



xviii. Shield's Secrets

A/N: Thank you @JarvisDropMyNeedle for your recommendations for the cover choice. As you can all tell, we have a new cover, that is not mine, just an image from the internet, but a very good image. I have always loved the quote, so that's the main reason I chose it.

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Auralie followed Tony to the lab. Thor had gone to question Coulson about a "Lady Jane" that he had apparently fallen for last time he was on Earth. Auralie assumed that was Jane Foster, an associate of Eric Selvik, but she didn't stick around for clarification. Thor was a very nice guy, but she had decided to follow the man with the best chance at understanding her references, and that was Tony, not Thor or Steve.

Bruce was waiting for them, and he smiled as they came in. Auralie smiled back because she knew how stressed he must be. He and Tony began talking about science, and Auralie took out a book to read. It was one of the Percy Jackson books and she felt herself relaxing as she sat down and let her troubles melt away until all that was left was the pages.

When she looked back up, Tony was saying, "you should come by Stark Tower sometime. It's Candyland."

Bruce smiled sadly, "thanks, but the last time I was in New York, I kind of broke..... Harlem."

"Well, I promise a stress-free environment," Tony replied, "no surprises." Then he promptly zapped his new friend with a little device, shocking Bruce in the side. Auralie tensed, but Bruce didn't even react, and she sunk back into her chair, relieved. She put her nose back in her book like Tony's recklessness was no big deal - hey, she did work with Clint, the man who hid in the vents to shoot Natasha with nerf guns - but Steve did not seem happy when he walked in.

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"Are you crazy," Steve yelled at Stark.

"Maybe," Tony replied.

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"Is everything a joke to you?" Steve scowled.

Tony smirked, "Funny things are."

"Endangering the lives of everyone aboard this ship is not funny," Steve fired back, "no offense Dr. Banner."

"It's ok, I wouldn't have come if I knew I couldn't handle pointy things," Bruce responded, still fiddling with his work.

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"Yeah, you do seem to have it very locked up," Tony smiled, "what's your secret? Breathing? Yoga? Big bag of weed?"

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"If it's that last option then I'm afraid we can't be friends," Auralie called from her chair, "I don't deal with people who do drugs, no matter the reason."

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"Smart kid," Bruce said, with the smallest of smiles, "no, it's not that. I'm just careful, you know?"

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Tony commented, "you're tiptoeing big man, you need to strut."

"Uh, I just want to do my work," Bruce said.

"We need to be focusing on what's important," Steve interjected, "retrieving the Tesseract."

"Yeah, sure, we will. And when the battle comes, I'll hear all about it on the news," Bruce replied, adjusting the equipment.

"Or you could be suiting up with us," Tony added.

Steve glared at the billionaire, "you know he can't do that."

"Why not," Tony asked, "why shouldn't he let off a little steam?"

"You know damn well why, lay off him," Steve barked. Auralie winced. Steve was only trying to help everyone, but he hadn't yet realized that Tony was nothing like a soldier. Tony did not like to take orders, he liked to let his free spirit shine. Which wasn't a bad thing, but it did bring the Iron Man into conflict with the Captain.

Suddenly, something on the console dinged. Tony smiled and pulled up a screen with a loading bar, checking the progress.

"What's that?" Steve asked, unfamiliar with all of the tech that surrounded him.

"My decoder," Tony replied, "I've been having Jarvis run it since the bridge. In a few hours, I'll know every dirty little secret Shield has to offer. Blueberry?" Tony had produced a package of blueberries out of nowhere.

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Steve refused the blueberries and began to yell at Tony. But then Bruce interjected, "a warm light for all mankind to share. Loki's jab at Fury. I think it was meant for you."

Tony gave Bruce a blueberry, then turned to Steve, "I'm kind of the only name in clean energy right now."

"So why didn't Fury call you in on the Tesseract project?" Bruce asked.

"Exactly," Tony smiled, "and we will find out once my decryption program is complete."

Steve looked angry, having been trained to follow orders. But Auralie had read the old reports on the man who had broken several laws trying to get into the army and fight for what was right. Auralie knew that Steve would choose what was right over orders.

"Steve," she said, "I know Tony's idea seems crazy and counterproductive, but I think it's important we know what everyone is doing. We can't have the Tesseract in the wrong hands, and if those hands happen to belong to Shield, then it is up to us to make sure we find the right hands. We need to know what's going on to do that."

Steve turned his glare on her, but it softened and he asked, "aren't you a Shield agent?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I know everything that goes on around here," the 16-year-old replied, "look, Shield took me in when I had no one, and gave me a home for the past three years. I will always be loyal to Maria and to Nat and Clint and Fury and Coulson for taking me in. And I'll be loyal to this organization. But I would rather do what's right than follow orders. I read the files, I think you know what I mean."

Steve met her gaze, then looked around at the two scientists, a look of intense concentration on his face. He opened his mouth but just said, "just find the cube," and left.

Auralie sighed but hoped she had at least helped him figure out why she had let Tony hack them, why it was important that they had all the information. Tony and Bruce began recalibrating their equipment, and Tony turned to the teenager that was watching him, "you wanna help?"

"No, but can I have a blueberry?" she asked. Tony smiled and let her take a handful and she popped them into her mouth, picking up her book again. But then a voice came over the comm that she kept in her pocket at all times.

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"Agent Shadow," Fury said, "Agent Romano is on her way to interrogate Loki. I want you to observe, invisibly, and prepare to be back up if she so needs it."

"Yes sir," Auralie replied, "I'm on my way."

A/N: Happy Thanksgiving!

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