



# Doppelgangers

A Fan Fiction

Featuring

Hawkeye, Mockingbird,  
Black Widow and Grifter

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## Introduction

Hello! Thanks for stopping by!

All writers stumble into the dreaded Writer's Block zone. I use role-playing games and fan fiction to pull out of the zone, like a nuke blasting that diamond that is the Phantom Zone.

What follows is the first of many fan fictions crafted with [Green Ronin Publishing's "DC Adventures" Role-Playing Game](#). Using their rules, I crafted a comic book adventure that is based mainly in the Marvel universe but includes elements from DC Comics too.

Unless otherwise noted, these stories occur in the present. The world knows about superheroes and mutants (Marvel-style mutants), but there's not that many of them.

The world is still afraid of these super-powered individuals, despite the best efforts of the Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate, also known as SHIELD, and the heroics of people like Spider-Man, Iron Man, Batman and the X-Men.

The following adventure dives into the special agents of SHIELD: Grifter, Hawkeye, Mockingbird and the Black Widow. You'll also meet SHIELD's director, General Nick Fury. This story features their first case against an old threat born again in the new age — HYDRA.

Credit where credit due — I borrowed the inner workings of the plot from a Green Ronin ["Mutants and Masterminds"](#) module called "The Proteus Plot," written by Steve Kenson.

I found character builds for the RPG on the forums at [Atomic Think Tank Roll Call](#). Many thanks to the posters there.

Coincidentally, both "DC Adventures" and "Mutants and Masterminds, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition" are on holiday sale (probably until January 1, 2017). Follow the links to pick them up.

Enjoy! More to come.

## Chapter One — Lunch and a Show?

Bobbi Morse elbowed her date Clint Barton in his side. Hard.

“Stop squirming,” she muttered under her breath in his direction.

“This is your thing, not mine,” Clint whispered back.

“You could have stayed home.”

“You said we were going to lunch and then a show,” Clint blasted back.

A few people standing in the crowd near them cast a disdainful glance at Clint and Bobbi. She smiled demurely. “Sorry. We’re not trying to be a part of the show,” Bobbi said while motioning to the presentation space in front of them.

A final glare and the people turned away.

Bobbi turned to Clint. She took his chin in her hand and turned his face toward hers. Thank God he was wearing his damn-near trademark, purple-lensed sunglasses. She often got lost in his baby blue eyes. With them blocked, she could remain her witty, caustic self.

“This is a show,” she insisted. “If it bores you that much, turn down your hearing aids.” She gave him a quick peck on the lips and then let him go, returning to the presentation.

It was indeed a show.

Stane International had pulled out all the stops at this year’s product showcase. They’d turned ten thousand square feet of the research floor of their New York headquarters into an exhibit floor. New products cluttered various booths, each with a team to showcase the product’s efficiency and place it in the hearts and minds of the attendee.

Bobbie and Clint stood at an exhibit about the latest Stane pharmaceuticals. The company had gone in that direction two years ago, after their hostile takeover attempt of rival military armaments firm Stark Industries went south.

Stark’s owner, Tony Stark, had literally beaten back Stane while in the guise of his heroic alter-ego, Iron Man. After the very public defeat of Obadiah Stane in his Iron Monger battle suit, his company dumped him and did everything in their power to get out of Stark’s shadow.

Hence pharmaceuticals and computer defense systems.

Not as sexy as robotics or big military guns, but much better for business.

As agents of the Strategic Homeland International Espionage and Law-Enforcement Division, a.k.a. SHIELD, Bobbi and Clint rarely got R&R time. When they did, Clint preferred going somewhere he could keep up his marksman skills, preferably with his bow.

Seeing as that’s all he did while on the job, Bobbi never thought it much for relaxing. She preferred a nice beach and a good book she could fall asleep reading.

Or thumbing through the latest issue of some scientific journal. That’s what brought Bobbi to Stane today. That and the ability to tease Tony Stark about Stane’s new hi-tech toys. They knew him through their SHIELD work, though he rarely played along with their spy games.

Bobbi glanced from the Stane presenter and back at Clint. He was doing better at hiding his complete boredom, though tugging on his collar to loosen his tie wasn’t the classiest of moves. Then again, Clint Barton wasn’t the classiest of guys. A street punk who turned good, he was the antithesis of all those Ivy League super nerds Bobbi had dated and dumped moons ago in college while studying for her science degrees.

What he lacked in class he made up for in charm. That’s what had ultimately won Bobbi over. That and his incredible ability to —

“Attention exhibit patrons,” interrupted a voice on a loudspeaker. “We regret to inform you that the exhibit must close early today. Please move to the main exit in an orderly fashion.”

Bobbi looked to Clint. He threw up his hands in surrender.

“I had nothing to do with that!” he said.

Bobbi shook her head. She grabbed Clint’s arm and led him past bewildered attendees, not to the main exit, but a door marked “employees only.” Two nondescript men in moderately expensive suits (better-looking ones than what Clint wore) stood by the door. One of them motioned for Bobbi and Clint to stop.

“You want to go the other way, ma’am,” he said.

Bobbi reached into her clutch and pulled out her SHIELD communicard. Flashing it before the guards, she identified herself and Clint as agents.

The guard studied the card, then looked back to Bobbi. “If you’ll please head to the exit.”

Clint stepped forward, producing his communicard. “We’re just curious as officers of the law what could prompt a sudden end to the show.”

The guard frowned. “Trouble in the building. But nothing you two can help with.”

“On the contrary,” Clint continued, showcasing that charm Bobbi loved. “This is exactly the kind of thing we do.”



“That guard is a sexist prick,” Bobbi said as she and Clint hurried down the hall from the elevator.

“Maybe, but we’re here now so —”

“I have half a mind to let whatever’s happening to happen, just to show that guy —”

Clint grabbed Bobbi’s arm and pulled her to him. He gave her a good, long kiss. When he pulled away, all Bobbi’s anger was gone. He smiled.

“Good. Now get your head in the game,” Clint said.

Bobbi sneaked another quick kiss. “I’m already thinking about the after party.”

“Then let’s get this over with.”

Both agents continued down the hall. They could already hear sounds of violence coming from somewhere beyond the security wall that had slammed into place before their arrival.

Several Stane security men in riot gear and weaponry stood at the ready by the door. Another man, an executive in a suit wearing a Kevlar vest, huddled with them. He was sweating, barely able to pay attention to what one of the guards was telling him.

“Agents Morse and Barton,” Bobbi said as they approached the Stane team. “Sit-rep.”

“We were told you were here,” the Stane guard talking to the exec said. “We were also told we should all stand down until your backup arrives.”

Clint broke into a smile. “I’m her backup. What’s going on?”

The guard looked from Clint to Bobbi. Off her stern look, he said, “Five guys in green costumes blew a hole in the wall, entered the lab just beyond this security wall. They’ve got two robots with them.”

“What’s in there?” Bobbi asked.

The guard started to respond, but the suit interrupted. “Stane property. And if you’re going to help, you’ll be sure that it remains just that.”

Bobbi cast a quick glance at Clint. She saw in his expression that he too thought this guy could turn into a problem. She did her best to defuse his concerns.

“That’s why General Fury sent us down here,” she said.

“I thought your general called you to stand down after you barged your way in,” the suit replied. He looked Bobbi up and down. “And what exactly are you going to do wearing a skirt and heels?”

Bobbi’s mouth opened, but then she closed it to think about her next words. Clint jumped in. “Do you have a schematic of that lab handy?”

The guard who had talked to them pulled out a tablet computer and set to work.

“You’re not thinking of going in there, are you?” the suit asked.

“Kinda hard to stop them from stealing Stane property if we don’t,” Bobbi said, trying to hold back her sarcasm.

Her failed effort drew a nasty glare from the suit.

The guard handed his tablet to Clint. Bobbi took it and held it between them. The guard pointed to a place on the screen.

“That’s the lab,” the guard said. “The hole they blew is here. A few of the men spread out, covering the two other entrances. The robots and the remaining men are guarding the server —” he pointed to another area on the screen. “Here.”

“Can we tap the surveillance cameras on this thing?” Bobbi asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” the guard replied.

“And I guess it’d be too much to ask to get a commlink with you?”

The guard looked to the suit. The suit shook his head.

Bobbi handed the tablet back to the guard.

“No gear, half blind,” Bobbi began. “This oughta be a good warm up for later.”

Clint smiled. To the guard, he said, “How about getting us inside?”

“But your boss said —!” the suit argued.

Bobbi held up a silencing hand.

“Our boss will be happier if we nab these guys without him,” she said.

“Means he doesn’t have to do the paperwork,” Clint added.



Bobbi, sans her high heels, slipped from the air vent and to the ground with no problem.

Clint had meant to do the same but hit one of the tables on the way down.

“What was that?” they heard one of the green-suited thugs exclaim. Another immediately told him to check it out.

“You’re on top tonight,” Bobbi scornfully told Clint.

“You’re too rough anyway,” he replied.

Both agents slipped around desks to hide away from the incoming thug.

When he rounded a corner, Clint stuck out his head.

“Nice outfit,” he said.

The thug swung his blaster rifle at Clint.

Bobbi knocked him unconscious before he could pull the trigger.

Clint quickly picked up the blaster. “Not a bow, but...”

“You’ll get over it,” Bobbi whispered. “C’mon. Other door’s this way.”

The pair hunkered down, making their way forward and using the environment to mask their approach.

“How’re you doing all this in a skirt?” Clint asked sarcastically.

Bobbi glared at him.

A few moments later, a second thug was within sight. His focus was on the first entrance to the room. The Stane guards on the other side had already dropped the security shield, so these guys weren't going anywhere without explosives.

Going anywhere didn't seem to be on their agenda.

Clint took this man down, knocking him on the back of the neck with his newly acquired rifle. As the man went down; Clint caught him to limit the noise.

Bobbi snuck ahead around a rack of menacing-looking vials and robot parts. She could see the last of the three patrolling guards watching the second door. Moments later, Clint came up behind her.

"Ladies first," he whispered.

"Such a gentleman."

Bobbi crept up to the thug. Like an uncoiling snake, she lashed out, grabbing the man about his neck and mouth. She kicked him in the back of the knee, bringing him down so she could put him in a chokehold.

Clint snuck out and caught his gun before it hit the ground.

Moments later, Bobbi lowered the unconscious man to the ground. Looking at him, she noted a weird logo on the upper breast of his gaudy green uniform. It was a yellow skull with several octopus-like tentacles spawning from its lower section.

"So the guard said the last two thugs were with two robots by the server," Clint said.

"What are the chances the robots will attack?" Bobbi asked.

"Hell, we don't even know who these guys are?"

"Should we ask 'em?"

"Let's."

The agents went back into stealth mode as they maneuvered past more racks, desks and laboratory tables. Moments later, they had their sights on the remaining green-suited men and their two robots.

"They're just standing there," Clint said.

Bobbi thought on this. "They're not here to steal anything. And they don't want to get any further in the building."

"So what are they waiting for?"

Clint felt a rumble in his pocket. That was his cell phone, conveniently turned on vibrate. Bobbi had left hers behind in her clutch with her shoes. Clint discretely checked the phone and found a text message.

"Backup's here," he told Bobbi.

"Who?" she asked.

Clint started typing a reply text. "Widow and Grifter. They're bringing presents."

"Great," Bobbi sighed. "I know how much she enjoyed handling your shaft."

Clint cast a glance at her. "Really? Now?" He sent his message and tucked the phone away.

Bobbi checked on the intruders. They hadn't moved despite losing contact with their other party members. "The plan?" she asked.

"Let Widow and Grifter get us our gear," Clint replied. "Then we mess these guys up."

## Chapter Two — Robot Shuffle

It didn't make sense for Clint and Bobbi to change into their official SHIELD uniforms as Hawkeye and Mockingbird, but it sure helped to have their gear.

Natasha Romanova, SHIELD codename Black Widow, slipped into position with Clint and Bobbi. She carried with her a long case, two in-ear communicators, two escrima sticks and a pair of white boots for a female.

"The general thought you could use these."

While sliding into her boots, Bobbi listened to how the Widow's Russian accent played through even a whisper. Bobbi had to admit it was alluring. And Natasha did rock a black bodysuit with all the right curves. Bobbi had seen the trail of broken hearts the Widow left behind and often worried that Clint would be one of them.

Bobbi grabbed the sticks and then slid one of the earpieces in place. Clint replaced one of his hearing aids with the other earpiece and then opened the case. Inside was his trademark longbow. A dozen arrows were also inside, with a variety of arrowheads to match. He selected one and attached it to an arrow shaft.

"Grifter is in position," the Widow said. "Give me fifteen seconds."

"Did Clint ever tell you that?" Bobbi asked.

"Only after round three," the Widow replied with a wink.

"I am so glad I'm smart enough not to shit where I eat," Grifter's husky voice came back over the comms.

"I've heard stories," Clint replied.

"And they're just that. Stories. Now if the Tango Trio is done swapping stories."

"Is that what the SHIELD staff calls us?" Bobbi asked.

The Widow moved away from Bobbi and Clint.

Bobbi leaned into Clint and covered the mic stem of her comm.

"Three rounds? Were you holding back?"

"I'm not even going to justify that," Clint replied.

Bobbi gave a sly smile. She turned and readied herself to move on the remaining intruders.

"That's fifteen," Clint said.

He stood up from cover and let his arrow fly. As it smashed into one of the two human intruders, the arrowhead burst open. A set of bolas wrapped around the man's arms at the elbows, forcing him to drop his rifle.

Grifter leaped from behind his cover, firing exotic twin pistols. Bursts of light from the guns shot through one of the robots. The thing sparked, flamed and fell to the floor. Grifter's other shots went wide but didn't hit anything explosive.

Thankfully, the Widow's aim was true; shooting from a triangulated vantage point so she wouldn't hit Grifter, her dual handguns' bullets perforated the remaining human intruder.

Bobbi took that as the cue to make her move. She leaped over a table, sliding feet first across its six feet in length. A variety of tools, parts and glass vials fell from the table, smashing and clattering upon the floor.

When she came to the end of the table, Bobbi slid down to the floor behind another table between her and the intruders. As she went behind cover, she threw one of her escrima sticks at one of the robots.

The stick smashed into what passed as the robot's face, shattering the visor that served as its visual sensors.

Clint let another arrow fly, this one without a special head. It smashed into the back of Bobbi's escrima stick, forcing it all the way through the robot's head. It jerked backward and fell to the floor.

Leaping from cover, Bobbi cautiously approached the intruders. The robots were down. One green-suited human was bleeding out, but medics could easily save him for later interrogation. The bolas wrapped the other guy like a Christmas present filled with information.

Black Widow joined Bobbi at the scene. She trained her guns on the fallen man just in case. Clint and Grifter surveyed the scene in case they missed anything.

As the downed intruder squirmed against Clint's bolas, Bobbi put a foot on his chest. He looked up at her.

Looking down the end of her remaining escrima stick, Bobbi said, "You probably know the drill here. Speak or lose the ability to speak."

To Bobbi's surprise, the intruder smiled.

"Bobbi! Move!" the Widow yelled

Almost too late Bobbi saw the remote detonator in the intruder's hand.

The next thing she knew, Bobbi felt Black Widow slamming into her. Both women flipped over a nearby table.

The robot with the arrow in its forehead exploded.

Debris shot into the air. Bobbi and the Widow were well behind the table and out of harm's way. Instead of flame and shrapnel, a gray cloud burst from the robot's shell, spreading fast about the room. The agents of SHIELD found themselves coughing, waving their hands to dissipate the cloud from around them. This cloud lasted for several minutes, during which the agents continued their coughing fits.

Five minutes in, there were four flashes of light within the cloud.

Then the cloud evaporated, leaving four bewildered agents behind.



"Agent Morse! Sitrep!" the image of General Nick Fury demanded over the tablet computer in Bobbi's hand. The man looked more haggard than usual, though Bobbi couldn't remember him not looking haggard. Came with the responsibility of running the world's largest spy factory.

Almost made her forgive him those nasty-smelling cigars he was always chomping on.

Almost.

Bobbi stood in the lab where she and her fellow agents had held off the set of green-suited intruders and their exploding robots. Unfortunately for their investigation, the second robot had also exploded, but without the gray cloud. There wasn't enough of either robot to salvage.

They didn't fare any better with the human intruders.

The ones who'd watched the doors had bitten down on cyanide capsules hidden in their teeth. Deader than Julius Caesar. The one in the bolas snare did the same. They got a med team in for the last guy. Here's to hoping Natasha hadn't shot anything too vital.

"The perps got in via an explosion to one of the walls," Bobbi told her superior. "There was one of those burrowing machines on the other side. Looks like they've been digging a tunnel for a few days now."

"Shit security for a high-end firm," Fury said.

Bobbi cast an eye over at the suit she and Clint had encountered earlier. He didn't look at all pleased with Fury's comment, but what was he gonna do after Fury's team effectively saved his ass?

Clint came over and joined Bobbi in staring at the tablet.

“Did a closer look at the digger,” he began. “Belongs to a local construction company. Grifter’s working on tracking them down now.”

“That’ll be your next stop,” Fury snapped. “Anything from the suits at Stane? What was so important in there?”

“Nothing that he wants to tell us,” Natasha chimed in, approaching Bobbi and Clint. Looking at Fury, she added, “And if I can’t get him to talk...”

“I and the full power of the intelligence community will,” Fury finished. “Anything else I should know immediately?”

“There is the matter of that cloud coming from the robot,” Bobbi said. Off Fury’s look of concern (if that’s what it was and not just a reaction to his eye patch being too tight), she added, “Prelim health checks are fine, thanks for asking.”

“Swing by medical on your way back from that construction site,” Fury ordered. “If that’s our only lead, we have to hit it hard and fast.”

Clint let out a giggle. Bobbi elbowed him in the side.

“Something funny, agent?” Fury asked.

“No sir!” Clint quickly replied.

Natasha also gave Clint a dirty look.

Bobbi took a few steps away from Clint and Natasha, turning the tablet so that Fury only saw her.

“We’re on it, general,” she assured him.

“Keep me or Agent Hill informed. Fury out.”

The tablet’s screen went blank.

Bobbi turned to Clint. “You know that man has no sense of humor!”

“Or sex life,” Clint replied.

“I don’t know,” Natasha said.

Clint and Bobbi looked at her suspiciously. Natasha didn’t think anything of it. At first. She put her hands on her hips in an indignant pose. “You don’t think —”

“Well, it’s not like you to say no to —”

“Not me,” Natasha insisted. “But I’ve known others.”

Clint looked intrigued. “Nick Fury is a playa?”

“Christ!”

The others turned to admit Grifter into their circle. He still wore the red bandana-looking mask he wore as some tactical advantage in combat. His blonde surfer-styled haircut jutted out from the tie around his head. It all played well with the trench coat covering his standard SHIELD combat uniform.

“I swear you people pay more attention to sexcapades than spycraft,” he said.

“Said the man who hasn’t had a date in... how long?” Clint asked.

“My business, Barton,” Grifter said. He held up a tablet. “I’ve got the address on that construction company. Better do as the general said.”

Bobbi looked around the room. SHIELD crime scene investigators were scraping up parts of the robots and scanning the place for any other clues. Stane’s suit and a few security guards looked on but were about as important as the furniture.

“Well we’re done here,” she said.

“Got your uniforms in the car,” Grifter said.

Bobbi nodded.

Grifter headed out. The others followed.

## Chapter Three — Voices in my Head

Gordon Construction was a quick SHIELD flying sedan ride from Stane in Manhattan to the Bronx. Grifter did the driving, with Black Widow next to him. Clint and Bobbi, now dressed in their official uniforms as Hawkeye and Mockingbird respectively, rode in the back.

Grifter converted the car back to ground mode a few blocks away from the brownstone housing the company's main office. He drove the car into a parallel parking spot across from the building. The agents took in the scene.

"Police update confirmed," Mockingbird said. "Place is shut down, has been for over a week. No one in or out."

The Widow looked up from her tablet. "I cross-referenced city construction contracts with Gordon Construction," she said. "The only contract they have is the apartments three blocks away from Stane International headquarters."

"Convenient access to a secluded lot," Hawkeye began.

"All the better to start burrowing without someone noticing that's all you're doing," Grifter finished.

Mockingbird secured her escrima sticks in the hip holsters of her black and white jumpsuit. She then secured her goggles in place. "Okay then. Hawkeye, get up top across the street, watch our backs. Grifter, have the car ready. Widow goes inside with me."

"You ladies have all the fun," Grifter said.

"I'll let you use the siren on the way back," Mockingbird said. She then slid out of the car. Hawkeye and Black Widow followed.



The lock was no problem for the Black Widow. The place didn't have any further security, electronic or otherwise. The lack of security didn't surprise Mockingbird as it fell in line with the idea that Gordon Construction was little more than a front to get a drilling machine.

The office itself wasn't anything special. One big space, several desks and office accouterments. Mockingbird noticed a definite lack of anything personal that would allude to anyone ever having worked here.

Widow found a file cabinet and set to work digging through the company records. A few minutes later, she said, "Pretty thin here."

Mockingbird joined her at the cabinet, digging into a lower drawer. "All we need is something that tells us who owns Gordon." After a few moments, she added, "You ever see anything like those guys back at Stane? I know green and yellow are complimentary colors and all, but wow."

"I have," Widow said. "Back in the late sixties."

Mockingbird paused. Natasha looked like she was barely out of her twenties. That made it hard to remember she was born in the early fifties. She'd received longevity thanks to a Russian Cold War variation of the Super Soldier serum, the same serum that had made Captain America back in World War Two. All part of her super-secret and oh-so-creepy backstory as a femme fatale assassin for Mother Russia.

The Widow withdrew some papers from the file cabinet. "Think I found what we need."

"Good thing, ladies," Hawkeye said over the team's com units. "We've got company in the form of a so-non-descript-its-obvious van."

“I’ve got it,” Grifter confirmed. “It’s slowing...”

Inside, Widow and Mockingbird started gathering files and heading for the door.

“What are they doing —” Mockingbird began, but Hawkeye cut her off.

“Ladies! Find some cover!” he yelled.



Outside, the van’s side door slid open. From his vantage point on the rooftop across from the Gordon office, Hawkeye could see the end of a rocket launcher extending from the opening. He prepped an arrow on his bowstring. He quickly did the computations for the trajectory and speed of the rocket against his angle of fire.

If he pulled off the shot he was planning, it’d be the kind of shot bards sang about in ballads.

Down below, Grifter started up the car while drawing one of his hi-tech handguns. He was on the wrong side of the van to stop whatever was coming out, but he damned sure could make sure the van didn’t go anywhere fast.

The owner of the launcher fired. In the second before its rocket payload appeared over the street headed for the Gordon building, Hawkeye let his arrow fly. Just as the rocket was inches from the building front, the arrow struck it, setting it off.

The building’s windows instantly shattered, as did a few from buildings across the street and the cars parked in front. Luckily, the location wasn’t populated; there’d have been a hell of a mess. That mess would be even worse if that rocket had exploded inside the building and taken it down.

Grifter slammed the gas and steered the sedan straight at the parked van. He smashed into the front of the van; the damage was cosmetic, but the van wouldn’t be driving forward through Grifter.

Shots rang out from inside the Gordon building. Hawkeye saw the rocket launcher fall out of the van. The women must’ve taken the shooter out of play. It was enough to spook the van’s driver. They slammed the thing into reverse.

Obviously confused, he rammed the van’s back end into a telephone pole thirty feet behind it. The pole bent, threatening to come down on the van.

Black Widow emerged from the smoke and took up a position of cover behind one of the damaged cars. She aimed a handgun at the van, waiting for anything. Mockingbird followed suit, holding the Widow’s other gun as she found cover. Hawkeye knew shooting wasn’t Mockingbird’s thing; not that she wasn’t good at it; she just preferred the intimacy of smashing a goon in the face.

Grifter threw open the door of his sedan, stepping out with his gun blazing. The driver took a hit, but Hawkeye couldn’t tell if it was enough to keep him down. Just in case, Hawkeye attached one of his special arrowheads to his next arrow. He drew a tensile-strength wire from the arrow head and attached it to his bow.

On the street, the bad guys returned fire at Mockingbird and Black Widow. Mockingbird took a hit to the shoulder. It didn’t stop her from returning fire. Widow backed her up with a few rounds.

And then a round of automatic fire sprayed the cars the ladies used for cover. Mockingbird took another hit, falling back behind cover. Bullets bounced off the front of the car Widow hid behind.

Hawkeye fired his arrow at the building across from him, which was four stories taller. The wire trailed out behind the arrow head.

A second later the head stabbed itself into the wall of the building in front of it. Hawkeye leaped from the roof, swinging down to the street on the side of the van opposite from the shooters. The arrowhead drew the wire into itself as Hawkeye swung down to the street below, the wire remaining taut, so he didn’t smash himself against anything.

Meanwhile, Widow fired again.

Grifter checked the driver. He was out. Grifter drew his second handgun and leaned with his back against the side of the van. With his head, he motioned for Hawkeye, now on the street, to go around the back of the van. Hawkeye acknowledged with a nod as he readied another arrow.

“All of you stand down!” came a woman’s voice from inside the van.

For a split second, Hawkeye felt a murmuring in his head, as if something was telling him to obey the command from the unseen woman. He quickly shook it off and moved to the back of the van. As he did, he caught a glimpse of Grifter. The man’s hands fell to his sides; he slumped to the ground.

“Grifter!” Hawkeye yelled over the com.

Grifter didn’t respond.

“Widow! Grifter is down!” he said.

Hawkeye didn’t get a response.

“Mockingbird! Talk to me!”

Nothing.

Bow at the ready, Hawkeye ran around to the open side of the van.

The butt of a rifle clocked him in the jaw.

Hawkeye fell back, but not off his feet.

When he looked back, he saw a blonde woman in a black topped bodysuit with an assault rifle running away from him. He reset his arrow and prepared to fire —

But then he heard the murmuring again. The point of his arrow dropped. The last thing he saw before passing out was the woman rounding a corner toward freedom.

## Chapter Four — Cleanup, Aisle Huh?

General Nicholas Fury wasn't an imposing man. Grifter and Hawkeye had him by a few inches in height, and Fury wasn't one of those muscle guys that seemed to overpopulate the military set. But the world-weary look in his eye and the sense of command he relayed even through a television monitor demanded respect.

It was that dedication and ability to find solutions that had allowed an African-American man in the late forties to get the reigns of the world's premiere spy outfit. Fury insists the fledgling United Nations gave him the command on the chance it'd all blow up in his face and then they could "blame the Darkie."

It never felt good for an agent who'd just botched a job to have to sit for the debriefing with the General. Something about feeling like you let down your domineering grandfather.

"We analyzed those papers you found at Gordon Construction," Fury began. "Total dead end. But that doesn't surprise or concern me."

Fury leaned forward toward the camera feeding the monitor, making him an even more imposing figure at the head of the table in the SHIELD briefing room.

"What the hell happened out there?" Fury demanded through the briefing room's speakers.

Mockingbird and her fellow agents Hawkeye, Black Widow and Grifter were alone in the briefing room. It was better that way; saved SHIELD's premiere agents some of the embarrassment. The underlings were already talking, and not in good ways.

"I made a hell of a shot," Hawkeye said.

"You always make a hell of a shot, Barton," Fury barked. "That's why the hell I drug you from that silly ass purple costume at the carnival and put you in the field! But watching traffic cams of my agents suddenly passing out just because a mercenary woman said to stand down demands an explanation!"

"We passed the medicals," Mockingbird interjected. "No signs of mental implants, control words, psychedelics. And my wounds were superficial, thanks for asking."

"Though if we're to be honest," Black Widow began.

"And I insist you are," Fury interjected.

"I don't know about all of you, but I never felt the same after that robot spewed that gray cloud."

The others in the room remained silent.

"Anybody else feel not so fresh?" Fury asked.

From the lack of answers, Fury's expression showed what amounted to frustration.

"All of you are on administrative leave, effective immediately. Take your butts to your bunks and hunker down for the next twenty-four."

"Can you at least tell us what we were up against?" Grifter asked.

"HYDRA," Widow replied.

The others looked at her.

"Near the end of World War Two, the Nazis splintered into two factions," Widow explained. "History tells of Hitler's side, its defeat at the hands of the Allies. People who would go on to authorize SHIELD buried all knowledge of the other faction — an organization called HYDRA."

"Explains that weird logo on our boys in green," Mockingbird observed.

"Fascists do like their symbols," Widow replied.

Fury took a long draw on his cigar before responding. "Agent Romanova is correct," he eventually said. "HYDRA was behind advanced tech projects. Its boss, a guy named the Red Skull felt he should lead the Reich."

"Hence the split," Grifter threw out.

"Points for the guy in the red bandana," Fury said. "The Skull disappeared about the same time as Captain America and his sidekick Bucky. Couple of posers ran things until the late sixties, but SHIELD shut them down. HYDRA went dormant. Don't know where this strain came from, but we've got agents on it.

"As for that blonde with the rifle, that was a mercenary named Steel Raven. She usually works out of the country. HYDRA must have dropped some heavy coin to get her to come stateside." Fury gave the team a moment to let that sink in. "Now get out of here. And don't be upset that I'm assigning agents to monitor you.

The agents looked to one another. Off their looks of concern, Fury added, "And don't try to shake my agents. Fury out."

The monitor went blank.

## Chapter Five — Unfinished Business

Late in the evening, when most of the citizens of New York had either gone to sleep or gone out to party, Mockingbird, Hawkeye, Black Widow and Grifter stood atop the Stane International headquarters building. They were in full costume, complete with weaponry.

“Fury’s gonna be pissed we shook his surveillance,” Grifter said.

“Always the boy scout,” Mockingbird teased.

“Not always,” Grifter replied. “Just when the general says to do something and I directly disobey it for no other reason than to satisfy your curiosity.”

Hawkeye laughed. “She’s a hard one to say no to.”

“Bobbi has a point,” the Widow said. “It all started here.”

Mockingbird motioned to a satchel she had at her hip. “Fury’s never going to let me in the lab to test a sample of that gray cloud. Got a better idea how to get another sample?”

“Stane is gonna love us,” Grifter said.

“Only if we let him know we’re here,” Mockingbird cut in. “And we’re not gonna let that happen, are we, agents of SHIELD?”

Mockingbird reached into the satchel and withdrew an ID card. She approached the door that accessed the rooftop. She slid the card into the card reader next to the door and waited.

“I’m guessing you didn’t file that with equipment management,” Grifter said.

“It was issued to me a few missions back. Kinda forgot to turn it in.”

A few moments later, the red light on the card reader turned to green. Mockingbird took the card back, then opened the door.

“Ladies first,” she said.

Black Widow entered. Mockingbird followed. The guys came last.

Ten minutes later, the team had slipped around security cameras and used a restricted elevator to make their way to the building’s second sub-basement. More dodging camera lines of sight and the agents were at the door to the main server room.

“The attack took place in a lab upstairs,” Widow said.

Mockingbird worked her card into the door’s card reader. “They were locking that down when we left. Figured we’d come straight here and see what the surveillance tapes and company memos have to say.”

Widow nodded. Grifter gripped his twin handguns in his holsters a bit tighter. Hawkeye already had an arrow nocked and ready to fly.

The card reader granted the team access. They entered the server room, closing the door behind them.

Mockingbird approached a locked server cabinet, one of many in the vast room.

“I don’t remember you being very computer savvy,” Hawkeye said. “Other than Sudoku.”

“Shush,” Mockingbird replied. “That’s why I brought —” She reached into her satchel and withdrew a tablet computer. A USB cable dangled from the device. “This!”

Mockingbird motioned to Black Widow. “You’re the best with this lock stuff.”

Widow moved to the internal lock on the cabinet. She withdrew a set of lockpicks from her yellow cylindrical wristbands and applied them to the lock. Tense moments later, she defeated the lock and opened the cabinet.

Mockingbird looked at the server access panel. She found a USB port and inserted her cable. Turning back to the tablet, she turned it on and fired up a program.

“How many laws are we breaking here?” Grifter asked.

“You know, you’re such a worry wart,” Mockingbird said. “Maybe we should get you a date.”

“I hear Agent Carter is into the strong, silent but needy type,” Widow added.

Grifter shook his head. “I am not needy.”

Hawkeye chimed in with, “Agent Hill is probably more his speed. Total dominatrix.”

“Or, she’s having to compensate for being the number two in a male-dominated field,”

Mockingbird rebutted. “She has to be twice as stern, twice as mean and twice as successful as Fury to get half the respect he gets.”

“Well he has been doing this spy thing forever,” Hawkeye said.

“I hear he was the one who found Jesus for Pontius Pilate,” Grifter quipped.

“Heh. Cash makes a funny,” Mockingbird said. “Women do like a sense of humor.”

“I do not need —” Grifter began, but the ding of the door’s card access interrupted.

Mockingbird quickly slid her tablet into the server access panel and closed the cabinet. Grifter and the others had already moved to hiding spots within the maze-like structure of the room’s servers. She did the same.

A moment later, a nerd in an ill-fitting suit entered the room. Two security guards in riot gear flanked him. The nerd studied a tablet.

“Server 203 was accessed,” the nerd said.

“That was fast,” Mockingbird muttered.

The nerd started toward the server access cabinet where Mockingbird had hidden her tablet, but one of the guards stopped him. He motioned to the other. The second guard drew his sidearm and stalked toward the unlocked cabinet. The first guard politely moved the nerd behind him as he too drew his sidearm.

It didn’t take all-star talent for Grifter to sneak up on the guard and the nerd. He pressed one of his guns to the back of the guard’s head; the other pointed at the nerd’s stomach.

Hawkeye appeared a distance in front of the advancing guard. His arrow pointed at the guard’s crotch. Black Widow flanked Hawkeye, her twin handguns at the ready.

The guard raised his sidearm but had to know he was hopelessly outgunned.

“I’ll take that,” Mockingbird said as she stepped from her hiding spot and smacked the guard’s wrist with one of her escrima sticks. The man yelped as his fingers flew open from the pain. His gun dropped to the floor. Mockingbird stood in front of him.

“Me and my friends are gonna finish what we were doing, then we’ll be back out of your hair,” she said. “Now you can stay awake and watch how the big girls do things, or...”

“Aaaaaah!”

That came from the nerd. He turned and ran for the door, dropping his tablet along the way.

The move gained him a pulse laser in his back from Grifter. Hawkeye dropped to his knee and fired his arrow between the legs of the two guards. The arrow struck the nerd’s leg; its head sent out a taser-like shock to the man’s system. He flopped on the ground, seizing.

Black Widow dove to the side and fired twin shots at the guard who still had his gun in hand. One volley crashed against the guard’s chest plate armor. The other pierced his helmet, taking him down.

Mockingbird quickly smashed her escrima stick into the disarmed guard’s helmet. It knocked him backward to the ground. She followed up with another strike to the head, knocking the man unconscious. She then took a quick survey of the scene.

“So much for not killing civilians,” she deadpanned.

“Don’t get sentimental now, Mockingbird,” Grifter said.

“Maybe if you’d gotten laid more you’d have let the guy live,” Hawkeye quipped.

Grifter motioned to Widow. “She’s laid half the damned planet and she bullseyed her guy,” he said. He then pointed at the nerd. “My guy’s gonna live!”

Widow slid her weapons into their holsters on her hips. “Nothing wrong with a girl getting what she wants.”

“Never mind,” Grifter said, sliding his guns away as well. “Let’s just get what we came for and get out of here before it turns into a real bloodbath.”

## Chapter Six — “Did I do That?”

Cash probably would have stayed in bed longer if the sun hadn't hit him right in the face. He'd remembered to take off his bandana last night, but not too close the blinds. He pulled the covers back over his head, but it was too late. He was awake now. Might as well get the day started.

Throwing away the sheets, Cash slid out of bed. He'd stripped down to his boxers. The brown pants, dark shirt, red gloves and matching bandana that made up his Grifter costume lay on the floor in a path to the bed. He didn't remember being so tired last night.

Come to think of it; he didn't remember much of last night.

A chime interrupted his attempt to recall the night before. He recognized it as the alert from his SHIELD-issue communicard. About the size of a credit card, the communicard not only served as an agent's ID card, but it also held the technology for a two-way transmitter with a direct line to SHIELD.

Cash wondered who'd be calling this early.

Crossing the cramped room, he picked up his Grifter pants. The communicard was in the pocket. It was the size of a credit card but a few millimeters thicker. Had to be to hold the tech that made it much more than a simple ID card. Cash caught a glimpse of himself on the card. He never liked the picture, something akin to the crap one gets at the DMV.

Holding the card parallel to the ground, he pressed a corner of the card. A small hologram appeared; it was the head and shoulders of General Fury.

“Wakey wakey, sunshine,” Fury said. “You see the morning news yet?”

Cash shook his head but knew Fury didn't call just to tell him about some celebrity on the morning news shows. He stepped out of the bedroom and into the small apartment's living room, taking the communicard with him. Digging through some dirty clothes on the sofa, Cash found the remote to the flatscreen television mounted on the wall. He clicked it on.

“Channel Two has some really good footage,” Fury's hologram said.

Turning to channel two, Cash was met with a story about a second break-in at Stane International within twenty-four hours. This time, the thieves got into a sub-basement server room. The suit the agents had encountered the day before came on, insisting the thieves didn't steal anything that would harm Stane customers or shareholders.

He wouldn't comment on anything else.

“Sucks to be them,” Cash said.

“No,” Fury barked. “Sucks to be you.”

Cash held up the communicard so he could look at Fury. The man's expression was passive, but even through a hologram Cash could see the anger building behind his commander's eye.

“It took some doing, but Stane's people were smart enough not to comment on the identities of the thieves,” Fury said. “You wanna tell me why the hell you, Hawkeye, Mockingbird, and the Widow went back to Stane International last night?”

Cash's jaw dropped. He ran his fingers through his disheveled blonde hair.

“Yeah, that's what I thought,” Fury said.

A knock at the door. Cash looked in that direction.

“That's your heavily armed escort, arrived to take you to the Triskelion,” Fury explained. “Please resist them, Cash. Save me the trouble of whipping your ass when you get here.”



Fury was intimidating enough on the briefing room's flatscreen. He was even worse in person. He strode back and forth in the space in front of the flatscreen. A trail of smoke danced about his head as he burned off yet another cigar.

"Washington is always up my ass about you four," Fury said mid-way through his tirade. "Always running around like a bunch of avengers or something, doing what you think is right. Regardless of consequences or info you don't know. I blame Stark's influence from the brief time he was here. Because I damn sure didn't teach you agents that."

Fury finally stopped and looked at the four agents, all presently in standard SHIELD uniforms and not their usual codenamed costumes. "And I damned sure didn't train you to murder innocent civilians just trying to get their nut in the world. What the fuck went through your minds last night?"

Agent Morse and the others were silent, looking at each other the way first graders look at one another when their teacher busts them for not feeding the now dead class goldfish.

"That was not a rhetorical fucking question!" Fury said. "SHIELD now has to buy Stane's shitty new stamina pill just to cover this shit up! Not to mention putting that guard's great-grandchildren through the Ivy League! So, I'm gonna ask you gain!"

Now Fury moved to Black Widow, getting in her face. She did her best to look away.

"What. The FUCK. Were. You. Thinking?" Fury demanded. He held his position for a moment, driving his words home.

A chime sounded, indicating a call over the room's intercom. Maria Hill's voice soon followed. "General Fury," was all she got out before Fury cut her off.

"What part of 'no interruptions' was difficult for you to grasp, Agent Hill?" Fury asked.

"Sir," Hill pressed on, "with all due respect —"

"I don't need respect!" Fury glared at the agents in front of him. "I need my agents to follow my Goddamned orders!"

"Um, you never ordered us not to go back to Stane," Agent Barton offered.

It earned him a glare from Fury that nearly set the agent on fire.

"General Fury," Hill cut in. "There is a call on your private line you need to take. Now."

"If the Hulk is trashing Manhattan again, call Stark, that Morales kid or Xavier in that order and —"

"Not as bad, sir, but even more relevant to the people in that room with you."

This new classification made Fury pause.

"Transfer the call to this room," he said.

Fury moved to the table and pressed a section at the table's head near the flatscreen. It pressed down, then back up just high enough to reveal a sleek cordless phone. Fury picked it up. "This is Fury."

He paused, listening to whoever was on the other end. To the surprise of the other agents, he gave a slight chuckle. "Well, that's pretty damned funny because Agent Romanova is —"

Whoever was talking to Fury cut him off. The agents couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, but they could see Fury's amusement melt into concern. He looked to Agent Romanova, then the others, in turn, still listening on the phone. Fury then turned his back on the agents.

"You have my undivided attention," Fury said, leaving the four agents to look to one another in confusion.

## Chapter Seven — Villain Revealed

### TWENTY MINUTES AGO

One moment, Agent Bobbi Morse was knocked down by the Black Widow as a gray cloud engulfed the Stane International lab.

The next, she found herself groggy but coming awake. She tried to move her hands, but they were clamped down to the gurney she found herself lying on. Looking around, Morse saw Clint, Black Widow and Grifter on similar gurneys next to her. They were similarly restrained. Their gear lay on a table about fifty feet away.

Cables ran from the gurneys and to a variety of monitors, computers, and scanners. Arching her head to look behind her, Bobbi saw four empty tubes. It bothered her they were roughly man-sized. Fluid dripped in various spots on the tubes. Whatever had been in there had recently been released.

Two robots who looked exactly like the things that broke into Stane moved between the gurneys as if they were doctors' assistants.

On the wall, Morse saw the same symbol she'd seen on the green and yellow-suited intruders. They were in some HYDRA mad scientist's laboratory.

"The first to wake, I see."

Bobbi craned her head in the direction of the robotic-sounding voice. There was a heavy security door near their weapons. It was open. In walked a six-foot-tall robot with yellow limbs and purple hands and boots. Instead of a head, there was a tablet-sized box that appeared to be a scanner of some kind.

A video monitor comprised the thing's torso. On that monitor was the face of a man.

The mad scientist.

"Not a smart move, kidnapping Agents of SHIELD," Bobbi said.

"Not a smart move getting caught," the robot thing replied. "But then again, you Americans were always inferior to the Germans."

"Weren't too inferior when we kicked your Nazi asses," Bobbi shot back.

The robot thing entered the room, storming toward Bobbi. "A momentary setback!" it squealed, its robo-voice feeding back on itself. The face on the monitor closed its eyes as if taking a moment to calm. When its eyes opened, they looked at Bobbi.

"In the time since, we have rebuilt ourselves," it said.

Bobbi looked around. "If I were into computer tech instead of chemistry, I'd be impressed," she said. Looking back at the robot, she added, "But if this is all you've got to say for a new batch of Nazis..."

"Do you remember the cloud that exploded in your face?" the robot asked. Off Bobbi's lack of answer, it continued. "In that cloud were millions of tiny nanites, all with one purpose — to copy the DNA of you four agents and then send your coordinates to this base."

Bobbi's eyes narrowed. "Those flashes of light..."

"We've perfected the process of teleportation," the robot said, "but have yet to disguise the tell-tale flash of light as one's atoms contract to cross the quantum space-time field. If our spies are correct, SHIELD has yet to even send a paper plate across a dinner table through teleportation."

“We prefer the social grace of passing plates,” Bobbi said. “Now I know my ‘we’ is SHIELD. And your ‘we’ is...?”

The robot stepped back, bowing slightly. “I am Arnim Zola, chief scientist for HYDRA.”

Bobbi looked from this Zola robot thingee and to the symbol on the wall. “HYDRA, huh?”

“Yes. As in ‘if you chop off one head, two more will grow.’”

Bobbi looked back to Zola. It took some effort to prevent an eye roll. A shame, because she was very good at eye rolls. She glanced past Zola to the gurney next to him. Grifter lay there, doing his best to play possum. Zola nor the robots noticed, but Bobbi saw Grifter’s hand slip out of his manacle. Looking at the other agents, they weren’t having any luck.

“We have remained in the shadows while the Allies’ successor SHIELD blunders in the light,” Zola said. Bobbi returned her focus to him.

“Waiting to get strong enough to strike?” she asked, planning on keeping him distracted long enough to give Grifter time to do whatever it was he had planned.

“The wait is over,” Zola said.

He turned away from Bobbi and headed toward the door. “My robots will keep you company. Until we no longer have need of you.”

Zola exited the room. The two robots lined up at the door, keeping watch on the agents.

“Tell me you can get out of there,” Bobbi said to Grifter.

“Got a hand free,” he replied. “Second I go for the other one those robots are gonna react. How about you two?” he threw to Widow and Clint.

“Never was much for sleight of hand,” Clint said.

Widow moved her hand but pulled too far. Her hand shot out of the manacle.

The robots held up their arms. Their hands bent at the wrist. Electric prods pushed out from their arms. “Put your hand back in the manacle,” one robot said in a digital voice. “We will not warn you again.”

Grifter reached over and freed his other hand.

The robots pressed forward.

Grifter rolled off his gurney and shoved it forward. Cables tore from it as it sped across the room at the robots. They easily sidestepped the gurney and continued forward, moving them into striking range.

Widow slipped off her manacle and got to her feet. Bobbi also freed herself but remained on the gurney.

“Little help here!” Clint yelled.

Grifter dashed for the table holding their weapons. The robots launched their electric attacks at him; one completely missed. The other struck Grifter, sending voltage through him. It was enough to make Grifter lose his footing — but he slid closer to the table. He reached up to the table and pulled it over.

One of his VAD PP30 handguns fell on the floor next to him. The other skidded to the middle of the room, as did the Widow’s twin handguns and her Widow’s Bite bracelets. Clint’s bow and arrow set plopped on the floor near the table. Bobbi’s escrima sticks rolled and hit under the gurneys.

“And now to shock your system,” Grifter said.

Widow dove, scooped up one of her guns and fired at one of the robots. Her bullet shattered the robot’s head. Sparks burst out as the thing fell to the ground.

“Seriously!” Clint yelled while pulling against his manacles.

Bobbi dropped from her gurney and picked up one of her escrima sticks. The remaining robot came at her with its electric prod. Its foot got caught in one of the loose cables from Grifter’s gurney. It tripped and fell, smashing its prod on impact.

Bobbi watched as its head exploded from a shot from Grifter's handgun.

"And that's an escape, boys and girls," Grifter said, blowing pretend smoke from the end of his gun.

"Would have loved to have seen it," Clint said, "but, um..."

Widow and Grifter got to their feet. Bobbi moved to Clint and released him from the gurney.

"What are the chances we can now quietly slip out of this place?" Clint asked.

A klaxon sounded.

The agents looked to one another, that same "you've got to be kidding me" expression on their faces.

"Saddle up!" Mockingbird said. She then looked about the room.

Catching her glance, Clint asked, "What are you thinking, Bobbi?"

Agent Bobbi Morse smiled. "Always wanted to play in a mad scientist's lab."

## Chapter Eight — Escape

### TEN MINUTES AGO

The moment the security door reached full open, Bobbi's jury-rigged electricity conductor sent several volts through the doorframe and out into the hall. The front two HYDRA goons took the brunt of the damage, falling back and away.

Bobbi stepped up partially from behind the stack of gurneys the agents had positioned in line-of-sight of the door. Using one of the Widow's handguns, she fired at the remaining four goons. Her shot rang true, but the goon's HYDRA suit had Kevlar padding protecting him.

Clint stood behind a computer stand just to the side the other agents behind the fallen gurneys. He fired off an arrow, striking the wall outside the door near the HYDRA goons. The arrowhead exploded, engulfing the goons in its blast. Two of them fell away unconscious. Another one staggered back

Shots from the Widow and Grifter removed that man from play.

The remaining goon fired his blaster rifle at the agents, but his shot went wide.

Bobbi's shot didn't.

Widow and Grifter stood from cover, their guns aimed at the door. Bobbi dashed to her jury-rigged conductor and shut it down. The electricity around the door faded. As she stood, Clint joined her.

"Clever thing with the door," he said.

"You know us scientists," Bobbi replied. "Always tinkering with something."

Grifter and Widow led the way through the door, the better idea as they had on their SHIELD agent uniforms. Not the standard fare; as special agents, they were allowed a bit of personality. But it was a lot better against bullets than the evening clothes Bobbi and Clint were still in from their day at the Stane Expo.

Luckily, there were no more bullets coming.

The agents found Arnim Zola alone in the next room, something with a bunch of computer stations. A cable ran from his scanner-head to one of the workstations. The agents aimed their guns and Clint's arrow at him.

"Unhook yourself, now!" Bobbi demanded.

Zola turned so that his torso monitor faced them. "Too late, agents," he said, his robotic voice fluctuated in amplitude.

"Should I ask why or just shoot that cable," Clint offered.

"I'm curious to know," Black Widow said. Bobbi thought that accent alone would get a man to spill, but, unfortunately, Zola was computer and not man.

"Go ahead and tell us why," Bobbi added. "It's super villain code, right?"

Zola's monitor cut to static for a moment. A second later, it faded back to the face, though the signal looked like it was failing fast. "While you've been here," Zola began, "perfect genetic duplicates of you have robbed Stane International of data HYDRA needs."

The agents looked to one another. This wasn't good.

"Those same agents will perform other crimes, destroying the reputation of SHIELD," Zola said. "HYDRA need only wait, then step in to save the world from itself. Without firing a single shot."

“Like this?” Bobbi asked a second before she fired her borrowed handgun and shattered the sensor atop Zola’s shoulders.

“Foolish heroics,” Zola said.

“We’re getting out of here,” Widow said. “We will reveal your clones.”

Zola replied with a laugh that extended beyond when his torso monitor winked out.

Grifter unloaded his handguns into Zola’s torso monitor, destroying the thing and, most importantly, ending the laugh.

“So what now?” Clint asked while lowering his arrow.

Bobbi looked to one of the workstations. “We find out where we are, then get back to the general before our already tarnished reps get that much worse.”



NOW

As they raced through Manhattan streets in a SHIELD van, Fury gave his agents terse orders.

After getting off the phone with his mysterious important caller, he told Morse and the other agents that an anonymous tip gave them HYDRA’s New York headquarters. At least, their staging grounds for their attack against Stane. There wasn’t much more info than an address at the east side docks. He was giving the agents a chance to redeem themselves by shutting the place down.

Two caveats: they’d have to go in standard SHIELD agent uniforms, and they’d carry subdermal trackers so he’d know where the hell they were this time.

The agents didn’t have a problem with either caveat; what choice did they have, other than time in the brig and prosecution for crimes they didn’t remember committing, crimes clearly relayed by the guard they hadn’t murdered.

As the van parked at the docks, Fury looked to the four agents. “I have a field team half a mile away. Say the word; they come in like the mother fucking cavalry. But I want you to find HYDRA first, neutralize them if you can.”

“And they’re supposed to be on the south side warehouse?” Morse asked.

“That’s the intel,” Fury replied.

“Reliable intel?” Cash asked.

Fury looked at him with mild frustration. “The best intel you’re gonna have before you take your motherfucking ass in there, agent!”

That ended the question and answer session.

“The evidence to exonerate you is in that warehouse, agents,” Fury said. He hit the wall that separated the passenger section from the drivers. The van’s rear doors opened. Standard SHIELD agents in SWAT gear stood outside.

“Go get it,” Fury finished.

Morse, Romanova, Barton and Cash headed out.

## Chapter Nine — When is an agent of SHIELD not an agent of SHIELD?

“Standard rules of engagement?” Barton asked.

“It’s worked before,” Morse replied.

With a nod, Barton followed the others into the dock area.

Back in the van, they’d checked out a map of the area. There were several container stacks between their entry point and the warehouse. Barton would move to one of the stacks that overlooked the front of the warehouse. He’d eliminate any enemies there, then use the area for reconnaissance.

The others would hang back until given the all clear. Then they’d make their way to the office entrance and breach from there, while Barton covered the warehouse’s freight access area.

While Barton moved into position, Cash got nosy. He inched along the container wall, keeping a careful eye out for opposition. Not wanting just to stand around, the female agents doubled back around the opposite side of Barton’s container, the side closer to the warehouse.

“Sniper!” Cash whispered over their headset coms. “Straight ahead of me, vantage to cover Barton’s final position and the freight entrance to the warehouse.”

“He hasn’t seen you yet, or he’d have shot you,” Romanova said.

Morse started to run back to Cash’s position, but Romanova stopped her. “We need to get the drop on that sniper.”

Morse nodded. She continued her stealth approach around the container, with Romanova close behind.

Meanwhile, Cash was surprised when an arrow shot at him by the sniper. It barely missed his head. Cash immediately returned fire with his twin VAP handguns. Sure, the noise would warn any HYDRA agents of an intruder, but he’d already been made. Might as well draw the hornets out of the nest so the rest of the team could pick them off.

Cash’s shots peppered the container beneath the sniper but didn’t score a hit.

And then the Black Widow dropped down from a container right in front of Cash. She zapped him with her Widow’s Bite. The electricity coursed through Cash, causing his teeth to slam together. He fired several wild shots.



Up above, Barton made it to the edge of the container’s roof and into position. He looked down to Cash’s position. Two aggressors were on him.

“You ladies aren’t going to believe this,” he said over the com.

“What?” Morse asked back. “Cash miss the sniper or something?”

“Yeah, but not that,” Barton said. “Cash has made contact with a tango. It’s the Black Widow.”



Cash instinctively knew the Black Widow attacking him was not the Natasha Romanova that came with him from the Triskelion. It didn’t make it any less strange. He shook off the uncanny for the moment and leaped over the Widow’s attempt to sweep his legs out from under him. Landing a few feet away, he leveled his twin handguns at her.

“I don’t wanna shoot you until I know what the hell is going on!” he shouted.

“Then you’ll go to jail never knowing,” the Widow responded as she pivoted to a crouching position.

As if that wasn’t enough of a mind blow, Bobbi Morse rounded the corner wearing an evening blouse and gaudy green pants that hung baggy on her athletic frame.

“What the hell? Bobbi too?” Cash said.

“Subdue now, ask questions later, Cash,” Barton said over the com.

And then Barton’s world went bright. He quickly turned away, but the damage was done. Barton couldn’t see, which meant he couldn’t shoot.

It’s the exact sort of thing he’d have done to an enemy.

Cash realized this was beyond talking. He fired two shots at the Widow. One went wide; the other slammed into her midsection. She stumbled, but her body armor sucked up the damage. The Widow came at him with a punch that damn near took his head off. Cash rolled with it, spinning and slamming his back against the nearby container.

Bobbi came at him with her escrima sticks. He used his guns to parry her blows.

Unfortunately, this left him open for a disarm from the Widow. One of his guns clattered away from him.

“Cash, talk to us,” Morse called on the com.

“Little busy with Date Night Bobbi trying to kick my ass!” he replied.

Morse and Romanova looked to one another, neither quite knowing what to make of Cash’s statement. He was known to joke, but combining that with Barton’s warning...

“The mission, Bobbi,” Romanova reminded.

On top of the container, Barton blinked his eyes rapidly. “Okay, ladies, think I’m coming back online,” he said down the com. “Now where’s that son of a bitch sniper and he better not look like me!”

He looked across the docks to the other container. Barton saw the sniper taking a bead on him. He fired an arrow back first, nailing the guy on the shoulder. The sniper dropped his bow, buying Barton valuable time.

Barton did feel a bit guilty; the guy looked like him. It was like shooting himself in the shoulder. But better the other self than him.

What the hell was going on?



Cash was feeling better, thanks to an ages old experiment that gave him regenerative abilities. The haze that Widow’s bite had sent him into had faded. He was back in business, and not a moment too soon. The imposter Bobbi came at him again.

“Two of you and I’m still standing?” he asked. “So much for women being equal to men!”

Bobbi lowered her escrima. “Back off, Natasha,” she demanded. “I’m gonna get all women’s lib on this son of a bitch.”

“That’s what he wants,” the Widow warned.

Bobbi took up a battle stance. “Then he’s gonna get two escrima shoved up his Cole Cash-looking ass!”

The Widow passed in between Cash and Bobbi. As she did, she ripped the gun from Cash’s hand. Throwing it away, she said, “At least it’ll be a fair weapon fight.”

Cash frowned beneath his bandana.

Bobbi came at him. She tried to feint, but he read it correctly and didn't fall for the bait. Instead, he clocked her with a chop to the shoulder. She stumbled back but kept coming. Black Widow did the honorable thing: she watched, waiting for an opening.



Barton saw the sniper dash to the far side of his container. He'd keep an eye out for him, but thought it better to check on Cash. He was locked in combat with the Mockingbird-lookalike, while the Widow-lookalike stood watch. She'd learn to be more active in a minute.

Unfortunately, the Cash-Morse fight wasn't enough of a distraction for the Widow. She spotted Barton on the roof and opened fire on him. She hit, but his SHIELD armor took the damage. Before Barton could re-aim at the Widow, she ran along the side of the container and out of sight.



Morse and Romanova were almost at the warehouse office entrance when a pulse bullet punched into Romanova's SHIELD uniform. She fell back from the impact. Morse turned to check on her; Romanova waved her away to cover while she looked for the source of the attack.

She saw a man who looked like Grifter standing atop the warehouse. He took aim to fire again. Romanova saw a spark from one of his VAP handguns, but then it just... died. The fake Grifter threw the gun away and aimed with his other weapon. Romanova drew her weapon and fired first, striking the man in the chest. He stumbled back but wasn't out.

Romanova took another shot from her prone position. Another hit but damn that Grifter body armor. She glanced to Morse. The woman had cracked the lock on the office door and was prepared to go inside. Morse hesitated, though, looking back at Romanova.

The former Russian spy waved Morse ahead just as a pulse bullet charred the ground next to her head. She rolled to cover as Morse slipped inside the warehouse.



"Not so talkative now, huh, Clone Cash?" Bobbi said as she smashed her escrima into Cash's midsection, causing him to buckle over.

"I may be willing to cede the fairer sex thing," he replied.

Bobbi smashed her other escrima upside Cash's head. He spat blood from under his bandana as he fell to the ground unconscious.



Barton stepped away from the ladder that led up to his position on the container. The Widow-lookalike had gotten there first and taken a shot. He was lucky she hadn't taken his head off with it. Trusty SHIELD Kevlar uniforms.

He moved back to a position from which he could snipe anyone who came up the ladder, though he knew no one would. If these lookalikes were clever at all, they'd know this tactic as well as he would.

Barton looked behind him. There was a second container stack next to this one, presumably with another ladder somewhere. He moved, hoping he could find it before the Widow or one of the other lookalike SHIELD agents did.



Either this warehouse was the best HYDRA cover ever, or it was just that — a warehouse. Looking around, Agent Morse didn't see one thing alluding to a secret HYDRA facility.

Suddenly, she turned around and pointed a SHIELD needler pistol at the door. To her relief, the sound she'd heard was Agent Romanova leaping into the building. The woman had taken a shot to the chest but was still up and mobile. Yeah SHIELD body armor!

"This isn't a HYDRA hideout," Morse said.

Romanova approached her, brushing an errant hair aside as if she hadn't just spent a few minutes firing away at a sniper who looked just like their fellow agent.

"All that from a cursory look?" she asked. "We need to dig deeper. Fury wouldn't send us here for no reason."

"Those imitations of us are the reason he sent us here."

Romanova took this in. "Do you think he knew we'd find them?"

"Knowing Fury, yes," Morse said. "His own little Battle Royale."

Turning from her fellow agent, Morse said into her comm, "Cash, Barton. Report in."

"This is Barton. Trying to circle around the fake Widow. She's as good a shot as you, Tash."

"When you shoot her, try to keep her face intact," Romanova said. "Maybe I can use it when I get older."

"Where's Cash?" Morse cut in.

"Don't know," Barton replied. "He was going toe-to-toe with your doppelganger when Widow-ganger started shooting at me. Had to hang back. I hit the sniper, but lost him."

"And we have the Clone Cash on the roof of the warehouse," Romanova said.

Morse touched Romanova's shoulder and then motioned to a "staff only" sign further back in the warehouse. "He has to come down some time," she said into the com. "We'll hold the fort here. Get here when you can, Barton."



Barton didn't bother with a sign off. He was too busy moving to the edge of the other container. He took a quick look over, saw a ladder just down the way. No resistance — yet. He took a quick look back at the other ladder. No one there either. Another look down the ladder —

A pulse bullet hit him square in the chest. As he stumbled backward away from the ledge, a regular bullet hit him in the back. He fell forward but held his balance at the container's edge.

"Could use some help, ladies!" he said into the com before stumbling back onto the container.

His move provided cover against the attackers on the ground, but now he had to deal with the attacker on the ladder he'd just left. He looked there; the Black Widow climbed the ladder, her handgun aimed at him.

"Just stop this, Clint," she said.

Barton motioned to his ears, then shrugged. "Can't hear you. Must have lost my hearing aids in all this running around."

"Bet you'll hear this!"

Barton recognized Bobbi's voice.

He wished he didn't recognize the feeling of her escrima stick smashing against the side of his head.

## Chapter Ten — Breaking the Mirror

“Clint!” Agent Morse waited a moment before calling her ex-husband’s name again.

No answer.

Standing in the warehouse, she looked to Romanova. The Russian nodded slowly, understanding that it was now them alone against the crew of HYDRA agents who looked and moved just like them.

“So what would I do now if I had a two-to-one advantage?” Morse thought aloud.

Moments later, she walked out of the warehouse office, her hands in the air and her escrima sticks in holsters at her side.

“Okay! Let’s just get to the bottom of this!” she yelled to the otherwise quiet docks.

“Where’s the Widow?”

It was Clint’s voice coming from a container top. Morse looked in that direction and saw Clint, an arrow aimed straight at her. But this Clint wasn’t in the SHIELD uniform. He wore a fashionable evening shirt and pants combo.

Down below, another Cole Cash stood before her. He was dressed as Grifter but had only one of his signature pistols aimed at her.

“You talking about my Widow or yours?” Morse asked.

“Am I really that snarky?”

This time Morse heard her voice coming back at her. She looked behind her and saw the dressed down version of herself. “Like the top,” she said. “The pants are a definite fashion disaster.”

“Borrowed them from some of your HYDRA buddies,” the other Morse said.

“I thought they were our buddies,” Morse replied.

The other Morse looked at her. Was that a hint of sadness in her eyes?

“There’s no nice way to say this, so I’ll just say it,” the other Morse began. “Somehow, HYDRA managed to clone us, the real agents of SHIELD. You’re the clone.”

Morse stared at her other.

“There’re two puddles of goo wearing standard issue SHIELD uniforms where your Barton and Cash used to be,” the other Grifter said.

“This isn’t your fault,” came a female voice with a Russian accent.

Morse turned the other way to see the Black Widow in her standard uniform. Turning back to her other, Agent Morse asked, “Okay. Let’s say I accept this crazy ass story. What happens to me?”

No one had an answer for that.

And then the group heard the crack of a sniper rifle.

Agent Morse’s head exploded.



“What the fuck!” Bobbi yelled.

She was close enough to the other Morse to get blood splattered on her evening shirt. Bobbi looked at her other self. It had fallen to the ground and, like the others began to decompose into a pile of goo. She’d be interested in studying it if she wasn’t so unnerved at watching what was left of her face decompose.

“Someone has to make the tough decision,” came General Fury’s voice. The group looked to see him approaching from the north side of the dock area. “This one wasn’t so tough, though.”

Bobbi stormed over to Fury.

“Maybe we could have salvaged her!” she said.

Fury looked confused. “For what? One of you is aggravating enough, Agent Morse.”

Bobbi scowled in response.

Fury looked at the other agents. He nodded his head. “All in all an effective mission. You’ve identified HYDRA as a resurgent and credible threat. Between this cloning tech and their teleportation, I’m giving them top priority over that COBRA organization.”

“What if that wasn’t the fake Bobbi?” Clint asked. He’d come down the ladder from the container and joined the group.

“Why’d you think I had them all wear standard SHIELD uniforms and not your normal costumes?” Fury responded. “And, if they figured things out and changed uniforms, I had them implanted with trackers so I’d know who’s who.”

“You couldn’t even know for sure if we were telling the truth,” Cash said.

Fury looked at him, then nodded. “Nope. Sure couldn’t.” He patted his stomach. “Call it a gut thing. See, those HYDRA duplicates murdered a guard at Stane.” Fury waited for that to sink in. “I know my team isn’t gonna do that to no civilian, despite how many times they’ve done so before for other masters.”

Here Fury cast a glance at the Black Widow. She gave him a nod to acknowledge the show of trust, rare as it was with the man. “But there’s one loose end,” she said before pointing a thumb back at herself.

Motioning to the pile of goo that was once a clone of Bobbi Morse, Fury said, “She... or it, rather, bought time for the Widow clone to escape. Took down some of my agents on the way out too.” He looked back to the Widow. “At least, that’s the story we’re leaking, so HYDRA will be looking for her.”

Natasha Romanova smiled.



Arnim Zola hated the time it took to upload his consciousness to another robot. But, it was a necessary evil he’d created back in the sixties that allowed him serial immortality. It was unfortunate he hadn’t devised the technology sooner; it could have saved the genius that was HYDRA’s original leader, the Red Skull.

Instead, HYDRA had to rely on dumb luck to have found him again.

The upload complete, Zola’s robotic form (identical to the one he used against the SHIELD agents) disconnected from the system server and moved to the research lab. It looked like his cloning lab, but with much more efficient technology. He approached a man in a leather trench coat standing in front of one of the tubes containing a clone.

“Your exercise bordered on failure, Arnim,” the man said in German.

“There is much to salvage, my lord,” Zola said timidly. “We know both the cloning process and the teleportation process work. Now we can duplicate and control anyone we can access with nanites.”

“Yet Fury’s team remains in play,” the man replied.

“A setback, yes. But it will mean nothing after your latest glorious plan.”

The man inhaled, then exhaled slowly. “It is a glorious plan, is it not?”

“Yes, my lord.”

The man stepped toward the clone container, placing his leather gloved hand against it.

Looking past him, Zola saw the contents of the container.

It was a perfect clone of America's original super-soldier — Captain America.  
In the reflection of the glass, Zola saw the face of the man to whom he spoke, the unmistakable face of the Red Skull.

###

## About the Author

The son of a sharecropper (not really), Mark Wooden has actively pursued the dream of being a Creative since his epic kindergarten work, "Ne-Ne the Vampire Panda."

He draws inspiration from "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Blade," decades of "Batman" and "X-Men" comic books and conspiracy epics "24" and "The X-Files." He'd be remiss if he didn't mention the influence of a certain Frank Miller-created assassin named Elektra.

Mark mines his two decades of experiences in live entertainment to instill humanity into the vampires, demons, werewolves, sorcerers and other creatures of his "Shadowdance" urban fantasy saga. The novels allow readers to confront the evil that men and monsters do from the comfort of a book.

"By Virtue Fall: A Song of the Shadowdance" is the first novel in the "Shadowdance" saga.

*Look into the shadows and see horror in action.*

Catch author Mark's pop culture musings on [Facebook](#), his "[Thinking Out Loud](#)" blog and [Twitter](#) (@Shadowdancesaga). [Become an Initiate](#) of the "Shadowdance" saga for free ebooks and geek culture news.

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None of the characters (or the plot, for that matter) belong to me as this is fan fiction, done for fun and as a creative exercise.

Coming Soon



Batman/ Iron Man:

Armored Underworld