

## Chapter 2 – Forging Your Way Through

Fury released a deep sigh before asking, “Where do you want to start? A lot of shit has happened in the last eight years.”

Carol thought about it. Fury was right; there were a lot of things she felt like she was missing, but they had to start somewhere. She felt safe asking about something more obvious. “Friday calls everyone by their title, so why are you Mr. Fury and not Director?”

Carol was surprised to notice his entire body stiffen, as if this was the most difficult part of the last few years. But after a moment, the man answered, “On paper, SHIELD is gone.”

Carol must have heard wrong. “What?”

Fury just moved his eyes from the window to her before speaking. “Hydra infiltrated SHIELD from the start. Two years ago, they began their uprising. Rogers, Romanoff, and I were forced to destroy SHIELD to defeat Hydra that day—or at least that’s what they believe.”

Carol frowned. “You said it was gone on paper alone. Why and how?”

Fury’s eyes shifted back to the window as he told the story. “The why began when I was named Director of SHIELD. I noticed the underhanded tactics we were ordered to use and knew something was wrong. At first, I kept the information to myself and kept observing. It was only in 2006 that I decided to turn to the only man who would be able to help me.”

Carol shifted her eyes back to the window and said, “Stark.”

Fury gave her a short nod. “Yes, Tony. I told him to keep my suspicion to himself and set Jarvis, his previous AI, to track any suspicious moves inside SHIELD. When Iron Man

happened, I asked him to act like he never knew of SHIELD before so he could mix among the agents to weed out the traitors. I made him a consultant so he could infiltrate with the higher-ups and still stay away from the WSC. During the uprising, Tony hid me until I could recover, but then Rogers found me, and shit hit the fan. Tony saved as many as he could, which, thanks to my early warning, was most.”

Carol nodded in understanding. You can’t save everyone everywhere, but Stark tried his best, and his best had one hell of a result. “So you are rebuilding,” she assumed.

Fury gave a small smile as he replied, “Yes. Tony keeps saying a war is coming for Earth, so we have to be prepared. He pulled all his strings in the military and with the president to have their backing for the secret rebuilding of SHIELD. You remember Coulson?” Carol did. She smiled at the memory of the man and nodded. “He is the new Director,” Fury said.

Carol crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. “Not you?”

Fury shrugged. “I am too used to playing their games by now. Coulson is the better choice. I took a page from the best man I know and became a consultant.”

Carol shook her head with a smile. Then realization hit her. “That General Hale wanted SHIELD to intervene in my case, but you didn’t call them; you called Stark instead.”

Fury nodded. “She was Hydra, and if SHIELD got involved, the WSC would have ordered for you to be contained for study. The system was broken, but that’s what Tony does best: create and fix things.”

Carol just shook her head. “Is that why he created the armor?”

Fury shook his head. “Pepper already told you he did it to escape terrorists who were paid to kill him. At first, he didn’t care about being a hero or any of that business, but since the invasion, Tony was determined to protect the Earth from what’s coming.”

Carol’s arms fell to her sides, and she stared at Fury with wide eyes. “What invasion?!”

So Fury told her. He told her about Loki, about the Chitauri, about the Avengers—Captain America, the Black Widow, Hawkeye, Thor, the Hulk, and, of course, Iron Man.

He told her how he faked Coulson’s death to motivate them to work together. How Rogers made himself the leader by calling out orders while having no idea of everyone’s positions, while Iron Man was flying all around helping wherever he could.

And finally, he told her about the WSC’s decision to nuke New York and how he called Tony, warning him. It was when Iron Man flew the nuke through the portal, destroying the mothership and killing all the Chitauri, that she finally realized why Iron Man was so familiar to her.

“The Mad Titan,” Carol mumbled.

Fury turned to give her an odd look. She sighed and said, “I think it’s better we talk about it with Stark as well.”

Fury eyed her for a moment before accepting. “So why did you decide to show up this time around? When I called you for the invasion, you never replied.”

Carol let out a heavy breath. “Look, the universe is a big place, and at the time of the invasion, I was so far from Earth it would have taken me at least a week to get here. Now the universe has more protectors flying around calling themselves ‘the Guardians of the

Galaxy.' It freed me enough to stick pretty close to this solar system, so when you called, I came as fast as I could."

Then she turned back toward the window, which was now blocked so they couldn't see the open-heart operation, and asked, "What the hell has been going on lately that you called me?"

Fury growled in anger before he started talking. It was another long story, apparently. One that began with a new law meant for super-powered humans and someone who believed he was above the law while others followed him blindly.

About a man who, in his blind pursuit of his old friend, created just chaos and a death toll. And when he was brought in, instead of working things out with his friend, Rogers broke out, leaving more bodies behind and no one to answer for them.

Fury told her about Stark recruiting the Panther guy and a Spider-Boy, which left Carol unimpressed by that reckless decision. Then came the battle at the airport, how Stark ordered his team to hold their punches while Rogers's team fought with everything they had.

Then Carol began feeling the anger radiating from Fury as he spoke about the Widow's betrayal by allowing Rogers and Barnes to escape in Stark's jet. How Colonel Rhodes was gravely injured during their escape and still was in the hospital.

Fury let out a breath before finishing the story. "Tony figured out who the fake doctor was, went to the Raft, and got Wilson to tell him they were in Siberia. All we know from there is that an hour after Tony requested entry to the Russian airspace, his suit released a distress signal with its last location, and there was no response from Tony. We already organized a search team when you arrived."

Carol blinked twice. She was about to say something about the state she found Stark in, but that was when Friday intervened. “Mr. Fury, I hacked the Hydra base and downloaded the security footage as well as the footage Boss saw there. I can display it alongside the Iron Man cameras for you to get the full scene.”

Fury and Carol exchanged a look, both knowing there was only one answer to that. “Please do, Friday.” For some reason, Carol was excited to talk with the AI for the first time.

Without any further comment, two holographic screens appeared in front of them, side by side.

On the left was the security footage, and on the right, the camera from Stark’s armor.

It started simple enough. Stark coming as a friend, the three advancing toward the heat signature. Both she and Fury were just as surprised as the three in the video when the soldiers were already dead. Then the Sokovian voice echoed in the room, followed by Stark’s threat, Roger’s question, and Zemo’s comment about fallen empires.

That was when the right screen changed from the camera to another security video with the date stamp of December 96. She heard Fury cursing at her side, but before she could ask, a car appeared in the frame. From there, it was a horror movie, watching two innocents killed as if they were nothing by someone they knew. Calling Barnes by his name granted the senior Stark no favors.

They watched on the left screen as Stark processed what he just saw. She noticed Barnes’s lowered head and tears, but then her eyes fell on Rogers. “He knew,” Carol whispered to herself. Fury noticed as well, she realized, when hearing him say the same thing but with a deep growl.

They went back to watching as Stark noticed Rogers ready for a fight and demanded if he knew. Rogers tried to lie, but Stark wisely didn't buy it. Then came the punch. And after that, an entire shitshow of a fight.

Carol didn't understand Stark in that moment. It was obvious the super-soldiers had an advantage in that closed location, so why not use his heavy weaponry? Why stick with low-powered blasts from his thrusters? Even when Friday pointed that out, Stark chose to pull his punches.

Because even in his grief and anger, he just wanted to hurt them and take them in, not kill them. He was a good man, maybe too good. And it cost him dearly in that fight.

Both she and Fury winced when they saw Rogers repeatedly hitting Stark's head from his point of view. They kept watching the right screen until the famous shield came down one last time, cutting the feed. Carol knew what the aftermath looked like in person, and it was horrifying to see the American idol start to leave with his buddy leaning on him. Not sparing a man who called him a friend a second glance until Stark called to him, demanding he leave the shield behind. For the first time since Carol heard of him, Rogers did the right thing.

After the two left, Stark dropped back to the floor to the position she found him in, let out a choked sob before fainting, and the feed on the left screen was cut too.

Carol felt a lot of things in that moment. Anger at Rogers, pity toward Stark. But there was more. She felt intrigued by the man who went toe to toe with two super-soldiers and almost won while holding himself back.

When she looked at Fury, a shiver went down her spine. His eye was narrow, his face red with fury, and his mouth in a thin line with fists clenched at his sides.

Then Friday's voice echoed in the room again. "The Arc Reactor is in place, and Extremis 3.0 entered Boss's system. Healing has begun." There was complete silence in the room for a few minutes until Friday spoke again. "All broken bones have been healed. Lung and frostbite damage will be fixed soon as well. I calculate 17 minutes until Extremis is fully integrated into Boss's system. Dr. Cho anticipates him waking up in the early evening. She will be moving him to somewhere more comfortable in an hour."

Carol was surprised by the sigh of relief she let out upon hearing this news. Fury himself looked a decade older as he said softly, "Thank you, Friday."

An hour later, Carol and Fury were sitting in another room on the same floor of Stark Tower. In front of them, on a bed, lay Stark, and he already looked far better than the last time she saw him. The color had mostly returned to his face, all the cuts and bruises were healed, and his breaths weren't so shallow anymore.

But what drew most of her attention was the bright blue light coming from the center of his chest. Obviously, it was the Arc Reactor she had heard so much about, but the broken one had only residual power she could sense. Now... Now the one inside Stark was emitting so much familiar energy that Carol felt drawn to it, but she held herself back.

She considered asking Fury about that, but science and explanations were never his strong suit. She would wait until she got to talk to Stark himself. She had many things she wanted to ask him.

Dr. Cho finished her last check of Stark before standing up and saying to Fury, "I have to go and rest a little. You have my number; call me if anything changes."

Fury gave her a short nod. "Of course, Helen. Thank you."

She smiled softly at Stark, saying, "He is one of a kind. The world needs him. I am glad I could help after everything he did for me."

The dark man actually chuckled in his deep voice before saying, “We both know what he would say to that.”

Dr. Cho’s smile grew as she commented, “Exactly my point. Fury. Captain.” And with that, the woman left the room.

Carol leaned back in her chair, eyes locked on the blue light at the man’s chest as she spoke, “The world is kind of a mess right now.”

Fury nodded, his eye locked on the man on the bed as well. “It is.”

Carol drew out the silence for a moment longer before pointing out, “I’m not sure even Tony Stark can handle it all on his own.”

She felt Fury shifting in his seat before he said firmly, “He won’t be on his own.”

Carol forced her stare to Fury and asked, curious, “What are you going to do?”

Fury smirked at her, the light in his eye gleaming as he said with the voice of a predator, “We are taking a play out of Hydra’s book. Stepping out of the shadows into the light.”