligence, Loki commands an army known as the Chitauri. They are not of Asgard and come from an unknown region of space. Clearly, Loki intends to use them to conquer Earth. In return, I suspect—"

"He'll use the Tesseract as payment."

Karl cut in suddenly. Among everyone present, only he knew the truth—the being behind the Chitauri was that purple tyrant, whose goal was to collect the six Infinity Stones.

Thor looked at Karl in surprise, then nodded. "Correct. He would trade the Tesseract."

"An alien army..." Tony stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Then he'll need to open a portal. That explains why he kidnapped Dr. Erik Selvig."

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Chapter 182 - 182 – Searching for the Tesseract

"Erik? Which Erik?"

Thor asked at once. Surely it wasn't that Erik he knew... right?

"A physicist," Tony replied.

The moment Thor heard that, his expression changed.

So it really was the Erik he knew.

"That's right," Natasha added. "Loki used some unknown method to control him—along with one of our own agents."

"But why would Loki surrender so easily?" Tony suddenly asked, a thought occurring to him. "He can't command any army from here."

"I think Loki's just insane," Bruce finally spoke up from the side. "No one knows what goes on in his head."

"Watch your tone, boy," Thor immediately snapped, turning on Bruce. "Loki is not insane. He is my brother—the prince of Asgard."

"The brother you're talking about killed over eighty people," Natasha said calmly.

"...Alright," Thor replied without hesitation, "he's adopted."

He instantly distanced himself from Loki.

"What I really want to know," Bruce continued, "is what they need iridium for."

Tony's eyes lit up as realization struck him.

"Iridium? That's a stabilizer. It ensures the portal won't collapse."

Bruce immediately understood. Among everyone present, only the two scientists were following the conversation; the rest looked completely lost.

"And not only that," Tony went on, "iridium allows the portal to be opened wide enough—and kept open for as long as Loki wants. As for the other components, Barton can get those easily."

Tony began pacing around the conference room.

"On top of that, they need a power source. The best option is something that can provide a continuous supply of extremely dense electrical energy—enough to activate the energy inside the Tesseract and sustain it at high output."

As he spoke, Tony wandered around, casually touching walls and inspecting corners.

Although he was subtle, Lucas could clearly tell what Tony was really doing—planting listening devices. The gadgets were unmistakably Skye's handiwork.

They weren't just for surveillance; at critical moments, they could even hack the system and take control of the entire Helicarrier.

When Skye first proposed the idea, Tony had immediately taken an interest. Together, they had actually developed the device. Lucas hadn't expected Tony to bring it along this time.

Among everyone present, only Lucas knew exactly what those little devices were for. It was clear Tony hadn't wasted his time "touring" the Helicarrier earlier.

After finishing the installation, Tony even shot Lucas a wink. The two exchanged a knowing smile.

"When did you become a thermonuclear astrophysicist, Tony?" Natasha asked curiously. She hadn't understood a single word he'd said. To be fair, aside from Bruce, no one else had either.

"Oh, last night," Tony replied casually.

"Didn't you people read Dr. Erik's mission package? It had his research notes and paper summaries. Don't tell me I'm the only one who did the homework. Seriously?"

Tony looked at everyone as if they were idiots. He couldn't believe S.H.I.E.L.D. had gathered a group of people who were completely lost in this discussion.

"So according to you," Fury asked, "what kind of special energy does Loki need to power the Tesseract?"

"He has to heat it to over a billion degrees Celsius to break its constraints and open the portal," Bruce said suddenly. This was squarely within his area of expertise.

Tony nodded and gave Bruce a thumbs-up.

"Exactly. Unless Dr. Erik finds a stable power supply to initiate the portal, any nuclear reactor on Earth could theoretically be reconfigured into a fusion reactor once the method is established."

"By the way," Tony added, grinning, "it's great to finally meet you, Dr. Banner. You're the only one here who actually gets it. And your paper on particle collision experiments helped me more than you know."

Tony wasn't flattering him. Aside from his father's legacy, Bruce's particle collision research had been crucial in helping Tony discover a new element to upgrade his arc reactor.

"Thank you, Mr. Stark," Bruce replied with a nod.

"Ever thought about joining Stark Industries?" Tony asked immediately. "I can offer you a Chief Scientist position."

Talent like this was rare anywhere.

Before Bruce could answer, Nick Fury walked in.

"Dr. Banner is here to help us track the Tesseract," Fury said coolly. "If you want to poach him, wait until this is over."

"By the way," Fury continued, "how's the research on Loki's scepter going? I saw with my own eyes how he used it to control my agents."

"Whoa—something that interesting?" Tony clapped his hands. "I definitely want a look at that."

With that, Tony and Bruce left together to study Loki's scepter.

The group gradually dispersed. Lucas returned to his quarters at an unhurried pace, planning to enjoy a nice long nap.

Just then, Skye burst into his room, holding her laptop excitedly.

"Lucas, look at this! S.H.I.E.L.D.'s computers are insane—this kind of hardware doesn't even exist on the market. Do you think they'd notice if I... you know... took one home?"

She held it up like a priceless treasure. Her own computer could no longer keep up with her intense workload, and after seeing S.H.I.E.L.D.'s hardware, she'd immediately wanted to claim one for herself.

It wasn't exactly honorable—but after spending so much time with Lucas, she'd picked up his habit of shamelessly exploiting S.H.I.E.L.D. whenever possible.

"If you like it, keep it," Lucas said lazily. "It's just a computer. They won't notice. And even if they do, they can't really complain. For all you know, it was meant for you—probably with a few listening devices installed."

Based on Lucas's understanding of S.H.I.E.L.D., Nick Fury never gave anything away for free. If he did, it either came with strings attached—or hidden traps.

"Huh?" Skye frowned and examined the laptop from every angle. "I'll need to give it a thorough check once I get home."

At the same time, Tony and Bruce had already begun running tests on Loki's scepter.

"Gamma readings show that the energy emitted by the scepter is identical to that of the Tesseract," Bruce said, scanning it back and forth. "I think we can use it to locate the Tesseract."

"Ohhh, that's going to be a long comparison process," Tony muttered while adjusting another instrument. "Good thing I didn't bring spare clothes."

Then he glanced at Bruce again.

"So—have you thought about it? Come to Stark Industries. We've got ten full floors dedicated to research. You'll love it."

Bruce smiled wryly.

"The last time I came to New York, I demolished half of Harlem's Chinatown. I'd rather not destroy your life's work too."

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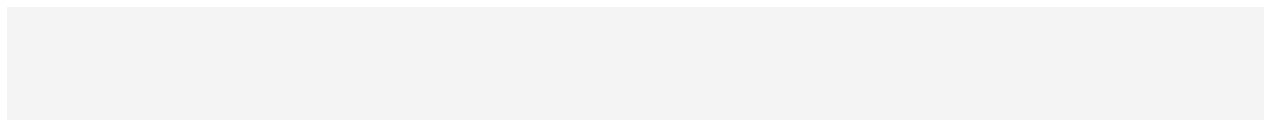
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Chapter 183 - 183 – Suspicions Toward Nick Fury



"Relax," Tony said casually. "I guarantee you a comfortable, stress-free work environment. No scares, no pressure."

Then he paused and added, "Besides, we've got Lucas on our side. The Hulk's a little afraid of him, isn't he?"

As he spoke, Stark pulled out a small electric shock device and jabbed Bruce with it.

"Ow—!"

Bruce yelped and stared at Tony in confusion.

"Huh? You didn't transform?" Tony teased.

At that moment, Steve walked in from outside and immediately spoke up when he saw the scene.

"Tony, are you insane?!"

Tony shrugged indifferently.

"Can't you be serious for once?" Steve demanded.

"Oh, you should be saying that to Lucas," Tony shot back without missing a beat. "He's even less serious than I am. I haven't seen him all day—who knows, maybe he's off fooling around with his three girlfriends."

Tony's mouth was as sharp as ever.

"By the way, Captain," he continued, "aren't you curious? Why did Nick Fury suddenly bring us all here? Why didn't he involve us earlier? What exactly is he hiding from us? And what has he been using the Tesseract for? If you think about it, everything started because he opened the portal while experimenting with it. Don't you think he has secrets he doesn't want anyone to know?"

Steve froze for a moment.

"You think Nick Fury is hiding something from us?"

"Hiding a lot," Tony replied flatly. "He's a spy, Captain—and not just any spy, but the head of them all. If he wasn't hiding things, that would be the real surprise. His secrets are like nested rings, one inside another. Isn't that right, Dr. Banner?"

Tony turned to Bruce. He knew Bruce had already noticed something—he just hadn't said it out loud.

Sure enough, Bruce hesitated before speaking.

"Well... I just want to focus on finding the Tesseract and then leave as soon as possible. As for everything else..."

He trailed off.

"Doctor," Steve said, looking straight at him, "you know something, don't you?"

Bruce sighed.

"Alright. When Loki was talking to Nick Fury earlier, he clearly said something that struck a nerve. And if you combine that with yesterday's media reports about Stark Industries—the Arc Reactor is already the most advanced clean energy source in the world."

He paused, then continued, "Logically speaking, Tony is the world's foremost authority on energy systems. So why didn't Fury involve him when researching the Tesseract's energy? No one understands energy acquisition better than Tony does."

Bruce didn't spell it out, but it was more than enough. It gave Steve plenty to think about. Why secretly build a classified research facility instead of working openly with the world's leading energy expert?

"Exactly," Tony said. "In fact, my software uncovered a classified S.H.I.E.L.D. file. I started digging immediately. Want to know what I found?"

He stepped closer and gave Steve a light pat on the shoulder.

"Wait—are you saying you hacked into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s classified files?"

Steve was about to continue, but Tony waved him off.

"I've already got JARVIS and another friend working on it. Soon enough, I'll know exactly what S.H.I.E.L.D. has been hiding."

Tony glanced at a palm-sized tablet. The progress bar was already past two-thirds complete.

"I think I know why Fury didn't want you involved in the research."

"A spy agency afraid of information leaks?" Steve frowned.

"I think Loki is just trying to get us to doubt each other," Steve said firmly. "He wants to sow discord so he can achieve his real objective."

Despite his doubts about Fury, Steve still didn't believe Fury was the kind of man who spoke of justice while acting corruptly behind the scenes. At heart, Steve was a soldier—trained to follow orders, not question them.

"Blind obedience has never been my style," Tony said dismissively. "I'm not some grunt."

"Everyone has their own personality, don't they—playboy?" Steve shot back.

He had never liked Tony's flippant attitude—and Lucas wasn't much better in his eyes. To Steve, those two treated this crisis like a joke.

"Wow," Tony smirked. "Hearing playboy come from you is a first. But really—who's dressed more flamboyantly here?"

He pointed at Steve's outfit.

Ever since boarding the Helicarrier, Steve had been wearing his Captain America uniform—bold red and blue, just as eye-catching as Peter Parker's getup. If Peter looked like a can of soda, Steve looked like a full bottle of cola.

Watching the argument escalate, Bruce finally couldn't take it anymore.

"Steve," he said quietly, "don't tell me you haven't felt it too. Doesn't any of this seem strange to you?"

Steve didn't argue. He had noticed something was off—his sense of duty had simply kept him from voicing it.

"You two keep looking for the Tesseract," he said at last. "I'm heading out."

With that, Steve left the lab. Where he was going was obvious enough.

Outside, he carefully scanned his surroundings. Once he was sure no one was watching, he quickly headed off in another direction.

Back in the lab, Tony and Bruce continued their conversation.

"That guy's a fossil," Tony muttered, leaning on the console. "He never should've been dug out of the ice."

"Maybe Loki was right," Bruce said quietly as he adjusted the readings. "In some ways, Loki really does have the upper hand."

"You mean his so-called alien army?" Tony scoffed. "It's just a military force. How strong could it really be?"

He was full of confidence in his armor—now upgraded with full vibranium plating. Even Mjolnir couldn't break it. And besides, his strongest armor still hadn't appeared yet—the one designed specifically to counter Lucas, forged mostly from Destroyer metal with a touch of vibranium.

"And you could fight alongside us too," Tony added. "Couldn't you?"

Bruce's expression darkened.

"That would be a nightmare. On the battlefield, I wouldn't be able to tell friend from foe."

"I think you can control it," Tony said reassuringly. "That's your talent."

But Bruce shook his head.

"It's not like that, Tony. I can't control the Hulk. Once he comes out, I go to sleep. I can only watch everything happen, with no control over my own body."

His face was filled with frustration. Every memory of the destruction the Hulk caused only deepened his resentment toward that side of himself.

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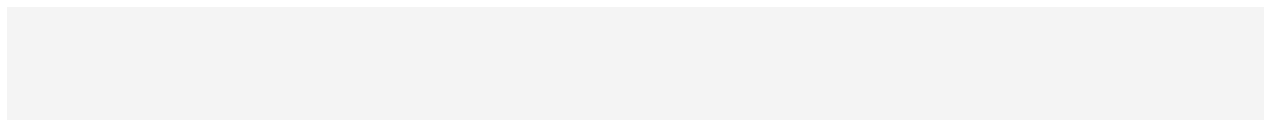
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"Hey, you can't think like that, man," Tony said. "When you were dying from gamma radiation, it was the Hulk who came out and saved you, wasn't it? Try to look on the bright side. The Hulk has saved you more than once. Otherwise, you'd still be locked up by that bastard Ross."

Seeing Bruce's expression, Tony continued trying to reassure him.

Bruce didn't argue. Tony wasn't wrong—the Hulk had saved him several times. But the Hulk had also destroyed countless things just as often. Saving himself at the cost of massive collateral damage and innocent lives was never what Bruce wanted.

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Elsewhere, Steve made his way to a concealed compartment of the Helicarrier. After confirming no one was around, he manually pried open the hatch and tore the door off entirely.

This was one of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s weapons storage areas. It was empty at the moment. Steve stepped inside, leapt up to the second level—more hidden and less likely to be discovered—and began searching.

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On the other side of the Helicarrier, Thor, worried about Jane's safety, found Coulson.

"Oh, you mean Jane Foster?" Coulson said. "After Dr. Erik Selvig was compromised, we quietly arranged a position for her at a remote observatory. It's far from New York, and the pay is generous. She had no reason to refuse. She's already started work there."

Coulson pulled up Jane's information on his screen and showed it to Thor, assuring him that she was perfectly safe.

"Thank you, Coulson," Thor said.

As he looked at Jane's photo, memories flooded back, as vivid as if they had happened just yesterday.

Thor walked over to a glass window, deep in thought.

"You know, Coulson, when I first came to Earth, this place was still wild and primitive. Humanity knelt before me. From that moment on, Midgard became one of the Nine Realms under Asgard's protection. Back then, Loki and I brought war to this world. I never imagined that war would return again."

Sorrow filled Thor's expression. He now understood that war was neither the only path nor a necessary one—and that a love of battle was no virtue.

"In my youth, I was brave and warlike. I even reveled in combat. Only now do I understand how painful war truly is."

"The war hasn't begun yet, Thor," Coulson replied. "And you still have the power to stop it."

At that moment, Nick Fury stepped forward.

"As long as you can persuade Loki to tell us where the Tesseract is."

Thor shook his head. "I don't know if I can. Loki's thoughts are impossible to read. From childhood to now, I've never known what he truly wants or longs for. That's why he resents me so deeply. I never tried to understand his heart—I only ever forced my own will upon him."

"Still, you should try," Fury said. "You're his brother. Your words will carry more weight than ours."

Seeing Fury's insistence, Thor said no more. In truth, he wanted answers as well—he wanted to ask Loki why.

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Meanwhile, Carl sat in his cabin, racking his brain over the Tesseract's whereabouts. In his past life, the films had never specified its exact location—only that it was in a truck. But where that truck was had never been revealed.

So for now, there was nothing Carl could do. He could only wait for Tony and Bruce to track it down through technical means.

At the moment, his cabin was crowded. Besides Gwen and the other girls, Peter and Felicia were there as well. What surprised everyone was that Felicia was wearing a black, form-fitting suit—not unlike Natasha's, yet distinctly different.

Her suit featured silver, fur-like tassels at the collar, cuffs, and calves. A closer look revealed that these "fur strands" were actually fine metallic filaments. Her hair had also been dyed silver.

"Felicia, what are you—"

Carl recognized the look immediately. It was unmistakably the future Black Cat.

He had always known Felicia would become Black Cat one day, but he never imagined she already was.

"What?" Felicia grinned. "So only you guys are allowed to be superheroes? I don't get a turn?"

She had clearly taken everyone by surprise—Peter included.

Carl looked at Peter, questioning him with his eyes.

Peter waved his hands. "I didn't know either. After we got back last time, I noticed Felicia kept heading out early and coming home late. I had no idea what she was doing. Later I found out she was training. Now she's agile like a real cat—and even in pure hand-to-hand combat, I can't beat her."

That was as much as Peter knew. He had asked how she suddenly became so skilled, but Felicia only told him that she was "carrying on a family tradition."

"Well then," Carl said, "I guess all those skills came from your father."

He knew the full story, of course. In his previous life, while playing Marvel's Spider-Man, he had thoroughly researched Black Cat.

Felicia's father had once been a master thief—never caught, highly skilled. Later, he trained Felicia himself, paving the way for the birth of Black Cat.

Black Cat possessed exceptional balance, agility, and strength. Her custom earrings enhanced her physical abilities, ensuring she always landed on her feet. Her eyes had superior night vision, allowing her to see clearly in the dark. Her combat skills rivaled Natasha's—and in terms of balance, even surpassed her.

"Carl... it sounds like you know a lot about me," Felicia said, looking at him in surprise.

Carl said nothing.

After all, a grown man knowing this much about his buddy's girlfriend's background looked suspicious at best. If he explained himself, he wouldn't even need Peter—Gwen and the other girls alone would tear him apart.

"So what's next?" Skye asked. "Do we just keep waiting? Tony's already investigating, and I can now take over the Helicarrier's operating system completely."

She glanced at her laptop—the progress bar had reached 100%. She could now access every system on the Helicarrier, alter data at will, and even take full control of the vessel itself.

Carl thought for a moment. It still wasn't time. Barton hadn't appeared yet, and the Helicarrier hadn't been sabotaged.

"Hold position for now," Carl said. "Barton will definitely attack this place. When that happens, the Helicarrier will fall into chaos. Your job is to keep it operational and make sure it doesn't drop out of the sky."

He wanted to avoid any catastrophic deviations caused by his presence. With so many people aboard, if the Helicarrier went down because of some butterfly effect, they'd be dead long before the Battle of New York even began.

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Elsewhere, Natasha arrived at Loki's containment cell. Loki immediately turned to look at her.

"Very few people can approach me this quietly," he said with a smile. "You're the first."

"And yet you still noticed," Natasha replied calmly, standing outside the glass.

"I thought you'd come a bit later," Loki said, stepping closer and meeting her gaze through the glass.

"After Nick Fury finished his little interrogation."

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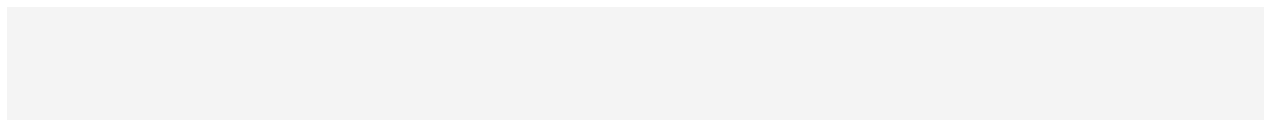
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Chapter 185 - 185 – Loki’s Plan



"Let me guess," Natasha said coolly. "Once you win and become the king of Earth—what happens to Barton?"

"I expanded his mind," Loki replied calmly. "Elevated it to an entirely new level—one far beyond what humans like you could ever imagine."

While the two of them probed each other with words, a large warning suddenly popped up in Nick Fury's command center:

UNKNOWN VIRUS INTRUSION DETECTED.

Fury immediately thought of Skye and Tony. Only those two were capable of something like this. At the same time, a sense of dread crept into his heart—something he had been deliberately hiding was likely about to be exposed.

At the same moment, in the weapons storage bay, Steve Rogers finally found what he had been searching for, tucked away in a corner on the second level.

He picked up the oddly shaped firearm. The instant he recognized its design, his expression darkened. He slammed the storage case shut with force.

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Meanwhile, Natasha had already extracted the information she wanted from Loki.

"So... it's because of Banner?" she said, turning to face him.

"What?!"

Loki froze. He never imagined that he, the God of Mischief, would be outplayed in a verbal exchange by an ordinary human. He was usually the one manipulating others with words—yet now he had fallen straight into her trap.

"You all heard that, right?" Natasha said into her comms. "Loki plans to turn Bruce into the Hulk. He wants Dr. Banner to stay in the lab and not leave. I'm on my way."

She hurried toward the lab, leaving behind a stunned Loki, who stared in disbelief at the direction she disappeared.

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On another deck, Nick Fury stormed into the laboratory and confronted Tony.

"What the hell are you doing, Tony?!"

"I should be asking you that," Tony shot back. "What exactly are you hiding?"

Tony completely ignored Fury's anger.

"Tony is tracking the Tesseract's signal," Bruce added calmly. "If nothing goes wrong, we'll soon be able to narrow it down to a one-kilometer radius."

He gestured for Fury to look at the screen.

"Now," Tony said, fingers flying over the keyboard, "let's see what secrets our great director has been keeping."

At that moment, Natasha and Thor also arrived at the lab. Both of them were there for Bruce—after all, Loki's plan centered entirely around him.

"I may not be good with computers," Steve suddenly said as he burst into the room, "but I have a faster way."

He joined in, openly confronting Fury.

"Listen, Steve," Fury said quickly, "we're only collecting data on the Tesseract. We're not building weapons—"

"That's enough, Black Baldy," Tony cut him off mercilessly. He shoved the screen right in front of Fury's face.

Displayed on it was the internal structure of a missile warhead. At its core glowed a faint blue light—it was unmistakably a high-yield weapon.

Steve stepped forward and threw the laser rifle he had found onto the table in front of Fury.

At that point, Fury had nothing left to say.

"So the world never really changed," Steve said quietly, bitter disappointment etched into his face. "The only difference is that the man pulling the strings is someone else. I gave everything for this country... and in the end, it became another Nazi regime."

Captain America was devastated. He had devoted his entire life to serving his country, only to realize it had merely become another Red Skull wearing a different mask.

Before Fury could respond, Bruce turned to Natasha.

"You knew about this too, didn't you?" Bruce asked. "Let me guess—Lucas knew as well?"

"Bruce, you're right," Lucas said calmly, having appeared at the doorway without anyone noticing. "I knew. And these weapons—most of them were designed to deal with me, weren't they, Black Baldy?"

He didn't bother hiding it. There was no point.

"Dr. Banner, Loki is manipulating you," Natasha said quickly. "Now isn't the time—"

"Oh? He's manipulating me?" Bruce snapped. "Then what about you? On one hand, you say I'm not a threat. On the other, you build a giant cage meant to lock me up. Now all these weapons show up. Do you really think I can feel safe?!"

His emotions surged, his heartbeat steadily accelerating.

"I want to know why you used the Tesseract to create weapons of mass destruction," Bruce demanded, pointing at the screen in front of Fury.

"Because of him—and him," Fury finally said, raising his hand and pointing at Lucas and Thor in turn.

Thor froze. He hadn't said a single word up to that point—how had he suddenly become part of this?

"Me?" Thor asked. "What does this have to do with me?"

Fury looked at Lucas and Thor before continuing.

"A few years ago, a completely ordinary man with no record of powers suddenly appeared in Hell's Kitchen. With a single tornado, he wiped out an

entire gang. Later, that same man turned into a hundred-meter-tall monster on the streets of New York, leveling entire city blocks—including dozens of skyscrapers over a hundred floors tall. That kind of apocalyptic power still keeps me awake at night. From that moment on, he was classified as an S-level threat."

Then Fury pointed at Thor.

"And last year, in New Mexico, a mysterious hammer fell from the sky. Shortly after, a man claiming to be a god showed up—and tore apart an entire town."

Lucas remained indifferent. Fury was stating facts, and Lucas didn't care in the slightest. Thor, however, was still processing what he was hearing.

"Compared to them," Fury continued, "humanity is pathetically fragile. We only want to protect ourselves with our own strength. Is that wrong?"

"We of Asgard seek peaceful coexistence with the people of Midgard," Thor said firmly. "We have no intention of waging war against your world."

"But you're not the only lifeforms in the universe," Fury countered sharply. "There are countless alien civilizations out there. Just because you value peace doesn't mean all of them do. The Chitauri are living proof of that."

His gaze locked onto Thor, his tone leaving no room for argument—and he wasn't wrong.

"So that's why you set your sights on the Tesseract?" Steve asked, still unable to accept it.

Thor immediately retorted, his voice echoing through the room.

"He's right about one thing—you opened the Tesseract recklessly. And by doing so, you sent a message to the entire Nine Realms—no, to the entire universe. You declared that Midgard was ready for war, at the highest possible level. You unknowingly provoked every civilization out there!"

As the future king of Asgard, Thor understood better than anyone what it meant to activate the Tesseract.

It wasn't exploration.

It was a challenge.

A declaration of war.

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Chapter 186 - 186 – The Influence of the Mind Stone Scepter

"A signal to start a war?" Nick Fury scoffed. "That's easy for you to say. You people forced our hand. We had to come up with countermeasures."

Fury remained stubborn. In his eyes, people like Lucas and Thor were threats that had to be restrained with even greater weapons.

"What about nuclear weapons?" Tony interjected. "Those things are pretty good at preventing wars."

"Oh, I almost forgot—we've got a war profiteer right here," Fury replied mockingly. "After all, the Stark fortune was built on weapons manufacturing, wasn't it, Mr. Stark?"

He wasn't wrong. Of everyone present, Tony arguably had the least moral standing to talk about weapons. Stark Industries had risen on the back of war.

"So now you're pointing the finger at me again?" Tony snapped. "What does that have to do with me? I don't even sell weapons anymore."

"I thought the people of Midgard had entered an age of true civilization," Thor said coldly. "Turns out you're still just short-sighted."

At that moment, Lucas stepped forward. He picked up the laser rifle and casually crushed it in his hand.

"Nick Fury," Lucas said calmly, "I told you before—if S.H.I.E.L.D. ever set its sights on me, I wouldn't hesitate to wipe you out. Right now feels like a pretty good opportunity. Loki alone is more than enough to keep busy. You can all go on your way in peace."

Purple lightning flickered in Lucas's eyes. With a thunderous roar, Mjolnir smashed through the wall and flew straight into his hand.

"I honestly don't know which one of you is supposed to be the God of Thunder," Tony muttered, glancing at Thor. "That hammer seems to like him more than you."

Thor's face darkened. His beloved hammer was completely unresponsive in Lucas's presence, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Fury immediately drew his gun and aimed it at Lucas. Steve also raised his guard instinctively. Lucas's words were no exaggeration—everyone present knew he truly had the power to annihilate S.H.I.E.L.D.

At the same time, behind them, Loki's scepter began to emit invisible waves, silently influencing everyone in the room.

Suddenly, Lucas hurled Mjolnir.

Before anyone could react, the hammer slammed directly into Loki's scepter.

Boom!

An invisible shockwave erupted. The scepter clattered to the floor, while Mjolnir was blasted away and embedded deep into the wall.

"Well?" Lucas said with a smile, folding his arms. "Feeling a bit calmer now?"

A wave of clarity washed over everyone. Only then did they realize that moments ago, their anger had been inexplicably amplified, their emotions spiraling out of control with just a few provocative words.

"What... just happened to us?" Natasha asked first, looking at Lucas in shock.

Lucas hopped up onto the table and finally explained.

"You were all affected by Loki's scepter," he said, pointing at it. "Didn't you notice how impulsive and irritable you suddenly became? How easily your emotions ran out of control? That's mind manipulation."

Everyone turned toward the fallen scepter. It was still emitting faint waves, but now that they were aware of it, the influence was far weaker.

"Damn it... Loki again," Tony cursed.

"Even so," Lucas continued coolly, his gaze locking onto Fury, "I still need to ask—Nick Fury, are you prepared to face my anger?"

Fury stiffened. He knew better than anyone that, even with Thor and the Hulk combined, they still wouldn't stand a chance against Lucas.

Slowly, Fury reached into his pocket and touched an old-fashioned pager—his final trump card.

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "You really think that ace of yours can handle me?"

He knew exactly what Fury was relying on. Truth be told, Lucas wasn't entirely certain himself. If he awakened Bahamut or Odin, Captain Marvel would be

nothing more than a warm-up. But at his current level... even Lucas wasn't fully confident.

"So you really do know about her," Fury said gravely.

Before anything else could happen, alarms suddenly blared throughout the ship.

"Unidentified Quinjet detected on the port side! All hands on alert! All hands on alert!"

Maria Hill's voice echoed through the Helicarrier.

"Skye," Lucas said into the comms, "take control of the entire Helicarrier immediately. Evade that aircraft."

"Roger."

"Everyone," Lucas said, turning back to the group, "Barton's here. Let's go greet him."

The Helicarrier suddenly began to climb at extreme speed.

"Motherf—!" Fury cursed as he scrambled for support. "Lucas, you hacked the Helicarrier?!"

"You'll thank me later," Lucas replied flatly. "You owe me one, Nick Fury."

"Wanda, begin," Lucas added over the comms. "Intercept all incoming arrows. I'm on my way."

Then he looked at Tony. "Suit up and come with me. The rest of you who can't fly—go watch Loki."

Just as he reached the door, Lucas suddenly paused and glanced back at Bruce.

"Bruce, keep your emotions steady," he said seriously. "I've got a bad feeling—you're about to become the Hulk."

With that, Lucas left. Tony immediately followed, fully aware of how serious the situation had become.

"Director," Natasha said quickly, "we should listen to Lucas and secure Loki. Barton is obviously here to extract him."

---

Outside the Helicarrier, Barton stood in the open hatch of the Quinjet, bow drawn tight. After calculating the angle, he released the string without hesitation.

The explosive arrow arced toward the Helicarrier in a dramatic curve. Even though the massive vessel attempted evasive maneuvers, its sheer size made it sluggish—something Barton had fully accounted for.

Just as the arrow was about to strike, a surge of crimson energy appeared out of nowhere, freezing it midair. The explosive countdown halted as if time itself had stopped.

Barton froze, reaching for another arrow—

—but a gold-and-red figure suddenly descended from above, landing directly in front of him.

"Surprise."

Tony raised his hand and fired a repulsor blast straight through the cockpit. The two pilots didn't even have time to scream before they were killed instantly.

The remaining passengers opened fire immediately.

Tony didn't bother dodging.

Bullets bounced harmlessly off his vibranium armor, completely incapable of penetrating it.

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At the same time, the aircraft began to lose control and plunge downward. Tony reacted instantly—he grabbed Barton, a stun device snapped out from his forearm, and with a single jolt, Barton was knocked unconscious. Without sparing the others a glance, Tony turned and flew straight back toward the Helicarrier with Barton in tow.

Lucas moved to the outside of the Helicarrier, keeping watch in case anyone else tried to launch a surprise attack.

Roar—!!!

A furious roar suddenly erupted behind him.

A massive green figure burst out of the Helicarrier, grabbing another figure and hurling him away like a ragdoll.

The one sent flying was Thor.

And the green monster was the Hulk.

By sheer misfortune, Thor was flung straight toward one of the Helicarrier's engines.

As expected, the engine didn't survive the impact. Thor was dragged directly into it, and in the next instant, the engine exploded. Thick black smoke and raging flames shot skyward.

"Lucas, the front-left engine of the Helicarrier has been completely destroyed," Skye reported urgently. "Current damage is manageable. The remaining three engines can still keep the Helicarrier airborne, but we can't afford to lose another one. Otherwise, we'll be forced into an emergency landing."

Skye's voice came through the comms. She was already in the control room, fully in charge of the Helicarrier's operations.

Thor was ejected from the ruined engine. Without Mjolnir, he began to plummet.

Lucas immediately summoned the hammer and hurled it toward him. Thor reacted quickly, catching it midair as the hammer carried him straight toward the enraged Hulk.

"Natalia, what happened?" Lucas demanded over the comms. "How did the Hulk get out?"

"I warned Banner to stay calm. How did this still happen?"

"Loki had a hidden satellite bomb on him," Natasha replied, clearly overwhelmed. "He detonated it right in Banner's face. If the Hulk didn't lose control after that, I'd be shocked."

The control room was in chaos. Hulk had torn apart nearly everything he could get his hands on. If Skye hadn't taken control of the system in advance, the Helicarrier would already be falling out of the sky.

"Wanda, go help Natasha," Lucas ordered. "I'll handle the Hulk."

With a flick of his cloak, Lucas shot toward the exterior of the Helicarrier, where the Hulk was still wreaking havoc.

"Tony, take Barton back and wake him up," Lucas added. "We need him conscious."

After giving the order, Lucas didn't look back. Tony slung Barton over his shoulder and flew back into the Helicarrier.

Steve had already arrived at the destroyed engine, working to put out the fires.

"Captain, give me a status report on the engine," Skye asked through the earpiece.

She needed precise information to coordinate repairs.

Nick Fury stood firmly at the command console, issuing orders nonstop. Beyond emergency procedures, he also commanded all agents to arm themselves and prepare for combat. Under his direction, S.H.I.E.L.D. began operating like a massive war machine.

"Uh... the first layer of turbine blades is damaged," Steve reported after a quick inspection. "The second layer should still be operational, but it'll need a manual restart. The external shielding is completely destroyed."

"Captain," Skye said, "there should be a red lever near you—that's the turbine restart switch. But you'll need someone to manually clear the debris and help rotate the blades."

Skye sat on the steps, laptop in hand, with Fury beside her. At that moment, Fury felt an overwhelming sense of relief that Lucas had Skye infiltrate the Helicarrier's systems in advance. Otherwise, it would've been impossible to keep the ship operational.

In front of them, the control station—normally operated by more than twenty people—had been reduced to rubble, courtesy of the Hulk.

Just then, Tony flew in and casually tossed the unconscious Barton onto a nearby table. Natasha rushed over to check on him.

"I stunned him," Tony said, his voice filtered through his helmet. "Get him awake as soon as possible—we'll need him in the fight."

"Cap, stay at the engine," Tony continued. "I'm on my way."

He shot back out of the control room, heading straight for Steve's position.

From the air, Tony had a much clearer view of the engine's condition.

"Skye, I'm going to clear the debris jammed in the turbine," Tony said. "You and the Captain need to follow my lead."

After a quick scan, he confirmed the blades were jammed and couldn't be restarted until the wreckage was removed.

"Captain, be ready. The moment I tell you to pull the lever, do it immediately."

Steve nodded—he'd already located the lever.

Tony flew directly into the massive turbine, using repulsors and lasers to blast away the broken blades and debris.

"All set, Cap!"

Tony began manually pushing the turbine blades. As he increased his force, the rotation speed steadily rose.

Soon, the turbine was spinning so fast that Tony could barely move. The acceleration pinned him against the inner blades—any longer, and he'd be shredded.

"Now, Cap! Pull it!"

Steve yanked the lever.

The turbine paused for less than a second.

That brief instant was all Tony needed.

He accelerated hard and shot out of the turbine just in time, narrowly avoiding being torn apart.

"Skye, restart the engine now!" Tony shouted into the comms.

Skye immediately initiated the restart. With a series of deep, thunderous rumbles, the engine slowly roared back to life. The Helicarrier stabilized, its motion growing steadily smoother.

---

Meanwhile, although Loki's bomb had successfully unleashed the Hulk, Loki himself didn't flee immediately.

He still needed to retrieve his Mind Stone scepter.

Thor, seething with rage, stormed up to the cell. This chaos—every bit of it—was Loki's doing.

"Loki! Do you even understand what you've done?!" Thor roared.

Inside the cell, Loki wore a deliberately provoking smile.

Thor smashed his fist into the control panel. The glass door slid open at once. Without hesitation, Thor lunged forward—

Only for his body to pass straight through Loki's.

He crashed onto the floor inside the cell.

With a soft hum, the Loki standing at the entrance vanished. The glass door began to close once more.

Thor realized he'd been tricked again.

The real Loki strolled over leisurely, a remote control in his hand.

"Brother," Loki said with a mocking grin, "after all these years, you still haven't changed. You're just as easy to fool as ever. You can't even see through such a simple illusion."

From childhood to now, this trick had never failed on Thor—not once.

"Loki!!" Thor roared in fury, smashing Mjolnir into the glass wall of the cell.

Suddenly, the four clamps holding the cell in place released at once.

The cell dropped abruptly—though it didn't fall all the way.

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"Hah—this cage was specially prepared for that monster."

Loki chuckled as he raised the remote control in his hand and shook it slightly.

"Humans always believe that gods are immortal. But honestly, I'm curious myself—care to test it?"

At that moment, Coulson arrived in front of Loki, holding a weapon developed from the Tesseract.

"Please hand over the remote," Coulson said calmly. "You should know the power of this thing."

He activated the weapon. Waves of blue energy surged forward, steadily building.

Loki's expression changed. Slowly, he raised both hands.

Coulson advanced step by step. "I think you know exactly how powerful this is. As for me... I'm not entirely sure yet. Want to find out?"

The instant Coulson finished speaking, another Loki suddenly appeared behind him. A dagger flashed, stabbing viciously toward Coulson's back.

"No!!"

Thor roared in rage, lightning crackling wildly in his eyes.

Whoosh—

A white web shot out, sticking firmly to Loki's dagger. A tremendous force followed, yanking it away before Loki could react, sending the weapon spinning off.

Two figures appeared beside Coulson, shielding him.

"Hey, Lucas really called it," Peter said, clad in his new suit, the large lenses on his mask narrowing and widening as he stared at Loki. "This guy—Atreus, right?—is seriously devious. Can't win head-on, so he always goes for cheap sneak attacks. Shameless!"

"Lucas was absolutely right," Gwen added, circling Coulson once to confirm he was unharmed before relaxing. "Coulson, you owe him a huge favor. If he hadn't told us to come save you, you'd be dead already."

Coulson's forehead was drenched in cold sweat. What had just happened was terrifyingly close—if Peter and Gwen had arrived even a second later, he would have been killed.

"That's not an easy favor to repay..." Coulson muttered, wiping his brow.

"Leave now. We'll handle things here," Gwen said firmly.

Loki's schemes were endless, and Coulson, being an ordinary human, would only be in danger if he stayed.

Coulson nodded and quickly withdrew. He knew remaining would only make him a liability.

Loki turned to Thor and suddenly smiled.

"Goodbye, my brother."

He pressed the button on the remote.

A violent sense of weightlessness struck instantly. The cage holding Thor was released and thrown off the Helicarrier.

At an altitude of tens of thousands of meters, even an Asgardian god could be reduced to pieces.

Trapped inside the free-falling cage, Thor barely had time to adjust his posture. He spun wildly, disoriented by the plunge.

He struggled to stabilize himself, but every attempt failed—the cage kept tumbling just out of control.

"Damn it—hold still!!!"

With a furious shout, Thor swung Mjolnir and smashed it against the glass. To his surprise, it worked—the cage jolted and briefly halted. Seizing the chance, Thor adjusted his posture, preparing to break free.

Just as the cage was about to slam into the ground, Thor burst out at the very last moment, plummeting straight down.

Boom! Boom!

One crash was the cage, shattered into fragments.

The other was Thor, headfirst into the earth.

"Pah—pah!"

Thor stood up, covered in dirt and debris. Mjolnir was nowhere to be seen. Before him stretched an endless ocean—he had no idea where he was.

"Damn it..."

Back on the Helicarrier, Peter watched Thor fall and shouted in alarm, charging straight toward Loki. Gwen fired webbing, trying to restrain him.

But both Peter's punch and Gwen's web passed straight through Loki's body.

From the very beginning, Loki's true body had never been here. Whether it was the Loki who confronted Thor earlier or the one facing Peter and Gwen now—both were merely illusions.

Loki faded from view, leisurely slipping through the chaos aboard the Helicarrier. He made his way into the laboratory, where his Mind Scepter lay.

"Oh—so this is where you were hiding."

He stepped forward and reached for the scepter.

Suddenly, crimson energy blocked his path, and a dark figure lunged at him.

Loki dodged with agility. A dagger appeared in his hand as he counterattacked without mercy.

Felicia, silver-haired, evaded the strike with ease. She kicked Loki's wrist sharply—the dagger flew from his grasp.

But Loki smiled, his scheme succeeding.

The disarmed dagger abruptly changed direction midair, shooting toward Wanda.

Wanda calmly raised her hand.

The dagger froze instantly—then disintegrated into dust.

This was something she had learned at Kamar-Taj. The Ancient One had thoroughly explained the nature of Chaos Magic and its applications. Wanda's talent was extraordinary—she had already grasped most of it.

Loki froze.

At that moment, two long, powerful legs wrapped around his neck.

The world spun violently—then bang, his body slammed into the floor.

Felicia had taken him down with a clean scissor kick.

Loki tried to rise, but crimson energy flared again, transforming into countless sharp blades that locked down every possible movement.

Feeling the Chaos energy radiating from those blades, Loki's expression finally changed. For the first time, he sensed the unmistakable presence of death.

"Hey—relax. I mean no harm," Loki said, raising his hands with feigned ease.

"Enough tricks, Loki," Felicia said coldly as she stepped forward, kicking away a dagger near him. Her black high heel pinned his wrist to the floor.

"Surrender."

"Wow," Loki said with a grin despite being restrained. "Being stepped on by a beautiful woman—what an honor."

Felicia, clad in her tight black suit, stared down at him with icy contempt.

She and Wanda were Lucas's contingency plan—specifically to prevent Loki from stealing back the Mind Scepter.

And Loki had walked straight into it.

Seeing that Felicia wouldn't respond, Loki turned his gaze to Wanda.

"I've seen this kind of energy before," he said slowly. "Your power is remarkably pure—unlike others, whose is full of impurities."

Whether he had truly seen it before didn't matter. What mattered was that he was stalling, searching for an opening.

Wanda remained unmoved.

At Kamar-Taj, she had learned the true origin of her power. She knew that she embodied one of the purest forms of dark magic—directly descended from its very source.

"You know," Loki continued softly, "this power has its flaws. The more you use it, the more darkness seeps into your heart. Bit by bit, it will consume you—until eventually..."

He smiled mysteriously.

"...everyone you care about will die because of you. Killed by that darkness you can no longer control."

He tilted his head, pretending to think.

"That man—Lucas, was it? The one you care about most. The day the darkness overwhelms you... he'll be the first to die by your hand."

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Chapter 189 - 189 – Loki Escapes the Helicarrier

The moment Wanda heard Loki's words, her mind involuntarily conjured an image of herself killing Lucas. In an instant, the dark, violent emotions buried deep within her surged violently, and the Chaos Magic inside her began to boil out of control.

"Wanda! Calm down! He's lying—don't let him deceive you!!"

Sensing that something was terribly wrong, Felicia immediately tried to calm her. The surging Chaos Magic had already formed a crimson energy field around Wanda, beginning to distort and affect the surrounding environment.

This was exactly the moment Loki had been waiting for.

He broke free of his restraints in one swift motion and snatched up the scepter.

"I didn't expect her to be this easy to influence," Loki said with a satisfied grin. "As I thought—her control over her power is far too weak. Well then... goodbye, ladies~~~"

With a graceful bow, Loki shattered the glass and leapt off the Helicarrier, landing neatly on a Quinjet sent to pick him up. In the next instant, the aircraft sped away.

"Wanda, wake up! Everything he said was a lie! Didn't you go to study magic? As long as you can control it, no one will get hurt!!"

Felicia continued to reassure her, but Wanda's eyes had already turned completely blood-red, and the violent energy around her showed no sign of subsiding.

Just as Felicia was at a loss, Gwen and Peter arrived at the laboratory and witnessed the scene.

"What's going on? What happened to Wanda?" Gwen asked as she stepped forward.

Felicia sighed and quickly explained everything, especially Loki's verbal provocation.

Gwen immediately moved in. Relying on her vibranium suit, she resisted the crushing pressure of the Chaos Magic with great difficulty and finally managed to grasp Wanda's hand.

At the same time, Gwen's consciousness was pulled into Wanda's inner world.

It was Gwen's first time seeing Wanda's heart.

A blood-red wasteland stretched endlessly before her, the entire world saturated with frenzied crimson power. The only place that could be called a refuge was a small house standing alone in the chaos.

Gwen pushed the door open—and froze.

The interior was laid out exactly like Lucas's apartment.

In the corner, Wanda sat curled up, hugging her knees.

"Wanda... Wanda... are you okay?"

Gwen walked over and sat beside her.

Wanda looked up in surprise when she saw Gwen.

"Gwen? Why are you here?"

Clearly, Wanda knew this place was the deepest part of her own mind.

"You lost control because of Loki's manipulation," Gwen said gently, taking Wanda's hand. "I'm here to save you."

"It's useless," Wanda said painfully, curling in on herself again. "I killed Lucas. You'll never forgive me—and I'll never forgive myself. Let me stay here. I don't care what happens outside anymore."

"That's not true," Gwen said firmly, pulling Wanda into an embrace. "Lucas is perfectly fine. That was all your imagination. He's still outside fighting the Hulk right now, and he needs your help. Don't you remember?"

"Really?!"

Wanda snapped her head up, staring at Gwen in disbelief.

"Of course it's real," Gwen replied with a confident smile. "Come with me and see for yourself. Trouble lasts forever—Lucas isn't the kind of guy who gets killed that easily. I've lived with him for over twenty years. I know him better than anyone."

"Really?! That's wonderful!" Wanda's eyes lit up with hope. "Lucas is okay... that's such a relief. I'll go with you right now!"

Gwen took Wanda's hand, and together they pushed open the door of the small house.

---

Outside, the crimson energy filling the laboratory suddenly collapsed inward, all of it being absorbed back into Wanda's body. Wanda and Gwen opened their eyes at the same time.

"Yes!! I knew they'd be fine!" Felicia exclaimed, rushing into the lab.

"That's great!"

Overcome with relief, Felicia hugged both Gwen and Wanda. She had been truly frightened just now—and it was also the first time she had fully realized the terrifying magnitude of Wanda's Chaos Magic.

---

Meanwhile, Lucas was completely unaware of what had happened to Wanda.

He stood on the Helicarrier's deck as the Hulk charged straight toward him.

Lucas twisted aside, narrowly avoiding the attack. Countless bolts of lightning erupted around him, surging toward the Hulk. Violent arcs of electricity slammed into the green behemoth.

"GRAAAAH—!!!"

The lightning coursed through the Hulk's body, overwhelming him with paralyzing current. With a thunderous crash, he slammed into the deck, completely immobilized.

But the Hulk did not lose consciousness.

His rage flared once more, eyes blazing red as he strained to rise again.

Lucas gave him no such chance.

More lightning descended, delivering an unrelenting electric onslaught.

Under the sustained barrage, the Hulk's consciousness finally collapsed. His massive body began to shrink, until Bruce Banner lay unconscious on the deck.

"Hah—didn't expect you to be in such good shape," Lucas remarked casually.

He immediately pulled out his phone and snapped several photos of Bruce's completely naked body. Thankfully, Bruce was unconscious—otherwise, he would have summoned the Hulk again just to kill Lucas.

With a gentle gust of wind lifting Bruce's body, Lucas carried the unconscious, fully exposed Banner toward the bridge, fully intending to give him the most brutal social death imaginable.

The Helicarrier was in utter chaos along the way.

When Lucas finally encountered Wanda again, she threw herself straight into his arms.

Lucas looked at Gwen in confusion, but Gwen neither explained nor had the time to—she simply sighed softly.

In the end, thanks to everyone's efforts, the Helicarrier was saved. Unlike in the original timeline, it was not torn apart beyond repair.

After Bruce woke up, he was forced to put on a black combat uniform from one of the strike teams. There was no alternative—either that, or stay naked.

During this time, Lucas learned from Gwen and Wanda what had happened earlier. Only then did he understand why Wanda had clung to him so tightly. He had assumed she had already gained control over her Chaos Magic—but it turned out she still had a very long way to go.

Among everyone, only Barton remained unconscious.

Natasha sought out Lucas. Since Loki had used magic to control Barton, it made sense to undo it with magic as well.

In the original timeline, Barton had been punched awake by Natasha. Here, however, he never even got the chance—Tony had already knocked him out cold with a powerful electric shock.

In the cabin, Barton lay unconscious, eyes closed.

Lightning flickered in Lucas's hand as he prepared to administer yet another "electric therapy session."

Wanda couldn't stand to watch.

She quickly stopped Lucas's would-be "Professor Yang" routine and stepped up to Barton herself.

"Just don't," she said helplessly. "I'll do it."

A wisp of crimson energy drifted from her fingertips. She gently touched Barton's temple, and the Chaos Magic flowed directly into his mind.

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Chapter 190 - 190 – The Next Move

"Ah—!!"

Barton let out a sharp cry and shot upright from the bed, instantly regaining consciousness. The residual energy of the Mind Scepter lingering in his body was erased in an instant by Chaos Magic.

He glanced around and quickly realized he was no longer in the previous base. Standing beside him were Lucas, Natasha, and Wanda—not Nick Fury or Erik Selvig.

"You're finally awake," Natasha said. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Barton, now calm but visibly shaken, sat slumped on the bed as Natasha handed him a cup of coffee.

He shook his head. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember anything. The last thing he recalled was encountering Loki at the base.

"That was days ago," Natasha said briefly. "You were under Loki's control this entire time—and you even led an attack on the Helicarrier."

"If Lucas hadn't foreseen it in advance," she added, "the Helicarrier might already be destroyed."

Barton said nothing, but his gaze slowly hardened.

"I'll make Loki pay for this."

---

The Helicarrier continued its steady flight through the sky as everyone gathered once more.

Inside the conference room, silence hung heavy. No one spoke—not even Lucas, who sat quietly to one side, an unusual sight in itself.

"You've all seen it," Nick Fury finally said, breaking the silence. "Loki used nothing more than a simple scheme to tear us apart. The Helicarrier nearly went down because of it."

"The truth is," Fury continued, "I did research the Tesseract to develop weapons. But I always had reservations about that path. So I prepared another option instead—something Lucas and Tony both know about."

He paused, then said clearly:

"The Avengers Initiative."

Fury folded his arms and looked around the room. His voice was no longer as forceful as before—now it was calm, almost reflective.

"The original purpose of this initiative was to bring extraordinary individuals together. To see if they could become something greater. To shoulder the responsibility of defending Earth and fight battles ordinary people could never win."

He let out a self-mocking chuckle.

"But I was wrong. You're unruly. You're driven by your own personalities. You fight alone. There's no coordination, no trust. Even now, you're still a loose collection of individuals."

Then his tone abruptly sharpened.

"But now, we don't have time anymore. There's no room left for adjustment, no room for hesitation. All we can do is fight. In the coming days, Earth will face its greatest crisis yet. Our task is to take our planet back from those alien invaders and drive those bastards off this world!"

His gaze swept across the room again, finally settling on Lucas—firm and unwavering.

"Lucas, you said I owed you an explanation. Fine. If we successfully repel the alien invasion this time, you're free to blow up S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters. I won't stop you."

Earlier, Lucas had been furious over S.H.I.E.L.D.'s weapons research and had even threatened to wipe the organization out entirely. Fury had been angry—but he had no real rebuttal.

Now, however, things were different. In Fury's eyes, if Lucas could resolve this crisis, then S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters was a small price to pay.

Lucas glanced at Fury, his expression unreadable.

"You don't need to say all that," he replied calmly. "I won't stand aside in this situation. Since I gave my word, I'll see it through."

With that, Lucas stood up and left the conference room.

Gwen and the others followed without hesitation. They weren't here for S.H.I.E.L.D.—they were here for Lucas.

Tony also rose to his feet.

"You guys carry on," he said casually. "I'm going to get some rest."

Then he left as well.

Fury watched them go and let out a bitter smile.

"Maybe my way of thinking really is outdated."

In his mind, the Avengers Initiative had effectively collapsed. He never imagined that these so-called superheroes lacked even the most basic sense of teamwork—each acting entirely on their own.

What Fury didn't realize was that he was wrong.

Tony and Steve's coordination during the Helicarrier crisis, Gwen, Wanda, and Peter's seamless teamwork, Thor's battlefield control—were those not cooperation? The only difference was that none of it had been planned in advance. It was instinctive, improvised teamwork born in the heat of the moment.

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Later that evening, Tony arrived alone at the containment area where Loki had once been imprisoned.

It was empty now.

The cage had fallen along with Thor, leaving only four grappling hooks swaying back and forth in the open air.

Lost in thought, Tony didn't notice Lucas approach until he spoke.

"What are you thinking about?"

Tony jumped slightly, snapping back to reality.

"Nothing much," he said. "Just wondering why Loki pretended to let us capture him. What did he gain from that?"

Lucas nodded.

"Probably to break us apart. To make sure we had neither the reason nor the mindset to work together. All of us together is something Loki absolutely doesn't want—our combined strength leaves him no chance. So he has to isolate us, one by one."

Tony thought about it—and realized Lucas was right.

"That makes perfect sense," Tony said slowly. "If Loki wants to win, dividing us is the best move. And not just that—he wants the whole world to see him defeat us. He needs to crush public resistance. He needs an audience. He wants everyone to witness it."

Tony's eyes suddenly widened.

"He needs a place that grabs attention. A landmark. Somewhere unforgettable. The top of the world. A—holy sh\*t."

Tony froze.

He knew exactly where that place was—and it was right in front of them.

"Lucas, gather everyone immediately," Tony said urgently. "I know where that damn reindeer is headed. He actually dares to do this—then I'll beat him so badly even Thor won't recognize him!"

With that, Tony hurried off, leaving behind Lucas, who wore a knowing expression.

"Looks like he figured it out with just a little push."

Lucas immediately instructed Skye to use the Helicarrier's broadcast system to summon everyone to the conference room.

Before long, everyone assembled, looking at Lucas in confusion.

"Don't look at me," Lucas said calmly. "I'm just the messenger. The real lead here is Tony—he's already figured out Loki's next move."

He pointed toward the door just as Tony walked in.

"Everyone," Tony said, "I've figured out Loki's next step. He needs a location with massive energy output—one that satisfies his ego and allows him to announce his arrival to the entire world."

A large screen lit up in front of them.

Displayed on it was New York's newest landmark—

Stark Tower.

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