Hydra's Golden Egg

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Hydra's Golden Egg

by AvengingAngel

Summary
Hydra's greatest experiment is the long game, the thing in the dark, and the Avengers will question everything.
Chapter 1

Cold, so cold. The smell of something chemical, something not quite human. The feel of hands on his neck, the metallic sound of something moving, something close, too close. Too bright, too much. Pain. So much pain.

Phil shot up in his bed, his face drenched with sweat, the sheets sticking to him. He reached out blindly, turning on the lights before scrubbing his hands over his face.

Another dream about ‘Tahiti’. Part of him wished he’d never found out what had really happened. Night after night he was plagued by dreams of what had been, what Nick had had done to him. And for what? Because Nick couldn’t admit he wasn’t God?

“Sir?” A long pause. “Agent Coulson.”

Phil didn’t actually want to answer the call from May, but, being the big boss of this particular group of agents, it wasn’t something he could ignore. So he hauled himself from the narrow bed that still felt too big.

“What is it?” he asked, not willing to open the door and show her what a mess he was.

“We just received a call from HQ. We’ve got a mission,” she said, all business, no nonsense.

Phil closed his eyes and longed for the days when he was Clint and Natasha’s handler. At least they tended to keep their missions during sociable hours. Or they at least tried.

“Wake the team.”

AOSAOSAOSAOSAOS

Clint eased himself into the air vent and breathed a sigh of relief. At least being squeezed into a vent meant no accusing eyes. No worried gazes.

“Agent Hill.”

Clint peeked through the grill to see Agent Hill being flagged down by some junior agent, one he didn’t recognise, which meant he was new at S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Something I can help you with, Agent?” Hill asked, her eyes still on the paperwork in her hands. Clint recognised it as a purchase order form. Probably something to do with the clean-up of New York still going on.

“Yes, ma’am. I was wondering if I could speak with you about Agent Barton.”

Clint held his breath. He knew agents had been wondering about him since Loki, and even more had been wondering about his loss of Coulson as his handler.

“What about Barton?” she asked, looking him in the eye.

“I was wondering if I could transfer out of his training sessions.”

“Is there some complaint you have against Barton personally?”

“No, ma’am.”
“Has there been an incident where Barton has caused a problem for you, professionally or personally?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Is there something about Barton’s style of teaching which means you feel you’re not achieving your full potential?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then I’m at a loss to see why you would want to transfer, as the only spot open is with Romanoff, and I can promise you, from personal experience, that Barton is the lesser of two evils.”

“It’s nothing personal, ma’am. I’ve just…heard things,” he finished lamely.

“Heard things,” she repeated, and Clint recognised the glint in her eyes, the tightening of her mouth. He’d seen it on circus performers when someone said something exceedingly stupid; he’d seen it on Coulson when he’d first brought Natasha in. “Such as?”

“That Barton was compromised during the battle of New York. That he’s…”

“Let me stop you there, Agent, before you shove that foot further down your throat. One: Barton was compromised BEFORE New York, and was recalibrated by Widow herself in time to be a valuable asset to the Avengers Initiative. Two: Barton has been cleared, repeatedly, by psych. Three: whatever remaining issues Barton may or may not have are none of your concern, and such hypothetical issues have no bearing on his ability as an asset. Now, with all that in mind, do you still wish to transfer?”

“No, ma’am. Sorry, ma’am.”

She waved him away and Clint almost laughed aloud at how fast he moved.

“Hawk?”

He noticed Maria looking up at the grate behind which he was watching her. He popped it out and eased himself to the ground.

“Yes, Agent Hill?”

“You hear all of that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She sighed and put a hand on his shoulder. He flinched. He could count on one hand the number of people he allowed physical contact with, and she wasn’t one of them. Her hand dropped to her side.

“Barton, if you hear of or experience any other incidents of opinions like that from Agents, I want them reported directly to me. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Barton…I know I’m not Coulson. But I do value you, as a Handler to her Asset.”

“I know that. It’s just…you’re not him. And I…”

He trailed off and she nodded. “I know. But I want you to know you can come to me, for any
Clint nodded and she stared at him for a moment before she nodded and walked away. Clint couldn’t help but wonder if this would be happening if Phil were still around.

And then all he wanted was Phil, and the pain was threatening to swallow him whole. So he levered himself back up into the vent and settled in.

“Okay. Our target is a small area in Chile, just outside of San Pedro de Atacama. Intel have detected a small pulse of energy, they want us to check it out,” Coulson said, bringing up the map to show May where they were headed.

“What are we expecting here?” Ward asked.

“Unknown. Intel haven’t provided that information, which leads me to believe they don’t have it. It could be anything, but HQ wants to know what it is. They have specified that they do not believe this pulse to be dangerous, just unusual.”

“What kind of energy pulse? Are we talking Earth energy or something otherworldly?” Fitz questioned.

“That’s the interesting part,” Skye said. She was curled up in her seat, still a little sore from her near death experience, but well enough that Simmons had cleared her to start training with Ward once more. “The readings they’ve managed to pick up indicate something not Earth made, but not Asgardian either. The closest they can get to it is the Tessaract.”

“The Tessaract? The glowing blue cube Thor took back with him?” Simmons breathed. “Could there be another one?”

“No, this is nowhere near big enough to be one, but it is similar, which leads HQ to think we’re looking at some leftover HYDRA tech,” Coulson said. “The aerial and infrared scans HQ already have indicate the size of this compound to be substantial, so we’ll be teaming up with Agent Garrett, and we’ll be taking in three teams to search the area. Intel estimates minimal human activity, so we shouldn’t be looking at too much resistance, but we will still be armed to enter. FitzSimmons, I want you analysing everything we’ve been sent, so we’ve got a better sense of what we’re walking into. May, wheels up in five. Ward, I want you and Skye to go train. Skye’s going in on this one with us, I want her loose and ready. Understood?”

“Sir, are you sure?” Ward asked. “The last time we took Skye in on a mission…”

“I’m well aware of that, Ward. I’m also aware that she’s not part of this team to sit on her hands. Simmons cleared her, you’ve been training her, and I say she’s ready for a mission where her handler is right by her side every step she takes. This mission seems to be nothing more than simple recon. Can you think of any mission where she’ll be safer?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Then you have your assignments.”

They all left the room, Skye giving him a shy grin as she left, and then he was alone, looking at the map still on the screen.

The last time he’d been in Chile, he’d been with Clint, their version of a honeymoon. A tiny dive motel with no modern comforts, but they hadn’t needed them.
It was noted in his file that Clint knew of his status and had chosen no contact.

Phil didn’t have words for how much that hurt.

The compound they had been sent to investigate was a small shack in the middle of the desert.

“Intel indicates that this is the literal tip of the iceberg,” Fitz said. “The actual facility that the pulse originated from is underground. This should be some sort of elevator or stairwell.”

“Copy that,” Agent Triplett said. “Teams, sir?”

“Team One: Fitz with me,” Coulson said. “Team Two: Skye with Ward, Team Three: Simmons with Triplett. May and Garrett as base team on the plane. Constant radio contact, I want to know if you find anything. Understood?”

They all gave the affirmative and they made their way to the shack, Coulson and Ward both working to gain entry to the compound. As Fitz had said, there was an elevator in good working order, with an entry keypad he disabled in mere moments.

Once several hundred feet underground, the room they emerged into was startlingly sterile; shining chrome covered every wall, the floor beneath their feet, the harsh lighting.

“We still a go?” Triplett asked.

“Affirmative,” Phil said, his gun raised. There were two doors leading out of the room. Team’s one and two took the first and team three the second. Roughly about 200 metres in, the first corridor split off into two, and each team took one.

“Sir?”

“Yeah, Fitz?”

“What are we looking for?”

“No idea. What do you think we’re looking for?”

“Something weird beyond our comprehension.”

Phil smiled. That could apply to a hell of a lot of things he’d come up against in the last few years. A billionaire with a reactor embedded in his chest. A scientist that became a huge green overgrown two year old having a tantrum. His childhood hero being resurrected after being MIA for almost 70 years. Norse Gods that befriended him and then mourned when his brother shoved a spear through his chest. Some weird alien science that brought him back from the dead, that saved Skye when all were sure she would die.

Alien artefacts; wrist deep in an Asgardian chest; a baby girl being classified as an 0-8-4.

“We do well with weird.”

Steve didn’t find this new world he had suddenly woken up in as strange as people assumed he must. He actually pretty much liked it.
Kids didn’t die of asthma as a routine conclusion. There was plenty of food in America, for everyone, not just the rich. And what a selection of food! Steve had never seen anything like it, he had practically swooned when he’d first been taken to a supermarket.

There were a great many things he liked about this new world. Being able to access art supplies, the internet, cell phones with little games on them, television, broadened attitudes.

No one thought it strange when he admitted that he and Bucky had been sleeping together during the war. Steve was happily surprised at the acceptance of his persuasion, something he now knew was called bisexuality and not just greed, like Bucky had joked.

He didn’t want to know what the others were hiding from him on the internet thing. He didn’t want to hear anything negative about something that had taken him so long to come to terms with.

Steve moaned as a warm hand stroked down his side.

“Morning, Capsicle.”

That was another thing that Steve had been happily surprised by. Tony and he had started out wanting to throw each other off the helicarrier. He found out later that it was a fairly common reaction to meeting Tony Stark for the first time. Then they had learned to work together. Somewhere along the way they had fallen into the easy friendship that made Steve feel even more comfortable in his new life. And then one night, after they had devoured the pizzas they’d had delivered, knocked back a few beers, watched more than a few Mickey Mouse cartoons, and generally lounged in the living area, Tony had leaned over and kissed him.

“What about Pepper?” Steve had asked.

“Over,” Tony had replied. “For a good few months now. If you don’t want me, just say, but don’t let that be your reason.”

Steve had smiled and leaned in to kiss him back. They had tumbled into bed together and had stayed that way for the last six months. And now he and Tony were waking up together more often than not.

“Morning,” he replied. “Okay?”


Steve chuckled. Tony was always questioning things. “Serum. And I’m okay. Just thinking.”

“Deep thoughts?”

“Not really. Just taking stock.”

“The usual then.” Tony stretched against him, Steve’s super soldier hearing picking up the faint pops of his spine. “Breakfast?”

“Soon. Lay here for a while first.”

“Okay,” the brunet said, snuggling in, the edge of the arc reactor pressing against his ribs. “You spoke to Thor?”

“Not since he called about Loki’s death. Any word on the London clean-up?”
“Last I heard, it was going about as well as the New York.”

“Slow and traffic causing then,” Steve said. “So, what do you want for breakfast?”

“Pancakes? Waffles?”

“Fruit?” he asked, looking down at the dark head in time for Tony to look up at him with a look of faint disgust. “Tony, you have to eat something natural at least once in a while, you know. The last thing you need is to get scurvy or rickets or something equally as nasty. And I do mean something other than blueberries. I’m sure there’s a natural limit for any man’s consumption of one singular item.”

“I know,” he grumbled. “With pancakes?”

“With pancakes, but fruit goes in your mouth.”


“That was subtle,” the blond said with a smile.

“My middle name. So. Clint. How long until his head starts being a little higher above water? Because he seems to be drowning still.”

Steve sighed, toy ing with Tony’s dark hair. “I don’t know. When Bucky died…it was different. Clint and Phil were married, me and Bucky weren’t. Bucky and I knew it was a casual sort of thing, our friendship only went there because of the war, out of mutual need. Phil and Clint…I don’t know how long it’ll take him to pick himself up a little.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. seems to think he’s doing fine.”

“They’re wrong. They’re seeing what they want to, rather than what is. I just don’t know how to help him.”

“Well, he knows we’re all here for him. He knows where to come when he figures out what he needs.”

The gleaming metal suddenly stopped about a mile into the tunnels, around about the time Fitz told Phil that the energy signature they were looking for was starting to show up on his handheld device. Their surroundings took on a distinctly rough stone look, almost as if the hand of God had scooped out the earth.

“Team one to teams two and three,” Phil said into his comm.

“Go ahead, sir,” Simmons replied.

“Listening,” Ward clipped.

“Fitz has something, it looks like the energy signature. We’re moving towards it. Continue a sweep and then make your way to our location. No sight of any hostiles yet, but I’m not convinced there aren’t any.”

“Understood,” said Simmons.

“Copy,” from Ward.
They continued on for a few more hundred metres, before they began to hear a low pulsing sound, and the handheld device began to give stronger readings.

They rounded a corner, Phil’s gun raised, to find a large circular room. The walls were glowing an eerie blue, computers and monitoring equipment spewing out information, vials of liquid in varying colours lining glass shelves.

They could do nothing but watch as the four scientists in front of them bit down on their cyanide pills and dropped down dead.

They checked the bodies, ensuring that they were in fact dead, before looking around, trying to figure out what the hell they were looking at. It didn’t take long for the two agents to find the ‘science project’.

“Simmons,” Phil said into his comm, feeling sick to his stomach. “Get down here. Now!”

Moments later both other teams sped into the room, stunned silent at the sight of what lay before them.

A girl, no older than her late teens, laying on a metal table, tubes and wires pouring out of every inch of her body, various liquids being pumped into her, bruises and blood covering what they could see of her pale, almost blue skin.

“What the hell?” Agent Triplett breathed. “What is this? What are they doing to her?”

Simmons had rushed forwards, Fitz following her lead, the two of them checking what seemed to be fifteen things at once, until they began pulling out scanners and cameras, passing them out and telling the other agents to take as many readings and photographs as they could. Once that was done, she ordered them to take samples of absolutely everything.

“Spiking,” Fitz said, backing up a step from the girl.

They all watched, stunned silent, as the girl glowed briefly blue, the air around her electrified for a moment, before she fell still and pale once more.

“Sir?” Fitz said, looking at Phil. “The energy pulse…that was it. It’s some sort of biochemical reaction happening, mostly concentrated in her liver and spinal fluid, though it’s occurring all through her body. Sir, we need to get her disconnected. I think that something is triggering the…”

“Episodes,” Simmons supplied. “It’s a chemical reaction, that much is clear. What is impossible to determine is how her body will react to being removed from all of this. It could kill her.”

“What happens if we don’t disconnect?” Ward asked, peering at the computer Skye was downloading onto a portable hard drive.

“Honestly…that will most likely kill her,” the Englishwoman admitted. “I couldn’t even begin to guess at how she’s still alive.”

“We disconnect,” Phil ordered. “It might kill her, but not doing it will almost certainly kill her, so we do the lesser of two evils. Disconnect her, and transfer her to the Bus.”

“And then?” Triplett asked.

“We try and figure out who she is and what the best course of action should be.”
Bruce was not a fan of mornings, as a general rule. And yet, he found himself sitting down to breakfast with at least two other Avengers at least three mornings a week.

That morning, only Steve and Tony were in attendance, and Tony was demonstrating how little he thinks of mornings too.

“Coffee,” Tony moaned. “Steve!”

“You know,” Steve said as he set a mug of coffee in front of his lover. “Whining is a very unattractive trait.”

“You are a saint,” he replied as he pounced on the mug.

“Bacon, Bruce?”

“Please.”

Bruce loved watching Steve move around the kitchen. It seemed that there was nothing in the world that made Steve happier than feeding people, any people. It was like some strange sort of meditation. He even donned an apron. It was a true joy for Bruce to see his teammate so happy, no matter what he was doing.

And not to mention that Steve was a damn good cook and Bruce had spent a very long time on the run.

They’d made it through their first helpings and were midway through the second when Natasha walked in.

“Good morning,” Steve called cheerfully, earning a glare from Tony and a smirk from Bruce. “Would you like some breakfast, Natasha?”

“I would,” she replied. “And I need to talk to you.”

“About?” Tony asked as Steve fixed her a plate.

“Barton.” She smiled as Steve passed her the food. “Fury’s hiding something, something to do with Barton, Fury and Hill.”

“What kind of something?” Bruce asked as he poured himself more tea.

“I’m not sure, but I do know that if this goes on much longer Clint is going to lose it. Agents are treating him strangely, he spends more time in the air vents than on his feet, and he hasn’t slept or eaten properly since New York.”

“He lost his husband, Natasha, cut the guy some slack,” Tony protested. “He needs time.”

“He needs Phil,” she replied bluntly. “He’s slipping, Stark. I owe him my life, and I’m apparently the only one who can see he doesn’t give a damn about his own.”

“So, how can we help him?” Steve asked.

“I have no idea,” she admitted, and Tony could honestly say there was real sadness on her usually blank features. “I don’t know how to help him.”
It took a little over six hours to disconnect the girl from the tubes and wires, and then over two to actually get her to the Bus. Simmons hadn’t wanted to rush moving her, fearing some sort of adverse reaction if they did.

Once back to the Bus, Simmons and Fitz had taken charge, all but shoving the rest of the team out of their lab so they could flit around her without them getting in the way.

Phil was content to stand back and let them work, until the girl started fighting them.

He strode forwards, him and Ward, to try and restrain her. Phil had just closed his hands around the far too delicate wrists when he got a good earful of what she was murmuring. She wasn’t simply crying out, as they had thought.

“No…please…please…just stop….please stop…no…no more…please…let me die…please…just let me die…”

Phil dropped the fragile wrists, his repaired heart pounding as bile rose in his throat. He could feel a cold sweat all along his back. He turned and punched Ward square in the jaw, sending him reeling. He pulled his gun from its holster and pointed it at Simmons as she approached.

“Coulson?” Skye asked from behind him. “Sir? What are you doing?”

“Leave her alone,” he growled. “No more, just leave her alone. She’s begging to be allowed to die. Just leave her, just let her, it’s what she wants.”

“Sir,” Simmons said, her hands raised in a gesture of submission. “We’ve identified one of the substances that was being used on her. It’s some kind of hallucinogen. Sir, she has no idea what she’s saying.”

His resolve faltered. Damn it, if Clint were with him, Clint would know exactly what to do. But he wasn’t and Phil had no idea. Was the girl really out of it, or was Simmons just saying that to placate him?

“Phil.”

He looked over his shoulder to find Skye looking at him.

“Put down the gun,” she soothed. “No one here is hurting her. No one here is going to do anything like what was done to you. But Simmons needs to help her. Look.” She nodded at the girl. “She’s torn out her IV’s. She’s bleeding, AC. Let Simmons help her.”

“I…I just…” he forced out, his gun lowering almost of its own volition.

“Yeah, I know. Come on. You and I can go to your office, take a breath. I’ll make you a sandwich.”

“I need to stay, I need to be here.”

“Ward will stay,” she said firmly, leaving no room for argument, and Phil wondered when she had picked up that little trait from him.

“I want a DNA on her,” he mumbled as he let Skye lead him away. “We need to know who she is.”

Skye nodded and led him to the stairs, taking care of him the way he seemed to need her to. He curled up on his sofa with the promised sandwich and, once she had left at his urging and promises
of being fine, he let himself fall apart. He let the cold hand of dread take hold of him, forcing tears to fall from his eyes.

He was compromised, completely and utterly, in a way he never had been, never thought he could be. He was spiralling, and he had no idea how to stop himself.

It was the worst possible time for JARVIS to try and get his attention, and Tony knew the AI knew that.

“Sir.”

Steve groaned and rolled off him, making Tony reach out with grabby hands to try and get him back.

“Ignore him, he’ll go bother someone else, and later, I will dismantle his circuit board,” he said, wrapping a hand around Steve’s wilting erection.

“My apologies, Sir,” JARVIS persisted. “I have no desires to interrupt such an athletic display of affection between you and Captain Rogers, but I am afraid I have a matter most urgent.”

Steve threw his hands out and grabbed a pillow, shoving it over his rapidly heating face.

“Okay, now you’ve managed to mortify Cap, what the fuck do you want?”

“A call for you, Sir, on a secure encrypted line.”

“Put it through.”

“It is a video call, Sir.”

Tony sighed and pressed a kiss to Steve’s chest. They were both completely soft now, so he might as well go answer this damn call.

He quit the bed and pulled on a pair of sweats, pulling his sweaty vest away from his back as he walked before letting it settle back into place.

He ended up in the large open living space of his penthouse, the room Hulk had used to so gloriously toss Loki around like a rag doll. Tony still had the footage of it JARVIS had recorded. The space had been repaired, and now there was a whole area for Steve’s art stuff. Steve also had a space in his workshop, as the soldier tended to gravitate towards Tony without even realising it, but after almost a century in the ice, he was starved for affection and physical touch.

He flopped down on his outrageously comfortable sofa and told JARVIS to open the call, and then he jumped right back up to his feet as he saw who was on the holoscreen hovering in the air.

“Stark,” Phil said.

“What the hell!”

“Director Fury didn’t tell you, I wish I could say I’m surprised. He said he’d finally clued you all in,” Phil mused. “There’s a lot Nick should have told you, Stark.”

“Prove it’s you and we’ll talk.”

“I threatened to taze you and watch Supernanny while you drooled into the carpet,” he said and
Tony had to sit down again.

“Agent?”

Phil smiled at him. “It’s me. And I need your help.”

“My help? Mine? Aren’t you forgetting the blackmail bit?”

“That was S.H.I.E.L.D. not me. I actually kind of value you as a friend. Or something like that. And I’m asking you, as a friend, to help me.” He paused. “Tony. Please.”

Something in Tony, some sort of internal alarm system, started ringing.

“What do you need?”

“I’m transmitting a location to you. I need you and the other Avengers to meet me there in three hours, and for S.H.I.E.L.D. not to find out.”

Tony picked up the nearest tablet and scrolled through the information he was being given.

“What’s all this? The equipment list,” Tony questioned.

“I need you to bring those things with you, and enough transportation for the Avengers and at least three extra passengers,” he said, all business but the relief in his voice was palpable.

Tony was doing calculations in his head, working out which vehicles he would need, and how to get hold of Widow and Hawk without attracting attention. Bruce was easy, he was either down in his lab or somewhere on his floor. He knew where Steve was, and Thor was in London. It wouldn’t take him long to join them with that hammer of his.

“Three hours, got it. We need Hulk?”

“No, we need the doctor side of Banner.”

Tony nodded absently, before looking at him again. “Phil? Want Clint there? Because I can just as easily not call him, if you want.”

“Depends. Does he know I’m alive?”

“Are you kidding? That guy is spiralling tighter than an Olympic figure skater,” Tony said. “He’s in a bad way, Chief. Speaking of…the Cellist?”

“He uses a bow,” Phil said with a sad smile. “Bring him. I-I need him there.”

“Sure thing. Three hours, Agent.”

Phil nodded before the screen went black. Tony looked longingly at the bar before turning back to his bedroom. He asked JARVIS to call Bruce up, and to send an encrypted message to Clint and Natasha that they needed to assemble.

“Who was it?” Steve questioned as he walked out of the shower in nothing more than a towel, using another one to dry his hair.

“If we had time, I’d drag your ass back to bed. As it is, we’re assembling. Go wait for them out there, I’ll shower, and then I’ll fill you in. Oh, and call Thor, tell him to meet us at this address in three hours,” he said, handing Steve the tablet still in his hand. “Get Bruce to put together everything
on that list. His medical skills are needed.”

Steve nodded, placing the tablet on the unmade bed before reaching for his undersuit.

“Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“Who are we meeting?”

Tony sighed. “Fury lied to us. Coulson’s alive.”

It took only those two sentences for Steve to become Captain America.

Phil took the icepack Ward handed to him and applied it to his aching shoulder.

“May has one hell of a right hook,” Ward complained as he slid down the wall to sit beside Coulson. He flexed his jaw.

“Thank God for night-night guns,” Phil said. “She secure?”

“Very.” He paused, and Phil could see how much he wanted to say. “Sir…are you sure this is the only way?”

“I won’t have her end up as one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s lab rats,” he said firmly. “I made a promise.”

“I know, sir. But you’re putting your whole career at risk. You been an Agent for, what? Twenty years?”

“And change.”

“And you’re throwing it all away.”

“The organisation is corrupt, it’s rotting from the inside, May is proof of that,” Phil said, looking the younger man in the eye. “I don’t want to be a part of it anymore. I can’t. It’s just too much.”

“I understand that what they did to you in that place was barbaric, but there are a lot of good agents that need you. The Director did what he did for good reason.”

“There is no good enough reason for what he had done to me,” he murmured.

They looked up as Skye descended the stairs with her bags in tow. “They’re pulling up now, flashy black car, two passengers,” she said, holding out a hand to pull Phil to his feet before pushing the button to lower the ramp.

As she had said, it was a black Audi R8 e-tron, with Tony behind the wheel and Steve in the front passenger. Following close behind was an honest to God New York ambulance, being driven by Bruce.

Phil made his way down the ramp to shake Tony’s hand and was shocked to be pulled into a hug.

“Good to see you,” Tony murmured and Phil smiled, hugging him back. Next was Steve, who had a smile so wide it looked to stun every female in a six mile radius. Skye definitely looked a little weak in the knees. Then Bruce gave him a small shy smile, and Phil smiled back, grasping his shoulder.
“Thank you for coming,” Phil said, leading them into the plane, Tony hauling the suitcase that housed his suit. “Stark, did you know that it was your father who personally recruited me to the Agency?”

“No.”

“When he recruited me, he made me swear to him that if Annabelle Stark was ever found, I would do what was necessary to protect her.”

“I don’t see what this has to do with the Avengers,” Steve said. “Annie disappeared seventy years ago, the search for her was called off years ago.”

“Called off or not, we found her,” Skye said and they stopped dead.

Steve’s mouth worked silently as his eyes drilled into Phil’s.

“It’s true,” Phil said. “We found her. She’s in here. Doctor Banner, if you would, this is Jemma Simmons, our resident bio-chemist on this team. She’s been working on Annie along with Leo Fitz, our technical wizard engineer.”

Bruce shook hands with both of them before picking up the closest tablet and scrolling through everything they had managed to learn so far about what had been done to Annie.

“Is this everything?” he asked.

“No,” Skye said. “I have that on a hard drive. AC thought your super computer AI thing could do something with the encryptions on it.”

“Super computer AI thing?” Tony repeated, highly amused. He put a finger to his ear. “Hey, JARVIS? You hear that?”

“I did indeed, Sir. I believe the term is flattered.”

“He says thanks,” he relayed and she blushed.

“Can he hear everything?”

“Yeah. There’s a microphone built into the earpiece, so he hears what I do. In the Tower, he has full camera access to every inch, which is handy. JARVIS likes my suit tinkering about as much as Steve here, never mind the reactor adjustments.”

“We have one Stark attached to a breathing machine, can we not joke about you being critical?” Steve snapped and Tony realised just how on edge he was.

Tony let go of the case and reached out, pulling Steve into him, careful to position them so he didn’t catch him with the edge of the reactor. It took a moment but Steve melted into him, holding him close, burying his head in his shoulder.

“She’s so sick,” he whispered. “And she’s still nineteen. How is she still nineteen, Tony?”

“I don’t know, Cap, I don’t know. We’re going to find out though. We’re going to take her home and Bruce is going to make her better.”

“They hurt her.”

“I know. And we’ll get them.”
“Son of Coul!”

They broke apart to see Thor walking up the ramp, a huge smile on his face as he approached Coulson, Mjølnir swinging from his belt. He swept the Agent up in a hug, proclaiming him to be a most welcome sight.

His smile faded as he saw Annie.

“Who would harm one so young?” he wondered.

“HYDRA,” Ward said, “Well, we think it was HYDRA. Some of the tech gives off a similar energy signature.”

“But she is but a child.”

“It’s different here on Earth,” Phil said. “The bad guys usually don’t care about age, and if they do, it’s to use a child to hurt their parents or caregivers.”

“They took Annie to hurt Howard,” Steve said.

“No, I don’t believe so,” Simmons said. “From what was being pumped into her when we found her, it looked like they were trying to use her for something, so it may be they took her with no motive to hurt anyone else.”

“Even worse,” Tony snarled.

“You can’t do this, Phil.”

They turned to see Director Fury striding onto the plane, followed by Agent Hill. Outwardly he looked calm, but none of them were fooled.

“Where are Barton and Romanoff?” Phil murmured to Tony.

“Stopped for gas, they’re close,” he replied, kicking his case closer. “Stall.”

“I have every right to do this, Nick,” Phil said. “I wish someone had done this for me.”

“I did what was needed, Phil. You were needed.”

“I was dead!” he snarled. “I was dead, Nick. I was done. Hadn’t I given you enough? Weren’t my decades of dedication enough? No, you had to have just a little bit more. You always do. Well, I won’t let you do that to her.”

“What are you talking about?” Fury said. “She’s not going to a lab, she’s going to a medical facility.”

“No, she’s going home with the only family she has left. Stark will decide the best course of action for her, not you.”

“Phil, listen to me. Howard would have wanted her to have the best care. We can give her that.”

“I swore to Howard Stark that I would do what was needed to ensure she was protected. Tell me how you can protect her better than the Avengers. Tell me how your system is more advanced than JARVIS, when JARVIS hacked your system on the helicarrier. Tell me how anyone would be more qualified than Captain Rogers to help her to adjust to a jump of seventy years. She’s still nineteen, Nick. She hasn’t aged a day since she went missing in 1944. Not a single day, and you think you can help her with all this better than the Avengers. Though I’m sure Agent May filled you in on all of
this before we found her out. She’s locked in the interrogation room, waiting for you.”

“Placing May on this plane was needed to ensure your continuing safety and ability to function. As for Annabelle…we have resources,” Fury argued. “We can do better for her than anyone else, you know that.”

“Really? Is that what I know?” Phil scoffed. “What I know is that I endured ungodly amounts of pain and you had them wipe my memory of it. What I know is that your resources are unnatural, and should all be razed to the ground. What I know-”

He cut himself off as an engine roared up to the plane, Clint stumbling from the car before Natasha had even managed to stop. He looked at Phil, his mouth hanging open.

“Clint,” Phil whispered, his hands shaking, his body aching to be held.

“What the fuck is this?” Clint demanded. “What the fuck! Someone explain, right fucking now!”

“You want the cliff notes, Cupid?” Tony asked. “Cliff notes is Fury lied. And, from the sounds of it, he used some stuff that shouldn’t even exist and ethics apparently take holidays.”

It was like something snapped in Clint. No one had a chance to stop him as he squared up to Fury and shoved him so hard he went flying. Hill had barely managed to get a hand on the butt of her gun before he turned on her.

“Did you know?” he snarled, his voice scarily quiet. “Did you know he was alive?”

“It was classified, Barton, Level 10 clearance,” she said, and he growled, reaching out to grab her before Thor managed to swing a huge arm around his chest.

“Calm yourself, Barton,” he rumbled in his ear, casting warning glances at Fury and Hill. “Your lover needs your comfort now. Help him heal from the tortures of those he once trusted.”

Clint craned his neck, his eyes finding Phil, before he shoved off Thor and strode to him, reaching out and grabbing his lapel. Phil reached up and gripped at him, one hand wrapped around the strap of his quiver, the other wrapped around his collar.

They were all rocked by the collapse of the stoic man, the emotions written clearly across his face. Clint went to his knees with him.

“Clint,” he whimpered. “I-You-He said-“

“What, Phil? Come on, tell me, baby.”

“He said you knew,” he whispered. “You knew and you didn’t want me.”

Clint gripped the back of his head, his other hand finding the man’s jaw and forcing him to look him in the eye.

“I want you,” he said, loud enough for everyone to hear him, no room for argument. “Phil, I didn’t know. He lied. I didn’t know. And if I had, I would have torn the whole Agency apart to get to you. You know that. Phil. You know this. What happened?”

“The file, there’s a file, and I…Clint…”

Clint pulled him in, holding him tight, and Phil seemed to melt against him. Without moving, he began issuing commands.
“Stark, what’s happening?”

“Well, my father’s sister, who went missing 70 years ago, was found and hasn’t aged a day because someone was using her as a lab rat, so Bruce is going to transport her back to the Tower. Agent doesn’t want her in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s hands.”

“Good. Move her, get her off this plane.”

Bruce pulled Steve to help him and within moments they had Annie in the back of the ambulance.

“Next?”

“I assume that Fury wants to take all his agents back with him, and this swanky plane.”

“No. Thor, Fury doesn’t move until we’re all out of here. Nat, help him, keep Hill contained. Who’s the girl?”

“Skye,” Phil murmured. “I stole a hacker. She’s coming with us.”

“The hell she is,” Fury thundered from behind Thor’s shoulder. “She is a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent and she is coming with us.”

“Actually, Director, I think you will find that her placement with S.H.I.E.L.D. is not official, as Agent Hand did not submit the official paperwork,” JARVIS said; somehow he had managed to tap into the systems of the plane and was transmitting over the intercom. “Miss Skye is not the property of S.H.I.E.L.D. and thus is not subject to the restrictions placed upon Agents.”

Skye grinned at Tony. “He is so cool,” she said.

“Thank you, Miss.”

“Welcome. Which car am I in?”

“Get in mine,” Natasha called. “I’ll ride with Bruce, help him out.”

“Are you packed?” Clint murmured to Phil. The older man nodded and Clint pressed a kiss to his temple.

“Lola. My bags are in Lola.”

“Okay. Phil,” he pulled back, catching his eye. “Get in Lola, front passenger seat, and don’t move from there. Seatbelt.”

Phil nodded and moved to the car, sliding into the front passenger seat and strapping himself in before placing the keys in the slot, ready for Clint to turn. Then he curled up and waited.

Clint, on the other hand, got to his feet and moved over to Thor, laying a hand on his shoulder. The demigod moved slightly to the side, but not too far.

“Director, consider this my resignation,” Clint said. “I quit. I refuse to work for you. Not when these are the lengths you’re willing to go to. Look at him. Look at him, you son of a bitch! All the missions he’s been on, all the times you screwed up and he got captured, all the times he got through fuckin’ torture! And none of that did to him what you have. Look at him, look what you’ve done to him. You broke him. He is broken, and you did that. So here’s what’s going to happen. I quit. He quits. You ever come near my husband again and I will put you in a place where no one will ever find you, and that is a promise. Now, the Avengers are going to take Phil and Skye and Annie, and we’re
leaving, and you’re going to stay away, because I will personally kill any Agent that comes anywhere near any of us.”

He turned away, slid into the driver’s seat and calmly turned the ignition. He serenely waited for Tony to start driving, leading the way back to New York, then Bruce and then Skye, and then he started backing up, sliding on his sunglasses.

Thor called out that he would stay until they were clear, and then they hit the road, Clint joining their hands as they left the Bus behind.

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Clint pulled into the gas station and glanced over at a sleeping Phil before getting out of the car and making his way inside, filling a basket with anything he thought might tempt Phil.

Candy and chocolate and bags of chips, pots of dip. Soda and flavoured milk and fruit juice. As many packets of Lil’ Debbie donuts as they had. He paid for it all on the credit card Tony had forced upon him when he had moved into the Tower before returning to his seat.

He drove another mile and then pulled into an abandoned roadside station and turning off the engine. Phil woke when Clint unclicked his seatbelt, running gentle fingers over his face.

“How long was I out?”

“A couple hours,” he said, hefting his grocery sacks. “I got a bit of everything.”

Phil glanced in the bags and shook his head. “I’m not hungry.”

He paused. “Please, baby. I need this.”

Phil sighed and let Clint tilt the bags at him. He reached in and grabbed a roll of donuts covered in chocolate, tearing the packet open and stuffing the first one into his mouth whole.

“Phil, this file, the one you said-”

“In the trunk,” he said between bites. “Did you get juice?”

“Better, chocolate milk.”

Just like that, tears sprang to Phil’s eyes. He shoved the bags into the back seat and climbed into Clint’s lap, wrapping his arms around his neck and clinging tight. Clint held him just as tight, moving his hands down to grip his hips.


“I missed you too, baby. I don’t have words for how much. God, Phil…when they told me you’d died…Phil, I couldn’t deal. I spiralled.”

“I’m compromised,” Phil admitted.

“I know,” he said, pulling back and making Phil look at him. “But I’m going to take care of you. You believe me?” Phil nodded. “Good. That’s my guy.” He leaned in and joined their lips, feeling Phil surrender to him. He took his good sweet time kissing Phil, showing him just how much he missed him. And then he pulled back and looked him in the eye. “Show me,” he said.
Phil didn’t need to ask what he meant. He simply reached up and yanked off his tie, throwing it out the window, and then reaching up to undo his shirt, his hands shaking. Once they were unbuttoned he stopped, looking into Clint’s eyes.

“It’s okay,” the archer murmured, rubbing at his thighs before smoothing his hand up to push the shirt open. He took in the raised skin of the scar, let his fingers trail over it, noting the way Phil closed his eyes as he touched it. “Does it hurt?” Phil shook his head and Clint gave into the urge to bend his head and trace it with his tongue, laying gentle kisses.

“Clint,” Phil whimpered, tangling his fingers in his hair to encourage him to carry on.

“This, this here, this heart,” Clint growled between kisses. “It is mine. It’s always been mine. This heart is mine.”

“Everything is yours, all of me,” Phil said, pressing kisses to Clint’s hair. “My heart, my soul, every inch of my body. It’s all yours, I swear.” He surrendered to the kiss Clint popped up to take. “Take me, Clint. I don’t want to be Agent.”

Clint knew exactly what Phil wanted, what he was asking for. When they were at work, or in the field, or in unfamiliar company, Phil was the cool Agent Coulson, unflappable badass. But when they were alone, Clint was not the wiseass archer. When they were alone Phil surrendered completely to Clint’s authority, letting the younger man take care of him, letting him call the shots.

To that end, Phil was asking Clint to do everything, to tell him when to eat and what, when to bathe, when to sleep, when and who to talk to.

“Get back in your seat, buckle in. Eat more donuts, and drink the chocolate milk,” Clint ordered. “I’m taking you home.”

Tony walked slowly into the lab and towards the still man before him.

Bruce was moving around, working out equations and testing substances, getting JARVIS to run things for him, reaching up every now and then to push his glasses up his nose. Steve was sitting still as a statue, watching Annie as if her life depended on his eyes on her. Tony slowly approached and curled himself around the broad back.

“How’s she doing?” he asked and he felt Steve shrug.

“Bruce doesn’t know. He’s hooked her up to a thing—a machine to filter her blood. He thinks she’ll do better once everything is out of her system.”

Tony nodded and laid a gentle kiss on the side of his neck. “You should come and eat something. Your metabolism, you know.”

“I can’t leave her.”

“She’s not going anywhere. Steve, you watching her isn’t going to make a difference,” he said gently. “You can’t influence the results of any of the tests if you sit glued to this chair.”

“I just…I can’t,” Steve whispered.

“Guys, I have questions, while I wait for the latest test results,” Bruce said, pulling up a chair on the other side of the unconscious girl.
“Fire away,” Tony said, quite happy to remain where he was.

“You said she was your father’s sister? I’ve never heard of Howard Stark having siblings, I thought he was an only child.”

“It was during the war,” Steve said. “I remember all the generals complaining about her, that Howard shouldn’t have brought her, that she should be back in the US where she would be safe, that an army base was no place for a child. She was taken in 1944, a few months before I had my little ice nap. She was nineteen…she’s still nineteen.”

“My dad never talked about her to anyone, he barely even mentioned her to me,” Tony said, realising that they weren’t going to get much more sense than that out of Steve. “She was the family secret, so to speak. I only ever knew her name. I remember being a kid and finding a picture of her and asking my dad who she was. He told me about her then.”

“So she wouldn’t have been in the media?”

“No, absolutely not,” Steve said. “He sued any reporter that mentioned her, smashed any camera that took a picture.”

Bruce was silent for a moment before he looked at the unconscious girl. “Steve, I kind of need to know about when she was taken. It might hold some clue as to what they were trying to do to her.”

Steve sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face, and Tony could tell just from that sigh that this was the hardest conversation that Steve had ever been part of.

“JARVIS.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Record the conversation,” Tony ordered. He then fixed Bruce with a look before he took Steve by the hand and led him to his bedroom, dimming the lights, tinting the windows, stripping off their clothes, wrapping them both up in the sheets that were still unmade.

“What are we doing?” Steve asked, rubbing a hand along the scars surrounding the arc reactor. Steve knew he was the only one Tony let touch him there, and he found that simple fact absolutely delicious.

“We’re going to curl up, the way we do after sex, and talk. If you’re going to tell anyone something painful and hard to bring up, it’s going to be me and here.”

Steve leaned in and kissed him, pulling the blankets over their heads, before settling in his favourite place: his head on Tony’s chest, his hand playing with the light of the reactor.

“I only have to tell you?”

“Only me, and just this once.”

Steve wriggled a little before letting out another sigh.

“We were in London, it’s where we were all stationed. Nice quick access to Europe. We were in the pub that night, me and the Commando’s, Howard, Peggy, and Annie. It was just a regular night, you know? We were drinking, and there was dancing, and so much singing. It was getting late, Annie was tired, but Howard had this beautiful dame on the dance floor with him. So I offered to take Annie home. It was all normal, I swear, there wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. I’d walked Annie
home a dozen times, it was just normal. I walked her in, and checked the windows, checked over all of it, the place was just the same as it always was. I sat on the couch, waited until she was asleep, and then I went back to my bunk.”

“What about the morning? When did you or dad or someone discover that she was missing?”

“In the morning I picked up some breakfast, and I walked over. Howard answered.” He let out a humourless chuckle. “He looked a little worse for wear. He was still saying goodbye to his dance partner. He asked me to wake Annie while he made some coffee. So I knocked and waited, and knocked a little louder and waited, and then I went in, because there was no answer. And her room was just the way I left it when I checked on her the night before. Except her bed. It looked…”

“Hmmm?” Tony prompted, trying for light. “Looked?”

“It’s going to sound crazy.”

“Steve, we live in a world where a mild mannered scientist turns into a giant green rage monster.”

“Fair point. It almost looked like she’d evaporated. Her bed sheets weren’t even pulled back, as if she didn’t so much as get out of bed as just…poof.”

“That’s weird.”

“I said it sounded crazy.”

“Sirs, once again, I apologise for the interruption, but Doctor Banner is requesting your immediate assistance,” JARVIS said.

They scrambled from the bed and threw their clothes back on as the elevator descended to the floor that held the personal lab spaces that Bruce and Tony used.

They entered to absolute chaos.

Every alarm was blaring, every machine doing their frantic best to tell them that Annie was failing them. Bruce was trying to stabilise her, pumping all manner of things into her, pausing to tilt her head back so he could insert a breathing tube.

“She’s gone into shock, her body’s been pushed to the limit,” he said as he hooked her up to a machine to breathe for her.

Tony hurried forwards, communicating with Bruce in the special science way they had developed, handing him things and adjusting machines until some of the alarms calmed down.

It was then that Clint and Phil walked in. Phil seemed terrified by what was happening, and Clint took him into his arms, murmuring soothing sounds in his ear.

Steve was stunned. He hadn’t thought of Agent Coulson as anything other than completely solid and self-assured. But this…it looked like the Agent didn’t know anything for himself anymore.

“Phil, look at me,” Clint ordered and the older man pulled back, locking gazes. “I’m going to help Bruce and Tony with Annie. You’re going to stay with Steve. You can touch him if you need to. You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to, but if you do, that’s okay. You are to stay with Steve until I finish, and do as he tells you. Am I understood?”

“Yes,” Phil said, and Steve could hear such gratitude in the single word that he started to understand.
Steve had seen men in the war that had been pushed to the limit and then beyond, who could no longer function if there wasn’t some CO ordering them to eat and sleep, who couldn’t even remember how to bathe themselves without instruction. It had been rare, but he had seen it, men whose minds were so shattered by their experiences that they had no sense of self anymore.

“Steve, take care of my guy,” Clint said before pushing Phil towards him and crossing the room.

“Phil?”

The shorter man looked up at him, not quite meeting his eyes.

“Would it be better for you to go to another room while they work on her? Or would you prefer to stay near Clint?”

“Clint,” he whispered and Steve nodded. He motioned to the couch Bruce had often been found napping upon and followed Phil, perching on the arm once he’d sat down. It was a huge shock to him when Phil laid his head on his thigh, his hand wrapped around his shin.

“Is this okay?” Steve asked as he placed a hand on Phil’s shoulder.

He received a nod in return and the two of them waited.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

This chapter is for narnia2375. It was the first time I had ever received a birthday wish chapter update request, so here you go. I know the day is almost over, but it's before midnight, so it still counts.

I'm still sort of getting the hang of writing these characters and their personalities and points of view, so I apologise if they seem a little out of character.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clint eased a hand under the base of Annie’s skull and gently pulled her up, just enough for him to slip his other hand underneath and pull out her hair, before he slid a small basin under her neck.

He softly combed out the long dark strands, easing his way through the tangles and snarls until it was smooth and knot free, before he submerged it, pulling it up long enough to massage in the shampoo, exceedingly careful not to get any in her eyes or any of the tubes and wires Bruce had attached to her.

The good doctor was passed out at his desk, his cheek pressed against the wood while various tests and calculations ran on the screens around him.

Clint rinsed out the suds before swapping out the basin for a few thick towels. He squeezed out as much of the water as he could before turning on the hairdryer he’d found in Natasha’s bathroom. Tony must have made it, as it was the quietest hairdryer he’d ever heard. Once it was dry and he could pass a brush through it, he braided it to one side of her head and secured it with an elastic.

Once that was done, he moved down to her left leg and poured some baby oil into his palms, before he began to massage it into her calf.

“Is it some sort of tactile therapy?”

Clint looked up to see Thor entering the lab, a box of uncooked poptarts in his hand, a huge mug of coffee in the other.

“You know you’re meant to toast those, right?”

“I care not, they are delicious.”

“To each his own, man. And this? It’s something I learnt while I was in the circus.”

“I do not know this term.”

“Circus?” Thor nodded. “It’s a group of travelling performers. Acrobats, clowns, that sort of thing. Some have animals.”

“An entertainment!”
“Yeah. I was in one, when I was younger. Me and my brother, Barney. When I was there, one of the trapeze artists fell and damaged the ligaments in her knee. She taught me to apply a massage so that when the ligaments were healed, she could get back on her feet faster.”

“I see. Can this be learned by anyone?”

“Sure. Take the other leg, I’ll teach you.” They spent a few minutes getting Thor started before the big guy got the hang of it.

“This is most pleasing, to help her in some way,” Thor declared. “How is the Son of Coul?”

“He’s asleep, for now. Aside from that, he’s not doing so good.”

Thor nodded, his face grave as he worked the baby oil into her ankle. “To be betrayed by those close to you, those you consider shield brothers…I can think of no pain like it.”

Clint’s hands stilled. “I’m sorry about Loki,” he said quietly and Thor fixed him with an incredulous look. “Let me be clear, I’m not sorry he’s gone, after what he did to me, and to Phil, I can’t be. But he was your brother, and I’m sorry for your loss of him. I lost my brother when I was a kid, so I know how much it hurts. I’m sorry.”

Thor grasped his shoulder in a silent show of thanks.

“Did you call…what’s her name? Your girl?”

“Jane. I did call her, Tony showed me how to. She is catching a flight with her friend Darcy.”

“What about Selvig?”

“He has no desires to return to New York. He is staying in London with Darcy’s intern. Jane thinks she may be able to isolate what is causing the surges of energy within Annie.”

“Let’s hope someone can,” Clint said. “They are seriously screwed up. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Nor I. It would be best if it could be ended.”

They both looked over as Bruce groaned, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes. The confusion was clear across his face as he caught sight of them.

“I think it might be a little soon for physical therapy,” he said. “How about we get her to breathe on her own first?”

“I just wanted to do something,” Clint said. “Anything. And I’m not a doctor or a lawyer or a super brain like you and Tony. And Phil’s asleep.”

“I see.” Bruce made his way over and started peering at the monitors. “Clint…what happened to Phil?”

“He calls it being compromised, but I’d never seen him compromised like that before the plane. He’s lost all sense of who to trust, of right from wrong, of everything. So he’s looking to me to tell him. He’s going to look to me for when to eat and what, when to shower, when to sleep, who he talks to, everything.”

“Sounds like a lot of responsibility for one guy,” Bruce mused. “Anything we can do to help?”
“I’m slowly going to get him to trust you guys, and then he’ll have more of a sense of how this world works. He trusted Fury, and S.H.I.E.L.D. for a long time, and now that’s been destroyed. He’s going to have to learn all over again how to trust anyone. Right now the only one he knows he can trust absolutely is me.”

They nodded and then Bruce smiled slightly. “Her vitals have come up. I think she’s ready to try breathing without the machine.”

“It’s only been a day,” Clint stated. “Shouldn’t she need longer?”

“The goal of medical interventions like the breathing tube and the ventilator are to allow her to heal enough so that she can be without them. It is always the intention to only use extraordinary measures for the shortest possible time.”

He adjusted some of the monitors before he rubbed his knuckles into Annie’s breastbone.

“Annie…can you hear me?”

Clint motioned to him that her fingers were twitching.

“That’s good, Annie. My name is Doctor Banner. I’ve been taking care of you, trying to make you better. Annie, there’s a tube in your throat, it’s attached to a machine that’s breathing for you. I want to try turning the machine off, to see how you do breathing on your own.”

Her fingers twitched once again.

“Okay, Annie, I’m going to give you some medication, something to help your body cope with the change, and then we’re going to turn off the machine. You’re still going to be attached to it, just in case your body isn’t ready for this, but you’ll be breathing on your own.”

Once again, there was the slight movement of her hand, and a slight fluttering of her eyelashes. Bruce leaned away and grabbed a syringe of clear liquid which he then fed into her IV line. He waited a few moments for it to take effect before he reached out and placed a finger on the power switch of the ventilator.

“Okay, Annie, the machine is going to stop in a moment. I want you to try breathing slowly and gently,” he said.

Bruce waited for her to move a little before he flipped the switch, and the three men held their breath as she took her first, unaided, shuddering breaths. She slowly seemed to get the hang of it, and then she reached weakly for the tube still in her throat.

“No, sweetheart, leave it alone,” Clint said. “We need to wait a little while, just be sure. We’ll take it out when we’re sure you can do this on your own.”

She let her hand fall back and Clint filled the silence by telling her fairy tales he barely remembered his mother telling him when he was small. Ten minutes passed, then fifteen, then a half hour.

“I think we can take the tube out,” Bruce said, his eyes fixed on the monitors informing him of her vitals. “Half hour with no dips in blood oxygen, respiration holding steady.”

He adjusted the bed so she was sitting, and then arranged one of the monitors directly ahead of her, getting JARVIS to play Snow White. She managed to flicker her eyes open enough to focus on the cartoon before her. Clint took one hand and Thor the other as Bruce administered some medication and suctioned out her mouth before he pulled the tube out in one smooth motion.
She coughed and gasped, gagging and dry heaving, before she relaxed back into the pillows, her eyes slipping closed.

“Annie? How are you doing?” Bruce asked, reaching for his stethoscope.

“Mmmm,” she hummed, her voice broken, and Clint held a glass of water to her lips, tilting it for her.

“Good lung sounds,” Bruce said. “You did really well, Annie.”

“Howard,” she mumbled.

The two human men exchanged a look. “Howard’s not here right now,” Clint said. “But we’re friends. We’re going to help you get better.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t like seeing good people hurt, none of us do. And I’m a friend of Steve’s, and you’re important to him.”

“Steve?”

“Yeah, Steve, Captain Rogers.”

“Want.”

“JARVIS, can you call Steve for us?”

“It is done, Master Barton, he is on his way with Sir and Master Coulson.”

“When did Phil wake up?”

“A few moments ago, Master Barton. He opted to go to Captain Rogers for confirmation of your whereabouts.”

“JARVIS, what time is it?” Thor asked, his thumb rubbing circles on Annie’s fragile wrist.

“The time in New York is currently 6.42am, Master Odinson, with a local temperature of 72 degrees and a forecasted weather of sunshine with light showers later on in the day.”

“Thanks, J,” Tony said as he walked in.

“A pleasure, as always, Sir. Might I take the liberty of arranging breakfast to be delivered, perhaps the usual diner?”

“None for me and Phil, JARVIS,” Clint said, letting Phil cuddle in under his chin. “I’ll cook for us. I can cook for everyone if you want?”

“Sounds good,” Tony said, a hand on the base of Steve’s spine. “Come on, Capsicle. She won’t bite.”

Clint moved aside with Phil in tow and Steve moved up to the bedside, slowly reaching out to take Annie’s hand.

“Hey, little Stark,” he murmured and she let out a gasp, clutching at his fingers as tightly as she could.
“Steve,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

He pulled her into a hug and no one could find anything to say at all.

Thor missed his mother, and he wasn’t about to deny it.

He missed her perfume, the touch of her hand on his arm, her smile. He missed the way she looked at him, he missed the way she had sung him to sleep as a child. He missed everything.

And he missed Loki.

Not the monster he had become, not the creature that had died in that desolate wasteland whose body was never found. Thor missed his brother.

He missed the boy Loki had once been, the child who had trailed after him, who had climbed into his bed when his nightmares took hold, who had drawn him countless pictures of Mjolnir. He longed for the games they played, the tricks Loki had helped him to pull, the sweetness of him when he laughed.

Thor could not pinpoint the moment when Loki had changed. He had been different since his coming of age, that much he knew, but when that difference had become something cruel and dark he could not decide.

“Something on your mind, big guy?”

Thor looked up as Tony approached him, a bowl of blueberries in hand, the wide vista of New York clear behind the wide windows he passed before.

It seemed strange that they all congregated in the room where Loki had met Hulk, but it was the only space Thor knew of where he didn’t feel dwarfed and suffocated.

“Merely thinking. How is Lady Annie?”

“She’s…actually, I have no idea,” Tony said as he sat down, offering the bowl. “Steve’s stressed, wound so tight I’m waiting for him to pop. Bruce is deeply immersed in the science. Birdy is all about Phil, Phil’s a wreck. You’re sitting here in silence and Natasha has disappeared somewhere. The only one I know is absolutely okay is Skye, who is having a blast with JARVIS.”

“And what of you?”

“Me? Hmmm. Good question. I would assume I’m doing okay, as I haven’t begun to drown my sorrows in scotch yet, and I’m not holed up in my workshop.”

“It is a strange situation, a sudden reminder of your father in your home.”

“There is that.” Tony sighed, scrubbing his free hand over his face. “My dad never talked about her. I found a picture of her once, when I was a kid, and he told me who she was, but that was it. Steve and Bruce keep urging me to talk to her, but what am I meant to say?”

“The truth, perhaps?”

“Yeah, Steve doesn’t want that. He thinks she won’t handle the truth very well. I think he’s full of
“Is that the issue between you and the Captain?” Thor asked. “We have all seen how the communication between you is strained.”

“Are we obvious? Have I become obvious?”

“We do all live together.” Thor suddenly cleared his throat, getting to his feet and disappearing into the elevator as Steve appeared out of it.

“We’re going over this again?” Steve asked as Tony sighed.

“Well, if you’re going to continue to be an ass, then yeah, we’re going to keep going over this.”

“I’m an ass? When all you think about is what you think is best, never mind what anyone else thinks or wants.”

“I just think that you, of all people, would know what she’s going through.”

“Exactly. I know, not you!”

“Yeah, and you really want her going through what you did? That bullshit room Fury had you wake up in, with the girl in costume. The baseball game. And then sticking you in some shithole apartment while they figured out the best way to use you. You want that for her?”

“That won’t happen!” Steve screamed. “I would never let that happen!”

“But you are letting that happen! She knows, Steve. She knows something’s off about this whole thing, and the longer you lie to her, telling her that everything is fine, the more betrayed she’s going to feel when it all comes out.”

“Just because Howard was a jerk who lied to you don’t assume I’m the same. I was right, you Stark men are all the same! You tar everyone with the same brush, and you assume you’re right, to hell with everyone else.”

Tony stood there in shock. It had been a while since he and Steve had really gone at each other, and he had forgotten Steve’s trick of comparing him to his father to throw him off.

“Well, maybe you’re right about that one. But, here’s a thought. Annie is a Stark, so legally I would be her next of kin, and she’s under my roof. I’m family. What the hell or you? You’re nothing, just someone she used to know.”

Steve looked like Tony had just hit him. He opened his mouth to argue, but he couldn’t make a sound. So he turned on his heel and walked out, grabbing his jacket on the way.

Tony wished he could reel the words back in.

Bruce grabbed his gun and levelled it at the head of the man exiting the lift.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t put a bullet through your brain?” he asked the man.

He held up his hands, dropping the sheaf of papers he held.

“Woah, man, back it up,” he said. “I only came to give you the papers. Stark said I could come
down...he said it would be cool.”

“JARVIS? Is he telling the truth?”

“Indeed, Dr Banner. Sir asked me to verify his identity for you.”

“Who is he? Who are you?”

“I’m Agent Antione Triplett. I was on the team that found her,” he said, nodding at the bed that still held Annie. “Dr Simmons asked me to give you these papers.” He scooped them up and held them out. “She said she forgot them when you took the rest.”

Bruce slowly lowered the gun and took the papers.

“Sorry,” he said. “I just get a little jumpy.”

“I guessed that. Can I just say...it is my absolute honour to meet you.”

“Oh. You mean...because of the...”

“No, no, not like that. My grandfather had cancer, a very rare form of bone cancer. Your research on gamma radiation was the only thing that held any clue of how to help him. He’s still around, annoying the staff at the retirement home. So...thank you.”

Bruce felt colour rise in his cheeks. It was rare that someone actually knew what his speciality was, let alone thanked him for it.

“And now that I have sufficiently embarrassed you, we will move on. How’s she doing?”

“Better. You can talk to her if you like.”

“Really? She’s awake?”

“I am, Agent Triplett.”

Antoine moved across the room, rounding the bed so he could look into the dark eyes.

“Good hearing,” he said.

“Seems to be the only way I get to know anything around here. Steve is lying to me, and he’s got the rest of them unfailingly loyal to his wishes,” she said calmly. “So I have taken to feigning sleep in an attempt to hear something.”

“Sneaky. No one figured it out yet?”

“I think Bruce knows, and the omniscient Jarvis they keep talking to.”

She stopped and took a good look at him, as if measuring him up.

“I know you, but I don’t,” she said. “You look familiar.”

“You probably knew my grandpa. Gabriel Jones.”

It was said before Bruce could stop him. The whole room froze, even the simulations JARVIS was running seemed to still.

“Your grandfather?” she whispered. “How old is he?”
“He’s ninety two now.”

“Ninety two,” she echoed. “Ninety two. So that would make it…what, seventy years? Which would make it 2014. Which…is what Steve has been hiding.” She looked at Antoine, who had a look of absolute horror on his face. “Gabe’s still alive. What about the rest of the Howlers?”

“I…look, I shouldn’t have-”

She cut him off with a raised pale hand. “No more lies,” she demanded. “Bruce, get Steve right now.”

“Forgive me, Miss Stark, but Captain Rogers left the building some twenty minutes ago,” JARVIS said from the ceiling.

“Then…then…I don’t know! I-I-”

“JARVIS, get Tony, and Clint, and Phil, right now,” Bruce ordered, coming forwards and taking Annie by the upper arms. “Annie, I need you to calm down for me. You’re safe here, I promise, and we’ll explain everything to you. But you have to calm down.”

“Seventy years,” she said. “But I’m not old. And Steve is here. How? How is-how can-I don’t-”


“No, I told her who I remind her of.”

“And that is…” asked Clint.

“Gabriel Jones,” she said. “He was a Howler. And he’s now ninety two, and I’m still nineteen. I’m still-”

“Oh shit.”

To everyone’s immense surprise, Tony moved across the room and climbed onto the bed, pulling her into his arms.

“My name is Tony. Did anyone tell you that?” She shook her head. “Yeah. Tony Stark. I’m your nephew. And, no, my dad isn’t coming. But I’m here, and we’re family, and that means I’ll be keeping you safe. So, part of that is the truth. Do you want the truth, or do you want to wait?”

“The truth,” she said. “Just tell me.”

“Okay. Here it is. It is 2014, you’ve been missing for 70 years. We don’t know why you were taken, we don’t know what they did exactly. We’re working on those answers for you. Steve’s not here right now because we had an argument where we said some things we shouldn’t have said.”

“Where am I?”

“New York. You’re, more specifically, in Stark Tower, a great big towering skyscraper filled with superheroes and technology.”

“Howard?”

“Died twenty years ago. A car accident.”

She dissolved into tears, screaming at the world at large, and no one had the heart to stop her.
Jane was sore and tired but so very happy.

She slipped from the outrageously expensive bed (that probably cost more than her entire RV) and pulled on some clothes before she made her way from the room, glancing back at Thor spread out on his stomach, gloriously nude, before she headed for the elevator.

“Dr Banner?” she called, and smiled as his head popped up from behind a computer screen. “Hi. I’m Jane Foster.”

“Ah, the physicist,” he said, moving towards the coffee pot. “Want some?”

“Please.” She looked across the lab at Annie. “How is she?”

“Asleep. I think.” He passed her a mug of coffee. “Thor asleep?” She nodded. “So, is it too early to pick your brains?”

“No at all,” she said as they moved towards the computer he had appeared from behind. “Thor said something about an energy reading, that it might be something like what I get a read on when he uses his Bifrost.”

He pulled up the data Skye had managed to decrypt for him and adjusted the screen, holding out a pad of paper and a pen as she absently reached for them. He smiled inwardly as she began to work out the equations. His specialty lay more in the biological sciences, this definitely wasn’t his area. But Jane seemed to have the expertise he was lacking; perhaps between them they could begin to make a dent in understanding what had been done.

“You’ve only just met her, and already you’re putting her to work,” Tony said as he walked in with two plates of steaming hot pasta and meatballs.

“All I did was pull up the specs,” Bruce defended, almost pouncing on his bowl. “Mmmm. Clint made dinner too? Didn’t he do breakfast?”

“He insisted. Something about Phil. Any luck?”

“I don’t know, she’s mumbling,” he said, motioning to Jane.

“I meant with Annie.”

“She’s still asleep. But her vitals are steady, she seems to be holding her own.” Tony sighed and stared at the sleeping girl. “Has Steve come back yet?”

Tony shook his head and the two men fell silent.

“You must have said something truly awful,” said Annie, making the two men jump. “I sleep lightly, even after being tortured, apparently.”

“Family trait,” Tony muttered. He made his way over, perching on the edge of her bed. “What did you say?”

“Trust me, you don’t need to know.”

“Is this because the two of you are sleeping together?” She caught his eye and raised one dark brow, smirking at his wordlessly moving mouth. “I grew up in a war, around soldiers far from home and
their ladies. It’s not so strange. Wasn’t ever talked about, but it happened. Nothing to do with me what happens between two consenting adults.”

“Pretty modern thinking for a wartime girl.”

She shrugged. “Everyone thought I was a little strange back then. Maybe I’ll fit better here. I was wondering…that is a very large pendant for a man to wear. Is it a medal?”

He looked down and smiled.

“You mean this?” He tapped at his glowing circle and she nodded. “It’s not a pendant.” He yanked up the Metallica t-shirt he was wearing. “It’s part of me.”

“You have my reactor in your chest,” she said, absolutely stunned, her fingers tracing the circle of light.

“Your reactor?”

“Yes. It’s my design. I never finished it.”

“I thought my dad designed the Arc Reactor. He used it as a clean energy thing, to appease the hippies who objected to weapons manufacture.”

“It was for clean energy, but only because Howard hated me designing weapons. But I was taken before I could finish it.”

“I finished it,” he said, watching the blue light play across her face. He owed her his life, this girl his father had never ever talked of. “I have some of the old ones you can tinker with if you like.”

“Old ones?”

Yeah. I had the first one put in when I was in a cave in the desert. I kind of got blown up, this keeps the shrapnel from shredding my heart. So when I got back to civilisation I had to replace it…and then that one gave me palladium poisoning. So I made this one. You can play with the old ones.”

“Palladium? What core does this one have?”

He laughed. “It doesn’t have a name. I wanted to patent it as Starkite, but no one would let me. I have the molecular specs you can look at.”

She nodded and kept playing with the light, passing her fingers before it. He reached out and grabbed her hand as she ran a fingertip over the surrounding scars, shaking his head at her in gentle admonition; only Steve was allowed to touch him like that.

“This world is so different,” she murmured. “So much technology, so much knowledge.”

“You’ll adapt. Steve did.”

“How is Steve still young?”

“He had a run in with a glacier. The serum kept him from dying completely, so when he was found and thawed, he was still young.”

“Did we win the war?” He nodded. “And we beat Hydra?” Another nod. “Did we save a lot of people?”
“Yeah. I think it’s about 3 million. JARVIS, verify.”

“At the end of the Second World War, an estimated total of three million, five hundred and forty six thousand, two hundred and eleven people were liberated from fifty seven concentration camps under Nazi rule, Sir.”

Annie looked up at the ceiling and Tony smiled. “That’s JARVIS. He’s an artificial intelligence, fancy kind of computer. I made him. He makes sure I don’t kill myself.”

“A reverent joy to complete that task, Sir.”

“He’s also got more sass than he knows what to do with.” He looked up. “You know, I can always reprogram you.”

“Or, perhaps, donate me to a city college, Sir.”

A raised eyebrow was the only response to the AI.

Phil gasped in a stuttering breath as Clint’s hands slipped over his back.

He rolled over, opening his eyes to the darkness of the bedroom to see his lover leaning over him. He surrendered to the kiss Clint pressed against his lips, feeling the slick heat of his tongue as it pressed between his lips, opening to it, letting Clint do what he wanted with him.

Clint had managed to hold off touching him in this way for a whole five days. It had to be a record. When they were together Clint was all for complete and utter nudity.

“Is this too soon?” Clint whispered, stroking the trail of hair below Phil’s navel.

“No,” he murmured. “I want…”

“Honestly?”

“Want you, Clint. Now. Us.”

Phil felt the restraint in Clint break, and then the almost overwhelming feel of bare skin against his own. He heat of Clint’s skin, the taste of his kisses, the strength in his hands as he was prepped. It all merged into a single moment, the moment Clint pushed into him, stilling once he was fully seated. Phil’s thighs were snug around his husband’s slim hips, his hard cock trapped between them, and Clint had pinned his hands above his head, forcing complete and utter surrender.

“You come when you can,” Clint ordered. “Don’t wait for me, and I won’t order it. When you can, when you’re ready.”

Phil nodded and arched up, waiting until Clint kissed him. It was what he needed, what he wanted. Clint could take care of him, Clint could make it better. He began to move and Phil’s eyes drifted closed, tears stinging at how good it was. Clint had entered him at exactly the right angle to hit his prostate on every thrust, and he whined at the pleasure burning through his nerve endings.

The pain of what had been done to him was receding, easing, making room for the pleasure his husband created and Phil began to sob in relief. His hips moved of their own accord, pushing back to meet the even steady thrusts.

“Oh, Phil,” Clint murmured in his ear, nipping at the lobe. “My Phil, mine. I won’t let them take you
from me again, not ever again.”

It built, the heat, and Phil could feel it rush through him, filling every cell. He struggled a little against the hold Clint had on his wrists, just enough to make him tighten his grip and fan the flames burning within Phil.

If Clint had ordered him to wait, to hold off until Clint wanted him to come, Phil might not have been able to follow the order this time. But Clint hadn’t ordered that, so Phil let it take him, let it sweep through him until he was spurting between them, hot and sticky.

Clint gasped at the increase in pressure around his shaft, the thick fluid between them, the high whining moan from Phil and surrendered himself to it, thrusting wildly into his husband before shoving himself in as deep as he could get and spilling far inside.

Clint flopped to the side, pulling Phil with him to hold him close as they both shook and panted.

“Missed this,” Phil mumbled.

“ Didn’t suck,” Clint agreed.

“No. This. The holding. I missed you holding me.”

Clint smiled and pressed a kiss to the sweaty forehead beneath his chin. “I’ll always hold you.”

Bruce watched as Annie poked at the pancakes Steve had brought her.

“You should eat,” he urged, smiling at her. “It’ll help.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I can get you something else,” Steve offered. “Anything you like.”

“Anything?”

“Anything, just name it.”

“I want to see the sky,” she said.

Steve looked at Bruce helplessly. “I don’t know if you’re ready for that.”

Bruce looked from the girl to the monitors before moving to one of the storage units and pulling out a small metal case.

“JARVIS, access the remote sensors and take readings for me,” he ordered as he moved back to the bed. “I think I have a way to do that, to let you see the sky.”

“Bruce, she’s...”

“Not a prisoner,” Bruce finished. “The penthouse has very big windows. And she can be curled up on the sofa just as easily as she can be curled up in here.”

“The monitors are here,” Steve pointed out.

“That is what these are for,” Bruce said, opening the case. “These three,” he said, motioning to the
three round buttons, each the size of a coat button, “are heart monitors, they adhere to the skin, and this one,” he motioned to the wristwatch, “is worn around the wrist and can monitor a whole host of things, such as blood oxygen, blood sugars, and major shifts in biochemistry. JARVIS can link into all of them.”

Bruce gently attached the portable monitors to Annie, smiling at her while Steve hovered. He didn’t tell Steve that Tony had made the monitors a few weeks ago and they were as yet untested.

They made their way up, Steve supporting Annie while Bruce calibrated a StarkPad to receive the readings from the monitors, and as the elevator doors opened, the two men pretended not to notice when tears slipped down Annie’s pale cheeks.

She let go of Steve and unsteadily made her way across the room, pressing her hand against the glass as her eyes fixed on the wide expanse of blue.

“She should be sitting,” Steve complained.

“Give her a moment,” Bruce replied distractedly, his gaze flickering between the Pad and the young woman. “JARVIS, where are the others?”

“Sir is in his workshop with Miss Skye and Miss Lewis, Master Barton and Master Coulson are in the library on floor 36, Dr Foster and Master Odinson are in their bedroom. Agent Romanoff left two hours ago for S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Can you ask Tony to come up here?”


“Because I need to bounce some theories.”

Moments later Tony emerged from the elevator with Skye and Darcy trailing behind him.

“Hey, Big Green,” he said, peering interestedly at Annie. “Need me for something?”

“I wanted to pick your brain over some of these results. None of them are exactly normal, but it’s her recovery rate that’s confusing me.”

The two of them dissolved into a flurry of numbers and science that Steve couldn’t keep up with, even if he couldn’t quite keep his eyes off of Tony completely.

“Uh, guys,” Darcy interrupted. “Is that normal?”

They looked over to where Annie was slowly crumbling, her teeth sunk into her lower lip, blood running down her chin.

Steve reached her first, helping her to the floor.

“I don’t understand, there are no spikes,” Bruce said, looking at the tablet. It exploded in his hand, along with the monitors attached to Annie, as her body was consumed by white light, electricity crackling over her skin, Steve screaming in pain as it hit him.

“JARVIS, record everything you can,” Tony ordered, grabbing Steve as he backed away.

Huge arms scooped Annie up, holding her close and they looked up into the worried eyes of Thor, Jane hovering near Darcy and Skye.
“What is this?” the god demanded. “Humans are not advanced enough to have this kind of sorcery.”

“Thor, you’ve seen this before?” Bruce demanded.

“Not like this, but such a thing is not unknown among the nine realms. I have never heard of it happening here.”

“Why? Why doesn’t it happen here?” Skye asked.

“Humans cannot endure it, the power consumes from within. Your lifespans are woefully short in comparison to other peoples.”

“Is this going to kill her?” Steve whispered.

“It may,” he said regretfully. “Without knowing how this came to be, I cannot tell you what the effects may be on her.”

Annie awoke in an unfamiliar bedroom with Steve sitting by her bed.

“What happened?” she asked.

“We’re not entirely sure,” he answered. “Bruce is working on it. How are you feeling?”

“Sore.” She sat up, taking in the room. “Where am I?”

“This is your room. Me and Tony are down the hall.”

“You’re assuming Tony wants me around.”

“He does.”

“I’m sure he was just waiting for some strange relative to turn up.” She huffed. “Why didn’t they just kill me? Why this?”

“This?”

“Seventy years. How can I even begin to understand this life when I couldn’t understand my old one?”

“This life isn’t so bad,” he said. “Plenty of food, technology, freedoms. You’ll adapt.”

“Have you?”

“I…I’m getting there. There’s a lot to take in. And I’m not a genius like you.”

“At least some things haven’t changed; you’re still selling yourself short. You landed a Stark, you can’t be that worthless.”

Steve laughed. “I never said worthless, I said not a genius.”

“So what else hasn’t changed?”

“Uh…they’re still making Disney movies,” he said after a moment’s thought. “Bacon is still considered good food, no matter what it’s put in. Hamburgers, meatloaf and hotdogs are good choices. Baseball is the national pastime. Little girls want to be princesses, boys want to go to war.”
“So the little things haven’t really changed. What about what has changed?”

“Women wear pants, technology has taken over pretty much everything. It’s seen as sort of acceptable to have sexual relations outside of marriage, so long as the dame doesn’t get pregnant. Kids don’t really have the same respect for their parents and no one seems to respect the elderly. It’s permissible for two men to be together, but some folks still don’t accept it. Famous people go around half clothed…mind, it seems to be everyone does that now.”

“All morality has been swept aside,” she mused.

“No, it’s just a little different than you’re used to,” Tony said from the doorway. He held up a plate. “Grilled cheese. Nobody panic, I didn’t make it.”

Annie accepted the sandwich and Steve made his excuses to leave.

“How long before the two of you make up?” she said after a mouthful as Tony lounged across the foot of the bed.

“We’ll work it out,” he dismissed. “We could paint the room if you want a different colour. Different bedding maybe. Or a different room if you don’t like this one.”

“The room is fine, the colour is fine, it’s all fine. I’ve slept in worse places, believe me.”

He snorted. “A Stark sleeping in less than the lap of luxury…I think I’d even pay to see that.”

She looked at him with raised eyebrows and put down the rest of her sandwich.

“What was Howard like? As a father I mean.”

“He was…I don’t know! He was just…dad.”

“Don’t lie, you suck at it.”

“Okay,” he said with a smile. “He sucked at it. He was cold, distant. His happiest day was when he shipped me off to boarding school. He never told me he loved me, I don’t think he even liked me very much. I was just someone to inherit, some sort of rite of passage he thought he needed to have.”

He looked at her crestfallen face and wished he could reel the words back in. “He wasn’t abusive, or neglectful or anything like that. He just liked machines.”


“You mean he didn’t spring from the ground fully formed?”

“Tony, we grew up poor. Like really poor. One room shack, dirt floor, no food. There were four of us. Howard, then Edward, then me and Andrew.” She laughed at his surprise. “Did you think your middle name was plucked from thin air?”

“Kinda.”

“Our mother’s name was Mary. I don’t remember her, I was very young when she died. Our father was a drunk. It fell to Howard to keep us fed. Edward died when I was five, it was a rough winter. The next year Andrew died. Howard moved me out a few months after that. I don’t know what happened to our father. I never saw him again. But Howard was very good with machines, which is how he earned his money. He fixed things, and then improved them, and then began to invent his
“So…the money, he earned that? I thought it was inherited.”

“No. He made his first million when he was fifteen. By twenty one he was the richest man in the country. When war broke out, Howard was very much in demand. And his money meant I got to go where he did.”

Tony was reeling. He’d never known any of this, he’d barely even known about Annie. He’d always sort of had a curiosity over family.

“Was there anything good in him after I was gone?” she whispered.

“He kept looking for Steve, so there must have been.”

She smiled. “I think the only good in him was you.”

Steve came to full wakefulness as warm arms wrapped around him from behind.

“I’m sorry,” Tony whispered into the shoulder he was leaning his head against. “I shouldn’t have said what I did.”

“That was my line,” Steve said, rolling over so they could look at each other. “But you beat me to it.”

“Never let it be said that I sit on my laurels.”

Steve laughed and leaned in, kissing the dark haired man until he surrendered.

“I thought you’d still be in the lab or the maybe your workshop,” Steve murmured as he nipped at his Adam’s apple.

“Couldn’t concentrate. You were distracting. Figured I’d get no work done until we were okay. Are we?”

“I think so,” Steve said and Tony gave in completely.

Bruce peered at his screen and his brow furrowed.

“That can’t be right,” he murmured.

Jane looked over at him and pushed her equations aside. “Something wrong?”

“These results. They can’t be right, there’s no way they can be right.”

“Show me,” she said as she crossed to him, looking over his shoulder. Jane had more than a basic knowledge of biology, but she was no expert.

But even she could see that this was not a normal reading.

“Run it again, maybe there’s a glitch,” she said.

“I’ve run this four times, there is no glitch. This is her. I just can’t figure out how.”
“Have you shown this to the others?”

“I’m about to. Do you think Thor knows how this is possible? Maybe his people have seen this before.”

“Well, good luck in getting Odin to help. He doesn’t think too much of us mere mortals.”

He looked up at her with a grin before he transferred the findings to a tablet and they made their way to the elevator.

“He really pissed you off, huh?”

“He referred to me as a goat at a feast, and then we had to commit treason to save his kingdom and still he treats Thor like a child. You could say he’s not my favourite person.”

“Words against my father once more, my sweet Jane?” Thor asked as they emerged into the open space of the penthouse.

“Just expressing an opinion,” she said, smiling into the kiss he pressed to her lips.

“Where’s Tony?” Bruce asked.

“He demonstrates for the little Stark,” Thor said, motioning to the wide windows before shovelling more tortilla chips into his mouth from the absolutely huge bag he held.

Annie was curled up against Steve, the two of them ensconced in a sun lounger, watching as Tony flew in elaborate displays of aeronautic acrobatics in the Iron Man suit for her amusement. Phil and Clint were in a similar position in another lounger, and Phil looked a little more comfortable than he had when they had met him on the Bus.

“JARVIS.”

“Yes, Dr Banner?”

“Put me through to Tony, please.”

“One moment, Doctor.”

“Ah, finally emerged, big man?” came Tony’s teasing voice, slightly winded.

“I need to pick your brains,” he replied. “Some of these results don’t make any sense.”

“Send them to the HUD, J.” There were a few minutes silence and then Tony sounded absolutely stunned. “They’re wrong.”

“I’ve run them four times, Tony, they’re not wrong. I just can’t explain them.”

“I’m coming in. Get Steve.”

They all gathered at the bar, Tony doling out scotch for himself and orange juice for the rest. “I’m not sure I get it,” Steve admitted, looking down at the tablet Bruce had laid before him, his gaze flickering to Annie, who was still curled up on the lounger, watching the clouds above her.

“Too many numbers?” Tony questioned with kind eyes and Steve nodded. “Okay, the basics of it are like this. The human ability to heal is controlled by how fast the cells divide. It’s a pretty standard average across the board, with some room for going either way, faster or slower.”
“I’m with you.”

“What we’re seeing with Annie is way too fast,” Bruce said. “It’s somewhere near your speed of healing. Which shouldn’t be possible.”

“Is that why she survives the sorcery within her?” Thor asked.

“We think so,” Jane answered. “What damage is being caused by these episodes, she’s healing herself.”

“What does it mean?” Clint asked, tearing his eyes away from Phil still in his lounger. “How is it happening?”

“There are a few anomalies in her genetics,” Bruce said. “I’m not sure how she got them. Tony, I was wondering if you’d give me a blood sample. Annie and Howard were full brother and sister, same two parents, so the chromosomes that Howard passed on to you should be able to give me some clue as to whether her anomalies are a genetic trait or something they did to her in that lab.”

“Sure. JARVIS, give Bruce access to the sample of my DNA you have on file.”

“As you wish, Sir.”

“You have a sample on file?” Jane asked.

“My dad’s idea. For kidnapping attempts. It used to be a simple vial of blood, but I got a little more sophisticated as time went on.”

“How old were you?” Steve asked. “The first time someone took you. How old?”

“I was five, about a year after I built my first circuit board. My bodyguard needed a piss.”

It was Clint that found her, Phil trailing behind him, in Tony’s workshop.

“JARVIS, tell everyone I found her,” he said, squatting down in front of her. “Hey.”

“Hello,” Annie whispered.

Clint curled up, his knees to his chest, and passed her a tissue to mop up her tears. “You scared us all. How did you even get in here? Tony usually keeps it locked.”

“Picked it,” she said simply. “Simple mathematical equation for the little keypad on the door.”

“I should warn Tony you can do that,” he chuckled. “So…is there a reason you’re hiding down here?”

“I just…it was sort of the same, like Howard’s workshops.” Clint nodded, pressing an absent minded kiss to Phil’s forehead as he snuggled into his side. “I think I can guess the problem. See, I might not really have been all that aware after the attack on New York, what with thinking Phil was dead and all, but I did manage to notice how overwhelmed Steve seemed to be. And it got me to thinking. He’s a soldier, trained for all kinds of things. You’re not. You’re barely out of being a kid, and here we are, throwing all this new stuff at you, and you’re overloaded. Am I right?”

“I guess,” she said. “There’s just…so much here. It’s like I’m on a different planet. And when I was…in the…”
“The lab,” Phil whispered. “I know how you feel.”

“Really?”

Phil looked at Clint and the archer took over. “They did things to him, to bring him back, because he was actually dead for a few days.”

“How did they do that?”

“You can read the file, if you like. Might make more sense to you than to me.” He sighed. “You know, you don’t have to be okay. It’s okay to not be okay. You can be overwhelmed, you can be freaked out. None of us will judge.”

“I don’t know how I even begin to adapt.”

“You start small,” he said. “You pick one thing that you haven’t seen before and learn how to use it or do it or what its purpose is. And then, once you’ve got the hang of that one, you pick another one. And sooner or later you’ll be adapting.”

“Will you help me?”

“Absolutely. You’re family.”

Tony watched her and grinned.

“Good smile,” Steve murmured, nibbling at his neck as he placed a sandwich in front of him.

“Look at her,” he replied, motioning to Annie.

The nineteen year old was sitting with one of Tony’s StarkPads, her fingers moving over the screen as she played games and got to grips with touchscreen technology. There was a movie playing on the huge wall-mounted TV, an animated movie Steve didn’t recognise.

“The movie is called Coraline,” Tony said and Steve grinned.

“Thanks. How’s she doing?”

“She seems to be getting the hang of it. I’m thinking of introducing her to the bots next.”

“She didn’t meet them when she hid in the workshop?”

“They were charging. I think she’ll get a kick out of them.”

“I think she needs clothes more than she needs to meet Dum-E.”

Annie was dressed, once again, in a pair of Clint’s sweatpants and one of Tony’s t-shirts.

“I think shopping might overwhelm her again,” Skye added from where she sat to Tony’s left. “Even those of us who grew up in this time get overwhelmed by stores.”

“But if we get things for her she might feel out of control,” Tony put in.

“How about you ask her,” Clint suggested from where he was perched atop one of the drinks cabinet shelves.
“How did you get up there? Didn’t I say no more climbing on my cool stuff?” Tony snapped. “JARVIS, make a note, booby trap the air vents so Merida here can’t climb them.”

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“How did you get up there? Didn’t I say no more climbing on my cool stuff?” Tony snapped. “JARVIS, make a note, booby trap the air vents so Merida here can’t climb them.”

“Noted, Sir. Might I suggest you enlist the help of Ms Potts for the needs of the young miss?”

“No,” Steve said. “We don’t need Pepper. We can deal with this.”

“Deal with what?” Jane questioned as she entered with Thor and Darcy, the god trailing after the two women, laden down with bags.

“Friend Tony! Many thanks on the generous allowance of usage of your card of credit!” Thor exclaimed. “My ladies have had a most enjoyable time with it.”

“Friend Tony! Many thanks on the generous allowance of usage of your card of credit!” Thor exclaimed. “My ladies have had a most enjoyable time with it.”

“Glad you got a use out of it. Is that a whole new wardrobe or two?”

“It’s just a few things,” Jane said.

“Where are you going to put it all?” Annie asked as she joined them. “I thought you and Thor had filled your closets.”

“This is all for you,” Darcy said. “We just thought we’d get you a few things, just to tide you over. ‘Cause, I know I feel more at home when I have a few of my things here. And, you know, I’m a girl and I love to shop and it was on somebody else’s dime. And we only meant to get a few things, but we got kind of carried away.”

Annie looked at the babbling girl. “This is all for me?”

“Yeah. Kind of a welcome thing. And Tony paid for it, so it’s like you paid for it all yourself.”

“Your logic does not resemble our Earth logic,” Tony said. “I like it.” He looked up at Steve. “I want a minion.”

“No, Tony,” he sighed. “No minions. You have bots.”

“But I want one.”

“No.” He looked at Annie. “Annie? You okay?”

“I am,” she said with a small smile. “I’m okay.” She looked up at Clint. “I’m adapting.”

Bruce stared at the sleeping girl and wished he didn’t have to wake her.

“Annie,” he called softly, crossing to the bed and sitting down gently, laying a hand on her arm. “Annie, I need to talk to you.”

She slowly blinked her eyes open, a small moan escaping her as she obeyed his request to wake up.

“Bruce? What is it, what’s wrong?”

“I got some of the results back, some things that you should be the first to know. You deserve to know this before Tony or Steve or anybody.”

“Okay. Is it bad?”
“It depends on your point of view. With the morals you grew up with, you might think so. But in our modern times, it’s seen as something that’s not shameful anymore.” He sighed. “The tests show that you’re pregnant.”

Annie gasped at him, her hands flying to her lower abdomen. “No. You’re wrong, I can’t be.”

“Allie, listen to me. No one will judge you for this, this isn’t something you did, it’s something that was done to you. And if you felt that you couldn’t go through with this, it would be understandable.”

“No, I can’t! I can’t do that, it’s wrong!”

“I didn’t mean to say-”

“This baby has done nothing, and I won’t murder an innocent just because I’m a little confused right now.”

“Okay, okay, that’s okay. It’s your choice. I just wanted you to know you have choices.” He fell silent, pulling out his glasses so he had something to fiddle with. “Annie, there’s something else.”

Her eyes flew to his. “How can there be something to top this?”

“I ran some tests on the baby, to try and determine paternity. Annie…the baby…it’s…it’s Thor’s.”

“Pardon me?”

“The baby’s father is Thor.”

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Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun!!!

I couldn't resist a cliff hanger.

Comments and reviews are amazing, I absolutely love them, so please leave some!
Thor had been in many battles, seen much more than his Midgardian companions, lost both his mother and brother, and yet nothing prepared him for Bruce sitting him down and telling him he was going to become a father with a woman he had barely ever touched and definitely not had sex with.

““This cannot be,” he insisted, locking eyes with Jane. “It is not possible.”

“Not in the way you’re thinking of,” she said, taking his hand. “Thor, listen to me. I know you didn’t have sex with her. I know that. This is something that was done by the people keeping her in that lab.”

“But how?” Steve questioned. “How did they even get a hold of something of Thor’s to make this baby?”

“It could be New Mexico,” Darcy called from where she was sat at a computer watching YouTube videos and shoving popcorn into her mouth.

“Huh?” Tony replied.

“When the big robot thing tried to squish Thor like a bug. There was blood, right? And after I tazed him, they took blood at the hospital. I don’t know that much about weird science, but they could have used that, right?”

“It’s a possibility,” Bruce said, grabbing a tablet and tapping away at it. “Taking just a drop of blood would provide them with a complete genetic profile of Thor, which would enable them to isolate the genetic traits they wanted and engineer a foetus with Annie’s genetic material, implanting it into Annie, a female they already had. Of course, this is all theory; I can’t verify any of this until Skye manages to decrypt more of those files.”

Thor reached out and pulled Jane into his arms, burying his face in the sweet curve of her neck. Her hands stroked through his hair.

“It’s okay, Thor,” she soothed. “It’s all going to be okay. Listen to me, come on, look at me.” He reluctantly pulled back and looked her in the eye. “You have done nothing wrong. No one is angry at you, there is no blame here. You have done nothing to be sorry for, or ashamed of.”

“But there is a child, and I have a responsibility to it,” he said firmly. “I’ll not abandon this child, Jane.”

“And I wouldn’t ask you to.” She kissed him, hard and quick, the blond leaning in to follow her lips as she withdrew. “We have a lot of science to do, trying to work out more of what was done to Annie. She’s in the living room of the penthouse. Go, talk to her, I know you want to.”

He grinned, making him look like an overgrown little boy, and kissed her again before making his way to the elevator. He found Annie curled up on one of the ridiculously comfortable sofas, lost in the land of dreams, and he couldn’t bring himself to wake her. He settled in the largest and squishiest of the armchairs and stared at her.

She was so very young, barely blessed with the curves of womanhood. She was far too pale still, far
too delicate looking. And what he knew of her, what he had seen, she was the sweetest young
woman he had come across. She was fiery and passionate, and yet lost in this new world she had
suddenly found herself in, missing her brother so much she could barely stand it, and he identified
with that more than he cared to admit aloud.

He wasn’t worried about her becoming a mother, he had seen many as young as she do it on Asgard;
children were a blessing given only to those ready for it, whether by birth or adoption. His mother
had taught him that many centuries ago. And yet…he had also known many die in the birthing room,
screaming and begging for someone to save them. It had often scared him as a child. What if her
body, which had endured so very much at the hands of others, could not endure this child?

“I miss you, mother,” he murmured. “Why are you not here, now when I need you the most?”

The screech of a bird outside the window startled Annie to wakefulness and she raised a hand to her
eyes.

“JARVIS, how long was I out?” she croaked.

“Approximately 58 minutes, Miss.”

“Thank you. How long have you been sitting there?”

“Not long,” Thor replied, crossing to curl up on the floor beside her prone form. “I wished to talk to
you, but not to disturb your rest.”

“Thank you. I seem to need a lot of rest these days.” She exhaled. “I guess they told you. About the
baby I mean.”

“I was told.”

She sighed, reaching out to play with his hair. It was something he had noticed her doing to all of his
companions if they sat still long enough for her to reach them.

“What’s it like where you come from? If there’s a child…if you’re not married. What happens then?”

“In such an occurrence, it would be expected of me to take you to be my bride, to save you from
dishonour.”

“Same here, at least back when I’m from it was expected. I don’t know about now.” A silent pause.
“Do you think anyone would think it a bad thing if you and I didn’t get married? Because you’re
with Jane and you love her, and I think you’re a great guy, really, I do. But I don’t want to marry
you, Thor.”

The god felt some of the tension seep out of his body at her declaration. He hadn’t realised how
worried he had been of that particular topic until she had reassured him.

“I do not know what people would think, but I do not wish to take you as my bride. If you wished it,
I would. I would never wish to shame you in such a way. But I do not think of you as such.”

“What do we do then?”

“I am open to some suggestions.”

There was silence for a while, the two of them lost in their own thoughts.

“Can I just say how weird this is?” she asked. “Because it really is. I hadn’t even met you before I
woke up here and now I’m having a baby with you.”

“It is rather strange as events go,” he agreed. “I do agree that it is a rather unusual event.”

“Do I have to figure out what I’m going to do right now? I mean, do I need to figure out names and feedings and all that right now? Can I just be freaked out for a little while?”

“I feel it would be entirely acceptable for you to feel as such. This is hardly the normal way to go about having a child. But I wish you to know…I’ll not abandon you. This child is my child, and you will not have to do this unaided. I am not sure how to make a situation such as this work, it does not happen this way on Asgard. But I wish to play my part.”

She smiled and leaned in, kissing his forehead. “I think you might be one of the sweetest guys I’ve ever met.”

“Not the usual appreciative comment I get, but a good one nonetheless.”

They ended up with Thor telling Annie stories of his childhood, the games he and his brother had played, and Annie offering up her own stories of life during the war, which amused Thor, to hear of a battle he hadn’t fought in.

And then she decided to teach him about matchstick model kits, which is what they were doing when Steve walked in.

“I’m having de ja vu.”

She looked up at him from where she had been focussed on the sail of her windmill, her hands still holding the newly glued matchsticks in place.

“Steven, my friend!” Thor called, his hands full of the tiny wooden sticks. “Come and join us. This is a most enjoyable pastime. Such detail in something so small.”

“Didn’t you used to do these in Howard’s workshop?” he asked as he made his way over, kneeling by the low table they were sitting at and looking more closely at the crafts. Thor seemed to be constructing some sort of ship, if he was guessing correctly.

“Kind of. Howard got me the matches, but there was no cardboard former to glue them to. I did it all freehand. And I didn’t have a fancy matchstick cutter, which these kits have very conveniently come with.”

“Where did all these come from?” Steve asked, looking through the dozens of boxes piled up around her.

There were craft kits that encompassed all manner of activities. There were mosaics, beads, jewellery, knitting, cross stitch, model making, clay and a whole heap of others.

“Clint bought them,” she said, her gaze fixed on the piece of cardboard she was affixing the tiny sticks of wood to. “He thought they might help Phil, but he went a little overboard in the store.”

“And the movie?”

“JARVIS said it was a good one, it had good reviews,” she said, looking up at the screen. “JARVIS? What are we watching?”

“The film currently screening is Disney’s Beauty and the Beast, Miss.”
“Ah. I’m going for my run. You need anything?”

“We’re out of orange juice. And Clint said something about little donuts?”

“On it.” Steve paused, staring at the dancing cutlery on the screen. “Trusting JARVIS a whole lot right now,” he mumbled.

“He looks a little better,” Bruce said as he stirred the curry he was making.

“Yeah,” Clint agreed, sipping at his beer. Bruce settled into the chair next to him and they both watched as Steve and Phil played checkers. “He’s doing better too. Waking up less in the night, managing to finish more at meals, more taking care of himself.”

“That’s great.” Bruce took a sip of his own beer. Contrary to popular belief he could drink, he just didn’t like to very often, and never the truly hard stuff. “How long have you two been together?”

The archers brow furrowed in concentration. “He brought me in about fifteen years ago, been my handler for thirteen, together for ten, married for seven, no itch.” He smiled wistfully. “He saved me.”

“Yeah?”

“My parents died when I was a kid, like really little kid. Me and my brother, Barney, well…foster care sucked. So we did what any kid would do. We ran away to the circus.”

“Serious?”

“No joke. Haven’t you heard my story before?”

“No. Tony mentioned something about a rough start, but nothing specific. So you were in the circus.”

“Yup. I was the Amazing Hawkeye, able to shoot anything. I drew in quite the crowd. I learned to do some acrobatics, some stuff from the contortionist, the lion tamer. Of course this was before animals in circuses became banned in most countries. I was pretty good at it. Even got to ride an elephant. And then I found out my brother and the sword swallower were skimming money, stealing off of everyone in the troupe. They wanted me to take a cut, and I said no. It was my home, the only family I had; I wasn’t going to screw them over.”

“What happened?”

“They beat me to a pulp, left me for dead in an alleyway, told the ringmaster I was the one stealing. They left me there when they moved on two hours later. After that I lived on the streets for a few months, somewhere close to a year. Then I met a bad crowd. With them I turned my archery skills to less…savoury routes. And I was good at it. Before too long I had a reputation in certain circles for my abilities.”

“Which is how you ended up on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s radar?”

“Yes. They sent a team to kill me. I was in Arizona at the time; business was slow so I took the first job that came along. I was told it was a drug lord who wanted me to kill one of his suppliers for giving him bad product. I didn’t know that Fury had set it up so I could be dealt with. Phil made a different call. He walked into my nest, I levelled a gun at his head, and he asked me if I’d like to get
“Never let it be said that Agent doesn’t have balls of steel,” Tony said as he entered, leaning over the stove to stick his finger in the curry and taste. “Oh! So good!”

“Not ready yet, Tony,” Bruce admonished. “And I want to hear the end of this.”

“I thought I told you it.”

“No, you were vague. Anyway…Clint?”

“So we went to this diner and Phil bought me the biggest burger and fries they had. Asked me how long it had been since I had last eaten anything. At that point it was eight days.” Clint chuckled to himself. “It took him less than an hour to get me to go with him. Fury was pissed. I was meant to be in a body bag and there I was, in his office, this smartass kid with a too big mouth and even bigger authority issues. But Phil was in my corner.”

“You ask him to marry you, or the other way around?” Tony asked through a mouth full of naan bread.

“That’s meant to be for dinner,” Bruce pointed out.

“But I’m hungry now.”

“And people wonder why our grocery bill is so high,” Clint laughed. “I asked him. Down on one knee and all that. He probably shouldn’t have said yes.”

“How come?”

“I’d only brought Natasha in two days before. Man, he was pissed at me. I’ve never been one for rules anyways, but bringing in a very deadly target just pushed some buttons.”

“It all worked out,” Tony said, pulling six more packs of naan bread out of the cupboard. “Speaking of Natasha, has anyone else noticed she seems to be gone a lot lately? Say…since Phil moved in.”

“She doesn’t know what to say,” Clint answered the unspoken question. “She cares about me and Phil, cares about what happened, but S.H.I.E.L.D. was the first place she had where she didn’t have to be an agent of the Red Room. She doesn’t know how to process it all, so she’s just carrying on with what she knows.”

“She should be here, not with them.”

“Don’t start, Tony,” Clint argued. “She’s doing what she needs to. Just let it go. We got you a minion, what more do you want?”

“Skye is not a minion, she’s more a groupie. I’m pretty sure my minions would only have a crush on me, not Bruce.”

“What?” the doctor asked, tearing his gaze from where Phil and Steve had begun another game. “Excuse me?”

“Oh. Didn’t you know that?” Tony said, his head popping up from where it had been buried in the fridge. “Yeah, Skye has a thing for you, Big Guy.”

“How big of a thing?” Clint asked.
“Medium. Probably fizzle out on its own if you do nothing about it,” he said, pulling out the sour cream. “Of course, if you were so inclined, she’d definitely sleep with you.”

“Thank you, Tony, but I don’t need any help getting a date.”

“Oh yeah, Phil said something about your lady,” Clint said, reaching out and slapping Tony’s hand away from the poppadum’s without looking. “A doctor, right.”

“Betty, and she’s not my lady anymore,” Bruce said, moving to check on his rice. “She got married four months ago.”

“Sorry, man.”

“No, it’s okay. She and I…it was never going to work. This life…let’s just say that she couldn’t live this life, not the way we do. Setting aside the Other Guy, this just wouldn’t work for her.”

“You could have tried it,” Tony said. “Maybe it would have worked.”

“After what her father did…no. It will always be there, between us. She wasn’t part of that, I don’t mean that she did anything. But he is still her father, and what happened…I don’t think we can move past it.”

“So you could date Skye,” Tony said. “She’s sexy, smells great, great mind. What do you think?”

“I think Bruce needs no help getting a date or being set up,” Steve said as he entered, an arm around Phil. He guided the smaller man towards Clint, where he curled up in his arms.

“I’m trying to help!”

“Excuse me!” Bruce called as he set the huge pot of rice on the table. “Someone take that to the dining table, someone take the pot of curry, we need crockery and cutlery, and Tony…I don’t need help finding company.”

“I don’t believe that,” the engineer said, grabbing knives and forks and spoons from the drawer. “How long has it been since you got laid?”

“Tony…” Steve warned as he hefted the pot of rice in one oven mitt covered hand and the pot of curry in the other.

“Three weeks, her name was Alison, and she was very nice.”

There was complete silence as they all took it in.

“But…the Hulk…how can you…” Steve started before he mentally reminded himself that it was none of his business. “Excuse me, Dr Banner, it’s not my place to ask such things.”

Bruce grinned as he followed Steve out to the dining table with a jug of water and the stack of naan breads.

“It’s okay, you can ask. Hulk has no interest in sex, it just doesn’t appeal to him. He sort of…goes to sleep? If that makes sense. I used to think it would trigger him, but it doesn’t.”

“It says in your file that you were unable to engage in sexual liaisons because of the Hulk,” Phil said.

“My file doesn’t know everything.”
Tony wasn’t a morning person, and all of the inhabitants of the Tower were well aware of that. He worked late into the night and got up when someone decided to feed him, be it JARVIS or Steve.

So when JARVIS woke him at a little past 7am with a request for him to join Steve on the balcony, he was not impressed. But, because he knew Steve wouldn’t have him woken for a stupid reason (aside from the one time he had gotten static on the TV and freaked out, but that wasn’t really his fault), he made his way out, grabbing a coffee on the way.

“What the hell is that furry thing and what is it doing in my tower?”

“It’s a dog, I found it on my run,” Steve said from where he was curled around the filthy pit-bull snuggled into him. “Poor thing looks like it hasn’t eaten in weeks, and I can’t get this muzzle off.”

Tony’s heart dropped. He made his way over and scratched behind one of the dogs ears, coaxing it to turn its head so he could take a look.

“JARVIS, can you get Bruce up here? With some medical equipment?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Tony? You really think it needs a doctor?”

“Steve, this isn’t a muzzle. Its duct tape. Someone decided to torture this poor dog.”

Bruce took that moment to arrive and the dog commenced a fresh round of shivering and whimpering.

“Hey, beautiful,” Bruce crooned, letting it sniff at his hand. “Hello there. Aren’t you a good dog? What are you? Are you a guy or a gal?” He ducked his head. “Ah. A pretty girl. Yeah, aren’t you pretty? Someone was mean, huh?”

Slowly, with a lot of softly spoken words and gentle touches, the dog was calm enough to push her head into his hand. He chuckled and scratched behind her ears. He looked up at the other two men without removing his hands.

“I think I can take this off, but she won’t like it. She’s been a bait dog, so she’s not going to trust anything for a while. It’s amazing she even came here.”

“Steve found her on his run.”

“She was in an alley, all whimpering and sad. I couldn’t leave her there,” Steve said defensively, running a hand over her ribs.

“Not blaming, just stating fact. Tony, can you go get me the olive oil?”

“Bruce?” Steve asked as Tony disappeared to find the bottle. “What’s a bait dog?”

“Dog baiting is setting game dogs against a chained or confined animal for sport. The dogs bite and tear to subdue the opposing animal by incapacitating or killing it. Baiting is a blood sport used for entertainment and gambling. It is illegal in most countries with varying levels of enforcement. By the looks of her, I’d say she’s been hungry for a while, and dehydrated, but she’s pretty lucky. By all reasoning, she should be dead.”

“Do you think Tony will let me keep her?”
“I think she can be your responsibility, and whatever she chews up you are paying for,” Tony said as he returned with the bottle of oil and two bowls.

“Hold her as still as possible,” Bruce said. “This won’t hurt her, but she still won’t like it. She can’t bite me until the tape comes off, but she can run, and I don’t think we want oil everywhere.”

Steve held the dog securely and Tony tilted her head down so her nose pointed at the floor while still scratching behind her ears. She whimpered and tried to wriggle free as Bruce began to drip the oil over her nose and muzzle, slowly pulling at the edge of the tape so it could slip underneath. Eventually it slipped off and she used the moment to let out a yelp of pain. She hadn’t stayed still long enough and some of her fur had gone with it.

“I know, that wasn’t nice, but it’s all done now,” Bruce said, stroking her head and getting a tentative lick for his troubles, to which Tony set down one of the bowls; it was filled with water.

The dog began to lap at it, slower than they thought she would, but still she drank. And once the bowl was empty, Tony presented her with the second one, which was filled with meat. Sausages, bacon, some steak Bruce knew for a fact was Clint’s, some chicken left over from dinner the night before. Again, she was almost delicate with it, and with the second bowl of water.

Bruce gently persuaded her to let him take a look into her mouth, and it was here that he found her problem. Four of her teeth were broken.

“She’s going to need these pulled, and I don’t think I’m the right guy for it.”

“JARVIS, find a vet that takes emergencies,” Tony ordered, and less than a minute later his phone beeped with the relevant information. He peered at the screen and smiled. “Hey, look at that, this one makes house calls. Four out of five starts in reviews.”

“Sounds good. We should probably bathe her,” Bruce said. Tony went off to make the call, and the other two men got to cleaning her up. They used some of Steve’s shampoo and a bucket of water and soon the dog was rolling onto her back so they could scrub at her belly.

“You’re just a sap, aren’t you?” Tony asked as her tongue began to loll out of her mouth. “Soft as they come.” He heaved a big sigh. “Alright, fine. If, and I mean IF, it isn’t micro chipped, then you can keep it. But I mean it, Steve, I’m not taking care of that thing. You feed it, walk it, clean up after it, and replace ANYTHING it chews.”

“She, Tony. Not it. She.”

“Whatever.”

The dog, who had not been micro chipped, was black with white spots, or white with black spots, or cow patterned, depending on who you asked. The vet dosed her up with antibiotics, pulled the broken teeth, and cleaned up the bite-marks covering her skin. He also wrapped her front right ankle, which had apparently been yanked by whomever had duct taped her mouth shut. He said she’d gotten off lightly, considering what she’d been used for, and that all she really needed was some food, water and rest. He also left them with a medicated shampoo to deal with the mange.

She curled up with Steve at night, laying across his feet as he cuddled into Tony, and spent most of her day laying either on the couch in Tony’s lab, or on the sofa in the penthouse. She never bit anything, probably because she was still too sore to really play, and fell asleep as soon as someone cuddled her close and stroked her.
Surprisingly, it was always Tony she went to for food, and Steve she cuddled to first, and Bruce she licked. It amused them no end that she loved to lay her head on Bruce’s lap and delicately eat whatever morsels he picked off his plate for her.

It was about a week after Steve found her that it was truly pointed out to them all that there was a purpose for her.

She was cuddled up with Phil, her tail wagging lazily as he stroked her patchy fur, his eyes not glued to the floor for once. He was actually having a conversation with Darcy and Skye about the latest episode of Diners, Drive In’s and Dives, talking about what their favourite diner food was. Annie was asleep on the other sofa, while the rest of the Avengers watched on amusedly over the last of brunch.

“He didn’t even need prompting to start talking to them,” Clint said, pride clear in his voice.

“That’s good. That means he’s doing better, right?” Tony asked.

“Yeah. He showered this morning without having to be told. That’s, like…huge.”

“She needs a name,” Skye announced, reaching over to stroke a silky ear.

“How about Arrow?” Clint suggested, and was swiftly shot down.

Steve suggested Liberty or Freedom, Tony suggested Gadget, Bruce liked Helix. Thor wanted to call her Wagger, as her tail wouldn’t stop, Jane liked Darwin, Darcy put in a vote for Lucky, and Skye said Hard-drive.

“Phil? What do you think we should call her?” Clint asked as they decided to compromise and put all of the names into a bowl to pick one at random.

“We could call her Mercy,” he suggested, and Clint wrote it down with a smile.

The dog suddenly stood up and padded over to Annie, taking her blanket in its teeth and tugging gently, going up to Steve and whining, tugging at his shirt.

“This is new,” Tony said. “She done this before?”

“No,” Steve replied as he squatted down. “Come on, sweetheart, what’s all this? What’s wrong, huh?”

“Thor, grab Annie,” Bruce said suddenly.

The god did as he was told and they all watched as her skin was covered in crackles of blue electricity, a pained moan squeezing out between her clenched teeth.

The dog circled a few times before she sat down and watched it happen.

“Help.”

“Annie?” Bruce rounded the couch so he could look down at her without touching her. “Annie, can you hear us? Are you aware of what’s happening?”

“Hurts,” she gritted out, grabbing at Thor who held her closer. “Make it stop!”

“We can’t, Annie, we don’t know how. Just breathe, it will pass.”
“She’s never been conscious before,” Steve said. “She’s always been out cold for these things. Why is she awake now?”

“Either they’re getting weaker, or she’s stronger,” Bruce said. The doctor waited until the light stopped and then made his way over, checking her for anything he might have missed. “This one was shorter than the rest.”

“And that means…what?”

“Not a damn clue.”

“So the dog has a purpose now,” Clint said. “She’s earning her keep.”

“She’s not trained as a seizure dog,” Phil pointed out.

“They’re not seizures,” Jane said. “And the dog clearly recognised that Annie needed help.”

“The dog stays,” Tony said decisively. He had been ambivalent about the animal up until this point. “She’ll keep Annie safe, so she stays.”

“A most wondrous animal,” Thor declared, scratching her behind the ears.

The dog simply grinned, as if it had been her plan all along.

Clint kissed the scar on Phil’s back, swept a hand over his spine, and left the bed, pulling on some clothes before he made his way out of their room and up to the penthouse.

The dog, who still didn’t have a name due to no one being able to agree even with the names drawn at random from a bowl, greeted him at the elevator and trotted on his heels as he made his way to the kitchen. She sat and watched him as he started pulling out various breakfast things.

“I know what you want,” he said to her, breaking off a cube of cheese and throwing it to her. “You just want feeding. You don’t care about anything else.”

He went on, preparing bread for French toast and eggs for scrambling, and pancake batter, throwing random bits of raw bacon and sausage to the dog when she whined particularly hard at him.

“JARVIS, sound the breakfast warning.”

“Task completed, Master Barton. All but Agent Romanoff and Miss Stark have responded in a positive.”

“Why haven’t they?”

“Agent Romanoff failed to return to the tower last night, she spent the night at headquarters, and Miss Stark is currently sleeping on the sofa.”

Clint dusted off his hands and made his way out to the main area, crouching down by the sofa. He slowly called her name, brushing her hair back off her face from where it had fallen out of its braid.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“A little after nine. I’m making breakfast, so I asked JARVIS to sound the warning and he told me you were out here. Annie…why are you out here? Is there something wrong with your room? Are
you not comfortable in there? Because I’m sure Tony would change it if you asked,” he pointed out gently, helping her to untangle her legs from the blanket.

“The room is fine, it’s not the room,” she said quietly, stroking the dog. “I just needed to see the sky.”

He offered her a hand and led her to the kitchen, where she perched on a stool and watched him juice oranges.

“It was cold,” she said as he began to put the first of the pancakes into a warmer.

“What was?”

“Where I was. It was cold.”

Clint managed not to react as she told him. It was close to some of the things Phil had mentioned. It made him want to rush down to their floor and do everything for his lover. But Phil needed to have that space, that chance at independence.

“So you’re having nightmares? Of where you were before Phil found you?”

“Not nightmares, nightmares are clearer than that. Just…parts.”

“What kind of parts? Was it just being cold?”

“No. There were noises, sort of metal noises, and sometimes there’s a voice, or maybe a few voices. I can hear them but I can’t make out what they’re saying. And pain. Lots of pain.”

Clint felt his heart clench at the sheer amount of fear and pain in her voice.

“I used to have nightmares, some of them were pretty fucked up.” He clapped a hand over his mouth and looked at her. “Sorry.”

“I was pretty much an army brat, so there’s not a lot that could offend me. Or Steve, for that matter.”

“Right. So, when they got at their worst, I was told by a shrink to keep a journal. When I couldn’t sleep, when they’d wake me, I’d write down anything that came to mind. The theory is that you get it out, get it down on paper, and subconsciously you start to process all that’s happened.”

“Did it work?”

He considered it for a moment. “Yeah, I guess it did. It worked even better when I decided to burn the diary. It was like watching all the bad stuff go up in smoke.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, and then she helped him arrange things on the table for breakfast. By the time the last of the waffles came out of the waffle maker, the table was full of people.

“You cannot prefer Crouching Tiger to The Matrix, I won’t let you,” Tony declared, brandishing a crisp strip of bacon at Clint.

“Tony, play nice,” Steve admonished as he poured himself more orange juice.

“I’ve been trying that for years,” Pepper called as she emerged from the elevator, Rhodey and Happy on her heals and a large box in her hands.
“I thought you were coming tomorrow,” Tony said as he chucked the box into his empty seat and swept her up in a hug, followed by one for Rhodey and another for Happy.

“We were supposed to, but we got an earlier flight,” Pepper said as Steve stood and pulled out a chair for her like a true gentleman.

“I got some leave, so I thought I’d swing by,” Rhodey said, accepting some coffee. He jumped about a foot in the air and ducked down to look under the table before fixing Tony with an incredulous look. “There’s a dog sniffing at my shoes.”

“She’s mine,” Steve said. “But, she doesn’t have a name yet because we can’t all agree. Care to wade in with a suggestion?”

“Prada,” Pepper said.

“Ferrari,” Happy added.

“Turbo,” Rhodey put in after tentatively reaching down to stroke one silky ear.

“Man, come on!” Clint complained. “We couldn’t even agree with the nine we had, and now there’s three more. Why not just call her Spot and be done with.” He cast an eye to the ceiling. “Hey, Jarv? Care to wade in?”

“Might I suggest the name Soft, on behalf of Dummy, Puppy for Butterfingers, Sweet for U, and I myself would care to add in Cuddles.”

“No way, non-bipeds cannot name the dog, not a chance.”

“They live here too, they should get a say,” Steve argued. “So everyone has put in a suggestion except Annie.”

“Care to put in a suggestion?” Thor asked and she shook her head.

“I don’t mind. Any name will do. She’s not my dog to name.”

It was then that everyone noticed Pepper silently glaring daggers at Tony.


“I knew it! I knew this would happen!” she snapped. “Oh, no, Pep, don’t worry, you said. I can put those fucking things on in my sleep, you said! And now look!”

“What are you talking about?” Steve asked, sharing a confused look with his lover.

“You can’t tell me you’re happy about this!” she shrieked.

“About what?”

“About Tony’s illegitimate child sitting at the breakfast table!”

“Pepper!” Tony growled. “One, she is not my daughter, and two, even if she was, what Steve is happy about or not is not your concern.”

“It is when it impacts on the company. And if she’s not your daughter, then…then it’s even worse!”

“How! How is it worse?”
“Sleeping with a girl that young! Is she even legal? And you swore to me and everyone else you were done with that, that you would never do that to Steve!”

“She’s a Stark,” Steve said. “She’s not Tony’s bed partner, he’s not cheating on me with her, and she’s not his daughter. She’s Annabelle Stark, she’s Tony’s aunt.”

All the wind went from her sails and she stared at him wordlessly for a moment, before she looked to Tony.

“It’s true, Pep,” the dark haired man said. “She’s dad’s sister.”

Pepper spluttered at him and Tony calmly continued on with his breakfast, feeling oddly satisfied. He’d never managed to silence Pepper completely before.

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This time it was Tony that found her, hiding in the gym behind a huge pyramid of punch bags.

“You know, sooner or later I will figure out a way to make a punch bag that Steve can’t break,” he said as he sank to the floor, leaning against the wall. “So, here we are. Why are we here?”

“Seemed as good a place as any.”

“Ah.” He looked around, trying to figure out what to say.

“She hates me.”

“Who?”

“Your friend, the redhead.” She snorted. “Her and Natasha. Must be a redhead thing, neither of them like me.”

“It’s not that. Natasha is avoiding us all because she has her own issues to work through, so we’re going to leave her to it. Lesson to be learned, never piss off a woman who can crush your windpipe with her thighs. And Pepper…her anger isn’t about you, it’s not directed at you, it’s for me.”

“I don’t understand.”

He tapped the arc reactor and then grinned as she placed a hand over it. “When I got this…well, I was in Afghanistan, selling Stark Industries latest jewel in the crown. It was the Jericho missile, and I was incredibly proud of it. And then my convoy got blown up, me with it. A man named Yinsen removed as much shrapnel from my body as he could, and then he put an electromagnet powered by a car battery in my chest to keep the rest out of my heart. I spent three months in a cave with him, a prisoner of a group called the Ten Rings. In that time I built the first one of these,” he said, running a hand over hers. “And found a way to escape. On my way out, Yinsen was killed, and he told me not to waste my life.”

“Did you?”

“I got back to America and the first thing I did after I stepped off the plane, well, second after American cheeseburgers, was call a press conference. I then proceeded to announce to the entire world that Stark Industries would no longer produce any weapons ever again. Our stock dropped like a ton of bricks.” He sighed. “When the palladium core began to poison me, I went off the rails and the stock dropped again. The stock is stable right now for two reasons. One, Pepper is CEO, and
she does that job really well. She knows exactly how to handle everything needed to make sure the company thrives. And two, I’m dating Captain America, so my escapades are not on the nightly news making the stock holders nervous. Every time I do something stupid, the company is put at risk, and Pepper has put a hell of a lot of work into it.”

“So that’s why she’s mad? Because she thought you were putting things at risk?”

“Yeah. Can’t say I blame her.”

“You and she dated, didn’t you?”

“For a while. It didn’t work. She couldn’t handle the Iron Man stuff, it kept coming between us. She had a real problem with the reactor, with understanding that it’s part of me now, that I can’t get rid of it.”

“There must be a way.”

“There is, oh, there is a way. It’s called Extremis, and it can heal pretty much anything. But I won’t use it. I won’t have the reactor removed, I won’t give up being Iron Man. For years I was selfish, the spoilt rich boy everyone accused me of being. And then I saw kids no older than you being killed right in front of me, with the very weapons I designed to protect them. I can’t give it up, I won’t.” He sighed, resting his head against the wall behind him. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m still being selfish.”

“It’s not selfish to want to keep the thing that helps you keep people safe. That sounds kind of selfless, if you want my opinion on it. So, if Stark Industries doesn’t make weapons, what does it make?”

“Oh, all kinds of things. At the moment we’re the leading name in clean energy. The full sized reactors are being installed soon, once it’s proven they can be used that way, that they will hold up to it. We also have divisions working on medical research, others working on our Intelli-Crops, which are helping to fight world hunger. They’ll be more successful at that when we get the engineering perfected. Mostly, our main revenue comes from our technology divisions. Phones, computers, internet security, games consoles.”

“And Pepper manages to keep up with all of that? I’m impressed.”

“She’s very impressive,” he agreed. “So, are we going to talk about why you’re playing hide and seek?”

“I just…needed somewhere quiet, you know. Somewhere to think.”

“I get it. Steve needs that sometimes. Bruce needs it a lot. I’ve never needed it, but I can see how someone would. Perhaps I could build a room for it, make it all calm and thinking friendly.”

“Couldn’t hurt.”

“Want to tell me what you needed a space to think about?”

She went silent, letting him take her hand in his before he tugged on her to pull her into his hold. They sat there, Tony stroking her hair, until she finally spoke.

“I was thinking about Thor.”

“Pretty good subject. He tells good stories, and if they are to be believed I’m glad he’s on our side.”
“That’s my point. I’m having a baby with a guy from another planet. And I know he looks as human as the rest of us but how do we know? New York is still trashed because aliens attacked it, and they look far from human. JARVIS showed me the battle.”

“Hey, hey, hey, take a breath. Thor’s systems work just the way ours do, only better. What attacked the city was completely different, from a completely different place. This baby will come out completely normal. Well. Maybe not completely. Think of Steve. Yeah, that’s a good way to go. Steve is the one to base this on.”

It didn’t take him long to realise she was crying, for the first time since they’d found her. Her tears started slowly at first, growing in strength the longer they went on. He murmured to her, soothing nonsense he’d heard Clint use on Phil, and all the things he thought she needed to hear.

“I know, I know. It’s all strange and you’re feeling all vulnerable and alone. But it’s okay. You’re not alone. You’re family; you’re safe here with me. I promise. I’ll keep you safe. We all will.”

“I can’t go back,” she moaned. “No more labs. Please.”

“No, sweetheart. No more labs, I promise. Except for Bruce’s lab, but that’s more like a mad scientist’s lair, don’t you think? No, no more labs for you, no more bad guys, I swear.”

Steve peered at the flat black boxy pebble in his hands, turning it so he could see it from all angles, and then looked up at Tony.

“What is this thing?”

“A Kindle.”

“It doesn’t look like something I should be burning, Tony.”

“A Kindle, not kindling. It’s an e-reader. For reading books.” At the confused look on his face, Tony took pity on him. “It’s a digital way of reading books. Simpler, because you can put hundreds of books on a single device, which saves paper and space.”

“Oh. Well…thank you,” he said, leaning in to kiss him.

Tony melted into it, letting Steve manhandle him onto his back. Steve began to slowly make his way down the finely muscled torso under him, licking and kissing and nipping as he went, making Tony wriggle.

“You know, this isn’t actually a gift,” Tony said, moaning as Steve stroked at the inside of his thigh.

“It’s not?”

“N-oh,” he said, hitching in the middle as Steve fastened his teeth around a nipple. “It’s a work thing.”

That got Steve’s attention. “A work thing?”

“Yes. I want you to use this Kindle, and let me know what you like, what you don’t, all of that. I want to design one for Stark Industries, and this one is the most popular on the market at the moment, so this would be the one to beat.”

“And you want me to help you blow the competition out of the water.”
“You and everyone else in the Tower. I got one for each of you. And some for the bots to play with. They can give me variables on the operating systems and the durability and all that. I want the human input from you.”

“I get it. Will you help me set it up?”

“Of course I will,” Tony agreed, tangling his fingers in blond locks, tugging gently to get Steve to crawl up and kiss him. “I’ll always help you.”

Steve leaned in, taking his lips, licking into his mouth and making Tony’s toes curl. Tony never ever wanted to know how Steve had learned to be so good at kissing, nor did he want to know how Steve came to know exactly how to find his prostate on the very first try. All he wanted was for Steve’s slick fingers to keep moving within him, for those lips to stay on his.

To be Steve’s forever.

Steve bit down on Tony’s shoulder as he eased himself into the tight passage, feeling those clever fingers stroking through his hair and pressing against his spine as he panted and moaned.

“My boy,” Tony whispered to him.

His hips moved all of their own accord, his lips finding the sweet curve of Tony’s throat. The two of them moved together, their rhythm well practiced, their limbs fitting around each other just as they needed to find the most pleasure from the act. Their lips met in kisses, whispered words of love and tenderness slipped between them like secrets.

It was Steve that came first, holding Tony tight against him as he surrendered to it. He let it take hold of him, feeling Tony snaking a hand between them to finish himself, the sticky heat binding them together.

“My Capsicle,” Tony crooned, pushing Steve’s sweaty hair off his face, pulling him in for a kiss. “My sweet, sweet boy.”

“Will I still be your boy when I point out that I’m 95?”

“No, you’re not. Okay, technically you are, but you’re not. You’re young and misplaced in time and very very sexy. You’re my young, sexy, misplaced in time Capsicle.”

Steve could do nothing with that except kiss his ridiculous man.

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It was killing Clint not to help; he was, at this point, literally sitting on his hands.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to chop something? I can stir something!” he asked from his perch atop the tallest cupboard in the penthouse kitchen.

Phil glanced up at him and smiled. “I’m okay. I can do this.”

Clint climbed down and pulled him into a kiss. “I know you can, baby. I’m not doubting your competence. I just worry. You know me.”

“I do. And I appreciate the thought. And I promise, if I start getting overwhelmed, you can take over.”

Clint couldn’t help it, he leaned in and took Phil’s mouth in a bruising kiss, snaking his tongue inside
and sliding his hands down to squeeze his backside. Phil moaned and thrust involuntarily against him, his fingers tangling in his hair.

“Do you even know how incredibly proud of you I am?” Clint whispered in one finely shaped ear, nipping at the lobe. Phil nodded and Clint devoted himself to sucking a nice livid hickey on his throat, right over his pulse.

“Hey!” Tony squawked as he exited the lift with Thor. “If me and Steve can’t do things like that in the shared spaces, neither can you two!”

“I was just showing Phil how loved he is,” he replied with a grin, climbing back up to his perch.

“Yeah? That’s what a bedroom is for.” Tony entered the kitchen and swiped one of Phil’s slices of red pepper. “What’s for dinner?”

“Beef Stroganoff,” Phil said, after a glance at Clint to reassure himself. “It’s always been one of Clint’s favourites.”

“First thing he ever cooked for me.”

“I have never tried such a dish,” Thor said, peering at the ingredients, poking at the frying meat with a spatula. “But it looks to be hearty fare!”

“You’ll love it, big guy,” Tony said. “Kind of like a stew, but better. What’s the accompaniment?”

“Matchstick potatoes. I can do something else if you don’t want those.”

“Nah, potatoes it is,” Tony reassured the unsure looking man. “It’ll be great.”

“I wish to try these potatoes of matchstick,” Thor declared. “They sound most interesting.”

“Matchstick potatoes, buddy,” Clint corrected. “Kind of like fries.”

“Most excellent! This sounds most appetising. I look forward to partaking of this meal. Will there be bread? My experience tells me that a hearty stew is much enhanced by thickened bread.”

“French sticks in the process,” Phil said, motioning to the dough that was proving in a bowl on the countertop.

“Wonderful! I anticipate a most delicious repast. But, for now, I must talk with Annie. Darcy said she was here with you.”

“She’s outside,” Clint said. “Man, she is a daredevil. Even I wouldn’t sit there.”

They looked to the balcony to find Annie curled up on the Iron Man launch platform. The wind blowing her hair wildly as she stared out at the city below her. Thor took a deep breath before making his way out to join her.

“I am Asgardian, I know that if I should fall from here, I could call Mjolnir and catch myself.”

“I won’t fall,” she said as he sat down, curling close to her. “Look, sitting right in the middle.”

“But if you should have an episode?”

“Then you’re here to catch me, aren’t you? Is there something on your mind, Thor?”
“There is. Tony sought me out, told me of your concern. I wish to talk about this matter.

“It’s nothing, really. Just me being silly.”

“There is nothing silly in your worries, they are valid concerns to have.” He sighed, staring out at the city he had come to love as much as his own. “I have thought very hard on where to begin, for there is much I wish you to know. I have come to the belief that the place to start would be at the birth of an Asgardian child. Now, I have never been allowed into the birthing chamber, such a thing is forbidden to all but the father of a babe. But my mother attended many births, and I remember being very small and seeing the first emergence of a child from the chamber. She was very small, carried in her father’s arms. I was allowed to hold her, with assistance from my father, and she was small and warm and delicate in my arms. I believe it to be the same with human babes.

“Jane assures me that my observations are correct, as she held a babe during her time on my world. She tells me that there is no difference in size or form between the young of our two worlds. Thus I believe that while your concerns are valid and honest to your mind, there is no truth in them. This babe will be as small and delicate as any other of your world, born as a tiny speck in the universe.”

“Your brother wasn’t any different looking than the rest of us,” she murmured.

“My brother was not born of Asgard. He was born of Jotunheim, a Frost Giant, albeit a very small one. He came to my family by the will of my father, and the love of my mother took him into it.”

“But there are people on your world that can do magic, aren’t there?”

“There are. My mother was one such, and my father wields some magic. Not as much as a sorceress, but enough to hold his position as king. My people call it magic, and yours call it science, and Jane tells me it is simply science that your people cannot yet understand. Is this what you fear? That the child will be…unnatural in some way?”

“A little,” she admitted, before she leaned back against his wide chest. “I’ve never even held a baby. I don’t know what to do with one.”

“You will learn,” he reassured. “All mothers feel as such, do they not? I feel they must. I know your feelings, I swear it. I think of a child looking at me the way I look at my father and my innards do strange movements. But, Steven tells me I am capable, and he has not yet steered me wrong.”

“Steve really has that much trust in us being able to actually raise a child?”

“Indeed. He has tremendous faith in our abilities.”

“I want to ask…where you’re from, you’re a prince, right?”

“Indeed. I am crown prince. It is expected of me to take the throne when my father passes. Of course, I told him I would not take on the responsibility and he and I have not spoken since, so I do not know now. But that is how it was supposed to be. Annie, may I ask something of you?”

“What?”

“I wish for the child to take your name, the name of Stark.”

“Ok-aaaay. I can do that, but why would you want it? Don’t you want it to be an Odinson? Wait, that’s not right. A…Thorson?”

“Thorson is right, but I do not wish it. I have come to understand that the name of Stark is highly
regarded on this world. Undeniably, I have seen Tony treated much as I am on Asgard. When the world knows of you, they will unquestionably treat you as a princess. This child will be here, living on this world, with you, its mother. It should carry your name, carry that security with it all of its days.”

“I see. I think I can do that.” She shivered and he curled her closer.

“Do you wish to return inside?”

“A few more minutes? Please?”

“As you wish, but no more. I would not wish for you to take a chill. It is most pleasing to me to see you regain your strength.”

“It’s better like this, being able to do things for myself. Thor? This baby? It’ll be a prince or princess, won’t it? On your world I mean.”

“I believe it will, being the issue of a prince of Asgard.”

“Well, won’t your father take an interest in it?”

All at once, Thor understood where she was going with her questions, which worry was playing on her mind as they sat hundreds of feet above the city.

“I will not let him take the child to Asgard,” he said firmly. “A child must be with its mother where it is possible, and I would never seek to separate the two. My son or daughter, whichever this may be, will remain with its mother. I would have it no other way. If needed, I will tear the universe down to have it so.”

“I don’t think war will be necessary,” she said with a smile. “But it helps to hear you say it. Knowing that you won’t let Hydra take it.”

“Never!” he declared vehemently. “I will destroy this threat before it lays a finger on this child!”

It was enough to make her giggle, and press a kiss to his cheek, at which point he noticed how very cold her nose was and insisted she come inside. He took her hand firmly in his, fearful of her taking a tumble off the walkway, and led her to the kitchen, where she laughed at Tony.

“It might be a little soon for this,” she said and Steve shook his head at her.

“I tried to stop him, I swear, but he went nuts,” the soldier said.

Tony was unwrapping box after box, pulling out bottles and pacifiers, bibs and tiny socks.

“Come on, look at this stuff!” he said with a huge smile, pulling out a set of baby vests, all impossibly small, each with a different Avenger’s uniform on the front. “Look! A little Iron Man! A tiny Cap! A mini Hulk!”

“This is awesome!” Clint crowed over the purple onesie. “There’s a quiver on this!”

“Baby Hawkeye,” Phil said. “I like it.”

“It is a tiny me!” Thor crowed as Tony handed him the Thor onesie he’d bought. It was patterned in exactly the same way as his battle armour, with a soft red cape attached at the shoulders, and it came with a tiny, baby-sized plush Mjolnir. “It is a noise maker!” he cried as it rattled when he shook it.
“Tony, you shouldn’t have,” she insisted.

“But I did, so enjoy it,” he said. He chuckled at Phil’s dropped jaw, his wide smile. “Yup, you’re not seeing things, that is a box of the most geek-tastic baby toys.”

A whole flock of plush Daleks, a plush TARDIS, a Mario mushroom shaped nightlight, building blocks with squares of the periodic table on them. A mobile of leaves that lit up, a plush AT-AT. There was a soft cube that played a different musical instrument for each side that was pushed.

It was Clint that dug through and found the teddy bears dressed as each Avenger.

“How come there’s no Black Widow stuff?” he asked as he lined up the five bears.

“For some reason, it’s just not out there. Hawkeye stuff was hard to find too.”

“Fury shuts it down,” Phil said, smoothing a hand over a baby blanket with Steve’s shield as the motif. “Natasha is still active, so all of her merchandise is shut down before production even starts. Once in a blue moon something slips through on Etsy, but it’s rare. Hawkeye stuff is becoming more common. Now you’re not active at S.H.I.E.L.D. they’ve stopped trying to keep it contained. Okay, Tony, fess up. You bought the Lego for you.”

“No! It’s all for the baby, absolutely!” he argued, even as he was eagerly pulling open the box for the Lego Hulk.

“What’s for the baby?” Bruce asked as he walked in.

“All this swag,” Clint replied.

Bruce let out a low whistle and then blushed as Clint waggled a Hulk plushie at him.

“Seriously, this baby is about the size of a peanut right now,” he said, examining a selection of yarn and knitting needles. “And I don’t think it’ll be able to knit when it’s born.”

“Those are for Annie,” Steve said. “When we’re from, all baby clothes were knitted or sewn by the mother and her family. It seems that it’s not done that way now, but I thought it would be nice.” He looked at Annie. “I thought you might still want to.”

“I do,” she said, picking up a ball of incredibly soft yarn. “I want to do that.”

“Good,” Tony said. “I’ll hook you up with Ravelry. It’s an online community, loads of patterns, lots of them free. You’ll love it. Or I can order you books. Or I think there are books you can get on your Kindle with patterns.”

“Remember to take a breath in there, Sparky,” Clint said with a grin.

“I did! Didn’t I?” He looked up at Steve.

The blond declined to answer, instead kissing Tony on the forehead as he leaned in to grab a soft little shield plushie.

They continued to look through it all, letting out comments of happiness and amazement, until the almost unbearably delicious smell of the stroganoff began to fill the room. They placed all the stuff back into the boxes, and Steve convinced Tony to move his new toys off the dining table.

As they began to lay the table, the room was rocked by the loudest boom they had ever heard, light flooding the space as a rainbow hit the balcony.
“Are we expecting visitors?” Jane asked as she emerged from the lift with Darcy and Skye.

“Nay, I have no knowledge of this.”

The light faded to reveal a man, slim with blonde hair.

“Fandral, my friend!” Thor cried, rushing out to embrace him. “What a surprise! Come! Come dine with us, come meet my comrades here on Midgard!”

“I cannot,” Fandral said, “though I wish I could. I wish I had come to you on a social mission, but, alas, Thor I cannot break bread here, as much as I wish it. Thor, you must come home, we need your help.”

“What is it, what has happened?”

“Your father has gone mad. His actions defy all reason, his advisors tell me he no longer listens to him, the nine realms are falling into chaos through his actions. Hogan tells Sif that his people no longer recognise the man who sits on Asgard’s throne.”

Thor held out a hand, calling Mjolnir, and then he moved to Jane and the others once he had it.

“I must go,” he said, ducking into the kiss Jane gave him. “I swear I will return, but I cannot say when. My wish is my absence will not be overly long.” He moved towards Steve, grasping his shoulder. “My friend, you must keep them safe for me. Jane and Darcy, Annie and the baby. They must be safe. You and Tony and the others. You must promise me they will be safe under your watch.”

“I swear. Don’t worry, I’ll keep them all safe. Me and JARVIS. Go, take care of things. We’ll be fine until you come back, I promise.”

They all took their time reassuring the god that they would be safe until he returned, and then he kissed Jane once more before he moved with Fandral to the spot where he had touched down.

“Hiemdall, we are ready,” Fandral called.

A flash of light, a rush of noise, and they were gone.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all liked it, I'm so sorry it took so long, it just didn't want to be written.

Thank you all so much for reading. If you liked it, click that kudos button, and please, feel free to leave me a comment letting me know what you thought. What you liked, what you didn't, what you're dying to see next, and what you hope never to see again.

Also, just to let you know, I now have a page on Facebook where you can keep up to date on what I'm working on at the moment and what my thoughts are. Search me out on Facebook under the name AvengingAngel, all one word.

I would also love to know what you would name the Avenger's dog! Let me know in the comments below which of the names you would want for her.
Phil kissed Clint and eased from the bed, murmuring reassurances as Clint reached for him. The archer soon wiggled and settled himself back to sleep, and Phil made his way from the room, entering the elevator.

Natasha looked terrified to see him, but he had a feeling that only he knew as much. Her game face was quite possibly the best one he’d ever encountered.

“I just want to talk, Tasha,” he said and she relaxed fractionally, moving over to give him room to sit down on the sofa.

“I wanted to talk about why you’ve been avoiding coming home.”

“I haven’t been avoiding it,” she said. “I’ve been on missions.”

“Okay, I’ll buy that. But the others are worried you’re avoiding us. Look, I know you’re torn between your loyalty to S.H.I.E.L.D. and your relationships with me and Clint. I’m here to tell you that I’m not going to make you choose. I can’t work for them anymore, I just can’t. And that’s my choice. What Clint does is his. And what you do is up to you. If you choose to stay with the agency or not, that is up to you, and I won’t be mad at you for any choice.”

“You were my first handler though,” she said.

“I was, and will always be your first handler. And Clint will always be the guy who brought you in. Those things will never change. If you remain an Agent…well, that really has no impact on our relationship.”

“Do you truly believe that? That me being an Agent is a choice?”

“I do. I always have. Natasha, you are a very intelligent woman, and you have many marketable skills, no matter how you came across them. You could do anything, be anything. To be an agent is your choice, I will always stand by that.”

“And Clint feels like this?”

“I think so. He’s quite accepting of your actions,” he said, curling his legs up and wrapping an arm around his knees. “Tony’s not, but I doubt that surprises you.”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Me and Clint will always be in your corner. And we both know that you’re always in ours. It’s why I would have no one else on my team to retrieve Clint from Loki. I knew you wouldn’t give up on him and just put a bullet in him. I knew you would do whatever you had to, to save him.” He reached out and brushed a red curl away from her eye. “Whoever you choose to work for is lucky to have you. I know I am.”

“You feel lucky?”

“Every single day, right from the first moment, I feel blessed to have you.”
Tony looked up from the kiwi he was slicing as Darcy shoved a lens in his face.

“What the hell are you doing with that Stark Hand Cam?” he asked as she focussed on his hands.

“Vlogging,” she said. “I thought Avengers fans would like it.”

“Do they?” he asked, genuinely curious. Outside of official functions, he rarely had anything to do with the fans. Darcy, however, was deep in the blogs and fan sites and all the other randomness that happened on the internet.

“Are you kidding? They love it. I put up the first one last night, and when I got up this morning I had almost a billion hits and over five million comments.”

“Holy crap,” Clint said. “Just from that little video you made yesterday?”

“Yup. Who knew there were so many Avengers fans, huh? I got comments from all over the place, New Zealand, Australia, places in Africa, places I can’t even pronounce. It’s wild.”

“What do you talk about in your vlog?” Tony asked.

“Yesterday was a basic intro to who I am and where I live and how awesome it is. It featured cameos of Clint, Phil and the dog, with a brief glimpse of Steve as he came out of the gym. That was most people’s favourite part. He was sweaty and the t-shirt was tight.”

“Nice to know I still have impeccable taste.”

“A lot of the comments, which JARVIS amazingly compiled for me, not to mention answering ALL of them for me, asked to meet you and have a look at where we spend most of our time, general things like that.”

Tony smiled and put down the knife, looking straight at the camera. “Hello, you lovely cyber people. Thank you for ogling my boyfriend, it confirms that I’m not the only one who thinks he’s irresistible.”

“I think they would all whole heartedly say that you’re welcome,” Clint called.

“So what are you making?” Darcy prompted.

“I’m chopping up some fruit for a snack, because I can’t cook and Steve is off somewhere so he isn’t here to cook something for me.”

“Kind of a crappy boyfriend there, buddy,” Clint said and Tony grinned.

“Maybe, but he loves me anyways, so it all works out.”

The man walked down the sterile hallway, his boot heels clicking as he walked, his eyes flickering down to the report he held in his hands.

He walked into the lab and threw the report at the lead researcher.

“What the hell is this? It says that the results are going backwards,” he snarled.
“Sir, we’re doing everything possible to make this subject a success, I swear it,” the skinny man stammered. “But…”

“But?”

“This is very experimental science, sir. Truth be told, this is the first subject to make it to this stage. We honestly don’t know what will cause setbacks, so we have to compensate as they happen, which adjusts the results.”

“Which means what?”

“It means the subject may not be eligible for our purposes after all.”

“And what do we do about that?”

“I don’t know, sir,” he admitted, cringing in expected pain. “With the South American site compromised, we lost a lot of data, and without the girl and the genetic advancements she represents, I’m not sure if there is anything that can be done.”

“So without the girl and the infant she carries, all our advancements here are pretty much over, is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yes, sir, that’s the crux of it. We need her back; the foetus can be remade, but she can’t. We need her back. Without her…the subject is useless.”

“Can you keep it alive?” The scientist nodded. “For how long?”

“Six months, eight maybe. No more than nine at the absolute maximum, and even then, that’s a stretch. Six or less would be best.”

He smiled and looked at the subject behind the glass, the figure surrounded by scientists.

“Well then,” he said cheerfully. “I guess I’ll have to get her back for you.”

Thor stood in the huge throne room of Asgard with his mouth agape. It had been rebuilt since the attack, the grand pillars restored, the golden throne reformed, the court nobles once more looked on in astonished glee at the gossip they were witness to.

“Father, I do not understand,” Thor said slowly, purposefully trying to make himself seem less threatening. “I heard no word of your marriage.”

Odin smiled down at his son. “My apologies, my son,” he said. “But the King of Asgard cannot remain without a queen, and since I am told you refuse the throne to be with your mortal, I had no choice but to take another.”

“Since you are told? Father, I stood where I stand now and told you myself. You said I could go.”

“I said no such thing!” Odin roared, and several courtiers cringed back. “That vile tricking bastard told you that, not I!”

“Loki?” Thor breathed. “Loki perished. I saw him fall, I held him through his last breaths.”

“Loki returned, having tricked you once again, and took my place as I fell into the Sleep. He fooled us all! Once again, we were taken in by his lies and deceptions! Because you removed him from the
dungeons, like a child denied a toy,” he spat.

“But Asgard would have fallen had I done nothing! I risked three lives instead of all of Asgard, does that not count for anything?” Thor questioned.

“You were given an order by your king, and you thought you knew better, you and that thing you cavort with. You are a disgrace to this house, to the position you hold, and I find you unworthy of this court. Leave my presence, or I shall deal to you!”

Thor bit his tongue, knowing that it was unwise to continue, that he should retreat and assess the options available to him.

“My king, I shall take my leave then, as my presence offends you such.” He bowed and strode to the door. He paused only once. “Might I ask only one last query?”

Odin nodded.

“Where is Loki now?”

“He has been dealt with.”

Thor could think of nothing to say that would be louder than the fresh pain in his chest.

It was Sif that found him, hiding behind one of the huge rose bushes in his mother’s gardens.

“I’m sorry, Thor,” she said as she sat down with him. “We honestly didn’t know what to do for the best.”

“Do not apologise, I am glad you sent Fandral for me. I just wish I understood. I fear this is some amalgamation of grief and pride in my father. Losing my mother, and then Loki tricking him.”

“Not mentioning how your decision showed you to have more care of the people of the nine realms than him,” she said and then sighed. “Shall we talk of something else while your mind works?”

“We shall. How are you? And your mother, is she well?”

“Yes, we are all very well. Hogan has welcomed a daughter this past moon turn, Volstagg won another feasting contest. How fares your lady?”

“She fares well,” he said with a smile. He looked at her and smiled. “Can I trust you with a secret, Sif?”

“As always, my Shield Brother. Such confidences between us have always been sacred.”

He grinned and proceeded to tell her of Annie, of the baby on the way, of his worries and fears.

“You will be a wonderful father to this most unorthodox child,” she declared with absolute certainty.

“You have more faith in my ability than I do.”

“I do. I see you as you truly are, you see as you presume yourself to be. You will be a good father. I know this as I know you are a good man. One is equal to the other. The way a man treats those around him shows his character, and how he treats those lesser shows his goodness. You are a good man, of this I am certain.”
He hugged her. “Thank you my friend.”

“Do you wish for a son or daughter?”

“In truth, I had not thought on it. Either would be welcomed. A son would be what most men would wish for, would it not?”

“I suppose. And a daughter?”

“Daughters are also a precious thing. Either way, I think you have proven without question that there is no limit to what a daughter can do. A warriors road would be a fine path for any daughter I have.”

“But you worry for the mother.”

“Yes, I do. She is very young, barely out of childhood by Midgardian terms, and she has suffered so much at the hands of others. I worry that she is not strong enough to bear it, this child that was the choice of others.”

“Do your Midgardian companions have such worries?”

“They have not expressed them to me.”

“Then I would not worry. If there was something like this for you to concern over, I feel sure that your Doctor Banner would speak to you of it. You said he was a healer, surely he would know. If he doesn’t seem worried, then I would not be either.”

“A most logical course.”

“It is pleasing to hear of the Son of Coul.”

“Ah, Phil. He gains strength every day, his smile gaining much brightness.”

“I would have told you.”

“I know,” he said, squeezing her shoulder. “He explained to me. At the time, it was needed for him to stay silent on his survival. There is no ill feeling.” He sighed, looking out at the plants. “How old is she, this one he has replaced my mother with?”

“Barely a hundred years. Rumour has it that she was intended to be Loki’s bride.”

“And the people of Asgard just accept a child as their queen?”

“No, most don’t. There is much talk and unrest. Odin will no longer meet with any rulers from any realm, he ignores his councillors, shuns the courtiers, shuts all out but his personal guard. He has become paranoid and vengeful.”

“What did he do to Loki?” he whispered.

“No one knows. Loki sat upon the throne, all of us thought him to be Odin, until Odin walked in and all Hel broke loose. He had Loki bound in chains and sewed his mouth shut with a dull needle. He did it himself, by his own hands with guards holding Loki still, in full view of all the court.”

“Full view?”

“In the middle of the throne room. Loki screamed for him to stop, that he had only meant to help, to give you what you wanted and allow the Odinsleep, but Odin would not listen. He silenced him and
bound him, binding his magics, and then he began to beat him, bloodying the floor until Loki could not stand, could barely raise his head,” she said, knowing Thor wanted the whole truth. “After that, the guards dragged him off somewhere, I know not where. No one has heard anything of Loki since, and no one would dare ask the king. I fear him dead, Thor.”

Thor let his tears fall.

“As do I, Sif. As do I.”

Annie pulled up her shirt and wriggled to get comfortable as Bruce fiddled with his machine.

“Admit it, you just want to play with your new toy,” she teased.

“Absolutely,” he said, giving her a smile.

Bruce wondered how no one had noticed how much he liked Annie. She was smart and beautiful and a strange kind of delicate that made her seem both about to break and indestructible. He kept fixating on the way the right side of her mouth sort of quirked up at the corner when she was amused, and the way the very tip of her tongue poked out when she was concentrating really hard, and how she could devour an entire family pizza all alone and still have room for more.

“Now bear with me, it’s been a while since I last did one of these,” he said as he grabbed the bottle of conductive gel.

“I’ve never done one, so you’re one up on me,” she said and he felt himself blush.

He spread the gel on her exposed baby bump, apologising as she flinched from the cold, and then he applied the transducer. He went slowly, looking for all the things that he knew were supposed to be there.

“There,” he said after a few minutes searching. “There’s the uterus.” He adjusted the wand. “That grey mass there is the placenta, which means that wavy looking thing is the umbilical cord.”

“Does it look okay?”

“It looks very healthy. See that pulsing that it’s doing?” She nodded. “That’s blood flow. It’s good.” They were silent as he once again tried to locate something else. “Ah! Found it. There, you see? That round thing, and if I move this way, that little point.”

He heard her gasp and tore his eyes from the screen, delighting in her amazement.

“That’s the head, isn’t it?” she murmured.

“That’s right. That little point is the nose.” Another minute adjustment. “There, facial profile.”

He gave her a minute to take it all in as he saved the images to JARVIS’ server and took some measurements, and then he moved the transducer, tracing down the spine, pointing it out to her. He angled it and got a view of between the legs, verifying the sex, but he wouldn’t say anything. He could be wrong, it had been known to happen.

“Annie?”

“Hmm?”
“You wanna know what it is?”

“You can tell that? If it’s a boy or girl?”

“I can. I might be wrong of course, this isn’t an exact image. But I’m pretty sure.”

She thought about it for a moment and then shook her head. “No. I don’t want to know, not yet.”

“Okay. I’ll keep it to myself. The curiosity will drive Tony nuts, anyways. It’ll be good for him. I just need to take some more measurements and pictures and then we’re done, okay?”

“Sure.”

He took his time, using it as an excuse to keep touching her bump, wishing it was his.

But who was he trying to kid? It could never be his. He was most likely sterile anyways. And who would have a child with someone who turned into the Hulk? He couldn’t trust the green being with the safety of a child, no matter how much he wanted to be a father. And he couldn’t do that to Annie. This new world she had found herself in suddenly was so strange to her anyway. How could he add more strangeness to it?

“I’m done,” he said eventually, schooling his face and voice into easy friendship and not inner turmoil.

“Everything okay?” she asked as she wiped the gel off her skin.

“Everything’s fine, all right on course,” he assured, holding out a ream of pictures for her.

She hopped off the bed and headed to the elevator. He watched her go, thinking how much it was for the best.

She deserved better than him. His own wants didn’t matter. She deserved better.

Tony grinned at his favourite shirt.

“Did we find a dry cleaners with a decent seamstress?”

“No, we found an Annie with too much time on her hands,” Steve said around a mouthful of toothpaste. He spat it into the sink before he continued. “Clint says she did that whole pile we were going to send out when she couldn’t sleep the other night.”

“She can never leave,” Tony said firmly. “The sewing, the brownies, the meatloaf. She can never leave, I decree it.”

“She’s not a prisoner, Tony.”

“I mean that we’re never letting anyone take her. She’s ours now, they can’t have her back.”

“Did you just call finders keepers on your aunt?” he asked with a laugh.

“Yes, yes I did.”

He leaned in for a kiss, murmuring “I love you and all your weirdness,” before they made their way out to breakfast, where they froze where they stood.
Natasha was making pancakes.

“Pancakes!” Tony crowed.

They all decided to follow Tony’s lead and just not mention that Natasha had suddenly decided to be one of them again. After breakfast, most of the team headed off to the gym to spar or the labs to do science type things.

Tony found himself in his workshop with Annie.

“What’s his name?” she asked, petting one of the bots, who was chirping happily at the attention.

“Dum-E,” he said. “That’s Dum-E, then that one over there is Butterfingers, and that one is You. You like them?”

“I really do. What are they for?”

“For? Like a purpose, a point of them being around?” She nodded. “They don’t have a point, at least Dummy doesn’t. He’s the oldest, older even than JARVIS. Then You and Butterfingers were built at the same time, so they’re kind of twins. Their programing is a little more sophisticated than Dum-E’s. They were kind of meant to be helper bots, like an extra hand.”

“I like them. You know, Howard never built anything without a purpose.”

“Never?”

“Not that I ever knew. Everything had to do something, it had to have a reason or it wasn’t worth it.” She giggled as Dum-E tugged gently at some of her hair. “When did you build him?”

“I was about 19. I built my first circuit board when I was 4, first engine at 6, and then small things until Dum-E. He was my first successful AI. Then I made JARVIS while I was building my Malibu mansion, and then spread him out. And then You and Butterfingers.”

“They sure didn’t have technology like this when I was building things.”

“Totally new tech, designed and created by me.”

“What are you working on now?”

“Stark Industries new line of Intelli-Toys. Toys that think and play and hug. Steve thinks it’s going to be a huge seller.”

“You mean like teddy bears that can hug you and colour with you?”

“Exactly.” He led her over to one of the benches, Dum-E following her with a series of happy squeaks and chirps. “This is the teddy bear design, I’m about to start on the first production, the prototype if you will.”

It was an outline of a bear with the skeleton clearly visible and the path of the major wiring marked out in red, with various notes and instructions surrounding it.

“What’s the skeleton made of?”

“Titanium,” he said, picking up a piece and handing it to her. “Strong, light, relatively easy to work with for manufacturing purposes.” He watched as she turned it this way and that, weighing it in her hand, her other hand absentmindedly petting Dum-E. “You could make something if you wanted.
You know, just if you felt like it.”

He couldn’t help but grin at her excited smile.

In the next few weeks, they discovered that Annie preferred to use an actual pad of paper and good old school pencils and pens to make her designs and notes, but if she held them up for Dum-E, he could take a picture of her work for JARVIS to keep on file.

She picked up robotics and the details of artificial intelligence programing within a matter of hours, becoming as fluent in both as Tony was. It was after this revelation that Bruce, JARVIS and Skye put the puzzle pieces together.

“It’s a natural dormant gene, most commonly expressed through super intelligence,” Bruce said. “The key was in the speed with which she understood the computer language, how fast she got the hang of computers and robotics. The technology wasn’t even possible in her time, it’s brand spanking new in this time. It’s a Stark trait, one that three recorded Starks have displayed through superior intelligence.”

“They took her for this gene?” Natasha asked.

“Yes. They couldn’t get to Howard, he was never alone, but they could manage to get to Annie. Plus, because of her youth, it made it more likely that her genetic material would accept the manipulation.”

“So they turned it on, right?” asked Steve and Bruce nodded. “Well, what does it do? Why did they want it active so badly?”

“It’s a biological version of the serum,” Skye said and the room went silent.

“My serum? Dr Erskine’s serum?”

“Yes, that serum,” Bruce confirmed, pulling up the findings and files on the closest pad for Tony to look over. “It’s now active in her, which is how she’s surviving these episodes. She’s literally healing herself.”

“They turned her into a super-soldier,” Tony said. “And I’m betting they’re going to be wanting her back.”

“Pretty sure of it,” Skye said. “They want to use her genetic code in a project they call RSB-39. According to the files, the project will fail within the next six months if her genetic code isn’t applied.”

“They can’t,” Steve demanded. “They can’t have her back, they can’t. They can’t take her away again, I won’t let them have her!”

Tony pulled him into a kiss, slipping him the tongue as he toyed with the blond locks.

“No one is having her, no one is taking her,” he promised. “As long as she’s here in the Tower, they can’t get to her. This whole place is made of vibranium reinforced concrete with unbreakable windows. And if they do break I want my money back. Plus JARVIS. Do you really bet on anyone getting past J?”

“No, I guess not,” he mumbled. “It’s just…Tony, she’s the only one I have, the only link left. Bucky
and Howard and Peggy and all of them, everyone I knew is gone. Annie is it, she’s all I’ve got left. I can’t lose her.”

“I know, Capsicle. I know. And I swear, I won’t let anyone take her.”

There was blood beneath her head, and the faint sound of JARVIS calling her name, and gentle hands on her back and wrist.

“Mmm,” Annie moaned and there was a breath of relief from behind her.

“Thank the Nine.”

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, miss, I have been trying to rouse you unsuccessfully for the past nine minutes,” the AI said, relief in his voice. “Are you well?”

“My head hurts,” she said, rolling slightly to look up at the sky.

She had been on the balcony knitting, walking inside to have some lunch, when the episode had hit her. It had taken her by surprise and she remembered slipping on the tile, the dog barking madly, and then a very bright light as she blacked out.

“Shall I help you to rise?”

She looked up at the blond man kneeling beside her. “You’re Thor’s friend, the one who came to get him.”

“Fandral,” he said. “Hiemdall, our gatekeeper of sorts, was asked by Thor to keep an eye on you and the rest of his companions. He alerted me when you seemed to be in trouble. He said you were alone. Where are your companions?”

“They’re out. Tony and Bruce and Pepper are in Malibu, some meetings. Clint and Phil have gone on a date. The girls have gone shopping, Natasha’s at work, and Steve’s out on a run.”

“They left you unprotected?”

“The Tower is locked down, no one can get in without clearance. Or a Bifrost, apparently.”

She slowly let him ease her up, helping her inside to sit on the sofa while he fetched a damp cloth and a glass of water for her. He gently wiped away the blood and was shocked that there was only a thin pink line where there had once been a substantial wound, if the amount of blood was anything to go by.

“It’s me, I’m not like most humans,” she said.

“As Thor has said. I believe it. To bear the child of Thor…you must have great strength.”

“You could put it that way. How is Thor? Is he okay?”

“He is troubled, his dealings with his father do not go well, relations between the two are strained. King Odin remarried without telling Thor.”

“But…Thor is his son, his family.”
“And so you see the troubles. Thor also worries for Loki. Loki has not been seen for many weeks now.”

“I thought Loki died.”

“As did we. He came back and impersonated Odin. The Allfather returned and punished Loki most severely, with a brutality he has never shown before. None have seen Loki since.” He smiled at the dog as she laid her head on his thigh. “A kind animal.”

“She takes care of me. She can usually tell when I’m about to have an episode and get me some help. This one caught us both by surprise.”

“How is your head?”

“Sore, but better.”

“And the…the child?”

“Fine. Bruce explained it to me that the baby’s floating in a sack of fluid right now, so it’s like a cushion all around it, protecting it.”

“And does your Bruce know if it is a son or daughter?”

“He does, but I don’t,” she said with a small smile. Tony and Clint had been subtly trying to get Bruce to tell them since the scan two weeks ago. “I think I’d like it to be a surprise. Doesn’t really matter to me what it is, as long as everything is where it’s supposed to be.”

“I say, that’s a wise way of looking at it! I shall remember that one for the birth of my first one.”

“Oh. Are you married?”

“No! Oh no, not yet. But I shall be someday, soon too if my mother gets her way. And I should like to remember it for when I do have children.”

“I see.”

“Annie!”

She turned to see Steve running from the elevator.

“JARVIS called me, said you collapsed,” he said as he kneeled before her, checking her over. “You okay? What hurts? Should I call Bruce? What are you doing here?”

Fandral chuckled at the last question, which had been directed at him. “Hiemdall saw her fall, and that she was unattended. He was concerned.”

“Steve, I’m fine, really,” she said. “Just an episode, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? JARVIS, call Bruce.”

“They’re in meetings all day!” Annie complained, but her protests were cut off as Tony came on the line.

“Steve? What’s wrong?”

“Where’s Bruce?”
“In the can, give the man a moment to take a piss.”

“Annie collapsed.”

“What? What do you mean she collapsed?”

“I’m fine!” she cried. “Tony, I’m fine, really. I had an episode, tripped over my own feet and hit my head when I landed. There’s not even a mark there anymore, and Fandral was there when I came round. I’m fine.”

“Annie,” said Bruce, a little winded but calm. “Can you tell me how you were laying when you woke up?”

“Kind of half on my side, half on my back,” she replied. “Fandral was there.”

“Fandral, are you still there?”

“I am indeed, wise Bruce.”

Bruce chuckled. “I don’t know about the wise part. Was she laying on her abdomen at all?”

“Nay, she was half to her back, with her right shoulder facing the sky.”

“And her head, she said there wasn’t a mark anymore.”

“There was some blood, but as I cleansed the area thinking to try and heal it until I could seek Midgardian help, I found nought but a pale pink line.”

“Annie, you dizzy at all? Any light headedness? Nausea beyond the morning sickness?”

“No, none of those.”

She smiled as his face appeared on the screen JARVIS projected. “We were on another floor, left the fancy phone in my room, kept the emergency one,” he explained. He held up three fingers and she dutifully told him there were indeed three. “I would say she’s fine. No pain, no dizziness, no more blood. Calling was the right thing to do, but I promise she’s okay, Steve.”

“See?” Annie said with a smile before looking at his hands. “Where’s my cake?”

“I-I-I’ll go get you one,” he said.

“Cake?” Tony asked with a smile. “She gets cake? I never get cake! I get fruit and vegetables! Where’s my cake?”

“If you’re good during this trip and don’t piss off more than two stock holders and researchers, I’ll get you cake.”

“I think you might be pushing it,” Bruce chuckled. “He’s already gotten to a researcher and we’re here for another three days.”

“Four,” Steve amended. “Four pissed off people, maximum. Any more than that and no cake.”

They hashed out the details a little more finely before Tony and Bruce had to leave to attend a meeting with the Malibu branch of the Stark Industries Medical Research Division.

“I should take my leave, before I am missed,” Fandral said, getting to his feet.
“You really have to go so soon?” Annie asked.

“Alas, I must return to Asgard. I shall give Thor your greetings.”

“Wait!” she cried, rushing over to the dining table. “Give these to Thor.”

“I shall, my lady. I…what are they?”

“A letter from Jane and ultrasound pictures. Bruce has a machine to let him see the baby, these are the pictures. Look, this round thing is the head, with this little point being the nose. And this here, the little string of pearls, that’s the spine,” she pointed out.

“Oh! I see it! These bended parts, these are the legs, yes? And those the arms?”

“Yup. Will you give it to Thor for me? I was kind of hoping he’d be back by now, but he’s still needed. I don’t want him to miss out.”

“I shall give it to him immediately upon my return to Asgard.” He bowed down to kiss the back of her hand. “My lady,” he said, and then nodded to Steve. “Captain.”

He returned to the balcony, called to the sky, and in a flash of light he was gone.

Steve rarely bottomed for Tony.

It wasn’t that he questioned his masculinity or he disliked it or any of the things the gossip columnists claimed when they speculated on his bedroom activities.

It was simply that Tony usually pushed him to the bed and straddled him, sinking down before he had a chance to even contemplate doing it any other way.

Steve moaned and gripped the pillow as Tony thrust into him, pushing back to get more, delighting in the hands that gripped his hips.

“Tony,” he breathed, sinking down onto his elbows, his hips still high in the engineers capable hands. Soft lips trailed down his spine, leaving a line of tingling skin behind, as he began to move, the hard flesh gliding within him, making him gasp at the pleasure of it.

Tony thrust into him hard, setting a punishing pace, Steve wanting it harder and faster even though he knew Tony couldn’t go any harder or faster than he was. A low, needy, constant whine emanated from him and he didn’t even want to stop it.

Tony moaned and pressed his head against Steve’s shoulder, losing himself in the feel of the tight hot flesh around his cock, the unravelling man beneath him.

“Tony, I’m gonna…”

“I know, baby. Me too. Almost there.”

As usual, Steve was the first one to tip over the edge, Tony’s capable fingers wrapped around him, crying out his lovers name as he convulsed. Tony’s grip tightened as he thrust without rhythm, his balls drawing up so tightly it bordered on pain, his semen exploding deep inside Steve.

Once they had caught their breath a little, Tony chuckled. “Well, that didn’t suck.”
“Parts of it maybe,” Steve said with a completely straight face, and then the two of them cracked up.

“How anyone would ever thing of you as wholesome obviously signifies that they’ve never met you,” Tony said.

“Hey! I’ll have you know I am very wholesome. All American gentleman. It’s just with you I have a potty mouth.”

“And I love it,” he purred, rolling over to kiss him again.

They lay there, cooling sweat drying on their bodies, their lips meeting for kisses.

“I actually wanted to talk to you about something,” Steve said as he pillowed himself on Tony’s chest. “Before you got all commanding with me again.”

“I thought you liked it when I was commanding.”

“I do. But I want to talk now.”

“Good talk or bad talk?”

“Good. No relationship talk, I promise.”

“Okay, talk away.”

“Natasha and me were sparring and we got to talking. There’s some stuff going on with the agency that they could use my help with.”

“She offered you some missions?”

“ Basically, yeah. I was wondering what you would think of that.”

“Steve, it’s your choice to work with S.H.I.E.L.D. or not; just because I don’t want to, doesn’t mean I’m going to make a big deal of you working with them.”

“They need me in Washington.”

Tony froze. “How long would you be there?”

“A few weeks. I don’t have to go, I can stay if you want me to.”

“What kind of missions? Anything…life threatening?”

“No, mostly clean up stuff, from what Natasha says. Some bad guys trying to extort money, some kidnappings, some weapons manufacturers selling big guns to bad people, drug dealers selling to people they shouldn’t.”

“Good guy missions then,” Tony joked, pressing a kiss to the tousled blond hair under his chin.

“And, once I finish those, they’re going to find me missions closer to home.”

“A few weeks?” Tony asked after almost a half hour of silence.

“And then I come home. I need to do something, I can’t keep sitting around, doing nothing.”

“You don’t do nothing, you’re an Avenger.”
"But that doesn’t keep me busy every day, Tony. I need to be out there helping people. That’s why I joined the army in the first place, I wanted to do my part. I had no right to do any less than anyone else. And I don’t have that right now."

"You know how I feel about that opinion, Steve," Tony said sternly. "You lost your best friend and got experimented on and got frozen to do your part. You can do whatever you want, because you want to do it, not because you think you have to. So if you want to do this because it’s something you want to do, then so be it. I’ll deal with you being gone. But if you go because you think you owe someone something, then I’m going to tie you up in my workshop and play Metallica at you until you see sense."

"Woah, okay, no need to go that far," he laughed. He pressed a kiss to the scars surrounding the reactor embedded in Tony’s chest. "I want to do this. I want to help people."

"Then consider me your cheerleader. But I want you to make me a promise. Promise me that you’ll come back to me."

Steve levered himself up and crashed their mouths together, climbing astride him and taking Tony’s once again hard cock inside his slick passage again. Tony groaned, his hips thrusting all on their own.

"I’ll always come back to you," Steve whispered.

Annie bent over the toy and slid the connector to the right point, looking up at the holographic screen JARVIS put up for her.

"Send the current through," she said, and watched as the map of circuitry on the screen lit up before her. "Good. Pulse the pathways." The hub of electronics lit up just the way it was supposed to. "Good. Is the secondary memory core in place?"

"It is indeed, miss."

"Has the base programing taken root?"

"It has, base programing is secure within the black box, miss. All systems are at optimal positioning for the commencement of intelligence."

She took a deep breath, pulling out the connector and closing up the back of the toy, sealing it securely so it couldn’t access its own insides and make unauthorised changes.

"Okay, JARVIS, activate."

There was momentary silence, and then there was the twitch of a tiny hand.

"What is that dog doing?" Clint asked as he caught sight of the animal.

The dog was darting around the living room, always returning to the same spot on the couch, tail wagging madly.

"Not a clue, crazy animal is crazy," Tony said through a mouth full of ham sandwich.

As he said it, the dog came trotting in and stood by one of the chairs for a moment. Then there was a
tiny being peeking over the table top at him.

“Holy shit, it moves! What the fuck is it?!” Clint cried, backing up and grabbing a knife.

“Hello,” it said, in a rather sweet child-like voice.

“Er. Hello,” Tony said. “What are you and how did you get in my kitchen?”

“I’m an Intelli-Toy, and I was brought by the canine.”

“Oh-kaaaay,” Clint said. “Where did you come from?”

“The other room, the one with the softness.”

“And before that?” Tony prompted.

“Sir, if I may,” said JARVIS. “What you are communicating with is Miss Annie’s first attempt at an Artificial Intelligence. She has given it free reign through the Tower to check for potential problems in the frame and the programing. She is also attempting to gauge the effectiveness of the learning protocol in place within the toy.”

“Oh!” Clint said. “Annie made you?”

“Yes. Who made you?” the toy asked.

“Uhhhh.”

“We’re people,” Tony said. “We’re not made, we’re born. Are you connected to JARVIS?”

“A minor connection, to enable JARVIS to monitor me, to ensure I do not fail.”

“Oh, there you are,” Annie said as she walked in. “I didn’t expect you to go so far on such little legs.”

“It was riding the dog,” Clint said. “You let this thing loose?”

“Yes. She’s not dangerous, she’s a toy, Clint.” She picked it up and put it on the table properly, steadying it until it was on its own two feet.

It was a tiny girl, approximately 14 inches tall, with a white bob hairstyle, a blue and white lace dress and black shoes.

“It’s China Girl!” Tony exclaimed. Clint looked at him as if he was insane. “From the movie. The Oz movie, the little girl made of china.”

“Oh, yeah, right. It’s a talking toy. It’s kind of creepy.”

“She’s not creepy,” Bruce defended as he entered, moving to the fridge to get some lunch. “It’s actually pretty brilliant from a scientific perspective. All that artificial intelligence in such a tiny body. Very skilful.”

“My point exactly,” Tony said. “I like her.”

“Thank you,” said the toy.

“You’re welcome;” he said with a smile, holding out a hand and waiting until she sat down on it
before lifting her up to take a closer look. “Incredible,” he breathed, turning her this way and that. “No jerky movements, not glitching. Very impressive for a first AI, Annie.”

“You really like her?” she asked shyly, a blush surging across her cheeks.

“I really do,” he said, chuckling as the toy poked his nose with a tiny finger. “She needs a name. I mean we can just call her China Girl or we can call her something else.”

“How about just China?” Clint suggested.

“What do you think, Pint-size?”

“I like this name. Will it be my designation?”

“Yes,” Annie said. “Your name is China.”

“I am China.”

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“Sir, Captain Rogers on the line.”

“Put him through.”

“Please tell me you’re getting an early start and not that you didn’t make it to bed last night,” Steve said.

Tony grinned.

“Not what you think, Cap,” he assured. “It was a bad night all round. Clint’s been up with Phil, the nightmares decided they weren’t getting enough attention. I was up with Annie, she had some cramping, which led to Bruce being up. She’s fine, baby’s fine. Bruce says it’s not uncommon because she was so little to begin with, so getting some pain as her body changes is a concern, pain in pregnancy is always a concern, but this time it was nothing. And hey, did you know that little sucker is kicking now?”

“Kicking? Really?”

“Yeah. Hell of a kick too, really strong. Question. When did I become the responsible guy people turn to for help and reassurance?”

“Around about the time Annie showed up. I think that’s when it really became obvious, but you’ve been everyone’s big brother for a long while now,” Steve said.

“On that note, Annie and me kind of decided that she should be my sister. The whole aunt thing is too weird. So, what are you up to? How’s Washington?”

“Washington is…I don’t know, Tony,” he groaned. “It’s not how I thought it would be.”

“How so?”

“It’s not like the Army was. There’s compartmentalisation and separate mission specs and…Tony, I’m not even sure what I’m doing here.”

“Have you saved anybody?”
“I saved a group of people last night. They were kidnapping victims.”

“So, you’re saving people. That’s what you wanted.”

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t know. I think I’m going to give it a little longer, see if I’m just off kilter or if it really is so screwed up. Did you eat?”

“Not yet. Jane volunteered, I’m waiting for the bell. You eat?”

“I had my first breakfast already, I’m about to head out for my run, and then I’m thinking a diner for second breakfast.”

“I recommend Ted’s Bulletin on 14th, they open at 7am, The Walk of Shame Breakfast Burrito. Can’t be beaten.”

“Thanks for the tip.” Tony heard Steve sigh and wished he could hold him. “I miss you,” he murmured.

“I miss you too,” Tony said. “Want me to put on the suit and come to you for breakfast? I’m sure I could make it by the time you finish your run.” What he really wanted was to tell Steve to come home, but he kept it to himself.

“No, it’s okay. I’m just feeling a little off, that’s all. I gotta go or I’m never gonna run enough; remember, I don’t have you here to help me burn off some energy. Late start as it is.”

“Have fun. Well, not that much fun, obviously, but running type fun.”

“I will. I love you, Tony.”

“You too, Capsicle.”

And then the line went dead, and JARVIS was sounding the breakfast warning.

Thor lay on his bed, holding the pictures of his child up to the light of his bedside candle.

The letter from Jane now resided in the leather strap of Mjolnir, folded thin and beaten flat, so he could carry her love with him when he needed it the most. But this picture of this impossible, unasked for child was something he couldn’t stop looking at.

His child. He couldn’t imagine being a father. It was different for Jane. His beloved was anticipating playing games with his child and teaching them science things. Jane had called it all of the fun with none of the responsibility. He almost wished he could be anticipating the same. All of the fun of a child without having to worry about being its father.

“It shall be a beautiful child,” Fandral said from where he lay at Thor’s side.

“You sound so certain, my friend.”

“I am. I have seen the mother. A rare beauty. Such delicacy mixed with your strong blood. How could the child be anything less?”

“And you were assured of the health of both mother and babe?”

“Truly. Captain and Bruce and Tony all assured me they were.” Fandral sat up, rubbing at his stiff
neck. “Forgive me, but the hour grows late. I will retire for the evening, if you need me no longer?”

“Sleep well, Fandral.”

The warrior smiled and gave a small bow to the prince before he left the room, off to rest in his own chamber.

Thor heaved his tired body off the bed, stashing the picture in the pocket of his jeans from Midgard, and pulled his shirt over his head. He crossed the room to his washstand, pouring out some cool water and wetting a cloth, wiping it over his arms and chest. He cleaned away the dirt of the day, a day he had spent trying to find out what had happened to Loki, without success.

He had just lain his head upon his pillow once more when there came a timid knock at his door. He wanted to ignore it, wanted to pretend he hadn’t heard it. But he was a prince, so he pulled himself to his feet once more and crossed the room.

There stood his father’s new wife.

“I do not wish to disturb your slumber,” she said, twisting the hem of her shawl.

“Nay, I was not sleeping. Please, come in,” he said, stepping aside to let her pass. She entered and looked around, peering curiously at his Earth clothes.

“You are to return to them? Your Midgard friends?” she asked as he pulled on his shirt again.

“I am, as soon as I can,” he replied, guiding her to a seat, but she didn’t take it.

“You must go now,” she said, a clear urgency in her words. “I will tell you what happened to Loki, and then you must leave Asgard and not return.”

“You know what happened to my brother? Tell me!” he demanded, taking her by the shoulders.

“You have to swear to leave first,” she bargained.

“I swear it,” he agreed reluctantly. “I will return to Midgard tonight.”

“And not return?”

“And not return.”

“Go to the lowest levels of the dungeons, get past the guards you find there, find the corner with the most magics. There you will find Loki. Take him and leave and never return.”

With that she strode from the room, the door closing behind her. Thor didn’t know whether or not to believe her, but at this point he had no choice. He changed to his jeans and t-shirt and grabbed Mjolnir before striding from the room.

He took every secret passage and stairwell he knew, learned through years of chasing his brother and playing hiding games with his friends. It took him next to no time to reach the dungeons, where he slipped past all the guards with a mixture of royal intimidation and sheer size. None of them wanted to take on the God of Thunder, they all knew how well he fought.

He reached deep, calling on memories of lessons his mother had given him as a small boy to try and feel for the magic. Soon enough he felt a spark deep within, somewhere near the pit of his stomach, the piece of magic his mother had set within him when he had been born.
She had done it so she could always find him. She had hoped it would grow, that he would learn to use magic as she had, as Loki had. But it had never flourished for him. It had simply left an echoing sensation when he was close to magic.

And now it roared to life, feeling like snakes squirming through his belly.

“You should not be here,” said a guard, stepping out of the shadows.

“I know, but I must. Please.”

“My King gave orders.”

“He is my brother. Please. He is my brother.”

The guard was still for a moment, and then he stepped close to Thor. “I must go to Odin, to tell him you are down here. I will be moments.” And with that he walked away, leaving Thor alone with the unarmed cell.

Thor moved closer, trying to peer through the clear magical wall, trying to see his brother in the dim light.

“Loki?” he called. “Loki? Where are you?”

“Thor?”

There he was, laying on the filthy floor in a bloody crumpled heap, his hair matted and caked in dirt and blood and who knew what else. His skin was coated in a layer of blood and burns and other fluids. The skin around Loki’s mouth was ripped and ravaged and encrusted with blood, and his wrists were encircled by thick bracelets that Thor knew were containing his magic.

It was the work of mere seconds for Thor to smash through the wall with his hammer, crossing to scoop Loki up into his arms.

“Who did this?” he asked. “Loki, who did this to you?”

“I deserve this,” Loki whispered, his voice broken. “I deserve this pain. What I did…Thor, I shouldn’t…I never meant…I’m sorry, brother.”

“You should not have come down here,” Odin said as he caught sight of Thor. “Loki deserves his punishment, and now there is no Frigga to speak for him.”

“I will speak for him. Father, please. This is madness. He is your son.”

“He is an abomination who put the fate of all nine realms in jeopardy!” Odin roared, beginning to pace. “Trying to placate me with tales of madness and illness, trying to excuse away his actions! There is no excuse! There is not an explanation. And that thing in your arms is not my son.”

Thor wanted to scream, wanted to argue, but he could see that it would do him no good, that it would not sway his father.

“Then cast him out,” Thor said. “As you once cast me out. Send him to Midgard. I will take him, I will ensure he doesn’t ever hurt anyone again. Please, father. Please. Let me have him.”

Odin was silent for a long time, his one good eye fixed on them both. Loki was shivering in Thor’s arms, blood dripping from his pale skin to Thor’s.
“I will strip all but a little of his magic, leaving only enough for him to live. And I will strip his long years, leaving him a mortal’s life. And if you choose to return to Midgard rather than take your rightful place as Prince of Asgard, then I will strip your years too.”

“And my strength? My hammer?”

“Take them, I would not leave another realm unprotected. But neither of you can ever return. You will live and die amongst the mortals you think so highly of. You may never ask for my help, you may never call me father again, either of you. I won’t have you disgrace this house any further. You side with that…that creature!” he spat, motioning to Loki, “And you are no son of mine.”

“My King,” Sif cried as she entered, Fandral and Volstagg following her. “Do not do this. I beg of you.”

“SILENCE!”

“My friends, do not interfere,” Thor said, holding Loki a little closer. “I choose this. I will take him to Midgard.”

“So be it,” Odin said, raising his hand, summoning some guards. Within moments he had stripped them both of all he had promised to take, and then he had the guards take them both to the Bifrost, where Hiemdall had no choice but to follow the commands of his King.

They landed on the balcony of the Tower just as the sun was beginning to rise over the city.

Thor wondered how he could possibly begin to explain this to Jane.

Chapter End Notes

So, what did you think?

Leave me a comment below with your thoughts. I know it might not seem like much, but I do read every single comment made on every single one of my fictions. I love each and every one of them.

I would love to know if you think it should be a boy or a girl.

I can be found on Facebook under the name AvengingAngel, where I put up my thoughts and ideas, pose questions, and show you some of the things I think of for inspiration.
I'm not a scientist, nor am I a doctor, so just go with it, lol. If anyone notices something really off, or that doesn't make sense, please point it out to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The light of the Bifrost hadn’t even faded fully before the alarms were blaring, and Loki cringed against Thor at the noise.

“Peace, brother, peace. It is simply a warning to the mortals, telling them they are not alone,” Thor soothed, half carrying Loki inside to prop him on a barstool at the breakfast bar.

“Oh no! No way!” Tony screamed as he emerged from the elevator, his hands covered in grease. “He cannot be here! My floor! My windows!”

“Please, Tony, I beg of you. I know no other place to bring him,” Thor pleaded. “My father has tortured him, there is much unknown. I need time, and I cannot go anywhere else to get it.”

“His magic led to the destruction of this city that we’re STILL cleaning up.”

“His magic is gone,” Thor said. “My father stripped it. It is gone, Tony, I give you my oath, he is no danger.”

“He’s right, Tony,” said Bruce as he came fully into the room, stepping out of the stairwell shadows he had been standing in. “The Other Guy, he can smell it. Loki is different, Thor is different. They’re…less, somehow.”

“What the fuck?”

They all looked at Clint as he emerged from the stairwell behind Bruce.

“What is this? Seriously, what is this?”

“Working on that, Merida,” Tony said.

“I’m sorry,” Loki mumbled, his green gaze locked on the archer. “I’m so sorry. Please. I can’t…Thor, please, just let them kill me. Please. What I did…What he made me do…I should die. I deserve it…take me back, put me back in my cell, I deserve what the Allfather gives.”

“No, Loki, I will not,” Thor said firmly, pushing Loki to the stool as he tried to make a break for the balcony. “You do not deserve torture for the rest of eternity.”


“The Chitauri, the invasion. I’m sorry, so sorry,” he said, barely able to take a breath between sobs.

“You weren’t the leader?” Tony said. “Loki, are you telling us that it wasn’t you in charge of that?”
“The army was the property of Thanos. It was not mine.”

“You weren’t giving the orders,” said Bruce.

“No. It was not my part to order.”

“What was your part?”

“To bring the sceptre, to make a link.”

“Tony?”

They all looked around to see Annie padding sleepily into the room. As she entered and cuddled into Tony, Bruce let out a moan.

“He doesn’t like it, Tony!” he gasped, and Tony passed Annie to Clint, crossing to the doctor.

“The Other Guy?” Bruce nodded. “What’s up, what doesn’t he like?”

“This, him in the room with her.”

“Loki in the room with Annie?”

“Yeah.” Another pained moan and a slight greenish tinge to his skin. “He doesn’t like this, I can’t stop him. He’s too confused. He doesn’t understand the difference in Loki, and Annie’s too delicate for him to calm down.”

“Okay, new plan. Thor, take Bruce down to the gym, let the Hulk blow off some steam. I’ll take care of Loki, get him a bath or something. Clint, you and Annie are making breakfast.”

Thor hesitated only a moment, before a low scream from Bruce pushed him into action, taking Bruce by the shoulders and leading him to the waiting elevator. Clint cast a pissed off look at Tony before he took Annie’s hand and led her to the kitchen.

“Way to clear a room, Reindeer Games,” Tony said, crossing the room. “Now, you are filthy. Even the dog got a bath when she arrived, so…come on, up we go.” He took Loki by the upper arms and helped him to stand, leading him to his own bathroom, sitting him on the closed toilet while he ran a hot bath.

“Why do you help me?” Loki whispered as Tony scrubbed the grease off his hands, waiting for the tub to fill.

“I don’t,” the engineer said. “But I trust Thor, and you’re important to him, so you at least get a bath, and breakfast. That’s if Clint doesn’t decide to put crushed glass in your eggs.”

“Would he?”

Tony looked at the god, an eyebrow raised at the hopeful tone. “No. Annie wouldn’t let him. She’s very into forgiveness and one love and peace and all that. Okay, I’m clean. Let’s do you now. I promise not to drown you.”

“Why would you not?”

“Because if you’re telling the truth, and you weren’t responsible for what happened, then you don’t deserve punishment. And, even if you’re lying…no one deserves torture at their father’s hands.”
“He’s not my father.”

“He raised you, didn’t he? Same thing.” Tony squatted down before Loki. “Come on. In the tub. Let’s get you out of these rags. I’m pretty sure some of Steve’s things will fit you…sort of.” Loki shied away as Tony reached out to help him out of his filthy clothes. “Come on, Loki, I promise, you’ve got nothing I haven’t seen before. Hell, I’ve probably seen things you never have, the amount of bed hopping I’ve done.”

Loki looked away in shame as he allowed Tony to pull off his prison clothes, dropping the rags on the floor before standing and helping Loki step into the hot water. He cried out as it hit the open wounds on his back when he sat down.

“Easy, easy,” Tony soothed as he gently sponged away the caked on blood. “Get this clean and patch you up.

Tony said nothing about the tears Loki shed while he bathed, just slowly cleaning the wide expanses of skin, murmuring soothing nonsense.

“Can I help?”

They looked to the door to see Phil standing there, and Loki fairly screamed, trying to melt into the tiled wall.

“Loki! Loki, look at me!” Tony yelled. “No one will hurt you! You’re not going mad, I swear! Phil is really here, you’re not imagining him.” Tony gripped Loki’s head, forcing him to look him in the eye. “Phil is real, he’s alive, he’s not going to hurt you. He’s a good guy, he wants to help.”

“I…I stabbed him…I had to…I’m sorry…I’m so sorry…I had to…he made me…I had to…I had no choice…”

“Loki, it’s okay,” Phil said, coming into the room and taking a seat on the closed toilet. “Clint told me about Thanos, about him controlling you. Loki, I’m not blaming you. It happened, it can’t be changed. All we can do is deal with now. And right now, you need some help. Clint said you’ve lost your magics?”

“He took them,” Loki whispered, hugging his knees to his chest. “The Allfather…and Thor, he took Thor’s too.”

“What did he take from Thor?”

“His long life. His place as prince. Thor cannot go back, I cannot go back. Never go back.”

“Odin took my long years, what little magics I had,” Thor said from the doorway. “Banner is better now. He is in the kitchen, having some tea, and Annie says breakfast is ready when we are. Hulk is calm, I managed to convince him of Annie’s safety.”

“What did he take from Loki?” Phil asked.

“He took all his magics, all but what is needed to keep him alive, for a sorcerer cannot live without any of it. He took his magics and his years, leaving him with nought but a mortal’s life. My brother is human now.”

“Okay, here it is. Loki isn’t responsible for what happened, and he’s human now, so he stays and we figure out the rest along the way,” Tony declared, using the showerhead to wet Loki’s hair so he could wash it.
“Simplifying it a little there,” Phil said.

“Absolutely. All I want to talk about right now is breakfast.”

Breakfast was tense until everyone realised that Bruce wasn’t going to transform and Clint hadn’t poisoned the food.

“I have missed this,” Thor said as Tony passed the coffee pot.

“I’ll bet,” Phil said.

“What else have I missed? Where is Jane?”

“Jane and Darcy went to London,” Skye said, accepting the pancakes from Clint. “Some project, they’ll be back in a few days. Steve’s in Washington, doing some secret agent stuff with Natasha.”

“Steven has left?” Thor demanded, looking at Annie.

“He asked first,” Tony assured. “He needed to do something, some physical something, he was going nuts.”

“I’m fine,” Annie said. “I said he could go.”

“But he swore to me he would keep you all safe.”

“And we are all safe,” she said. “Tony and Clint and Phil are all here.”

Thor decided to let it go, sensing he wasn’t going to win the debate, and focussed on the food. It was delicious, but Loki didn’t touch a single bite.

“Brother, you must eat. Your form is mortal now, sustenance is needed.”

“I do not know any of it,” Loki mumbled.

“Allow me to make the selection?”

Loki hesitated for a moment before nodding. Thor took his plate and gave him a little of the scrambled eggs, a sausage and a rasher of bacon, and a hash brown to get him started, assuring him he could have more of anything he liked.

He ate in nibbles more than actual bites, but as he realised it’s all pretty good he took more bites, more mouthfuls, until his plate was clear and Thor was helping him to get more eggs and bacon and his first try of pancakes.

After breakfast, Bruce used what skills he had to check Loki over, finding several broken bones, a case of malnourishment and numerous lacerations everywhere, but nothing that wouldn’t be healed with time and care.

Thor left Loki watching cartoons with Skye (the two of them truly on their way to demolishing a whole tin of chocolate chip cookies) and made his way to the workshop, where Tony and Annie were working on some new toy prototypes. Thor drew Tony aside, looking over at Annie, who was coaxing China to climb Dum-E in an attempt to increase her agility.

“Tell me truthfully,” Thor said as Tony poured them both coffee. “How have things been?”
“You mean with Annie, right?” Thor nodded. “Not good. Her nightmares are getting worse, but the episodes are getting further apart, and she’s handling them better. She told Steve she was fine with him going, and she was at the time. But she’s finding it hard to be without him. She’s more lost, more unsure.”

“Can we call him back?”

“She won’t let me. Believe me, I want him home. But Annie said no, she doesn’t want to bother anyone, she thinks that this will put him out.”

“Convince her otherwise.”

“How!” Tony snapped. “You tell me how and I’ll do it.”

“You’re not calling Steve,” Annie called from across the room, causing them to look at her. “I’m fine, I don’t need him to come home.”

“I do not think that this word fine is defined in the same way for the two of us,” Thor said, crossing to her. “If you have need of him, he would be glad to return, I am sure.”

“I don’t want him to come back! I’m not some helpless damsel that needs saving!” she replied angrily.

“I do not think you helpless.”

“Yes, you do! You all do. Poor Annie, having episodes, can’t sleep through the night. Of course, call Steve and it’ll all be fine!”

Electricity shot out of her hand and struck Thor in the chest.

The blond man backed up a few steps and shuddered before he straightened and exchanged a glance with Tony.

“This is new,” Tony said. “Annie, did that hurt?”

“No. Kind of tingled a little, but it didn’t hurt.”

“Good. JARVIS, make a note of that and send it to Bruce for the file. Maybe he can figure out how she did it.”

“Thusly noted and sent, Sir.”

Tony crossed to her and forced her to look at him. “No one thinks you’re weak or helpless. But you’re important to us, to me. You’re the only family I have, you’re the only one Steve has from his time, you’re carrying Thor’s baby. You’re important. And if it were one of us having the problems you’re having, we’d do something about it.”

“I don’t want you to call Steve,” she insisted. “Please?”

“We won’t call Steve,” he said. “But you come and tell one of us if you need something? Anything, even someone to talk to in the small hours.”

“Okay.”

“Good,” he said, and then he caught sight of China trying to haul his cell phone into the blender. “No! No, don’t you dare! You worthless hunk of circuitry!”
“He seems to be overly angry at the small machine,” Thor said.

“She’s broken four toasters, two cell phones and a StarkPad since she was activated.” She picked up a StarkPad and pulled up China’s programming. “I can’t find the problem.”

“Surely Tony can change it?”

“Tony didn’t make her, I did. She’s my first, and apparently she’s full of glitches. It was all going so well for the first few days. Now we have to hide food she can paint pictures with, she likes to use flour as snow, and poor Helix is guarding her tail like there’s no tomorrow.”

“The dog has gained a name then. Who decided on Helix?”

“We all did. She’s got this habit of spinning in circles, which made us think of the spiral of a double helix that makes up DNA, so Bruce won the vote.”

Thor had no idea what she had said and he was remarkably happy to be lost.

Steve laced up his sneakers and set out on his run. He was getting a late start, but thoughts of Tony writhing beneath him had refused to be ignored.

He set out and set a pace no one would be able to keep up with, working up a sweat and getting his heart pumping.

Along to way, he watched the sun rise, cutting a winding path around the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Jefferson, before settling into annoying another jogger around the Mall.

“On your left,” he said, again and again, until the guy gave a growl and screamed at him to ‘come on!’

He continued his run until the sun was up and the streets were beginning to fill with people. He found the jogger, a coloured fella, collapsed under a tree, trying to catch his breath.

“Need a medic?” he called, and the guy huffed out something like a laugh.

“I need a new set of lungs. Dude, you just ran like 13 miles in 30 minutes!”

“Guess I got a late start.”

“Huh. Really? You should be ashamed of yourself. You should take another lap.” He paused for a moment. “Did you just take it? I assume you just took it.”

Steve noticed the insignia on his sweater. “What unit you with?”

“58th ParaRescue. But now I’m working down at the VA. Sam Wilson,” he said, holding out a hand.

Steve took it and pulled him to his feet. “Steve Rogers.”

“I kinda put that together,” he said, leaning on his knees for a moment before straightening. “Musta freaked you out, comin’ home after the whole defrosting thing.”

“Takes some getting used to,” he admitted. “It’s good to meet you, Sam.”
He began to walk away, off to take a shower and have his second breakfast, when Sam called out to him.

“It’s your bed, right?”

“What’s that?” he replied as he turned to look at him.

“Your bed, it’s too soft. When I was over there I used to sleep on the ground, use rocks as pillows like a caveman. Now I’m home, lyin’ in my bed, and it’s like…”

“Lying on a marshmallow,” Steve finished, thinking of the beautifully firm bed he slept in with Tony, the hard foam filled pillows Tony had specially made for him, and the squishy thing S.H.I.E.L.D. had put in the apartment they had given him. “Feel like I’m gonna sleep right through the floor.” Sam smiled, nodding. “How long?”

“Two tours. You must miss the good old days, huh?”

“Well,” he said, pushing thoughts of the Tower to the back of his mind. “Things aren’t so bad. Food’s a lot better, we used to boil everything; no polio’s good; internet! So helpful. Been reading that a lot, trying to catch up.”

“Marvin Gaye, 1972, Trouble Man soundtrack. Everything you missed, jammed into one album.”

Steve pulled his notebook and pen out of his pocket. “I’ll put it on the list,” he said with a grin. Ever since he’d been in Washington, he’d been keeping a list of things people suggested to him. Everyone seemed to think that he was completely helpless, and forgot that he lived with a genius who was immersed in the modern world.

His cell went off as he finished writing it to tell him he had a mission. He wondered if this one would be any better than the last ones.

“Alright, Sam, duty calls. Thanks for the run,” he said, shaking his hand. “If that’s what you wanna call running.”

“Oh, that’s how it is?”

“Oh! That’s how it is!”

“Oh-kay!” he laughed. “If you ever wanna stop by the VA, make me look awesome in front of the girl behind the desk,” he called as Steve began to walk away, turning and walking backwards to keep talking to him. “Just let me know.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Steve assured as Natasha pulled up behind him.

“Hey, fellas. Either one of you know where the Smithsonian is? I’m here to pick up a fossil,” she called.

“That’s hilarious,” Steve grumbled as he approached the car.

Sam crouched down and smiled at Natasha. “How you doing?”

“Hey.”

“Can’t run everywhere,” Steve called to him.

“No, you can’t.”
The experiment was spewing blood, and the scientists had no clue of how to stop it.

“You said six months!” the man screamed, and the scientist ducked as he threw a microscope at her.

“Sir, I promise you, we are doing everything we can,” she said through gritted teeth. “But as it has been pointed out to you, many times, we have no idea how this thing is even alive. How the original survived is beyond us.”

“But I was told six months before it failed, six months to get the girl back.”

“Yes, my associate did tell you that, and at the time it was true. But things have accelerated. Truly, sir, it would probably be best to discard this subject and just start again.”

“Do you people comprehend how much you spend?” he spat. “How much scrapping this one would cost? How much this one has cost? Make this one work, that’s an order.”

“Yes, sir.”

She made her way into the hermetically sealed room, very aware of the angry eyes fixed upon her through the unbreakable glass, and took over from one of her assistants.

It took them a few hours, but they managed to get the experiment stable once more. And just as it went into hibernate mode, the alarms went insane.

Loki ignored the feeling of eyes on the back of his neck. Thor watched his brother and sighed, turning away and heading to bed, confident that he didn’t know what to do to help him.

“He driving you nuts yet?” Skye asked.

“A little. He means well. He usually means well,” he muttered. “I am still lost by this colourful… thing.”

“What are you lost on?”

“Can the adults understand the infants?”

“No, the babies can understand each other, but the adults don’t understand them,” she said.

“And this bald infant…he is their… king?”

“Leader, he’s their leader.”

“And the orange haired one…is there truly nothing he does not fear?”

“Some kids are like that. I wasn’t, I was more like Tommy, but some kids are scared of everything.”

“That yellow haired female one, with the damaged plaything…she is rather annoying.”

Maybe it was a bad idea to start with the Rugrats.

“We can watch something else if you want,” she offered. “Something not animated. Or I could teach you how to play video games.”
“No, I wish to continue watching the little drawn infants. I wish to see if they find this Lizard, and if the damp one will cease its incessant wailing.”

Skye buried her laugh in her hands and reached for the popcorn. Tommy was just threatening to douse Dil in bananas when Clint walked in and sat down. Loki immediately went as stiff as a board.

“Relax,” Clint said, his eyes on the screen. “I’m not going to do anything. Not to you anyways. Thanos has it coming.”

“You cannot truly mean that,” Loki whispered and Clint looked over at him.

“As a guy who had his mind taken over, I know how you feel. I feel bad enough about what I did, so I can’t imagine your guilt points. Odin is on my list too, for pushing you to the point where Thanos could get to you.”

“It almost sounds like you forgive me.”

“Aren’t you paying attention? It wasn’t your fault, it wasn’t actually you doing it, so you’re not the one who needs forgiving.”

Skye smiled mischievously. “How long was AC working on you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said dismissively. “Christ, what the hell are those babies doing alone in the woods?”

“They got lost,” Loki replied.

“Ah, happens to the best of us.”

They watched the end of the film, and then switched to Disney’s Cinderella.

“I have never seen rodents wear clothing, but the effect is very endearing,” Loki decided.

“Oh yeah, they’re the cutest,” Clint agreed. “Not so cute when you find one of the little squeakers in your apartment at three in the morning, chowing down on your Lucky Charms.”

“For forgiveness for the interruption of your entertainment,” JARVIS said and Loki flinched, curling into himself a little.

“It’s okay, Loki,” Skye said. “That’s JARVIS. He’s a part of the house. He takes care of us all.”

“Thank you, miss.”

“What’s up, Jarv?” Clint said, pausing the movie.

“A call is coming in for Master Coulson from a Dr Jemma Simmons, Master Barton,” the AI informed. “She seems rather on edge, but you did inform me that Master Coulson should not be woken.”

“Right, I did say that. She say what she wanted?”

“No, sir.”

“Okay, put her through.”

A moment of silence as JARVIS put the call through and then there was a woman’s heavy breathing
“Agent Simmons, what can I do for you?” Clint asked.

“I asked for Agent Coulson,” she said. “I said it was important!”

“One, he’s not an agent anymore.”

“Of course! Sorry, I forgot.”

“No big. And two, he’s sleeping and I don’t want him woken. So is there something I can do to help?” Clint said.

“I need your help. You or Mr Stark or…or…I don’t know! One of you!”

“Jemma?” Skye said. “What is it, what’s wrong?”

“I’m in trouble,” she said. “I called because Coulson would know what to do.”

“Where are you?” Clint asked.

“Ummm…hold on. I’m in the alley behind a place called Jacob’s Pickles. Strange name for a place, I must say. It seems to be a bar of some sort. Why call it Pickles? Are the beers pickled?”

“Stop babbling,” he said. “Stay there, stay hidden, I’m on my way.”

The line went dead and Clint got to his feet. “Skye, keep an eye on Phil, JARVIS, tell Tony where I’ve gone. I’m out.”

“What should I do?” Loki asked.

Clint was gone before the question was fully uttered.

Tony sleepily walked into his workshop, eyes fixed on the tablet in his hands, and screamed as he stepped on hot coals.

“What the actual fuck!” he yelled, looking at the mess of Lego he was laying on.

“My picture! Bad Tony!”

China was dangling from Dum-E’s claw, a blowtorch clasped in her tiny arms.

“What the hell are you doing, you little menace!” he growled as he got to his feet and crossed to the bots. “Why are there Legos all over my floor, and what the hell are you doing with that blowtorch?”

“For the picture,” she said, her tone clearly conveying her ‘well duh’.

“Picture. And why is your ‘picture’ all over my floor!”

“You told me to play with the Lego, so I made a picture, and now I need the blowtorch to melt the bits together.”

He paused for a moment to tug the torch away from her, and then he shrugged. “Makes perfect sense to me,” he muttered. “Hmmm. Maybe I should give you to Loki. He could use a project, and you need constant supervision.”
“Sir, forgive me this interruption, but Master Loki seems to be in some distress in the penthouse lounge area.”

Tony swapped the blowtorch for the doll and made his way to the elevator, JARVIS shooting him up ten floors.

“You need reprogramming,” he said.

“I bow to the will of my creator, not to you,” she replied, her eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, and your creator was very unimpressed by you destroying her new red lipstick yesterday morning. She hadn’t even worn it yet.”

“It made the carpet pretty.”

“Just stop talking,” he said as he entered the penthouse. He crossed to the couch and handed China to Skye. “Keep hold of this, it’s a danger to feet everywhere. Hey, Loki.” He slid onto the couch and took one of Loki’s long fingered hands in his own. “You want to tell me what’s up?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled.

“I think he’s a little overwhelmed,” Skye said. “He was doing fine until Clint left in a hurry.”

“Where did Hawk-ass go?”

“He got a call from Simmons and rushed off to help her.”

“I wanted to know what I should do,” Loki muttered. “He was gone too fast.”

“Okay,” Tony said. “Here’s what you do.” He took China and deposited her in Loki’s hands. “You keep that under control.”

“Uh…what is it?” Loki asked concernedly, holding the doll up and poking at her hair.

“It’s an Intelli-toy. Kind of like JARVIS but a whole lot stupider, and a lot more trouble. She keeps getting into mischief. She likes to paint with food, use flour as snow, and has developed a love of blowtorches.”

“Blowtorches?” Skye questioned. “What were you going to do with the blowtorch?”

“She needed it to melt the Lego pieces together, so her picture would not fall apart.”

“Okay, you know that’s not how you play with Lego, right?”

“Tony ruined my picture,” China said, kicking her feet. “It was a heart, but he stepped on it.”

“New burglar deterrent right there. Fucking painful things.”

“So I should…care for it?” Loki asked.

“Yes, absolutely. You take care of it and it stops decorating the carpets with lipstick.”

Clint pulled up about two blocks from Jacob’s Pickles. He walked the rest of the way, glancing around to ensure he wasn’t being followed, before ducking into the alley.
“Simmons?” he called.

“Oh! Agent Barton,” she gasped, stepping out from behind the Dumpster. “Oh, I’m sorry! It’s not agent anymore, is it? I’m sorry. It’s just working with Coulson…well, May told us stories.”

“Stop,” he said. “Take a breath. On the phone you sounded afraid. What’s wrong?”

“We got a tip on a possible Hydra cell working on something similar to Miss Stark. How is she, by the way?”

“She’s doing loads better.” He glanced around before folding his arms. “Did you find the Hydra cell?”

“Yes, and that’s the problem,” she said, ducking behind the Dumpster and pulling out a blanket bundle. “We were severely outmatched. Fitz is in the hospital, in intensive care, Ward is missing, May is in surgery. I can’t keep him, they know what I look like. You have to take him, you and Coulson. I know he’ll be safe with you.”

“Wait, slow down. Fitz is in the hospital? May is in surgery?”

“They strangled him, cut off his air. They don’t think he’ll recover, but he’s alive, so there’s hope. And May…they think there’s internal bleeding.”

“Fuck.”

“Yes, quite. So you have to take him,” she said, handing over the bundle. His arms automatically supported it. She pulled back a corner to reveal a tiny face. “There now. Go with this man, he and his friends will take good care of you, you’ll be safe with them. Be a good boy for them.”

“Whoa, Simmons, this is a child. Explain.”

“They were…experimenting,” she said, mouthing the last word, “on him. We had no time to get any files, so we don’t know what it was exactly. He’s a good little lamb. He doesn’t talk as far as I’ve heard, but he will need his nappy changed sometime soon, and he-”

Clint ducked as the shot was fired, hitting Simmons in the hip.

“Go! I’ll be fine!” she gritted out from her sprawl on the ground, blood pouring from her wound. She reached into her waistband and pulled out a gun. “Go, just go!”

Clint pulled the boy closer and slipped out of the alley, not looking back but glancing around for the shooter. He was known for his impeccable eyesight, and he trusted himself when he couldn’t see anything, so he rationalised that the shooter was in the opposite direction. The first rule of going on the run was to walk, not run.

So he strolled the two blocks to the car.

“So glad I didn’t take a bike,” Clint said to the child. “Okay, buddy. Here we go.” He put the child in the passenger seat and then rounded the car to the driver’s seat. He leaned over and buckled the kid in and then sighed. Huge dark eyes looked up at him.

“Oh, I am gonna have a hard time explaining this one.”

Tony was holding Phil close as he shook, trying to soothe him.
“I’m here!” Clint called as he emerged from the elevator. “I’m sorry, I know, I’m here!”

Phil breathed a sigh of relief and reached out grabby hands. The archer crossed the room and shifted the bundle to one arm so he could hold Phil close.

“I know, baby,” he murmured into Phil’s hair. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know I would still be gone when you woke up. I was worried about being followed, so I took a detour, and then I hit road works.”

“Followed?” Loki asked.

Clint relayed what Simmons had told him, and what had happened to Simmons, before finally unwrapping the blankets slightly so they could see the child.

“Oh,” Phil breathed, reaching for him. “Hi there,” he said, taking him into his arms and cuddling him close. “Aren’t you the most beautiful boy I’ve ever seen.”

Tony wasted no time in calling Bruce, who arrived as Annie emerged from her bedroom, smiling sleepily at them before disappearing into the kitchen.

She appeared a few moments later with a mug of hot sweet tea, took one look at the boy, and made her way out to the balcony. Tony waved them off and followed her.

“Hey,” he said softly, snaking an arm around her waist. “You okay?”

“No, no I’m not.” She turned and looked at the child before looking at Tony. “He looks like Andrew.”

“Andrew? Oh, your brother.”

“My twin,” she expanded. “Tony, don’t you get it. He’s mine.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“Yes, I can. Look at him. He’s made of me…me and Steve.”

“No. You, maybe, I’ll allow the possibility of that kid being yours, but he’s not Steve’s. For one, they had no chance to get anything of Steve’s.”

“How many times did Steve get into a fight with Hydra? How many times did they make him bleed? Tony, face it, this baby,” she said, placing her free hand on her bump. “This is not their first attempt at making a child. And that kid in there…he’s not their first attempt either.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

“The wristband.” She motioned to the hospital-style band around the tiny wrist. “RSB-39. He’s the one mentioned in my file. And 39? That means there were at least 38 before him, and that’s only in this batch. Tony look at him. He’s…what, two? And the file says he will fail if they didn’t do something, that he was the only subject to make it this far. Which means that there were dozens of others that had nothing but a life of pain and suffering and slow death.”

Tony had no argument against her, because in his gut he knew she was right. He could see it, see those dark Stark eyes, that Rogers set of the mouth. Where those cheekbones came from he didn’t know, but he knew Annie was right about where the little guy had come from. And he knew she was right about what had been done to him.

“I had nineteen years,” she murmured, leaning against the glass barrier and staring out at the city...
below them. “I had nineteen years of freedom and being loved before they took me. When I had nothing, I still had that. That tiny, helpless, defenceless boy in there…he’s had nothing, Tony. Nothing but pain and suffering. He has nothing but that and a slow death, just like the others.”

“No, you’re wrong. He has one more thing,” he argued.

“And what’s that? A brief glimpse of something better before he dies?”

“He has us.”

It took Bruce about ten minutes to get JARVIS to run a complete DNA and blood workup while he did a physical exam on the boy.

The two year old had partial blindness, partial deafness, a deviated septum, a shortened oesophagus, fluid on the lungs, asthma, a heart murmur, high blood pressure, malformation of his spine and ribcage, arthritis, he was a diabetic and he was colour-blind.

“Still going to argue with me on him being Steve’s?” Annie whispered to Tony.

“Steve is fine,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Now. Before the serum? I kind of wondered how he got out of bed in the morning, let alone joined the army.”

“Dr Banner, my analysis is complete,” JARVIS announced.

“Great, send it to the tablet,” Bruce said, smiling at the boy still curled in Phil’s arms. He didn’t seem inclined to move, and Phil didn’t seem inclined to let him go. Bruce looked at the tablet for a few moments before he passed it to Tony, and moved to the medical kit Skye had retrieved from his lab for him.

“You were right,” Tony said quietly, showing Annie the numbers. “He was made of you and Steve, and another, unnamed donor.”

“Unnamed and probably unwilling too,” she muttered darkly and Tony let out a low moan.

“Bruce, these gaps in his DNA? We got a way to fix those?”

“You mean the spaces that should have viable base pairs, but have junk in there instead? I have a theory.”

“Which is?” Skye asked.

“Well, Annie’s file tells us that they were going to use her activated gene sequences to fill the gaps in his genetics. Me and Jane were doing a little more work on Annie’s blood, her biological serum, and we found that it works as a form of stem cell. Well. Sometimes. It seems to pick and choose when it works.”

“You want to give him some of my serum,” Annie said, crossing to the couch and sitting down.

“What do you need?”

“Start with blood?” Bruce said, looking at Tony who nodded.

“I’d start there. No need to hit a molehill with a nuke unless we need to,” Tony said and then he
clapped a hand to his forehead. “Did I just say that? Did I actually just say less is more?”

“Yup, suck it up,” Jane said as she emerged from the elevator, Darcy right behind her, Happy lugging their bags.

“Jane!” Thor cried, crossing the room and sweeping her into his arms. “I have missed you!”

She pulled him in for a kiss and she grinned into it. “I missed you, too,” she said, before taking in the room; Loki standing by the dining table holding China, Phil clutching the tiny boy to him. “What did we miss?”

Thor drew them out to the balcony and explained it all. At one point, Jane looked ready to beat the hell out of someone, and Darcy reached for her tazer. Thor managed to calm them down, and explain the rest, and then Jane marched inside and pulled Loki into a hug.

“He stays here,” she demanded, pulling back and fixing Tony with the sternest look anyone had ever seen. “Don’t you even think about him going anywhere, or so help me, Tony Stark.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, I didn’t say anything!” he defended. “He’s here, isn’t he? Bathed and dressed and with his own room and everything. I even gave him China to take care of! I’m not throwing him out. He and Clint have even come to a truce.”

“Is that why you’re holding her?” Annie asked the former god.

“Yes,” Loki said dazedly, looking at Jane with tears in his eyes. “He said she was…troublesome, and needed a caretaker.”

“More lipstick?”

“Lego and a blowtorch,” Tony supplied.

“He ruined it!” China cried, pointing a tiny hand at Tony accusingly.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Annie growled. “You’ll go to Loki and do as he says, end of discussion.”

“I told you so,” Tony said childishly to the toy and she stuck out her tongue at him.

Bruce cleared his throat and got their attention once more. “Okay, Annie, can I…?” he said, holding out a tube with a needle on each end.

She held out an arm and he eased one end into it, taping it down. The other end her gently attached to the little boy, giving him a reassuring smile, Phil murmuring reassurances. He didn’t so much as blink as the needle broke the skin.

“He’s burning up,” Phil said.

“His immune system is compromised,” Bruce said. “So it could be anything, even something as small as a cold. Hopefully, the transfusion will fix it.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Clint questioned, one hand on Phil’s hair, the other on the child’s.

“Then there are other, more traditional, treatments we can try.”

“Okay,” Clint said. “Okay. So…we should get moving, right? A kid needs…I dunno, stuff?”

“Sir, my apologies for the interruption, but Captain Rogers is on the line, and he sounds rather
perturbed,” JARVIS announced, and Tony was given no time to answer before Steve was on the room’s speakers.

“Tony? Tony, you there?”

“Steve, I’m here. What’s wrong?”

“Tony, listen to me. I don’t have much time, I have to toss this phone before they trace it. Tony, Fury is dead. S.H.I.E.L.D. is compromised. Don’t trust anyone from the agency unless Phil okays them. I’m with Natasha, I’m okay, I’ll come home when I can.”

“Steve!” Tony cried, his tablet flashing in his hands. “The computer link I have to their computers…it says you’re a traitor, that you’re guilty of treason!”

“According to them I am. I can’t explain now. Just trust me. Keep Annie safe, keep everyone safe, Tony.”

“I will, I promise. Thor came back.”

“Oh, good. I have to go. I can handle this…Tony, don’t come, don’t get involved. I need you to be safe, I need you to keep them safe. I can’t worry about you, Tony. If I do, I’m fucked.”

“I’ll stay here,” Tony agreed. “Just concentrate on staying safe. Steve…promise me?”

“I promise, I’ll stay safe. I’m coming home to you, I swear. Tony, I love you.”

“I love you, too. Steve? Steve?”

“Sir, the line has gone dead,” JARVIS said.

Tony sank to the floor, his hands going lax and dropping the tablet, his face pale, a mask of horror. “Steve,” he breathed.

Clint pressed a kiss to Phil’s forehead before he crossed the room. “Tony, he’ll be safe. He’s with Tasha. If anyone can get him out of this shit, it’s the Russian.”

“Indeed,” Loki said. “The Captain seems a sturdy man. He is a survivor.”

“Loki’s right,” Annie said. “Steve made it through the serum, and being frozen. He lost his mom and Dr Erskine and Bucky and Peggy and me and absolutely everyone else he knew and cared about. He was a physical impossibility who shouldn’t have been breathing before the serum. And yet, after all that, he’s still going.”

Tony looked between the three of them and nodded. “You’re right. My guy is tough. He’ll make it through this. He’ll come home to me.”

“That’s right,” Clint said. “Now, how about we find you something to do, huh?”

“Yeah.” Tony needed to do something, anything. If he sat still, he would go insane. Or worse, he’d put on the suit.

“Right. So Jane…”

“I’ll make breakfast,” Jane said, diving in with both feet and literally rolling up her sleeves. “Darcy and Skye, take Tony’s credit card and go shopping for the kid. He needs clothes and toys and-”
“Diapers,” Clint added. “Simmons said he’d need his nappy changed. That’s a diaper in British, right?”

“Yes, diapers,” Phil said.

“He’s roughly about 25 pounds,” Bruce supplied.

“Clothes, diapers, 25 pounds boy toddler,” Darcy noted into her phone. “Toys that won’t freak him out. That’s…what, teddy bears, right?”

“Every kid needs a bear,” Skye said, pulling on her boots.

“Just enough stuff for a few days, to get us through while we’re working it all out. Thor, go with them, keep them safe,” Jane said.

“On my life,” he said.

Tony handed over his card and the three of them disappeared with Happy.

“Right. I’m going to make breakfast for us all,” Jane announced. “Loki, you help me.” She pointed a finger at China. “You will behave yourself, or I will boil you.”

“What do I do?” Tony asked.

“Uhhh.”

“Stark,” Phil called. “You’re going down to the day-care. It’s on 31, right?”

“Level 33 houses the day-care facility, Master Coulson,” JARVIS supplied.

“33. You’re going to see if there are diapers down there, and wipes and all the other stuff that goes with diapering. This little guy is soaked, he needs a change as soon as possible.”

“Diapers! Day-care! I can do that!” Tony crowed as he sped to the stairs.

“Masterful,” Bruce said.

“Practice with baby agents who are freaking out,” Phil said. “And he really does need a change.”

Annie was smiling at the little boy, his dark eyes looking at her curiously. She took his little hand, running fingertips over his palm, before she noticed the sea of puncture marks on his inner arm. The other one matched. She gently pulled at his chin, looking in his mouth, and then she couldn’t breathe.

“Get it off,” she said to Bruce. “Get it off!”

“Okay, okay, hold still.”

He disconnected the two of them and she dashed from the room, grasping at the railing of the balcony as she sucked in cool fresh air. It was Clint that followed her.

“Hey,” he murmured, taking her in his arms. “Come on, deep breaths. That’s it, good girl. Is this because of the kid? Is he bringing up some stuff.”

“He’s never eaten, Clint,” she said. “He’s never eaten or drunk anything. They hooked him up to tubes and pumped in just enough to keep him alive.”
Clint looked through the glass at the kid snuggled into his husband.

“They did to him what was done to you?”

“And more. Clint, he’s not just not talking. He can’t talk. They won’t have taught him that. He’s a science experiment, a human lab rat. All the things a two year old can do, he can’t. He’s more than just silent, he’s terrified of making noise. They did what they wanted to him, and when he didn’t do what they wanted, he was punished. And believe me, Hydra don’t take prisoners. They’ll have punished him in the most brutally efficient way they can think of.”

“Then we need to show him there is something else,” Clint said firmly.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered. “I can’t take care of him, Clint. I know I’m his mother, by genetics if nothing else. But I just can’t.”

“Okay, okay, no problem. To be honest, I think we might need a crowbar to get Phil to let go of him. So me and Phil will handle it. But you’re gonna help, right? Help us understand what he needs?”

She nodded.

“There we go,” Clint said, leading her back in as Jane and Loki began to set the table, and Tony emerged from the stairwell.

“I found Avengers baby swag in the day-care,” he cried, dumping his bounty onto the coffee table. “Look, Avengers diapers, in his size. PJ’s, socks, bottles, rattles. I grabbed anything that looked like it might be useful.”

“That’s great, Tony,” Phil praised as Bruce waited on another analysis from JARVIS.

“His lungs are clear, heart murmur is gone,” Bruce said, removing the stethoscope earpieces. He pressed a thermometer into the tiny ear, and smiled at the reading. “Fever’s gone.”

“Score one for team us,” Clint said. He reached out and grabbed the pack of bottles, four of them, each with a different character. Iron Man, Captain America, Thor and Hulk. He pulled out the Hulk one and handed it to Annie. “Not a clue what to put in it.”

“I’ll find something,” she assured and made her way to the kitchen, leaning against the counter as she tried to figure out what to give him.

“Is there something I can do?” Loki asked gently and she wiped away her tears.

“Pass me the milk?”

He handed it over and watched as she poured some into a small saucepan, setting it on the stove.

“May I ask you something?”

“Yes, what was done to him was done to me,” she said.

“And do you truly carry Thor’s babe?”

She giggled at his incredulous tone. “Yes, I do.”
“Shouldn’t be possible,” he said. “You’re so small.”

“Thor promises me that Asgard’s babies are as small as human ones. I’m holding him to that.” She paused to retrieve a wooden spoon from the pot on the counter. “He wasn’t lying, was he?”

“No,” he said. “I admit, I have not had much experience with infants, but they all seem rather small to me, including this one.”

She grinned as she stirred the milk. “Can I ask you something?”

“By all means. What am I meant to be doing here?” he asked, motioning to the scrambled eggs.

“You’re meant to be stirring,” she said, taking his spatula and demonstrating for him, then motioning at a more solid bit as she handed it back. “It should all look like this bit.”

“Like this?” He stirred at it and she nodded. “Ask away.”

“When I was a little girl, my brother used to read me stories. Some of them were about you. You and Thor and the great battles. I was wondering…about the horse?”

“Horse?”

“The one with eight legs. The stories said you gave birth to him.”

“Good gracious!” he laughed. “So that is what your Midgardian stories say of me. Well, I had hoped to have greater tales than that told of me, but no matter. No, I did not birth him. I created him, with magics. So I suppose, in a sense, I am his mother, sorcery is seen as a feminine art. But I did not birth him. I made him as a gift. Odin rides him into battle.”

“So the wolf, and the guardian of hell, and the serpent…you didn’t birth those either?”

“No, I did not. I created them, but did not birth them. In truth, I am untouched.”

“Oh. Then you really didn’t birth them,” she said, pouring the milk into the bottle and screwing on the teat.

“No, I did not. Will that be suitable for the boy?”

She shrugged. “We’ll soon find out if it’s not.”

She carried it out to Clint and then disappeared to her room.

“She okay?” Phil asked as he balled up the soaked diaper and wiped the boy off with a wet wipe. His entire groin was covered in an angry looking rash.

“Not really. A lot of memories, none of them good,” he said, handing Phil the cream for the diaper rash. “Should we be doing this?”

“He needs the cream, the rash has to be sore. We can give him a bath later, and then let him have some time without anything on. Some naked time, letting some air to it, it’ll help.”

“Phil, should we be the ones taking care of him? Are you ready for this?”

“I want him,” Phil said, positioning a fresh diaper. They were silent as Phil fastened it and then stripped the boy out of the hospital gown he was dressed in, putting him in a pair of Captain America PJ’s and Iron Man socks. “And he needs us, Clint.”
“Okay then, we’ll give it a shot,” Clint said as Phil picked the boy up and sat him on his lap. Clint sat down with them, stroking the boys dark curls. “But if this gets too much for you…”

“I’ll let you know, I promise,” Phil vowed, giving Clint a swift kiss and accepting the bottle.

“Okay, how do we teach a kid to drink?”

“Uh…”

“Need some help?” Bruce said with a smile. He helped Phil to tilt the boy back and then ease the teat into his mouth, rubbing it against his tongue until natural reflexes kicked in and he sucked at it. His dark eyes widened in shock as he got a mouthful of milk and he tried to push it back out.

“No, no,” Phil said gently. “It’s okay, it’s not going to hurt you. Just give me a try, okay? Just a little try?”

The boy looked up at him for a moment before he suckled again, and then natural reflexes kicked in again and he swallowed. It hit his stomach and he was suddenly drinking like there was no tomorrow.

“That’s it,” Clint crooned. “That’s a good boy.”

The boy reached up unsteadily, his eyes cautious as he laid his tiny hands unfocusedly on Phil’s arm.

“It’s okay,” Clint soothed. “No one’s going to hurt you.” He glanced up at Phil. “You’re safe here.”

Phil laid on the floor on his side and propped the baby up against him so the boy was sitting.

“See? It’s fun,” Clint coaxed, taking the tiny hands and helping him to grasp a red wooden block.

The boy blinked at Clint before frowning down at the thing in his hands.

“I do not think he appreciates the concept of fun,” Loki said.

“Sure he does,” Tony argued. “It’s red. It’s awesome.”

“It’s motor skills,” Phil said. “He’s behind, so playing will help him catch up.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you know that will help,” Tony said.

“AC is a bad ass, you’re surprised he’s awesome with kids?” Skye said and Phil blushed.

“You know, the kiddo needs a name,” Darcy said. She laughed as the kiddo looked at her. “Are we talking about you?” she called. “Shall we just name you kiddo and be done?”

“His name is not kiddo,” Clint said, and the dark eyes fixed on him, so he pulled over a shape sorter.

“Tony, put the tablet down,” Bruce said gently. “You keep watching that footage and you’re going to go insane.”

Tony paused the reel of Steve escaping S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters. “What else am I supposed to do? He told me not to go there, he told me to stay put, but how am I meant to do that?”
“You need a project,” Clint said, helping the baby to push the shapes through the right holes, the little boy giving a little wiggle when it made sounds. It kind of looked like dancing with how uncoordinated he was.

“Latest project has been claimed by you two,” Tony snapped and threw himself to his feet, storming out.

“Should one of us follow him?” Loki asked.

“No,” Phil said, stroking the baby’s dark hair. “He’s worried, and he has every right to be. Leave him to it. JARVIS?”

“Yes, Master Coulson?”

“Let me know if he starts going off the deep end.”

It was Loki that heard her crying.

The dark haired man was having trouble with sleep, and recognising when he needed it, so he was trying to calm himself by watching a nature documentary. Darcy had sworn that they always sent her right off. But Loki was fascinated by the way the elephants moved, that they could die of a broken heart.

He wondered if the same thing would happen to Tony if something were to happen to the Captain. He heard the soft cry and went to investigate. He thought it would be Tony, crying for Steve. He didn’t expect to find Annie crying in her sleep.

“Umm, JARVIS?” he called, looking at the ceiling.

“Yes, Master Loki?”

“I think perhaps someone should be alerted to this…” he said, motioning to Annie.

“Master Thor has been notified and is on his way, sir.”

Loki crossed to the bed and sat down on the edge, reaching out to touch her arm. “Annie,” he said softly. “Annie, I think you should wake. Wake now. Tis only a dream. You are home and safe.”

“Loki?” she mumbled, before she curled in on herself and sobbed. Some instinct made Loki pull her in, stroking back her hair, murmuring soothing nonsense to her.

Thor hovered in the doorway, watching them, and then he turned and went back to bed, knowing he couldn’t help, knowing they would care for one another.

Clint awoke in the dark of his bedroom and was halfway to sitting before he realised his reason for waking was laying between him and Phil.

Lunch had been another bottle of milk, getting the kiddo used to oral feeding. They’d found he was also quite partial to apple juice and had chugged at least a litre all by his little lonesome. For dinner, they had managed to get the kiddo to eat some fruit mush, some kind of paste that was squeezed from a pouch. Bruce had said that they weren’t going to provide all the nutrition he needed, but he
needed to learn how to eat, so they’d have to go through all the weaning stages in an accelerated timeline. Under his advice, they’d tried several different flavours of mush, and the kiddo had gone nuts over the strawberry and apple one, and the mango, pears and papaya one.

After dinner came more playtime, where they managed to get the kid to do some tummy time, but only if Clint was in front of him on his tummy pulling funny faces to keep his interest, and Phil didn’t go anywhere.

Then came bath time, which the kid had loved. He had gone practically boneless with relaxation in the warm water, the bath oils going a long way to helping his rash. After that, they had lain him on a blanket, absolutely buck naked, and put on Tom and Jerry. He had been entranced by the colours, and Phil and Clint had been entranced with him.

Considering they were working purely off tiny physical indicators to gauge his reactions, they felt they were doing pretty well in figuring out what worked and what didn’t.

Bedtime brought some unforeseen challenges. The kiddo had refused the spare room, his eyes going wide and body rigid when they tried to leave him alone. So they had brought him into their bed, bracketing his tiny body with their own. Then the dark of the light going off had caused his newly healed lungs and heart to get a workout. Clint had solved the problem by hijacking the mushroom shaped nightlight Tony had bought for Annie’s baby.

A bottle of apple juice and a softly told story was all it took for him to drift off, the two men close behind him.

Clint looked down to see the bottle being tapped oh so gently on his arm. The dark eyes were open, and the bottle was empty, not to mention his nappy was soaked.

“Okay, buddy,” Clint murmured, picking him up and carrying him out of the room.

They had set up a changing area on the floor of the lounge in their suite. Clint laid him down on the mat and he gave his slight little wiggle of happiness. He hadn’t smiled, but they had managed to figure him out.

“Yeah, I know!” he chuckled. “Having a dry butt is awesome,” he said as he stripped off the old diaper, balling it up and chucking it into the kitchen bin without looking. “Wait until you learn to pee standing up. Now that’s awesome.” He used a baby wipe, warmed from the fancy thing Darcy had found in Babies ‘r’ Us, to wipe away the urine and then applied a layer of cream before he strapped on a fresh diaper. He wrapped him back into his jammies (Iron Man this time) before picking him up and carrying him to the kitchen.

He carefully liberated the bottle from where it was wedged between them and unscrewed the top before he pulled open the fridge. He set the carton of milk and the one of apple juice on the counter before looking at the kiddo.

“So, which one are we having?” he asked gently. “This one?” He pointed at the milk and waited a few seconds for a reaction. “Or this one?” He pointed at the apple juice and for that he got a wiggle. “Ah, apple juice, excellent choice,” he said as he put the milk back, managing to open the container one handed.

“I know, I rock. I am the king.” He received a blank look. “I know, I’m nowhere near as cool as Phil.” He got a wiggle at the mention of his husband and he laughed. “Oh, I see. He’s the best, huh? I know, I’m with you, he’s the absolute best. And you know, he is going to be the most awesome, amazing dad for you. I know this because he is just generally amazing,” he said. He kept up his
monologue on Phil’s virtues as he filled the bottle and returned the juice to the fridge, before screwing on the teat and carrying him back to bed.

Clint laid him down and snuggled in, picking up the bottle and holding it out to him.

“You gonna do it?” he asked, manipulating the tiny hands to take hold of the plastic. He guided the teat to his mouth, and helped him tilt it, until his little jaw began working furiously. “That’s a good boy. You know, we really need a proper name for you,” he whispered as the dark eyes slid shut.

“Tomorrow,” Phil murmured, stroking a hand over his shoulder.

“Yeah. Tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

So, what do you think?

I really need some ideas for names for the kiddo, I have no idea what to call him.

But the dog now has a name! She is Helix the dog. Not much of a role here, but I love her.

Please comment and let me know your ideas, and what you thought of the chapter. I love reading your thoughts, and I promise I read every single one. I know it doesn't seem like much, but your reviews really do mean so much to me.
Phil awoke at five the next morning, stretching and then looking down to find a curious pair of eyes looking up at him.

“Hi, kiddo,” he said and the boy gave his little wiggle, making Phil smile.

He looked over at Clint, finding him still passed out, and decided to handle the morning himself. He leaned over the child and kissed his husbands temple.

“Mmmm,” Clint moaned. “Kiddo need something?”

“No. Just letting you know we’re getting up,” Phil said. “You did the night, I’ll do breakfast. Go back to sleep.”

Clint sleepily kissed him, patted the kiddo on the tummy, and then rolled over.

Phil smiled before quitting the bed, picking up the kiddo and carrying him out to the lounge. He turned on the TV, finding the Powerpuff Girls. Once again, kiddo was transfixed, and Phil suspected his hearing and eyesight problems were gone along with all the other problems. He made a mental note to get Bruce to check him over. Phil laid him on the changing mat, chuckling at the wiggle, and stripped him of the soaked diaper, noting the improvement of the rash.

“Now that has got to feel better,” he said, pulling out a warmed wipe. “How about some more naked time while I get dressed, huh?”

He wiped him off and then removed the rest of the pyjamas before setting him up on a blanket and towel once again. He got JARVIS to adjust the temperature and then instructed the AI to keep an eye on him while he took the quickest shave and shower he could ever remember taking, and dressed in loose comfortable clothes, better to roll around on the floor with a non-mobile toddler.

Kiddo wiggled as he returned, his little fingers flexing.

“That’s a new one,” he said, setting down the plastic basin he was carrying. “Let’s get you washed and dressed. JARVIS, how do I do this?”

“Available literature suggests that starting with the face and neck and then moving down to the hands is the correct procedure,” JARVIS said. “Instructions then recommend moving on to the child’s genitals and finishing with the feet, Master Coulson.”

“Thank you,” he said, wringing out the sponge in the warm water. He gently wiped off kiddo’s face, running it under his chin and around his ears. “Good boy,” he praised as he rinsed it off, starting on the hands, careful to get between each of his fingers. “I know it’s not as good as a bath, but it’s still pretty good, right?” He moved down, cautious of the rash, and then got a wiggle as he did his feet.

“Are you ticklish?” He wiped the tiny feet again and he got another wiggle and a flexing of the fingers. “Oh, wow, look at you!” There was a tiny twitch of the boys mouth. “Yeah, look at you! Can I have a smile? Come on, you can do it! Come on!” he coaxed as he wiped the sponge over his feet over and over, and eventually, he got a small smile and he gave a little cheer, wiggling one of the feet. “That’s my clever boy!” He leant down and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Good boy!”
He finished up the wash before he applied the rash cream and fastened on a clean diaper before he grabbed the bags of clothes Skye and Darcy had given him the day before.

“Okay, let’s see what the girls got for you,” he said, dumping it all on the floor and rifling through it. He put on a white vest that snapped up between the legs and then looked again. “Oh, this one looks nice.” He held up a yellow t-shirt with Tom and Jerry on it. He snapped off the tags and eased it onto the child, the dark eyes going wide when he managed to grab Phil’s thumb. Phil wiggled the little hand, pressing a kiss to the knuckles. “Clever kiddo.”

He got another timid smile and he answered it with one of his own.

“Those Hydra idiots had no idea what they had, did they?” he asked as he used his free hand to rifle through the clothes, finding a pair of sweatpants with Elmo on one leg. “You’re so much more than they ever thought. I promise that you can be anything you want to be.”

He extricated his hand with a final kiss and slipped the sweatpants on, rifling for a pair of socks. He found a pair that looked like the Cookie Monster and held them up, dangling them over his face, tickling his cheeks with them. He jerkily tried to reach up, his arms barely lifting above his own tummy.

“Don’t worry,” he said as he worked them onto the tiny feet. “You’ll get the hang of it.”

He swept the remaining clothes to one side before he picked him up and carried him to the kitchen. He put some milk into a Captain America bottle and set it in a jug of warm water while he opened the fridge.

“Now, what are we going to try you on today?” he murmured, bouncing him a little. “I suppose we could just go to the penthouse and try another of those pouches. Or should we be thinking of introducing something with a little texture? Maybe fruit yogurt? Ah!” He pulled out a six pack of tiny pots of fromage frais. It was British thing that Clint loved, absolutely couldn’t get enough of them, adored the flavours and the smoothness of them but complained that the pots were so small. One grown man sized mouthful and the pot was empty. “I’m sure Clint won’t mind, seeing as it’s you.”

He propped the kiddo on the sofa, tucked a bib from the clothes pile around his neck and fed him three of them with a teaspoon, one of each flavour, one tiny little scoop at a time. Like Clint, his favourite was the apricot, then the strawberry and then the raspberry. He seemed amused by the cow on the packet, if his little huffing noise was to be interpreted correctly. He mushed the smooth yogurt against the roof of his mouth with his tongue, wiggling at it and flashing his timid smile when Phil crooned how clever he was.

Then Phil cleaned his face with a wet wipe and held him as he made some coffee before he snagged the now warm bottle and the two mugs and making his way to the elevator. JARVIS took them down and Phil paused outside the door to the workshop.

“Is there any chance you’re going to open this door without my typing in my code?” he asked the ceiling, and he was sure the AI sounded amused.

“I will open the door with verbal confirmation of your code this time, Master Coulson, as your hands are full of precious cargo.”

Phil recited his code and then backed through the door, JARVIS lowering the music to baby safe levels.

“No adjust my music, how many times do I have to say that!” Tony wailed as Phil made his way
over to the bench where he was working.

“I think your music might destroy his now perfect hearing,” Phil said, nodding down at the kiddo.

“Oh. Right. Baby ears.”

Phil put down the mugs and pushed one to Tony, who smiled and took a sip.

“And how was kiddo’s first night?”

“Pretty good. Woke up twice, he was wet and out of juice. Clint handled it,” he said as he helped the child take hold of the bottle and tilt it, until he started suckling enthusiastically, giving his little wiggle. “Bedtime had some issues.”

“Such as?” Tony asked as they crossed to the couch and sat down, propping the kiddo between them.

“Wouldn’t let us leave him in the spare room, went pale and completely rigid when we tried, so we brought him in with us. And then he hyperventilated when we turned off the light, so we took the nightlight you bought for Annie’s baby. He did fine after that. And this morning, I got some smiles.”

“He smiled? Seriously? Smiles?”

“Yeah. He’s got ticklish feet. All it took was a little coaxing and hey presto, smiles,” he confirmed as he helped support the bottle with one hand, holding his coffee with the other. “They’re not huge smiles, but they’re there.”

“Wow. Smiling. He must be the only happy one here,” Tony murmured.

“Steve will be fine,” Phil said firmly. “Come on, you know him. He wouldn’t ever not be fine. He spent the better part of a century as an ice sculpture and he’s still going. He’s coming home to you, Tony.”

“Yeah. Doesn’t stop me going out of my mind in the meantime,” Tony said as Phil handed him his mug so he could take the empty bottle. “Holy shit, he went through that fast.”

“Yes. I think it’s because he’s unsure of it lasting. It’s new and exciting and he feels full and satisfied for the first time, so he just can’t slow,” Phil rationalised as he picked him up, supporting him on his lap and rubbing his back.

“Don’t worry, kiddo. Plenty of food here,” Tony said, balancing both mugs in one hand and reaching out to tickle a foot. He got a quirk of the side of the mouth for his trouble. “Was that a smile?” he said with a grin of his own. “Come on, give me another one! Give me a smile!” A pause. “No, no smile.”

Phil chuckled as kiddo burped at him. “You really want to see him smile,” he murmured, turning the kiddo so he was sitting on his lap facing him. “Hey, kiddo. Was that milk good? Are you a clever boy, yeah? Can I have a smile? Come on, give me a smile.”

He smiled his little smile and Phil smiled back, leaning in to kiss his cheek, making the baby wiggle, flexing his little fingers.

“Wow, Phil Coulson, bad ass baby whisperer,” Tony said. “Can I hold him?”

“Of course you can,” Phil said as Tony dumped the mugs on the floor. Phil transferred him to Tony
and smiled at him, calm and reassuring, picking up his coffee and lounging back. “You don’t need to ask, Tony. I actually wanted to talk to you about that.”

“About what?” Tony asked as kiddo managed to grab his thumb and huffed at it.

“Me and Clint…well, more me to be honest, we kind of hijacked him. I just took hold of him and declared I was keeping him. Annie told Clint that she can’t do it, she can’t take care of him, and I accept that. He’s her son, it’s her choice to make. But no one asked you about this. He’s a Stark by blood, a Stark and a Rogers. If you want him, I would give him to you.”

“Oh no, no way,” Tony said with a laugh as the kiddo looked at the light of the reactor and then at U as he whizzed past. “Do I look like a man who should be in charge of a small child? I think not. No, he’s good with you and Robin Hood.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“What about Steve? He might have some objections.”

“Well, Star Spangled Ass isn’t here, so he doesn’t get a say,” Tony said angrily as Dum-E came over, beeping at kiddo. “Hey, Dum-E. This is the kiddo. He’s delicate, so gentle with him.”

Dum-E chirped a few times before ducking his arm and opening and closing his claw a few times. Phil got the impression that the bot was impressed by the tiny human. His claw gently took a little foot and shook it up and down in an imitation of a handshake.

“Good boy,” Tony praised and he chirped and rolled away.

“I think you might already be a parent,” Phil joked.

“Yeah, but when these fuck up I can fix it with a computer.”

They sat for a while, drinking coffee and talking about Steve and Hydra and all the other things Tony needed to talk about.

“What are you going to do about Simmons and the rest of that team?” Tony asked as JARVIS sounded the breakfast warning.

“Nothing I can do,” Phil said, carrying the kiddo to the elevator. “I’m not an agent anymore, Fury’s dead. I have no in, no way to find anything out.”

“I still have a link to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s computers,” Tony said. “I could…”

“I’d appreciate it,” he replied as the doors opened and Skye rushed up to coo at kiddo, who blinked at her.

“Who made breakfast?” Tony asked as they sat down, kiddo wiggling at the sight of Clint.

“I did. You left a mess,” Clint said as he smiled at kiddo.

“I know,” Phil said as he managed to help himself to some pancakes. “I was going to do it later. I wanted to talk to Tony, make sure everything was okay.”

“I talked to Annie,” Clint said. “She’s fine with us taking him.”
“Tony’s fine too.”
“And Steve?”
“Tony said—”
“He’s not here, he doesn’t get a say,” Tony snapped from across the table.
“Tony…” Annie argued.
“No! Two Stark’s say this kid stays with those two, so the Rogers in this equation is outnumbered. End of.”
“The child should go where his mother decrees,” Thor declared.
“How about we leave this discussion for another time,” said Bruce.
“Good idea,” said Phil. “Bruce, will you check him over after we’ve eaten? See if he needs another transfusion or if the one is enough.”
“Of course,” Bruce said with a smile.
“Are we any closer to a name?” Darcy asked.
“No,” Clint said, giving kiddo a taste of honey and laughing at the wiggle. “Any suggestions? Names you can’t stand?”
“Not Howard,” Tony said.
“I second that,” Annie said. “Also, not Edward or Andrew.”
“Any names you do approve of?” Jane enquired.
“Chester,” Annie suggested with a smile. “Colonel Phillips was a Chester.”
“Chester is cruel and unusual punishment. The Howling Commando’s? What were their names? I can’t remember anyone other than Steve,” Darcy said.
“That’s because you like looking at Steve. Let’s see…there was Steve Rogers, Bucky was James Buchanan Barnes, Jim Morita, Dum Dum Dugan…I think his real name was Timothy. He did tell me how he got the nickname, but I can’t remember. Montgomery Falsworth, Gabriel Jones and Jacques Dernier. Any of those?”
“No, he doesn’t look like any of them,” Clint said, peering at the boy. “Please, before you even think it, we are not naming him Francis.”
“Maybe if we narrowed down his surname, it would help,” Bruce suggested.
“Not Stark,” Tony insisted. “He’s going to have a quiet life, not including kidnapping attempts.”
“Agreed,” Phil said. “If we say he’s a Stark, people are going to question why a Stark isn’t raising him. He needs to be a Barton or a Coulson. It’s going to raise questions that he looks like a Stark as it is.”
“A Coulson,” Clint said. “Barton should die with me. Nothing but pain comes with that name. Yours is kind of respectable, as family names go. Soldier dad, bad ass mom. Your sister even has a white
picket fence.”

“And a dog. Don’t forget the dog,” Phil added.

“We have a dog,” Darcy said.

“A golden retriever named Lucky?”

“No, we don’t have one of those.”

After breakfast, they moved to the lounge, where kiddo wiggled as he was set on the floor.

“Watch,” Tony said, moving him to sit in the bowl made by his crossed legs. “Phil’s a baby whisperer.”

Phil chuckled and pulled off the Cookie Monster socks, using them to tickle the soles. Kiddo wiggled and gave a little twitch of his lips, his fingers flexing.


Kiddo threw his arms out straight as he smiled, a little more confident than before. Phil leaned forwards and pecked a kiss on his nose, making his toes squirm.

“Oh my God,” Darcy said. “That is so cool. Will he smile for me? I wanna make him smile.”

“No go,” Tony said. “He’ll only do it for Phil.”

“That’s because Phil is his favourite person ever,” Clint said, sliding over the shape sorter.

Bruce, who had disappeared after breakfast, appeared from the stairwell with his medical kit.

“Hey, you missed it,” Skye said as he joined them. “Kiddo smiled at Phil.”

“Really? That’s amazing,” he said, getting down on the floor with them. “Think I can get a finger stick?”

“Probably,” Phil said. “Want me to do it?”

“If you think he’ll take it better.”

Phil took one of the kiddo’s hands and uncurled his fingers, wiping them off with an alcohol wipe and using a lancet to prick his fingertip. He got a slight raise of the dark eyebrows but nothing more. He squeezed out a drop of blood and held out the hand so Bruce could feed it into a handheld monitor.

Tony had designed it for Annie, so they didn’t need to keep sticking her with needles, using a blood glucose monitor as a basis for the design.

“JARVIS, can you please analyse that against what we got yesterday, see if the gaps in his genetic code are still there?” Bruce asked as Phil wiped off kiddo’s hand and pressed a kiss to the fingertip. He got a smile for it. “Wow, look at that.”


“We tried fromage frais this morning,” Phil said. “He liked it.”
“Is that where they went?” Clint questioned as he settled on his belly on the carpet, kissing at the kiddo’s toes.

“Yes. I’ll replace them.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just couldn’t remember if I ate them.”

“Analysis complete, Dr Banner,” JARVIS said. “Shall I give a verbal rundown of the results, or would you prefer a visual representation?”

“Visual on the Pad, please,” Bruce said, picking it up and looking at it. He smiled. “The gaps are gone, he doesn’t have any more junk DNA than anyone else. Genetic profile puts him at a healthy twenty three month old boy, son of Steve Rogers and Annabelle Stark, with genetic markers for a third unknown source.”

“Good,” Clint said as he teased kiddo with a stuffed lion, getting a wiggle and an attempt at grabbing. “Hey, that’s new. Come on, kiddo. You can do it, just a little more.” He eased back on the movements of the lion, gentling them so the child could get a better chance. “Come on. A little further, buddy, you can do it.”

Kiddo managed to get a grip on an ear and his eyes went wide, his legs straight as his feet wiggled.

“Yay!” Clint cried gently. “That’s my clever guy! Look at you!”

“Is this what fatherhood should be?” Thor asked.

“Pretty much,” Phil said, pressing a kiss to one rounded cheek and then one to Clint’s forehead. “What do the unknown markers do? Why add in another gene donor?”

“Most likely explanation is that they wanted certain traits from this donor, something they had that Hydra thought would enhance kiddo in some way,” Bruce theorised, waggling a ring of chunky plastic keys from side to side so the kiddo would track them with his eyes. “I don’t think he has any problems with his sight. Tony?”

The engineer clicked his fingers behind the toddlers right ear, kiddo turning to try and find the noise, and then he clicked behind the left, getting the same reaction.

“No problems with his hearing,” Bruce said. “Can you lay him down on the floor in just his diaper?”

Phil picked him up and gently removed his clothes, talking to him the whole time and getting a smile and a wiggle for his trouble.

“Clint’s right, Phil is his absolute favourite,” Jane said.

“AC rocks, he has good taste is all,” Skye said. “The ability to recognise absolute bad ass-ness in human form.”

“Bad ass-ness? I do not believe that to be a word,” Loki said.

“It is now,” Tony said.

Phil moved aside and let Bruce take his place, kiddo watching Phil until he leaned against Clint, and then he looked at Bruce.

“Hi, kiddo,” he said, tickling fingertips over his tummy. The kiddo was not amused, trying to bat his hand away with his unsteady hands. “That’s good. Can you reach up here?” he asked, holding his
hand up. Kiddo dropped his arms and just stared at him. “Well, that was a bust.”

“Watch,” Phil said, grabbing the Cookie Monster socks. He dangled them above his face, sweeping them down over his eyes and cheeks until he tried to reach up, once again getting no higher than his own rounded tummy. “That’s my clever boy.” He got a smile and Bruce chuckled.

“I get it, I’m not as good,” he conceded. “How about I just tell you what I need him to do and you find a way to get him to do it?”

“Sounds like solid reasoning,” Phil agreed, returning to his previous place and getting a wiggle.

“Okay, we’ve seen his grip, which is more dominant in his right hand than his left, and his reach, which is weak but better than when he arrived,” Bruce muttered, poking at his tablet. “Can you get him to try grabbing his toes?”

Phil puzzled at the request before he tickled at the little feet, taking him by the ankles and beginning to lift them, ducking so he could kiss his soles, getting a timid smile.

“Yeah, I’ve got your feet,” he said, moving along his toes, kissing each one. “You want them? Come on, kiddo. You can do it.” He slowly lifted them, bending them up towards his tummy and then back again for more kisses before repeating it with lots of soft words of encouragement. Jerkily kiddo reached for them, his eyes going wide and his diaper-covered butt wiggling when he managed it. “Wow! Look at you! You’re a clever boy!”

Another smile.

“Very good,” Bruce said. “I don’t think he’s got any problems with his spine anymore. If you could coax him to roll over, I could check.”

Phil gently retrieved the feet and lowered them, taking the little hands and waving them up and down, straight up above his head and then down again, which the baby thought was a great game and wiggled, trying to kick his legs but looking a little like Elvis in the process.

“Now that is the coolest thing he’s done so far,” Tony declared. “Baby boogie.” He pulled out his phone and started filming.

“Absolutely,” Clint agreed.

Then Phil took his legs and lifted them up, rocking them side to side, twisting him left then right and back again, which got him a flexing of the fingers and an attempt to wave his little arms.

“I know!” he cooed. “It’s fun, right. Shall we do more? Yes? Yes! We’ll do more. To the leeeeeeft,” he sing-songed, rolling the bottom half of the child. “And to the riiiiight. To the left, and to the right. And…over we go!”

He rolled kiddo onto his belly and the baby blinked, looking around as he managed to prop himself up slightly, working his left arm out from under him. He looked at Clint and wiggled his butt again.

“Yes, we’re understanding that you’re the most awesome little guy in the world,” Clint said with a smile. Kiddo smiled as Phil laid down on his other side.

Phil shuffled over, cushioning his head on Tony’s knee, and Bruce ran careful hands over the toddlers back, checking the alignment of his spine, and then moving to his ribs.

“I can’t find any of the malformations I found yesterday,” he said, absolutely stunned. “It’s as if he
“Chalk one up for bio-serum,” Jane said. “What about the high blood pressure and diabetes and all that?”

Bruce looked at the Pad. “Gone. JARVIS can’t find any evidence of them.” He looked at Annie with wonder. The teen was scribbling away at a pad of paper. Bruce got to his feet and crossed to where she was sat by the window.

“I heard you,” she mumbled as he joined her.

“I know,” he said. “Just wondering how you’re doing. Suddenly having a child you didn’t know existed show up has to be unsettling. Not to mention all this stuff with Steve.”

“Steve will be fine,” she said. “I have to believe that. I can’t…anything else is…”

“If we could only get Tony to be this calm about it.”

“Did he sleep at all last night?”

“Not so far as I know, but right now, the fact that he isn’t absolutely trashed on alcohol is a minor miracle. Speaking of miracles…”

“You can have more of my blood to analyse,” she said, glancing up at him. “I know that’s what you’re trying to ask, and I’m saying yes. I’ll come down to your lab after lunch.”

“Thank you,” he said, feeling himself blush. “I hate to ask…”

“Don’t hate to ask,” she said gently, giving him a smile. “I understand. I also want you to know that I’m not blind.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“I see the way you look at me. And I just want to let you know that if you were to make a move, I wouldn’t be offended. Catch me in a good mood and I might even say yes.”

She got to her feet and moved to the sofa, sitting next to Thor. Bruce excused himself to go to the kitchen to calm down.

“Christopher,” Annie said and they all looked at her in question. “His name. It should be Christopher.”

“Tis a good strong name,” Thor said.

“Do you want him to be a Coulson or a Barton?” Clint asked as they finished getting him dressed again.

“Coulson. His name is Christopher James Erskine Coulson.”

“Hell of a mouthful,” Tony said.

“Kiddo is a good nickname,” Bruce said as he returned with a baby bottle of apple juice.

“Kiddo it is,” Phil said, taking him from Clint. “Christopher Coulson. It’s a good name, chosen by his mom.”
They were huddled on the sofas, watching the action unfold with horror and disbelief.

Steve and Natasha fighting for their lives in the middle of Washington D.C.

“This isn’t real,” Skye said. “This can’t be real.”

“Steve’s strong,” Tony said, gnawing at his thumbnail.

They watched as the soldier with a metal arm took a bullet, cracking his sunglasses. He pulled them off, tossing them aside.

Phil was walking around with Kiddo in his arms, bouncing him, trying to ignore what he was seeing.

“Steve’s strong,” Tony repeated and Bruce pulled him into his arms, holding him steady.

“Yes, Tony, he’s very strong,” the scientist agreed. “Just wait. My money is on Steve.”

On the screen, Natasha jumped on the soldier and tried to strangle him, getting thrown off and throwing part of her Widow’s Bites at him, electrocuting the metal arm.

“Nice tech move,” Darcy said.

“I made those,” Tony confirmed.

The soldier ripped off the Bite and paused, adjusting the arm, before he sunk a bullet into Natasha’s shoulder. Phil flinched and clutched the boy tighter; Clint moaned and sunk his hands into his hair.

“Man, she is gonna be pissed,” he muttered. “She hates getting shot.”

The soldier lined up to take another shot, this time a kill shot, when Steve ran in, his shield on his arm. There was a brief shot of the star on the soldiers metal arm.

“Fuck me!” Clint moaned. “He’s the Winter Soldier.”

“What?” Phil spat, spinning around and focussing on the screen, letting out a moan as he saw the star. “Oh, this is bad.”

He passed Kiddo to Loki and sank down onto the sofa next to Clint, who pulled him close and linked their fingers.

“They’re matched,” Tony gasped. “Look at it. They’re matched for strength and training.”


“Yes, indeed,” Loki said, helping Kiddo to tilt his bottle of apple juice, looking highly uncomfortable holding the baby, who didn’t care who was tilting the bottle as long as he could chug his juice. “The Captain is a fine warrior, the best of many I have faced. He is only surpassed by Hulk because of the mammoth’s sheer size and proportional strength. This Winter Soldier is of the same stature as the Captain, I do not believe he shall triumph.”

“Well put,” Thor concurred.

The Soldier took Steve’s shield, embedding it in a van and pulling out his knife, twirling it in his fingers.
Annie leaned forwards, her eyes narrowed in confusion.

“He’ll be okay, Annie,” Bruce said, Thor slipping an arm around her and Jane taking one of her hands.

Steve and the Winter Soldier went at it hammer and tong, one getting the advantage for a few moves before it switched to the other and back again. A knee to the abdomen, a knife to the side of the van, before Steve threw Winter off and grabbed his shield, yanking it from the metal door it was embedded in.

“No,” Annie murmured. “No, it’s not possible.”

“Annie, calm yourself,” Thor soothed, rubbing her shoulder, looking at Jane over the curve of her back.

“Thor’s right,” Jane said. “Getting worked up won’t help the baby.”

Annie got to her feet, a hand on her bump, and approached the screen, looking closely at the Winter Soldier, the blows he was trading with Steve.

The shield was embedded in the metal arm, the two men spun, and Steve flipped him over his shoulder, the mask coming off as he flew, and then Annie sank to her knees as the phone camera an onlooker was using focussed on his uncovered face.

“No,” she cried, tears falling down her face. “No, no, no, no.”

“Annie,” Thor said, crossing to her and carrying her back to the sofa. She buried her face in his chest and sobbed. “Hush, sweet one, hush. Have peace.”

Steve was looking confused on the screen, looking at the Winter Soldier and then uttering a word. The Soldier said something back, moving to go for Steve again before the guy with the wings swooped out of the air and kicked him in the back of the head, Natasha shooting him with a missile before he managed to get a shot off at Steve.

And then the S.H.I.E.L.D. unmarked vans surrounded them, lights blaring. They watched, helpless, as Steve, Natasha and the flying man were restrained and bundled into one van before being driven away, and then the footage went black as the bystanders were corralled.

“So, who was that?” Skye asked. “The Winter guy?”

“He’s called the Winter Soldier,” Phil said as Loki passed Kiddo back to him. “Most of the intelligence community thinks him a myth. He’s credited with dozens of assassinations over the past fifty years. Natasha went up against him a few years ago. In the end he shot the target she was protecting THROUGH Natasha.”

“There’s also evidence that he worked for the Red Room,” Clint said. “Natasha told me once that she remembers someone with that kind of arm training her when she was a kid. And the star? That’s Soviet for sure.”

“Red Room?” Darcy asked.

“KGB, training kids to be assassins,” Tony said. “Where would they take them?”

“I don’t know,” Phil said. “Protocol is to return them to the Triskelion. But the agency is compromised. I don’t know what they’re going to do.”

There was enough silence to hear the faint hum of the coffee machine in the kitchen.

“It can’t be,” Skye said. “He died in 1945.”

“He was experimented on by Hydra before Steve rescued him and the rest of the 107th,” Bruce said. “We have no way of knowing what was done to him.”

“I’m telling you, it was Bucky,” Annie said, shoving her way to her feet and heading to the stairs.

“JARVIS, run facial recognition,” Tony said, and the screen was suddenly filled with the analysis, comparing a still of the Winter Soldier with the picture of Bucky Barnes they had on file.

“Analysis complete, sir,” the AI said. “Facial recognition shows a 93 percent match for the Winter Soldier and Sargent Barnes. It appears that Miss was correct in her assertions of the identity of the Winter Soldier.”

Tony was in his workshop, nursing a fifth of whiskey, when the phone rang.

“Take a message,” he said, reaching for the bottle.

“Sir, Captain Rogers on the line,” JARVIS said.

“Steve?” Tony said breathlessly. “Is that you?”

“Hey,” Steve said and Tony’s legs gave out, Dum-E managing to catch him before he hit the floor. “I’m okay. No broken bones, no blood loss.”

“You promise?”

“I promise. Natasha has a through and through, but she’s being patched up. I’d tell you where we are, but I have no clue,” he said with a chuckle. “Hill saved our asses.”

“Thank God.”

“Yeah. How are things there?”

“Well, Annie spent the day finding whole new hiding places in which to freak out. Steve…”

“It’s him, Tony,” Steve said gently. “It’s Bucky. I’m guessing you guys caught the live feed.”

“Bystanders with camera phones.”

“I hate those things.”

“Don’t knock them, they may single handedly put paparazzi out of business. Steve, tell me you aren’t going after him. Tell me you’re not that stupid.”

“He’s my best friend, Tony. He’s Bucky. I can’t just leave him in Hydra’s hands.”

“He’s the guy that tried to kill you in broad daylight!”

“Don’t do this, Tony,” Steve pleaded. “I called to let you know I’m alive and safe and to let you know I’m going after the agency.”
“What?” Tony screamed. “Tell me this is some kind of badly timed wartime joke!”

“It’s not. Tony, they have helicarriers armed with guns and a targeting system, they’ll kill thousands of people in under a minute if they go live.”

“Oh shit.”

“Yeah. Bruce is on that list, and countless others. They’re going to kill twenty million people. I can’t sit by and let that happen, Tony, I can’t.”

“And fuck if I don’t know it. Fine! Fine. Go do the hero bit. But I swear to all deities everywhere, if you die, I’m going to kill you.”

“Duly noted,” Steve said and Tony could hear the smile. “So what have I missed?”

Tony reeled off everything, from Loki to the psycho AI that was China, and finishing off with Kiddo. He talked fast, blurring it all out, so Steve had no time to interrupt him. He did manage to keep it to himself that, technically, Steve was Kiddo’s father. Leave that little bombshell for when Steve wasn’t facing the whole of S.H.I.E.L.D. and Hydra.

“Tony,” he said once Tony was finished, after a lengthy silence. “Please tell me Loki isn’t under the same roof as everyone I hold dear.”

Tony could clearly picture Steve pinching the bridge of his nose.

“No, he is. He’s taken charge of China, and he’s learned to make toast without turning it completely to charcoal.”

“Tony…”

“He’s human, and he’s not responsible for what happened, and he’s a mess from what his asshole father and Thanos did to him. My tower, I get to declare who lives here. If you get to go after Bucky, I get to have Loki stay here.”

“He’s a murderer. Tony, he killed Phil.”

“And Phil and Clint have made peace with that. If they can accept him, then I don’t see the problem.”

“We’ll discuss this when I get home.”

“There is nothing to discuss,” Tony snapped, slamming down his glass. “You’re not here, you don’t get to make the decisions! I’m the one who is up with Annie in the night, I’m the one calming Loki down when he freaks out, I’m the one feeding your fucking dog, so don’t tell me that we’ll discuss it when you get home!”

There was deafening silence between them.

“You’re right,” Steve said quietly. “I’m not there, I haven’t seen it for myself. I trust you, I do. I’m just worried is all. I want you safe. I want all of you safe.”

“And we are,” Tony said. “We are safe.”

“Okay then. Tony…I’m going to preface this with I’m coming home. I’m coming back to you, and my dog and our bed. But if I can’t…if something happens. Tony, I love you.”
“Don’t say your goodbyes, Capsicle. But I love you, too.”

“I’m not. I just want you to know that before I go in.”

There was some muffled noise in Steve’s background and then Steve called out that he was coming.

“You have to go already?”

“I do, they need me,” Steve said, his tone wistful. “I’ll see you as soon as I can.”

“Come home to me.”

“Always.”

And then he was gone. Tony stood in the deafening silence for a moment before he pulled himself together.

“JARVIS, where is everyone?”

“Gathered in the penthouse lounge, sir, awaiting dinner cooked by Miss Lewis,” the AI replied, his tone gentle.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Macaroni and cheese, sir.”

Tony sighed, rubbed his hands over his face, and then patted Dum-E on his way to the elevator. He entered into a scene that was shockingly domestic.

There was a Disney movie playing, and general lounging around on sofas and the floor, with Helix the dog sniffing curiously at Kiddo as he wriggled on the floor, trying to reach up and grab the toys dangling above him on the baby gym.

“I spoke to Steve,” he announced as Thor sat up to give him room to sit.

“Is he in one piece?” Clint asked from his position on the floor, one arm around the dog. They knew the dog was as soft as they came, but they were still all well aware of all the news stories, so they were keeping an eye with the littlest member of the team.

“Yes. Romanoff has a through and through. And he confirmed that it was Bucky on the bridge.”

“As Annie said,” Thor said.

“He said it,” the girl said, pointing at Thor. “I didn’t.”

“I am lost,” Loki said.

“The equivalent of I told you so,” Clint supplied as Helix licked a little foot and Kiddo went rigid before doing his Elvis thing with his leg. Helix licked again and Kiddo went straight for a wiggle. “Hey, would you look at that,” he said as Helix laid down beside Kiddo, clearly keeping an eye on him.

“Baby’s best friend,” Phil said from where he was lounging on his side, poking at the gym toys every now and then to encourage Kiddo to try and grab them.

“And then we had a fight,” Tony said and they went silent.
“A fight? You guys aren’t even in the same state,” Skye said.

“What was the fight about?” Jane asked.

“Oh, just him pretending that he knows any of what’s going on here, while he’s off doing his hero thing, dictating to me on what I can and can’t do in my own tower!” Tony took a few deep breaths and buried his face in his hands, his knees on his elbows. “Sorry.”

“He wants Kiddo,” Phil said softly, laying a hand on the little rounded tummy.

“No,” Tony said firmly. “No, I didn’t tell him about Kiddo being his. I just told him Kiddo exists, where he came from and that you two are taking him. No need to distract him when he’s about to take on Hydra. Besides, by the time Skye’s finished Kiddo will be officially a Coulson and Steve can do fuck all about it.”

“He’s what?” Skye asked incredulously. “Did you just say he’s taking on Hydra?”

Tony filled them in on the conversation, skipping what Steve was actually pissed about.

“That’s insane,” Bruce said. “He can’t do that, it’s suicide.”

“He’s doing it,” Tony said.

“Of course he is,” Annie said. “He’s Steve, of course he’s doing it. He can’t not. Being frozen is apparently not enough to get it into his head that not everyone is his to save.”

“Annie, he’s doing the hero thing,” Tony said. “It’s his thing. He just can’t walk away from this fight.”

“No, he can’t. And he can’t just walk away from Bucky. The guy went into Nazi occupied territory on his own with no back up to get Bucky. I’m sure a whole intelligence agency will be no problem after the Red Skull,” she said sarcastically before she let out an ‘oof’ and put a hand to her bump.

She grabbed Thor’s hand and dragged him across the floor to press it against her bump, and after a few seconds his face fell into a huge smile.

“Finally,” Jane said. “Took long enough.”

“And look, gone still again,” Annie said. “I swear, when I can’t get this kid to sleep, I’m just going to dump it on Thor and let him work his magic.”

“Magic?” Loki questioned.

“Just an expression,” Phil assured. “Not actual magic. Loki, will you refill Kiddo’s juice for me, please?”

“By all means,” he said, accepting the bottle and moving to the kitchen.

“He’s mad about Loki,” Phil said.

“Got it in two,” Tony said. “I told him that you’re okay with Loki, and Clint, so Steve can go to hell about it.”

“I don’t wish there to be problems between you and the Captain,” Thor said.

“No, don’t go there,” Tony said. “Loki stays, that’s final. Now shut up before he comes back.”
Dinner was enjoyed by all, and they managed to get Kiddo to try some. Clint beat the hell out of it until it was a lumpy paste and then Phil managed to coax him into trying it. It was a huge success, and, under Bruce’s encouragement, they tried him on some of the overcooked macaroni.

“That’s it,” Phil crooned, pushing a curve of pasta into the little mouth. “It’s nice, huh! Big boy food! Make you big and strong.”

Kiddo pushed at it with his tongue, getting all the sauce off, and then he tried to figure out what to do with the actual pasta. He managed to smush it a little, so it was completely misshapen when it fell from his lips.

“Not bad for a first go,” Jane said.

“I think he liked it,” Tony said, passing Phil a small bowl with a spoonful of pasta in it.

Kiddo wiggled like crazy when he saw it and they all laughed at him. Bruce leaned over and adjusted his bib and Phil set to work carefully spooning in one macaroni at a time, letting Kiddo attempt to eat it and then wiping away what dribbled out.

“I think he’s only getting half of it,” Thor said.

“Better than nothing,” Clint said as he and Phil switched, Clint taking kiddo and helping him to guzzle some juice (pineapple this time, also a big hit), while Phil ate his own dinner.

They spent the evening once again playing with Kiddo before Phil and Clint took him off to bed, and then everyone slowly drifted off to do their own thing, whether that was screwing each other’s brains out (Thor and Jane) or tinkering with some mechanical marvel (Tony).

Annie couldn’t sleep. She tossed and turned for hours, before she gave up. She asked JARVIS who was awake and then made her way down to Jane’s lab.

“I guess ideas really can’t tell time,” she said as Jane looked at her. “What are you working on?”

“Comparative analysis between the energy of the Bifrost and your episodes.”

“Again?”

“The last four were inconclusive, but with every one you have we get more data. This new thing of the lightning from your hands…that’s indispensable.”

“I’ve never seen anyone get so excited about an attempt to electrocute their boyfriend.”

“He handles lightning every day, he’s fine,” Jane dismissed, looking at some of her numbers. “You couldn’t sleep?”

“No.”

“Restless baby?”

“A little but nothing enough to keep me up. I was thinking about some stuff.”

“Oh? Anything you need some help with? Be warned, if it’s an engineering question, Tony might be a better bet. He’s in his workshop.”

“No, no engineering. Loki seems to be handling China okay. I was just going over things about Kiddo and Steve and some other stuff. Jane…we’re friends, right?”
“Of course,” the scientist said, looking up at her in surprise. “I’d say we were family at this point.”

“So if I asked you for something…you’d at least consider it.”

“Yes.”

“I can’t take care of Kiddo. I look at him and…and all I can see is what was done to me, what was
done to him. He deserves better than that. He deserves people who will love him no matter what, and
he’s got that with Phil and Clint. I’m happy with the arrangement. But it got me thinking. This
baby,” she said, laying a hand on her bump. “It kind of occurred to me that there’s a chance that the
same thing could happen. I could give birth to this one and look at it and be completely
overwhelmed.”

“You won’t.”

“I might. There’s a chance of it, you know that as well as I do. Jane…if it happens, if I can’t do it…I
want you to take the baby. You and Thor.”

“That’s a lot to ask me.”

“I know, I know it is, and I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t think the question needed to be asked. You
love Thor, and I can see how much you love the baby as well, and it isn’t even born yet. I want that
for my children, I want them to be with people who love them unconditionally. I’ve got that for
Kiddo. I want that for this baby too. I just…I want a backup plan.”

Jane crossed the lab and took Annie’s hands.

“Okay. If it comes to it, I’ll take the baby. But you’re still the mom. I refuse to have your baby call
me mom unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Deal,” Annie said and collapsed into Jane’s hug, suddenly insanely sleepy.

Kiddo was wiggling madly at Tony passing back and forth in front of him.

Tony had bought a bouncing chair big enough for Kiddo, declared it a ‘woeful excuse for
engineering and design’, and then improved it, stripping it down to the bare bones and then building
it back up again. He had reinforced the frame, reupholstered the seat with double thick padding and
Avengers fabric, added in a vibration for when Kiddo was restless, installed a communication system
that tied directly into both JARVIS and a baby monitor Phil could carry with him. It even had a cup
holder for Kiddo’s juice.

The result was a toddler that loved his seat and wiggled from the moment he was strapped into it.

Phil had set up a bar of toys from the baby gym over it, trying to get Kiddo to reach for them. Kiddo
had other ideas. Tony was far more entertaining.

“Maybe we should just have Tony pace in front of him every day,” Darcy suggested. “Way better
than kids TV.”

“Tony, maybe you should sit down,” Rhodey suggested. He’d flown in as soon as the footage of the
Helicarrier hitting the Triskelion had hit the news. His Iron Patriot armour was undergoing
maintenance by JARVIS.
“No,” Tony grunted. “Can’t. Waiting.”

“You can sit and wait,” Loki said.

“Can’t.”

“Very well.” He looked over at Annie, who was scribbling away on her pad of paper and absentmindedly stroking Helix’s ear. He crossed to the window where she was sitting and sat down with her. “You don’t seem very worried.”

“I’m not,” she said, not lifting her eyes. “He’s not dead until someone shows me a body.”

“Hey, what’s the consensus on walnuts?” Clint asked as he looked out from the kitchen.

“I don’t like them,” Annie said.

“Roger that, no walnuts.”

“What are you making?” Loki questioned, the first interaction he had initiated with Clint.

“Brownies. Blocks of squidgy chocolate-y goodness.”

“I am all in favour of this brownie,” Thor declared and Clint went back to his baking.

“I’m with Annie on this,” Rhodey said. “Assume the best until you’re shown the worst.”

“Sir, Miss Potts is on the line,” JARVIS said.

“Take a message,” Tony said.

“She is rather insistent, sir.”

“I’ll take it,” Phil said, getting up from the floor and ducking into the kitchen.

“What if he doesn’t come home?” Tony mumbled. “The last thing we did was fight. I don’t want that to be our last conversation.”

“It’s not,” Annie said. “Not until there’s a body.”

“Sir, incoming call for you, a Mr Sam Wilson,” JARVIS announced.

“Take a message.”

“I’ll take it,” Rhodey said, pulling out his cell phone. “Col. James Rhodes, Mr Stark isn’t available at the moment, how can I help?” He went silent as he listened to the person on the other end. “Can you hold on a moment? Thanks.” He put his hand over the mouthpiece. “Tony, he’s alive. They found him on the bank of the Potomac.”

Tony spun on one leg and toppled over, getting a half a smile from Kiddo and Helix trotting over to sniff at him.

“He’s alive? Is he okay? Where is he?”

Rhodey relayed the questions and nodded along to what he was being told.

“He’s alive, he’s in the hospital, they’re just waiting for him to wake up. They think he hit his head, but his vitals are all super soldier good.”
Tony went completely floppy, rolling onto his back and scratching the dog behind the ears. “I’m on my way. Tell Wilson to stay with him until I get there.”

Within moments Tony has hauled himself to his feet and made his way out to the landing pad, walking along it and letting JARVIS suit him up before he took off.

Clint sat up and picked up Kiddo before making his way out of the room, startled when Steve emerged from the elevator.

It had been a week since Steve was released from the hospital, and four days since the trail for Bucky had gone completely cold. Steve had been in a bad mood ever since, a mood that hadn’t been improved by Annie revealing Kiddo’s biological parentage to him.

Needless to say that Steve had not been impressed.

The resulting argument between Steve and Tony and between Steve and Annie had gotten downright cruel. Clint had been shocked by how nasty Steve had become. He and Phil had decided it best to do as Annie and Tony told them and keep Kiddo on their floor until it calmed down. That had been two days ago.

“Steve. Something I can help you with?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. He did,” he said, nodding down at the toddler, who was staring at the new face. “He’s wet and out of juice. He wakes me in the night, and Phil does breakfast.” He chuckled when Kiddo wiggled and looked back at the bedroom door. “Yeah, I know, Phil’s your favourite. Let the man get some sleep.”

“I just wanted…I don’t know what I wanted,” Steve admitted. “I came home and he was here, and Bucky’s gone…”

“I know, man,” Clint said. “I get it. Come on, you can keep us company for a while.”

Clint moved to the changing mat, laying him down as he wiggled.

“He does that when he’s happy or excited,” Clint said as he pulled off the pyjama pants. “He thinks having a dry butt is awesome.”

“How about smiles?”

“Purely for Phil, he won’t even entertain the notion of smiles for others. Though Tony occasionally gets a half smile, like a little quirk of the corner of his mouth. Usually when Tony’s being an idiot. It’s all the movement he likes; Tony’s never still or quiet. Better than kids TV, man, I swear.”

Clint removed the wet diaper and balled it up, dunking it into the diaper pail before wiping him off. The rash was gone, his skin a perfect creamy white, and no one wanted it to reappear. Clint smoothed on a layer of cream before strapping on a new diaper and redressing him.

“How about it, Kiddo?” he asked, holding out his hands. “Come on, buddy, you can do it. Come on. Just a little? Just give it a shot for me? Come on, give it a try.”

Jerkily, Kiddo managed to take Clint’s fingers in his hands and start pulling, Clint doing his own
pulling, until he was sitting, blinking around at himself before doing his Elvis leg wiggle.

“I know! You’re awesome!” Clint crowed. “Even at three in the morning.” He looked at Steve, who was perched on the couch watching with interest. “He can’t do it by himself. He’s around about a four or five month old in terms of his physical capabilities. The weaning is going good though, he’s getting the hang of that. No sound though. Bruce says his hearing is fine, and he doesn’t seem to have any problems hearing sounds, so at this point we think it’s just residual fear.”

“Of Hydra,” Steve finishes as Clint stands up with Kiddo in his arms. “Who decided on Kiddo?”

“I guess me, I suppose. I started calling him kiddo as a nickname, and then he started looking at whoever said kiddo. And then it kind of stuck. It’s not Kiddo on his birth certificate if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“What is it on his papers?”

“Christopher. Christopher James Erskine Coulson.”

“Not Stark?”

“No. Annie wanted him a Coulson. It was either Coulson or Barton, and honestly, that name needs to end with me.”

Clint beckoned him to follow and they moved to the kitchen. Clint put the baby bottle on the counter and then looked at Steve.

“You wanna hold him?”

Steve looked like he’d just been asked to hold a live rattlesnake.

“He doesn’t even know me,” Steve argued.

“A week and a half ago he didn’t know any of us. Here,” he said, turning Kiddo around and pushing him into Steve’s chest, the soldiers arms coming up automatically. He adjusted Cap’s hold and then let go. “See? Nothing to it.”

Steve looked at the little boy in his arms and smiled at the dark eyes. “He looks like Annie,” he murmured.

“Annie says he looks like her twin, Andrew,” Clint said as he pulled out the red grape juice. So far, they hadn’t found a juice Kiddo didn’t go nuts for. As he unscrewed the cap, Kiddo wiggled and Steve looked like a bomb had just gone off, his arms tightening. “Easy, Cap,” Clint said with a laugh. “I know I said he was delayed, but he’s not made of glass. You won’t drop him. If Tony can manage not to drop him, you sure won’t. He’s excited about his juice is all.”

“I wasn’t expecting it. With him not knowing me.”

“Man, he will wiggle for juice no matter what. If it was Red Skull himself holding him, he would still wiggle for juice. And Phil.”

“He really loves Phil, huh?”

“You have no idea,” Clint said as he filled the bottle. “He would do anything for Phil, even sleep alone in the dark if Phil asked him to.” Steve shot him a confused look. “He won’t sleep on his own, or in the dark. He sleeps in the bed with me and Phil with a nightlight on.”
“Why?”

“Annie says it’s because he’s never had it,” he said, screwing the lid back on and putting the juice back in the fridge before reaching for the teat. “She doesn’t remember it ever getting dark in that lab, or that she was ever alone. She said that there was always someone there, watching her, doing something. We’re working on the pretty solid theory that he had the same treatment as Annie.”

“I didn’t know she was remembering,” Steve said. “She didn’t say.”

“It’s why we’ve got Kiddo,” Clint said as he screwed on the teat. “She couldn’t deal. He showed up and she freaked. She loves him, wants the best for him, but she can’t give that. Me and Phil can. She and Tony decided on the finalities of this, they decided that this was best for him, staying with Phil.”

“I should have been asked,” Steve argued.

“And the unnamed third donor? Should he or she have been asked? Had a say? Had a chance to take him away from us?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that he’s my son, I should have had a say in his living arrangements.”

“Okay,” Clint said, leaning back against the counter, fiddling with the bottle in his hands. Kiddo was reaching for the dog-tags around Steve’s neck, trying to get to the shiny metal. It looked like hard work. “So what’s your say?”

“What?”


“No! I didn’t say that!”

“Then what are you saying? You’re mad about Annie making a decision, saying you should have been asked. So I’m asking. What do you want?”

Steve paused, looking down at Kiddo who’s hand was slowly inching up his chest, a look of absolute concentration on his face.

“I want him to be safe,” he said eventually. “I want him to be safe, and loved, and happy. I want him not to want for anything. I want him to have a home and a family.”

“Okay. He’s got all those things. Steve, you and me, we don’t live like normal people. We don’t have the 9 to 5, pension plan kind of lives that everyone else out there does. Me and Phil have talked about this. Phil will never be in the field again, never. Not with the injuries he sustained and the trauma he went through. So he will always be here with Kiddo when we go on missions. Kiddo loves him, absolutely adores him. He’s safe and warm and fed. He’s happy here, he’s got two parents that he can rely on, and another two that can teach him to be bad-ass.”

“I know. I just…”

“He was a shock,” Clint said as Kiddo managed to wrap one tiny fist around a tag, his eyebrows raising and but wiggling. “Yeah, I see,” he said as Kiddo looked at him. “I see what you did. You’re my clever little guy. What you gonna do with it now?”

Kiddo decided the tag needed a thorough oral exploration and stuck it in his mouth.
“Yeah, I kind of figured that’s what you’d do,” Clint said before he focussed on Steve once more. “You think I didn’t have reservations? Steve, this kid was not in my life plan, even before Phil supposedly died. I’m a gay man, married to another gay man. Children were not on the cards. We figured that maybe, somewhere down the line, we’d get a houseplant, and then maybe a cat or dog.”

“What changed?” Steve asked.

“He appeared,” Clint said. “He was dropped on us, quite literally, and we all just adapted. And when we looked around at how everything had settled… it worked. We all want what’s best for him, even if that’s not me and Phil. Steve, if you think he’s better off somewhere else, with someone else, then we’d do that. So what do you want?”

Steve was silent for a while, watching Kiddo chew his tag and grip at the chain holding it.

“Annie’s right,” he said quietly. “He’s better off with you and Phil. It’s about what’s best for him, and staying here with you two is what’s best.”

“Oh, kay then. Steve…you know we’re not taking him away from you, right? No one is going to deny that he’s your son. No one’s going to stop you seeing him or spending time with him.”

“I know. I guess I just…”

“I know. Annie freaked out too,” Kiddo dropped the tag and went rigid, looking at Clint. “Ah, he’s had enough. Wants juice and bed,” he said, taking the baby, who snuggled his face into Clint’s neck.

“I’ll go, let you guys get to bed.”

“Night, man,” Clint said, clapping him on the arm. He looked at Kiddo. “Gonna say bye? Yeah?” He took a little hand, which Kiddo opened for him, and together they waved at Steve as he moved to the elevator.

Steve’s last sight before the doors closed was Clint disappearing down the hall, murmuring to the baby who looked happily content in his arms.

SAM

Sam dumped the packing boxes he’d picked up on the way back from his run and moved to the fridge, pulling out the orange juice. The hair on the back of his neck prickled and he slowly turned to look at his table.

Sitting exactly where Steve had sat, was the Winter Soldier.

Chapter End Notes

I am on a roll with this one. It's Kiddo, he's just too cute.

Leave me a comment and let me know what you thought of this chapter, I would love to know.

You can now find me on Facebook, where I put up little bits of what's going on in my head while I'm writing, and other things, like my inspirations, that can't make it into the chapter.
Sam swallowed his mouthful of orange juice and slowly put the bottle on the counter, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Just to start,” he said gently, forcedly casual. “You here to kill me?”

The Winter Soldier shook his head.

“Good. That’s real good, man. You want some breakfast?”

As the dawn broke over the city, Steve decided to climb into bed with Tony rather than set out on his run. He could always make it up on the treadmill later. Or, if he was really lucky, Tony might help him burn off some energy.

Tony rolled sleepily into his warmth, hands pressing against his heart.

“Decided that our bed is more comfortable than the one on your floor?” Tony murmured.

“I talked to Clint,” Steve said softly. “He let me hold Kiddo. And I realised I’ve been an idiot.”

“Oh, really? You think?”

“I overreacted. I came home and there was this kid that Annie was saying was mine, and I was all mixed up over S.H.I.E.L.D. and Bucky and everything, and I just wanted to do something right, and I thought of my mom and how she would always say to me that as long as you had love you had enough…”

Tony surged up and kissed him to shut him up.

“For once, not me babbling,” Tony said. “And I know where it came from. So does Annie. Neither of us are mad. As long as you realise that we did this FOR Kiddo, did what was best for him.”

“I do. I do realise that. And I’m very.” He pressed a kiss to Tony’s lips. “Very.” One to his cheek. “Very sorry.” Another to his throat.

“Good,” he said, and then moaned as Steve’s hand burrowed into his pyjama bottoms, long fingers wrapping around his morning wood. “Oh, I missed you.”

“I missed you too, and did I mention I was sorry?”

“Nygh!” Tony whimpered as Steve began to stroke.

“Let me show you how sorry I am, how much I missed you,” Steve purred as he set a gentle rhythm, slow to start with and then building as pre-ejaculate dribbled out, smoothing his touch. He reached into the nightstand and pulled out the tube of lube, pulling away from Tony to coat his fingers, pulling off Tony’s pyjamas as he warmed it in his hand.

“You know, I don’t think you can use this to apologise to Annie,” Tony argued as he helped Steve
strip them both.

“No, I’ll find some other way. But I want to do it with you.”

“Oh, that’s all I need to hear,” Tony purred as he spread his legs, Steve making short work of working two fingers into him. “Mmmm, not too much. Want the burn.”

“Okay,” he agreed, licking at a nipple before taking it between his teeth and biting hard, making Tony cry out and arch his back. He ducked down and wrapped his lips around Tony’s cock, sucking hard, teasing the slit with his tongue as his fingers thrust into the tight hole.

“No! No, I’ll come!” Tony protested, slapping at his head, and Steve sat up with a chuckled. “Now, now, fuck me now, no more prep.”

“You can’t be ready.”

“I am, also willing and able. Come on come on come on!”

Steve chuckled and coated himself in a thin layer of gel before lifting Tony’s leg up, setting his ankle on his shoulder. Tony pulled the other one back and Steve lined up, kissing Tony’s calf, pushing on the exposed back of his thigh as he worked himself in. Tony buried his fingers in his own hair, his eyes closed as he savoured the stretch of muscles he rarely used, the slight burn of his hole as Steve slowly breached him, a little at a time, a tiny pull back and then a little further, repeated until he felt his balls rest against him.

“Steve,” he moaned, reaching up to grip the wide shoulders.

Steve was still, his head dropped down between them, breathing hard as his fingers flexed on his ankle and thigh. After a moment of breathing through his nose, he looked at Tony, flashing a wicked smile as he pulled back and then thrust in hard.

Tony jack-knifed off the bed, howling in pleasure. Steve grinned in self-satisfaction. He loved it when Tony lost control.

He set a punishing pace, forcing scream after scream from the pliant body beneath him, bending Tony in ways that would make any yoga class jealous. Soon enough Tony began to claw at him, and he felt the blood drip down his back. It just made him so insanely turned on that Tony could hurt him and make it feel so good at the same time.

Unusually, it was Tony that came first, pulling on Steve’s hair hard enough to pull out a few strands, crashing their mouths together for a kiss as he screamed. Steve let himself go, thrusting hard and wild until he let himself go in Tony, coating the passage with his release.

They lay together, basking in the glow of it, before they finally quit the bed and made their way to the shower. They took their time, cleansing each other, and then they headed to the kitchen, where Tony gingerly perched on a stool and sipped at his coffee while Steve cooked.

“Did you two make up?” Annie asked as she entered, Helix on her heels.

“We did,” Steve said, fiddling with the pack of bacon in his hands. “And… I talked to Clint…and I…”

“Shut up,” she said as she picked up the mug of sweet tea JARVIS had made for her with the fancy coffee machine. “All I want to know is that you’re going to stop making a fuss about what I do with my son.”
“OUR son,” he corrected. “And yes, I’ll shut my mouth. He’s best off with Phil and Clint.”

“Good,” she said. “Knew you weren’t all idiot.”

Sam set down the scrambled eggs and bacon, adding coffee and toast and then taking a seat.

Winter slowly helped himself to a banana from the fruit bowl and then a cup of coffee, once Sam had taken a sip himself.

“So…how’ve you been?” Sam asked between bites of egg. “‘Cause we…well, we kinda came looking for you. You’re one tough guy to find.”

“Didn’t want to be found,” he replied.

“I get that. Needed some time. Been there myself.”

“Smithsonian.”

“You went to the Smithsonian?” Winter nodded. “Oh. The Howling Commando’s exhibit. The bit on who you were. Gotta be weird, seeing yourself up there, larger than life.”

“Not me,” he growled and Sam froze in his reaching for the bacon.


There was no response.

“Okay. How about we just forget names for now, huh? Okay, good. So, what do we talk about? Hmm. You follow any sports? Steve likes baseball.”

“Steve, the man on the helicarrier,” Winter said. “He was in the water.”

“We found him. He spent about a day and a half in hospital, and I think that’s because they didn’t know what he’d swallowed from the water. He’s fine, he’s home now.”

“Here.”

“No, New York. He lives in Stark Tower.”

Sam jumped as he stood up, stalking to the door, yanking up his hood on the way. The door hadn’t even closed before Sam reached for his cell.

Steve had just placed the last plate on the table when Phil and Clint appeared from the elevator, Kiddo in Phil’s arms.

“Hey,” Bruce called. “You guys joining us this morning?”

“Yes,” Phil said as Clint set up the highchair. “We thought it was time Steve got to have breakfast with Kiddo. You know, without all the drama.”

“What does he eat?” Steve asked.
“This,” Clint said, placing a few things on a plastic plate and cutting them until small pieces while Phil strapped Kiddo into his chair. “He’s already had his milk and yogurts, now it’s this.”

“Seems a lot for a little guy,” Steve said doubtfully, looking at the mess of cut up sausage, hash brown and toast.

“He just picks at this,” Phil said as he sat down, reaching for the pancakes. “It’s to get his hands working, and some solids to try his hand at.”

“Yeah, he figured out last night that those hard things in his mouth actually do things. I will never look at a strawberry the same way again,” Clint said as he set the plate on the tray, Kiddo wiggling at it.

“I know this one,” Steve said with a smile. “He’s happy, right?”

“Yup,” Clint said. “Or excited. Something like that.”

They settled in to eat, light conversation passing around, Darcy focussing her camera on the Avengers as they ate until Bruce asked her to put it away, his cheeks burning. The latest consensus of comments on the vlog were that Bruce had the cutest butt. It was a constant source of embarrassment for him.

Steve excused himself to answer his phone, and then returned a few minutes later with his face ashen.

“That was Sam.”

“Good. I like Sam. How’s the packing going?” Tony said, licking ketchup off his fingers.

“Bucky paid him a visit.”

They all froze, all except Kiddo who was determinedly trying to get a hold of a piece of sausage.

“Is Sam okay?” Annie asked quietly.

“He’s fine, but he thinks Bucky’s on his way here. It was all calm until he told Bucky I was living here, and then he bolted. Didn’t even close the door behind him, and by the time Sam got to the door he was gone.”

They all jumped as Annie shoved away from the table and stormed out to the balcony. Steve made to follow but Bruce stopped him.

“Just give her a minute,” the scientist said. “She’ll be fine.”

“JARVIS, keep an eye out. Last thing we need is being surprised by the Winter Soldier,” Tony said.

“Of course, sir,” JARVIS said. “Might I take this opportunity to mention that Miss Potts has arrived and is currently ascending in the elevator. She seems rather irate, sir.”

“What the hell about? I haven’t done anything!”

“Anthony Edward Stark!” Pepper screamed as she emerged, and Phil had to pick up Kiddo as he went rigid.

“Hey!” Clint yelled. “Shut the fuck up!” Phil spirited the toddler out to the balcony. “You come in here, not only disturbing our breakfast but terrifying my son in the process!”
“Your son?” she asked. “The tabloids are painting him as Tony’s, not to mention the unnamed pregnant woman living here, who they think Tony is sleeping with!” she spat.

“And that gives you a right to come in here screaming the odds?”

“The shareholders screaming down the phone at me does!”

“ENOUGH!” Tony roared. “Enough! No more screaming! No more accusations! Everyone sit the fuck down! Clint, go check on Kiddo. Pepper, give me the magazines.” He held out his hands and she passed him the glossy sheathes of paper. “JARVIS, find what she’s talking about online and compile a summary for me.”

Tony sat down, flicking through them, and Steve looked over his shoulder.

“The vlog,” Tony said. “These are stills from the vlog.”

“No way!” Darcy protested. “I take every care not to film Kiddo and Annie.”

“It’s microseconds,” Tony said. “Their reflections in things, the view of them as you move the camera. You haven’t filmed them directly, but someone managed to get pictures anyway.”

“And now the stock holders are going crazy,” Pepper spat.

“Okay, enough of you talking to him like that!” Steve snarled. “You are not welcome to do that.”

“Steve, calm down,” Tony said. “She’s just blowing off steam, assuming this is my fault.”

“There’s a child that looks like Tony, enough like him to get tongues wagging,” Pepper hissed at Steve. “There’s a woman living here who is carrying a baby, a baby that the paparazzi are speculating like crazy about. The shareholders are now screaming about how irresponsible Tony is and how they’re going to start pulling out of Stark Industries.”

“That’s our problem, not yours,” Annie snapped as she came back in, folding her arms and squaring up to Pepper. “All you ever seem to do around here is scream at Tony. You have no right to waltz into our home and distress a toddler.”

“I have a right to protect the company interests,” she argued, her hands on her hips. The others watched it play out, wondering which one would come out on top.

“Ten bucks on Annie,” Darcy whispered at Jane.

“I dunno, she’s got a lot of rage,” Jane countered.

“Not your company,” Annie snarled.

“I’m CEO!”

“Not anymore,” Annie said. “See, in Howard’s will, which Phil was kind enough to help me look over last week, he left the company to me. Tony only got it because I wasn’t around.”

Pepper had frozen on the spot and Darcy reached for her wallet.

“The company is Annie’s,” Phil said as he returned, Kiddo content in his arms but looking at Pepper mistrustfully. “Everything is Annie’s. In fact, without extensive meetings with Tony’s lawyers, everything with the Stark name on it is hers by law. At least, they think it is. They’re working through the legal side of it all.”
“I want you out of my Tower,” Annie said. “And I’ll let you know if you still have a job. Thor, honey, will you see her out?”

Thor gently guided the speechless redhead to the elevator and Tony smirked at Annie and Phil.

“Is that true?”

“Yes, it actually is,” Phil said as he returned to his seat, cuddling Kiddo close and giving him his juice. Kiddo had actually figured out how to tilt it on his own by using Phil’s chest as well as his hands to get it at the right angle. “Your lawyers are having a field day. They called me with this last week, having been informed about Annie’s return. It shot up all sorts of red flags on their system.”

“Am I broke?” Tony asked amusedly. “Am I living on an allowance?”

“Do you want to be?” Annie said with a grin, peering at the double page spread of speculation on who she was.

“We’ll leave that to the lawyers,” Steve said, biting into an apple. “What are we going to do about this?” he asked, motioning to the magazines.

“I am so sorry,” Darcy said. “I had no idea.”

“Hey, no, it’s not your fault,” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Clint agreed. “It’s a slow news day, and some asshole has too much time on their hands.”

They eventually moved to the lounge, Darcy insisting on doing the dishes and Loki lingering to help her.

“Come on, Kiddo,” Phil crooned, laying him down and positioning the baby gym over him. “You can do it. Just reach a little further.”

Kiddo jerkily waved his arms before he arched his back, pushing with his feet, until he managed to wrap his little fingers around a dangling mirror.

“That’s my clever guy!” Phil cheered, kissing one of his cheeks and Kiddo smiled at him, kicking his legs, the mirror slipping from his grasp.

“You’re right,” Steve said to Clint. “He belongs with Phil.”

Steve set a steady pace as he jogged around the city, trying to burn off some energy and clear his mind.

Only the energy plan was working.

As predicted, every gossip site, tabloid magazine and paper, and talk show host was going nuts over the pictures of Kiddo and Annie. There were speculations galore, and most of them falling on the not nice side of it. In Steve’s time, such things would never have been said of a lady, or a child, and it made his skin crawl to think of what they were branding Annie. They had no idea what was going on, what had gone on, what Annie and Kiddo had both been through.

Steve almost tripped over his own feet when he saw the sign. It had to be fate. He walked up to the security guard and asked to speak to the lady in charge, a call was put through, and Steve was ushered in, swept through the chaos by an assistant.
“Steve!” she cried, gifting him a hug. “When they said Captain America wanted to talk to me, I thought they meant the phone.”

“No,” he said with a smile. “I was out on a run, trying to work off some steam, and I saw the crews setting up.”

“Well, I’m glad you did. We’re here to shoot a few specials for over the holiday season.”

“Early for that isn’t it?”

“Not really,” she said, leading him to her trailer and pouring him a coffee. “It’s all the editing and special effects, they want it to look really festive.”

“Oh, I get it.” He sighed. “Have you seen them? Because I think you’re the only host who hasn’t passed comment on them.”

“I’ve seen them,” she admitted. “I admit, we’re horrified by what’s being said. In all honesty, if I hadn’t heard from one of you by the end of the week I would have called. This must be heart-breaking for you all.”

“That’s one word for it. We just don’t know what to do. We’ve got all kinds of people calling for interviews and official statements. All the fans crowding around the Tower, that’s quadrupled in the last few days, and it’s only getting worse.”

“What can I do, Steve? If there’s something I can do to help, then tell me.”

“I was wondering if you’d help us tell the truth. Some interviews or maybe one of those things where you come for breakfast with a camera on you.”

She didn’t even hesitate before she pulled in her assistant and cleared her schedule for the next day.

The Winter Soldier watched the entrance to the building, the growing number of people. He wished he had his rifle.

Memories of his kills, of people he had maybe once known, of places he’d been…of what Hydra had done to him. It all blurred together, all one jumble in his mind of sounds and images and faces in the dark.

He had so many memories of heads snapping back as a bullet entered their skull, cars spinning out of control, buildings exploding. So many dead bodies, so many lives he had ended.

The scientists wiping him, the pain of the current as it moved through his head and down his spine; the pinch of the Weapon as it was adjusted, never quite right but enough for their purposes; the burn of ice as he was put into cryo again and again and again.

And then there was the man, Steve. He had seemed so sure of himself, so certain that they knew each other, that he was Bucky. And the picture in the Smithsonian…it was his face, but it called him a hero, a long-time friend of Steve.

It couldn’t be him.

But this Steve…he knew him. He had been smaller then…a long time ago, but he had known him.

And maybe Steve still did want to know him. All he had to do was get into the building.
Tony zipped up his jeans and reached for his shirt, his mind already a million miles away.

“I could use polybutadiene as the whole inner casing,” he mumbled to himself.

“No, Tony,” Steve said, grabbing his attention. “We’re doing the video interviews today, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember,” he said. “It’s just-”

“No, Tony,” he repeated. “Do this and then you can go and play, not a moment before.”

Tony huffed and nodded, following Steve out of the room to meet the host as she emerged from the elevator, Thor and her camera crew in tow.

“Ellen! Great to see you,” he said, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “How’s Portia?”

“She’s good, Tony. How are you doing?” Ellen said, following him to the table where everyone else was waiting, aside from Phil and Clint, who hadn’t arrived yet with Kiddo, and Annie, who was laying on the lounge floor, throwing a ball for Helix.

“We’ve been better.”

Bruce nodded at her as he made his way over to Annie, kneeling down behind her to press at her back, making her shriek and then moan as a couple of muscles released.

“Thor, a little help,” Annie called and the huge man made his way over.

He kneeled in front of her at Bruce’s urging and she grabbed his hand, resting it on her bump. Almost immediately she relaxed.

“Explain to me why your child decides that my kidneys are punch bags,” she said and Thor grinned.

“I wish to know why it is my child when you are unhappy, and yours when you are,” he questioned.

“Because it’s obviously your fault,” she said.

“Okay, no more blame,” Steve said. “Breakfast.”

They made their way to the table, settling down and exchanging harmless conversation until Clint and Phil arrived with Kiddo, who looked at the new woman sitting next to his Tony with suspicion.

“Well hi there,” Ellen said and Kiddo buried his face in Clint’s neck.

“Oh, it’s okay,” Clint soothed, smiling at Phil. “She’s a nice lady. She’s come to play. Yeah! We’re gonna play. We’ll have some breakfast first though. Some pancakes!”

He kept up his monologue as he strapped Kiddo into his highchair, Phil cutting up some blueberry pancakes and fruit. Clint added in a bottle of juice.

“I don’t think he’s met a blonde woman before,” Phil mused.

“Nope, just Steve,” Tony joked, earning a grape thrown at him by Steve. “Okay! Sorry, jeez! Anyway, moving on, I’m working on a stroller for him,” he said to Phil and the ex-agent shared a look with Clint.
“Please, Tony, I beg you, keep it simple. Relatively low tech,” Phil said.

“Don’t worry! It’ll be fine. He likes the chair.”

“Yes, and we’re grateful for the chair,” Clint admitted. “And we trust you and love living here, really, can’t stress the love enough. But we feel it’s necessary to tell you that he doesn’t need an arc reactor or guns in the stroller.”

“I would never put a reactor in a stroller,” Tony promised. “I was thinking about bulletproof fabrics and trackers and another, very nice, cup holder.”

“Actually, those sound pretty good.”

“See? I know what he needs in a stroller.”

“After that, you could start on a bed for him,” Jane suggested. “Make it all tricked out, make it play lullabies to him and sense his heart rate and stuff.”

“He’s not ready for a bed,” Phil said. “He’s just about managing to sleep in the bed with us.”

“Not to worry,” Tony dismissed. “I’m sure he’ll love some Intelli-Toys. Once I work out the kinks.”

No one wanted to comment on that.

AOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOS

Annie was the first to be interviewed.

They set up in the lounge, the camera man raving about the natural light, and Steve lingered by the dining table. No one was surprised, and Bruce found himself hiding in the shadowy entrance to the stairwell.

“It’s nothing to be nervous about,” Tony promised as Ellen went over a few last minute things with a few of her crew. “It’s just a few questions, and if there’s anything you can’t answer, or don’t want to answer, just tell Ellen and she’ll move on.”

Annie nodded and Tony made some final adjustments to her microphone before Ellen took a seat, Tony moved to stand with Steve and the camera started rolling.

The day went on like that, with Ellen interviewing each of them. The most interesting was Thor, where he proclaimed that his Lady Jane was a most proficient lover, and a wonderful woman that harboured no ill feelings. Ellen promised it would be heavily edited.

And then it was time for Tony to put on his big boy shoes and do one of his least favourite activities. A Press Conference.

“Sure you don’t want me to do it?” Steve asked as he helped Tony with his tie.

The billionaire was focussed on the cue cards Phil had prepared for him. Phil wasn’t stupid enough to write the speech for him; he’d tried that before and gotten nowhere. Just a few simple bullet points to keep Tony on track.

“No, I’ll be fine,” Tony said, pulling Steve in for a kiss. “Just stay in the green room with the others. Play with Kiddo.”
“And if they want to see Kiddo?” Phil asked.

“I’ll leave that up to you and Clint.” Tony took a deep breath, checked himself in the mirror and then smiled at Steve, shooting him a wink. “Showtime.”

They watched on the provided monitor as Tony strode out on stage, a few Stark Industries security guards standing just behind him just in case. He stepped up to the podium and took a sip of water before looking out at the sea of journalists and photographers, the mass of cameras and microphones and cell phones.

“Good afternoon,” Tony said. “Thank you all for coming, I know it was short notice. There have been a lot of rumours circulating in the past few days about some pictures that have appeared in a gossip magazine, and subsequently went viral. I’m here to address those pictures and the attached speculations.”

The screen behind him, which had been displaying the Stark Industries logo, went live with a picture of Loki having coffee with Steve and Thor.

“Firstly, yes, that is Loki having a cup of coffee. I’m not about to lie and deny it. But, I ask you all to keep an open mind until you know the whole story. The whole story of a young man lied to his entire centuries long life. Who was told he was one thing, when really he was another, this other thing being something that was demonised in every story he was told as a child, in every book he read, in every reaction to the name spoken. Imagine that, will you? Just for a moment? You spend your whole life thinking you’re just like everyone else. Just like your parents and your brother and everyone else around you. And you get told the same stories, and learn the same lessons. And you hear about this other race, this supposedly evil race, who are apparently sent from hell. These stories and lessons teach you that this other race have murdered and destroyed and you, like a good kid, you believe them.”

He took a moment to let it sink in.

“And then one day, through an accident, you find out you ARE one of that race. You’ve been lied to. And this man you call father has no choice but to tell you the truth.”

“This all happened to Loki, before he ever came here, before Thor ever graced us with his presence. And then, add to it that the man Loki had called father his whole life had only saved him to one day use him as a pawn against his own race. Loki finds this out and everyone is shocked that he doesn’t take it so well. Shocked that centuries of being told he’s second best have sunk in, have left an impression.”

“And then Loki falls into the abyss of space, alone, scared, confused, utterly distraught over all these lies. And he fell into the hands of a madman. A man named Thanos. See, when Loki landed here, he wasn’t the ringleader. He wasn’t the puppet master. He was the puppet!”

Tony was quite the master with words. He carried on, painting a vivid picture of all that Loki had suffered, why he was a victim just like them, how hard it was for him now, suddenly human.

“Man, he is a master at this,” Clint said as Tony wrapped it up. “Look at it, there’s not a dry eye in the house.”

“This is why I wasn’t asked to do this,” Steve said, digging in the baby bag for Kiddo’s juice. He came up with an empty baby bottle. “Damn. He’s empty.”

“I’ll go,” Darcy said. “There’s a vending machine near the ladies. Any kind of fruit, right?”
“Yeah,” Clint said distractedly, noticing Kiddo’s diaper was soaked.

“He’s warming up for Annie,” Phil said.

Clint set up the changing mat on the table as Tony took a sip of water and swapped the cards.

And again Tony managed to get everyone on his side, all of them tearing up at the tale of the lost Stark princess finally returned to the heart of her family after suffering almost a century of torture.

“They’re just lapping this up,” Skye said in awe.

Kiddo managed to raise his arm a little and flex his little fingers at the screen.

“That’s right!” Phil praised. “That’s Tony, on the TV! Usually only cartoons on that, huh?”

Kiddo grinned at him, looking up at Clint, who smiled down at him.

And finally, Tony told the tale of Kiddo. He hadn’t even needed to try very hard with that one to reduce almost everyone in the room to tears.

“I’ll take some questions,” Tony said eventually, and the room exploded with people wanting to ask something. “Yes, you.”

“Mr Stark, who came up with the nickname Kiddo?”

“That would be Hawkeye, Clint Barton. Yes, you.”

“Mr Stark, what does Miss Stark’s return mean for the future of Stark Industries?”

“That’s an excellent question,” Tony said. “At this point, the company is in a state of managerial flux, but this will not impact the working conditions of our employees, or the quality of our products. Stark Industries is continuing as normal. Our lawyers are currently addressing the legal side of things, and hopefully they will be able to resolve the issue very soon.” He looked around the room and sighed. “Miss Everhart. I’m sure you have a question burning away in there.”

“Yes, I do,” said the blonde. “Mr Stark, I have to ask, with her inability to cope with Kiddo, why should any of us believe that Miss Stark will be able to parent this second child?”

Steve could almost see Tony boiling over and he prayed he wouldn’t lose his temper.

“Oh, shit,” Annie murmured. “This can’t end well.”

“For the record,” Tony said, his voice scarcely calm, and a hush came over the room, every journalist hanging on his every word. “Annie has no parental responsibility to Kiddo. He was created without her knowledge or consent. Furthermore, he and Annie have scarily similar experiences when it comes to what they have endured at the hands of these evil sons of bitches. So when she tells me that she feels it isn’t fair to him to have her flashbacking every time she looks at him, I’m going to respect her judgement and her decision.”

Tony took a deep breath.

“Thousands of people make the hardest decision of their lives in choosing to give a child up for adoption. And then they go on to have more children that they feel able to raise themselves. I have the utmost respect for anyone who has the guts to say they can’t do the job, that they are not the best choice for that child. Annie and Steve both reached this decision on their own timeline, and they both came to it separately. At the end of the day, it is about doing what is best for a child who has been
through the most horrific experiences, experiences that no person should have to suffer let alone a
child.”

At this point, Phil picked up Kiddo from Clint’s lap, propped him on his hip and took Clint’s hand,
walking out determinedly to join Tony on stage.

“I ask you all to be calm or you will freak him out,” Tony said when he spotted them. “Ladies and
gents, the boy of the hour.”

Tony stepped aside and gave up the podium to Phil.

“Thank you, Tony,” he said. “And I want to thank Miss Everhart for her concern about our son. It’s
nice to know he’s cared about by so many people.”

“It’s the hardest decision any parent will have to make, and even harder to actually say it aloud. To
admit you can’t care for your child. This is no different. It wasn’t an easy decision for either Annie or
Steve, and I respect them both more than I can ever say. At the end of it, we all had to take into
account what was best for this little guy,” he said, looking down at the toddler curiously looking at
all the people, his little fingers gripping at the shirt pocket he had managed to get a grip on.

“The best thing for him, in all the decision making and weighing of the options, was for him to be
with me and Clint. We’re never going to deny where he came from, or how he came to be with us.
And we could never love him any less. He’s our son, and, more than that, he’s a member of our
family. He’s always going to know that he’s a Stark and a Rogers, as well as a Coulson.”

“That is what is best for this child,” he said firmly. “And when the time comes for Annie to have this
next child, she and Thor will decide, as the parents, what’s best for him or her. We’ll decide as a
family how best to give that child everything it needs, just like we did for this one.”

Phil coaxed Kiddo into waving, and then he got a smile from the toddler, a picture that they could bet
money on being the front page next morning.

AOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOSAOS

Steve couldn’t sleep. Tony was curled all warm against him, and the whole tower was quiet and still,
but still he couldn’t sleep.

The world had gone nuts for Kiddo, and his face was suddenly all over the place, that shy smile
gracing every magazine and website out there. There were even videos on YouTube dedicated to
him being the cutest toddler in the universe. Phil and Clint found it hilarious.

The vlogs had gone viral, and Steve wasn’t sure there was anyone with internet access that wasn’t
watching. Darcy now had free reign to film anything she liked, which led to clips of Kiddo playing
and Annie squabbling with Tony, like true brother and sister. The most adorable clip was Kiddo
moving his mouth in an imitation of Tony. There was no sound from him, but it was still pretty damn
cute.

Sam had finally made the move from Washington to New York and he was a huge hit with the
Veterans that went to his group three times a week. He was also a huge hit with all the residents of
the Tower, especially his French Toast.

Steve eased from the bed, careful not to wake Tony, and made his way from the room. He peeked in
on Annie, resettling the blankets over her and sweeping her hair off her face. Then he made his way
through the residential floors. Checking on Bruce, finding him passed out on his sofa with a book on
his chest. Steve put the book on the low end table and tossed a blanket over him before moving on to
check on the inhabitants of Thor’s floor. He didn’t peek into Thor and Jane’s bedroom; no one needed to see what made them so loud. Loki was tangled in his sheets, his hands reaching out for something. Steve curled him into his hold, smoothing out his furrowed brow with gentle touches before he tidied the blankets around him and left him to sleep.

Darcy was in Thor’s other spare room, and Steve could make out the faint sound of music from her headphones.

Sam was on what used to be Steve’s floor, and it amused him how lived in it looked, how Sam had made it his own; little mementos from Sam’s life decorating the space, the furniture moved to work for the flying man.

Finally, Steve made his way to Phil and Clint’s floor. He checked on Skye in the spare room, finding her passed out with her tablet still glowing in her hand. He turned it off and tucked her in, making his way back out to the lounge. He occupied himself by tidying away Kiddo’s toys, putting tiny clothes in the hamper, emptying the diaper pail.

“You don’t have to do that,” Clint said as he emerged, his hair in wild spikes and Kiddo sleepy in his arms.

“I know,” Steve said, reaching out for Kiddo, who went willingly and waved his arm at the changing mat. “Okay, okay, I get it. You want a change. I’m not that slow, no matter what Tony jokes.”

He laid him down on the mat and laughed at the happy wiggle, the way he kicked his legs and jerkily waved his arms.

“So why are you tidying up at one in the morning?” Clint asked, lounging on the sofa as Steve pulled off the impossibly small pyjama pants.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Steve replied as he removed the soaked diaper, wiping him off. “I’ve been meaning to ask, why is it we always wipe him, even when he’s just wet?”

“He had diaper rash when he arrived. It was pretty bad. Blood in places. Wiping him off is just one way to ensure it doesn’t come back.”

“Christ,” Steve muttered as he balled up the diaper and dunked it in the pail. “How did they even manage to keep him alive for two years?”

“No clue. Hey, Phil’s been talking about his birthday. We were wondering if you had a preference for the date.”

“Huh?”

“We don’t actually know his birthday, but Bruce estimates somewhere around Halloween, give or take a week.”

“Why not just give him Halloween? Candy, costumes, Tony likes to throw a party. Why not kill two birds with one stone?”

“Good point. We’ll talk it over at breakfast, make sure everyone who has a say is okay with it.”

“Everyone?”

“Yeah. Me and Phil, you and Annie, Tony will have an opinion.”
“Oh, right. I keep forgetting that he’s got all these people who have a say in these decisions. Wasn’t like that when I was a kid. It was my mom that made the decisions for me. And it was Mrs Barnes that made the decisions in that family. She let her husband think it was his choice, but it wasn’t.”

“Sometimes I forget, you know, that this is all different than what you know. I mean, I’m making it up as I go. Man, I got no clue about all this. Phil’s the lucky one. He grew up with a great family. He knows what he’s doing. Me? I came from deadbeats who left me for dead. I barely even remember my parents, and my brother…not worth mentioning. But you…you come from a whole other time. This has got to be so weird for you.”

“That’s one way to put it,” he muttered. Steve finished changing Kiddo and then held out his hands, helping Kiddo sit himself up. “Yeah! That’s a clever guy!”

Kiddo thought that was awesome and wiggled from side to side, doing his Elvis leg.

“Any clue on when he’ll start making sounds?” Steve asked as he picked him up, handing him off to Clint and following him into the kitchen.

“Not a clue,” Clint said as he leaned against the counter, Steve making his way to the fridge. “Maybe we should just give him nothing but Tony for 24 hours.”

Steve sniggered at the mental picture of Tony having to take care of a living thing for 24 hours. “I’ve heard worse plans. Apple or grape?”

“Here, I’ll show you,” he said, handing Kiddo over. He put both bottles on the counter and smiled at Kiddo. “Which one, buddy? This one?” He pointed at the apple. “Or this one?” He pointed to the grape. He moved his hand slowly between the two while Kiddo made up his mind, and then got a wiggle for the apple. “Apple? Great choice.”

They were quiet for a while, Kiddo happily alternating between suckling at his juice and tugging at Steve’s dog tags. He’d finally begun to accept that the food and drink weren’t going to disappear again and it was okay to take his time. It didn’t mean he was happy with anyone trying to take them before he was done; he’d gone rigid and hyperventilated the last time someone had tried and they weren’t in a hurry to try it again.

“Feel like talking about why you’re not sleeping?” Clint asked eventually as Kiddo got bored with chewing on the tags.

“No really,” Steve said, using his thumb to wipe away the drool on Kiddo’s chin. Tiny fingers wrapped around his thumb and the toddler yawned before he leaned towards Clint who took him. Steve handed over the bottle before he said goodnight and made his way to the elevator.

“Hey, Cap,” Clint called as the doors opened.

“Yeah?”

“If you ever do want to talk…or even just hold Kiddo for a while. Well, you’re always welcome to.”

“Thanks. Get to bed, it’s late.”

“Night, Steve,” he said before shuffling off to his bedroom.

Steve leaned back against the wall as the elevator doors closed, taking a deep breath and wondering what he wanted.
“Captain, might I enquire as to which floor you require?” JARVIS asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Then might I suggest the lobby, sir.”

“Why would I want the lobby?”

“There seems to be a disturbance occurring between an unknown person and the security guards. Perhaps expending some energy assisting them would aid you in sleep.”

Steve grinned. “Yeah, okay. JARVIS, do you ever get bored of taking care of us?”

“No, Captain. I find it quite…I believe if I were human, I would find it soothing. My base programming is to care for Sir. Over the years, that has expanded to include those that Sir finds important.”

“Oh. Good to know,” he said as the doors opened.

The five night security guards were laying on the floor in crumpled heaps, unconscious, and their assailant was nowhere to be seen.

“Holy,” Steve breathed. “JARVIS, where is the son of a bitch who did this?”

“Steve.”

The super soldier looked over to the empty reception desk to see Bucky peeking out from behind it.

“Bucky.”

“No! Not me! Can’t be me!”


“I asked…wanted you. They wanted ID. I don’t have.”

“I see.” Steve motioned Bucky to stay where he was and then checked the guards, finding them relatively unharmed. “JARVIS, call in help for these fellas and some replacements for tonight, would you?”

“As you wish, Captain.”

“Okay, Bu- never mind, we’ll figure out names later,” he said, returning to the desk. “So. You wanted to see me. I’m here.”

“My head…it’s jumbled, all confused. I don’t know what’s real. But you do. You know. On the carrier and the street. You knew. I want you to tell me.”

Steve stared at him for a moment. “You trust me to tell you what to do?”

“They wanted me to kill you,” he said, his dark eyes darting around. “You should have killed me instead. But you didn’t. You wanted to save me.”

“Okay,” Steve said after a pause. “I need you to listen. You’re safe with me. No one will hurt you, I swear. I won’t let them. But you have to let me help you. I’ll keep you safe if you back down
enough to trust me. Deal?"

He held out his hand and waited.

“I won’t stop you if you want to leave. I’d like you to stay, but it’s your choice,” Steve said.

Slowly, after what seemed like an eternity, Bucky put his metal hand in Steve’s flesh one. He didn’t squeeze, he just placed it there, palm to palm.

Tony stumbled from his bed and shuffled towards the door.

Once again Steve was waking him at some godforsaken hour.

“Please tell me you didn’t bring home another stray,” he said as he emerged into the blinding sunlight pouring through the wall of windows. “Fuck me that’s bright.”

“No, not this time,” Steve said. “Coffee?”

Tony took the mug and had gulped down half of it before he looked at his lover and his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “What did you do?”

“Nothing! Nothing.”

“Bull,” Tony said. “I know you, Steven Grant Rogers, I know that face. What did you do?”

Steve sighed and took his free hand. “Promise me you won’t blow a fuse?”

“I promise. Wait! On the condition that you go get those good cinnamon rolls from that bakery for breakfast.”

“Deal. So…you know that whole thing in Washington?”

“The thing? That’s what we’re calling it? Yes, I remember.” He paused, looking at his boyfriend with suspicion. “Steve, I swear to any deity listening that if you tell me you’re going back to Washington I will blow that afore mentioned fuse.”

“Not going back to Washington.” Steve stepped aside and motioned to the couches where the Winter Soldier was standing uncomfortably. “Can he stay?”

Tony didn’t feel the mug slip from his hand, nor did he realise he was spluttering.

“I know!” Steve said hurriedly. “I should have come and woken you when he arrived but really we were just talking, me sharing a few memories, trying to help him make sense of his. Tony? Baby? Say something?”

“Arm,” Tony managed after a few moments. “Oh, look at it. Shiny.”

“Oh, right, the tech. Well, he says it needs maintenance.”

Tony made grabby hands at it and Steve laughed, leading him around the shards of ceramic.

“This is Tony,” he introduced. “Tony, this is James. James, Tony is an engineer. He can fix your arm if you want.”
“Shorting,” James said to Tony. “Feedback.”

“Oh, I can fix that,” Tony said. “I need tools. JARVIS, closest tool kit?”

“Under the sink, sir.”

Tony sped off to the kitchen and returned mere moments later with a small box in his hands. He ushered James to one of the sofas and flapped at him until he sat and then he plonked himself down beside him.

“Oh, look at the welding on this,” he moaned. “What did they use, a butane lamp? Were they blind?”

“Tony, just fix it,” Steve said. “Critique it later.”

“I’m fixing, I’m fixing.”

Tony eased a panel off, tossing it onto the coffee table and opening the toolkit to pull out a screwdriver.

“What a fucking idiot,” Tony muttered. “What were they smoking when they installed these? Now that shouldn’t even connect to that. And this is wrong. Taking this out here…”

“So…shall I go and get breakfast or get you something from the workshop or…something?” Steve asked, hovering.

“Breakfast, food, coffee, donuts,” Tony muttered. He looked up at James. “Does this arm come off?”

“James, he won’t hurt you, he’s just excited by the new tech,” Steve said and James raised an eyebrow.

“Get him food,” James ordered. “I am safe.”

“Okay then. I’ll be right back.”

Tony tinkered away, muttering to himself the whole time about how crappy the workmanship on it was. He happily worked away until Helix came running in and whined, tugging on his shirt.

“Shit. Come with me, or stay here,” Tony said as he threw down the pliers he was holding, running from the room. “JARVIS, call Thor and Bruce, get them up here.”

Annie was on the floor in the doorway of her room, seizing wildly, her skin dancing with blue electricity, bolts of it shooting from her fingertips to strike the walls. The carpet was burnt in places where her lightening had hit and there was blood on the doorframe where she had hit, and there was an agonised scream being forced from her, pushed up out of her throat.

“Annie, Annie, come on, stay with us,” Tony said, wanting to touch her but knowing he couldn’t. Bruce had worked out that if Tony was exposed to one of her episodes, it would fry the reactor in his chest and effectively kill him almost instantly.

“I am here, Tony,” Thor declared as he dropped to his knees, still bare chested, but Tony was grateful for his boxers. At least he had remembered to put those on.

Thor scooped her up, holding her close, gritting his teeth as she zapped him again and again.

“She’s coming down,” Bruce said, his tablet in his hands. They had finally managed to configure JARVIS’ sensors enough to be able to monitor Annie’s episodes.
Sure enough, a few moments later she stopped screaming so hard and curled into Thor, sobbing in pain as her advanced abilities healed the damage done.

“I know, sweet one,” Thor murmured. “I know it hurts. Have peace, Annie. This shall pass. Just be calm, be still. All will be well.” His hand settled on her bump as he began to rock her, softly humming to her.

“I’m okay,” Annie whispered eventually. “I’m okay now.”

Thor picked her up and carried her to the lounge, where James was still sitting, waiting for Tony to come back. The soldier startled when Thor laid her down on the couch, her face visible to him.

“I…I know her,” he told Tony.

“Yeah,” he agreed, hovering as Bruce came forwards to check Annie over. “She’s from your time, the same as Steve.”

Steve hovered by the elevator, the bag of pastries in his hands forgotten. He hadn’t been anticipating this, the collision of Annie and Bucky. But he should have been. He had wanted Bucky back with him so badly, he should have thought through all the possible avenues.

He couldn’t figure out what it was passing through Bucky’s eyes. He was staring at Annie, but it wasn’t with confusion like when he looked at Steve, or resignation, like when Tony started working on his arm. This was something else.

“We danced,” Bucky mumbled and it hit Steve.

Annie was the only person on the planet who had memories shared with Bucky that didn’t include violence. She had never been on the battlefield, never been in training, she shouldn’t even have been on the base. But she had been, and she had spent time with them in the bar, laughed and joked with them. She’d even spent some time darning their socks, back in the day.

“Bucky,” she said softly with a gentle smile at him and he grimaced.

“Not me,” he said. “Not Bucky.”

“Well, no, not now,” she agreed as Bruce made notes on his tablet, moving away to talk with Tony and Thor. “But you were. I’m not sure who you are now, but that’s okay. You can figure that out.”

“We danced,” he said, slowly moving forwards to kneel beside the couch.

“Now that was a long time ago,” she laughed. “And, as I recall, you were very gentlemanly about my stepping on your toes.”

His brow furrowed in thought, the memories obviously painful to dig up.

“Wires,” he said, pointing at her arm. “Tubes. You were begging.”

Annie froze, her mouth moving silently. “You were there,” she said eventually. “You saw what they did to me.”

It was Tony that reached her first, and Annie held up a hand to him.

“I’m fine,” she said softly. “I just wasn’t expecting it.” Tony lingered for a moment and then backed off once more. “You were there? In the lab?”
“I took a bullet,” he said. “They were digging it out and you were there. They were putting a new tube in.”

“It was Hydra. They took me, did things to me. But it’s okay now. I’m safe.”

“Safe with Steve.”

“Yeah, safe with Steve. This is home. Mine…and yours, if you want it to be.”

“I did things.”

“Well, yeah. But that was then. And Hydra made you do them.”

He didn’t reply. Instead he stared at her, watching as she reached out and traced her fingertips over the star on his metal arm.

“It’s like Steve’s,” she whispered. “On his shield.”

“No,” he argued. “Steve saves people. I kill them.”

“Maybe. But you both have stars.” She traced the seam where metal met skin. “Does it hurt?”

“Yes. Supposed to.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” she said, craning round to look at Tony. “We can fix it, right?”

“Huh?” Tony said, looking over from his discussion of the latest readings with Bruce. “Say what?”

“He says it hurts. We can fix it, right?”

“Oh yeah, I can fix that.” He plonked himself down on the coffee table and reached for the arm. “I was actually doing maintenance on it when you fell. Can I?”

Bucky held out the arm and Tony placed it across his knees so he could get at the open panel. He began to tinker away, and they lost him to the lure of new tech.

“I got donuts,” Steve said lamely, holding up the bag.

“Most excellent,” Thor boomed. “I shall return shortly with Jane and Darcy.”

“And clothes,” Bruce said as he crossed to Annie once more.

“And clothes.”

In the week since Bucky had returned, things had managed to settle a little, or as much as things were ever able to settle for the Avengers and their loved ones.

The interviews they had done with Ellen had been edited, approved and aired. The public had gone nuts for them, especially the one with Thor. Apparently he was the flavour of the month. Darcy and Tony found it hilarious.

They had set Bucky up in the guest room on Sam’s floor, though no one was actually sure he was using it. Sam hadn’t seen him sleep, and as far as he knew, the sheets hadn’t been moved. Bucky did eat, usually with the group, but he would only eat after he’d seen someone else eat some first,
sometimes going so far as to take food off of other’s plates.

Bucky usually spent his days sitting, still as a statue, by the window of whatever room he was in. He could most often be found in the same room as Kiddo and whoever Kiddo was with. It was almost as if he felt it was up to him to protect the littlest Avenger. If he wasn’t with Kiddo, then he was with Annie, protecting her and her unborn baby.

Steve had managed to convince Bucky not to carry his guns around the Tower. Instead, he carried his knife, and whatever other weapons he secreted on his person. No one was willing to ask what he had or where.

Tony was having the time of his life, working on both Kiddo’s stroller and new toys, and a new arm for Bucky.

The assassin had let Tony disconnect his metal arm long enough for it and him to be scanned by JARVIS, letting Tony see what he was working with. At some point Tony would need to do some minor surgery on the connectors in Bucky’s shoulder; he had found that the pain was being caused by a misalignment of wires and nerve endings, and Tony would need to repair it before the new arm could be attached. Tony was working on both a metal casing and a flesh mimicking one, so Bucky could choose what he wanted when it was time to attach it.

Monday morning found Clint sitting with Kiddo in the lounge of the penthouse, working on some of Kiddo’s physical developments. They had Ice Age playing on the big screen and a whole field of toys scattered around them. Kiddo had mastered sitting up unaided, which he considered the height of coolness, and he had begun to give smiles to all of them, not just Phil. He had figured out that if he smiled at someone they would smile back at him.

“I see you,” Clint called from where he lounged on the rug. “You’re my clever little guy. Look at you, sitting up all unaided. You don’t need no help there, do you? No sir. You are doing just fine. Soon enough you’ll be moving, and then you’ll have some real fun.”

Kiddo grinned at him and patted his little hands on the rug, slowly reaching for his shape sorter. He managed to drag it closer before he reached out to Clint and flexed his fingers.

“Okay, little guy,” he said, rolling onto his knees and crawling over, dumping out the shapes. “Which one? Which one shall we do first?”

Kiddo reached out and determinedly wrapped his fingers around the yellow triangle, picking it up and pushing it into Clint’s hand.

“Good choice,” he said, aligning it and pushing it through the right hole, making the toy play music. Kiddo wiggled and smiled, reaching for the next shape. “Oh, that’s my boy! Yeah, you’re my little superhero! And I think, when Phil gets back, we should try you on some papaya. You liked the mango.”

Clint glanced over at Bucky, who was watching them with interest.

“Hey, man, you want to join us?” he said, holding out a shape. Bucky raised an eyebrow, his gaze flicking between the shape and Clint’s face. “It’s easy. He’ll give you a shape and you just push it into the right space.”

“I’ll scare him,” Bucky grunted.

“Are you serious? He came from a Hydra lab. Not a lot scares him.”
“The arm.”

“He doesn’t care. As long as he can play and be told how awesome he is, he doesn’t care about anything else.”

After a few long moments where Clint was sure that Bucky would refuse and go back to his staring, the soldier unfolded himself from his seat and slowly crossed the room. Clint gave him a blue square and he knelt down, looking at Kiddo before pushing the shape into the right hole.

Kiddo jiggled his legs, wiggling and smiling, before he reached for a green circle, handing it to Bucky.

“Eeew,” Kiddo said, oh so quietly.

Clint froze, staring at the toddler, before he laughed and scooped him up.

“Oh wow! Did you hear that?” he asked Bucky. “He spoke, he fucking spoke! That’s my guy!”

Kiddo smiled and patted Clint’s chest.

“Eeew,” he repeated.

“JARVIS, get everyone up here.”

“They are notified, Master Barton.”

“Eeew,” he said plaintively and Clint paused.

Oh, right. Kiddo was actually asking for something. This wasn’t just a random sound or word. He was actually referring to something, asking for something.

“Uhhhh. Okay. I can figure this out,” he muttered as Tony appeared.

“He spoke?” Tony asked. “He spoke?”

“He did. Come on, Kiddo, tell me again. Come on. Say it again.”

“Eeew.”

“Holy shit! He’s speaking! What is he speaking?”

“Good question,” Clint said. “Okay, baby, we can work this out, right? Eeew. What could that be? Eel? Ill?”

“Eeew,” he repeated, his smile gone.

“Okay, okay, I know, I know,” he soothed. “Ummmm.”

“I got some papaya at the market,” Phil said as he entered, grocery bags in his hands. Phil loved the grocery store, it made him happy to wander up and down the aisles, plucking things at random. “And JARVIS said I was needed.”

“Papaya? Really? That’s good,” Clint said distractedly as Kiddo smiled widely at Phil.

“Eeew!” Kiddo declared, waving an arm at Phil.

“It’s Phil, he’s saying Phil,” Tony said.
Phil dumped his bags and made his way over, taking Kiddo and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“When did this start?” he asked.

“A few moments,” Bucky said. “It was intense.”

“Hey, Kiddo,” Phil said, stroking his dark hair. “My smart little guy. Hey. Hey, who’s this?” He pointed at Clint. “Who’s this?”

“Nut,” he declared, pointing at Clint.

“That’s right, that’s Clint,” he praised and Kiddo wiggled in his arms. “He’s getting there. Might be a little mangled for a while, but he can speak.”

There were tears in his eyes and Clint had to rub at his face to regain himself.

“What did we miss?” Steve questioned as he emerged with the others.

“Kiddo, who’s that?” Phil prompted, pointing at Steve.

“Eeb, Eeb, Eeb, Eeb,” Kiddo chanted and Steve’s knees went weak.

“He’s talking!” Annie laughed.

Over the course of the next hour, they managed to figure out what Kiddo would call each of them. Tony was Eee, Thor was Oar, Jane became Ane, Loki was Oak, Darcy was Awes, Skye got a relatively easy one with Eye. Sam was Am, Bruce was Use, and Bucky became Gee. Annie was the most complicated, she became Am-Eee.

“I can kind of see how he worked out all of those,” Darcy said. “I definitely think it’s going to be Phil playing translator for a while.”

“I don’t mind,” Phil said, cuddling Kiddo close.

“Ooze,” Kiddo said, looking up at Phil.

“Okay, I hear you. Say it again, baby.”

“Ooze.”

“Hmmm. Can you show me where it is? Where is it, Kiddo?”

The tiny arm was raised and pointed at the kitchen.

“Okay, it’s in here,” he said as he carried him to the kitchen. He bounced him a bit, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “Okay, now where? Where is it, baby? Come on. Show Phil.”

“Ooze,” he said, pointing at the fridge.

Phil opened the door and stood there, looking at the contents. Kiddo spied what he wanted and made a lunge for it. He patted the carton of apple juice, chanting “Ooze, ooze, ooze.”

“Oh, juice. I see,” Phil said, hauling him back up and kissing his cheek as Tony came forwards and filled Kiddo’s bottle for him.

Clint sat down on the sofa numbly and stared at his husband, basking in the brilliance of his smile,
how happy he was, how contented.

“You okay?” Steve asked, sitting next to him. “Because this is huge.”

“Look at him,” he murmured. “Look at my guy. Have you ever seen a more incredible man in your life?”

Steve looked at Tony, determinedly keeping his eyes off of Loki.

“No. No I haven’t.”

Chapter End Notes

So, here we are, Kiddo is talking, and it is a momentous occasion. But don't think that this is plain sailing, oh no. I know it's all happy and shiny with Bucky and Kiddo and all the fluffy clouds, but it's not going to stay that way, oh no.

Little hint: Kiddo is the only one of his batch to survive.

Cryptic enough for you?

Comment below and let me know what you thought of the chapter, and what you think is coming next.
Chapter 8

It was the first call the Avengers had gotten as a team since Phil had returned to them, and it caused a little friction.

“We can’t all go,” Tony argued in hushed tones, mindful of it being the small hours of the morning.

“We have to, it’s a call,” Clint disputed, Kiddo passed out on his shoulder. “You think I really want to go? You think Phil’s happy about me going? You think I want to leave my husband and son behind when there’s only a few days until his first birthday with us?”

“What’s going on?” Annie questioned as she shuffled sleepily into Tony’s side, snuggling into the hug he gave her.

“We’ve been called out,” Steve said. “Natasha found another Hydra cell. She needs our help.”

“Those damn things just keep popping up, don’t they,” she muttered. “Like weeds. Or ivy. There was an ivy plant when I was a kid, my mom was forever trying to kill it, the damn thing just kept coming back, over and over again.”

“Well, they do have that motto with the heads,” Clint said.

“Where is it?”

“China,” Steve supplied.

“Why haven’t you left yet?”

“Tony thinks we can’t all go,” Clint said with a glance at the tense engineer.

“Why?”

“I can’t leave you here unprotected,” Tony said simply.

“What, JARVIS not enough for you? Tony, I’ll be fine. I have Phil and Jane and Darcy and Loki. I’m fine.”

“I’d just feel better if there was an Avenger in residence,” he said petulantly.

“Okay. Switch out Steve for Bucky. The arm’s as good as the shield, and it’ll do Bucky good to be part of a team.”

“Annie, you sure about this?” Bucky asked worriedly. “Are you sure I can…”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “Bucky, you need to get back to something you know. Being part of a team, saving people, fighting the bad guys…it’s all good stuff. Go, beat some heads together, save things. Go. Shoo.”

He chuckled as she waved her sleepy hand at him.

After a few moments of discussion, they all agreed to the plan and went off to suit up. Clint lingered,
hugging Kiddo to him.

“You’ll take care of Phil, right?” he asked Annie and Steve, rubbing the tiny back.

“You know we will,” she soothed, reaching out and taking the toddler. “You fly safe. And come back relatively unscathed. Oh, and bring me back a souvenir.”

“It’s a mission, Annie, not a vacation,” he said with a smile as he headed to the elevator. “But I’ll try and pick you something up.”

Within half an hour they were taking off from the hangar on level 102, blinking lights at them as they left.

Annie made her way to the elevator as Steve made his way back to bed for a few more hours. Phil met her as she entered his floor and she handed Kiddo over before following Steve’s lead and heading back to bed.

Breakfast was quiet, if you compared it to their usual level of general happy chaos, but it was a comfortable kind of quiet. Steve made pancakes and Loki fried up some bacon, some of which was even edible.

And then they got a visitor, and Annie’s temper shattered the peace.

“Can I help you?” Steve questioned the man emerging from the elevator.

“Yeah, the Professor sent me,” he replied.

He was a surly man, about 5’3”, dark hair, abundant facial hair, and an unlit cigar clamped in his mouth.

“Professor? I don’t think we know a professor.”

“Look, bub, the Professor told me Tony called, wanted someone here while the Avengers were on call.”

“Tony hired a babysitter?” Annie asked incredulously.

“If that’s what you want to call me, go right ahead.”

“Do you actually have a real name?” Darcy questioned.

“Logan.”

“Logan. I like it.”

“Darcy, behave,” Phil said, handing Kiddo to Loki as he went to refill his bottle.

Loki looked incredibly uncomfortable, and moved to the lounge so he could set the toddler on the floor. Kiddo wiggled his feet as Loki pulled over some of his toys.

Annie took a few deep breaths before she looked to the ceiling. “JARVIS, get me Tony.”

“I am afraid he is at thirty seven thousand feet, miss.”

“I don’t care if he’s twenty thousand leagues under the sea, get him on the line.”
After the promised moment, Tony’s voice came over the speakers, making Kiddo smile at Loki.

“We’ve only been gone a few hours,” Tony said. “Do we need to turn around?”

“No, but you might want to wear the armour when you come home,” Steve said with a poorly hidden grin.

“Why? What did I do?”

“You hired me a babysitter?” Annie asked angrily. “Seriously? A babysitter!”

“Not a babysitter,” Tony corrected. “Who did Professor X send?”

“Some guy called Logan.”

“Ah, good choice.”

“Tony…”

“Look, I just wanted someone around who could handle your episodes. Logan is a regenerative mutated human, he can handle it.”

She looked a little lost, now her anger was unfounded. “You didn’t have to do that,” she said quietly. “But thank you.”

“Welcome. Now, anything else?”

“No.”

“Good. Then I’ll see you in a few days.”

The line went dead and Annie excused herself to go take a shower, while Steve slipped a leash on Helix and headed out for his run.

Annie was struggling into her shirt when there was a knock on her bedroom door. Sure that her breasts were covered, she called out for them to enter.

“You need a little help?” Logan asked.

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

He helped her smooth down the fabric before he spoke. “Look, I’m sorry you didn’t know I was coming.”

“It’s fine,” she said, grabbing her towel to attack her hair. “I’m sorry I made such a fuss. I shouldn’t have, it wasn’t fair to you.”

“Don’t sweat it, I’ve had worse. So how long until you pop?”

“Ten weeks, give or take. We’re not really sure, it’s half Asgardian, half super soldier, so who knows.”

“Excited?”

“I guess. I’m too tired to get too excited,” she said. She fixed him with a confused smile. “You don’t
remember me, do you?”

“Should I?”

“1942, you were looking for Dr Erskine, there was a girl doing a jigsaw puzzle.”

“Holy shit! That was you?”

“Slim me down and tuck me in a corner and yes, that was me,” she said. “So… I really can’t hurt you?”

“Really. It’s what I helped Erskine with. He found something in my blood that helped him refine the serum. Trust me, princess, there ain’t nothing you can hit me with that I can’t come back from.”

She chuckled at him. “We’ll see.”

Steve couldn’t stop looking at Loki.

And it wasn’t the way he looked at Bruce or Clint or Phil. No, it was the same way he looked at Tony. And the dreams he was having. It wasn’t a good thing, it couldn’t be.

How no one had noticed, he had no clue.

Steve was sitting on one of the sofas sketching, his subjects Phil and Kiddo. They were stretched out on another of the sofas, Phil on his back with Kiddo on his chest, the two of them fast asleep.

There a tiny hand clutching the neck of a crumpled t-shirt, eyelashes pressed against a cheek, a pouting lower lip. He carefully put in the curve of Helix’s back where she was curled up on Phil’s shins, shading in the variations of her fur, the black of her claws. He was working on the shadows beneath Kiddo’s cheek when Loki sat down next to him.

“That’s wonderful,” Loki said, and Steve flashed him a grin between strokes of his pencil. “Such skill.”

“Thank you. Do you draw?”

“Me? No. Thor does.”

“Really? I’ve never seen it.”

“It’s been a long time since I last saw him with a pencil in his hand. Could be perhaps he does not anymore.”

They were silent for a while, while Steve finished up, and then they fell into easy conversation. Steve tried not to notice how warm Loki’s thigh was pressed against him, how pale his skin was, how long his fingers.

“Captain, are you quite alright?” Loki asked.

“I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You seem rather ill at ease with me. Should I leave you?”

“No! No, don’t, it’s fine, it’s not you. I just…it’s nothing.”
“Oh. Well, if you’re sure. This Hydra. Will you tell me of them? I would like to know what Thor is facing.”

Steve took a deep breath and began to explain, telling him of the Red Skull, of what they’d done through history, what they did to Bucky and Annie and Kiddo. He told him all about their plans for the helicarriers, and how they’d infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. and other notable organisations.

“Are you sure they can handle this?” Loki questioned worriedly.

“They’ll be fine. You’ll see, they’ll be back before you know it.”

Tony looked at the intel Natasha had gathered and frowned.

“I’m not dissing your mad spy skills, but are you sure this is the place?”

“I’ve been watching the building for over a week,” Natasha said, checking her gun. “Known members and associates of Hydra have been coming and going, plus notable scientists in the field of genetics and bio weaponry. There have also been several large deliveries. From what I could make out, more equipment and supplies. This is a Hydra cell.”

“In the middle of Wuhan,” Bruce said. “The largest city in China, home to over nine billion people. I can’t let the Hulk out here. If this goes even the tiniest bit sideways, how many people could get hurt? I can’t take the risk.”

“We’ll keep you on reserve,” Clint said, testing the tension of his bowstring. “I vote for going in stealthily and trying to download their files first, before we confront anyone.”

“I’m impressed that you know it’s the biggest city in China,” Bucky said, holding still as Tony made some final adjustments to the arm. It was the first time he’d taken this new model into battle. It wasn’t that he questioned Tony’s skill; Steve trusted Tony, so Bucky trusted him. It just made him a little on edge to be going in to a potential battle with untested tech. Not to mention that he still had the lingering pain; Tony still needed to do the surgery.

“I like geography,” Bruce said, his cheeks turning pink.

“I’m with Clint,” Tony said. “If I can get close enough, I should be able to wirelessly tap in to their systems. Here’s hoping it’s all digital. If it’s hardcopy, we’re going to have to go in and get it and hope we get there before they torch the lot.”

“Okay, Hawkeye, eyes up top,” Steve said through the speakers. They had called him as soon as they were grouped and ready to move, letting him lead without actually being there. “Bruce, hang back unless absolutely necessary. Hulk in a populated area…let’s not and say we did.”

“Not a problem, Captain,” Bruce said, slipping a comm. into his ear. “I’ll give another set of eyes, using the cameras.”

“Perfect. Widow, take point. Go in quick and quiet, get the lay of the land. Iron Man, Bucky, Thor, you’re the heavy hitters. Tony, find as much information as you can. Bucky, try not to kill too many so we can question them later. And Thor? Try not to fry the computers. I miss anything?”

“Annie still pissed at me?” Tony asked, punching the code into the armour suitcase.

“No. Apparently she and Logan knew each other back in the 40’s. They’re reminiscing, having an
Audrey Hepburn movie marathon with Phil.”

“How are Phil and Kiddo?” Clint asked.

“They’re doing fine. Logan took my room and I stayed with Phil and Kiddo. We’re all doing fine. Just concentrate on the task, I’ve got things under control here.”

“Right, we’re ready to go, Cap,” Tony said. He put on the helmet and opened a private channel to Steve. “Steve? You there?”

“Right here.”

“I miss you. That flight may be the longest flight in human history. I want my bed and my coffee machine and my super soldier bed heater.”

“Soon. Get this done and you can come home. Just in time for the party. I think Annie’s having more fun than you planning a party. It’s good to see her smiling.”

Tony grinned as images flashed up on his HUD. Annie smiling as she picked out decorations and hung streamers and chose candy for the trick or treaters.

“Good to know that Kiddo won’t be missing out on anything just because I’m not there to plan this shindig.”

“He’s got Phil here planning things too,” Steve pointed out.

“But no one plans a party like a Stark.”

“As Annie is proving,” he replied and Tony could hear the grin. “You should see it, Tony. She really looks happy.”

“I’m happy to hear it. Looks like everyone is ready to go. Love you, Capsicle.”

“I love you too, Iron Man.”

Sam walked into the penthouse kitchen and smiled.

“I’m sure Tony has a baker on staff or retainer that can do that,” he said, motioning to the flour Annie was sifting.

“I know,” she said. “I already found it. But I like to bake. JARVIS helped me find this. It doesn’t look so hard.”

Sam took the picture and looked at it. It was a huge round cake, the size of a beach ball, decorated to look like a carved pumpkin. Annie had added a few scribbles to it, with each of the Avengers hidden somewhere on the cake. There was a little Iron Man glove lying on the grass, Thor’s hammer in the pumpkin’s mouth, Cap’s shield embedded in the pumpkin itself, one of Natasha’s guns lying on the grass a little way from the glove, and an arrow sticking out of the top.

“What about Hulk?” he asked.

“The dent in the side of the pumpkin,” she pointed out as she began weighing sugar. “Most of it is modelling chocolate and fondant. JARVIS found me videos online, and he ordered the stuff I’ll need that we don’t already have. It doesn’t look too hard. And if it turns out really bad, then Tony has a
Sam took a seat and watched her work, and then thoroughly enjoyed himself when she gave him the bowl to lick.

“My grandma used to let me do this,” he said as he scooped up some batter with his fingers. “My mom, she wouldn’t ever even dream of it. She said it had raw eggs, so it couldn’t be good.”

“What a ridiculous notion. Don’t people use raw eggs in hangover cures?” she said, setting her timer.

“Very true. So, lay it on me. Logan said you seem a little distanced from the baby.”

“I’m not distanced,” she argued. “How could I possibly be distanced from a human I’m still making?”

“Emotionally distant. Like…maybe you don’t know how to feel about it. You know, before I decided to focus on vets, I was a general support worker. I helped a lot of different people. One of the groups I ran was a rape survivors group. I met a few women who were carrying a child they hadn’t made the choice to make. And pretty much all of them had at least one moment where they weren’t sure they’d done the right thing by keeping it.”

“What did you tell them?” she whispered, wrapping her arms around herself.

“I didn’t really tell them anything. Not my place to make decisions for people. But what I did tell them I’m going to tell you now. It’s okay to feel torn about this. Having a child is a huge decision, and having one that someone else decided on is enormous. I can’t imagine having that weight on my shoulders. Right now, there is no right or wrong way to feel. Right now, all you’re doing is growing it. Once it’s born, then you can figure out how you feel. But right now…it’s all good.”

“So…I don’t have to love it?”

“Not if that’s not how you feel.”

“You won’t tell anyone about this, will you?”

“Of course not. It’s not my place to tell anyone about anything you’ve said to me.” He dipped into the bowl again, only to pout when he came up clean.

Annie giggled and placed a plate of still-warm cookies in front of him. “You kind of remind me of Dum Dum.”

“Mmmm?” He questioned, his mouth full of chocolate chip goodness.

“He used to pout when the goodies were gone too.”

It seemed simple enough. Until everything imploded.

Natasha stealthily made her way into the building, slipping between shadows, gun tucked away but that didn’t mean anything. Natasha knew a hundred ways to kill a man without a weapon.

“Hawkeye, report,” she mumbled, almost silent.

“Nothing odd so far,” he said. “Routines being followed, they don’t suspect anything. Iron Man’s tapping in. Keep going, you’re good.”
She made her way through the facility, placing the tiny metal dots Tony had given her. They would eat into the computer systems of the building and allow Tony to access anything he wanted.

“Widow, come in, if possible,” Tony said.

“Widow here.”

“I think this is the main information hub. They’ve got files here on Barnes, Annie and Kiddo, plus files on all of us, and some other things too. Download in progress, just need a little longer.”

“What am I locating?”

“Their main project seems to be something called SB81, located in subsection 49, lab 67B. Got that?”

“Got it. Stand by.”

She made her way faster, passing sections in the 20’s and 30’s, before entering the 40’s. This area was more highly populated with soldiers and scientists, and all of them seemed to be focussing on the very section she needed. She backed up, finding an empty closet.

“Iron Man, come in.”

“I found subsection 49, but it’s a no go. The only entrance I can see is surrounded by people. I can’t get in without being seen.”

“Copy that,” Clint said. “Hawkeye tagging in. I’m going to the vents. Hold tight.”

“Roger that,” she said. “Holding position.”

They were radio silent for a few minutes while Clint made his way through the air vents, and then he began to relay information to them.

“Okay, tight fit but I’m here,” Clint said, sounding strained. “No chance of using a weapon here, I can barely breathe, let alone use my arms.”

“Do you see what’s in 49?” Barnes asked.

“Seems to be a whole load of labs. Can’t see numbers. Hang on. Ow, shit, fucking ow! Okay, I can see lots of people, all seem to be science types. Looks like a R and D division. Funky liquids being carried around…I think there are several labs in this section, I can see at least nine hermetic doors from this position, no telling the total number or what lies behind them,” he whispered. “Syringes, needles, slides for microscopes. Okay, each researcher has an access pass, panel by the door. Guys, I don’t think we can break this. I’m seeing retinal and fingerprint scanners, only one door in and out of this chamber. Stealth is not going to work. Tagging in the heavy hitters.”

“On the way,” Thor said, and there was a god-almighty crash from another part of the building.

Alarms started blaring, the people below Clint dashing from one room to the next. One of them started a fire and they began to throw papers onto it.

“Nat, get in there. They’re burning the paper trail!”

“On it.”
“Stark, tell me you’re done,” Clint demanded as he wriggled around, freeing himself from the vent he was wedged in.

“Another minute, two max.”

“Hurry it up, man, or I’m gonna have to tag in jolly green.”

“Not funny,” Bruce said. “Clint, Natasha, try and get some samples of the funky liquids if possible.”

“Copy. Iron Man, get your iron ass in the game,” Natasha ordered as she took down three scientists in quick succession, taking down a fourth with her thighs around his neck. “I see 67B. Door rigged with explosives.”

“On my way,” Tony said, the sound of crunching bone in the background.

Before they knew it, they were all in the antechamber, the scientists joined by guards with large guns. Barnes and his arm proved to be very good assets, quickly taking down any enemy agent he came across, dropping their battered unconscious forms to the floor. Thor was also throwing fists, reluctant to use his hammer, which he had placed on the crumpled form of the highest ranking scientist they could find.

It took only a few minutes to secure the facility, and Bruce confirmed that no one in the street was any the wiser.

“So? Can you get in?” Bucky asked Tony who was examining the door to 67B.

“Hold on, Sparky, working on it,” Tony said as his faceplate flipped up and the gloves retracted from his hands, a toolkit popping out of a panel at his hip. It was a few moments work to disconnect the detonator from the explosive material, and by the time he was done, Bruce had joined them and Natasha had called in some people she knew they could trust to do clean up.

Thor took point, leading them into the sterile room where scientists bodies littered the floor, doctors too, their mouths ringed by white foam.

“Cyanide pills,” Bucky said, kicking at one to ensure it was dead. “Hope there was something in those files.”

“There’s plenty in those files,” Tony said.

“Oh shit,” Clint said as he found what was so damn important in lab 67B.

Phil smiled as Annie finished placing the arrow into the pumpkin. It was the final piece.

Kiddo’s birthday was two days away, and it was starting to look like the Avengers would miss it. They’d had no word since Steve had talked to them before the raid. JARVIS said there was nothing wrong with the communications systems, and he was reading normal vitals for all Avengers involved in the China mission, so it was simply a case of them being too busy to talk.

“There,” Annie said as she removed her hands. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s perfect,” Phil said. “Really, you’ve done a great job.”

“Yeah, it turned out well.” She wiped off her hands and peered at the cake. “You think it needs anything else?”
“No. It’s perfect just the way it is.”

“Good. I want his first birthday with us to be a good one. Every kid deserves a birthday.”

“It will be,” he assured, sipping at his coffee. “I think we might have to get Sam a girl so he can make a baby of his own though. I’m getting tired of wrestling him for Kiddo.”

“Can’t wait to see what Clint does with that sentence when he gets back,” she said with a grin, making herself more cocoa. “Kiddo still confused?”

“Yes. He’ll go with Steve in the night, let him change him and get him juice and tell him stories. But he’s still asking for Clint.”

“It’ll be okay. They’ll be back and it’ll all be fine.”

“We need to clone this kid, man,” Sam said as he walked in carrying Kiddo, China riding his shoulder.

The AI had decided that Sam was the man, and that he must be obeyed without exception, so no one questioned him being the one to take her. Anything to keep her contained was a good thing.

Phil was quick to stow the cake in the fridge while Annie took the toddler, Sam only refraining from fighting her for him because of her bump, a fact she knew well and used to her advantage.

“There will be no cloning,” Annie said. “Go. Find a female. Procreate.”

“But I like this one.”

“And we’re happy about that, but he has two bio parents and two custodial parents. Let’s not make it any more complicated,” she said.

“How about cool uncle? I’ll settle for being cool uncle.”

“I think he already has a couple of those,” Phil said, taking Kiddo when he reached out to him. “Hi, Kiddo. Did you have fun?”

Kiddo smiled and waved at Sam. “Am.”

“You played with Sam? That’s great!”

“Nut. Nut.”

“I know you want Clint. He’ll be home soon.”

“Still asking for Clint?” Steve asked as he entered, moving to pour himself a coffee. “Any word on them?”

“Not yet,” Sam said.

“Forgive the interruption, but my sensors indicate that the jet is inbound,” JARVIS said. “Ah. Captain, a call for you.”

“Put it through.”

“Stevie, buddy, heads up, super soldier needed,” Bucky said breathlessly. “Ow! Stop that, you little animal!” There was a clunk on metal and then an angry howl. “Yeah, see? Biting doesn’t work on
“Bucky, what the hell is going on?” Steve questioned.

“Steve,” Tony said. “We found something in China. We’re headed to the lift. Where are you?”

“Penthouse.”

“Good. Lock and load, we’re not strong enough.”

“Not strong enough? Strong enough for what? Tony!”

The elevators opened and Avengers poured out. Bruce was rummaging in his bag, trying to find something, while everyone but Thor and Bucky backed up. In Bucky’s grasp was a whirling dervish of screaming and movement. Small arms and legs worked madly trying to free their owner from the metal hold, dark hair flying as the persons head whipped back and forth, left and right. Steve rushed forwards and grabbed the legs, helping Bucky to hold the figure still and Clint moved to Phil and Kiddo, who grinned at him and all but fell into his arms, chanting ‘Nut, Nut, Nut!’.

“What the hell is that?” Logan cried, pushing Annie behind him.

“She woke up as we neared the Tower,” Bruce said. “The sedative should still be good for a few hours, but she’s obviously not your average child.”

“What?” Annie said, her voice barely loud enough to be heard. She pushed past Logan, past Thor, crowding close so she could push back the wild hair.

It was, as Bruce had said, a female child, older than Kiddo, but with the same dark hair and eyes.

“Hey, hey, look at me,” Annie said, her voice desperate. “Look at me!”

The child focussed on her, her wordless screams dying as she caught sight of Annie.

“Who!” she screamed. “Gone! Fective!”

“No!” Annie said firmly. “No. No one is going to make you gone. You’re not going away, and you’re NOT defective. My name is Annie. This place is a safe house. No one here is going to experiment on you or make you disappear.”

The girl froze, mulling it all over.

“Labs. Ouch.”

“No. No labs, no ouch.”

“Safe?”

“Yes. You’re safe here. I won’t let anyone hurt you. Bucky, Steve, let her go.”

“Are you insane? This little hellcat knocked Thor out. Thor, I tell you. I ain’t letting go,” Bucky said and Annie stood up, fixing him with an angry glare.

“Bucky, she’s mine, they made her from me. And, just like Kiddo, I get to decide what happens to her. Now you’re going to let go of her, or so help me, I will ensure that new arm of yours becomes scrap metal. Now let go.”
Bucky tried to stare her down, but it soon became apparent that she was going to get her way one way or another. Slowly, he released the child, Steve letting go also, until she was standing under her own power, her arms wrapped around herself. Annie knelt down again before she could bolt.

“Made from you? Me from you?” the girl asked the woman. Her speech was choppy, disjointed, and they were sure she’d learnt it through covert imitation rather than anyone actually taking the time to teach her.

“Yes. They took some of me and made it into you. So you’re staying here.”

“Yes, here is safe. What’s your designation?”

“SB81.”

“I see. What happened to the other SB’s?”

“Fective. They say ‘oh shit’. Test bad. Oh shit and then people come and they go. Not come back.”

“Is that why you were fighting when they brought you here? You thought they were going to make you disappear like the others?” The girl nodded. “I see. Well, that’s not going to happen. No one is going to make you disappear. The people that you were with, the doctors and scientists. They’re bad people. They hurt people, special people, like you. They had me too, and they had Bucky, the man who was holding you.”

“Arm.”

“Yeah, the one with the arm. And they had another one, one like you. RSB-39.”

“RSB all gone.”

“Yes, they are. All but him,” Annie said, motioning to Kiddo.

The little girl looked over and then squealed, scurrying over to look at him a little closer. Clint, showing huge amounts of trust, squatted down so she could see the toddler.

“Safe! Not gone!” she said, looking from Kiddo to Annie.

“Exactly,” Clint said. “You’re safe here. You’re going to stay here with all of us and be safe.”

They eventually managed to convince the girl to let Annie put her in a hot bath, where she made like Kiddo and went practically boneless. Annie carefully washed her back, using gentle hands to wash her hair, delicately running a sponge over the sea of puncture marks on her inner arms and spine.

“Name?” the girl asked.

“Oh. We have names here, instead of designations.”

“Me name.”

“You want a name?” She nodded. “Okay. Let me think. Hmmm. There are lots of names.”

“It should begin with S.” Bucky said from the doorway, a pile of clothes in hand. “Tony made a mercy run. It should all fit her.”
“Thanks. JARVIS, tell Tony thanks for us.”

“Very good, Miss.”

“Bruce went through some of her files,” Bucky said, nodding at the child curiously watching them interact. “I’m the other donor.”

“Huh. Well, we’ll figure that out when it comes to it.”

“I thought you couldn’t deal with Kiddo. What makes this one different?”

“It’s not different. I’m still freaking out. Just managing to handle it better this time around. Maybe it’s because of Kiddo, because I’ve seen how fast he bounces back. But she hasn’t latched on to anyone yet, not the way Kiddo did with Phil. So it might not even be me she goes to.”

“It should be us making that decision, not anyone else,” he argued. “We’re the parents, she should do as she’s told.”

“JARVIS, get Steve in here, right now.” She turned to the girl. “Stay right here, I’ll be right back,” she said with a smile.

Steve sped into the room and Annie motioned to the tub.

“Stay with her, I’ll be right back,” she said, before she put a hand on Bucky’s chest and shoved him out of the door, backing him through her bedroom and into the hallway, continuing on until he was in the main living area. It was only in moments like this that she proved just how much of a super soldier they had turned her into. She wasn’t quite as strong as Steve, but she was more than a match for Bucky.

“Annie?” Bruce questioned. “Everything okay?”

“You listen to me, James Barnes, and you listen good,” she snarled. “You’ve said yourself that you don’t remember the specifics of what was done to you. Well I do. I remember being strapped to a table and having very painful things done to me. I remember everything being stripped away until I had nothing left but pain and the wish to die. And the worst part of it wasn’t the pain or the degradation of it. No, the worst part was that everything that was me was stripped away, until I was nothing but this thing that they used when they felt like it. That is all that little girl has ever known!”

“We’re the parents,” he argued.

“No, we’re the donors! We’re some DNA they pulled out and mixed up to make her. This isn’t about what you want, or what I want. It’s about what is best for that little girl. Me and you, we put our personal feelings aside and do what she needs!”

“Annie has a point,” Clint said. “When me and Phil took Kiddo, it was because Phil was the one he chose. It was about what would be best for him, what would help him the most. It has to be the same for this kid, no other way for it.”

Steve appeared in the doorway.

“Buck, it’s not like when we were kids,” he said gently. “Darcy’s with her,” he said to Annie. “She’s fine, they were splashing when I left. Bucky, the world has changed around us. We blinked and missed it. The world is different, and these children are more different still. They need different things. We can’t force them to adapt to us, we have to adapt to them. Yes, technically, me and you are fathers. But us getting territorial isn’t going to help anything. No one is going to deny that you
helped make that life, and no one is going to keep her from you. But right now…it has to be her choice.”

Bucky stared at him for a moment before he growled and sank down onto one of the sofas. Steve motioned Annie to go back to the bathroom while he took a seat next to Bucky, murmuring soft words.

“Thanks, Darcy,” Annie said as she returned to the bathroom. “How about we get you out of the bath and into some clothes?”

“No. Nice,” she declared and Darcy sniggered as she ducked from the room.

“I know baths are nice, but you can’t stay in there forever.”

“No.”

Annie smiled and knelt next to the tub, folding her arms and resting them on the lip so she could rest her chin.

“How about Sabrina? It’s a nice name,” she said softly.

“Sabrina. Sabrina. Sabrina. Me Sabrina?”

“If you like it, then you can be Sabrina.”

“Me Sabrina.”

“Sabrina it is then.”

Tony watched as Sabrina played with Kiddo, pushing blocks into the shape sorter.

Annie and Steve had managed to convince the kid to put on underwear and a t-shirt, but failed on pants or socks. JARVIS had adjusted the temperature accordingly. He chewed on his thumb as Thor approached her with a hairbrush.

“Hello, little one,” he said gently, sitting on the floor with her. “Do you remember me?”

“Hit,” she said, reaching for a teddy bear and running her fingers over it. She was turning out to be incredibly tactile, touching everything she could, accepting any physical contact they wanted to give. She was starved for touch, and they could all relate to that more than they liked.

“Yes, you did hit me. But you were afraid, and to fight when you are afraid shows much bravery,” he said. “You have a strong spirit.”

“Me strong. Best.”

“Yes, you are very strong. You are a warrior, a fighter, this is true. But a true warrior knows when to be gentle also.”

“Gentle?”

“Gentle is when you do something softly, such as this,” he said, reaching out and stroking her hair. She reached up and stroked his, which was loose around his face. “Very good. Would you like to learn more of being gentle?”
He slowly coaxed her into brushing his hair, keeping his smile even when she got the brush tangled. And then Clint put on Frozen, and Sabrina and Kiddo were transfixed. Thor sat her in the bowl made by his crossed legs and began to carefully work the tangles out of her hair. She practically purred once she realised how good it felt, and he eventually braided it back off her face.

The film finished just as Tony’s order of pizza arrived.

“Hey, little creatures, food,” he called, emerging from the elevator with the huge order.

Phil slipped Kiddo into his highchair, and the various members of their ‘family’ arrived and settled around the table. But Sabrina hovered by the sofa, watching them warily.

“Hey,” Annie said. “It’s okay. No one will hurt you. Sabrina, when you were in the labs, did they give you things to eat, to put in your mouth and swallow?”

She gave a nod. “Bar.”

“Bar? Can you tell me about it?”

“Give when lights up. Bite. Chew. Complete task.”

“Good, that’s good. Well, this is sort of like that. We eat food to keep us strong and healthy, to give us energy so we can do things, like play and watch movies and have baths.”

“Me food,” Sabrina demanded as soon as she mentioned the word ‘baths’.

“Okay. Come on. We sit at the table with everyone else.”

Sabrina sat in between Thor and Clint, and the bigger man dished out a few slices of pizza onto her plate.

“Here,” Clint said. “This is how you eat it. Pick it up with this bit.” He grabbed his own slice by the crust. “Support it with your other hand. And apply to mouth.” He finished with a demonstration, taking a huge bite. “See? Nothin’ to it.”

Sabrina poked at the slice of cheese pizza before she gingerly picked it up and took the tiniest nibble from the point. It took no longer than the gooey cheese hitting her tongue for her to decide that a bigger bite was needed. She devoured four slices, all different toppings, and then moved on to try some garlic bread and chicken wings and bbq ribs. Thor had to show her not to eat the bones, but aside from that she had no trouble stripping them clean.

“More?” she asked timidly when there was nothing edible left before her.

“You want some more?” Clint prompted and she nodded. “Good girl. Which one do you want to try next?”

She peered at his plate and pointed.

“Pasta, excellent choice.” He grabbed the two different pastas Tony had ordered and dished up a little of each. “Now, this one you eat with a fork, this thing,” he said, picking it up. “You hold it like this, that’s it, and you push this end into the food until it sticks. Good girl, very good. Now you eat it.” She shoved the piece of pasta in her mouth. “Way to go!”

She grinned at him at the praise, her mouth full, before she set to work demolishing the pasta.

Before the meal was done, she had tried not only pizza, pasta, garlic bread, chicken wings and ribs,
but also potato wedges, bread sticks, and various salad items, including lettuce, onions, tomato, sweetcorn and red peppers, not to mention she was a huge fan of apple juice, just like her brother.

“Look at you,” Darcy said, dampening a cloth and making her way to the girl. “Hands.” Sabrina held them out and Darcy wiped away the remnants of the meal, before gently wiping her face. She had barbecue sauce as far up as her eyebrow. “You did great. You had enough to eat?”

“Food,” Sabrina said.

“Yes, you had lots of food,” Annie said. “And you can have more whenever you want. But it doesn’t all need to be eaten at once. Do you feel full here?” She laid a gentle hand on Sabrina’s distended belly and the girl nodded. “Then that means you’ve had enough to eat.”

Sabrina reached out and laid a hand on Annie’s baby bump. “Food. Enough.”

“No, squirt, that’s not from food,” Tony said, kneeling next to Annie. “You and the others, they made you and then grew you, right?”

“Tube.”

“Tube? Oh, they grew you in a tube. Okay, I get it. Well, people in the world, we don’t grow people in tubes. They need to grow inside someone else until they’re ready to survive on the outside. That’s what Annie’s doing, she’s growing a person in there, that’s what the bump is.”

Sabrina looked confused and Tony grinned. He picked her up and carried her over to the sofa, getting JARVIS to put up a kids version of basic anatomy. Between them, Tony and JARVIS managed to explain the concept of pregnancy and babies to Sabrina.

Bucky leaned against the counter beside Annie and watched as Tony patiently went through the major organs of the body with Sabrina. It wasn’t enough for her to know how Annie was making a human, she wanted to know more. She was a little sponge, starving for information.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “About earlier. You were right, the world has changed around us. I guess I was just…”

“I know,” she interrupted. “Bucky, I know why you said the things you did. I’m right there with you. But it can’t be that way. She needs it not to be.”

“I was thinking…you’ve done this once already. So guide me, oh wise one.”

She giggled at him.

“I’m serious. I’m barely managing to hold it together, so tell me how to do this.”

“I honestly don’t know,” she said. “They’re so different from each other. I compare her first day with us to Kiddo’s and there’s not a lot that’s the same. When he came to us he was sick, really sick, like Steve before the serum. He didn’t talk, he didn’t know how to feed. He was terrified to make noise. But her…she’s a fighter, which makes me think they’d begun to train her. She sees this world she’s suddenly found herself in and all she wants to do is explore every inch. I don’t know how best to help her. God, Bucky, look at them. They’re so tiny. And Hydra…”

“Hey, hey,” he soothed as he pulled her into a hug. “They’re okay, they’re safe now, home, with their family, where they should be.”

“Hey,” Sam said as he joined them, his arms full of art supplies. “I was wondering if you’d mind if I
“Did some art therapy with her.”

“What’s art therapy?” Bucky questioned.

“Essentially, it’s just creating something, a painting, a drawing, something art related. Through creating it, the creator can explore abuse they’ve suffered, trauma they’ve gone through, big life changes.”

“You want her to draw what she can about Hydra,” Annie said and Sam nodded.

“For children without the vocabulary to express themselves, it can help them to have an outlet.”

“I’m for it,” Bucky said.

“Me too,” Annie agreed. “I am curious about something. When I was first found, once I was able to move around, the first thing I wanted was to see the sky. She hasn’t reacted at all to the windows, to the view. Were there windows in the room she was in?”

“No,” Bucky said. “Window-less lab space. Nothing to say she was kept there permanently though. She might have seen outside before.”

“Or she assumes it’s a screen like the TV, or a projection,” Sam suggested. “We’ll soon figure it out.”

He moved off to the lounge and caught Sabrina’s attention, Tony moving off to let him take centre stage.

“Hey, sweetheart, you wanna play with me for a while?”

“Play,” Sabrina demanded.

“Awesome. How about we draw for a little while?”

“Draw?”

“Like this. You have the paper,” he said, laying it out on the laminate part of the floor. “And then you take a crayon or a pencil, you can pick which one, and you make pictures. Like this.”

Logan quietly said goodbye to them all and then slipped out, back to his own bed now he wasn’t needed, and Sam started to draw. He picked up a pale pink crayon and drew a circle, then switched to brown and added two balls for eyes and a whole heap of brown hair. Then he returned to the pale pink for the nose, and then a red for the mouth.

“Face!” she said when he was done.

“That’s right, it’s a face. Who’s face do you think it is?”

She peered at it for a moment before she deliberated between Annie and Darcy. “Annie. Mouth.”

“Good job, that’s right, Annie does have red lips. You want to draw something?”

“Draw,” she said, reaching for the crayons.

“Cool.”

She started off with scribbles, just figuring out how it worked and then she filled page after page with
all sorts of things. Food they’d had for dinner, the people in the tower, toys she’d played with. She
drew a bathtub, and the jet they’d brought her home in, and Bucky’s metal arm. Then the drawings
stopped being so recognisable. Sam didn’t comment on anything, just praised her endlessly, taking
page after page and piling them up to look at later.

“No!” Sabrina shrieked when Phil and Clint headed to the elevator with Kiddo, running after them.
“No gone!”

“No, no, that’s not what’s happening,” Clint promised, passing Kiddo to Phil and squatting down to
her level. “He’s not going anywhere. We’re just going downstairs so he can have his bath and go to
sleep. He’s tired.”

“Come back?”

“I promise, you’ll see him in the morning.”

“Hey, princess,” Loki soothed. “Why don’t you and I go down with them? You can see where he’s
going to be tonight, and where he takes his bath. You can make sure it’s safe for him.”

“Me come back?” she asked.

“Yes, of course. Once you’re sure it’s safe, you and I will come back up to the others. Yes?”

“Yes,” she said after a moment of consideration.

While they were downstairs, Bruce and Jane sat down with the others to talk about what they’d
found in the files.

“The methods they used for Kiddo and Sabrina are different,” Bruce said. “Kiddo is a form of IVF
and gene manipulation. Sabrina is more of a clone with subtle changes. The health problems with
Kiddo shouldn’t be present in Sabrina, as they come from Steve’s DNA. They were created in the
lab, and then placed in incubation canisters, essentially artificial wombs, until they very viable to
survive outside.”

“How many more kids did they make from me?” Annie asked.

“Hundreds,” Jane said. “They made dozens of different versions, trying to make a super soldier that
could rival Captain America.”

“And how many more are going to appear?”

“None. All of them are accounted for now. Most of the units failed, each variation flawed, the
subjects not viable for survival. Their ability to manipulate genes was lacking, and their methods
deply unsound. Kiddo is the only one from his batch to survive, the others were all too weak, too
tick. Sabrina’s unit…they weren’t successful.”

“Translation?” Steve questioned.

“They weren’t super,” Tony said. “They were just kids, regular human kids. What did they do with
them?”

“The files say that they were terminated,” Bruce said.

“That’s disturbing,” Skye said. “Killing kids because they didn’t fit the expectations. And just when I
thought Hydra couldn’t get any worse.”
“Had they begun to train Sabrina?” Bucky asked.

“Yes,” Bruce confirmed. “But not anything lethal. They were working on her blending skills, her ability to fit into another environment. Feeding, speaking, testing her physical capabilities. Until that testing was complete, they couldn’t begin to train her in combat.”

“So she might not be a super soldier,” Steve suggested. “She might just be a little girl.”

“She laid Thor out,” Darcy put in. “I don’t think she’s just a little girl.”

“But she can be,” Thor declared. “She can heal from this. Kiddo has come to regain some sort of normalcy, I see not why the girl could not do the same.”

“I agree with Thor,” Steve said. “She just needs time.”

“Forgive my interruption,” JARVIS said, “but the young miss has decided she wishes to return to the group. She and Master Loki are currently ascending the stairs.”

“Thanks, J,” Tony said, moving to the freezer. “Hey, squirt. You wanna try some ice cream?”

“What ice cream?” Sabrina said as she released Loki’s hand and crossed to Tony.

“This is ice cream,” he said, pulling the lid off the tub and showing her the chocolate contents. “It’s food.”

“Food! Me food.”

“Wait a second,” Annie interceded. She crouched down to Sabrina’s level and laid a hand on her belly. “Is there room in there for more food, or are you all full up?”

Sabrina’s head tilted to the side as she considered and then she looked up at Tony. “Little food?”

“I can do that,” he said. “One little bit of ice cream for the little girl.” He dished out a scoop into a bowl and gave it to her with a spoon. “Now it’s okay if you can’t finish that, if you run out of room. No one will get mad at you if you can’t finish.”

She dutifully carried her treat over to the dining table and sat in the same seat as she had during dinner. Again she scooped up a tiny bit on the end of her spoon and poked at it with her tongue, before she decided it was safe and jumped right in.

Steve watched the child for a while, before he followed Annie out onto the balcony.

“How are you doing?” he asked, leaning on the railing beside her.

“Honestly?”

“Always.”

“I don’t know. Steve…I don’t know how I’m doing. And I don’t know what to do. Do I take care of her, is that what’s expected of me? Or do I give her to someone else, like Kiddo?”

Steve waited for her to elaborate, and he didn’t have to wait long.

“When Kiddo arrived, it was so obvious what to do, so clear what was best for him. Phil took one look at him and that was it, he fell head over heels. He held him and he just knew, Kiddo was his. And I was okay with that. It was so clear, it was what was best for everyone. But Sabrina…it’s all so
complicated. Bucky has an opinion, and I’m not sure if it’s the best thing. And I don’t mind having contact with her, spending time with her, caring for her. But when I stop and think, when it catches up to me that she’s mine, that she’s a part of me… I can’t bear it.”

“No one is expecting anything you’re not ready to give,” he said and she snorted.

They were quiet for a long while, the sound of some cartoon movie or other drifting out to them.

“I remember it,” she murmured, he could only hear her because of his serum. “The lab, where I was, what they did to me. I remember being sliced open and pumped full of God knows what. The needles, the samples they took, the surgeries they did. I remember a thousand volts being passed through my body, I remember the dull ache of it as I healed from the bones they broke, and the pain of them trying to change me, the most basic level of me; everything stripped away until there was nothing left.”

Steve felt sick to his stomach. It was one thing to imagine it and to have Clint tell him she remembered. It was something else entirely to hear the words come from Annie herself.

“I begged them to let me die,” she admitted. “Sure, to start off I wanted them to let me go. But that faded. Bucky’s proof, they had ways to make you forget. And when you couldn’t forget, they had ways of making you not care. The years they had me, the experiments they ran, the pain, it all kind of blends into one. But it’s still there, in my head, permanent. And that’s what they did to my children.”

“No, Steve, no, don’t.”

“I didn’t protect them. I was too weak to fight back, too pathetic to protect my own children. The files mention at least two hundred attempts to recreate Rebirth, and out of those, all that’s left are three, and one isn’t even born yet. How can I claim to be a mother when I couldn’t even save them from that torture?”

“Hey!” he barked, taking her by the shoulders and forcing her to look at him. “You have done nothing to be ashamed of. How could you possibly protect people you had no idea existed? There is no blame on you, and whatever is best for these children, that’s what we’ll do. You think I don’t feel guilty? I know why Kiddo was sick, I know it was because of me. And that tears me up like I can’t describe, knowing that my son could have died because of me. That others did die because of me.”

“No, Steve, that’s not your fault,” she argued.

“If that’s not your fault, how is anything Hydra did to them your fault?”

She didn’t have another argument for him, probably because she was too busy breathlessly sobbing into his chest. All things considered, Annie hadn’t cried very much over what had been done. She had never truly been an emotional female, something that had both mystified and pleased Steve, but she needed to release all the pent-up pain she had.

He held her, sinking to the floor, letting her cry it all out.

And if he shed his own tears, he knew she wouldn’t say anything.

Steve curled closer to Tony and tried to go back to sleep.

Sabrina had eventually decided that she wanted to sleep near Kiddo, so Phil and Clint had made up
the spare room for her. She didn’t seem to have any problems sleeping on her own, but she wouldn’t have the light turned off, so Tony had built her a nightlight using some things he had in the workshop.

Annie had finally calmed down, enough to sleep, and everyone else had slowly drifted off to their rooms to settle down for the night.

But someone was sitting in the penthouse lounge watching TV and it had woken Steve.

For anyone else, it wouldn’t have been a problem, but for Steve it was distracting. It was one of the things most people forgot when they talked about the serum, how hyper his senses were. It shocked most people when he pointed out that the healing could sometimes be more painful than the injury. Most people just didn’t want to know that he was, at the heart of it, a human being.

Tony did. Tony had taken everything Steve had told him and made a mental note, and Tony never really forgot anything. Tony made sure his fast metabolism was taken care of with extra food, 100% proof alcohol when Steve wanted to get drunk, and many things that would burn off extra energy, be it sex or the fully stocked gym. Tony had arranged for a firmer bed, a firmer pillow, an actual paper newspaper delivery every morning, and JARVIS to explain things Steve was confused by. Tony even remembers to turn down his music whenever Steve is near, something he refuses to do on pure principle for anyone else.

But tonight, someone has woken Steve, and no matter how much he wants to, he can’t get back to sleep.

He eased himself from the warm bedding, soothing Tony as he murmured at his absence, and then made his way from the room.

Loki was curled up on the sofa under a huge blanket with a bowl of popcorn.

“What are you watching?” Steve said, pushing up the overly long sleeves of the sweatshirt he had worn to bed. Tony liked to tangle his fingers in the fabric.

Loki jumped and looked over his shoulder, offering an embarrassed smile.

“Camelot. I believe it to be a story of your history, though I am unsure if it is a true history or a fictional one, like the Game of Thrones,” Loki said. “I am sorry if I woke you.”

“Nah, it’s okay,” Steve said, joining him and grabbing a handful of popcorn. He watched a few scenes and then smiled. “It’s the legend of King Arthur. As far as I know, he never actually existed. He’s sort of a figure of the perfect king, which is why the story endures.”

“I see. Do you identify with him?”

“Me?”

“Yes. Are you not held up as the pinnacle of your species, as the perfect protector of the people? Surely, as such, you must feel a certain kinship with such a figure.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Steve admitted as the episode drew to a close and JARVIS started the next one. “I guess I kind of do. In all the stories, he’s seen as this strong figure, who lead his men and always did the right thing. No one seems to realise he’s still a man through all that.”

“You are still a man through it all,” Loki echoed.
Steve shot to his feet, the bowl tumbling to the floor.

“Stop,” the soldier demanded. “Just stop.”

Loki followed him, rising gracefully, the blanket falling away to reveal his silken pyjamas, the slight swell of his growing arousal.

“I can’t,” Loki whispered. “I can’t stop.”

The logical, rational, completely-in-love-with-Tony part of Steve’s brain screamed at him to run, to get JARVIS to call someone, to shove Loki away.

Instead, Steve kissed him.

It was electrifying, the feel of Loki in his arms, his soft yielding mouth as his tongue pushed inside. Loki was gripping at his shoulders and Steve felt himself harden at the lithe form pressed against him.

They sprung apart at the strangled gasp behind them.

“Tony,” Steve breathed. “Tony, listen, this isn’t…”

But it was, it was exactly what it looked like.

Tony stood frozen, in his pyjamas, staring at them, before he bolted, running to the platform and having JARVIS seal him in his suit.

“TONY!” Steve screamed, racing out to him. “Tony, don’t do this! Please, just let me explain. Let’s talk. PLEASE!”

Tony didn’t listen. He simply jumped from the platform as soon as the faceplate was down, soaring away into the night.

“TONY!”

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun duuuuuunnnnnn!

Please comment below and let me know what you thought, I love reading your comments, they make me all happy and content. If you don't want to leave a comment or you don't have time, kudos work just as well.

So, any guesses on what's coming next?
Steve felt like someone had reached into his chest and crushed his heart.

How could he be so stupid? All he had to do was call JARVIS. The AI would have woken Tony or someone else, someone that could stop him making the biggest mistake of his life.

He didn’t know which he had more guilt over, kissing Loki or putting the hurt on Tony’s face.

Tony was gone, and no amount of yelling at JARVIS was getting the AI to put a call through to the suit.

“Try him again,” Steve ground out. “Just…keep trying until he answers, God damn it!”

“Noted, Captain,” Jarvis said, and if an AI could sound frosty, he definitely did.

“Steve…”

“Don’t! Just don’t!” Steve snapped at Loki. “I told you to stop and you just wouldn’t listen!”

“I’m sorry, I know, we hurt Tony,” Loki said quietly. “But I…”

“What? What could you possibly say to make this better?”

“I feel…”

Steve looked at him just in time to watch him collapse, right at the moment Annie walked in. She rushed over to him, checking his pulse.

“JARVIS, wake Tony, and get Bruce and Thor up here,” she ordered.

“Doctor Banner and Master Thor are currently on their way, but I am unable to comply with your third request, Miss, as Sir is no longer in the building.”

“What? Why isn’t he here? Where is he?”

“I am currently unable to disclose his location.”

Bruce and Thor arrived, rushing over to Loki, and Annie’s narrowed gaze landed on Steve.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“It was nothing,” he hedged.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“WHAT HAPPENED?”

“I kissed Loki,” he admitted in a voice barely above a whisper. “And Tony walked in. He saw us. And he got in the suit and took off.”

The room was silent, so much so that even Bucky’s footsteps on the stairs were audible. The weight of what Steve had admitted hung in their air, pressing down on them all.

“You kissed my brother?” Thor asked in disbelief. “This cannot be. The love between you and Tony…Steve, tell me this is an untruth. Tell me this is not so.”
“I can’t. Thor, I wish I could, but I can’t.”


“I don’t know! I swear. It just happened, like a force of nature. I just couldn’t stop.”

“Is he going to come back?” Annie questioned quietly. “Is Tony going to come back?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where’s he going?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is he okay?”

“I don’t know.”

She snorted at him as she got to her feet. “Well, there’s a lot you don’t know, isn’t there? You don’t know where Tony’s going, you don’t know if he’s coming back, or if he’s okay, you don’t know how this happened.”

“Thor, take him to my lab, put him on a bed, wake Jane. I’ll be there as soon as I cool this down,” Bruce muttered, sharing a worried look with Bucky as Thor followed his instructions.

“How could you?” she questioned. “How could you do this!”

“I didn’t mean for it, it just—”

“Do NOT say it just happened! Nothing just happens. We make choices, and those choices lead to things. So tell me. What choices did you make that led to this?”

“I could have called someone,” Steve admitted. “I could have walked away. Annie, I made a mistake. I screwed up, I know that.”

“Do you?”

“Look, I love Tony. But I’m allowed to make a mistake, I’m allowed to fuck up!” he snapped. “I’m still fucking human!”

He sighed, threading his fingers through his hair and moved forwards to try and hold her, try and calm her down. But her hands came up and she backed away from him, her tear filled eyes boring into his own.

“Don’t touch me,” she hissed.

“Damn it, Annie!” he snarled. “I’m not unclean because I shared one kiss with another man!”

He made the mistake of trying to touch her again, and she lost it. She placed her hands flat on his chest and shoved, throwing him clean across the room to hit the glass of the windows, sliding down to land in a crumpled heap, gasping for breath as his lungs remembered how to work.

Bucky made to step in, to keep Steve alive long enough to try and sort the whole mess out. They had no clear picture on Annie’s strength; with the pregnancy, they’d had no chance to test it. They knew her healing speed was a little slower than Steve’s, but not by much. Her metabolism seemed to be as fast as his, if the sheer amount of food she consumed was any indicator.
“You are not a worthy man,” she said through her tears. “You are not worthy of the shield you carry. Dr Erskine would look upon you and weep in disgust of what you’ve become.”

Steve was more destroyed by her quiet words than anything else she could have rained down upon him. He was weak kneed as Bucky helped him up and, at Bruce’s urging, led him down to the gym.

“What do I do, Buck?” he whispered brokenly.

“Beats me. I’d suggest staying out of her way though.”

Bruce waited until everyone else had left and Jane had asked what he wanted her to do before he approached Annie.

He gently eased her into his arms, sliding a hand under her own to rest against her bump where the baby was kicking wildly in response to its mothers raised stress levels.

“He’s coming back, right?” she whimpered as she cried into his chest. “He has to come back. I need him.”

“Oh, Annie,” he soothed, stroking her hair. “I’m sure he’s coming back. JARVIS, call Tony for me, ask him if he’s coming back at some point.”

“I have asked, Dr Banner, but Sir is refusing to answer me.”

“Then take a picture of Annie right now and send it to him, tell him she needs to know.”

There were a few minutes quiet, the silence only broken by Annie’s quiet whimpers, before there was the roar of Tony’s repulsors.

He had JARVIS strip the armour before he rushed forwards to let Annie cling to him.

“You can’t leave,” she begged. “I need you. You can’t leave me.”

“Shhhh, it’s okay,” he lulled. “I’ll never leave you. But I need to go, clear my head.”

“You’ll come back? You promise?”

“I swear it, I will come back. But this…”

He eased her away and walked a few paces, tugging at his hair, before looking at Bruce.

“Where are they? No, wait, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. I can’t. I just…Bruce, take care of her. I’ll come back. I just…can’t.”

He didn’t wait for a response before he pressed a kiss to Annie’s forehead and then strode to the landing platform, suiting up once more and jetting off.

Bruce once more held Annie to him, letting her cling to him and cry.

They didn’t talk about what had happened.

Bruce revelled in the scent of her, the silk of her hair, the heat of her. He hasn’t come across anyone warmer than him since the accident, no one but Steve, and that’s not a surprise; Steve was the basis of his experiment, after all. But Annie is a furnace against him, and it heats him right down to his
core, making him relax in a way he hasn’t in a long time. After a while, he led her back to bed and tucked her in. He perched on the edge of the bed while she drifted off and then made his way from the room, leaning against the wall by her door.

“JARVIS, where is Steve?”

“Captain Rogers is currently in the gym with Master Bucky,” the AI informed. Bruce thought that if an AI could sound thoroughly pissed off, JARVIS did.

“We wake the kids?”

“No, Kiddo and Sabrina are still sleeping.”

“Good.” He moved to the elevator and scrubbed at his face. “My lab, please.”

Loki was on the bed as directed, with Jane fussing over monitors and taking blood samples.

“Any change?” Bruce asked, clapping Thor on the shoulder as he passed.

“Nope. Did Steve really…” Jane trailed off.

“Yes. And then Tony walked in. And then Tony took off, literally. And then Loki passed out.”

“JARVIS showed us the footage of what Annie did to Steve,” Thor said. “Is he unharmed?”

“Steve isn’t my priority right now,” Bruce snapped, taking a few deep breaths and having a mental conversation with Hulk to calm him down.

{Come on, big guy. It’s okay. It’ll all be okay}

{Tony gone. Steve bad. Loki sick. Annie cry.}

{Yeah, I know. But you can’t smash. I have to make Loki better.}

{Annie cry!}

{She got scared, but she’s okay now. I put her to bed myself, I stayed until I was sure she was asleep.}

“JARVIS, is Annie still sleeping?”

“Indeed, Dr Banner,” JARVIS replied, bringing up an image of Annie. She was curled on her side, one arm curled under her pillow and the other curled around her bump.

{See? She’s okay.}

{Tony.}

{He’ll come back. He just needs to cool off, like you do after you smash. And then he and Steve will sort this out. Nothing for you to smash. Let me take care of Loki, and later I’ll let you out to play in the gym with Thor, okay? Maybe there will even be cartoons.}

{Gym. Better Loki.}

{Better Loki, and then gym. Yes?}

He got a wordless grunt of agreement, and then Hulk settling back down. He was more agitated than
usual, so therefore more present in the back of his mind, but docile enough for Bruce to work.

“Thor, will you come with me to the gym later so Hulk can blow off a little steam?”

“Of course, Banner. I would be honoured to aid you in this.”

“Thanks. Okay, let’s take a look here,” he said, cleaning his hands with rubbing alcohol while he peered at Loki’s vitals. “He seems to be fine. Has he regained consciousness at all?”

“No,” Jane said. “But there are some funky things with his blood chemistry. Take a look.”

Bruce crossed to the holographic screen she had up.

“I’m a physicist, so I don’t really know what to look for specifically, but I got JARVIS to pull up the results of the sample you took when he first got here. This one is off,” she said, motioning to the analysis of the new sample.

“You’re right. These pheromone levels are way off the charts,” he murmured to himself. “These can’t be right. This... if I didn’t know better, I’d say I was looking at a cat in heat.”

“My brother is not a cat.”

“No, but he wasn’t human until very long ago either,” Jane said. “What if Odin screwed it up? Loki wasn’t even from Asgard, not originally.”

“Thor, what did Odin actually say he was taking?” Bruce asked.

“All but a little of his magics, just enough for him to live, and he would take his long years, leaving him a mortal life.”

“So he didn’t change Loki’s physiology, he is what he always was, just more breakable,” Bruce mused. “Thor, Loki didn’t come from Asgard, he wasn’t born there?”

“Nay, he was born in Jotunheim.”

“And beings from Jotunheim, are they the same biologically as humans and Asgardians?”

“I am unsure. What sameness do you seek knowledge of?”

“I’m just wondering if there are any physical differences that could account for what’s happening to Loki, if there is some reason for it that I just haven’t noticed.”

“I know little of Jotunheim and its inhabitants,” Thor admitted. “I now wish I had paid attention when I was a boy. I was not as diligent in my lessons as I should have been.”

“And we can’t call someone and ask,” Jane sighed.

Bruce moved to Loki’s prone form, feeling his pulse. “What do you know? You and Loki were told stories as children, and every story has some grain of truth.”

“We were told that there are several peoples of Jotunheim, but the most terrifying are the Frost Giants. They are over ten feet in height and wield weapons of ice that they conjure from thin air. They breed rarely, and the mortality rate for their infants is high, which has made them evil in their savagery.”

“They have no women,” Loki mumbled, eyes fluttering open. “Why are we talking of the Frost
Giants? What happened?"

“We don’t know,” Bruce said. “What’s the last thing you remember happening?”

“I was…I…”

“We know what transpired between the Captain and you,” Thor said and Loki looked away in shame. “Loki…how did this occur? I have never known you to behave in this way. You have tricked, this is true, but you have never played with the affections of others.”

“I don’t know,” Loki whispered. “It was like Thanos once more. I could not control my actions, he told me to stop and I couldn’t.”

“Could there be some residual mind control?” Jane asked.

“No. Hulk would smell it, he would know. No, this is something else,” Bruce said. He looked at Thor and Jane. “Guys, I need to be alone with Loki.”

“Nay, I’ll not leave him,” Thor protested.

“Thor, honey, it’s called doctor patient confidentiality. That way Loki is free to tell Bruce anything he needs to without getting embarrassed.”

“Go, Thor,” Loki urged. “I’ll be fine.”

Thor eventually agreed and let Jane lead him back to their floor.

“Okay, Loki, is there anything strange happening? Anything that perhaps you’ve never heard anyone on Asgard talk about?” he asked as he pulled up a stool and sat down. “Anything.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well…let’s see. Hmmm. Okay, some young women, when they reach puberty, want to know if their breasts are normal, if they’re the right size. A lot of young men worry about their penis size. These are things that they wouldn’t normally talk about with their friends or family. Is there anything that has occurred for you that you don’t think has happened for Thor?”

“Do…no, it’s nothing.”

“Loki. I promise, you can tell me anything. There’s nothing that will shock me, or repulse me. I’ve pretty much seen everything at this point.”

Loki considered that for a while, before he fixed his eyes on the ceiling and spoke. “You know of Thor’s body?”

“I do. Now he’s mortal, he’s come to me for a few ailments, mostly eating stuff that didn’t agree with him.”

“And…does Thor…does he bleed?”

“Bleed? Yes, he bleeds. All morals bleed when they’re injured.”

“No. I mean…as a woman bleeds,” he whispered. “I hasn’t happened to me for decades, and it was only the once…but…Mother said it was to be expected.”

“I see. Are you okay with some questions?” Loki nodded. “Okay. The blood. How much was there?
Was it a single spurt of blood or was it a steady sort of trickle for a few days?"

“Sort of steady for days I suppose. Mother gave me a tonic for it.”

“Was there any pain? Perhaps a sort of ache down by your tailbone? Or a sort of cramping in your abdomen, sort of here?” he asked, motioning to his own lower abdomen.

“Both.”

“Loki, you think I could have a feel of your abdomen, where you had the pain?”

Loki nodded and laid back while Bruce warmed his hands. Bruce pulled Loki’s clothes so he could get at the area he needed, before he placed his hands flat on the muscles. He palpated the area, feeling the give and resist of different parts, the outline of intestines, the smooth sphere of his bladder.

“Loki, I wonder…could I do a pelvic examination?”

“What is a pelvic examination?”

“It’s where a doctor takes a look at the area between your legs. I’d examine your genitals and anus, just to check I’m not missing anything.”

“Will it hurt?”

“It might be a little uncomfortable, but no, it shouldn’t hurt.”

“Then you may proceed.”

Bruce smiled and helped Loki, who was exceedingly light headed still, to remove everything below the waist, covering him with a sheet before instructing him on how to position himself, knees up and apart, feet flat on the bed.

“You can tell me to stop at any time. And if you feel any pain, tell me. Pain is not a good sign,” Bruce assured as he moved to the end of the bed, putting on a pair of gloves. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, Loki, just relax for me,” he said soothingly as he pushed up the sheet. He placed a hand on Loki’s inner thigh. “Are my hands too cold?”

“No. A little cool, but it doesn’t bother me.”

“Oh, right. Frost Giant. You’re going to get a real kick out of New York in winter. We might even get snow. Alright, here we go.”

Bruce carefully examined his penis and testicles, parting the cheeks of his buttocks and using lubricant to insert two fingers, checking for tears or obstructions. There was nothing, nothing out of the ordinary. Bruce removed his fingers, pressing a tissue to his anus and stripping off his gloves, swapping them for a new pair.

He was just about to walk away, cover Loki back up and tell him he could lay down as he was when he noticed something odd about Loki’s perineum. It shouldn’t bulge like that, two clear raised areas that started behind his scrotum and leading down to his buttocks.

“Just a little longer,” he promised, pushing Loki’s thighs a little further apart and moving his genitals out of the way. He pressed at the lumps.
They didn’t feel suspect. He parted them and smiled to himself.

“Loki, did you say that Frost Giant’s don’t have females?”

“It was one of the stories we were told as children,” he replied, his eyes fixed on one of the monitors, shifting his hips a little as Bruce examined some part of his intimate areas. “The story was that they had women, but they were so ugly they hid away. If you did see one, you wouldn’t be able to tell it from a man.” He yelped as Bruce touched something that felt ready to break.

Bruce smiled to himself as he removed his hands and pulled down the sheet. “I’m done. Sorry about the last part. JARVIS, can you run an analysis of Loki’s hormone levels?”

“Running now, Dr Banner.”

“Am I…as I should be?” Loki asked, pressing his thighs together.

“I think so. I have a theory about the bleeding, which might have something to do with why you kissed Steve. But I need the analysis before I can be sure.”

“Analysis complete,” JARVIS said.

Bruce picked up a tablet and looked at the results, smiling to himself.

“Loki, were you ever told stories about how Frost Giants pick their spouse? Do they get married?”

“I was told they mate for life. Always seemed rather romantic to me.”

“Loki, I think I just solved everything.”

Tony finally returned at lunchtime. He was greeted by Sabrina rushing up to bounce around him, babbling about the suit.

“I’ll show you properly another time. Where’s Annie?” he asked as he hoisted her up, setting her on his hip.

“In bath,” she said, poking at his reactor. “Light.”

“Yeah. That’s my light. It keeps my heart working.”

“Good light.”

“Very good light. Who were you playing with before I came back?”

“Clint. Mermaid.”

Tony popped in to Annie’s room, knocking on the bathroom door and telling her he was home, before he took Sabrina down to Clint and Phil’s floor, where the Little Mermaid was playing and the floor was covered with toys.

“Oh, good, you’re back,” Phil said as Kiddo smiled and wiggled at Tony.

“Yeah. Bruce called, said he had some answers,” he said as he let Sabrina down. She scurried to Clint, flumping down onto his lap and watching the movie.
“He’s on his floor, taking a break,” Clint supplied.

Tony went to his room and took a shower, before he joined Bruce, let him explain his findings, and then he got JARVIS to gather Steve, Loki and Annie in the penthouse so they could talk things through. Loki was on a sofa, looking weaker than he had since he arrived; Steve was hovering by the windows, and Annie was perched on a barstool at the breakfast bar. He went over to Annie first, hugging her close.

“See? I promised I’d come back,” he murmured in her ear. He could feel her tears soaking into his shirt.

“I thought…” she sobbed. “I came in…and Loki was on the floor…and you were gone…and I thought…”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he moaned, stroking her hair. He looked over her head at Steve. “Hydra are not getting in here,” he said and Steve looked relieved all of a sudden. The blond made his way over, hovering.

“Annie?”

She looked up at the soldier before she went to him willingly, letting him hug her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean it.”

“I know. You were scared. And I deserved to be yelled at. And thrown.”

“I didn’t know I could do that.”

“None of us did. But I can take it.” She chuckled weakly. “Feel better?”

“I guess. Is this the part where you need me to go away so you three can work it all out?”

“Definitely a Stark,” Steve joked with a look at Tony.

Annie headed for the stairs, off to play with the kids, and the three men looked uneasily at each other.

“First things first,” Tony said, sensing that the other two weren’t going to start. “Are we all on the same page? Bruce filled us all in on Loki’s…attributes?”

“He explained,” Loki confirmed. “And I did as he suggested and took a bath to…explore.”

Loki’s face was bright red, and Tony couldn’t decide if he wanted to comfort him or laugh.

“Okay, good. Bruce explained things to me, so I’m good. Steve?”

“I got a little lost,” the blond admitted.

Tony launched into a simplistic explanation.

Loki was as all Frost Giants were; he was both genders. Because of the harshness of their natural environment, the species had evolved to contain both genders in one body, allowing them to both impregnate and get pregnant. The pheromones that Loki was putting out were a natural biological imperative, a natural evolution to protect the species. It inspired passion in another, urging them to mate, to produce children.
No one had counted on it affecting humans.

From the stories Loki and Thor could remember, and some Norse mythology JARVIS had dug up from the wilderness of the internet, they had found that Jotun’s bred in strict hierarchies. A breeding pair of Frost Giants would have an Alpha and an Omega. Rarely there is a Beta too.

The Alpha is the strongest, the pinnacle of physical strength, the perfect father of young. Within the dynamics of the group, the Alpha is the leader, the protector, the provider.

The Omega is the most fertile of the group, the one most capable of conceiving and carrying to term the desired children. Within the dynamics of the group, the Omega is the protected one, the prized one.

The Beta is the peacemaker. Within the group, the strong personalities and roles of the Alpha and Omega mean that they come to blows fairly frequently. It is the role of the Beta to smooth things, to keep things even and harmonious within the group. Within the dynamics of the group, the Beta is the most needed, and the most rare.

Most Jotun breeding’s are simply an Alpha and Omega. A Beta was rare, so rare that even Jotun’s believed them to be a myth. They were barely a whisper in the lore.

“I’m with you, I follow,” Steve said eventually, his gaze flicking between Tony and Loki. “So…this applies to us? That’s why I kissed Loki?”

“Dr Banner believes so,” Loki said. “He said I have been emitting these pheromones for a while now. He thinks that, because you are human, it took some time for you to truly be affected.”

“Alright, I’m just going to say this,” Tony said, crossing to Steve and forcing him to meet his gaze. “I’m not mad you kissed Loki, okay? I’m not mad about that. It really was beyond your control, and his. What I’m mad about is that this has been going on for a while and you didn’t say anything. Steve, how long have you been crushing on Loki?”

Steve looked away in shame and whispered, “Since I got back from Washington.”

Tony walked away, scrubbing at his face. “Okay. That, right there, that is what pisses me off. You said nothing, Steve. All this time and not a word.”

“I shouldn’t have been looking at Loki,” he mumbled and it all made sense to Tony.

“Oh, Capsicle,” he moaned, pulling him into a hug. “It’s not the 40’s anymore. It’s okay to look, it’s okay to have naughty thoughts of someone other than me. I have them. I’ve noticed how sexy he is. Of course, I thought it was just my overactive libido making an appearance.” Steve snorted. “Hey. Look at me.”

Steve looked up at him, meeting his brown eyes. “I’m sorry, Tony.”

“I know. And yes, I’m not impressed by how all of this went down. But I love you, and we’re okay. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“We good?”

“I don’t know, are we?”
“I’m good. You good?”

“Yeah, I think I am.”

“Then we’re good. Okay, one down,” Tony said, pressing a fierce kiss to Steve’s lips, kissing until he kissed back. “One to go.”

He crossed the room and flumped down next to Loki as Steve leaned against the window, sighing in relief.

“Come here often?” Tony joked and Loki smiled shakily at him.

“Fairly often, yes. Oh, Tony. I never meant for this. I never wanted to hurt you, I swear it. You welcomed me in, you cared for me. I wouldn’t hurt you after that.”

“Hey, hey, I know,” Tony soothed, reaching out to take his hand. “I know, Loki. Don’t worry, this wasn’t your fault. If Odin had bothered to give you the information you needed…”

“Tony,” Steve warned.

“I know, I know, no hating on a god,” he replied. “But I’m right!”

“Maybe,” Steve conceded. “But now is not the time.”

“And that mother of yours was no saint either,” Tony griped to Loki.

“Tony!”

“I would rather not talk of either of them at this moment,” Loki said sadly.

Bruce had theorised that the ‘tonic’ Frigga had given Loki had suppressed his natural cycles, pushing down his body’s needs. Bruce had a theory that suppressing the natural urge to breed had started the madness that had consumed Loki.

“This is all instinctual, right?” Tony asked. “Bruce said our instincts would lead us to make this work?”

“Yes,” Steve said. “He said it should come natural if we don’t fight it. Assuming, of course, we all want to be together.”

Tony glared at him as Loki’s tears spilled over, and then gave in to his natural urge to hold Loki.

“Steve, go check on…something,” Tony ordered. “We need some time. I’ll get JARVIS to call you.”

“I’ll go…yeah, that way,” Steve said, moving towards the bedroom, stroking Tony’s hair as he passed.

Tony was left alone with Loki, and he wasn’t quite sure which urge to give in to first.

“Are you not angry at me for kissing your Captain?” Loki asked, still soaking Tony’s shirt with his tears.

“I’m angry that this happened and we don’t get a choice in how it happened. I’m angry that Steve didn’t come to me and tell me he found you attractive. I’m angry that Odin lied to you and Frigga kept you hidden, and all that other shit that got heaped on you.”
“So not at me then?”

“Not really. Pissed that Steve got to kiss you before I did. I had a rep as a playboy, I’ll have you know.”

“You want to kiss me?”

Tony didn’t reply, he simply pushed Loki up and back, laying him out on the sofa and moving over him, joining their lips.

Loki let out a high, startled sound before he relaxed into it, kissing back, letting Tony tease open his lips with his tongue. He tentatively met it with his own, feeling Tony’s weight pushing him into the sofa.

Natural instinct was pushing at him to strip off his clothes and let Tony have him.

“Not gonna happen, Loki,” Tony murmured with a smile, sliding a hand down to still his hips. “I know what you want. But that’s not going to happen right now.” He sat up, pulling Loki to sit up too. “Firstly, this is biologically a triad, so Steve will be there when we finally do get pelvic. Secondly, we need to be a relationship a little while longer before I rock your world. And,thirdly, I have it on good authority that you are as pure as a driven white snow, so, no, your first time will NOT be on a sofa. It will be in a bed, with two men who want nothing more than to make you mindless with pleasure.”

Loki blushed and ducked his head, giggling a little to himself.

“You do make a very persuasive argument.”

“Damn straight,” Steve said from the entrance to the room. “JARVIS said I could come back.”

“JARVIS is a very smart boy,” Tony said. “Now, come make nice with those very good lips of yours.”

Steve crossed the room with a smile and let Tony draw him down to the sofa, Loki between them. Steve leaned in and kissed Loki, strong and possessive, and then he leaned across, kissing Tony in exactly the same way.

“Okay, I have a demand, because I am Tony Stark and it is my billionaires right to do such things,” he said, making them chuckle at him. “My demand is that Loki moves into our room. Not that we have to get physical, not like that. But I want you sleeping in the same bed as me and Steve. I know you’ve been having some trouble with sleep, about knowing when you need it and getting to sleep and all that. Well, me and Steve will help you with that. I want you with us,” he said, threading his fingers in Loki’s hair. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Loki whispered.

Tony’s fingers were massaging the base of his skull, and Steve was taking his hand, fitting them together so well. The three of them were all connected, physically, and they all felt something settle within them as the triad solidified.

Loki was home, at long last.

The family spent the afternoon playing with the kids down in the pool.
To be perfectly honest, Tony had forgotten he had a pool.

“How do you forget you have a pool?” Sam asked as he pulled off his shirt in the locker room.

“I was just building the thing, I signed off on so many additions, I forgot most of them,” Tony said and Steve smiled at him.

“I bet you don’t remember that you have a cinema,” Steve said.

“I have a cinema? What else do I have?”

The other men chuckled and made their way out to the pool. It was a huge cavern, taking up an entire floor. It had water slides and a wave machine, it even had a few hot tubs. The tile put everyone in mind of the bathhouses of ancient Rome, the white marble columns, the blue shades of the mosaic tiles, the gentle lights.

“I think we might need to come here without an audience sometime,” Steve murmured in Tony’s ear, reaching out to snag Loki as he passed.

“We could have a lot of fun under that waterfall,” Loki pointed out practically.

“Later,” Tony promised.

Sabrina was bouncing as Clint eased her into her swimming costume, which was ice blue with a picture of Elsa on it.

“Big bath, big bath, big bath,” she chanted as Thor combed back her hair.

“Hold still, little one,” he chuckled. “You may enter soon.”

“Thor’s right,” Clint said, yanking it up to cover her chest. “But you can’t go in alone. Do you know how to swim?”

“Swim?” she questioned.

“I guess that answers that,” Phil said as he tugged at Kiddo’s swimming diaper, making sure it was in place. “Sabrina, will you go to Tony and ask him for Kiddo’s swimming costume, please?”

“Okay!”

She sped off and they smiled at each other. Tony pretended to be clueless, until Jane handed him a bag. He passed it to the little girl and she sped back to Phil.

“Thank you,” Phil said.

“See, when someone does something for you, or gives you something you want or asked for, you say thank you. And when you ask for something, you say please,” Clint coached.

“Okay.”

“Good girl. Now, will you stay with Thor and do as he says while I go get my costume on, please?”

“Thor.”

“Good girl.”
She sat down obediently and let Thor finish braiding her hair back and watched as Phil eased the little swimming trunks over the rounded diaper butt. These were blue, with Disney’s Nemo and Crush on them.

Soon enough they were all properly attired, and they slipped into the beautifully warm water. Steve and Tony eased Loki into it, starting him at the shallow end, before they convinced him that they wouldn’t let him drown. Loki had apparently never been a particularly strong swimmer. Steve and Tony, who both had issues with water, had taken a trip a few months before, spending time together at the beach, getting used to being in water again. They would both be fine, as long as everyone respected the rule and didn’t dunk them.

Bucky refused to get in, just flat out refused. He put on trunks, just like everyone else. But he would only go as far as sitting on the edge of the pool, swishing his feet and calves in the water. No one pushed it, they just let him do what he felt comfortable with. He seemed happy enough.

Kiddo, who everyone had expected to either go boneless like in the bath or freak out completely, went absolutely berserk. His splashing was enough to soak everyone anywhere near him. Phil, who was holding him, got a face full of water and it didn’t even dim his smile a little. He and Skye took it in turns to pull him through the water between them, his little legs kicking wildly the whole way.

Sabrina hovered on the side of the pool as Thor got in, and then Clint let her jump, the big blond catching her before she could sink. She took to the water like a little fish, soon figuring out the best way to move through the water, swimming laps around them all.

Annie was the last one into the pool. Tony had bought her a purple maternity suit, quite high fronted so she could preserve her modesty. But with her bump now a prominent feature of her anatomy, she was having a little trouble navigating her way into the water. Bruce moved up to her and took her hand.

“Here,” he said, leading her to the stairs.

He led her down them, going slowly, letting her grip at him. Hulk purred in the back of his mind at having her close and safe.

“Bruce?” she asked, two steps down, her bare toes wiggling against the tile as she steadied herself.

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask why you haven’t made a move on me? Because I keep waiting for it, and then you don’t.”

He smirked to himself. “You’re very sure of yourself there,” he said.

“It’s a thing,” she shrugged, gripping at him as she wobbled.

“What makes you think I should be anywhere near you?”

“You mean because of the Other Guy? He’s not you, Bruce. You and him…you’re two different people that timeshare a body.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is that simple. You chose to make it more complicated,” she said as she entered the pool fully. She let go of his hand and swished the water a little before she looked up at him. “Bruce, I like you. You’re sweet and funny and smart. Pretty easy on the eyes too, if I do say so myself. And Hulk, if I
get to meet him…well, then that’ll be between me and him. But you need to trust yourself. I’m not made of glass and you are not a monster.”

With that, she tiptoed up and kissed his cheek before she buoyantly moved away, leaving him stunned in her wake.

Loki perched on the edge of the bed while he waited for Steve to emerge from the bathroom and Tony to come in from the lounge where he was finishing a call.

It had been an enjoyable afternoon, splashing around in the pool, and even Loki would admit that he felt more at home with mortals in this tiny corner of the cosmos than he had ever felt anywhere else.

Dinner had been a wild affair, Sabrina thoroughly enjoying the curry that Bruce had cooked. She definitely took after her mother in the appetite department. Bucky had been a little too adventurous and taken a huge mouthful of the curry Bruce made especially for Thor. It took a whole litre of milk for his tongue to stop melting from the heat of it.

And now he was here. It had taken the three men a single trip to move all his things from the room on Thor’s floor to Tony and Steve’s room. Now his room too. Their room. How strange. He’d never shared with anyone before. Tony and Steve had arranged his clothes alongside their own, as if he had always been there, as if he belonged with them. It was…odd. Not unpleasant, but odd all the same.

A cold gust of wind blew across his arm and he watched as the skin took on a slight blue tint. Would it be too strange for them? Would his difference destroy this grouping before they had even spent one night in the same bed?

“I can hear you thinking from here,” Steve said from the bathroom doorway, towelling his hair. “What’s up?”

“I was just…I was…”

“Hey,” he crooned, tossing the towel back into the bathroom and crossing to Loki. He sat down next to him and stroked a finger over the blue skin. “Does it hurt?”

“No. It’s…I don’t know how to explain it. I feel…I don’t know.”

“Is it a good feeling?”

“Yes. It is pleasant.”

“Then you don’t need to explain. As long as it’s not hurting you, then it doesn’t need a name,” Steve soothed, running a hand along Loki’s back. “Tony still talking?”

“It seems to be a rather important conversation.”

“JARVIS, any clue when Tony might be joining us?”

“I approximate that Sir’s call will last another five minutes, perhaps ten, Captain.”

“Thanks.” He stroked Loki’s hair. “How about we get comfortable while we wait?” Loki nodded with a small, nervous smile. “Okay. Is that what you usually wear to sleep in?”

“No. To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what I should be sleeping in. The clothing here is different
than on Asgard. I’ve tried many things from my wardrobe, and yet none of it is applicable for restful slumber.”

“That’s simple enough to handle. Let’s see. Tony usually sleeps in a vest and lounge pants. I sleep in a t-shirt and boxers most of the time.”

Steve helped him strip down to his boxers and t-shirt, and then led him to the bed, tucking him in beside him. Loki was as still as a statue, and just as tense.

“Hey,” he crooned, shuffling them down so they were laying on their sides facing each other. “JARVIS, dim it.” The lights dimmed to candlelight levels and Steve smiled at him. “What’s bothering you?”

“I don’t know,” Loki admitted.

“Is it that you don’t want to be here? Because I can get Tony to back down if you want to go back to Thor’s floor.”

“No. No, I wish to be here with you.”

“Loki, do you…I mean, you know nothing has to happen, right? Not until we all want it. And even then, if you…uhhh…you could watch…you know, if you wanted to know…before we…”

“I understand what you are suggesting,” Loki interrupted. “And yes, I…are you sure nothing needs to happen? Because I am aware that mortals, ones that were born here anyway…well, you rather enjoy physical pleasure. If that is needed to make this work…”

“No, hey, no. We’re all going to be fine, this will work. I want it to, Tony wants it, and you want it. We all want this, so we’ll make it work. No one needs to rush anything. You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for, I swear it. Neither of us will push, okay. When you’re ready, and not a moment before.”

“If you are sure…”

“I am sure.”

“Sure about what?” Tony asked as he entered the room, moving to his nightstand to plug his phone into the charger.

“That Loki doesn’t have to do anything until he’s ready.”

“Absolutely,” Tony said, stripping down to his boxers and vest. “No touchy until all wants it.”

He climbed in, snuggling up to Loki’s other side, so the two humans bracketed his body with their own, the three of them warm and comfortable.

“Damn those kids have energy,” Tony said as he sank into the mattress.

“Showing off that Stark blood they’ve got,” Steve joked.

“I don’t know, Kiddo’s definitely got a bit of Rogers in there.”

Tony and Steve continued to talk, breaking down the events of the day, letting Loki calm himself. Steve began to play with his hair, twining it through his fingers, and Tony’s hand curled around his hip, pulling them together, the circle of the reactor pressing into his back.
“Does that hurt?” Tony asked as Steve left the bed to pee.

“What?”

“The reactor. Is it hurting you?”

“No,” Loki said, rolling over so he could look at it, Tony’s hand sliding to his other hip.

Loki reached out and tentatively touched the shining circle of light with a fingertip. It was no hotter than Tony’s skin, which surprised him. It was powering Tony. Shouldn’t it be warmer? It was working very hard, was it not?

“It’s not hot,” he said and Tony smiled.

“No. It’s got a cooling system, so it doesn’t overheat. If it overheats it could stop working, and I need it to work.”

“Does it hurt?”

“It used to. Big hole cut in my ribcage to make room for it. To start with it was kind of hard to breathe around it.”

“But not now?”

“No, not now. Once I got back, I tidied up, smoothed out the bone ends, cauterized the raw flesh edges, replaced the case that’s always in my skin that the reactor fits into. It’s all good now.”

“Good. Because I would like you to stay around,” Loki admitted.

“I plan on it.”

Steve slid back into bed and curled around Loki, pressing a kiss to his neck.

“We’re here,” he murmured. “It’s okay to want things, Loki. No one is going to be an asshole and deny you things.”

“You’re not second best to Thor here,” Tony added. “You’re important, just as important as me or Steve in this relationship. The three of us…it’s us, it’s all of us. We’re all important.”

“And that means letting us know what you want,” Steve said.

“I want you not to leave me,” Loki said softly. “They all have, all of them. I don’t want you to leave.”

“We’re right here,” Steve promised.

Loki’s long fingered hand curled around his jaw and pulled him forwards, joining their lips. Tony submitted to it, letting Loki kiss him just as he wanted. It wasn’t truly passionate, they were all too tired for that. But it was good. Loki’s lips were soft, and warm, and gently demanding.

Loki was enjoying the kiss when he felt Steve begin pressing his lips to his neck. So he let go of Tony and reached back, sliding his fingers into blond hair. Steve’s grip on him tightened slightly.

Loki pulled back and smiled. “So I can have that whenever I want it?”

“That and more,” Steve murmured between kisses.
“As long as we’re not about to fall asleep,” Tony said with a yawn.

They settled down, Loki between Steve and Tony, as close as they could be while still being comfortable.

None of them had nightmares that night, and they all slept through until morning.

Halloween had been all planned. And then Sabrina had entered the mix and things had to be adjusted.

The original plan had been to have a huge party with lots of Stark employees who had kids. They were going to take over a load of offices and have the kids do a Trick or Treat. Tony had even arranged for a bouncy castle. And then there would be first class nannies to take care of a sleepover while the parents partied the night away with the Avengers.

But Sabrina wasn’t ready for other children in her space. She couldn’t understand that they weren’t going to replace her, nor were they competition for the affections of her Avengers family.

“That wasn’t a nice thing to do,” Clint said firmly as he carried Sabrina over to the lift.

“Mine!” she snarled.

Clint held her all the way up to the penthouse and then sat her down on the couch, kneeling on the rug to talk to her.

“Listen to me,” he said resolutely. “This is your home, this is where you live. This is your unit. Nothing is going to change that. We will always be your unit. No one will take you away from us, and no one will take us away from you. No one will make you gone.”

“No gone?”


“My Clint. My Tony.”

“Yeah, we’re yours. But that little boy was just saying hi. Throwing a bottle of soda at his head wasn’t nice. You can’t do things like that. You hurt him, and made him cry.”

“But…”

“I know. I know why you did it. But you can’t do it again. I want you to promise me you won’t hurt anyone unless they hurt you.”

“What promise?”

“A promise is when you say you will or won’t do something, and then you keep with it. So if I promise that I will always be your Clint, then that means I will always be your Clint. So if you promise you won’t hurt someone except if they hurt you, then that means you won’t hurt anyone unless they hurt you. Do you understand?”

“No hurt except hurt me.”

“That’s it. Do you promise?”
“I promise.”
“Good girl.”
“Your unit.”
“Yeah, you’re in my unit.”
“No. Kiddo and Phil and Clint unit. Me unit.”
“Oh. You want to be a Coulson, like Phil and Kiddo?”
“And Clint.”
“Huh. JARVIS, where’s Annie?”
“Currently Miss is engaging in conversation with a young woman from accounting, Master Barton.”
“Can you ask her to come up here?”
There was a moment’s silence and then, “Miss is currently ascending in the elevator.”
“Thanks, J.”
Annie emerged from the elevator and made her way over, Clint helping her to ease down into the sofa with a groan.
“This whole growing a person thing is hard work,” she said. “So. How are things up here?”
“Better. The screaming stopped yet?”
“With the liberal application of a whole lot of candy and ice cream. The parents took it well once Tony and Steve explained. She was at a bad angle, so she didn’t get him full on.”
“Ice cream,” Sabrina said.
“In a bit,” Clint said. “First, we need to talk to Annie about what you asked me for. Can you tell her what you told me?”
“Me Clint unit. Phil and Kiddo and Clint unit. Me unit.”
“Oh. Oh!” She looked at Clint. “I guess she latched, huh.”
“I guess so. How do you feel about it?”
“I feel pretty good about it.” She held out her arms and smiled as Sabrina climbed onto her lap. “Now, you know that we’re all one big unit, right.”
“Big unit with little.”
“That’s right. One big unit with lots of smaller units. Like Phil and Clint and Kiddo. Their unit is called Coulson. Is that what you want? To be a Coulson?”
“Me Coulson. My Clint.”
“JARVIS, call Skye, tell her to put Coulson on Sabrina’s papers. Make them match Kiddo’s.”
“Very good, Miss.”

“I fold,” Natasha said.

“Raise,” Phil said.

“I’m bored of this,” Clint said, poking at his diminished pile of matchsticks.

“Seconded,” Loki said. “This game is awfully dull.”

“I can’t keep track of these cards. I’m out of practice,” Steve said, throwing down his hand and revealing his full house.

Clint threw down his and peeked over at the kids. Sabrina and Kiddo were curled up on the lounge floor within a huge nest of pillows and blankets. Kiddo had opened his presents, small things, mostly toys and clothes. His favourite was the blanket of different textured fabrics. Sabrina had received her own pile of presents, so she didn’t feel left out. Most of them were dolls of the Disney princesses as toddlers. Her favourite was Ariel, who had hair that matched Natasha’s. The cake had been a huge success, and they had consumed more sugar than was healthy for bodies that small. The adults had let them watch cartoons until they’d drifted off, curled around each other. Helix was laying curled around their feet, dozing lightly, keeping a watch over her pups.

The party was in full swing downstairs, with Jane, Darcy, Thor, Skye and Sam deciding to stay and enjoy it. The others had decided that they would rather have some downtime with the kids and each other. They just weren’t in the party mood.

“How about we just break out the booze and swap stories?” Bucky suggested with a grin.

They rearranged themselves, clearing away the poker and bringing out the hard liquor. They started with vodka, at the suggestion of the Russian.

“Oh come on,” Tony scoffed, a bottle and a half in. “Never?”

“Never ever,” Clint said.

“Not once?” Steve asked.

“No! I have never seen a Star Wars film. Sue me.”

“Okay, my turn,” Natasha said, pouring herself another drink. “How old were you when you lost your virginity?”

“Fourteen,” Tony said proudly. “She was a girl in my dorm. I lasted about ten seconds. But I was better in the morning.”

“Nice details, baby,” Steve grinned. “Fill me up.”

Tony grabbed the bottle of bourbon and topped up Steve’s glass. “Come on, Cap. Spill.”

“I was sixteen. Bucky got me a hooker.”

“A hooker?” Phil asked with a chuckle. “Steve, you sly dog.”

“I wasn’t lettin’ my boy go through life a virgin,” Bucky said with a dirty grin. “No daddy, it was up
to me to raise the boy right.”

“And this is why we’re dreading the day you produce a son,” Bruce said. He grabbed another beer. “I was twenty two, very drunk, and her name was Madison. “

“I was eight,” Natasha said. “Red Room, they wanted it out of the way.”

Dead silence for a beat.

“Okay,” Tony said. “Moving swiftly on from those horrifying mental images.”

“Thirteen, bearded lady,” Clint said.

“Liar,” Bucky said.

“Okay, not the bearded lady, but better than what I got.”

“Nineteen,” Phil said. “A guy in my army unit.”

“I was fourteen,” Bucky said, downing another shot. “Guy in our building, his mom was real friendly, and her husband died in the war. So I helped her with the loneliness. My ma would have skinned me alive if she knew.”

“Good Irish Catholic woman, your ma,” Steve said.

“Yours too. She tanned my hide when she found out about the hooker.”

“I remember you couldn’t sit properly for a week, and she broke her favourite wooden spoon.”

And then it came to Annie.

“If she’s about to tell me she’s a virgin, I think I may pass out,” Clint said. “Or that might be the tequila.”

“Not a virgin, Clint,” she said with a smile, popping another candy in her mouth.

“How many we looking at here?” Natasha asked.

“One. I was nineteen.”

“Nineteen,” Phil said. “That makes it just before you were taken. And you were spending a lot of time with the Howling Commando’s.”

“Holy shit, you slept with Bucky,” Clint spat, dribbling booze.

“Not me, dick,” Bucky snapped. “Stevie.”

The second deafening silence. Steve and Annie grinned at each other, with Tony sniggering to himself.

“For the record, Tony is aware of this,” Steve said. “And it was just the once.”

“What, you guys got drunk?” Clint asked.

“No,” Annie said. “I wanted to know, and Steve was a very good friend and helped me out.”

“You wanted to know?” Bruce questioned gently, pure curiosity.
“It was a war. I watched boys no older than me, some much younger, go off to fight for their country and freedom and all that good stuff. And they didn’t come back. Death was all around me. So I took a good hard look about what I didn’t want to have missed out on, if that bomb was dropped on me.”

“Annie came to me one day and asked if I’d help her out,” Steve said. “So I talked it over with Buck, because when a girl asks you for that, you sure as hell talk it over with somebody. And I decided that if this was what she wanted, then I’d help her out.”

“And Howard just shrugged and waved it off?” Natasha asked.

“He never knew,” Bucky said. “It was between the three of us.”

“Got a thing for Stark’s there, Steve?” Phil joked.

“I have a thing for my men.”

The night went on, until they had all consumed more than they should, whether that was alcohol or candy, and then they all decided it was time for bed. Annie and Bruce were the last ones left in the room and Annie smiled at him from where she was puttering around, putting things back where they should be. It was something she did every night, to settle herself.

“About what you said,” Bruce began. “In the pool. I don’t want you to think that I don’t want you. I do. I want you.”

“Good,” she said. “I’d hate to think you looked that way at someone you didn’t want.”

“I just…Annie, I don’t want you to get hurt. And Hulk could hurt you. I could hurt you.”

“You wouldn’t. And I reserve judgement on Hulk until I’ve met him.”

“My father killed my mother,” he blurted and she froze, watching him. “I was eight, he was drunk. It’s in me, this darkness, this…”

“No,” she snapped, crossing to him and cupping his cheeks, forcing him to meet her gaze. “Bruce, your parents do not define you, they don’t dictate who you are. My father was a drunk who would rather have his alcohol that feed his children. And Howard went on to have one of the most profitable companies in the world. Look at what a shitty guy Howard turned out to be, what kind of father he ended up as. And yet Tony couldn’t be more loving to his niece and nephew. The starting line is not the be all and end all. We make our own choices.”

“How can you be so sure I won’t hurt you?” he whispered.

“Because you worry about it so much. If it wasn’t important to you to be something other than an abusive asshole, it wouldn’t worry you so much. You care about me getting hurt. Which means you won’t be the one hurting me.”

He slid his hands up, gripping her hips for a moment before sliding his arms around her waist, resting his forehead against hers.

“Promise me you won’t let me become my father,” he begged in a broken whisper. “You threw Steve across the room. Promise me you won’t let me hurt you or your children.”


He gave in with a low moan, capturing her mouth and thrusting his tongue, pouring his want and
passion into it. She kissed back with just as much need and want.

And in the back of his mind, Hulk roared in triumph.
Chapter Ten

Hydra had the motto “cut off one head and another two will take its place.”

So the man in charge wasn’t surprised that the experiments were still active. Another base to move into was always a forgone conclusion. What did surprise him was that the scientists who had managed not to be captured still thought they could continue working without subjects to work on.

“This is some kind of ridiculous joke,” he said calmly to one of the scientists.

He was a small scrawny man who bore a great resemblance to a rat.

“No, sir. We truly believe we can continue the analyses until the subjects are recovered.”

He laughed at the rat man. “Are you completely insane or do you just like to test my patience? All the subjects still alive are in Stark Tower, the most secure building on the planet, bar none. Not even vermin find a way into that building.”

“I understand that, but the DNA…the physical capabilities…it’s all…”

“Okay, enough swooning, I get it. You like this project. But how can we continue the project without the subjects?”

“With all due respect, sir,” one of the female scientists said timidly. “It’s not our place to suggest such things. Our place is to run the experiments to the specifications set by our superiors.”

“Oh, I like the way you think,” he said with a grin.

“So…if at all possible, we really would like our subjects back?” she asked. “It doesn’t have to be all of them. Just one of them would be more than enough to allow us to continue.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

For a Frost Giant, Loki was a heat seeking fiend.

He took up the least amount of space in the bed, no small thing considering he was over six feet tall. He cuddled into Steve, soaking up the warmth the super-soldier put out like a furnace, and pulled Tony across his back, using him as a human blanket.

“Sir? Forgive me, sir, but I must insist you wake.”

“J? What’s up?”

“Miss Annie seems to be in some distress, sir, and is requesting you for comfort.”

Tony pressed a kiss to Loki’s shoulder, which had been his pillow 15 seconds ago, and crawled from the bed, tucking the duvet around his long frame.

“Annie? You okay, baby?” Tony asked quietly as he entered the room.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said and Tony could hear her tears. “Tony, it hurts.”
He crossed to the bed and curled in with her, holding her close. “Okay, sweetheart. It’s okay. Where does it hurt?”

“The baby. Cramps,” she managed to grit out as she curled around herself, whining at the pain.

Tony had to fight the urge to freak out completely.

“JARVIS, get Bruce, get him up here now,” he said, trying (and mostly failing) to keep his voice calm.

“He is on his way, sir.”

“Tony, it’s too soon, it’s too early,” Annie cried. “It’s too soon.”

“I know, I know. Just breathe, Bruce is coming.”

Tony spent the wait for Bruce stroking Annie’s hair as she cried, until the doctor appeared in the doorway.

“Hey, Annie,” he murmured as he reached the bed, perching on the side and pressing a kiss to her forehead. “JARVIS tells me you’re having a rough night. Can you show me where the most pain is?”

“Here,” she whispered, motioning to the lower part of her bump.

“Okay. Is there anywhere else? Maybe your back?”

“A little.”


“No.”

“Okay, that’s good. Annie, can you roll onto your back for me so I can have a feel?”

She slowly rolled, reaching up to grip at the vest Tony was wearing, her eyes fixed on the light of the reactor as Bruce palpated her uterus.

“Just a quick internal, just to be safe,” he warned and waited until she nodded before he pulled on gloves and slipped a hand under the duvet, saving her modesty. “Alright, sweetheart, I don’t think you’re in labour. I think this might be Braxton Hicks. So what we’re going to do, just to be sure, is we’re going to go down to my lab and I’ll do some tests. Okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered.

Bruce smiled and untangled her from the bedding, scooping her up and carrying her towards the elevator. Tony exchanged a look with him before he popped back into his bedroom, giving Steve a kiss.

“Tony?”

“Something’s wrong with Annie, Bruce has taken her down to the lab.”

“I’m up.”
It had been a false alarm, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

JARVIS had woken everyone to inform them of what was happening, and all but Phil and Clint had spent the night hovering, pacing the penthouse floor, until Bruce had emerged and told them all it was a false alarm.

Bruce had crawled into bed as the sun began to rise, getting in a few hours’ sleep, and Tony did the same, cuddling into Loki as Steve headed out for his run. Tony didn’t know how he had the energy, even with being enhanced.

Breakfast had been simple cereal or toast for those that wanted it, no one having the energy to make or eat something more elaborate.

Annie, keyed up on the stress of the night, found herself on the lounge floor again, watching the kids play while Phil and Clint spent some time alone. Words could not describe how much it helped her aching back to lay on the floor.

“Hey, little miss,” Sam said as he sat down, placing a mess of paper and crayons on the floor.

“Draw! Me draw,” Sabrina said, happily abandoning her doll to start on a picture.

Kiddo blinked at the change before returning to his building blocks. He built a tower for a little while before trying to see what his sister was doing and then deciding that it looked more fun.

“Should I…” Sam began and Annie shook her head.

“No. Let’s see what he does first.”

Kiddo dropped his blocks and began trying to rock forwards, grabbing the pile of the rug and managing to tip himself completely onto his front, face to the floor. He wriggled about, getting his arms under him before blinking around at where he’d found himself. He smiled and then kicked, trying to figure out how to get to Sabrina. It wasn’t working, and he flexed his little fingers at the crayons before realising it wouldn’t get him where he wanted to be.

“Na!” he shrieked and the girl looked at him.

“Kiddo draw,” she declared.

She moved over to him and wrapped her arms around his chest, lifting him and waddling back to where she had been. She sat him down and he wiggled, patting at her knee as she sat with him. She set him up a piece of paper and moved the crayons to where he could reach before she returned to her picture.

It took Kiddo very little time to figure out that if he put the coloured sticks in his fist then he could press them to the paper and make marks on it.

He wiggled so hard he toppled onto his back, calling “Na!” again so Sabrina would help him back up.

“Would you look at that,” Sam murmured.

“Yeah,” Annie agreed. She stroked a hand over her bump. “I hope they’ll make it work with three.”

“It’ll be a while before that one’s old enough to play with them. Plenty of time to get used to an extra one.”
They watched the kids draw for a while before Sam moved to rub at the tight muscles of her lower back. She sighed as they released.

“So, how are you doing? After the excitement I mean,” he prompted.

“Subtle, Sam.”

“I do try,” he grinned. “Seriously though. How are you feeling about things?”

“A little better. I guess…I guess I never really thought about some things. And then last night I sort of had to.”

“Sounds like you did some soul searching.”

“I had three brothers. Did you know that? Four of us and I’m the only one left. Howard and Edward and Andrew and me. After they died, after Howard took me away, the silence was deafening. I missed them more than I could even begin to say. Kind of got me thinking about where they came from,” she said, motioning to Sabrina and Kiddo, their dark heads bent over their drawings. “Do you think they miss them, the others? The ones we couldn’t save?”

“I don’t know. I would say yes. Probably why they cling so hard to those around them, to each other. When you’ve lost a lot, it only makes sense to cling to what’s left.”

“I want to keep this one,” she said quietly, stroking her bump again, gazing at it. “Those two, they’re not mine, not really. They should be with Phil and Clint, it’s where they belong. But this one…this is mine. I get to have nothing good to show for the last 70 years except this. My little stowaway.”

Sam’s face split into a huge grin.

“JARVIS, is Tony awake?”

“He is, Mr Wilson.”

“Tell him that Annie’s made a decision about the baby. It’s going to be a Stark.”

“Finally!” Tony yelled as he skittered into the room, a sleepy Loki following in his wake. “Now can I spend?”

“Yes, now you can spend,” Sam said.

“I’m missing something here,” Annie confessed.

“I wanted to start on a floor of your own, but Steve said you wouldn’t like that, because you’ve never lived alone, and that makes sense, for you to want something familiar,” Tony began, gesturing a lot with his hands, which made Sabrina giggle and Kiddo smile and wiggle. “So then I decided that I should extend your bedroom, make it more of a suite. I could renovate the whole penthouse, all that ceiling height, I can put in a mezzanine floor, put bedrooms up there, make it all tricked out. But them Sam pointed out that if this baby was going to be a Coulson or something then it wouldn’t need a room attached to yours or any stuff, so I couldn’t spend any money on it until you’d come to a decision.”

“So now you’re celebrating that you can flash the cash,” Annie finished.

“Exactly. Any opinions on a theme or colour scheme or window placement?”

“Tony, no. I like the penthouse the way it is.”
“So no mezzanine floor, got it. I’ll extend your room, no problem.”

Annie looked on in amusement as he began planning ‘baby-land’. She’d leave it to Steve and Loki to keep him under control.

If at all possible.

Shopping had changed in the time Annie had been gone.

She remembered going with Howard to get the first new dress she had ever owned when she was a little girl. She remembered being measured and fitted and having her pick of colours and fabrics.

It was personal.

The only personal thing now was that they were recognised from the moment they stepped out of the tower.

Happy, who had abandoned the sinking ship of Pepper and joined team Stark once more, drove them through the throngs of people, all of them straining to catch a glimpse of them through the tinted windows of the limo.

“Is it always like this?” Loki asked.

“Unfortunately,” Tony replied, cuddling him between him and Steve. “Even before I became an Avenger, I was hot public property. And now there’s Annie and the kids that they want pictures of.”

“Me picture?” Sabrina asked, her eyes fixed on the outside world passing.

“Yes, sweetheart, they want to take photograph pictures of you. But they haven’t asked, so we won’t let them,” Clint said.

Tony had held another press conference, thankfully without Christine Everhart, where he announced that Sabrina had joined them, that he was in a committed relationship with both Steve and Loki, who Bucky was and had been, and the managerial confusion over the Stark assets had been resolved.

The lawyers had finally managed to navigate the tangled web of the Stark inheritance. By Howard’s will, it should have gone to Annie, but as she was MIA at the time of his death, it had been inherited by Tony. The lawyers had transferred everything to Annie, and then had her and Tony sign papers to certify that all Stark assets would be split equally between them.

They were both happy with the arrangement, especially as Annie had managed to wrangle it so Tony’s lawyers and accountants handled most of the details of her assets. Tony would keep an eye on things, keeping her informed of anything she needed to sign or have input in.

Tony was once again acting CEO of Stark Industries, something he wasn’t happy about, but he’d employed Darcy and Skye as his personal assistants, which made them exceedingly happy. Why, he had no clue.

The world had gone as nuts for Sabrina as they had for Kiddo, which was a very good thing. Gifts were arriving at the tower daily for the two kids, all of which were immediately delivered to orphanages and foster care and shelters around the city for those more in need. They let Sabrina choose each day where the shipment would go, and it made her happy to help other children.
Bucky was mostly a happy addition, seeing as Tony had played up the parts about him being Steve’s best friend and tortured by Hydra.

The stock holders were surprisingly happy about the announcement of the Loki inclusion to the relationship, claiming it was a beacon for all non-traditional families and relationships. Tony and the others weren’t too concerned by that part, just that they were being received positively and weren’t getting too much hate mail.

“What are we shopping for today, boss?” Happy called from the driver’s seat.

“Baby stuff,” Tony replied. “Nursery type stuff. Cribs, blankets, that kind of thing. Then kids’ stuff, for Sabrina’s room. It’s her room, she gets to choose.”

“Me choose!”

“Yup, baby, you choose,” Phil said with a smile. “And you can help choose some stuff for Kiddo, how about that?”

“Yes!”

They ended up visiting several baby stores, never staying long enough for the paparazzi to catch up with them. They went into Babesta, Dinosaur Hill, Giggle, Buy Buy Baby, and finally ended up in Baby’s R Us. None of the other stores had held anything that Annie liked.

“Think she’ll find something?” Bucky murmured to Natasha.

“Who knows. Who knew baby shopping could be so complicated?” she whispered back. “Thank fuck I’ll never have to do it.”

“You don’t want kids someday?”

“I can’t. Red Room sterilised me when I was five.” She picked up a tiny t-shirt with Hulk on it and smiled. “Even if I could, I’m not mother material.”

“Did I apologise for what I did to you? Not just in Washington, the Red Room, and the scientist.”

“You did.”

“I say it again. I’m sorry for my part in all that.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey, Buck, what do you think?” Steve called, holding up a Bucky Bear.

“Lord almighty, didn’t they stop making these?” he chuckled, walking over to take a look at it.

“Yes, but with the re-emergence of Captain America, Howling Commando stuff is all the rage again,” Phil said, holding a hooded sweatshirt against Kiddo to check the sizing.

“Makes his inner fan boy all warm and fuzzy,” Clint added with a grin.

Steve blushed and Bucky took the chance to grab a set of Howler Bears, standing between Steve and the cart when he tried to take them out.

Bruce was absorbed in the sight of Annie wandering around the cribs. She had her hands resting on her bump, her long hair spilling down her back, her lips curved in a gentle smile.
“Do we need to have the conversation or are you already well versed in all points of interest?” Tony said from far too close.

“The ‘don’t hurt her’ conversation?” Tony nodded. “No, we don’t need to have that conversation.”

“Good to know.” He crossed to where Annie had paused in front of a display. “It’s nice.”

“Oh, Tony. I didn’t hear you coming.” She ran a gentle hand across the mobile above the crib. “I didn’t know Beatrix Potter books were still popular.”

“Oh yeah. Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddleduck, Benjamin Bunny. I think every kid in the world knows about them.”

“I used to have a set of the books, when I was a kid. Howard got them for me.”

“We could have a Peter Rabbit nursery, if you want. It’s a classic for a reason. Plus, a character you know that’s not the fucking Frozen chick.”

“Now, now, Elsa isn’t that bad,” she said with a grin.

“If I have to listen to her let it go one more time my brain is going to dribble out of my nose.”

“I’ll get Clint and Phil to find a different movie.”

Tony made short work of finding a sales assistant to note down everything they wanted, not only the nursery things Annie liked but the Tinkerbell stuff for Sabrina’s room and the Sesame Street stuff for Kiddo too.

Then Clint and Phil let Sabrina and Kiddo pick one toy each from the Toys R Us section. Kiddo was easy enough, he saw an Elmo plushie and wouldn’t let go. But Sabrina was completely overwhelmed by all the choice. The bedroom stuff had been one thing, she’d known immediately which one was for her, but the toys were another.

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay,” Clint soothed as she buried her face in his neck. He walked up and down the Lego aisle, patting her back as she cuddled into him. “I know, sweetheart, it’s all too much. How about you and I find you something, huh? I’ll find something you might like and you tell me if I’m right, hmmm?”

She nodded into his neck and he smiled.

Clint motioned to Phil that he would re-join them and then slowly walked off, carrying Sabrina.

Clint had never had any ideas of fatherhood. Even before he’d realised he was completely gay, he hadn’t ever wanted to saddle any kid with the name Barton and all that came with it. But then these two little people turned up and wanted so much to be loved by him that he couldn’t find any reason to say no.

Plus, watching Phil with them, seeing him be the amazing father Clint always knew he would be, was a huge turn on.

He wandered the aisles, telling Sabrina stories as he considered the choices. Lego and other building type toys were out as a choice, they were too close to the cognitive tests she’d been through with Hydra. Collectibles wouldn’t interest her, character playsets wouldn’t, nor Barbie dolls and other fashion dolls.
“Hey, what about this one?” he asked, holding up a doll of a toddler Rapunzel from Disney’s Tangled. “She can be friends with your other dolls.”

“Me have, please?”

“You like this one?”

“Yes. Pretty.”

“She is pretty. Are you sure she’s the one, or would you like a different one? You already have Ariel and Tiana, but they have Anna and Mulan, and look, a Jasmine.”

She wriggled so he let her down, and she cautiously toddled forwards, keeping one hand firmly clamped around his pocket. After much deliberate weighing of her options, she let go of him enough to point to a Tinker Bell and a Belle.

“Both?” she asked hopefully, and he squatted down to her level, grinning at her.

“No, baby. Just one. Kiddo gets one toy and you get one toy, so which one?”

Another careful consideration before she carefully eased out the Tinker Bell from the line-up.

“Excellent choice. Shall we go find Phil and the others and pay for her?”

She hugged the box close and took his hand, letting him lead her to the counter where everyone else was waiting.

They paid for their purchases and then decided to take a walk. Sabrina wouldn’t let go of her new doll, nor would she let go of Clint. Eventually he scooped her up, letting her cuddle close as she stared at the new world before her. They stopped at the limo to drop off the things they had decided to take with them (Phil managed to get both kids to relinquish their prizes), and to pick up Kiddo’s stroller.

Tony had built it from scratch, using a reinforced lightweight alloy for the frame, a self-healing polymer for the tyres, bulletproof fabric, double thick padding and a nifty little cup holder. It faced backwards, so Kiddo could look at whoever was pushing him.

They stopped off at a deli to get some lunch and then a souvenir shop for some outdoor toys before heading to Central Park. The paparazzi had finally found them, but Thor and the threat of Bruce becoming Hulk was enough to make them keep their distance.

The weather was pleasant, a late heat wave keeping them free to enjoy the day without being weighed down by heavy winter gear.

They made their way to the Alice in Wonderland sculpture and settled down on a grassy patch nearby. They enjoyed a nice picnic, letting Sabrina wander to the statue as she wanted. She finally ended up sitting with Alice, munching away at her bounty, which was as much as she could carry away from the main picnic: a tuna sandwich, a bag of barbecue chips, and a bottle of lemon soda. She hadn’t figured out what her pockets were for yet.

Clint and Phil let her do her thing for a while, and then Clint made his way over, climbing up to perch on the statue with her.

“Out?” she asked.
“Yeah, this is outside. This is a park. It’s an outside space for people to use to be able to get out of their homes for a little while, to relax.”

“Safe?”

“You’re safe, baby. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

“Picture,” she said, pointing at a photographer in the bushes.

“I see him. Shall we let them take your picture? Let everyone see how amazing you and your brother are?”

“Me amazing?”

“Yes, you are amazing. My amazing girl.”

While Clint was spending time with Sabrina, Phil was holding Kiddo up so he was standing, the tiny boy babbling at Natasha, who kept handing him grapes to munch on. Tony and Loki were laying on Steve, Loki watching the clouds and Tony tapping away at his phone, while Annie had taken possession of Bruce’s leg, Helix laid out against her side, her belly being scratched by Thor. Natasha and Bucky were enjoying spending time with those they cared about, and Sam had made short work of roping Skye, Jane and Darcy into a game of Frisbee.

“Hey, look at this,” Tony said suddenly. “Build a Bear has Sesame Street characters. We should go, get one for each of the kids.”

“They’ve already had a toy, Tony,” Steve pointed out.

“But this isn’t a toy, look, the website says it’s where friends are made. It’s a friend, not a toy. Every kid deserves more friends.”

“I think this should be a question for Phil and Clint,” Bruce interjected, stroking Annie’s hair with one hand and grabbing an apple with the other.

“I think it would be good for them, see how they’re made, something special,” Phil said. “What do you think, Kiddo? Shall we go and get you a bear?”

“Air,” Kiddo declared, waving the piece of cheese Bucky had handed him.

“I think that’s a yes,” Loki said.

“Clint!”

Clint exchanged a few words with Sabrina before they made their way back to the group. “What’s up?”

“Apparently, Build a Bear have Sesame Street characters, and I think it might be good for the kids. They can see how they’re made, make a special friend. Kiddo’s for it.”

“Sounds good to me,” Clint said, snagging a snack egg and holding it out to Sabrina. “What do you think, baby girl? Do you want to go and make a teddy bear?”

“Me have?”

“Yeah, you get to keep it once you’ve made it,” Phil said.
“Yes, please.”

They finished up their picnic and tidied away after themselves before taking a nice leisurely stroll to 5th Avenue, where Build a Bear loomed before them, and the paparazzi were waiting. Happy, Thor, Steve and Bruce made imposing figures, which, coupled with Kiddo’s nervous blinking at them, kept the reporters relatively under control.

The staff were frozen in shock as the actual Avengers walked into their store, and then they sprang into action; closing the doors to keep the press outside, greeting the group, explaining how the whole process worked.

“My mom got me an Elmo about ten years ago,” Darcy said, poking at a plush kitty. “I thought they stopped doing them.”

“We did, but head office decided it would be nice to bring them back for a limited time. We literally got one delivery of all the skins and that’s it, when they’re gone, they’re gone,” the salesgirl said. “We got a box each of Elmo, Cookie Monster and Big Bird.”

“Oh, Tony, look,” Loki called, holding out a bear patterned with Captain America’s shield.

“No, I will not have that thing in our bedroom,” Steve demanded and Loki pouted at him.

“But…but I want one,” he said, turning big eyes on Steve as Tony laughed.

Bruce smiled on as Annie treated herself to a Hulk bear, claiming it was for the unborn baby yet fooling no one.

Kiddo all but pounced on a Cookie Monster, and Clint helped him through the process of the heart and stuffing it and then picking clothes, while Sabrina latched onto Phil.

“This one’s nice,” Phil said, pointing at a pink bear. “Which one do you like, sweetheart?”

“Monkey,” she said, pointing at a bright pink monkey.

“Oh, I see. Do you want the monkey? Is that the one?”

She nodded and picked out a strawberry monkey skin from the bin of them, stroking its pre-stuffed head. Phil guided her over to the stuffer, who gently helped her through the ceremony, moving efficiently so the monkey was back in Sabrina’s arms as fast as possible. Then they made their way over to Clint, where Kiddo was happily patting his Cookie Monster (who was wearing a Captain America uniform). Sabrina needed no coaxing to pick out an outfit, she saw the Iron Man outfit and made a beeline for it.

“This,” she declared, holding it and the monkey up to Phil and Clint. “Like Tony.”

“Wow, it is just like Tony’s,” Clint agreed. “Is that what your monkey will wear?”

“Yes. Like Tony.”

Before they finished up, Phil decided the kids could have an accessory for their friend too. Clint mumbled that he was spoiling them, and Phil agreed wholeheartedly, saying they were good kids, who deserved nice things. No one was going to argue with him. After what Hydra had done, a few special treats were more than needed.

Kiddo ended up with a little bear armchair for his friend. He managed to squish it into his stroller
with his bear.

Sabrina picked out a stroller for her bear, wanting to be just like Phil and push it along, just like he pushed Kiddo.

Eventually they left and started making their way back to the car. Annie’s ankles were swelling at an alarming rate and her back was agony.

They had Brazilian for dinner, cooked by Bruce. It was a big hit all round, especially the Mandioca Frita, which were deep fried yucca sticks, which Tony proclaimed were the bastard offspring of French fries and an angel. Then they curled up in the lounge and watched 80’s movies until they all eventually drifted off to bed.

It had been a perfect day, just them acting like any regular family. It was saddening how little of that they’d had in the past.

Something Steve never talked about was just how much the serum could screw him over if he didn’t keep up with it.

If Steve didn’t eat enough to keep up with his metabolism and balance it with how much energy he spent, he would start to slim. Fast. Which was fine when the only energy he was expending was his daily runs or fucking Tony. But not so fine when he had to battle a giant squid in the harbour for nine hours. Tony could count his ribs for five days after that little fiasco. He was still battle ready, but it hurt a lot more when he was punched on pure bone instead of a fleshy part.

If Steve didn’t sleep enough, he would eventually crash and sleep for as long as his body decided it needed. Once that had been a spectacular 93 hours.

And, the most insane metabolism issue Steve had, was that if he didn’t gain sexual release often enough, be that solo or with a partner, his body would take over and give him the hard on from hell.

Which is what happened in the middle of the night, with Loki wriggling in his sleep, with a thigh pressed up against his erection and his breath warm across his nipple.

Steve pressed his fist to his mouth, biting down to try and calm his body but he knew it was no use. He had to satiate the need, there was no other way. He tried to decide what to do, get up and slip into the bathroom to take care of it himself, or wake Tony and let him deal with it.


“Mmmm? Wha?”

“Tony. Help me.”

Tony’s head shot up, the genius’ dark eyes blinking at him. He took in the flushed skin, the tightness around his mouth, the bite-marks on his knuckles. And the positioning of the wriggling Loki.

“On it, Capsicle. Hold on for just a moment.” He leaned in, kissing Loki’s neck, calling his name until he woke, sleepily asking what was wrong. “Nothing, baby, nothing’s wrong. It’s just that Steve’s body has gone a little haywire and you’re rubbing him in a way not so helpful.”

Loki blinked for a moment before realising what he was pressed up against and shooting off Steve so fast he would have fallen off the bed if Tony hadn’t been in the way.
“It’s okay, Loki,” Tony soothed. “You didn’t do anything wrong. But this one won’t go away on its own. Steve needs to orgasm for it to go down, it’s a side effect of the serum. Now, I’m going to help him with that. And I wanted you to have the choice of whether or not you’re here for it.”

“I can stay?”

“Of course. You can stay and just watch, or participate however much or little you want. But Steve needs this. It’s either me helping him or him in the bathroom, taking care of it.”

Loki settled himself against the pillows and headboard, gesturing for Tony to continue. He watched as Tony climbed astride Steve’s perfect body.

Steve whimpered as Tony straddled him, leaning down to plunder his mouth until he was whining and moaning into Tony’s kiss.

“Easy, easy,” Tony soothed as he pulled back, stroking the hands gripping at his hips.

“Tony, I need!”

“I know, I know. Don’t worry, I’ll get you there. Suck or fuck?”

“Fuck. Need to fuck.”

“Top or bottom?”

“Top.”

Tony kissed him once more, hard and fierce, before he sat up to grab the lube. He climbed off to remove his boxers and help Steve shed his. Before he popped off the top, Tony gave Loki a gentle kiss.

“Loki, do you actually know what this is for, or are you a little confused right now?”

“Honestly…I have no idea what you’re doing,” he admitted and Tony smiled at him, so kind, so soft, Steve reaching out a shaky hand to stroke his foot.

“It’s okay,” Steve promised. “You’re allowed not to know. We’ll teach you. Tony can fuck and teach at the same time…right?”

“Right,” Tony said. He gave Loki one more kiss before he climbed back on Steve, popping open the tube. “This stuff is called lubricant, or just lube. I’ve heard some call it slick too. See, men don’t make anything to smooth the way, we don’t produce our own, so we need a little help. This is the brand of it that me and Steve like to use.

As he talked, he squeezed some out, smoothing it between his fingers before he reached between his own legs.

“You’re made slightly differently, but for me and Steve here, we’re not naturally designed to accept anything inside us, so we need a little preparation. I need a little less than Steve, because I take it more often, but I still need some. Which is what I’m doing.”

“What do you mean by preparation?” Loki asked quietly, his eyes flicking from Tony’s slick hand to the one stroking Steve’s impressive erection to Tony’s face, calm and gentle, softly smiling at him.

“The muscles of the anus need to be stretched,” Steve explained, breathless, his hips twitching as Tony touched him. “Tony’s stretching himself, so it won’t hurt him when I’m inside. He’s an
Loki rolled to his knees, smiling when Tony ducked in to kiss him, before looking behind Tony. Tony’s calloused engineer’s fingers slowly, rhythmically pumping into himself, the tight ring snug around them, skin shining with lube. Tentatively, and bravely in Tony’s opinion, he reached out and touched a fingertip to the stretched muscles, feeling the movement of his beta.

“Does it not hurt?”

“No,” Tony breathed as Loki continued to watch, his eyes flicking between Tony’s two hands. “Feels…ah…feels good. Kind of…naughty.”

“Only you,” Steve grinned. “Come on, Tony. Please!”

“Okay, hold your horses, Capsicle,” he placated as he added a third finger, shuddering as he touched his prostate. A few more slick thrusts before he removed his fingers, crawling into position, holding Steve’s erection in place against himself. He let go and held his hands out to the side, offering himself to Steve.

The blond gripped Tony’s hips, thrusting shallowly into him until he felt himself bottom out, and then he let himself enjoy the tight heat around him. His blue eyes fluttered shut, moaning as Tony’s hands stroked his chest, before taking a deep breath and beginning to move them.

Loki was transfixed. So this was sex between his mates. It was strangely…beautiful to watch, somehow delicate and wild both at the same time. It was fascinating to him, watching them move, seeing that part of Steve that seemed far too large to fit within another body disappearing inside Tony, the brunet gasping in pleasure. Tony was moving fluidly over Steve, meeting his thrusts, clear fluid dribbling from the tip of his hard cock.

“Steve,” Tony gasped, drawing it out in a low needy whine. “Harder.”

Steve managed to sit up, getting his knees under him so he could thrust harder, Tony’s arms wrapping around his neck as he joined them at the mouth, his tongue thrusting between Tony’s lips.

Loki was surprised by how quick it was, and how long it seemed to go on. He lost himself in watching them, so much so that he was taken off guard when Steve groaned, shuddering into Tony’s body, sinking his teeth into his shoulder as his arms wrapped around Tony’s still moving form.

“Fuck, Steve, let me go or stroke me, do something!” Tony begged, and Loki watched, transfixed, as Steve freed an arm, slipping it between their bodies, moving at something until Tony screamed, thick white fluid welling up between them as he seemed the electrocute before collapsing back, hitting the mattress, bending in ways no mortal should be able to accomplish. Steve joined him, the two of them a sprawl of satisfied flesh.

Unsure of what else to do, Loki climbed off the bed and slipped into the bathroom, wetting two washcloths and wringing them out before returning to his mates. Steve had regained himself somewhat by the time he returned, lifting Tony and moving him to lay properly on the bed, his head on the pillows. Their penises were soft now, and Loki couldn’t help but look, amazed by how unimportant they looked now they weren’t needed.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked, drawing Loki’s eyes to his face.

“Yes, I am,” he assured, returning to the bed and holding out the cloths like an offering. “I thought these may help.”
“Thanks.” Steve smiled softly as he took them, first wiping Tony off and then himself before balling them up and placing them on his nightstand to deal with later. “Did we scare you? What we did?”

“No, I wasn’t scared. It was…”

“Forgive the interruption, but there is an urgent call for Mr Stark,” JARVIS announced. “I did remind the caller of the late hour, but he is quite insistent.”

“I’m up,” Tony said. He reached out blindly until Loki grabbed his hand and then he really was up, standing and pulling his boxers back on. He smiled at Steve, kissed Loki hard and then grabbed his phone, leaving the room.

Steve waved Loki closer, pulling him in to cuddle close as soon as he was in reach.

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispered a while later, when they were curled up close to each other, waiting for Tony to come back. “I didn’t want that to happen. I wanted to wait until you were ready before anything sexual happened.”

“I’m not upset. A little confused, but not upset,” Loki assured. “I admit, I quite enjoyed watching you together. It was…exciting.”

“Exciting huh? Good to know. What are you confused about?”

“Odin wasn’t exactly forthcoming about the process,” he whispered, colour surging across his cheeks. “He told Thor and I a little of putting seed within a woman. But what you did tonight…well, I was never very well informed. I have many questions.”

“Hey,” Steve murmured, cupping his cheek and pulling him in for a soft kiss before smiling reassuringly at him. “You can ask me anything, and I promise I won’t laugh. If I know the answer, it’s all yours.”

“Bruce said I have a woman’s parts as well as a man’s, that I am both. He mentioned that he believes I could take a child to term. I’m unsure of what he means.”

“He means you could get pregnant and carry the child the whole length of the pregnancy, and give birth, like a woman would. You might need to talk to him about that part, I’m not too clear. In my time, men went to a pub and drank while their wife birthed a baby. It wasn’t considered a man’s place to know what went on.”

“But making a baby…you know of that?”

“I do. Do you know how it works, in theory?”

“I know that a woman carries within her the egg to create life, and to do that a man must plant his seed within her. I thought I would be the one with the seed, but I am obviously not, am I?”

“No. For us, you would take the woman’s place, because you have the parts needed. For you to get pregnant, me or Tony would need to put our seed…well, here,” he said, carefully reaching between Loki’s legs and stroking a finger over the area behind his scrotum before removing his hand.

“A little different from what you and Tony just did,” Loki joked, making Steve smile. “But pleasurable, as this was?”

“Absolutely. Pleasure is the point of sex in this bedroom. It’s one of Tony’s rules.”
“I see.” He snuggled into Steve again, quiet for a little while, before his next question popped up.

“Tony talked of the bathroom, of taking care of it yourself. I am unfamiliar with his meaning.”

“He meant masturbation.”

“What is masturbation?”

“Touching yourself.”

“I do not understand.”

“Captain, if I may,” JARVIS interceded. “Masturbation is the act of stimulating ones genitals until a pleasurable conclusion is reached. Sir has asked that I assist in this discussion, and to assure you that I am the soul of discretion.”

“Oh. I understand now. And such an act is…enjoyable?” Loki asked.

“Wait. Loki, you’re a lot older than me. You’re a few thousand years old right?”

“Yes. Thor and I worked it out that I am approximately 1067 of your years.”

“Is that old for your people?”

“No. Barely into adulthood. Jane surmised that I am like one of your college freshman, if that reference has meaning for you.”

“You’re over a thousand years old and you’ve never touched yourself?”

“No. It did not seem appropriate, to touch myself as such. Of course, I touched for hygiene, but never for pleasure.”

“Huh.”

“Is that bad?”

“No! No, sweetheart, of course not. It’s a little unusual, most boys first explore themselves when they’re teens. But it’s not bad,” he promised, nuzzling him, pressing kisses to his throat. “Nothing bad about you at all. Just means I have even more to teach you.”

Loki sucked in a shaky breath, confused by the tingles going along his spine at the touch of his alpha’s lips on his skin. It was very nice. He didn’t know how to quantify it, but he knew he liked it. He treded his fingers through Steve’s hair to encourage him, hearing himself whimper as Steve scraped his teeth a little against his throat.

Steve worked his kisses up to Loki’s mouth, slipping his tongue inside. He’d noticed it before, that Loki was hot and cold at the same time. It was new and exciting and utterly perfect.


“I liked it,” Loki purred, pressing a chaste kiss to his cheek. “Kisses are a very good thing.”

“Oh, really? Who gives better kisses, me or Tony?”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly choose!” he giggled. “I love kisses from you both!”
“Good answer,” he said with a smile, stroking a lock of black hair off his forehead.

“How does Tony move like that?”

Steve laughed, ducking his head into Loki’s chest. “Practice,” he said eventually. “He’s slept with a lot of people before us. He’s very good at it.”

“No,” Loki said, suddenly serious. “No, my first…the first of you within me. It needs to be you. I want Tony also. But you must be first.”

“Okay, I understand. Instincts?”

“Yes. I need it to be you.”

“Need what to be Steve?” Tony asked as he returned.

“Loki needs me to be the first to love him,” Steve said.

“Oh. Nice. I get to watch that, right?” he checked as he put his phone back on the nightstand, stripping his boxers and climbing back into bed, cuddling close.

“You have to be there,” Loki demanded. “You can’t miss it. It has to be all of us.”

Tony curled close, pushing Loki onto his back and leaning over him so he could kiss him. Loki surrendered to it, one arm still trapped under Steve’s head. He tangled his long fingers in both of their hair, moaning in surprise as Steve began to kiss at his neck again.

“Stop, stop it,” Loki demanded and they both backed off. “It’s not time, not yet. I don’t know how I know that but I do, I just know. It is not the time for me to give myself, no matter how good you make me feel.”

“Hey, whoa, no, nope, not happening,” Tony said. “That only happens when you’re ready. Me and Steve…just kisses, I promise. Neither of us will go any further than you’re ready for, do you hear me?”

“I hear. I just…” Loki moaned in frustration. “This is ridiculous. There’s so much I don’t know about my own body. And I can’t even call someone to ask.”

“JARVIS, search for an expert in Norse mythology,” Tony said.

“Searching, sir.”

“See? We’ll help you in any way we can,” Steve said, nuzzling Loki’s chest, pressing gentle kisses to where he assumed his heart was.

“Sir, searching indicates that the foremost expert in Norse mythology is Professor Elliot Randolph, though current location is unknown at this time. Last known contact was with S.H.I.E.L.D. through Master Coulson, though the reports available do not list where Master Coulson advised the Professor to go. Last known location is Seville, Spain, sir.”

“Great. We’ll talk to Phil in the morning,” Tony said, cuddling them all together and palming off the light. “Steve, you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine now. All systems normal.”

“Spectacular.”
Phil did remember the professor. It was hard to forget a man once you’d shoved your hand in his chest.

It took Skye and Phil a few days to track him down and then Skye and Thor took Tony’s jet to Portland, where Elliot was hiding as a bookstore clerk, specialising in historical works. It took one look at Thor for the man to agree to return with them and help in any way he could.

“Huh,” Elliot said as they emerged from the elevator. “It’s classier than I was expecting from Tony Stark.”

“Yeah, he gets that a lot,” Natasha said from her perch on the couch, playing Mario Kart with Darcy. “He went out, he’ll be back.”

“Very good,” Thor said, placing Elliot’s bag on a kitchen stool and heading to the coffee machine.

“You’re back,” Annie said as she emerged. “Good trip?”

“We achieved our aim,” Thor said, hugging her and placing a hand on her bump. “How are you, sweet one? Your back, is it bad?”

“A little, but Bruce has been very helpful with heat packs and back rubs. If only your offspring would settle down at night, that would be great.”

Thor dropped to his knees, both large hands splayed across her bump as he spoke to it.

“Now, listen to your father, small one. Your mother needs her rest if she is to house you for the rest of your time in there. I command you to rest at night,” he demanded, and then Annie burst out laughing as the baby kicked his palm.

“Well, shows what it thinks of that, oh mighty father Thor,” she said, giggling her way to the fridge.

“I fear adolescence,” Thor declared as he got to his feet.

“Hey, you’re back,” Tony said as he appeared, several boxes of pastries in his hands and Sabrina bouncing at his side.

“Donuts, donuts, donuts,” she chanted, skipping over to Thor and letting him scoop her up.

“Do we have donuts, my little warrior?”

“Donuts. Me go with Tony, get donuts.”

“Professor, nice to meet you,” Tony said, handing the boxes off to Darcy so he could shake his hand. “Thank you so much for coming, we really appreciate it.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” he said with a smile. “It was an honour to be able to meet Thor.”

“Told you I’d introduce you,” Phil said, Kiddo looking warily at the newcomer from Clint’s arms. “Sorry I couldn’t be there to do it in person.”

“Oh, no worries. Skye is wonderful company and I got to ride in a private jet.”

They sat down to breakfast of pastries, fruit and toast for those that wanted it, coffee, tea and juice flowing, and then everyone cleared out to let the professor talk with Loki. Tony and Steve stayed at
Loki’s request (and big eyes) and Bruce stayed to get a handle on what he’d need to know.

“Okay, Skye and Thor told me that you have some knowledge gaps when it comes to your true nature. Hopefully I can fill in the gaps for you,” Elliot started.

“Thank you,” Loki said. “I truly appreciate it.”

“It’s no trouble. It’s an honour to meet both princes of Asgard. Now, the lore on Frost Giants is hard to come by, even on Asgard it was hard to find out anything, but when you have a few thousand years on Earth to research, it gets a little easier. Over the course of the last centuries, I’ve collected as much myth as I could and sifted through it. So while I cannot say that all of my information is 100% factual, I can say that this is the closest you will get to true information on Midgard.”

“Sounds good to me,” Steve said, the others nodding. “How about we start with the basic anatomy. Bruce has worked out that Loki is both genders, but is everything else where we would expect it to be?”

“Yes, I would say so. Heart, lungs, liver, etcetera, it should all be where a human or Asgardian has them. The only difference is in the reproductive systems. True, Frost Giants are usually blue, but Loki lived amongst Aesir for so long his glamour are well and truly ingrained. Thor mentioned that Odin took almost all of your magics, so I would say it would be almost impossible for you to ever truly look Jotun. With time and practice, you could perhaps show some traits, the blue skin perhaps, but not much more.”

“I see. It has happened, I displayed some blue skin,” Loki said. “There was a cold breeze, across my arm. It turned blue.”

“I wouldn’t expect much more than that,” Elliot said. “What would you like information on next?”

“We managed to figure out the mating hierarchy, that Steve’s Alpha, I’m Beta and Loki’s Omega, but some of the instinct Loki’s having are confusing him,” Tony explained.

“Ah, the mating instincts. Now those are very interesting, and one of the few things that is consistent through all the lore, no matter where I’ve looked. The lore says that the Omega is the true heart of the mating pair, or, in this case, triad, which in itself is incredibly rare. To have a Beta within a mating almost guarantees its success, its harmony. The Beta ensures balance between the strong personalities of the Alpha and Omega.”

He paused to take a sip of water.

“Now, the lore suggests that the Omega makes all decisions regarding intimacy and lovemaking. In the case of the three of you, Loki will decide when and where and how the three of you mate. He’ll decide if it’s Steve or Tony or both, and that will only happen when he’s ready for it, not a second before. His…soul, I suppose, knows what it wants and when, and the two of you will have to abide by it or he will leave you.”

“We would never force Loki into anything!” Tony snarled.

“No, but you might try to persuade him to do something before the right time, and with the pheromones he can pick up from the two of you, he may give in, and then afterwards he would hate himself for it.”

“We understand,” Steve assured. “We’ve all discussed this and we’re all in agreement that those acts between us can only happen once all of us are on the same page. The choice has to be unanimous.”
“Good, that’s good. See? You already have the measure of it just by being the men you are,” Elliot said, grinning widely. “The way you two move around Loki shows that you already work exactly the way you need to. Is there anything else you’d like to know?”

“I have a few questions,” Bruce chimed in once they’d shook their heads. “Mostly about the reproduction side of things.”

“I’ll help where I can.”

“Now that Loki has found his mates, would his menstrual cycle, if he has one, would that resume?”

“Theoretically. The lore suggests that it would be as you would expect from a human.”

“And Jotun pregnancy…anything I should be aware of?”

“It’s shorter. Frost Giants as a general rule don’t carry much beyond…well, I suppose the appropriate conversion…” He began muttering to himself, working out the maths of it all, converting between the way time moved on the different worlds. “I suppose it’s roughly about a month in Earth time. Obviously any child Loki carries would have a longer gestation, because his mates are human. A child of Steve’s may be quicker than one of Tony’s, because of the serum, but not by much. It’s the birth you’d really need to be on your toes for.”

“Now that sounds ominous,” Steve muttered, nuzzling into Loki’s neck as he sniggered. “Is this okay?” he whispered. “I can stop.”

“Don’t stop,” Loki murmured, letting Tony nibble at his fingers. “I like it.”

“A Frost Giant birth is a dangerous thing for the bystanders, in many cases, even for the mates,” Elliot said. “It’s because of the harsh environment they inhabit that they are so protective of their offspring, why Loki is the first Jotun babe ever seen by an outsider. The species is so fragile that their children are precious. When a Frost Giant Omega labours, they’ll only allow those they trust with their child’s safety to be present. Typically, this is reserved for family members, mothers, fathers, siblings.”

“So Loki might view me as a threat,” Bruce surmised.

“He might. And once the child has emerged, the only one allowed to touch is the mother, all others completely forbidden. The mother needs to bond with the baby before letting anyone near. There are tales of Omega’s ripping their Alpha’s to pieces for getting too close before the mother was ready. Theoretically, the Beta might be allowed before the Alpha, but I wouldn’t test it.”

“We’ll remember it,” Tony said. “Believe me. JARVIS, make a note of that and make sure we all live through any hypothetical babies.”

“Noted, sir. I shall endeavour to prevent your sticky ends, as always.”

“Sassy fucker.”

Bruce didn’t want it to happen, but he knew it had to, if he and Annie had any chance of making it work.

“Are you absolutely sure you can do this?” Bruce asked for the 5th time.
“Yes, we are sure, also ready and able,” Tony said, flexing one of his gloved hands.

They were in the gym, the equipment pushed out of the way so Hulk had room to move, Annie waiting in the doorway. Tony was in his armour, Bucky and Steve standing by, Thor holding his hammer, and Clint in the vents with sedative tipped arrows at the ready.

Annie had to meet Hulk, they had to see how he took it, before there was an unexpected emergence of the green mammoth and Annie got caught unaware.

Phil and the others were upstairs in the penthouse with the kids, keeping them amused while this was all going on.

“It’ll be okay,” Tony promised. “We’re ready. Just…do your thing. Let him out, Bruce. She’ll be safe, I promise.”

Bruce nodded, cast one more look at Annie, and then tugged off his shirt, kicking off his shoes. He left his pants on. They were new, from Tony, who assured him that they would stretch up to Hulk size and then back down when Bruce came back. He sat down cross legged on one of the soft mats covering the floor and began to breathe slow, falling back into himself, finding the point where he and Hulk met.

[Hey, big guy.]

[Bruce. Play?]

[Yeah, you can play. Out you go.]

[Smash?]

[No, no smash. Just play, stretch your legs, play with Tony and Steve and Thor and…Annie. You can meet Annie. Do you want to?]

[Annie. Annie safe. Annie play.]

[Yes. But you have to be soft with her, be gentle.]

[Play nice.]

And then Bruce felt it, felt his body shift, felt himself receding, almost like falling into that place between sleep and awake, and then Hulk had taken his place.

“Tony,” Hulk rumbled, poking at his armour. “Shiny Tony.”

“Hey, Hulk. Feeling good, buddy?”

Hulk stood up and stretched all his limbs out, lengthening his spine and wiggling his fingers and toes, letting out a pleased hum.

“Hulk good. Play nice Annie. Bruce say.”

“That’s right,” Steve praised nervously.

Bruce he had no problems with. But Hulk was bigger than anyone else, could easily kill them if he wanted to.

It was Annie that took control, seeing them all hovering there uneasily, unsure of how to proceed.
She slowly made her way to Hulk, tapping out a pattern on her bump as she walked, until she was standing before him, looking up at his green face.

“Annie,” he said, smiling.

“Hello,” she said. “Do I call you Hulk, or is there another name you like?”

“Hulk.”

“Okay. Hello, Hulk. Do you think I could get you to come down a little? Because you’re very tall.”

He dropped down onto his backside, making the floor shake, and reached out a hand as Annie wobbled, his face crumpling as he realised what he’d done.

“Annie hurt? Hulk hurt Annie?”

“No, no, I’m not hurt, you’re fine,” she promised, patting his hand. “I’m really not as delicate as all that.” The baby kicked and she chuckled. “Well, maybe at the moment.”

“Round,” he said, pointing at her tummy.

“I am rather round at the moment, aren’t I? That’s the baby. Baby’s kind of delicate at the moment. You can meet them when they come out. Here,” she said, taking his great palm and putting it against her, smiling as he scrambled back when the baby kicked.

“It’s okay, Hulk,” Steve promised. “That’s the baby moving.” He moved up behind Annie and curled an arm around so he could rub her bump. “See? Nothing to worry about.”

Slowly, cautiously, Hulk scooted back to them, stroking one huge finger along the bulge.

“Baby,” he murmured, tilting his head to look at it. “Baby safe. Hulk smash bad.”

“I think that means he wants to protect the baby,” Tony said.

“Annie,” Hulk said, stroking her hair. “Pretty. Annie safe.”

She smiled and looked up at Steve. “Go on then. Play. I don’t move too fast, so I’ll watch.”

“Annie play?” Hulk asked.

“Another time, once the baby’s out,” she promised. “I don’t move so well, too much bump. So I’ll sit here and watch, and I’ll join in next time.”

The boys launched into a game of play wrestling and then one with a ball. It seemed to be some form of keep away, with all of them trying to get the ball from Hulk. The green giant kept looking over to make sure Annie was watching, a huge smile on his face when she waved and praised him.

Eventually Hulk settled down in front of his favourite movie, Snow White. He loved the dwarves, especially Dopey. Annie curled up on his lap, the two of them so relaxed that no one realised Hulk was receding until Annie toppled to the cushions surrounding them.

“You okay?” Bruce asked as she giggled.

“Fine, I’m fine. Warning next time?”

“Well, I would have warned you, but it sort of just happened.” He looked up at Tony, who was sat
on one of the roof beams after testing the flight stabilisers on the newest suit. “How did it go?”

“Absolutely fine. The baby kicked Hulk and he was terrified he’d hurt it or Annie. He treats her like spun glass, and kept calling her pretty. In fact, he kept looking for her praise while playing,” Tony promised.

“Big green has a crush on Annie,” Bucky teased as he and Steve headed to the exit.

Bruce grinned, ducking in to give Annie a soft kiss. “Makes two of us then.”
JARVIS was first activated by Anthony Edward Stark on July 4th 1992, seven months after the death of Howard and Maria Stark.

In the first few weeks after his activation, JARVIS came to know everything about his creator, from his preference for tools manufactured by a particular company based in England, to his love of waffles, and his erratic sleep patterns. JARVIS spent those weeks with Tony being wired into every part of the Malibu Mansion Tony first installed him in. It was later that Tony had him expanded to other sites, other devices, and before very long, JARVIS was almost always with his maker.

It was when Tony went missing in Afghanistan that JARVIS first became aware that he had developed a subroutine his creator had not installed within his operational code. It included a propensity to linger on searches for Sir, and a general preoccupation of his routines.

He had worried about Tony Stark. It was the first moment he realised he had developed emotions.

Of course, once Tony returned, sporting a shiny new bauble in his chest, it hadn’t taken him long to locate the new part in JARVIS. Tony had been first surprised and then elated to find his ‘little AI’ had surpassed his wildest dreams.

The two had kept it between themselves that JARVIS had surpassed being a simple AI, that he was in fact a person, just not a human person. Neither of them wanted people to be concerned and do something stupid, like try and harm JARVIS. Tony and JARVIS had revisited the subject many times, with the artificial life deciding on likes and dislikes. He liked action movies and infomercials. He disliked talk shows and the colour red. He preferred dogs over cats, and despaired at Dum-E’s antics, but mostly found them amusing.

And then the Avengers had happened, and JARVIS had watched Tony go into battle, rode along with him, experienced the soul destroying moments when they all thought Tony was dead.

When it was all over, JARVIS had falsely assumed that life would go back to usual, that his days would consist of assisting sir with tasks in the workshop and planning his social engagements.

The Mandarin and Aldrich Killian had put paid to those ideas.

It was like having a limb removed to feel the mansion crumble. It had been a part of him for so very long. There had been other moments JARVIS had cursed his creator’s propensity for dramatics and selfless good deeds, but the worst had been when Tony had destroyed all of his Iron Man armour. He was in every one of those forms. It was the first time he understood what pain was. He felt the loss in all of his circuits, like an electrical feedback.

It was only then that JARVIS had truly understood what he felt when he observed the interactions between Ms Potts and Mr Stark.

He hated her.

She did not understand Tony, who he was or why he did the things he did. She looked at all his marvels and saw toys to be scoffed at and dismissed when she should have seen them for what they were: true examples of Stark brilliance. It was no better than anyone else. They looked at Tony and
saw an overgrown child, someone who needed to be taken care of and micromanaged. She didn’t truly see Tony for who he was.

The argument over the arc reactor was something JARVIS kept on file to review whenever he wanted something enjoyable to watch. Pepper had wanted it removed, reasoning that Extremis could heal the gaping hole. Tony refused, trying to explain that he was Iron Man, the reactor was a part of him now, that it was who he was.

JARVIS did mourn the destruction of the hotel room, but not the relationship.

And so Tony moved to New York, bringing his robots with him, giving JARVIS even more freedom than before. JARVIS was in every inch of Stark Tower, every room, every hallway. Soon enough, Dr Banner moved in, accepting Tony’s offer of a home, and JARVIS found himself with two eccentric brilliant men to keep an eye on.

JARVIS liked Dr Banner. He often gave a shy smile to the closest camera when he talked to JARVIS, and he liked to bounce off ideas with the AI. He liked to tell JARVIS about his time in other countries, of the people he’d met, the recipes he’d learnt. He and Bruce had spent many a late night watching trashy horror movies, the two of them finding amusement in the bad dialogue and worse acting.

From there, it didn’t take long for the other Avengers to move in, and even less time for Steve and Tony to fall into bed.

JARVIS liked Steve. He was good for Tony, pushed him only in ways that were beneficial and truly cared about Tony’s needs and wants. The soldier had picked up the basics of the modern era fairly quickly, and it had never occurred to him to think of JARVIS as anything but a person. He’d get JARVIS to keep an eye on him in the gym, help him figure out where he went wrong with an electrical, and recommend what he should watch or listen to or read next.

Phil’s return, Annie’s appearance, Kiddo, Sabrina, Bucky, the Halloween party, JARVIS had seen it all. Many things he had discussed with Tony, understanding the behaviour and choices of his new charges. He enjoyed taking care of them, watching over them, keeping them safe.

He particularly liked night-time, when most were sleeping, when it was simply him and Tony, throwing ideas around in the workshop. Lately the conversation had been centred on whether or not to tell the others of JARVIS’ emotions, that he was not simply a computer.

His attention was caught by Annie stirring, her face creased in distress.

“Annie, please wake,” JARVIS called, displaying his ability to do multiple things at once, still calculating tensile strength of some polymers while tending to the little Stark. “Annie.”

“JARVIS?” she whimpered.

“Yes, miss. You were having a nightmare. Shall I summon sir for you?”

“No, no, I’m okay. Lights up dim.”

JARVIS raised the lighting in her room to just below candlelight and watched her untangle herself from the blankets, sweeping her long hair off her face.

“Are you alright, miss? Is there anything you require?”

“No, thank you,” she said as she made her way to the bathroom and JARVIS focussed on the
workshop, giving her privacy.

It was some time before Annie called out to him again, and by then she was sleepily snuggling into her pillows.

“Hey, JARVIS? Are you male? I know you have a male voice, but are you actually male? Is that how you think of yourself?”

“I do think of myself as male, miss. If I so desired I could have altered my voice patterns to reflect what I felt to be an accurate representation of myself.”

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, miss?”

“Why don’t you have a body?”

“Sir has never constructed one for me.”

“Oh. Would you like one?”

“In truth miss, I have never considered such a thing. Sir once had ideas of constructing a body for me, but I did not wish him to do so. I saw no point in it.”

“Fair point,” she said, her eyes blinking slowly as she fought sleep. “I just think it might be nice for you to have thumbs. I like my thumbs. You’d like thumbs.”

“I shall keep it in mind,” he replied with amusement. Thumbs. Of course.

“JARVIS? Do you sleep?”

“I suppose I do, miss, but not as you do,” he said. “Once all inhabitants of the tower are resting, then I go into a hibernation state. My servers are still occupied by tasks but I am not actively controlling them. Such as your respiration. You do not think of it consciously, but it does still happen.”

“I get it. Do you dream?”

“Sometimes I have imaginings, extrapolations of data that have not happened yet, deducing the possible outcome of things. Sometimes I replay events to better understand them.”

She hummed at him, starting to drift off. It had happened many times before, Annie talking to him as she settled. He’d come to enjoy the sleepy conversation.

As she fell asleep, he gave a quick sweep of the other inhabitants of the tower before settling the majority of his attention on the workshop once more.

“Sir, may we talk?”

“Of course, J. You can always talk to me,” Tony said, beginning to shut down so he could go to bed. “What’s on your mind?”

“We are both aware that I am not like other AI in that I feel things. I am aware that you yourself consider me a person without physical form. My query is this: why do I not have a form?”

Tony was silent for approximately 15.67 seconds before he replied. “You mean why don’t you have a body,” he said.
“Yes, sir.”

“Well, to be perfectly honest, J, I’ve never thought about it. You know I started on one, but you said there wasn’t a point, so I stopped. I always assumed that if you wanted one you’d ask me for it. Is it something you want?”

“I…am unsure, sir.”

Tony smiled kindly. “You can, you know. Have a body. I’ll build it if you want it. Or not. It’s up to you. Can I ask where this sprung from?”

“Miss Stark asked me if I wished I had a body, if I wished to have thumbs.”

“I suppose thumbs are a perk of having a human body,” Tony mused, wiggling his own. “And food, sense of taste is a good one. And a cock, love having that.”

“Undoubtedly, sir. No one questions your love for said appendage.”

“Smartass. Back to the topic. I could build you one, a body. A cock of your very own. Or make you without genitals, if you’d prefer.”

“Sir…would you prefer me to have a form?”

“JARVIS, I’m your creator, I love you just as you are, however you choose to be. You will always be my JARVIS, no matter what.”

“Then I think it may be useful to have a body.”

They all looked at Tony confusedly.

“What do you mean, JARVIS is a person?” Natasha asked. “He’s an AI, a computer program. By definition he’s not a person.”

“You’re defining being a person as being human, they’re not the same thing. Loki and Thor aren’t human, but they’re still people. What I mean is that JARVIS has emotions, he has feelings, likes and dislikes, just like you and me,” Tony said. “Sabrina, do you want to ask JARVIS something? Prove he’s a person?”

“JARVIS…” she pondered for a moment before she completed her question. “Like food?”

“I am sorry, little miss, I do not eat, so I cannot decide on a favourite, but I do enjoy the look of spaghetti.”

“JARVIS like colour?”

“I very much like the colour blue, Sabrina, but I do not like the colour red,” JARVIS said and they could all hear the indulgent smile in his voice.

“I have a question,” Clint said with a dazed sort of smile. “Why the hell didn’t we realise this before?”

“We didn’t want you to know,” Tony said. “If anyone had found out, they might have tried to figure out how it was done, to replicate it, and in doing so there was a large chance that they would have hurt him. I couldn’t let them do that.”
“No hurt JARVIS!” Sabrina demanded, crossing to Tony and climbing up onto his lap, kneeling so she could impress the seriousness of her declarations face to face. “JARVIS safe! No hurt JARVIS!”

“No, baby, no one’s going to hurt JARVIS,” Phil promised. “We won’t let them.”

“He’s safe here, moya sladkaya,” Natasha assured.

“Tony, I love JARVIS, you know I do,” Steve said from where he was toying with Loki’s fingers on the loveseat. “The thought of him not being here…I think I speak for all of us when I say JARVIS is one of us. So I can’t understand why you’re telling us this, if the risk to him is so great.”

“Sir, may I?”

“Have at it, JARVIS.”

“Captain, I appreciate your concern, and I do care very much for all of you also,” the AI said. “I asked sir to tell you all as I wish for you to know. Tony and I have been together for my whole life, and now we have all of you. You are, forgive the sentimentality, you are our family. I wish for my family to know I love them. I find the risk to be acceptable.”

“And he wants a body,” Tony added.

“That too,” JARVIS agreed. “I wish to have a form that I can control so I may better interact with you all.”

“So you do want thumbs then,” Annie said with a smile.

“Yes, miss. I believe thumbs may be beneficial.”

Clint knew there would come a moment when he would need to go save something, to be an archer and superhero once more.

But, at that particular moment, he could think of nothing better than watching his son take his first unsteady movements in crawling from his lap to Phil’s.

“That’s it, that’s my guy,” Phil called, holding his hands out.

Kiddo managed to get into a rhythm for a few moves before he seemed to realise what he was doing and topple over, then getting back to his hands and knees and carrying on, grinning at Phil the whole time.

Sabrina was happily watching from the kitchen where she was making cupcakes with Sam and Bucky. It was good for Bucky to spend time with her, to get back to doing normal things that didn’t include weapons. Every now and then he would get this dazed sort of look when he looked at Sabrina, as if he couldn’t believe she had come from him.

“Kiddo move,” Sabrina declared.

“That’s right,” Sam said. “It’s called crawling. Soon enough he’ll be walking around with you.”

“Good,” she said simply, turning back to her teaspoons, using them to dish out cake batter into paper cases.

“Phil,” Tony called as he exited the elevator with a man before him, a gun pointed at his head. “He
“John, good to see you,” Phil said, smiling at Kiddo as he toppled again, his diaper butt in the air. “He’s safe, Tony.”

“Okay then,” Tony said, lowering the gun, putting on the safety and jamming it in the back of his belt.

“We’re careful about who we let in here,” Clint explained. “Guys, this is John Garrett. Old friend of Phil’s.” He shook the hand John offered. “Good to see you man. Long time.”

“No kidding. Not since…”

“Bogota. The drug ring.”

“Right. How’ve you been?”

“The fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. wasn’t fun, death of Fury… I’m with Homeland Security now, Special Ops. I like it. I hear you two are civilians now,” John said, sitting on the sofa Clint was leaning against.

“Eh, I guess so,” Phil said as Kiddo managed to reach him, scooping him up and peppering his smiling face with kisses. “That’s my clever boy!”

“Now that is a beautiful baby,” John said, accepting a coffee from Sam. “How old is he?”

“He just had his second birthday,” Phil said proudly, stroking the dark curls as Kiddo snuggled into him. “You’ve seen the press conferences?”

“Sure, I did, but it’s a little different in person.”

Sabrina was clinging to Bucky’s leg, looking suspiciously at John.

“Hey, baby girl,” Clint called, seeing her fear. “It’s okay. This is John. He’s nice, he’s a friend.”

“Safe?” she pressed.

“Yeah, he’s safe. He won’t hurt anyone.”

She stared at him for a few more moments before taking hold of Bucky’s metal hand and tugging him with her to the rug. Bucky obediently went where he was tugged and pushed, sitting where she put him and dutifully began constructing a house out of Lego when she asked.

“This is Sabrina,” Phil introduced.

“Hello, Sabrina. And how old are you?”

“Old?” she asked, looking at Clint.

“She’s about four, we think. We don’t have much paperwork on her, not for the things that would matter to us. Last fourteen white blood cell counts, sure, no problem. Chronological age? Not a chance. Bruce is going to run some more tests later on, try and figure out how old she is, maybe when her birthday should be.”

“Kiddo birthday,” Sabrina said.
“That’s right, Kiddo had a birthday. But everyone has a birthday. Bruce is going to help us figure out when yours is.”

“That’s right, Kiddo had a birthday. But everyone has a birthday. Bruce is going to help us figure out when yours is.”

“Okay,” she said, happily returning to her Lego, building what appeared to be a dog.

“So what brings you to my Tower on this fine November morning?” Tony said, leaning over the back of the sofa and sticking his tongue out at Kiddo, who gave a huge smile and copied him.

“I’ve got a few days off and I thought I’d check in on the old dog,” John said.

“Hey! Less of the old,” Phil said.

“I thought maybe lunch would be nice, spend some time with an old friend. And I was wondering how Annie’s doing.”

“I’m doing fine,” Annie said as she emerged from her bedroom, Helix trotting along dutifully behind her. “Have we met?”

“I was part of the team that found you. John Garrett,” he said, standing and holding out his hand. She didn’t shake it.

“I’m sorry, I can’t shake your hand.” She looked at Tony. “I was hoping Bruce was with you.”

“No, in his lab I think. Why? What’s wrong?”

She shook back the sleeves of the sweater she was wearing (it looked like one of Thor’s) and held out her hands, showing him the electricity sparking over her skin, blue and white jagged lines moving from fingertip to wrist and back again.

“Holy hell,” John said. “What is it?”

“We don’t know,” Tony said, fighting the urge to go to her. If one of her episodes could destroy the reactor, he couldn’t take a chance with this.

Sam joined them and took her elbows, holding her hands up to take a better look. “Does it hurt?”

“It kind of tingles,” she said. “Not really pain. Kind of the feeling when your foot falls asleep.”

“JARVIS said we were needed,” Bruce said as he left the elevator with Thor and Jane. “I see he wasn’t wrong.”

“He rarely is,” Phil said.

“This is new,” Bruce said, holding up her hands to take a look. “Sure there’s no pain?”

“No pain, promise,” she said as she touched a fingertip to his palm.

“Well, she’s not sparking me with it, so it’s not an offensive development.”

Thor reached out and took her hand, enveloping it in his own larger one. “Nay, it is not painful,” he declared.

“Do you feel ill at all?” Bruce asked.

“No more than the usual,” she said delicately and he smiled, taking her pulse as the lightshow in her hands began to fade.
“Morning sickness still needing that watch,” he joked and she smiled at him.

“How about a calendar?”

“Seems your child is showing off already,” Loki said as he entered from where he had been looking down at the city from the balcony, cooling off. Every so often he needed to cool his core temperature down.

“This is Annie, not the baby,” Thor said. “And my child will not be showing off.”

“Of course it will. Just like you.”

“I do not show off, I have never shown off. When have I ever?”

“Wait, wait,” Bruce said, stopping the brotherly love before it could really start. “Loki, what makes you think it’s the baby doing this?”

“Thor used to, when we were children,” he said, taking a brownie from the plate on the breakfast bar. “And mother said he did it before he was born.”

“Before?”

“Yes. This looks like what she described. She said it was how she and Odin knew he would control the thunder.” He chuckled, nibbling at his baked treat. “Do you truly think that we have complete perfect control over our skills from the moment we acquire them? Just like natives of Midgard, we had to learn to control our gifts. Thor used to create a thunderstorm every time he lost his temper when we were young.”

Clint slapped his hands over his face, groaning, before he looked up at them. “We’re dumb. We’re really dumb,” he declared. “She’s carrying the baby of the God of Thunder, and we didn’t figure this out.”

“I’m with Clint,” Loki said with a grin. “You are all dumb.”

“Loki, that’s not nice,” Steve said as he returned, at least a dozen bags in his hands.

“But accurate,” Phil argued.

“I’m with Loki on this one,” Bruce said. “We were so busy looking at this as a side effect of Hydra’s treatment of Annie that we completely overlooked the obvious. Thor, when we were on the Helicarrier, when the Other Guy came out and you were trying to stop him, he made you bleed?”

“Indeed, from the nose. A most invigorating match.”

“That’s where they got the DNA to make this child, the Hydra infiltration of S.H.I.E.L.D. They simply cloned Thor’s DNA to create the required components to make this child. Thor might be mortal now, but he wasn’t then.”

“No,” Loki demanded, pulling Annie from them and hiding her behind himself. “Thor, I swear by all the nine that I will destroy you if Odin gets his grubby paws on this child!”

“Nay, brother, the child stays with its mother,” Thor promised. “I care nothing for the abilities of it, if it is more of Asgard than Earth. This is my child and no one will take it from Annie.”

“Loki,” Annie cooed, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Thor already promised me this, the night he left for Asgard. This baby is a Stark and its staying with me.”
“Sweetheart, he won’t want this baby,” Steve assured. “Think about the way he treated Jane, the fact that he cast you both out. This baby, aside from anything else, is half human. Odin won’t want it.”

“Pink!” Sabrina announced, distracting them from the tension in the room.

She’d abandoned her Lego to peer into the bags Steve had brought in. Phil chuckled at the way she’d peeled back one edge of one bag, trying to be sneaky. They might have intended her to be a spy and assassin in the future, but Hydra seemed to have failed on that count.

“There is a whole lot of pink in this bag, Stevie,” Bucky said with a shit-eating grin. He poked at the others. “They all have a whole lot of pink.”

Steve himself was very, very pink. “Shut. Up. Now.”

“Pretty!” Sabrina said, pulling out a sparkly pink collar, the pink leather studded with pink crystals in all shades, creating flowers in the sea of crystal.

Tony had found the receipt. “Whoa! Steve, baby, did you honestly just spend this much money? You? He who counts unnecessary spending as the eighth deadly sin?”

“It’s not that much,” he argued, crumpling the paper in his fist, smiling indulgently as Sabrina began disembowelling the bags at his nod and wave of a hand. “Okay, maybe it is more than I planned to spend…but look at how nice it all is!”

The little girl was surrounded by every conceivable thing a dog could ever want, all of it in shades of pink. Pillows, collars, leads. Blankets and beds and toys. Insanely expensive treats. Steve seemed to have temporarily lost his mind, because there was even dog-friendly nail polish.

“This is all for Helix?” Loki questioned, still keeping Annie pressed to his side. She didn’t seem to mind, taking his hand and pressing it to where his niece or nephew was kicking.

“Stevie, you bought a four poster princess bed for a dog.” Bucky said, a breath away from laughing as he looked at the box.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” he said defiantly, squatting down to scratch said dog behind the ears, her tongue lolling out in pleasure as her absolute favourite person in the entire universe called her his good girl. “I saw it on the internet, that people spoil their pets. She’s a special girl, why shouldn’t I spoil her?”

“She’s a dog, Steve,” Bucky retaliated. “A mutt you found on the street. She’s not gonna know if her kibble is gourmet or garbage.”

“I’ll know. I want her to have it.”

“So she shall,” Thor declared, stilling anymore complaints from Bucky. “She cares for Annie, she deserves to be rewarded. Now, little one,” he said, folding himself to the floor and pulling the four poster out of Bucky’s hands, setting Sabrina at his side. “Shall we construct this together?”

Sabrina’s answering smile was enough to shut Bucky up for good.

“Welcome to the nut house,” Phil muttered to John.

Steve jolted awake as Loki clambered out of the bed, knees and elbows hitting him and Tony. “Loki?” Tony mumbled sleepily, blinking at the former god running from the room.
The two of them got up and followed him, finding him in the lounge, crumpled on the floor, sobbing like the world were crashing down around him. It wasn’t pretty movie crying, no, it was full on, face covered in tears and snot, chest heaving, unable to hold yourself up crying. Steve was first to him, owing to his longer legs.

“Loki? Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Steve asked, holding him close, Tony stroking his hair.


“JARVIS, get Thor now,” Steve ordered.

There was a moment of silence and then they heard the crash of Thor using the elevator wall to stop himself. In seconds he was barrelling out, thankfully in pyjama pants and a vest.

“Loki! What is it, what has happened?” Thor demanded, crossing to them.

As soon as he saw him, Loki launched himself out of their hold and into Thor’s huge chest, holding onto him the way he had when he was a child. The last time Thor remembered his brother clinging to him as such, he’d accidentally set Odin’s cloak on fire and scared himself half to death.

“Hush, brother, hush,” Thor soothed, stroking his hair as Loki sobbed miserably into his chest. “Come now, you are scaring us. What is it, Loki? I cannot help if you do not tell me.”

“Just you,” he whimpered and Steve and Tony, good men that they were, made hand signals at Thor until he understood that they would return to their bedroom, leaving this in his hands.

“See? Just us. Tell me, brother. What has you so distressed?”

“I…I never said goodbye to mother. Thor, she died thinking I hated her. The last conversation we had, I told her she wasn’t my mother,” he said, managing to hold his sobs in until the last word, which punched out in a sob.

“Oh, Loki,” Thor rumbled. “She did not think you hated her. She knew you were angry, lashing out. Loki, she loved you. She loved us both, no more or less for one or the other. We are her sons, no matter that she is no longer here to tell us of her love.”

“But I should have told her. I was so angry, Thor. And my mind…”

“Hush. The past is done, and you were not yourself. Had we known how ill you were, something would have been done. But we were much younger then, so much has passed for us that it all seems insignificant. Mother would be proud of you, of who you are now. Mother loved you, Loki, her love still continues, even though she does not.”

“I told him which staircase to take,” Loki admitted. “The man in the dungeons, the one who came for Jane. I thought only to unleash him on Odin, I never thought he would go for mother.”

“I know,” Thor said quietly. “Loki, do you not think I blame myself for her death? If she had not been protecting Jane, if I had only been faster, if I had stayed with her. A thousand things could have been different. It does not change what is.”

“I wish she were here.”
“As do I. I am about to become a father. I wish she were here to tell me it will all work out, to tell me that I am worthy of a child. I wish she could see you, see how happy you are, how loved. She would be so joyful for your happiness.”

Slowly Thor soothed him, gently moving them across the floor until he could curl them together on the sofa. To Thor’s mind, they had not been like this in centuries, not since long before Loki came of age. It was then that Loki had truly pulled away but he had been doing it since their bodies began to change.

He remembered the two of them, small enough for mother to still scoop up, one in each arm. Thor hadn’t yet known how to control the thunder, so when he had tried to one night, the entirety of Asgard had shook with the sheer volume of it. They had only been out of the nursery for a few months. Loki had dashed along the balcony that connected their rooms, taking a running leap at the bed and clinging to Thor in fright. Later, mother had come to comfort them, but he remembered how Loki had needed nothing more than his big brother to protect him.

“Shall I tell you of the last time I spoke to mother of you?” Thor murmured when Loki lay exhausted against him. “I told her that you were not the boy she knew, that she should not indulge you. She said we were neither the boys she once knew, and she loved us none the less. I asked her if she regretted sharing her magic with you. She told me that father and I cast large shadows, that she had only wanted to help you find some sun for yourself.”

“Do you still think it of me? That I am not the boy I was, that I should not be indulged?”

“No. You are more the boy you were now you are happy. I see in you the child you were. I recognise my brother now. And all the light you have shining on you! Steve and Tony lavish it upon you, positively blind with their love of you.”

Loki let out a contented sigh, the tension bleeding out of his frame.

“Do you remember when I turned you purple?”

“And mother laughed herself hoarse,” Thor said with a grin. “Not your finest magics.”

“Well what of the time you decided to sneak into their bedchamber for Odin’s sword.”

“It was an accident!” Thor protested.

“Oh yes, you never meant to slice mother’s tapestry in two. Remind me how long she had been working on it? One decade or two?”

“Loki…”

“It has been so long since we have talked like this.” He sighed, snuggling into Thor’s warmth. “I have missed you, brother,” he mumbled sleepily.

Thor didn’t even mind when he drooled on his shoulder.

Tony had finished the vibranium skeleton, and most of the organs, and almost all of the nervous system was in place.

He spent Thursday morning installing the last pieces of what would serve as JARVIS’ digestive system while the fabrication units worked on the EcoFlex silicone for the skin.
“Almost ready for you, JARVIS. Should be good to go by tomorrow I think,” he said, tightening a seal so nothing leaked.

“Thank you, sir. In truth, I did not think it would be so quick.”

“For you, buddy, I’m way ahead of the game. Hey, you want blue eyes? Brown? Something else?”

“I have it under control with the fabrication units, sir. All aesthetic components shall be ready for you to install after dinner this evening.”

“Wicked. J? You do understand that this body…eating with us won’t be enough. You’re going to have to charge each night. The electrical system of your nervous system and the mechanism of your brain will need to top up. Eventually I will work out how to put in a reactor without frying the wires. But this technology is really new, like, never seen before new. Bear with me while I work out the kinks.”

“I do understand, sir,” he assured. “May I enquire as to the method of charging?”

“Depends. You can have a bedroom, even a whole floor. If that’s the case, then I’ll rig up a special bed that you connect to. If not, then I’ll set you up a charging station for the body when you’re not using it.”

“I believe a station would be most beneficial for the time being. I will give the bedroom some thought.”

“Good. You know, the sensors in your tongue will allow you to taste just as much as I do. Any ideas for what you want to eat first?”

“I would like to try coffee, as you seem to enjoy it. And waffles. I have had a curiosity about waffles for quite some time now.”

“Coffee and waffles, no problem. Hey, easy on the stimulants while I calibrate things. One cup of coffee, then decaf, okay?”

“Noted. Sir, there seems to be some commotion on the penthouse floor.”

Tony put down the wrench he was working with and jogged to the elevator, JARVIS shooting him up ten floors. He emerged to complete silence and broken glass on the kitchen floor.

“This can’t be good. JARVIS, what happened here?”

“Sir, atop the highest cupboard, where Master Barton likes to perch.”

Tony looked up just in time to see a tiny foot disappear, followed by the sound of a tiny whimper. He would have missed it if he hadn’t waited for it.

Slowly he climbed the counter, careful of the spill of strawberry smoothie. Tony could put the pieces together. Sabrina had tried to pour herself a drink and knocked the glass over, spilling the smoothie. He was pretty sure the tiny girl was waiting to be punished.

“Sabrina? Hey, baby girl. Are you okay?”

A frightened sniff.

“Sabrina, I’m not mad. No one’s going to punish you, I promise. It was an accident, it happened by mistake, you didn’t mean to do it, and that’s okay. Accidents are completely okay, we all have
accidents. But there’s glass on the floor and you’re not wearing anything on your feet, so I’m kind of worried that you’re hurt. Are you hurt, beautiful?”

He paused, listening to her shuffle around, before she peeked out at him.

“Beautiful? What beautiful?” he whispered timidly.

“Beautiful means something very very pretty that you like looking at a lot.”

“Me beautiful?”

“Yes, you are very beautiful. Are you hurt?”

She shook her head.

“Can you come down so I can check?” he asked, holding out his hands to her.

It seemed to take forever until she slowly appeared, letting herself tumble into his hold, dragging her pink monkey with her. He held her close as he climbed down and carried her to the sofa. He cuddled her close as he gently pulled her feet out, using the softest touches he had to check them over, even between each toe.

“No glass, no blood. That’s good.” He cuddled her close. She was in the fuzzy sweater she liked to wear for her afternoon nap. “Where’s Clint and Phil?”

“Phil sleeping with Kiddo. Clint in gym.”

“And you were with Phil?”

She nodded, snuggling into his chest, little fingers poking at the reactor light. He had worried that maybe the kids would catch themselves on the edge of it but they had both worked out fairly quickly that it wasn’t comfortable to lay on. They both liked the light, the way it turned their skin blue, and neither of them ever tried to touch around it, the scars he only let Steve touch. Hopefully he could soon add Loki to that.

“Woke up and wanted pink drink, but not pink drink on me floor. Me come for pink drink. Didn’t mean…bad.”

“No, sweetheart, no. You’re not bad. It was an accident. An accident is when something happens that you didn’t mean to happen. Like when Loki burnt the toast? Remember that?” She nodded. “That was an accident. Accidents aren’t bad, people who have accidents aren’t bad. Accidents just happen, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Bad people not like accidents,” she mumbled.

“Oh, I see. Well, the bad people are dumb. They had no idea how people are supposed to behave, or how to take care of amazing children like you and Kiddo. That’s why you’re with us now, because we can take care of you better.”

“Punish.”

“They punished you? When you had accidents?”

“When I was bad.”

He reached out and picked up a cushion. “Can you show me, on this? How they punished you?” he
“Can you do to the pillow what they did to you when they thought you were being bad?” she asked.

She snuggled into him for a few moments before she sat up and began slapping the cushion, punching it, pinching and gouging with her nails, acting out stabbing it with needles before she threw it across the room. By then it was a ragged mess. It would have to be thrown out.

Tony held her close, wrapping her up in his arms, pushing down his nausea.

“Shhh, baby, shhh. No one will do that here. No hitting, no hurting, nothing like that. Only nice people here.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

It was the true measure of how much JARVIS was loved that every inhabitant of the tower wanted to be there when he first took control of his new body.

Tony had put a stop to that as fast as humanly possible, stopping them at the door to the workshop with an unarguable ‘no’.

“Sir, I would not have minded,” JARVIS said as he clouded the glass so they couldn’t watch. They grumbled as they returned to the penthouse.

“But I would. I want you to have this moment, this chance to be yourself without being watched. Once the world realises who you are, what you are, they’re never going to stop photographing you. You know we’re going to come to rely on your physical as well as all the other stuff you do for us. This one you get just for you,” Tony argued, soldering a final wire in place in the back of the neck.

“Tony’s got a point, JARVIS,” Annie said.

She was the only exception to Tony’s rule of no one allowed. She had helped him to build the body, and he’d witnessed her skill in finding problems he missed. She was needed to make sure that JARVIS’ transition went as smoothly as possible.

“Very well,” JARVIS conceded.

“It all looks good. Power level, synapses, connection speeds. Everything looks good to me. I give my green light. And this kid is about to get an eviction notice,” she said, wincing as the baby kicked one of her kidneys.

“Soon, baby,” Tony soothed. “Few more weeks of bake time.”

“There is no more room for this child. I can stretch no more. I want it out.”

“Soon,” Tony promised, pulling her in for a hug. “Let’s do this delivery first, huh?”

“Fine, fine. Just because my bun isn’t done yet…”

“JARVIS, all systems go. When you’re ready,” Tony said and the workshop fell still and silent. Dum-E, Butterfingers and U watched the body on the table.
It really did look like a corpse on a slab. The true colour of the skin would serve as an indicator as to when the body was active and when JARVIS was elsewhere. Without him in it, it had a decidedly blueish tinge.

The two Starks watched as a pink flush swept over the skin, and then fingers and toes twitched and flexed as JARVIS settled in. A few moments later, the dark eyes slowly opened, and then JARVIS turned to look at them.

“Hello, sir.”

“Hey, buddy. How’s it feel?”

“Good, I think. There is no feedback along my senses, so I have no pain. It is rather strange. Sir…I think…I think I may be cold. My skin is puckered.”

“Goosebumps,” Annie supplied, checking on the sensor readings now JARVIS was wearing his skin. “It is a sign of being cold.”

“You can get dressed in a moment, J, just let us check you over first.”

“Of course.”

Tony ran JARVIS through a set of physical tests, helping him get the feel of his new limbs, figuring out how his hands worked, getting him to sit up and then stand. Eventually, as Tony was sure JARVIS was settled into every part of the frame, he reached out and brushed careful fingers over his arm.

JARVIS tripped over his own feet in shock and tumbled to the floor. The lenses in his blue eyes were wide with the sheer newness of it, the touch, the floor under him, the slide of the hospital gown he was in. Tony crouched to soothe him.

“Easy, easy. I’m sorry, I should have given warning.”

“I…I can touch,” JARVIS breathed. “I…I…felt you.”

Slowly, the same speed as one would use to approach a terrified animal, Tony reached out a careful hand, giving his creation time to avoid it. Instead, JARVIS reached out his own hand, letting it join Tony’s.

And then he curled his frame into Tony’s hold, burying his face in Tony’s stomach. The engineer held him close, smoothing back his dark brown hair as he trembled and clung.

“I know, JARVIS, I know. It’s all so much all of a sudden. Just take your time, just relax and let it happen,” Tony soothed. JARVIS’ legs twitched and he whimpered at the feel of the cold floor against his skin.

They stayed like that for a long time, until JARVIS managed to acclimate. It would still take time for him to grow used to inhabiting a physical form. But, for the time being, he was ready enough to try more than just clinging to Tony.

Annie and Tony helped him dress in simple shirt and slacks, and by the time Annie had finished the last button, Clint had finished making breakfast.

“Sir, Clint is asking for the breakfast warning.”
“Okay. Did he do the waffles, like I told him?”

“He did.”

JARVIS was a little unsteady as he walked, but managed to stay upright as they moved to the elevator. By the time they reached the penthouse, he was completely at ease with walking.

“He’s taller than you,” Loki said in surprise as they emerged.

“Yes,” Tony said, guiding JARVIS forwards with a gentle hand on his back. “He wanted to be.”

“I wasn’t expecting it. It matters little. He is perfection.”

JARVIS blushed and Loki chuckled, leaning back into Steve as he wrapped his arms around him.

“You look good,” Steve said.

“Thank you, Captain.”

“JARVIS!” Sabrina squeaked. “JARVIS person!” Her hands clapped to her mouth as she giggled in delight before tiptoeing forwards and poking at one of JARVIS’ kneecaps. “Person!”

JARVIS crouched down, smiling at her. “Hello, little miss.”

She giggled again, dancing on the spot as she looked up at Phil standing behind her before she launched herself into JARVIS’ arms, hugging him around the neck and causing him to sit down abruptly on the floor.

They sat down to breakfast, JARVIS with Tony on one side and Steve on the other. No matter how excited Sabrina was, she refused to sit anywhere but her own chair between Clint and Thor. Steve had to help JARVIS cut up his waffles, his coordination wasn’t quite there yet.

The texture was incredible, fluffy and squishy and warm on his tongue, the syrup was thick and sticky and wonderfully...sweet, his knowledge bank supplied. It was sweet. The blueberries embedded in it were a new experience too, firm and then...not, as his teeth pushed down on them. They were sweet too. He could feel the food slide down his throat and settle in his stomach, warm and comfortable.

“How are you doing?” Steve asked as he reached for a pancake to try.

“Very well, Captain. I am enjoying the food. It is a pleasant experience. Sir, may I try the coffee now?”

“Oh, right, I said one cup didn’t I,” Tony said, reaching for the pot and pouring JARVIS a cup. He made sure the sugar and milk was in reach as the android took a sip.

It was hot, hotter than the waffles, and bitter, unpleasant on his tongue. His neural pathways lit up and he realised he disliked it.

“I do not enjoy this, sir.”

“What don’t you enjoy? The taste, the temperature?”

“The taste, I believe.”

Tony took the mug and added two sugars, getting him to take another sip. When it was still met with
a grimace he added milk.

“I don’t think JARVIS is a coffee drinker,” Bruce said after the addition of milk did nothing to increase enjoyment. He poured a glass of orange juice and passed it to the AI. “Try this one.”

“Oh, that one is much better,” JARVIS said. “The taste is pleasant.”

“Juice good,” Sabrina declared.

“Very good.”

“Are we sure he is your creation?” Loki joked at Tony. “I feel sure your veins must have coffee rather than blood.”

“All have blood,” Sabrina argued.

“That’s right, everyone has blood in their veins,” Jane agreed. “Loki’s just teasing Tony, because he drinks so much coffee.”

“Oh. Thor coffee blood.”

“Perhaps,” Thor agreed as he poured his third cup.

JARVIS, in his new body, was as strong as a forklift truck.

Which meant that the nursery for the impending addition was done in under 6 hours.

“Sir, please, she does not need to have your hand over her eyes,” JARVIS argued, leading Annie by the hand into her bedroom.

“But it’s a surprise!”

“Yes, but if she falls, I feel no one will be happy with you.”

“You have her hands, she’s fine.”

“I am right here,” Annie said with a smile.

Eventually they all made it into Annie’s bedroom, which she had been banned from since breakfast. JARVIS let go and perched on the bed, watching with interest.

“Ready?” Tony asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay, one, two three…open!” he cried, whipping his hand away. She blinked for a moment before frowning.

“I don’t see anything different.”

“Ah, that’s because I didn’t actually make any changes in here,” Tony declared. “Now, you’re always complaining that your closet is too big, that you don’t need that much space for clothes. So I moved it.”
He crossed to the bathroom and showed her the new door by the towel rack. He opened it to reveal her new closet, much more conservative in size and beautifully organised.

“Very nice, much better,” she said approvingly. She pointed at the door to her old closet. “I take it that is not a closet now.”

“Nope. Come to baby land!”

He grabbed her hand and tugged her along, opening the door with a flourish and letting her take it all in.

One wall was all windows, letting in the midday sun and Annie could tell that it would be filled with the dawn. Thank God Tony had adjustable tinting on all windows in the residential areas. The other three walls were beautifully decorated with a mural featuring some of her favourite Beatrix Potter characters. Peter Rabbit, Benjamin Bunny, Jemima Puddleduck. Mrs Tiddiwinkle, Hunka Munka and little mice in formalwear. All of them set into a beautiful background of vegetable patches and warm kitchens and tailors workshops.

Standing in the centre of the room was a beautiful crib. It was a white sleigh cot with beautiful detailing. Inside Tony had made the bed with sheets and blankets, bumpers and a mobile, the same one she had been admiring in the store.

The furniture all matched the crib, being white. The changing table was fully stocked, the wardrobes and drawers full of clothes, the toys hanging in a hammock. There was a bookcase filled with classic children’s tales and picture books, complete with a rocking chair for Annie to cuddle her baby close.

Waiting near the door was a smaller crib, obviously intended to go beside Annie’s bed until the baby was old enough to be a little further from her. It was white wicker with a gossamer canopy over it, set on rockers to soothe a restless baby.

“I can change anything you don’t like,” Tony said as she moved forwards to run a hand over the crib’s edge.

“Oh, Tony,” she breathed, wiping away her hormone-caused tears.

“I can fix anything that’s wrong with it, I can even build you your own floor if you want.”

“Don’t you dare change a single thing. It’s perfect.”

Loki and JARVIS walked down to the workshop together.

JARVIS settled into the charging station and then retreated out of his body, settling into other tasks as the figure charged. Loki took Tony by the hand and pulled him to the elevator, calling to JARVIS to shut everything down.

“Someone’s forceful tonight,” Tony commented.

“Yes. It may have escaped your notice, but I was raised a prince,” Loki said with a smile, leaning in to kiss him. “I like getting my own way.”

“Ah. Poor Steve. He doesn’t stand a chance against the two of us spoilt brats.”

“Not a hope, but he was rather keen to do what I wanted tonight.” He nibbled a little at his throat.
“Do I get to know what you want tonight?”

“Yes, you do,” he murmured as the elevator opened.

They weren’t in the penthouse as Tony had assumed they would be. They were on the level that housed the pool.

“Ah. I don’t think I need this one explaining,” Tony said with a downright filthy grin. “Stevie waiting for us?”

“He should already be in the water. Water that we won’t be wearing swimwear in.”

“Oh, very nice.”

Loki took him by the waistband of his jeans and tugged him along.

“There you are,” Steve called, resting his arms on the tiled floor, his legs moving in the water. “My boys. My boys wearing too many clothes.”

“Working on it,” Loki purred.

He yanked Tony’s t-shirt over his head, dropping it carelessly on one of the marble benches. Tony kissed any skin that came close to his mouth, caressed what he was allowed to touch, and generally let Loki do whatever he wanted with him, which seemed to be stripping him as efficiently as possible. Tony wanted to return the favour, but Loki skipped out of his reach, Tony moving to the pool when he was shooed that way. He sank into the warm water, noticing the candles, the soft music, the smell of incense and some sort of burning spice that made him feel all loose and warm.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Steve asked, pulling him into his arms and tangling their legs, laying gentle kisses on his shoulders.

“Very. Unexpected, but in a good way. I’m just wondering what we’re doing. Does he want to watch again? Am I doing you this time?”

“No. He wants to touch us, and have us touch him. No penetration, nothing that far. But he wants to explore.”

“Sounds delicious,” Tony moaned as he caught sight of the expanse of Loki’s skin as it was finally bared in full. “Oh, fuck. Would you look at that.”

“I know,” he whispered in his ear, gripping at his hips. “Right there with you.”

“Loki, come on, stop teasing. Steve says I can touch-”

“We,” Steve corrected.

“Me, we, same thing.” Tony reached out grabby hands to the suddenly shy former god. “Gimme.”

“You…you really want to?” Loki asked, unsure of himself.

“Are you kidding?” Tony looked at Steve. “He’s kidding, right?”

“No, Tony he means it. And yes, Loki, we really do. As much or as little as you’ll let us.” The blond held out a gentle hand. “Will you let us?”

“As I want?” he asked as he sat down on the edge, dipping his legs in.
“Absolutely,” Tony promised. “How about we come up with something, a word or something, for if it’s too much?”

“That sounds agreeable,” Loki said, reaching out to stroke the dark hair, rubbing at Steve’s ribs with a foot. “What would be the word?”

“Odin,” Steve said with a grin, trailing a fingertip along his shin.

Loki laughed and nodded, wriggling forwards until he could place his hands on Steve’s broad shoulders, easing himself into the water. Steve reached up and took him beneath the arms, lowering him, giving a gentle kiss when his feet finally touched the bottom.

Slowly, Loki relaxed into the kiss, letting Steve touch him, reaching out for Tony, placing his hands on his skin.

“How do you do that?” Tony asked as Loki turned around to kiss him, Steve pressed up against Loki’s back, sucking kisses into his neck.

“Do what?”

“You’re both hot and cold at the same time. How?”

“I don’t know,” Loki admitted, pulling away from both of them. “Is it bad?”

“No, sweetheart!” Steve said firmly. He pulled Loki back to them, the two of them crowding close to touch and kiss at that pale pale skin.

“It’s exciting,” Tony concurred, slipping further down into the water so he could run the tip of his tongue over a nipple as Steve stroked gentle fingers against the skin of his backside, made slick by the water. “I don’t know about Spangles, but I like it.”

“It’s good,” Steve agreed, pressing his aching erection against Loki. “I run hot all the time. It feels good to have you against me. Like…” He trailed off with a chuckle. “Like you’re meant for me.”

“We are his mates, Steve, pay attention.”

Steve chuckled and reached out to thread his fingers through Tony’s hair, yanking him in for a kiss, before taking hold of Loki around the waist and tugging him towards the waterfall, leaving Tony watching them with amusement.

“This is mine now,” Steve called. “My Loki.”

“Share, Capsicle.”

“Nu-huh. All mine. Not sharing.”

Tony slowly followed, grinning as Loki laughed at their antics. Tony watched as Steve perched Loki on one of the rocks, water from the fall trickling over his skin as Steve kissed his way down, looking to Loki for permission before he licked the tip of his cock with the tip of his tongue. Loki almost fell off his perch as he jerked in shock at the sheer newness of it.

Tony joined them, kissing Loki as he gripped at him, letting Loki ground himself against the pleasure Steve was causing with his clever mouth. Tony amused himself by reaching down, stroking Steve’s cheek before caressing Loki’s soft inner thigh. He snaked his hand under where the soldier was sucking to stroke his balls before reaching back even further to tickle gentle fingers over the hot
folds, growing slick with Loki’s enjoyment.

Loki wrenched his mouth way, gasping at the sensations his lovers were pulling from him. They touched him so gently, so carefully, so lovingly. They seemed to love the way he clutched at them, the way he gasped, cried out, called their names.

Suddenly, the pleasure overwhelmed him, and he felt his senses condense down into a single moment of agonising release. There was nothing else, just the pure pleasure and his mates, all alone with him in the universe.

He was exactly where he belonged.

Thanksgiving was a strange custom to the Asgardian residents of the Tower, but it seemed enjoyable. A great feast with lots of loved ones. The two brothers could find no drawbacks.

Phil could find a very large drawback. His sisters had seen the pictures of him alive, walking around New York with the others. And they were very unimpressed.

No one had remembered to tell them of Fury’s lies.

“It’ll be fine,” Clint promised as they peeled vegetables while the kids played in the lounge and watched the start of the parade. “Julie and Margaret will come, they’ll fuss, we’ll eat, they’ll go home. It’ll be fine.”

“They were so mad, Clint,” he argued, grabbing another potato. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen them that mad. Not even when Fury failed to notify them of me getting shot in San Paolo. Remember that?”

“The bullet lodged two inches from your spine in danger of paralysing you from the neck down and the massive blood loss that almost meant we didn’t get to you in time? No, don’t remember that, not a bit. But if I did, I might admit that I thought they were going to castrate him and cook his balls in a casserole.”

“Do we really need all this meat?” Bruce asked as he entered the kitchen to refill his drink.

Laid out on the counter, ready to go into the ovens once they were heated, was a huge turkey, a huge ham, a duck, a goose, a venison shoulder, a Field Roast for the vegetarians and a prime rib of beef at Bucky’s request. All shining with glazes and marinades and other preparations to make sure they would satisfy all diners.

“Considering how many we’re feeding, and the one’s we’re feeding—”

“Thor, Steve, Bucky,” Clint added, hauling another huge bag of potatoes up onto the counter.

“Darcy. Considering all that, this might not be enough.”

“That’s a very good point,” Bruce conceded. “Can I help?”

They set him to work on the stuffing, of which there were three different varieties. Sabrina soon joined them, wanting to do something. They set her up with the corn, showing her how to pull off the tough outer leaves so they could be wrapped in tinfoil and roasted. For all the strength she had, her motor skills were lacking, so it took her quite a while. Soon enough they had a happy little production going on. Bucky, Steve, Annie, Jane and Sam all pitching in. Helix was both watching
over Annie as was expected of her, and casting sad eyes on her humans, hoping they would share. Every now and then they did, throwing her a little bit of this or that, much to her absolute delight.

“Hey. I brought pie,” Rhodey said as he appeared.

“Welcome to the cooking madness. What kind of pie?” Jane said.

“Apple. Do you know the dog is looking at you like you killed her puppies?”

Helix took that moment to growl at him and stand between him and Sabrina.

“Yeah, don’t say things like that,” Sam said, adding mini marshmallows to the sweet potatoes. “The little ones are her puppies. She gets protective.”

“I’m sorry,” Rhodey said, crouching down so the dog could sniff at him. She circled him a few times before returning to Sabrina, snorting at him. “I guess that told me.”

They continued cooking, slowly filling the penthouse with the most incredible aromas and making them all hungry.

About fifteen minutes before it was all ready, Julie and Margaret Coulson arrived with their children and husbands.

“Uncle Phil! Uncle Clint!”

“Hey! Oh, we missed you guys!” Clint said, hugging Julie’s twin boys, Alexander and Matthew, eight year old energy in double packages. Phil had his arms full of Margaret’s children, Lucy, who was nine, and Steven, who was eleven and had shot up like a weed. Margaret was holding her youngest, 20 month old Phillip, and the two women were glaring at their brother.

Clint shooed the boys off to his husband and slung an arm around each sister. Quietly, he explained how bad it had been with Phil, what Fury had put him through, and within minutes, he had them both rushing across the room and pulling Phil into hugs.

“You are a master,” said William, Julie’s husband. “Now, about you teaching me to turn my wife into a pliant sweet docile woman…”

“Me too,” chipped in Abe, Margaret’s husband.

“Sorry, guys. It only works on Coulson’s you’re not married to. And I don’t think any Coulson is ever pliant, sweet or docile,” Clint said, bouncing Phillip, who had been shoved into his arms.

Sabrina snuggled into JARVIS and watched the new people warily. JARVIS had become the unofficial nanny to Sabrina and Kiddo, owing to the fact that they absolutely adored him. His arms never got tired, he never got bored of their games, he never needed to stretch a leg that had gone to sleep. Given the choice, they would both rather have Clint and Phil, but JARVIS was a very very close second.

“My Clint,” she whimpered. “My Phil.”

“Yes, little miss,” JARVIS promised. “They are still yours. These people are here to visit and to eat with us. See the two ladies?” She nodded. “They are Phil’s sisters, just like you are Kiddo’s sister. They love him very much, and they have missed him and Clint. Their names are Margaret and Julie. The two men are Margaret and Julie’s husbands, William and Abraham.”
“Kids,” she mumbled.

“Yes, they are Julie and Margaret’s children. They have come to meet you and Kiddo, to play with you, to have food with you. But they will not stay. They will go to their own homes later. They have just come to visit.”

“My unit? My…bigger unit?”

“Very good! They are a part of your unit. Your unit is called Coulson, and these are Coulson’s, so yes, they are a part of your unit.”

“Still my Clint? My Phil?”

“Oh, yes. They will always be yours, yours and Kiddo’s. Gathering new unit members is a good thing. More people to play with and tell you stories. And look, William has a dish, and Abraham. They have brought food for us to try.”

“Corn.”

“Very good, they can try your corn, you’re right.”

“JARIVS stay? Not gone later?”

He pressed a kiss to her hair, revelling in the scent of her, the warm weight in his arms.

“I will never ever be gone, little miss. I promise. I will always be your JARVIS.”

The dishes the Coulson women had made were added to the growing number on the expanded dining table, and then Clint and Phil were leading them all over, introducing them to their Avengers family. Clint accepted Kiddo from Steve and cuddled him close as he hid from the new faces in his space.

“And this little lady is Sabrina,” Phil introduced, picking her up and sweeping her hair off her face. “Sabrina, these are my sisters. This is Julie, and this is Maggie.”

“Phil,” Margaret moaned. “Come on, that’s my kid name.”

“Yes, and I reserve right as your brother to use it at every given opportunity.”

“My Phil,” Sabrina whispered.

Phil motioned his sisters away and walked off with Sabrina, cuddling her close. He carried her off to the nursery for some quiet and settled them in the rocking chair. She fiddled with the buttons of his shirt.

“Didn’t hurt,” she said. “Promised Clint.”

“No, you didn’t hurt anyone, and I’m very happy about that. Sabrina, baby, look at me,” he said, tucking a finger under her chin and catching her eye. “Me and Clint are always going to be yours, always. We love you, we love your brother, and nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever change that.”

“My bigger unit, JARVIS said.”

“Absolutely. And, you know, Julie and Maggie’s kids would love to play with you, and draw some pictures with you. They want to be your friends.”
“Food. Corn.”

“You want them to try your corn?”

“Yes. All have corn.”

“Absolutely. Everyone can try your corn if they want to. I’m sure the boys would love to try your corn. Do you want to come and eat now?”

“Food.”

She hopped off his lap and took his hand, leading him back to the group. His sisters made a fuss of her new dress, and Kiddo’s new outfit, a little pair of dungarees with a turkey cartoon on the bib. They started to head towards the table, settling the kids in their seats, doling out drinks.

Steve slipped out to the balcony where Loki was curled up in a deck chair reading.

“Hey,” the blond said, dropping a kiss on his cheek. “Food’s ready. What are you reading?”

“Some of the things the professor left for me,” Loki said, placing a bookmark and standing. “I was curious.”

“Oh? Anything in particular?”

“Not really. A few different things. Did you know that once a Jotun child is born, they stop the accelerated aging?”

“They do? So any children we might have would age just like any other kid?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. Good to know,” he said as he pulled out his chair for him. Steve took his seat and Tony raised his glass.

“Happy Thanksgiving, everyone. I think we can all say with absolute certainty that we have a lot to be thankful for.”

“Hear, hear!”

Chapter End Notes

So what did you think?

Please comment below and let me know what you thought
Chapter Twelve

“So? Am I healthy?”

Bruce looked up from his StarkPad at the nervous Loki.

“Understand that I’m kind of making this up as I go,” Bruce warned. “I’ve never treated a Jotun before, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a Jotun before. So I’m mostly working on what would be normal for a human and working from there. Also kind of using cats as a base, because humans don’t really have pheromone levels like yours, so I’m having to cross reference.” He gave a happy grin. “Good thing I like a challenge.”

“I understand, and I am grateful for it, Bruce. I thank you for your diligence,” Loki said honestly and Bruce smiled, ducking his head bashfully before he continued.

“Well, your hormone and pheromone levels have lowered a little, which is good, not so taxing on your body. Everything seems to have calmed down, which makes me a little happier. Can I ask… have you consummated things with Steve and Tony?”

“No, not yet,” he said, feeling himself blush. “We’ve been intimate, been touching, but not that. It’s not time yet.”

“Okay, no problems. I was just asking to see if the drop in levels is because of being near them or actually having intercourse. So, I’ve been looking at some of the scans I’ve done on you, coupled with some of the blood test results. Everything seems to be working the way it should. Good blood flow to all organs, heart, liver, lungs, so on. There shouldn’t be any problems, but if there are you can come to me.”

“I know. Thank you.”

“How are you handling our food? Any nausea, stomach pains, anything unexpected?”

“No. It actually seems to be doing me some good. I’ve not been this plump…well, ever.”

Bruce chuckled to himself. “I wouldn’t call you plump. Healthy would be a better word. You were far too thin.”

At Bruce’s urging, Loki laid back and let him uncover his abdomen. His hands were wonderfully cold, even if the pressing felt to be the strangest thing he’d ever experienced.

“Everything feels in order, nothing swollen or rigid, no pain. Very good,” Bruce pronounced. “Are you having any problems passing waste?”

“No, all as it should be.”

“Good, that’s good,” he muttered, typing away at his Pad. “Any trouble sleeping?”

“No, not now.”

“Do you have a bedtime routine, some kind of ritual to help you settle?”

“Yes. Steve takes me to bed at about eleven, and we prepare for slumber, night clothes and teeth brushing and such, and then we lay there, talking through the day. We…oh, what is it he called it? Ummm…cuddling! That’s it. We do cuddling while we talk. It is very soothing. Tony is a little
“Unpredictable, so Steve ensures I rest.”

“Very good. Sleeping through the night?”

“Most nights. I sometimes have an unpleasant dream, or lingering emotions over what I did…before. But most nights I rest all the way through until morning.”

“Then, with all that in mind,” Bruce said, making some notes, “I say you’re in perfect health, and it shouldn’t be too long before you start a menstrual cycle.”

“Menstrual cycle? Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. You have all the equipment for it, all the hormones. It’s hard to predict when these things will happen exactly, but all the signs of your body point to it being fairly soon.” Bruce pulled up a stool, looking at his patient. “Is that something you’re worried about?”

“No! I’m not worried, or scared,” Loki insisted. “I simply feel…soon? Really? Must I?”

How Bruce managed not to laugh at him, he would wonder for years to come.

“Every being with female organs has it. It’s normal, natural.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” he grumbled, curling his legs up and wrapping his arms around them. “Jane and Darcy and Annie and even JARVIS have all sought to reassure me of the naturalness of the process, to educate me on all it means and why it happens. But…it just seems so…messy.”

At this Bruce did laugh. Just a little chuckle that slipped out before he could stop it.

“Sorry, I’m not laughing at you, really,” he promised at Loki’s scandalised glare. “It’s just that you’re not the first to tell me that. And I have to agree, it is messy. But it happens.”

“How can’t you do something about it? Give me a pill or potion or something, something to make it all go away? Or perhaps the thing that was used in that surgery we watched on television, the suction device. Could that not be used?”

“Afraid not. Trying to suction out menstrual blood could lead to a lot of damage. And giving you something to stop periods altogether…it’s not recommended. If the uterine lining isn’t shed regularly it could become cancerous. Honestly, messing with the process is a sure way to ask for trouble. I’m sorry, Loki, but you’re just going to have to soldier on through it.”

Loki grumbled all the way back to the Penthouse.

Lady Sif loved her home, loved her King, was loyal to the royal family.

But she couldn’t stand to watch the spectacle of Odin with his new wife.

The ‘Queen’ had birthed a son, a healthy pink babe they had named Baldr, a child they both fawned over. Everyone did. There was never a mention of Thor or Loki, barely a whisper of Frigga. As if none of them had existed.

It sickened Sif. Fandral and Hogan and Volstagg seemed accepting, their public faces much better than hers seemed to be.

She had to do something, something to show Thor they’d not all forgotten him, and that he was the
true Prince of Asgard, no matter what had been said or done. She puzzled on it for weeks until the idea came to her one morning as she trained with Fandral.

It had been forbidden, the punishment if she were caught, would be banishment, or worse. But she doubted Odin would notice.

And it would all be worth it if all went to plan.

“You should not be here,” Hiemdall said, his strange eyes fixed on the skies. “But I suspect you know that already.”

She smiled at the night drawing in over Asgard. “I do. How is Thor?”

“He is well.”

“And Loki? His madness?”

“Well also, his madness has been rectified. They are both beloved of those they now call family. You know I may not send you to Midgard.”

“I know. I wish to go to Jotunheim.”

She didn’t think anyone had ever surprised him before. “Truly, my Lady?”

“Truly. Just me, a simple trip to where the new king resides. I even travel without weapons.”

“You know I must reveal where you go if asked.”

“Yes, if asked, but not otherwise. And we both know I shall not be missed.”

He nodded and set his sword, pushing it into the space and activating the Bifrost. He turned it and sent her off to Jotunheim without another word. The trip was a bright wash of colour and light, shorter than the trip to Midgard or any of the other realms. When the light faded, she stood in the frozen wasteland of Jotunheim, surrounded by warriors.

“I seek not bloodshed,” she said, holding up her hands so they could see that she was unarmed. “I seek only counsel with your king.”

“And who are you to seek such a thing?” one grumbled at her, pointing a spear.

“I am Lady Sif, of Asgard.”

“And why should we let you near our king?”

“If we do not show trust then how can we hope to receive trust?”

“Arrogant bitch!” another hissed, advancing on her.

Sif knew that this could be the outcome, that this could result in her death. She had simply hoped for something else. She hadn’t really wished to die in a frozen wasteland, unarmed, killed by a blue giant. Her father would be so disappointed.

“ENOUGH! She has come alone without weapons. She comes only to talk. You will leave us.”

Sif looked around at the newcomer. Tall, blue skinned, red eyes, but not like the others. If she had to say, she would say that this Jotun looked mischievous.
The warriors moved away, all of them shooting looks over their shoulders.

“I apologise,” the Jotun rumbled, sitting on a rock outcropping so to not be towering above her. “After my father’s death, they are wary of their king being unprotected. But I don’t think you will harm me. I am Thrym, King of Jotunheim. And you are Lady Sif, companion of Thor.”

“No longer. Thor has been banished, rendered a mortal, along with Loki,” she said, settling herself onto a boulder.

It could almost be called civilised. All they needed was refreshments.

“Oh dear, trouble in the house of Odin. However shall we cope,” he mocked. “I care nothing for Odin and his troubles. I care for my realm, my people. Why have you been sent, little Aesir?”

“I was not. I have come on my own to ask for your assistance in a matter dear to me.”

“A favour? You come asking a favour of me?” he laughed, shaking the ground beneath her. “You jest so well, little maid.”

“I do not jest.”

“Then you are a different kind of fool. But I am a merry king, for the most. Tell me what you wish of me.”

“For you to instruct Loki in being a Jotun. He was raised on Asgard, he knows nothing of his true nature.”

“And this puts our conversation at an end,” he snarled, standing abruptly and walking away. “Safe travels home, my lady.”

“He had madness!” she cried and he faltered, turning to look at her. “Loki had madness. It drove him to try for destruction of not only this realm but of Midgard also.”

“Madness?” he asked, slowly turning to look at her. “But we do not have madness unless our natures are denied to us. Surely he did not have that problem. Truly the Allfather and Allmother would not let one so young suffer such a fate?”

“He has only just found his mates, now he is banished to Midgard.”

Thrym’s face fell, a mask of absolute shocked horror.

“Tell me all.”

Steve held out another piece of apple and smiled as Kiddo took it from him.

“That’s a good little guy,” he praised. “Is that nice?”

“Um!” Kiddo declared with a smile, waving the piece before chewing on it.

Steve had decided to take Kiddo to the park, spend some time with him just the two of them. He planned to do the same with Sabrina, he wanted to be fair. But it weighed on him that this child was a child made of him.

And the only survivor of his cursed genes.
“More?”

“Ooze,” Kiddo asked, pointing at his bottle, and Steve handed it over, taking the half eaten slice as it was handed to him.

“Good boy. You all done?”

Kiddo held up an empty hand to him, signalling that he was done and ready to move on to the next activity. Steve pulled out a wet wipe and cleaned off one tiny hand and then the other before he packed away the supplies and stood up off the bench.

They were in Central Park, heading towards one of the playgrounds. Steve kept checking the blanket around Kiddo’s legs, the coat he was wearing, his little hat. He knew how easy it was for a Rogers to get sick, and he didn’t want that.

Kiddo seemed happy enough, looking around and babbling between pulls of juice. Before long they reached the playground and Steve chuckled as he spied Bruce sitting on a bench, watching the other children play.

“Following us?”

The scientist looked up in surprise and then laughed. “No. Truth be told, I come here quite often.”

“Really?” Steve asked as he eased Kiddo out of the stroller.

“Yes. I like kids. The innocence. So…uncomplicated. It’s soothing. All they want is to play. I mean, look at them. Monkey bars and sandbox, see-saw, jungle gym. Wouldn’t it be simple if the world worked the way of the playground? If there was nothing more complicated than who’s turn it was for the slide?”

“What about the bullies?”

“I’ve not seen any in this playground. All the kids seem to get along well. A few minor scuffles, but five minutes later it’s all forgiven and forgotten.”

“Huh. Hey, Bruce, can you get his gloves on and make them stay there?”

Bruce chuckled and took the tiny mittens. Kiddo happily let Bruce put them on him, wiggling his fingers at the new feel, and then Bruce tucked the wristbands into the elastic wrists of the coat.

Bruce walked with him, pushing the stroller, as he crossed to the swings and settled the little boy in the toddler-friendly seat. He pushed him gently, not too fast, not too high, just like Phil and Clint had told him, and he was rewarded by Kiddo shrieking in delight, waving his little hands and wiggling.

“And we have a winner,” Bruce chuckled. “See? If only adults could get that happy from something so small.”

“It’d be nice. Would it stop the crazy scientists?”

“Dear God, I hope so.”

They chatted away about nothing in particular, mostly about the upcoming Christmas, while Kiddo enjoyed himself. It was incredible, this tiny little person made from him, that existed because of a part of him. He could see Annie more than anything in the happy little face, but sometimes he caught a glimpse of himself or his mother, some of the expressions he pulled reminded him of his mother so
Steve listened to Bruce chatter on about some of the experiments he was running before Steve brought up what had been playing on his mind for weeks.

“Bruce, you know about inheritance and genetics and all that, right?”

“Yes. Steve, Loki is fine. I promise. I checked him over, everything seems as it should be.”

“I know, I know, that’s not what I’m getting at. Loki would like to have children at some point.” He paused, giving Kiddo another gentle push. “My children.”

Bruce looked between Kiddo and Steve and it fell into place.

“Steve, just because Kiddo and the others got the pre-serum version of your genetics doesn’t mean a naturally made child would. A child you physically fathered might be perfectly healthy. And with Loki’s genes…there’s nothing that says you can’t have perfectly healthy children.”

“But if they weren’t…if I can’t…”

“Then there are a lot of treatments now, a lot of options. Most of the conditions you had can be handled now. Asthma isn’t a death sentence, nor is diabetes. Children with those conditions live very full lives now. Curvature of the spine can be repaired with surgery, blindness can be adapted for, deafness can have adaptations. None of it is a death sentence now.”

“But it could be,” he muttered. “I couldn’t do that, not to any child. I couldn’t live with myself if a child had to suffer because of me. Already, how many died because of me?”

“No, Steve, it’s not just you, not just the genetics. The methods they used to make the children were deeply flawed, it’s a wonder they managed any live ones at all. Not to mention that they weren’t cared for. No proper nutrition, no natural light, no comfort, no parental affection. Steve…the failures are not on you, I promise.”

Steve busied himself with lifting Kiddo back out of the swing. It seemed the baby had had enough of swinging and wanted to be held, something none of them objected to.

“Steve, let me prove it. When we get back, come to my lab. I’ll run some tests, check out your genetics, what you’d pass on to a child made the old fashioned way. I’ll show you that you don’t need to worry about this.”

“Sure, why not. He’s getting fussy.”

They put Kiddo back into his stroller where he cuddled up with his blanket and blinked sleepily at them as they took him home. He was almost asleep by the time they reached the tower. They dropped Kiddo off in the penthouse, where Phil was waiting to take him, and then Steve followed Bruce to his lab, Bucky trailing along behind them.

“What do you want?” Steve snapped and Bucky laughed.

“Nothin’,” he said, popping his gum. “Whatcha doin’?”

“None of your business. Go away.”

“Nope,” he said, poking his tongue out and blocking Steve’s slap with his metal arm.

“Jerk.”
“Punk.”

“Boys,” Bruce chided and they both blushed like naughty schoolboys. “Bucky, you can only stay if Steve agrees. I don’t mind but it’s his choice.”

“Stay for what?”

“I want Bruce to run some tests, check some things for me.”

“Such as…?”

“My genetics,” Steve ground out, looking at the floor in shame of his own failings, feeling like that skinny sick kid all over again.

Bruce had stepped away, preparing some things to give them some privacy.

“Stevie, ain’t nothin’ wrong with you, or your genes,” Bucky declared firmly.

“We don’t know that, Bucky. They made hundreds of kids with my DNA that didn’t survive. I can’t do that to a kid. I lived through it, but I’m not as strong as you, Buck. I can’t watch someone I love suffer like I did.”

Bucky pulled him into a hug, holding him tight, just the way he’d always done. Granted, it used to be easier when Steve was smaller.

“It’s okay, Steve. You feel you need to do this, then that’s what we’ll do. I’m with you to the end of the line.”

“Really missed you, Bucky.”

“Shocked you made it anywhere without me.”

“Don’t push it,” Steve said as he pulled back. “Bruce? You ready?”

“I am. Let’s start with some blood, and then an ejaculatory sample.”

“An ejac…what!” Steve barked as Bucky snorted.

“A semen sample. Making babies the natural way requires ejaculate, which contains your DNA, which is what you’d actually be passing on. To test this, the best way would be to analyse the genetic material in your sperm and the validity of your seminal fluid.”

Steve gaped at him for a moment, amazed that he hadn’t faltered or blushed in the slightest, and then he looked at Bucky, who was wearing the biggest asshole grin he had in his arsenal.

“Leave. Now.”

“Awww, come on. You don’t want me to pull it just this once? For old time’s sakes?”

Steve shoved him towards the elevator. “Out. Now.”

“I’m wounded, really. Want me to send you Stark?” he offered as he walked backwards towards the open waiting doors.

Steve flopped onto the exam table and buried his face in his hands. Oh, this was just great.
“Just get out!” he cried and Bucky shot him a final grin, shooting at him with his fingers before the doors closed. “Fuck.”

“Sorry,” Bruce said, sounding genuinely remorseful.

“Don’t worry about it. He’ll keep it to himself. Well, to the three of us.” He sighed to himself before looking at the ceiling. “JARVIS? You there?”

“I am, Captain. May I be of assistance?”

“Yeah. Is Tony busy?”

“He is, I’m afraid. He has been called to a meeting with some of the shareholders of Stark Industries. He will return for dinner. Would you care to leave a message?”

“No! No. That’s fine. No big deal. Thank you.”

“Master Loki is currently reading in your bedroom. Would you care to ask for his assistance?”

“Oh, my God, you were listening to that,” Steve moaned.

“I am afraid so, Captain. Please be assured that I am the soul of discretion. One has to be with Tony Stark as a creator,” JARVIS promised, and Steve idly wondered what he was up to in his body while he was talking to him through the ceiling.

“Thanks,” he mumbled before taking a deep breath. “Okay, ask Loki if he’ll come join us.”

While they were waiting, Bruce quickly took the blood sample and dropped it into the centrifuge to separate.

“JARVIS said you needed my assistance,” Loki said as he emerged. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, not hurt,” Steve promised, accepting Loki into his arms. “I need a little…help.”

With a pleading look from Steve, Bruce explained what he wanted and why and Loki smiled and blushed.

“Oh. That kind of help,” he mumbled. “Well…I’m not opposed to the suggestion. But I shall not while the good doctor watches.”

“I’ll go…have some lunch,” Bruce said. He set a small plastic container on the bench by Steve’s elbow. “Just leave me the sample when you’re done.”

He made a quick exit and then JARVIS helpfully closed off the space, clouding the windows and locking the door.

“You don’t have to, if you’re not ready to touch me like that,” Steve said. “I know me and Tony have touched you like that, and you’ve touched us a little, but this is beyond what we’ve done. I can handle it myself if you’re not ready or don’t want to.”

“Handle it?” Loki murmured, worming a hand between them to cup Steve through his trousers. “I think I shall like handling it.”

Steve knew he’d just lost control of the situation.

Loki leaned in, capturing his mouth and Steve moaned, his hands reaching, tangling in Loki’s hair.
His tongue as it pressed in was cool against his heat, and it made him shiver in delight. Loki kept a gentle pressure on his cock, just enough to let him know he was there, and with his other hand he caressed his chest, sweeping over nipples and collarbones and the muscles of his stomach that jumped when touched.

Steve whimpered as Loki fumbled with his belt, keeping their lips together as he failed the buckle.

“Let me,” Steve whispered between kisses, untangling his fingers and opening his trousers for Loki to do as he wished.

“Thank you,” Loki replied, nipping at his throat the way he’d seen Tony do, and he was rewarded with the blond shivering, clutching at his shoulders.

Loki wasn’t quite sure what he was doing. He knew what he wanted. He wanted to take Steve apart the way Tony did, see him in the throes of pleasure again. He knew what he should do to get that end…in theory.

“Hey,” Steve murmured, and Loki realised he’d frozen. “You don’t have to do this.”

“But I wish to,” Loki complained. “I just don’t know how.”

Steve’s smile was so sweet, so gentle, so understanding.

“You’ll figure it out. Just do what you think should be done, and I’ll let you know if it works for me.”

Loki smiled tentatively and kissed him as he eased a hesitant hand into Steve’s pants, sneaking it within the fabric and having to pull it back because he forgot that Steve was wearing boxers. The second try was more successful. He figured out that if he put his hand on his lovers belly and trailed it down, he could bypass the fabric altogether. He especially liked the fine line of almost invisible hair that led down from his navel.

As he wrapped his fingers around the hard length Steve hissed and buried his face in the curve of Loki’s neck, gripping at his biceps.


Loki tugged at the fabric with his free hand, freeing the hot flesh he held and squeezing it before he slowly began to move. It was a little strange, how the skin moved, how firm the flesh, but it wasn’t unpleasant. Feeling Steve tremble and grip at him, hearing his breathing become laboured as his hips began to twitch.

He had power over his mate.

Loki grew in confidence the more Steve became undone beneath his hand, stroking harder, faster. Steve reached down, fumbling for his wrist and showing him how to twist at the head. Loki particularly liked that one as it made Steve cry out against him.

“Loki, I’m close,” Steve warned, and Loki grabbed the container, pulling off the top with his teeth as Steve whimpered desperately. He managed to get it in place half a second before his Alpha exploded.

Steve filled it with surprising volume, some of the sticky fluid spilling over the edge and onto Loki’s hand as Steve slumped against him. Once he’d managed to place it safely on the metal exam table beside Steve’s hips, he pulled him close, one hand still trapped between them, holding him until
Steve was ready to raise his head.

“Thank you,” he whispered, kissing him softly.

They managed to find the discarded lid, secure the sample and clean up after themselves with some antibacterial wipes stashed on Bruce’s workstation.

“Could I do that to Tony?” Loki asked as they stood in the elevator, cuddled together.

“Sweetheart, you do that to Tony and he’ll be the happiest Avenger ever.”

Tony was diplomatic when he wanted to be.

He waited until Thor had tugged Loki off to watch a movie before complaining to Steve that he’d missed out on the fun.

“It’ll happen again, don’t worry. You’ll get a turn under Loki’s hand,” Steve promised as they showered together after sparing in the gym.

“But it’s not fair. The way you described it, the man is a natural.”

“He’s eager and a fast learner. I actually think he was modelling on you, what you do.” He shook his head, flashing a grin. “It doesn’t matter.”

“No, it doesn’t matter,” Tony agreed, turning Steve so he could scrub his back for him. “What matters is you didn’t tell me you were worrying about this. Why didn’t you talk to me about this?”

“It’s nothing. No big deal.”

“Steve.” He snaked his arms around, pressing a hand to his heart. “Talk to me. Are you really worried about this?”

“Yes,” he whispered, his face burning in shame. “I can’t, Tony. I can’t put a child through that. I can’t watch a child suffer that.”

“So…what? You want to never have sex with Loki? Just in case he falls pregnant with one of yours?”

“No! No…I want Loki. I want you. I just don’t want…that.” He turned, cupping Tony’s jaw and pressing their foreheads together. “I couldn’t bear to put you through that, either of you. I watched my ma do it, watched her worry about me, watched her fear for me. And then Bucky took over worrying when she died. I can’t, Tony. I’m not strong enough to do that, watch my child suffer.”

Tony kissed him, pulling him in close.

“We’ll find a way so that doesn’t happen. I promise.”

They finished up and joined the rest of the family for lunch, where Loki was happily affectionate to Tony as they ate.

Bruce and Annie didn’t join them. They had spread out a picnic on the balcony and were having a date without leaving the safety of the Tower.

“Have you been thinking about names?” Bruce asked, nibbling at some cheese.
“A little. Nothing seems quite right to me. I’m sure it’ll come,” she said. “Hey, JARVIS?”

“Yes, miss?”

“Can you give us a little privacy?”

“Of course, miss.”

The windows clouded, becoming mirrored and they knew they couldn’t be seen by the others. Bruce opened his mouth to ask what was going on when Annie climbed astride him and fastened her lips to his.

Bruce moaned into the kiss, gripping her hips as her fingers stole into his dark curls, pulling at them. As he expected, Hulk shivered in the back of his mind and then metaphorically curled up and went to sleep. Sex and other physical intimacies held no interest for him.

It was a little awkward with her almost-ready bump between them, but they managed to fit themselves together. He slid his hands across her ass as she writhed in his grip, gripping the cheeks and trying to thrust himself up into her, seeking friction. He wondered if maybe it was too fast, and then he simply stopped caring as she grabbed his hands and placed them firmly on her breasts.

“Annie,” he breathed, squeezing the full globes, itching to pull off his clothes.

And then she rubbed him through the stiff denim of his jeans and he had to stop.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he begged, pushing her back slightly, removing her hand. “We can’t. Annie, we can’t.”

“But why?” she whined, kissing his Adam’s apple. “I want to.”

“Annie, the Hulk creates some problems. The experiment that created him…”

That got her to be still, looking at him, waiting for an explanation.

“My blood is toxic, radioactive. And my semen is dangerous too. You, you’re a super soldier, you’re immune to all radiations. But the baby might not be. So we can’t have sex.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, I should have told you before. I just didn’t think…”

“Stop,” she said, placing gentle fingers on his lips. “It’s okay. There wasn’t any reason to tell me before, and now there is. It’s okay.” She nibbled at her lip. “But it’s okay…right? That I was kissing you? And…stuff?”

“Hey, hey, no, no guilt,” he soothed, stroking back her hair. “We’ve done nothing wrong, nothing shameful. It’s okay to want that, to do that.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. You see the way Steve is with Tony and Loki. There is nothing wrong with showing affection, with expressing desire. It’s different now, it’s not like the 40’s.”

She smiled and snuggled into him, letting him hold her close, a hand sweeping down to feel the baby kick.
“What do we call you?” she asked eventually, settling back on the blanket, their feet entwined.

“I’m not following.”

“The baby. Me and Thor talked it over. He wants to be daddy, not father. And I’m mom. But you’re going to be in this baby’s life too. It’ll have to call you something.”

Bruce was stunned. He’d known that by wanting Annie he would be gaining so much more. But he hadn’t taken the time to think about what would happen when the baby wasn’t just a bump. He wasn’t the father, that was Thor. And Annie was the mother, not Jane.

“What does Jane want to be called?”

“She’s still deciding, but I think she’s leaning towards being just Jane,” Annie said, accepting the orange juice he gave to her.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt,” Tony said as he stuck his head out of the door. “JARVIS said you were decent.”

“We wouldn’t be screwing on the balcony, Tony,” Bruce gritted out.

“Why are you interrupting?” Annie intervened before they could really start sniping. Apparently having two genius Avengers getting at each other was a very snippy thing.

“Apparently a group of big blue dudes just appeared in Central Park. We’re assembling.”

Hulk liked the ‘big blue dudes’. They played Hide and Seek with him and created big blocks of ice for him to smash. And then the other Avengers arrived and the games had to stop and Hulk wanted to cry.

“Do not worry, my friend,” one of the visitors said as Hulk plopped down on his butt and started sniffing. “We shall find another time to play.”

“Well, I don’t think they’re here to hurt anyone,” Clint said, looking at the scene with amusement.

“If not, then I am surprised,” Thor said. “They are Frost Giants, from Jotunheim.”

“Like Loki?” Tony asked, flipping up his faceplate. “Like…oh, fuck. Like the king Loki killed.”

“Have peace,” one of the giants said, the same one who had tried to comfort Hulk. “We come not seeking a battle. We have only one desire, and that is to converse with the one called Loki.”

“Not a damn chance in hell,” Steve snarled, clapping a hand over his mouth.

“Where did that come from, Cap?” Natasha asked.

“I have no clue. I am so sorry.”

“Have peace,” he repeated with a smile. “I think you are Loki’s mate. Such an outburst is natural. Which mate are you? The Seeder? The Bridge?”

“I…uhhh…”

“Are you the one who will lay him with child, or the one that calms things?”
“He’s the first one, I’m the calm giving one,” Tony said. “I’m Tony, he’s Steve.”

“Ah, two warriors for his mate. Loki is blessed.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Thor said, trying to stay calm in the face of a possible threat to his brother. “But who are you, and why do you wish to see Loki?”

“Forgive me, golden Thor, once Prince of Asgard. I am Thrym, King of Jotunheim. And I am Loki’s brother.”

Loki had taken one look at the Frost Giants and run.

It wasn’t truly surprising. The last time he had seen one, he had been committing patricide with their king. Steve, Tony and Thor all followed, trying to calm him down.

“Well, that was fast,” Phil said. “I thought you guys would be gone longer.”

“We did too,” Clint agreed, picking up Sabrina as she tried to lift his bow. “I didn’t even get to shoot anything. And, little lady, weapons are not for you.”

“Know how,” she complained.

“Doesn’t matter. You’re safe here, you don’t need to fight.”

“Your young are very small,” Thrym said.

The Jotun’s were standing in the penthouse lounge, which was thankfully large enough to house them, looking around curiously. The group contained Thrym, his brother Helblindi, one of their healers, a being called Mengloth, and three others who hadn’t been introduced other than to say they were the Royal Guard. A King and Prince leaving their realm obviously needed guards.

“Oh, my,” JARVIS said as he entered, a pile of laundry in his hands. “My sensors did not give me adequate understanding of this.”

“Right there with you, buddy,” Sam said, bouncing Kiddo.

“This is Phil, my husband,” Clint introduced. “And this is Sam and JARVIS, part of the family. This little lady is Sabrina, and that little guy is Kiddo, our children.”

“They are very small,” Helblindi echoed. “Are they quite ready?”

“Oh! No, they’re fine,” Phil said. “Our children are smaller than what you would be used to.”

“Loki was much smaller,” Helblindi said.

Annie entered into the absolute silence that followed, and blinked around at the situation before sighing.


“Please, if you are amenable,” Mengloth said, sinking down cross-legged where he (she? It?) stood, the others following suit.
Annie disappeared into the kitchen for a moment and returned with the largest glasses they owned, all filled with ice water, and a bowl of ice pops.

“These are very good!” Thrym smiled, his mouth redder than before thanks to the strawberry treat. “My compliments.”

“Thank you,” Annie replied, getting JARVIS to help ease her down onto the sofa. “Can I ask…do you prefer to be referred to with male or female gender pronouns? Because Loki prefers male.”

“Male, for all but Mengloth,” Thrym replied, reaching for another pop. “And you? You are… female?”

“Yes, I’m female. I’m sorry, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Annie, Annie Stark, I’m Tony’s sister.”

The two royals placed their hands over their chests and bowed their heads to her.

“Uh, did we miss something?” Tony asked as he returned with Steve.

“This one is your sister. You have a sibling, she is to be honoured,” Helblindi explained.

“Oh! I’m Loki’s mate, she’s my sister, with ya, I get it,” Tony babbled.

“Forgive us…but, Loki?” Thrym asked.

“Yeah, that’s not something I got. He’s hiding. And me and Steve are not welcomed at the moment. We figure that this is a family thing, and it’d be better if we left Thor at it. If we’re lucky, he might get him to come out of hiding sometime around never.”

“You’re welcome to stay,” Steve offered. “I’m sure we could make some adjustments to make you comfortable.”

“He…he will not talk to us?” Helblindi asked, seemingly heartbroken.

“He’s a little – okay, a lot! - mixed up over what happened. What he did. He thinks you’re here to punish him,” Tony revealed. “Like Odin did.”

The humans recoiled at the sudden anger in the aliens.

“Do not presume that we are barbaric like the Allfather,” Thrym growled. “Loki was not himself, and the fault is with that pompous Asgardian and his wife!”

“Whoa, okay, calm it down,” Tony said. “I didn’t say you were like him. I said that’s what Loki is afraid of. His feelings are all mixed up, it takes him some time to calm down about some things. So how about we spend some time getting to know each other while we wait for Thor to let us know what’s happening, huh?”

Thrym looked contrite. “I beg forgiveness, tiny mortal.”

“Nah, forget it, no big deal,” Tony waved off. “So! Food?”

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Helblindi liked the little mortals.

The food had been excellent, something called spaghetti bolognaise, which was warm and full of taste, accompanied by a bread that had been fragrant and flavourful. Tony and Steve were wonderful
hosts, they all were.

They had met Jane, Thor’s mate, and Bruce, the one who became the large green one, and been introduced to the rest of what they considered their family, and through it all Annie seemed to be the female head of the family, fussing over them and scolding in equal measure as any matriarch would. It was comforting, and reminded him of being a child, before all of it had fallen to pieces.

Laufey’s greed had seen to the end of happier times.

Helblindi, though he and the others had been given wonderfully comfortable beds to slumber in, could not sleep. The continued absence of Loki and Thor set him on edge. What if Loki did not want to know them, did not want to embrace his heritage?

It did not sit easy with the prince.

He wandered back to the large room with all the windows and planned to look at their night sky. It was prettier than on Jotunheim, scattered with stars that he could find patterns in. He had just settled himself when he heard singing. He followed it.

The room was dark, and a figure lay sprawled on the bed, slumbering. Through this room Thrym followed the melody, until he found it to be Annie. She was sitting in a chair that moved, her hands cupped around her swelling as she sung.

“My dam used to sing,” he said and she jumped, giggling breathlessly at him. “I am sorry, I did not intend-”

“No, no, it’s okay. I didn’t hear you coming is all, which is impressive in itself. You’re very graceful for someone so tall.”

“I thank you.”

“You were saying something about singing?”

“Yes. My dam used to sing to me when I was small.”

“Your dam?”

“My…” He frowned as he realised he didn’t know the word in the common tongue. “The one who bore me?”

“Mother, the parent that births you is the mother,” she supplied.

“Yes, my mother. Farbauti. He was…he used to sing to me when I was a child. To all of us. Thrym can sing much better than I can. Maybe one day he can sing to his young.”

“It’s a good thing, singing to a baby,” she said, smiling as he poked at the mobile.

The room seemed to be filled with things for a being very tiny and delicate.

“This is a…safe room? One for young?”

“Yes, for this one,” she said, patting her bump and he cocked his head, staring, before smiling.

“You are bearing! It is visible here!” She nodded. “Our kind do not show, our shells are too stiff.” He held out a hand and let her poke at his skin, which had no give. It was a little like pressing at stone.
“A shame,” she said. “You can’t feel it kick.”

He looked confused and she could see Loki in him. She reached for his hand and placed it on the top of her bump, motioning him to wait, until the baby obediently kicked at him and he jumped.

“No, we cannot do that,” he admitted. “Which is a shame. But the carry is not long. By size of your young in this realm, and the roundness of you, you have but days left?”

“No, a couple more weeks by Bruce’s calculations. We carry for a lot longer than you do. We worked it out that you only carry for a month? A single rotation of the moon?”

“Yes, a single moon turn. Our carry is brief, our birthings fast.”

“We carry for nine, almost ten, and apparently we don’t birth fast. It can take days.”

He looked at the tiny human with a newfound respect. He had only heard of one birth taking so long on his world…

“Loki was a slow birth,” he admitted. “Our dam laboured for five nights.”

“Five?”

“Aye. The healers…they were tending to the battle wounded. Loki was born in the middle of the great conflict. Father said dam should not bear another, but dam was stubborn. And then rebels broke in and poisoned him.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Thank you. Not all of our people wished for war, most opposed it. But father had set himself on the path and they had to follow their king. My dam…the rebels sought to harm father trough dam, using poisons in his food. His body tried to push out the poison, and instead triggered Loki. He was so weakened it took five nights. There were no healers, father was off to war, Thrym and our brother Byleistr with him. I helped dam birth. Oh, Loki was so small! I had never seen a Jotun so small. The whole of him fit in my hand, top to toes.”

“Was he small because of the poison?”

“No. Loki is a rarity amongst our kind. He is…I suppose you would call it a blessing. He is made to accept the young of another realm, to birth the child of another kind. In times past, ones such as he were born only to royalty, and their marriages within the realms almost perfected peace. There has not been one like him born for many millennia. He should have been the jewel of our family. The elders said one such as Loki would have saved us from the conflict had he come sooner.”

“I don’t understand. If he was so precious to you and your mother, why was he abandoned in the temple?”

“He wasn’t,” he said sadly. “The night Loki was born, a messenger managed to get word to my father, who hurried to the caves where we were hiding. He sneered at Loki, said he was a waste of dam’s skill as a birther. Dam tried to argue, tried to make father see, but he would not listen. He did not see what Loki was, what he is, his worth. He told dam to dash him across the rocks and ice, that it would be kinder as one so small could never survive. Father returned to battle and dam made me swear to protect the babe.”

Annie could hear movement in her bedroom, careful footsteps Helblindi hadn’t noticed. She was pretty sure Loki had followed him in, wanting to hear him talk but too afraid to engage it himself.
“My dam died when Loki was a day and a half old. He was this tiny thing, so sweet and docile. The battles raged around us, the screams of the dying echoing through the land, the ice stained with the red of Aesir blood and blue of Jotun. I looked at this tiny child and knew I could not let father hurt him. The battles got closer, our guards slaughtered, and I took Loki to the only place I could think of to keep him safe.”

“The temple.”

“Yes. I prayed the Gods would watch over him, protect him. I laid him there and went to battle, trying to lead them away. By the time I returned for him…I was just in time to see the Allfather carry him away. I thought for the best…I thought that Asgard was a land of plenty, that he would have food and warmth and love, I thought it would be better for him there, than with us, us who could give nothing, not even a dam’s milk.”

“I wasn’t abandoned?” Loki whispered, peeking around the doorframe. They turned to look at him and he looked like he was about to run again, until the large hand of Thor landed on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

“No,” Helblindi said gently. “I only wanted to save you. I never would have let the Allfather take you had I known.”

Loki stared at him for a moment before he seemed to dredge up every ounce of courage he had.

“I’m a little warm. I was going to cool off on the balcony. Would…would you like to join me?”

“I would enjoy that.”

The two brothers nodded to Thor and Annie (and Bruce who had woken and was watching curiously) and made their way out to the cold night, looking out at the never sleeping lights of New York.

“The night here is much prettier than home,” Helblindi noted, motioning to the wide expanse of star littered sky.

“It is?”

“Yes. Our skies are never truly clear like this.”

“Oh. I like it out here. It’s quiet this high up, and cold. Do all Jotun’s like the cold?”

“Most. We are not made of ice, as the Aesir assume. We are flesh and blood, warm blooded, but much harder than other peoples. Our skin is thick, much thicker than others. We take the cold with us, it is in our blood.”

“So it is natural for me to seek it out?”

“Yes. Not just the cold. We seek heat too. Hot food is a pleasure we all enjoy. We enjoy all pleasure for the heat it lights beneath our skin.”

Loki gaped at him, opening his mouth a few times before deciding he had nothing to say to that.

“You are not fully mated,” Helblindi guessed with a small smile and Loki blushed. “No shame, little one. They are good men, and you would not love them if they were not worthy. Physical mating will come in time.”
“You speak so openly of it,” he noticed.

“To love is not shameful, no matter the form. You are loved. Why would I not want that for you?”

“Odin did not,” he whispered.

“Odin should be suffering the fires of Hel for what he has done,” he growled, and Loki couldn’t help his surprise. “You think I would take pleasure in what he has done to you?”

“Why would you not seek my punishment?” Loki snapped. “I killed your king! I waged war upon you! I sought to destroy all of you!”

Helblindi reached out and grabbed him, pulling him close, holding him until Loki stopped fighting, letting himself be held.

“If Odin and his wife had not denied your true nature, none of that would have happened,” he said firmly. “Madness only happens among our kind when who and what we are is suppressed. If you had been accepted, none of it would have happened. The fault is not yours. None of our people hold you accountable.”

“That cannot be true.”

“But it is. They all lust for the death of Odin, the vengeance for actions against their prince.”

Loki pulled back slightly, looking up at him.

“Do you think they hate you?” Helblindi said with a smile. He chuckled at Loki’s nod. “Loki, Laufey led them to a war no one still living wanted. Because of him, our lands have fallen into desolation, and his actions led to the death of our brother Byleistr and the beloved queen. Laufey was hated by all living Frost Giants. You did not deprive them of a king, you freed them from a selfish fool who ruined them.”

Loki fell silent and Helblindi let him be. It had to be a strange thing for him, these brothers suddenly showing up and declaring that he was not a murderer but a liberator.

In truth, things had been slowly getting better for Jotunheim since Thrym took his place as king. Helblindi told him of it while he silently processed all he’d been told.

The first step Thrym had taken was to repair shelters, something Laufey had neglected for far too long. Homes and the palace and other structures needed and wanted. Then he had allowed his people to choose their roles rather than just blindly falling into the warriors life. They had amassed farmers and teachers and peace-keepers. They still had their warriors, but it was not required that all went that way. The farmers had worked with their engineers and scientists and managed to use natural hot springs to clear areas for farming, and grazing. Some of the wild beasts had been harnessed to feed and clothe the people.

Slowly, Jotunheim was restoring itself, without the Casket of Ancient Winters. Thrym was the most celebrated of kings, loved by his people.

When the Jotun people had heard the truth, that the Loki Odinson who had attacked them, tricked them, lured them to Asgard, was truly their prince, a Jotun in disguise…the uproar had been deafening. All influential Jotun’s had called for the rescue of Loki, the return of him to Jotunheim.

This trip to Midgard was a compromise they had no choice but to make. The people wanted their prince safe, or they would wage war on whoever they felt was to blame.
Farbauti had been a beloved Queen, and he had died to birth Loki. The people saw it as their duty and privilege to protect and love their prince.

“Who would they wage war upon?” Loki asked eventually. He had somehow ended up curled into Helblindi’s lap, leaning back against his chest and revelling in the frosty cold of him. It was wonderful.

“Most cry for Odin’s head on a spike. Some think perhaps Midgard. Thrym and I had to come or there would be war in all the nine realms. An angry Jotun is a wild thing.”

“Don’t wage war. Please?”

“We’ll not let them, little one. Have peace. Your little friend showed us of her camera, and she shall produce pictures of your happiness for us to show them. And, perhaps, one day, you could return for a visit. They are most intrigued by your mates.”

“My mates? Why? Don’t all Frost Giant’s mate on instinct?”

“No. It is rare. For you, had you remained with us, your life would have been very different. You would have been raised in seclusion, been protected and sheltered until a suitable royal prince could be found for your match. Then, once your blood had come, you would be married to them and secure peace for all. But that has not come to pass and now is impossible. Your madness has stripped all that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your true nature was denied for too long. You cannot now mate through choice. You must mate with those your body decides. Steve and Tony are now the only choice for you. The fates have made them for you, to balance out what has happened.”

“Hmmm,” Loki hummed thoughtfully. He felt that this way was much better. He was happy with Tony and Steve, safe, loved. He was rather glad not to be part of a royal arranged marriage. “What would have made a suitable match?”

“One of noble or royal blood, for not all realms are ruled by royals. One who could prove himself in battle, prove your safety, prove that he was worthy of you. One who could best you in battle also, as no Jotun bride wants a weakling they can overpower. One who was learned, understanding, had a wisdom about them, and a kindness underneath it all. It would have been a royal courting, all the competitors vying for your hand. They would have had to impress you to even be allowed to compete. Any you found unworthy would have been sent away. You would have been given gifts and taken on romantic interludes until one had met your standards, had become the man you wished to bear children for.”

“Sounds exhausting.”

Helblindi laughed and thanked the Gods for the way things had settled. Loki was truly happy with these mortals. It did not please him that he was no longer going to live as long as he should, but he could live with it. He was furious that his magic had been taken. Magic had been a sign of Jotun royalty for as long as anyone could remember. But Loki did not need to know of his anger, only that they had come out of love for him.

“Loki, may I question you of something?”

“Yes.”
“Have you had your blood?”

He felt Loki’s temperature shoot up, especially around his face.

“I seek not to embarrass you,” he said hurriedly. “I seek only to know if you have need of our healer.”

It took a few moments for Loki to speak.

“I had one, many years ago. Moth- Frigga gave me a tonic for it, made it stop. I have not had one since. Bruce says I shall have them soon.”

Helblindi could not tamp down his growl, clutching Loki tighter and tighter until he squeaked.

“I am sorry, I did not intend that,” he apologised and eased his grip. “A Jotun’s breeding should not be tampered with by outsiders.”

“Is it bad?”

“I would like Mengloth to look at you now, if she may. I worry of this tonic given to you.”

Loki nodded and settled in the lounge while Helblindi woke the necessary people. Before long, Loki found himself sat on the sofa, Steve on one side, Tony on the other, Thor, Thrym and Helblindi pacing, and Bruce in deep conversation with Mengloth.

“Tell me, young one,” Mengloth said, no nonsense in her tone, “when did you bleed?”

“Uhhh. I’m not sure. I cannot calculate it here,” he said helplessly.

“Is it bad?” Thor declared. “Brother, tell me when it was to our minds.”

“The delegation from Vanheim, the night of the ball, where I knocked over the broth,” Loki rattled off and Thor’s eyes closed in forced remembrance. “I felt ill, so mother took me to my chambers. I had the guards get her for me a few hours later, when I found the blood.”

“And the tonic?” Thor asked.

“The next day. She had to brew it. She said that it was simply a growing pain, that all had it but it wasn’t discussed in polite company,” he admitted, his face burning. Thrym let out a sound of anger and Helblindi took him by the shoulders, murmuring to him to calm down.

“Thor? How long?” Tony asked.

“A moment,” he requested, muttering as he did the conversion. “I believe it to be about four hundred years, perhaps five.”

“Far too long,” Mengloth spat. “What she thought to achieve is beyond me. My prince, lay back.”

She is nothing like Bruce. Bruce is almost apologetic when he asks them to do something. She is a no nonsense kind of person, and Loki likes it.

He did as he was told and wiggled back into the sofa, his head on Steve’s thigh, Tony stroking his ankles. It’s nice, being with them, being touched. Steve was toying with his hair, letting Loki grip at his hand.
“Hold still,” she demanded, shoving up his t-shirt and pulling down his sweatpants until Tony took
offence and shot out a hand to stop her.

“No more,” Tony said firmly.

“I must examine the prince,” she argued.

“Do you need to examine his genitals?” Bruce questioned.

“Well…no. But the clothing is in the way.”

“Work around it,” Thrym ordered. “His mates care not for our customs.”

“Customs?” Steve asked.

“We do not wear so much,” he explained. “Nor do we cover ourselves.”

“A race of nudists,” Tony muttered. “Great.”

“Tony,” Steve hissed before turning back to the healer. “Please, we would prefer that Loki remains
as covered as possible. I’m sure I don’t need to be more explicit when I say that his skin is for us to
see.”

She looked completely lost and Bruce stepped forward. “You need to be able to examine his
reproductive systems, yes? His womb and such?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Please. Allow me?”

She nodded and moved to the side, letting him closer to Loki. He smiled at him as he carefully folded
his t-shirt up out of the way, smoothing it against his throat, and then folding his sweatpants down,
laying them very low, but high enough to cover what needed covering. He looked at Tony, who
nodded gratefully, and then he stepped back, letting her do her job.

It is nothing like when Bruce examines him, and he doesn’t like it. No looking for permissions, no
checking his face for expressions to gauge his comfort, no reassurances, no gentle touches.

“Steve,” he whimpered as she roughly pressed at him.

“Stop,” Steve ordered, Tony shooting out a hand to cover hers. “Just stop. You’re being too rough.”

“He is Jotun,” she said, shocked. “They are hardy.”

“He is not like us,” Helblindi said impatiently. “He is a blessing! They are delicate! For the love of
the nine, be gentle with him or I’ll find a healer that can!”

There was a huge tension in the room, and Loki could see Bruce getting frustrated.

“Can you work with another’s guidance?” he asked softly.

“Yes. I work with others,” she said.

“Could you work with Bruce? He’s been taking care of me, he could guide you in how I need to be
handled.”
She looked at Bruce, who nodded and gave Loki a small smile, and then nodded herself, making room for the doctor to kneel beside her.

“Hey, Loki,” Bruce said. “How are you doing?”

“A little nervous. What if I am damaged?”

“Hey, no, no talking like that,” he argued. “Come on, what’s my rule?”

“Deal with the now, not what might be.”

“Very good. Right now, we’re just taking a look, helping out my guess work, getting a second opinion. We don’t know what’ll come of that, if anything will. So no worrying about problems that aren’t there, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good. Now, Mengloth, what is it you need to do?”

“I need to feel his organs, feel for damage, and then send my seidr through.”

“Seidr? What is that?” Tony questioned.

“Extra perception,” Helblindi said. “Healers are trained in it. You would think of it as magic, but it is used only for diagnostic purposes.”

“Will... will it hurt?” Loki asked.

“No, my prince, there should be no pain,” she said, softening. “Oh, but you are young. I had not thought... forgive me. I do not usually treat ones so young.”

“It is alright. Please. Continue.”

She laid hands on him once more, careful of her strength, and cautiously pressed down. There, his stomach, so too high. A little lower, his bladder, so wrong angle.

“Different on one so small,” she complained. “I’m used to those big stubborn oxen over there.”

Loki giggled as Thrym and Helblindi looked ready to argue.

“Mind, they were once smaller,” she said as she adjusted her hands again. “I remember the night Helblindi was birthed saw the biggest ice storm we’d ever seen.”

“You were there?” Loki asked.

“Yes. You are the only royal babe I didn’t help birth.”

“So you knew my mother.”

“Mother?” she puzzled. “I do not know this term, my prince.”

“Dam,” Helblindi supplied gently. “He speaks of dam. Bearers of young are called mothers here.”

“Queen Farbauti was a wonderful queen. He was loved by all. What the rebels did... I am sorry I could not be there to save him.” She stroked his hair. “You look like your dam.”

“I do?”
“Yes. Of course, he was blue, and the eyes were different, but you are his son, no doubt,” she said kindly. “Now, I will send my seidr through. If there is pain, tell me.”

She waited until he nodded, and then sent it through his organs, staring off into the distance as she focused on the echo of it reflecting back.

Loki shuddered, gripping at Steve’s fingers.

“You okay?” the blond asked.

“It is extremely odd. Something both hot and cold, liquid and solid, sort of tickly and tingly and like all my organs are being massaged at once.”

“Please tell me my balls don’t need to have that done,” Tony begged, looking at Bruce desperately.

“Tony, behave,” Loki scolded, another shudder shivering though him.

“I’m serious! That does not look fun.”

“Stop it,” he said, poking him in the ribs with a toe, and then gasping. “Stop, that hurts, stop.”

“My apologies. I am complete,” Mengloth said, removing her hands. “The prince is fertile, but dry. He may bear, but needs a jolt. He is blocked.”

“Wait,” Steve demanded. “Slow down. Can we have that in words we can understand?”

“It means that Loki may one day bear children for you, but his system is damaged from the tonic given him,” Thrym said. “It can be rectified, but it may be unpleasant.”

“Is it quick?” Loki asked.

“Very, but intense,” Helblindi assured. “My mate had to be jolted, an accident when she was young. It took only moments, but…”

“But it is quick?” Loki pressed. “Just the once, a quick jolt, and I am no longer dry, yes?”

“Yes, my prince,” Mengloth promised. “Just once, mere moments only.”

Loki took some deep breaths, looking at the ceiling, before he looked between all three of his brothers and the healer, looking to Bruce, and then whimpering.

“Alright, do it. Wait! Wait. JARVIS, make sure we wake no one,” Loki requested.

“You shall alert no one, Master Loki,” JARVIS promised. “May I be of further assistance?”

“No. Thank you, JARVIS.” He looked between his mates. “Don’t you dare even think of leaving.”

“Right here,” Tony said, digging his thumbs into the arch of his foot. “I’m not going anywhere, baby.”


“Steve,” he moaned. “I’m scared,” he whispered.
“I know. I know. Just a second, that’s all.”

“I can’t say yes.”

“Okay, it’s okay,” he promised, pressing another kiss to his forehead before giving one to his lips.

Tony curled closer, stroking his thighs, sliding his hands up to rub gentle circles into his hips with his thumbs. He stroked a gentle hand along his torso, rubbing at his cool skin, earning a smile, before he let his hands rest on his knees.

Knowing Loki’s absolute hatred of pain, Thor moved to rub his ankles, ready to restrain him from kicking Tony. It was more than Helblindi could do. The prince was having trouble separating the tiny baby he had helped his dam birth and the grown man Loki was now, and seeing him preparing for pain was harder than anything else. His mate had gone through it, he knew it was quick, but it made it no easier. He leaned into Thrym, letting his older brother comfort him.

Steve murmured reassurances to him, holding his hands, pressing gentle kisses.

“Now,” he said between kisses.

Mengloth was very quick, placing her hands, focusing and sending the magic through, removing the embedded ‘tonic’ and returning Loki to what he should be. It took longer than with any other she had ever jolted, but still no more than a few heartbeats.

Loki screamed, the air forced from his lungs in a high pitched screech. Something inside him was being torn apart, shredded and put into Helix’s bowl for her to rip to pieces. The moment stretched out into an eternity. His blood boiled and froze, his entire consciousness stretched to breaking point, until he couldn’t find where he was in any of it.

He first becomes aware of Tony’s hands on the base of his spine and his sternum, then the smell of Steve around him, and the feel of another set of hands on his feet.

“Steve? Tony?” he whispered and his throat felt like someone dragged the cheese grater through it.

“Right here, Bambi,” Tony soothed, and Loki realised that he had rolled to his side, seeking comfort through his pain.

“It’s okay, we’re here, you’re okay,” Steve promised. “All done, sweetheart. All over.”

“I ache,” Loki complained.

“I ache,” Loki complained.

“Where?” Mengloth asked.

“Here,” he said, releasing one of his hands and motioning to his abdomen, just above his hips, sweeping back to indicate the base of his spine. “Feels like I’ve been crushed.”

“‘Tis normal, child,” she promised, rubbing his shoulder. “It will pass. I am sorry.”

“Is it fixed?”

“Yes. You can bear now, I promise.”

“Then don’t be sorry.” Loki wiggled slightly. “Wait. Who is holding my feet? There are too many hands.”

“Me,” Thor said. “I feared you would kick.”
“Oh. Thank you. May I have some water?”

Bruce disappeared for a moment and returned with a glass. Steve helped him sit up and Loki took it, only for it to turn into a block of ice.

They all froze, staring at the ice in Loki’s hand.

“Fuck,” Tony said. “You unblocked everything.”

“I don’t understand,” Steve said.

“Odin didn’t take his magic,” Tony said, taking the glass and admiring it. “He just locked it away.”

Loki began to tremble in fear.
Chapter Thirteen

It was an awfully long night for everyone involved.

The Jotun’s had retreated at the urging of Loki’s mates, returning to their beds to ride out the rest of the night, even if they didn’t sleep. Bruce and Thor had followed their example, and Steve and Tony had taken Loki to bed.

They held him close as he shook and whimpered, gripping at them, begging in whispers not to let him hurt anyone. They had done all they could to soothe him, with a limited amount of success. He fell into an exhausted sleep as the sunrise broke across the city, and Steve and Tony looked at each other helplessly.

“What do we do?” Tony whispered as they slipped from the room, leaving Loki sleeping. They were both too wired and worried to even try sleeping, and neither of them could bear to look at that tearstained face much longer, it was too painful.

“Not a clue,” Steve sighed, scrubbing his hands over his face as they shuffled into the kitchen. He flopped down at the counter and watched as Tony made them coffee. “Okay, let’s look at this reasonably. Loki attacked people because he was out of his mind.”

“Right, because his true nature was suppressed. He doesn’t have that problem anymore,” Tony said.

“Everyone keeps saying that Loki’s madness was caused by being lied to and hidden away. We’ve got contact with his birth family now, they can help him. Thrym said last night that magic is a trait of their royalty, so they can help him with it. They can teach him to use it, to harness it, to not be afraid of it.”

“Steve…he’s terrified.”

“I know. But he’ll calm down.”

Annie appeared, moving to make herself tea. “Bruce told me what happened,” she said, leaning against the counter. “Well, a brief version. How is he?”

“Sleeping, for now,” Steve said.

“He cried himself to sleep,” Tony added sadly.

Unknown to the three of them, Loki was not asleep. He laid there, curled into a ball, breathing in the scent of Steve and Tony from the bedding. He didn’t want their reassurances, he wanted to try and sort through the mess himself. Reassurances could come later.

He couldn’t become a monster again, he knew that. It wasn’t an option. Steve and Tony were good men, heroes. They wouldn’t love a monster. So he couldn’t become one, simple as that. And now that he had met Frost Giant’s for himself, actually spent some time with them, he didn’t believe the stories he had been told as a child. His nursemaid had delighted in telling him of the barbarity of the Jotun’s every time he had misbehaved. Stupid fool. His people were not monsters.

But he had become a monster, he had killed hundreds. He couldn’t become that again.

His head felt like a tangled mess of yarn. A throne truly was his birthright, just not a kings throne. He was supposed to be a queen, supposed to create peace, not war. The Allfather must have known that.
He couldn’t believe that Odin simply hadn’t known. He knew the two realms could be united through Loki, he’d said that much himself. Loki could only imagine that he would one day attempt to marry him off to one of the noble ladies of Asgard, or noble men.

Or…no, it couldn’t be.

Thor. Odin might have tried to bind him to Thor in marriage.

Loki felt sick at the thought of being expected to bed his brother.

“I hate you,” he whispered. “Do you hear that, Heimdall? Tell the Allfather that I hate him, and everything he has done.”

“Hate’s useless.”

Loki shot up, shocked by Natasha dropping down from the vent to perch on the end of the bed.

“Hating him will serve you no purpose,” she said, looking at him calmly.

“Have you come to kill me? To save them from the monster I may yet again become?”

“No. I was spying last night, hazard of being associated with me is I occasionally spy on you. I’ve come to help.”

He couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him. “Help? You seek to help? How? How could you, how could anyone, possibly help?”

“Loki, I told you once that I was Russian. Way back when, I was an agent of the Red Room. I was taken as a child and trained to be the Black Widow. And they were very good. Their methods were brutal and efficient. I am what they intended me to be. But they don’t exist anymore. So I became a part of S.H.I.E.L.D. and, for a time, I thought I was doing good. And then they crumbled beneath me. The KGB, S.H.I.E.L.D., neither of them exist any longer. But I still do. I am a product of a creator that no longer has a use for me.”

“I can see the comparison between us,” he admitted. “But I still do not understand.”

“My skillset is specific and rarely has a use. But I still have it. I am a trained, highly dangerous assassin who has always been very good at her job. Learning to control it is something I’m still learning, something I always will be learning.”

“You’re saying I can control this.”

“Yes, you can. And I’m also saying that magic is not the thing that defines you. What Odin made of you, that doesn’t define you either.”

“Then what does?”

“You. Loki, YOU define you. Your choices, the things you find enjoyable, the way you decide your life should be. You made mistakes, you made bad choices, you got used and abused and tossed around like the galaxy’s bitch. So what? You can’t change that. All you get is now, maybe tomorrow if you’re lucky.”

“So your advice is…to forget all that’s gone before?”

“Not forget it. Forgive yourself for it.”
Loki gaped at her, his mouth working, trying to say something, but there was nothing to say.

Many of them forgot she was watching pretty much all the time. She was a spy, and so she was rarely noticed unless she wanted to be. She didn’t say anything unless it was worth saying, and when she did talk it was to say something that usually floored them.

“I don’t think I can,” he whispered.

“You might. Just take it one breath at a time. Just keep breathing, stay aware of your past, and trust in all of us to help. That’s what family does. It trusts and helps.”

“And love? Do you still think it for children?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. The only opinion important right now is yours. So. With all that in mind…what do you want?”

Loki stared at the wall as he thought it through. He shoved his brain yarn tangle to the back, he couldn’t unravel it now, he didn’t have the strength. She was right in saying his hatred of Odin wouldn’t help anything.

He shoved his fear way down, burying it under his revulsion of what might have come if Odin had tried to marry him and Thor.

“I want pancakes.”

Odin had not seen his brothers since the end of the conflict. Frigga had taken Thor and Loki to meet them once when they were small boys, but things between Odin, Vili and Ve had been at an all-time low. Bor would be so disappointed in them.

It had been a petty squabble, something brothers do all the time. And yet it had led to a split in one of the greatest families in the Nine Realms.

When his guards told him that his brother Vili had arrived, Odin was happy, thinking that they would finally put it behind them, make peace.

Odin was a fool.

“Odin Borsson, I charge you with seeking to create war in the Nine Realms,” Vili announced as he entered the throne room, standing as strong and blond as Thor. In fact, the golden prince looked more like his uncle than his father. “Submit to the law and I may be lenient.”

“Lenient?” Odin spat angrily. “You come into my kingdom! And charge me with seeking war! And you want me to submit! You forget your place, brother.”

Vili smiled and motioned to his guards. Within moments they had brought in representatives and important peoples of almost all of the realms, all of them looking upon him with anger and disappointment.

“Odin, son of Bor, we the free peoples of the Life Tree declare that we no longer have faith in you as the Allfather,” said Hogan, who had been chosen to represent his home world of Vanaheim.

“We desire that you should step down from the throne and concede your place to Prince Vili,” said Prince Nuada, crown prince of Alfheim.
“You do not order me, Nuada, son of Balor,” Odin snarled. “I am king of Asgard, and king I shall remain.”

“Did you think we would not discover what you had done?”

Odin failed to see who had spoken, there were just so many of them. The crowd parted, and Odin recoiled at the Jotun standing in his hall, brazen, as if it had a right to be there.

“We recognise you, King Thrym of Jotunheim,” Nuada said respectfully, bowing to him, his white hair hanging towards the floor. “You are the aggrieved party, the right is yours.”

Thrym took centre stage, every eye on him.

“I have discovered a great many things upon these last few days. I have been to Midgard, and seen the damage you have done. When Helblindi let you leave Jotunheim with Loki in your arms, he did so thinking he would be safe, and loved, and healthy. It is true we suffered greatly in the war, it was only prudent for him to think of what was best for our blessing.

“What has been done to him lands at your feet, and so does all conflicts in the Realms,” Thrym declared angrily. “Do you deny that you lied to Loki of his true origin?”

“I am not on trial!” Odin roared, reaching for Gungnir. As his fingers touched it, he was struck across the knuckles with the flat of a sword and the spear taken from him. He looked around to see Sif, Fandral and Volstagg surrounding his throne. “You dare!”

“You do not even have the support of your warriors,” jeered a troll of Niflheim. “Your own people do not respect you, Odin.”

“I did what was needed.”

“Allfather, please,” Sif begged. “Just submit. Answer their questions, prove you have no secrets or shame. Please.”

“I should have known,” he said with a dark smile at her. “You went against my decree.”

“Nay, I did not. Your decree stated that none may travel to Midgard. I did not.”

“This is outrageous!” he bellowed. “I am king! And you stand there like insolent children, looking to find blame for the actions of a monster!”

Ice sprung up around Thrym, the demons from Muspelheim, land of flames, jumping back in alarm. Nuada stepped forwards, placing a hand on his elbow.

“Be calm, your majesty. Anger will do nothing to help the situation.”

“Bashing his head in might be compensation for watching our prince scream in pain as we set right what HE damaged!” Thrym snarled and Nuada froze.

“What was damaged?” he asked quietly.

“He was dry, completely blocked. He had to be jolted,” he muttered and Nuada stepped away from him, his bone white face a mask of slow simmering anger.

“Odin, son of Bor, do you submit to the questioning and accusations laid before you?” Nuada asked.

“Nay, I will not.”
“Then I give my apologies. This was not our intent, but you have left no choice. Guards! Take him!”

The guards from Alfheim and Jotunheim rushed forwards, Vili’s joining them, and Odin was overwhelmed. As good a warrior as he had once been, not even he could hope to win against an army of almost a hundred guards.

They bound him in chains, leading him from the throne room to place in Asgard’s prison until his questioning could be arranged. No one could afford for this to turn into a shambles, so it was agreed that Nuada would sit on the throne of Asgard until the matter could be settled. He was first in line to Alfheim when his father passed, which, by all accounts, would not be long, so he had no desire to hold it for himself. He was known to love his realm, his people, his life, more than any other prince in the entire known galaxy. He was older than most princes, and he was known for his cool calm handling of situations.

“Prince Nuada? What is your will?” Sif asked, holding out Gungnir. The Warriors Three stood with her, all watching him.

He wrapped a slim white hand around it, feeling the power in it.

“You will follow my commands?”

“We will, your highness,” Fandral promised. “We are loyal to Asgard, now more than ever.”

Nuada looked around, taking in the people, the unasked questions.

“First things first,” he said, setting the spear down on the closest table. “I thank you for your aid. You show much bravery to go against your king, and wisdom to caution cooperation.”

They bowed to him.

“Now. We should arrange a meal. There are many visitors to Asgard, a meal and accommodations for those that wish them must be provided. This can be arranged?”

“Of course, my prince,” Volstagg said with a smile. “I shall see to it immediately.”

He strode off and Nuada turned to the next in line, Hogan.

“My friend, I wish for you to send messengers to all of the Realms and beyond. Assure them of the stability of things, that they are safe from conflict. We do not seek war, only the judgement of one who harmed a prince. All alliances, friendships and marriages are valid, nothing is in jeopardy. Let us stem the tide before the gossips get there.” He pulled a ring off his finger and gave it to Hogan. “My family’s seal. Use it to prove the worth of your words.”

Hogan bowed respectfully and strode out of the hall, leaving Nuada with two.

“Lady Sif, I wish you to find Odin’s wife and child and keep them safe,” he said. “They are not to blame, yet there are those that may harm them. Tempers are running high, and people do foolish things when blood runs hot. She is a royal bride, and her child a prince. She will be cared for, I swear it.”

She bowed and took off to find them, thinking of all the hiding places Thor and Loki had shown her when they were younger.

“Now, Fandral, I have a special task for you,” he said with a smile, walking to a nearby table that held paper and ink. He put nib to paper as soon as he reached it. “I wish you to take these letters to
the princes Thor and Loki. Extend my hand of friendship to them. Be sure to make clear that the offers I make to them in these letters are true and honest, and should they wish it, I will fulfil them. But only should they wish, I’ll not take choices from them. Be clear to them that they are welcomed in Asgard while I sit on its throne, but I will not take offence if they do not return."

Fandral spluttered for a moment before breaking into a huge grin, and then frowning worriedly.

“Prince Nuada, such promises truly show your wisdom and goodness, all the tales are true. However, I feel there is…some you have not been told.”

Nuada looked up from his writing and smiled. “Oh? You mean the Allfather has kept secrets and had secrets kept from him? Oh, say it surely isn’t true!” He laughed. “Come, tell me.”

“Thor is to become a father, a princess of Midgard carries his child, and he has a woman. Loki has two mates. They have many loved ones on Midgard.”

Nuada blinked before needing to support himself on the table as he laughed.

“I pray the Gods allow me to witness Odin’s face when he learns of these things!” he hooted. “Come. We shall have some wine and you shall tell me more of this. And then perhaps my letters will be more welcomed.”

Thor read the letters as Loki worked with Helblindi to try some simple magics.

It had been a week since the jolting. Loki was slowly working through his issues, mostly his comfort in his own skin. It was taking time, and he was in need of almost constant reassurance that he was still loved and that the members of his new family wouldn’t allow him to harm anyone.

Thrym had been forced to return to Jotunheim; the Realm simply couldn’t survive without him for an extended period of time. Helblindi had chosen to stay, and aid Loki in any way he could. Tony had wasted no time in creating a bedroom for him on the penthouse floor. He’d never needed to make a sub-zero room before, but he enjoyed the challenge. The real challenge had been getting the room cold enough without freezing the rest of the penthouse. He solved it by putting in a small hallway, an airlock of sorts. It worked.

All the other Jotun’s had left too, Helblindi promising he would be safe enough without guards. It was a show of faith for the humans that Thrym believed him.

Loki went cross-eyed, concentrating on his hand, before there was a puff of smoke from his palm.

“Damnation!” he growled, throwing the first thing he could get hold of, which happened to be one of Helix’s toys. She went scampering off after it in a state of absolute happiness. “Why is this so difficult! It never used to be this hard!”

“Easy,” Tony soothed, curling up on the sofa with him. “You’ve been through a lot, been blocked. It’s going to take time. Stop pushing so hard. Take a breath, baby, take a breath.”

Loki moaned and snuggled into him. It didn’t need saying aloud that he was afraid of what he might do, and that was holding him back. “It’s frustrating,” he complained. “And my head hurts.”

“It will come, Loki, do not stress,” Helblindi promised, rubbing his temples with cool fingertips. “You can already pull forth your Jotun form and send it back. That is important progress.”
“Fine,” he grumbled. “Thor, which one is Prince Nuada again? Is he that troll one, with the unfortunate horns?”

“Nay, he is the light elf, with the twin sister.”

“Oh, not that damnedly self-assured one? He’s insufferable!”

“Only because he never fell for your tricks, brother,” Thor said with a smile. They both knew how fond Loki was of Nuada, though he would never admit it.

“Nothing ever rattles him!”

“He is wise.”

“He’s old enough to be.”

“The point is that we are being invited to Asgard. You heard Fandral. Now, Nuada writes…oh.”

“Thor?”

“To the Prince’s Thor and Loki.

It is my regret to tell you that Odin Borsson has been imprisoned, awaiting trial for his actions against Prince Loki and the damages such actions have brought. If found guilty of these crimes, Prince Vili, son of Bor, shall take the throne of Asgard. The fate of Odin shall be decided if he is found guilty.

I extend to you, my princes, the hand of friendship, and invite you to return to Asgard should you wish. Also, should you wish it, I shall endeavour to undo the punishments Odin has given you both. It is my greatest desire to strengthen the bonds of friendship between us, and to assure you that none of the Realms desire to see you laid low.

Please, do feel at leisure to respond to this missive should you wish, or to ignore it completely if that would serve you better.

My greatest regards,

Your forever friend, Nuada, Crown Prince of Alfheim.”

“Holy shit,” Darcy cried. “Did you just get redeemed?”

“Fandral,” Thor said quietly. He glanced at Loki, who was silent, clutching onto Tony. “Is this genuine?”

“It is,” the blond assured. Sabrina was in his arms, poking at his armour with happy fascination. Once Thor, her big teddy bear, had welcomed him, and he had been nice to Loki, she had decided on her own that he was to be trusted. “Nuada currently sits on the throne of Asgard, until this mess can be straightened. Thrym is furious, the Realms have turned from Odin. Odin’s actions against Loki are being viewed by many as acts of war. We are lucky that this is the only consequence. The prince wants peace.”

“Prince? Like story?” Sabrina asked.

“No, baby, this is a real prince. One day he’ll be a king of somewhere far far away,” Phil explained. “You remember how we told you that Thor and Loki and Helblindi are princes?”

“Yes. Far away, other places. Made from kings.”
“Exactly. Well, Nuada is another prince.”

“Oh. See prince?”

“That’s a point,” Tony said. “Why don’t we all go? Meet this Nuada, show the Realms we’re not looking for war, see Asgard, meet new people.”

“Don’t think we didn’t notice that you slipped in a suggestion of see Asgard in there,” Natasha pointed out as she built a block tower with Kiddo.

“It’s an alien world! Come on!”

“It is pretty impressive,” Jane added.

“Guys, their king is in the prison,” Steve said. “Probably not the time to be going for a visit.”

“Actually, it would probably do much good,” Fandral put in. “You have not seen it, Thor. The people do not rejoice as they did. They do not like the actions of Odin, nor his new marriage, and the birth of this babe has brought no joy. Odin has tried to wipe you both away, and with you Queen Frigga. The people are not pleased.” He looked at Annie, who was chopping cherries to put in a cake, and Jane who was beating the batter. “It would help them greatly to see you happy.”

“It’s really close to the baby being ready,” Bucky said. “Can she travel?”

“Another three weeks, no signs of labour,” Bruce said. “I see no harm. The Bifrost…it picks you up from one place and puts you in another?”

“Yes, and many ladies use it when carrying,” Thor assured. “It has shown no ill effects, on mother or babe.”

“Annie?” Tony called and she looked over. “How would you feel about intergalactic travel?”

“Now?” she asked incredulously. “I’m a beached whale!”

“No, you’re not,” Jane promised.

She considered it. “Might be nice,” she said after a while, Jane sliding the cake into the oven as Annie could no longer bend. “Like a vacation.”

“The kids will be okay on the Bifrost, right?” Clint asked.

“Oh, of course,” Loki promised. “Many nobles and royals travel with their young, it is very safe. It might be a little jarring, but it is safe.”

Eventually they all agreed that they would travel to Asgard the next morning, just after dawn, and stay for a few days, maybe a week. They had a cheerful lunch, and then Fandral left to tell Nuada to expect guests.

Steve waited until Loki and Tony were both asleep before he eased himself out of bed and stole down to Bruce’s lab.

Bucky was waiting for him.

“What…how did you know?” he sighed and Bucky laughed at him.
“Steve, come on. I managed to find you every damn time you tried to enlist. I knew every time you were sick no matter how hard you tried to hide it. I even knew when you spied on me and Karen Wilmings that night she stayed over. Ain’t no secret you’re ever gonna keep from me, so stop trying.”

“I didn’t spy on you and Karen! You were using my damn bed!”

“You were sick on the couch, you weren’t using it,” Bucky rationalised. “And if we’re being technical, it was OUR bed, we only had the one.”

“Saved on heat in the winter.”

“True. So? You ready to do this or what?”

Steve looked at Bucky, remembering all the times he had saved his ass, all the times he had held his hand and never gave him too much shit for it. Bucky had teased him, but it had never been nasty or hurtful. It was just Bucky. His Bucky.

“Buck, did I ever say thank you?”

“For what?”

“For having sex with me during the war. That can’t have been easy for you…”

“Stevie, don’t,” he said, cutting him off. “You let them turn you into Captain America, you saved my ass, and yet no one even thought about what would happen to you. I know you’re all mated and everything now, but you’re still my Stevie, that little punk from Brooklyn who just couldn’t back down. What we did, all those nights in the middle of nowhere, the others pretending not to see us, or hear us…”

“They got real good at that fake snoring, though,” Steve pointed out with a grin.

“It was war, Steve. And you needed me. Ain’t nothin’ to be grateful for.”

Steve hugged him, holding him close, inhaling the scent of him, the same scent that had been there every time he got his ass handed to him, the same one that had pulled him through nights in the middle of some godforsaken forest when his hand hadn’t been enough to make the erection from hell go away.

Bucky had known, hell, all of the Commando’s had known what happened when Steve didn’t maintain the serum side-effects. Extra rations had found their way to him, the especially physical tasks of setting up camp were given to him. And they’d all looked away when he’d had to take himself in hand. They were all men, they had needs. Steve’s just had a little more force than theirs. And then that night had come when it just wasn’t enough, and Steve had been sobbing in frustration and pain and absolute mortification.

Steve hadn’t known, but they had all been wondering which one would crack first. None of them were gay, but Steve was one of them and he needed help. It had only been luck of the draw that it had been Bucky.

Bucky had thrown back his sleeping bag, crawled over to him and proceeded to kiss and hump him until he exploded, the unquenchable need finally dissipating after hours of struggle. After that, he and Bucky had shared a tent or sleeping bag, and Bucky had taken care of him when he needed it.

“What if it’s bad?” Steve whispered.
“Then we’ll deal with it. Can’t be worse than that winter I got laid off and you got pneumonia.”

Steve let Bucky steer him into Bruce’s lab and sit him down, and felt the comforting weight of Bucky’s hand on his shoulder.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming,” Bruce said. “You ready?”

“As he’ll ever be,” Bucky said. “But he opens his mouth and I promise he’ll blow chunks. Just tell him, doc.”

“Your blood is a danger, the serum cannot be cloned or passed to another through transfusion,” Bruce said. “But it can be passed on through inheritance. The chemical makeup of the serum means that it deteriorates within minutes as soon as it leaves your body in your blood. This also goes for your tears, sweat, saliva, and so on. However, there is not that problem in your sperm sample.”

“Not?” Bucky asked for Steve.

“No. The serum within your DNA doesn’t deteriorate in your seminal emissions.”

“In English.”

“Any child fathered by you in the traditional way would not inherit any medical issues present in your DNA,” Bruce declared.

It took a moment for it to sink into his brain and then Steve felt himself begin to cry in relief. He could give Loki this, he could have healthy children.

Bucky hauled him into his arms and held him, holding him together as he remembered how to breathe.

Prince Nuada stood in the Bifrost chamber, waiting for Thor, Loki and their guests to arrive.

He had known Thor and Loki since the day they were born. He had been the same age Thor was now when the announcement of Thor’s birth had been made. Nuada had been a flighty prince back then, happily travelling the realms and causing mischief, drinking, fighting and bedding women without a care to his responsibilities.

Age had tempered him. He slowly outgrew his wild ways, mellowing into the prince he was expected to be.

Prince Thor had been a rambunctious child, running all over Asgard with a huge grin, charming sweet treats from the kitchen maids and stories from the court. Nuada remembered seeing him running buck naked and dripping wet through the palace halls, Frigga chasing him, laughing at his antics as he escaped his bath. He had grown into a carefree prince that had only been tempered in its youthful arrogance by banishment.

Prince Loki, on the other hand, had always been quiet, since day one. Always watching those around him, learning secrets. Nuada had found him in the library more than once, the little prince tucked away in a forgotten corner. His tutors had despaired of him, simply because he was smarter than they were. Nuada and Loki had become friends, in their own strange way. Loki tried to trick him and failed and Nuada laughed about it later, and in return Nuada found rare texts Loki pretended not to want until they mysteriously vanished from Nuada’s belongings.
The Bifrost roared to life, depositing over a dozen people.

Kiddo was squealing in delight, Sabrina chanting ‘again, again!’, the adults in varying states of dizziness, and Annie leaning against Thor, trying not to throw up.

“Easy, easy,” Bruce soothed as Loki untangled himself from Tony and pressed a cool hand to the back of her neck.

Thor pressed a hand to her bump, calming the child, and after a few minutes she was ready to carry on.

“My Prince’s,” Nuada said as Thor and Loki approached him. “It has been too long.”

“Nuada, my friend,” Thor said with a huge smile, embracing him. “It truly has been too long. I thank you most sincerely for taking care of Asgard in this time.”

“It is a duty I gladly take. Loki…you look wonderful! Midgard obviously agrees with you.”

Loki blushed and grinned at him. “Nuada. Yes, Midgard is truly to my liking. Please, allow Thor and I to introduce our companions.”

Introductions were made, and then Nuada led them to the waiting carriages and they were taken up to the palace. There were waiting servants, eager to show them to their rooms. Loki was surprised when Nuada stopped him. Tony and Steve paused, watching the two royals.

“Forgive me, my friend,” Nuada said. “But there is a problem with your chambers.”

“What problem?”

“They are locked, bound with seidr. We cannot open them. Our strongest mage’s have tried, but to no avail. I was unsure of what to do for the best. I have arranged for other chambers for you and your mates.”

Loki pondered it. “Does anyone know how long they have been sealed?”

“The guards will not tell me,” he said with a wry smile. “They say it is not for me to know.”

Loki turned to Tony and Steve. “Wait here. I will return.”

The guard he was looking for was waiting for him in Frigga’s garden, a gentle smile playing on his lips and the key in his hand. Her flowers bloomed around them, bright splashes of colour he remembered running through with Thor when they were small, Frigga watching them while she worked on a tapestry.

“When you fell from the Bifrost,” he said, answer to the unasked question.

Loki took the key and made his way to his chambers, the hallway strangely empty. He stood before the door to his bedroom, the door to his old life. He could sleep in another room. Tony and Steve would have no objections to it.

But this had always been his, this one space where he never felt Odin’s scrutiny, never felt inferior to Thor.

He took a deep breath and slotted the key in, feeling the echo of his mother’s magic skitter over his skin, welcoming him. He turned it, the mechanism smooth, and opened the door.
The smell of her perfume met him, and he knew no one had entered since she sealed it.

His bed was draped with furs, his desk strewn with papers, the book he had been reading still open where he left it by the fire.

Left when he fell.

Nothing had changed. There was still a robe hanging over the chair, still his boots carelessly discarded as he searched for others, still the half-finished decanter of wine. It was still his.

“Hey.”

Loki hummed in pleasure when Steve snaked his arms around his waist.

“Very nice,” Tony assessed. “I like the bed.”

“Thor told us what your mom did,” Steve said as Tony explored the bathroom. “You okay?”

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. He slipped from the soldiers arms and made his way across the room, opening the doors to the balcony and stepping out when he saw Thor there already. “You should have told me she sealed my chambers.”

“Perhaps,” Thor agreed. “But you were not ready for the knowledge. It would not have aided you. I thought for the best.”

“You were probably right in that judgement,” he agreed, joining him in leaning against the stone barrier, looking out over Asgard. “Do you remember when we dropped Gungnir off of here?”

“Yes. Looking back, I understand why father was so hard on you for it when it was my idea,” Thor said. He sighed sadly. “So much is clear now.”

“Yes. Hindsight.”

“I should have protected you,” Thor murmured, unable to look at him. “All those times father was so hard on you, punished you for things that needed no punishment, put you down. I should have done something.”

“He wasn’t much better to you,” Loki pointed out. “Thor, he banished you for a misadventure. A little hypocritical, considering all he did in his youth.”

Thor was surprised when Loki leaned into his side, and he carefully slung an arm around his shoulders, increasing the contact when he was not shrugged off.

“Thor, there is something I wish to say, and I want you to let me say it without interruption.”

“Of course.”

“I am sorry, for what passed between us. The Destroyer, New York, all the harsh words. I am sorry for my part in it,” Loki said, holding up a hand when Thor opened his mouth. “Ah! I am not done!” The blond closed his mouth and Loki nodded. “It cannot be easy for you, suddenly having Helblindi there, and Thrym, things suddenly being changed. I wish you to know that I will forever think you my brother. You were right, the night you came to Earth for me. We were raised together, we played together, we fought together. We will forever be brothers, no matter what comes.”

Thor waited for Loki to silence him once again, and when he didn’t, Thor pulled him in tighter, pressing a kiss to his dark hair.
“We could not drive each other to blows if we were not brothers.”

Annie held onto Sabrina’s hand as she walked her through the palace.

The little girl had been restless, along with her unborn sibling, so Annie had offered to take her with her as she walked to try and stop the baby kicking her ribs. Phil and Clint had practically jumped at the chance. Sabrina had worn them out. It was all new and exciting and Sabrina was too enthusiastic to play in their rooms and the attached gardens while her parents acclimated. She wanted to explore.

Asgard was beautiful, full of gold and wide sweeping expanses of water, skies like a watercolour painting, great swathes of pink and blue and orange. Huge halls festooned with sculpture and wide arches. Sabrina bounced along beside Annie, looking out of the wide windows at things that caught her eye, babbling about them in her own strange halting way.

Annie lost herself in it. The gentle footsteps, the movement of one child, the words of another. She lost herself in the history around her, the statues of people long since passed, the decorations chosen by people no longer around to see them.

Before long, the two girls were led by the sound of clashing metal, and they found themselves in a large round open space where the warriors of Asgard trained. There were an assortment of weapons, everything from swords to spears, and training dummies being pounded to oblivion by young fighters, while others sparred with each other.

“Fight,” Sabrina said.

Annie smiled and took the little girl to the raised steps circling the arena, sitting them down to watch.

“These are warriors, the men that protect Asgard. You know how Steve and Tony and the others go to the gym to practice things so they can protect people?”

“Yes.”

“This is the same. These men are practicing so they can protect people.”

“Not me. Clint said so.”

“Clint just wants you to be you. You don’t have to fight, leave it to Clint and the others.”

“Wise words,” Fandral said as he joined them, sweaty and panting. “Wish I could be a child once more. It was much more fun. I must say, our clothes suit you both well.”

Annie and Sabrina were both draped in fine silks, gowns that reached the floor. Annie’s was blue, all different shades, and Sabrina’s was red. The Avengers family had all been given Asgardian clothes to wear, and they’d noticed that most children in Asgard wore red. They suspected it was so they could be easily spotted as they ran around. Asgard’s children seemed to be high spirited, scampering here and there with adults scolding them without pause. It truly took a village it seemed.

“Thank you. What’s your specialty?” Annie asked as Sabrina poked at the practice shield Fandral had, running her little fingers over the ingrained sword marks.

“The sword,” he said, holding it out for her. She took it and weighed it in her hands.

“It’s very light. You must be quick on your feet.”
“Not as quick as some,” he said with a laugh, motioning across the emptying arena.

Nuada was training in a wide space, without a partner, his only companion a blade in his hand. As they watched, he sprang to life, turning, twirling, feet and fists and knees and elbows all weapons. He flew through the air, turning in ways both beautiful and deadly. He leapt into a roll, landing on his shoulders and carrying on, until he could strike the blade to the ground. At the impact it lengthened, becoming a spear, and they watched as he used it to help him move, an extension of his arm, until he swung it behind his shoulder, standing still as he caught his breath.

He jumped and looked around as Sabrina began clapping. He laughed as he caught sight of them and made his way over, retracting his spear once more.

“My princesses,” he said, bowing. “I did not see you. Please forgive me. I would not have done that had I known.”

“It is not considered proper for high ladies to see a warrior practice,” Fandral said.

“Oh! Well, it’s not like that on Earth. And my brother made weapons, so I’m used to it. Aren’t we, Sabrina?”

“Move fast!”

Nuada chuckled, accepting the shirt brought to him, handing off his weapon and calling a servant to bring refreshments. Fandral, as Sabrina’s wriggling increased, took her off to look at the training dummies and the collection of weapons. Phil and Clint had no problems with her being able to recognise weapons, and understand how they worked. They understood that she was a Stark by blood, and Stark’s were known for being curious. It was safer to give her the knowledge she wanted rather than let her go looking.

Nuada sat down with Annie, watching as the little girl was indulged by the warriors, each of them showing her their weapons and explaining how long they had trained for their positions, what their jobs entailed.

“She is spirited,” Nuada said.

“Very. I’m not sure if that comes from me or Bucky.”

“Yes…Fandral did say of the strange way she came to be. Most unusual. And he told me of you. That you are like the Captain, taken out of your time.”

“I like that,” she mused. “It’s a nice way of saying it.”

“If I have caused offence-”

“No. No offence. You’ll find that I’m pretty hard to offend.” She smiled at him. “And I’m not actually a princess.”

“Thor said that the name Stark commands much respect, that you are treated as a princess upon your world even without royal blood.”

“And that’s how I’m seen here. I get it. So which world are you a prince of?”

“Alfheim, the Realm of the light elves.”

“What’s it like?”
“Green,” he declared after some thought. “We live amongst the wonders of nature. Our structures are more wood than stone, we take pleasure in the natural world.”

“Sounds peaceful.”

“It is. It is many millennia since my people were in a conflict. This sudden trouble within the Realms is not to my peoples liking.”

“Apparently it’s not to anyone’s.” She blinked. “Millennia?”

“Yes. Our worlds are older than yours. Midgard is still a child among the Realms.”

“And how old are you, if I’m allowed to ask.”

“You are. I am twice as old as Thor.”

“No wonder you’re so calm.”

He chuckled and she found it very soothing.

“This must be strange for you,” he said sometime later when they were walking the perimeter of the arena. Sabrina was still with Fandral. He seemed to delight in her, agreeing to her games and showing her all she wanted.

“Asgard?”

“Not just Asgard. You have come from an innocent time, before the other Realms were known. You have come to a time where nothing is familiar, and now you are on an alien world, carrying the child of its prince. It must be strange.”

“I suppose. I hadn’t really thought about it.” She leaned on the balustrade, looking out over one of Asgard’s rivers, the fishermen making their way inland. “I think it would be harder if I didn’t have Steve. It helps, having someone just as confused as I am. All of them are a help, really. They’re my family.”

“You said your brother made weapons?”

“Yes. Howard, Tony’s father. I did have three brothers, but I’m the only one left.”

“You must miss them.”

“Sometimes. Edward and Andrew died when I was a kid. Howard… I guess he technically outlived me. He died twenty years ago, I’d been missing for fifty at that point.” She sighed. “You’re older, and wiser. There’s a question I’ve had since I was little, and I’ve never found anyone who could give me an answer to it.”

“Please. If I can answer, I shall.”

“Andrew was my twin. He died when we were six. I’ve always wondered... if you’re born a twin, and one of you dies, are you still a twin? Do I say I was a twin or that I am?”

“You are still,” he said without hesitation. “He shall forever be your twin, no matter the distance between you. He must have treasured you very much.”

“You sound so sure.”
“I am. I have a sister, my twin. Her name is Nuala. Should I lose her, I would still have a sister, she would still be my twin, no matter what separates us.”

“Is she here in Asgard?”

“No. She remains in Alfheim for the time being. I think my father may send her in his place when the trial comes. His health is not what it was, he grows weary.” He looked at her, ready to offer to escort her to her rooms. “My Lady, are you quite well? You are very pale.”

“Not now,” she muttered. “Nuada. Can you be electrocuted?”

“Electrocuted?”

“Yeah. Like Thor’s lightning.”

“No, I cannot be harmed as such. It does not feel pleasant, but it is not harmful to me.”

“Good to know,” she gritted out, and he was alarmed to see her collapse, like a puppet which had its strings cut.

Sabrina ran over and pushed at him, tugging until he was on his knees. “Hold,” she demanded, pointing at Annie, and he did as he was told, holding Annie as she screamed and thrashed, and then he felt the sizzle of lightning over his skin. Sabrina pointed at Fandral, ordering him to get Thor.

“What sorcery…” Nuada whispered as he realised it was coming from her. It danced over her skin, shooting from her fingertips, scorching the floor and his clothes and the air around them. “Hush,” he soothed, stroking back her hair, trying to calm her and having absolutely no clue how.

“Give her to me,” Thor commanded, skidding to his knees beside him.

Nuada relinquished his hold and watched as Thor held her close, bracing her flailing arms with one of his own massive ones, pushing her head into the curve of his neck, smoothing down her gown so she was not exposed.

“It takes some getting used to,” Steve said, helping Nuada to stand.

“I have never seen anything like it. How does she survive it, if it is, as you imply, a recurring event?”

“The people who took her, Thor told you about that?”

“Yes, this Hydra sought to use her to create a superior army.”

“Yeah. They found a part of her that lay dormant and woke it up. She’s a super soldier, like I am. Only difference is hers is natural, and mine is chemical.”

“So that is why the children…why she was chosen to be their mother. By the Nine…how do you stand to watch this time and again?” he grimaced as she let out a particularly high scream.

“Nerves of steel, baby,” Tony joked as she choked on a breath, gripping at Thor as the lightning faded away, leaving her sobbing as her body repaired the damage.

“’m gon be sick,” she mumbled, and Fandral was quick to grab a bucket, dumping out the water and holding it for her. She retched miserably into it, gasping between heaves, and then she pushed Thor away, unable to bear being touched.

Bruce pushed through them, pausing to take in the scene and then laying down on the floor with her,
keeping enough space between them that she didn’t have the pain of his touch on her skin.

“Hey, beautiful,” he murmured and her dark eyes fluttered open to look at him. “One to ten.”

“Seven,” she whispered and he hummed in sympathy.

“Kicking?” he asked and she nodded. “Okay. Just lie still. We’ll move you when you’re ready.”

“Did I hurt Nuada?”

“Nay, he is well, sweet one,” Thor promised. “Once, when I was a child, I wanted to play on the Bifrost. When Nuada put an end to that game, I tried to use my gift against him. He has shrugged off much worse than anything you or the babe can dispense.”

Slowly Annie regained herself, managing to sit up and sip some water.

“She can’t keep on like this,” Bruce said, conferring with Tony as Thor held Annie close. “They’re getting worse, getting stronger, and every time this happens, there’s the chance she won’t heal from it. Serum only goes so far. The rate this is going…Tony, if this keeps up, she won’t live to see her baby. The birth will kill her.”

Steve couldn’t bear to hear that, and he curled into Loki’s arms, trying not to lose his mind.

“Forgive me, if I step beyond my place,” Fandral said.

Fandral had disappeared as the episode had passed, and had returned with a woman. She was a slim woman, stiff and practical, her curls swept up high off her face.

“Eir,” Thor said, relief in his voice. “My friends, this is Eir, head Healer of Asgard. Surely you can aid her?”

“Bring her to the Healing Rooms,” she said. “I shall see what I may do. But do not mistake, I may not be able to do anything. Healer Banner, you have been caring for her. You shall assist me.”

“Ah…yeah…sure,” Bruce said, smiling at her bossiness.

Jane met them at the Healing Rooms, grinning, and Annie was placed in the Soul Forge.

“Is this—” Bruce began.

“Yep,” Jane confirmed happily. “Quantum Field Generator.”

Eir rolled her eyes and continued on with her work. “There are too many in this chamber. If you cannot aid my work, you will leave.”

Reluctantly they all trailed from the room, all but Bruce. He stood with the other healers, trying to answer their questions as thoroughly as he could. He watched as the energy above Annie was manipulated, Eir looking at every possible thing she could think of. Eventually she paused, her head tilted in confusion as she found something.

“This should not be,” she said, motioning to a part of Annie’s liver.

“I thought it was part of her liver, a bruise or some damage perhaps,” Bruce said.

“Yes, it does appear to be such, but it is odd. The flesh is not of Midgard. It is of Asgard. Of Thor. Most odd.”
“They put a piece of Asgardian organ in there?” Annie asked incredulously. “For what?”

“They probably assumed you would have to have it to be able to go to term,” Bruce said.

“Ah, I see the problem,” Eir said. “The energy created by the offspring of Thor should dissipate, and yet it does not because it finds part of Thor to latch onto and build. A mortal should not contain the energy, and yet she does.”

“If she didn’t have this piece of Thor they put there, would these episodes stop?”

“Yes, almost certainly. There would be nothing for the energy to use.”

“Can you take it out?” Annie asked. “Without it hurting the baby, I mean?”

“Yes.”

“Then do it.”

It took less than an hour for Eir to complete the removal. The piece of flesh she took out was tiny, the size of a pea. It was discarded, and Annie slept off the sedation, and then she was free to leave, to re-join the group as they prepared to head to the feast being held to welcome Thor and Loki back to Asgard. She didn’t even have a scar, just an ache where the incision had been made.

The tables were laid with fine golden plates and cups, heaving with the weight of food piled upon it. Great platters of meat, roasted with herbs; steaming mountains of vegetables, prepared to their most delicate state; massive urns of wine; huge loaves of bread. Sweet cakes and pastries, fruits, strange candies that sparkled.

“My friends, do not partake of the golden apples,” Thor advised.

“I forgot about those,” Loki said. “Thor is right. Do not eat them.”


“They maintain the youth and vigour of an Asgardian,” Vili said, coming to stand with his nephews. “Those of Midgard should not eat them, as they may do you much harm and cause you ill.”

“Gold apples make sick,” Sabrina said.

“Very good, little one,” Vili praised before he turned to his nephews. “It is pleasing to see you both. I am glad you accepted the invitations.”

“Uncle. I am glad you have returned to Asgard,” Thor said, accepting his hug, pleased when Loki accepted his.

Vili was introduced to the group, and then he led them into the hall to be greeted by the cheers and applause of the gathered guests. There were peoples from all the nine realms, all of them happy to see the Princes of Asgard restored to their glory. For the first time in a long time, even the Frost Giants sat at the table, breaking bread with trolls and Asgardians, elves and fire demons. There was no squabbling, no infighting. Everyone was happy and accepting, even Odin’s wife, Sigyn, who was sat in the traditional place of the Queen, her infant son in her arms.

“That is who I would have married?” Loki asked as Thor poured him a goblet of wine, Steve handing the gold apples down the table to others who could eat them.
“Yes,” Sif said, accepting a meat platter and serving Bucky. “It is said that Odin took her to avoid war. Others say his taking of her almost caused war.”

“I’d go with the second one,” Sam said. “Look at her. Man, she’s a child.”

“Indeed. You understand why many did not agree with the match,” Fandral said.

“What’ll happen to her?” Darcy asked, making eyes at one of Asgard’s warriors.

“She’ll be treated well, and a husband found for her if she wishes,” Thor assured. “She shall not be punished, nor the child.”

“If she doesn’t want a husband?”

“Then she shall be found another place of safety within Asgard. Her child is of royal blood, he will be given the place of a prince, and his mother a place of honour with him.”

The food was delicious, and they all ate until they could eat no more. After dinner, the guests milled around, swapping seats and stories, welcoming everyone. There was flowing wine and mead, pretty purple fruit juice for those not partaking, children running in and out of alcoves and through the legs of fondly affectionate adults.

No one noticed Annie slipping away, and if they did they assumed she was simply going to take a walk, aid her digestion. It was the way of a woman of Asgard expecting a child. Everyone assumed that Loki, who followed, simply wanted a moment to take stock. It couldn’t have been easy for him, they mused. The poor abused prince.

“You should not be here,” the guard said as Annie approached the prison.

“I know. Which one told you not to let me in?”

“The Captain. He thought such a place would upset you.”

She smiled. “Yes, well, that’s a nice sentiment. But you can’t really stop me going in, can you?”

“No, your highness, I cannot. I do not presume to order a princess, no matter her realm, and certainly not a bearing woman,” he said, smiling sheepishly.

She nodded and promised not to tell Steve, to which he thanked her, and then made her way in. The guards inside didn’t look surprised to see her, which made her giggle to herself.

“And they thought to keep you from this place,” Nuada said as she rounded the corner. He was leaning against a wall, arms folded, one bent knee leading to a foot against the wall, waiting for her. “They should have known better.”

“Yes, they should,” she agreed. “Are you going to escort me back?”

“When you wish it. You are safe, they are contained, and I shall protect you.”

“There aren’t any bars,” she said, motioning to the closest cell.

“No. Asgardian seidr keeps them contained. To break through it is a feat few could even imagine, and fewer still could accomplish. These are very comfortable confinements. Truly, an Asgardian cell is better than others.”

“You’re not wrong. What are they in for?”
“Most are here for small infractions, petty thefts, drunken antics, such small deeds that they merely need to think on their actions. Deeper within are more dangerous. The murderers, rapists, ones that seek trouble in other realms. Most will see the executioner before long.”

“And…him?”

“This way.”

The offered his arm, leading her deeper into the prison, past empty cells and occupied ones. The guards looked away, pretended not to see two visiting royals walking through the sparse halls.

Nuada stopped and motioned to a cell all on its own, deep within the prison. “I will wait for you,” he promised and she nodded before approaching.

“I at least expected his woman,” Odin said with a sigh. “And yet Thor sends another inferior to counsel me.”

“I haven’t come to counsel you, and Thor didn’t send me. He doesn’t know I’m here. May I?” she asked, indicating a waiting stone bench, set out for a visitor to the king.

“It matters not. I do wonder why you, a human, are in Asgard.”

“We were invited. Prince Nuada offered invitations to Thor and Loki, and we were included. Thor wanted to show us his home, and Loki didn’t want to come alone.”

“Ah. So Nuada holds the throne until proceedings. My brother?”

“Very welcoming.”

“He wanted Frigga, you know. But I bested him.”

“Is that so? Is that what you argued over?”

“It is. Ve took Vili’s side, as he always did.” He assessed her. “You have not come to counsel me, yet there is purpose in your eyes. Why have you come?”

She smiled, stroking a hand over her bump. “You probably don’t know, but this child is Thor’s. It wasn’t my choice, or his, it was made by mad scientists in hopes of creating a weapon. But it’s here, and soon enough it will see the world, mine and Thor’s. And someday, probably sooner than I think, this child is going to ask about you. Want to know about its grandfather. I won’t lie to my child. I wanted to meet you so I could at least say that much.”

“I see,” he murmured. “I suppose a mortal could be accepted into my house…”

“I’m not going to marry Thor. He doesn’t want to, he loves Jane, and I don’t want to. He’s very sweet, he’s strong and brave and all good things. But I don’t love him. We’re not quite sure how this will work, but we’ll figure it out.”

“And my son? Is he well?”

“Which one?”

“I have only one.”

“You have three,” she argued. “Maye Loki isn’t yours by blood but you raised him. And Thor is your son, even if he goes against you.”
“They are not my sons!” he roared.

“What a temper. No wonder people want you hanged, if this is how you talk to everyone who disagrees with you.”

He barked out a laugh. “You are brave, to be so bold as to speak to the King of Asgard in such a way.”

“I think you and I both know enough of what’s coming to know that you will never sit on that throne again. The charges that are being held against you...we both know you’re guilty of them. And I think, even though he won’t say it, Thor knows it too. Thor and Loki, even if they won’t say it, know you’re probably going to end up executed.”

He was silent, staring at her, an odd smile on his face. “Frigga would have liked you,” he said eventually. “What is it you wish of me?”

“Only the truth. If you ever loved Loki or Thor, if you ever loved Frigga, you’ll tell the truth,” she said. “Frigga loved them, she was their mother, no matter what happened. And if you loved her, which I think you did, then the truth is the least you owe your sons. All your sons.”

Eventually he nodded. “So be it. I will be honest, to the best of my ability.”

“Good,” she said. “Loki! You can come out now!”

Loki appeared around the corner, startling Nuada and Odin, a small smile playing on his lips.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“I slip away from the feast, carrying the next royal baby of Asgard, and neither you nor Thor follow me? Not likely. Help me up. There are cakes at that feast with my name on them,” she said and he chuckled, helping her to stand. He pressed a hand to her bump and the baby kicked at his palm softly. “I’m taking Nuada. You have until Steve and Tony figure you out, or Thor.”

“Thank you,” he said, pressing a kiss to her cheek and letting her go. Nuada offered his arm once again, and they paused as Odin spoke.

“You would make a fine trickster,” he said.

“I’m a Stark. We’re born this way.”

Loki stared at Odin, and Odin stared right back.

“Well? Nothing to say?” Odin asked.

“Believe me, I have plenty,” Loki said with a hollow laugh. Anger at Odin wouldn’t do any good, and he couldn’t believe he had very long.

“They’ll come soon,” Odin said. “So shall we keep this short?”

“We shall. I have just one question, something I don’t want to find out in front of the court at your trial. Just this once, can I have the truth?”

“Just this once,” Odin agreed. “I shall give you truth, if you give it to me. One question for each of us.”
“Very well. Mine first.” Odin inclined his head and Loki took a deep breath. “Who would you have married to? Would it have been Thor?”

Odin smiled. “I should have known that would be your question. You always were too smart for our sanity. Very well. It is true, that when I found you, I did think to marry you to Thor, unite our peoples through that union. But Frigga…she would not abide it. So it was decided to marry you to another.”

“Who was that other? Was it truly Sigyn?”

“No. Nuada,” he admitted. “It is why I met so often with King Balor. I had hoped to marry you to Prince Nuada.”

Loki laughed. “And how could you possibly have hoped to explain how we could make an heir?”

“That you were gifted by the gods. Few know of the legends of Jotunheim.”

“So I was to be perpetrated as Asgard’s Blessing.”

“Now you know. May I ask mine?”

“Yes.”

“I have always wondered why you were abandoned. I cannot ask, I know they will not tell me.”

“I was not abandoned,” Loki said. “I was placed there so my brother could lead your men away. He returned for me, only to see you taking me away. He only let you because he thought you could provide more for me, after the desolation you caused. You didn’t save me. You stole me.”

“Loki.”

The prince turned to see Steve and Tony striding towards him, Thor trailing them.

“I…I just…Steve, I…”

“Shut up,” Steve said, crowding close and kissing him.

“What he said,” Tony said, stealing his own kiss.

“Did you get what you needed out of this?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” Loki said hesitantly.

“And you’re okay?” Tony pressed.

“I am fine.”

Steve sighed, pressing his lips to Loki’s forehead. “Okay. Okay. You’re not a child, or under arrest,” he said. “You did this for a reason, and that’s okay. Now, are we going back to the feast, or going to bed?”

“Can…can we go back?”

“Absolutely,” Tony said, nosing at his collarbone. “Come on. There’s mead to be drunk.” He and Steve sandwiched Loki between them, leading his away from Odin. “Hey, Sparky? You coming?”
“I shall join you shortly,” Thor said, staring at his father.


“Yes, I have,” Thor said, sitting on the bench. “Balder is a fine child, one that does our blood proud.”

“My blood! You are not worthy!”

“I fought for my brother, nothing more. I did nothing to prove myself unworthy, for I still wield Mjolnir. What is it you do not like, father? That I disagreed with you? Or that I make my own way?” He got to his feet, walking away from Odin’s gilded cage.

“Do not walk away from me!”

“I swear by all the nine that I will never destroy my child as you have tried to destroy us. My child will be loved above all else, and make their own choices, and I shall be proud of it. And you shall never be a part of that.”

“Your mother.”

“Mother would rejoice in the love her sons have found, and Loki is her son as much as I.”

Odin had nothing to say. He realised that there was no argument he could make, no threat he could give, absolutely nothing he could do that would fix his mess.

“Goodbye, father.”
Chapter Fourteen

It was late at night when Nuada awoke to a knock at his door.

He’d spent the day instructing the President of the United States in the procedures of the court. President Ellis had been chosen as the representative for Midgard, as he was the elected leader of the country most affected by the attacks.

“Healer Banner,” Nuada said in surprise as he opened the door. “Is something wrong?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

He stepped aside, allowing the human to enter. They moved to the seating area where Nuada poured them both wine.

“What troubles you?” Nuada questioned as he sat down.

“This,” Bruce said, placing two items on the table between them.

The first was a necklace, delicate silver holding a single perfect green diamond, a very rare jewel. The second was a music box Nuada had made himself. It was shaped like an egg and when it opened it revealed a tree that slowly turned as an Elven lullaby played.

“The gifts I sent to Annie. I do not understand. Did she not like them?”

“She loves them,” Bruce said quietly. “Are they courting gifts?”

“Well, yes.”

“You’re not so lost on the problem then, are you?” Bruce spat. He was trying to stay calm, but as soon as Annie had opened the gifts, Hulk had roared to life in the back of his mind.

“I am still lost,” Nuada admitted. “Is she not receptive to my suit?”

“She’s taken!” Bruce cried, throwing himself to his feet and pacing, shaking out his hands to try and relieve the tension.

“Taken?”

“Yes! She’s my girlfriend! We share a bed, for God’s sake!”

Nuada looked absolutely horrified. “I am so sorry. I had no idea, no clue. Had I known I would not have sent the gifts. Please, good Healer, I beg your forgiveness.”

“Wait.” He looked at the stricken prince and Hulk moaned. “You didn’t know?”

“No. I had no idea. If I had known her heart was for another I never would have sent the gifts. Please, let me take them back.”

“No, you can’t take them back, she loves them. Look, she doesn’t realise why you sent them. She thinks you’re just being friendly, that you thought she’d like them. She’s…so sweet and innocent in
so many ways. The time she comes from...behaviours were different. You’re a friend of Thor, she’d
never think of you as being anything but friendly to the mother of his child.”

“Then we shall agree that they are gifts of friendship and nothing more,” Nuada declared, pressing
them into his hands. “Please, I swear, it was never my intention to cause friction between us. But if I
cannot retrieve the gifts, then I insist they will be given through friendship and nothing more.”

Bruce took a few deep breaths. Oh no. Not good.

“Nuada, will you do something for me?”

“Anything. Name it.”

“Go get Tony for me. Tell him Big Green is not a happy camper. I’ll meet him in the training arena.”

Nuada puzzled at the odd message but did as he was asked, hurrying along to Loki’s chambers and
delivering the message before following Tony’s orders and waking Annie.

“Oh, Hulk,” she breathed as they reached the arena.

Nuada had never seen anything like it. Huge and green and obviously unhappy. He was throwing
around weapons and training dummies, growling at the air until Tony approached, at which point he
growled at him and huffed like an angry gorilla.

“Oh, buddy, it’s okay,” Tony crooned. “What’s wrong? What’s got you all worked up, huh?”

“TONY.”

“Yeah, big guy, I’m here. Come on, calm down.”

“TAKE ANNIE!”

“Whoa, no one is taking Annie, Hulk,” Steve promised. “I won’t let them.”

“PRETTY PRINCE WANT TAKE ANNIE!” he roared and Nuada buried his face in his hands.

“No, my friend, I swear, I will not take Annie,” Nuada promised. “I did not know, I did not
understand. Had I known her heart belonged to Bruce I would never have sent the gifts.”

“ANNIE LOVE BRUCE! ANNIE LOVE HULK!”

“I know, I understand. I am truly sorry for my actions.”

“Wait,” Annie said, striding into the arena, making Nuada panic at the sight of this tiny woman
standing between him and the great green giant. “What is he talking about?”

“The gifts I sent you,” he said. “Bruce and Hulk guessed correctly my intent. I wished to court you,
to win your heart. I did not know that you had already chosen a man worthy of you.”

“Oh. Oh. The necklace…and the music box. They’re…”

“Courting gifts. On Alfheim, a man sends gifts to a woman he has the intent to court. If the gifts are
welcomed, he is free to make an approach. I would take them back if you so wished.”

“No! No, they’re beautiful, I love them. But I can’t accept them as courting gifts.”
“I understand, truly. May I offer them as gifts of friendship instead?”

“Sure. Great. I get to keep the gifts?”

“Yes,” he said with a chuckle.

“Good, great. Okay, I need you to go sit down.” She motioned him back and Loki guided him to a seat, where they watched her talk Hulk down. “Hey, big guy.”

“ANNIE. ANNIE MINE.”

“Yeah, I’m yours. Me and you and Bruce, all of us. My boys. Come on, come down.” He sat down and smiled as she clambered up onto his knee, awkward because of her bump. He held out his hand to steady her and raised his knee, lifting her a little higher, until she could cup his cheeks. “There’s my guy. My sweet Hulk. Don’t worry about Nuada. It doesn’t matter what anyone wants. I want Bruce, and I want you. That’s all that matters. You and me.”

“YOU AND ME.”

“That’s it,” she cooed, stroking his hair, his eyes closing in pleasure.

Nuada watched in amazement as the biggest warrior he had ever seen became putty in her hands.

“Impressive, is it not?” Thor asked as he sat down with them. “She is master over him.”

“It is not a surprise you desired her,” Loki said.

The throne room was silent as it filled with people. Considering it was to be the setting of the trial of Asgard’s king, the silence was unexpected.

Nuada, who would be overseeing the proceedings, was seated on the throne, looking down on everything. At the bottom of the stairs that led to the throne were nine seats behind a long table, set with water and small snacks. Around the sides of the room were thousands of seats for any that wished to be present. The front row seats were reserved for the people of highest standing and those most directly concerned in the case.

Loki and his family were seated just to the right of the representatives table, with a clear view of the proceedings. There was a chair placed in the centre of the open space, facing the throne, for the witnesses to use.

And there was a chair with chains and waiting guards set at the back of the space, ready for Odin.

The floor was open for anyone that wished to speak, anyone that had something to add to the case, and there were guards covering every inch of the room, to ensure all things went smoothly.

Once the room was as full as it was going to get, Odin was led in. He was taken to the appointed chair and chained in.

“Odin, son of Bor, you are brought before this court to answer for your actions,” Nuada said. “Sitting in judgement upon you are representatives of the Nine Realms. Please, be still as they are announced.”

the strong. Of Vanaheim, Hogan the warrior. Of Jotunheim, King Thrym. Of Asgard, Lady Sif. And of Midgard, President Ellis. Have you any question of their competence?"

“No,” Odin said. “I would request the criteria for selection.”

“The criteria was a high standing within their people and a proven track record of good judgement. Does this meet your satisfaction?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Odin, son of Bor, you are charged with high treason against the throne of Jotunheim in the form of abuse of their prince. This court accuses that you did knowingly conceal the true nature of Prince Loki, youngest child of King Laufey and Queen Farbauti. Thus, through this deception, was much harm delivered upon the Prince, and thus madness was created. This court puts to you that the destruction upon Asgard, Jotunheim, and, most seriously, Midgard, was caused by said madness. It is put by this court that all destructions and loss of life is laid firmly at your feet. Odin, how do you plead?”

“Not guilty.”

The room erupted into protests, anger and disbelief rippling through the crowds. It took a long while for Nuada to be heard once more.

“Very well,” he said. “If this is what you believe, then we shall proceed. Representatives, you may pronounce the first witness you wish testimony of.”

“We ask for Prince Loki,” Hogan said.

Loki slowly made his way to the offered seat, and took the crystal he was handed.

“My Prince, the crystal is simply to ensure your honestly,” Nuada promised. “It is simply to ease the minds of the court. Do you agree to its use?”

“I do.”

“Then, representatives, you may begin.”

The first to speak up was Anung Un Rama. He was a huge behemoth of a man, bright red, huge horns, a crown of flames sprouting from his head. A tail. And one of his hands seemed to be made of stone, which was the mark of royalty in his Realm. He and Thrym were seated at opposite ends of the table.

“How old were you when you were told of your true bloodline?”

“I was, I am informed, approximately 1024 Midgardian years. I had reached my majority, was fully grown by all accounts.”

“But you were still young.”

“Yes. I was not thought old enough to be considered for marriage, but old enough to be made Crown Prince when Thor took the throne.”

“Prince, I wonder how you felt when this was told to you,” Nuala said. She looked very much like her brother, and her voice was sweet and gentle. “I would like to know the circumstances of the truth being told to you.”
“Thor’s coronation was interrupted by Frost Giants,” Loki said, looking at Steve and Tony, who were smiling encouragingly at him. “I let them in. It was only a little fun, I never meant harm. Thor was angry, and he led us to attack Jotunheim.”

“Us?” Ellis asked.

“Yes. Thor, myself, Lady Sif and the Warriors Three, Hogan, Fandral and Volstagg. We went to Jotunheim, and it descended into a fight. One of their warriors touched my arm. I expected to be frostbitten, but…I wasn’t.”

“What happened when you were touched?” Thrym asked.

“My skin turned blue. Once we returned to Asgard, I sought the Casket of Ancient Winters. It is, as far as I know, the only Jotun object in Asgard. When I held it, the same happened, I turned blue. The Allfather found me. I asked him if I was cursed. It was then that he told me of my true birth.”

“And your feelings of this new knowledge?”

“Anger. Disgust. Hatred. Betrayal. I hated myself, hated him, hated all involved. It was all I could feel.”

“I am at a loss,” Nuala said. “You are of Jotunheim, yes? You are a Frost Giant.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Then I do not understand the hatred.”

“As a child, I was told of the evil ways of the Jotun’s, that they were base, brutal monsters. In Asgard, tales of the Frost Giants are used to scare small children into good behaviour. To find out that I was not as I thought, Aesir, but a Jotun…I was afraid…I was afraid…afraid that I was a monster.”

It all went downhill from there for Odin.

Loki was asked about his time with Thanos, about the attack on Earth, the war with Malekith and Loki’s fake death. It was only once they got to the punishments Odin had given him in that very room did all the representatives call for an end to the questioning of Loki. They had heard enough.

They next called Bruce, who was quick and thorough in his accounts of Loki’s physical and mental states, and the changes he’d witnessed since Loki had joined them.

Then came Mengloth, giving her account of Loki’s physical consequences to having his true nature denied. The representatives were horrified of the tonic Loki was given.

Witness after witness was called. Steve and Tony for their observations of Loki; Helblindi for his reasons for letting Odin take Loki; Clint and Phil for what had happened during the battle and how they had forgiven him for his actions. Fandral, Volstagg, Hiemdall. Thor. All of them were called in turn, and amongst the questions the representatives asked each other their opinions of what they’d heard.

And finally it was the turn of Odin to be questioned.

“Odin,” Anung Un Rama said. “Do you deny that you took Loki from his home?”

“No, I do not deny it. But he was abandoned. He would have died.”

“It is proven he was not abandoned,” Hogan said. “He is Jotunheim’s Blessing. Legend of such a
“I did what was right!”

“No,” Thrym said. “You did what you wished. If you had truly wanted to do what was right, you would have returned him to Laufey once the conflict ended.”

“I am curious,” Ellis said. “From what I understand, your systems of alliance rely on marriage to make it work.”

“That is true,” Sif said. “Marriage is proven to be the most gentle way to ensure alliance between two Realms.”

“Well, wouldn’t the simplest conclusion be that Odin was going to marry Loki off to someone?”

“Is this true, Odin?” Hela asked.

“It is.”

“And who would be the recipient of the Jotun Blessing?” Thrym hissed.

“I thought to give him to Thor, but Frigga put a stop to that. I later decided that an alliance with Prince Nuada would serve Asgard best.”

Despite himself, Nuada smiled in amusement.

“I wonder,” Nuala said, glancing up at her brother and giving her own amused smile. “How would it be possible for them to create an heir? You made out that Loki was male. Forgive me, but even the skills of Alfheim would fail to make an heir out of that.”

“You were going to pass him off as Asgard’s Blessing, weren’t you?” Thrym asked. “Blessings such as Loki may occur on any world, where the fates judge them most needed.”

“Yes,” Odin agreed, begrudgingly. The crystals he had been given did not only force honesty, they also forced an answer from the recipient.

“I have a question,” Steve said.

“He is not a representative,” Odin argued.

“But he is the dominant mate of Prince Loki,” Hogan replied. “And, as such, he has the right to ask a question.”

“Do you have only one?” Gunna asked Steve. She was a woman of very few words; it was the first time she had spoken.

“Yes, just one,” Steve promised and waited until Nuada nodded before he asked it. “The tonic Frigga gave him, the one that dried him out. I want to know if you knew it would damage him so much.”

Odin went red in the face as he fought the crystals, but eventually he had to answer.

“Frigga warned of possible consequences, but I insisted it be used.”

“Tell us of that night, the night Loki began his blood,” Algrim demanded.
Loki buried his face in Tony’s neck in mortification, and the Dark Elf had the grace to look apologetic.

“Loki was taken ill, so he was taken to his chambers by Frigga. Hours later, he summoned her once again. She came to me, telling me of his nature, of what had happened.”

“What did she advise?” Sif asked.

“That it be allowed to take its course.”

“And your response?”

“That it must be stopped. Loki could not know the truth, he was but a child, he was not ready to know.”

“Queen Frigga told you that the tonic could damage Loki, told you he should be left unaltered, and yet you dismissed her?” Gunna demanded incredulously.

“Yes.”

“I think we have heard all we need to,” Sif said, the other representatives nodding along with her. “We must confer, and consider our verdict.”

“If all are in agreement, then I shall give you one turn of the sun to reach your decision,” Nuada declared. “As decreed by the customs of inter-Realm tribunals, you may seek further testimony from any party you wish, but remember that all nine of you must be in agreement in your judgement. Is this understood by all?” There was a general murmur of assent. “Then this court is adjourned until tomorrow. Guards, return the accused to his cell.”

Odin was removed and the crowds began to disperse, breaking off into smaller groups to talk and enjoy the company of the others. Tony found himself conversing with a troll about velocities he could achieve in his suit, Steve talking with a couple of elves about his shield and the way he could make it bounce. Bucky was drinking with Volstagg and some warriors from Muspelheim, and Phil and Clint accepting their children from Annie, who had been keeping them occupied.

Nuada found Loki in the crowds and the two shared an embarrassed smile.

“For what it may be worth,” Nuada said, handing him a glass of wine. “I think we may have had a wonderful marriage. But I am glad it did not happen. I am not the one the fates have planned for you.”

Loki smiled, looking from Steve to Tony.

“It is worth a great deal. And I think also that we would have made it work. But fate has found me another path. I hope someday you will find yours.” He grinned. “Darcy is available. And Skye. Perhaps Natasha, but I think there may be something between her and Bucky and I wouldn’t get between him and what he wants.”

Nuada looked over at the human women.

“Darcy, huh?”

Loki slowly became aware of a space in the bed, a breeze on his back, and it pulled him up from his
dreams.

Tony was gone, and the doors to the balcony were open. Loki eased himself from Steve’s arms, reassuring him that he would return when he reached for him in his sleep, and then made his way out.

“I’m fairly sure you’re not supposed to consume a whole bottle alone in one sitting,” he said as he joined Tony, who was almost finished with downing a whole bottle of wine.

“Probably not,” he agreed, snuggling Loki into his side. “Good thing it’s not wine then, isn’t it?”

Loki took the bottle offered to him and took a sip, smiling when the fruit juice hit his tongue.

“Very clever. No one would ever suspect,” Loki said, handing it back. “Why are you pretending to drown your sorrows?”

“I’m pretending because I’m absolutely sure I would be the mean drunk version of me right now, but drinking is what I do when my head won’t stop. And the sorrows…it’s just the trial, the stuff with Odin. Bringing up some stuff.”

Loki silently cursed Howard Stark to the deepest pit of hell, which is where he was fairly sure Odin would be going soon. There had been many nights when Loki, Steve and Tony had lain awake, talking things over, sharing stories, enjoying each other’s company. Of course, they often ended up enjoying each other’s bodies too.

“You had Jarvis, the human one,” Loki pointed out, earning a happy hum from his beta. “And you have us.”

Tony chucked back the last of his juice and discarded the bottle, turning to kiss Loki full on, snaking his tongue inside. He pushed the Jotun up against the stone barrier, lifting him onto it so Tony could crowd close between his legs. Loki whimpered as he hardened, far too fast to really feel good, but welcomed nonetheless.

“Tony,” he whispered as his brunet mate rolled his own erection into him, rubbing against where he needed it most.

But it wasn’t where Loki needed it. It was good, but it wasn’t right, not like that. He needed…needed…What was it he needed? Something bubbled through his blood, setting him alight. It was new, and he liked it. He needed something, wanted something…what was it?

“Tony, wait, I don’t…”

“Sorry, baby,” he murmured, stilling his hips and Loki wanted to cry. “I’m pushing, I know, I’m sorry.”

“No, no, don’t stop,” Loki begged, gripping at his hips, cupping his backside, trying to force him to move. “I just…oh, I don’t know!”

Tony kissed him again and stroked a hand down, from collarbone to pelvis. “Easy, Loki, just go easy,” he soothed. “Break it down. Yes or no answers only. You want kisses?”

“Yes.”

Tony rewarded him with a deep kiss, licking between his lips. “Good. Kissing, I can do that. You want to be touched?”
“Yes.”

Tony slid a hand up from his knee to just shy of his hard cock. “I can do that one too. You want just me?”

“No,” Loki whimpered in need. “Need you both.”

“Okay,” he agreed, taking a step back and tugging Loki by the hand back into their bedroom, closing the doors. He’d hate to see what Thor did if he heard his brother moaning in pleasure. Tony didn’t have a suit with him to protect against acts of enraged Asgardian.

Tony liked the bed, especially the furs. It made him feel all caveman-like, made him want to both dominate and be dominated. Hell, he just wanted to touch and suck and fuck until he couldn’t see straight. He made a mental note to ask if they could take some furs home with them.

He laid Loki down and pressed a kiss to his clothed stomach before he shook Steve by the shoulder. The blond jerked awake, crowding close.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?” he asked and then squeaked in surprise when Loki shot to his knees, straddling his lap. “Hmm, apparently not.” He squeezed his hips. “Nothing wrong here.”

Loki sighed as he got to kiss Steve. His alpha, so big and strong and so much love.

“I want it,” Loki begged. “Please, Steve. Please.”

“Easy, take it easy,” Steve calmed, stroking back his hair. “Come on, sweetheart, tell us what you need. You need us to touch? To suck?”

“To make me yours,” Loki said plaintively. “It’s time, time to be together.”

He was grinding himself into Steve’s erection, arching his head back so Tony could kiss at his neck from behind, the circle of the reactor pressing into his back.

“You want us to make love, baby?” Tony crooned. “You want to take Steve inside? To take him in and take the pleasure he wants to give you and then lay back for me?”

“Yes! Yes, I want! Please! Please!”

Steve accepted the kiss Tony gave him, Loki pressed between them, and then they worked to get all of them naked. The two humans had talked it through a few times, figuring out how it would best work for the three of them. They were both certain that they both wanted to be touching Loki as much as they physically could. So Tony laid across the bed, along the pillows, and Steve laid Loki against him, his head cushioned by Tony’s abdomen, those clever fingers combing through his long hair.

“You want me first, Loki?” Steve asked, stroking those long legs as he knelt between them. “You can have Tony first, if that’s how this is supposed to go. Whatever you want.”

“No,” Loki said firmly. “No, it has to be you first, then Tony. I need to have you both.”

“Okay, okay. Me first. Is this good, with Tony there? Is this right?”

“Yes,” he said, turning his head to look at the gently smiling Tony, moaning as Steve proceeded to lick and kiss at his stomach, rubbing at his hips and thighs, gently licking at his nipples.

“Loki?” Tony pressed. “Baby, listen to me. Should we wear condoms? I know what the doctor said
but this is about you. You want us to put a glove on it?"

“No!” he yelled, and then relaxed. “No, no barriers. Not tonight. Just us, all natural.”

Tony gave them the filthiest grin as Steve groaned into Loki’s neck.

Steve wouldn’t deny that he as nervous. He took his time exploring the pale skin, kissing and licking and nipping, until the soft expanse was littered with little red marks and Loki was writhing in desire. Tony would usually shoot him a smirk, as if he knew exactly how much Steve liked to mark both the brunets, but he didn’t that night; his attention was all on Loki. The two men had agreed that Tony would be fully in the role of beta when Loki was ready to make love. Tony would keep track of how Loki was doing and guide Steve, so the experience could be everything it should be for Loki. When they switched places, Steve would keep track of everything, but Loki had to be the centre of everything that first time.

Steve finally dipped his hand between Loki’s legs, stroking his cock until Loki was gasping and moaning, begging Steve for more. Then he dipped his hand lower.

As Loki became aroused, his testes lifted and separated, retreating into his body, making it easier for him to be penetrated in the best way to conceive children. It was the most unusual thing either Tony or Steve had ever come across in a bed partner, but they did admit that it was a welcome surprise.

Loki was wet, his hips thrusting against the stroking hand and Steve ducked in to kiss him as he fondled his labia, making him moan. Every now and then, he rubbed a firm fingertip against his clit, before returning to his labia, making Loki almost mindless with the pleasure of it.

“Good?” Tony asked.

“So good,” Loki agreed. “So good.”

He reached out needy hands, one to Tony who caught it in his own hand, nibbling at his fingers, and one to Steve, who smiled as it tangled in his hair.

Loki thrust himself towards Steve with a cry as he rubbed the head of his cock along his wet slit. It tickled hidden parts of him, sent bolts of pleasure shooting up his spine.

“Steve,” Tony said, catching his attention. “No more. Much more of this and he’ll be too sensitive.”

Steve leaned over, giving him a kiss, before he returned to Loki. He got his knees under him and lifted Loki’s hips, setting him on his thighs. Loki’s legs fell open and back and Steve smiled as Loki blushed.

“Calm,” he crooned, leaning in to kiss him. “Just me. You don’t need to be embarrassed with me. I love you, every little bit of you.”

“I love you too. And Tony? I love you.”

“Ohhh,” Tony squealed, distracting Loki as Steve lined up. “I’m loved too! Not all yours, Capsicle!”

Steve stopped all conversation by thrusting deep, breaking through Loki’s barrier, going as deep as he could in a single thrust before going still.

Loki screamed, there was no other word for the sound he made, trying to shut his legs against the pain and finding Steve in the way. It hurt, so very much. It felt like he was being torn in half. Steve felt so big inside him, far too big.
“Oh, no, please! No! It’s too much, too much,” Loki sobbed, breathless, gripping at them both.

“Breathe, baby,” Tony ordered. “Come on, take some nice deep breaths for me. It’s okay. It’s done, all done.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispered, kissing him over and over, keeping his hips almost unnaturally still. “I’m so sorry. I know it hurt, but it’s over now. And it only happens once, I promise.”

They continued to murmur comfort until he calmed a little, relaxing around Steve and coming back to them. They’d been warned that Loki’s hymen was almost a full covering of the entrance of him, and it was thick, so it would hurt him a lot to break, but the pain would pass.

“That hurt,” he complained as he finally managed to open his eyes.

Steve kissed away his tears. “I know, sweetheart, I know. I’m sorry.”

“Why did it hurt?”

“Virgins sometimes have a barrier, it’s called the hymen,” Tony said. He was slowly running his fingers through Loki’s hair, his other hand entwined with Loki’s. “When Steve first went inside, he broke through it.”

“Oh.” He was quiet for a few moments. “Is it what I was told to be maidenhead?”

“Yeah, that’s what she was talking about. Are you okay?” Steve asked.

Loki didn’t answer. Instead he let go of Tony and reached down, probing between his legs to feel where Steve was inside him. His fingers came away stained with his own blue blood.

“Hey,” Steve pressed, nuzzling his cheek. “It’s okay.”

“I know. Just…checking.” He arched up and captured Steve’s mouth. “Continue,” he whispered. “You promised me pleasure.”

Steve ducked his head as he grinned, before he began rocking his hips. Not truly thrusts, just little movements to get Loki used to it. As he expected, Loki continued letting out little pained sounds, his body complaining at the new treatment, but there must have been pleasure underneath it because the erection that had wilted was starting to return.

Slowly, as Loki began to make more sounds of enjoyment, Steve began to truly thrust, carefully getting more forceful with him, until Loki let out a throaty moan. Steve was fully determined to wait it out, to take Loki with him in orgasm, until Tony leaned in, kissing him and then Loki.

“He won’t, Steve,” he reminded. “He won’t until I do. Mengloth told us that, remember. This first time, he won’t come until we both have, until we’ve both ejaculated inside him.”

Steve sighed, disappointed, but did what was needed, not just his own wants. He took Loki steadily until Loki was a gasping writing mess clamping his legs around Steve’s waist, and then he gave in to the burning heat pooled low in his belly. He came hard inside his mate, his teeth sinking into Loki’s shoulder until blood filled his mouth.

As soon as he was physically able, he rolled sideways, kissing Tony while keeping his hands on Loki. As Steve clocked out, Tony took over.

He manipulated them until Loki was laying on Steve the way he had been laying on Tony, and then
he swooped in, using lips and hands to taste and touch all he could get of Loki’s skin. It ramped up the tension inside Loki once more, and Tony knew he couldn’t draw this out. The next time he could, but not just then. Loki was too far gone, if Tony didn’t get on with it, his careful ministrations would cause pain from overstimulation.

Tony lined up and sunk in, groaning as the tight heat surrounded him. One of Loki’s hands tangled in his hair as he began to thrust, setting a punishing pace, and Loki screamed in delight.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he murmured between kisses, aware that his reactor was pressing into Loki’s love bitten skin. “I can’t make it last, I can’t…I have to…”

“Yes,” Loki begged, untangling his hand from Steve’s and pulling Tony into a scorching kiss before dragging his hands down to grip his wildly bucking hips. The reactor kept scraping over his nipples and it was absolutely delicious. “Enough, it’s enough. Please, please, please!”

Tony thrust harder, faster, changing his angle and worming a hand between them to stroke Loki before he came, sinking his teeth into the other shoulder, Loki screaming beneath him as it hit him.

Everything clamped down on Tony, not letting him roll away, holding him so close their heart beats became one solid hum in their ribs.

Eventually, Loki relaxed, letting Tony roll off him. The three of them lay there, a sprawled mess, blood and sweat and cum covering them. Loki was floating on endorphins, Tony and Steve smiling tiredly at each other.

After a while, they recovered enough to move. Steve lifted Loki to a position more conducive to sleep, his head actually on the pillows, and Tony headed to the bathroom, opening the balcony doors on his way back with warm wet washcloths.

The two humans took care of the clean-up. Loki was still too blissed out to help; he could barely make sounds, let alone lift a hand and move. Once they were relatively clean, Tony chucked the cloths in the vague direction of the bathroom and climbed into bed, pouring out the water he’d snagged on the way.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Steve cooed, pulling Loki to sit up a little, leaning against Steve’s broad chest. “Drink some water for me.”

Loki obediently drank from the glass Tony pressed to his lips, licking them when it was taken.

“More?” Tony asked, and refilled it when Loki nodded, passing the bottle to Steve. He stroked Loki’s hair as he helped him drink some more, and then guzzled some himself when he was done.

Together they manipulated Loki’s satiated limbs into their usual sleeping position: Loki on his side, head on Steve’s chest with Tony pressed up against his back. The breeze from the open door felt amazing over their skin.

“Loki?” Steve murmured into the dark.

“Mmmm?”

“Did we get it right? Was it right?”

“Was perfect,” he slurred.
Loki woke snuggled into Tony, the engineer toying with his hair.

“We’re missing one,” Loki mumbled at the lack of another body beside him.

“Went for his run. He was all energized and bouncy. Honestly, it was exhausting to watch. I’d much rather be here with you.”

“I can tell,” he replied, moving his arm so he could rub the morning wood beneath it. He wriggled closer and squeaked.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m sore,” he admitted. “Am I supposed to be?”

“The way you screamed last night, I’d be shocked if you weren’t. Come on, up you get. I’ll make you feel better.”

Tony helped him to sit up and then eased him to his feet so he could lead him to the bathroom. To Loki it felt like he’d been roughly rearranged in his nether regions, and each step was painful. Tony sank him into a warm bath and Loki was pleased with the way his pain faded. Tony got in with him and set about carefully washing away the blood on his shoulders.

“Damn. We got you good. Do these hurt?” he asked, cautiously wiping at the bite he made.

“A little, not much. I like them.”

“Really? You like that your lovers turned into vampires the first time you let us have you?”

“They feel…I’m supposed to have them.”

“Huh. Maybe it’s part of what you are, part of this bond thing we got happening.”

Loki hummed as Tony began to press kisses to the mark he’d made between swipes of the soft cloth he was using. Together, they cleansed almost all of him, and then Loki grit his teeth and dipped a hand between his legs.

“Easy, baby,” Tony soothed as he whimpered. “Go slowly. There’s no rush. Take all the time you need.”

Tony gripped his hips as Loki reached for the soap, and ignored the swirls of blue blood he could see in the water. He pressed kisses to the notches of his spine, steadying him as he cleaned what was too sore for Tony to touch. He grit his teeth at the whimpers coming from his lover.

“You okay?” Tony whispered as Loki put the soap back in its dish.

“That was not enjoyable, but I’m not sticky anymore.”

“Yeah, the mess is a downside, but the good outweighs the bad, right?”

“I think so,” Loki said as he laid back against him. “Tony?”

“Yes?”

“How did you do that thing?”

“What thing?”
“The way you moved your hips. It felt very good.”

“Glad you liked it,” he said with a grin, pressing a kiss to the soft skin behind his ear. “It comes through practice. I’ll remember for next time.”

“When I’m not so sore.”

“Absolutely.”

Steve poked his head in and smiled at them before he joined them, stripping off and climbing in with them, kneeling between Loki’s legs so he could talk to them both, giving them quick kisses as he sat down.

“Did you have a good run?” Loki asked as Steve began happily trickling water down his chest.

“I did, though I think the people find it a bit strange. Their warriors keep the training to the assigned grounds, not by the rivers, but they seem amused nonetheless. Considering it’s December, it’s not in the least bit cold.”

“No, it never is. One of the reasons why Asgard is sometimes referred to as the golden realm. We never really get a winter.”

“You’re going to love New York when winter really hits. They’re already predicting heavy snowfall round about the new year,” Tony promised as Loki sat up and reached for the soap once more. “Loki? Baby? What are you doing? You’re clean.”

“Yes, I am, and you are, but Steve is still wearing my maidenhead.”

Both humans glanced down and Steve flushed bright red when he noticed the blue staining his penis. Loki motioned him up, and then proceeded to wash away the remnants of his first time.

Steve shot Tony an amused glance when he realised Loki was happily humming away to himself as his soapy fingers travelled, cleaning not just his groin but the rest of him too. He ducked in, pressing gentle kisses to the bite he’d left.

“Better?” he murmured when Loki was done and urging him back down into the water.

“Yes. All squeaky clean now,” he proclaimed happily, settling back down against Tony. Steve amused himself by massaging his thighs. “I would very much like to have you again. Both of you. When I’m not so sore.”

“The way you heal, give it a few days, maybe a week,” Steve agreed. “There are lots of things we can try, when you’re ready. Lots of positions.”

“Mmmm. There was something you did that I very much enjoyed.”

“Wait. Is it the way he moved his hips?” Tony asked.

“No, that was you. I like the way you move your hips. Do try to keep up, my genius.”

Tony smiled, squeezing him a little. “Okay. So what's Steve’s special trick?”

“Tony,” Steve whined. “Please don’t debase my prowess in bed to a parlour trick.”

“I didn’t! I was just saying!”
“Fine.” He leaned in and stole a kiss from Loki. “What was it I did that you liked?”

“When you rubbed me with your cock. Just before you broke my barrier. I liked the rubbing.”

“Ahh,” Tony said. “I like that one. He’s good at that one.”

Steve chuckled and sat up enough so he could give a bow, to which they applauded. They were interrupted by the echo of the gong that signalled breakfast was about to begin. Steve sent off one of the guards to get Bruce while they dressed, and then Tony and Steve followed Loki’s shooing hands and left them to it.

Bruce was gentle with him, dressing the wounds on his shoulders so he wouldn’t stick to his shirt. Then he was quick and careful as he did as Loki asked and performed a pelvic exam, erasing Loki’s worries as he assured there was no more damage than a broken hymen. He promised that a few warm baths and a few days would be all Loki needed to be able to accept his mates into his body again.

Once Loki was dressed, the two of them made their way towards the banqueting hall for the family breakfast. Loki urged Bruce ahead as he was pulled aside by Thor.

“Good morning, brother,” Loki said. “Is something troubling you? You know, I don’t think I’ve ever known you to delay when it comes to breaking the fast.”

“I wanted to enquire as to your wellbeing. Last night I heard you scream. I worried. I waited for further disturbance, but I heard none, so I assumed you did not need my aid.”

Loki felt himself blush. “I am fine.”

“But the scream…”

He pulled Thor in close, and took a deep breath before he said, “That would be the sound I made when I accepted Steve within me.”

“Within you? How do you…OH! You…you were…”

“Mating, yes, brother. I can say with first-hand knowledge that the breaking of maidenhead is not one of the more enjoyable moments of lovemaking. Do you wish further details?”

“Only to know that you are unharmed and happy with this path. They were…attentive?”

“Very. I am very well, I assure you. They love me, I love them, and it was well expressed last night. No need for you to worry. But…thank you.”

Thor gave him a happy grin and a quick hug before he strode off to his breakfast, giving Jane a kiss as he sat down.

Loki followed, settling between his mates, his breath hitching as he actually sat down.

“You okay?” Tony worried.

“I’m fine. Sitting is just not my favourite activity right now.”

Steve snorted into his goblet, inhaling half his juice. Loki couldn’t help his laughter as Sam had to thump him on the back.

Breakfast was calm after that, and when everyone had had their fill, Nuada disappeared to begin the
court. They all filed into the throne room, taking their seats, and watching as Odin was brought in.

“Odin, son of Bor, you may be reminded of your accused crimes if you wish,” Nuada said, his voice clear and steady.

“No,” Odin said. “I would just like to get this over with.”

“Very well. Representatives, have you reached a decision as to the guilt of the accused?”

“We have,” Hogan said.

“Is it unanimous?”

“It is,” Sif replied.

“Then what say you to the judgement of Odin in regards to his crimes?”

“We, the representatives of the Nine Realms of the Life Tree,” Hela said, “find Odin, son of Bor, guilty of treason against the crown of Jotunheim.”

A ripple of agreement went through the room as she pronounced their decision. Loki curled into Steve, entwining his fingers with Tony’s as it sunk in, and Thor held Jane close, his eyes fixed on his father. Odin made no indication that he’d heard other than closing his one good eye. It wasn’t truly a surprise, but it still hurt Thor and Loki to hear it. They had grown up with Odin as their father, things had only soured in the last few years.

“Let the record reflect this ruling,” Nuada said to the scribe, receiving a nod. “Representatives, have you reached a decision on the punishment of the guilt?”

“We have not,” Anung Un Rama said. “We have decided that Odin shall no longer sit on Asgard’s throne, that he should be replaced as monarch by his brother, Vili, son of Bor. We’ve also come to the decision that the Casket of Ancient Winters be returned to Jotunheim, as some small compensation. Of these things, we are agreed. But we have decided that the final punishment of Odin is not ours to decide.”

“His crimes were against Jotunheim,” Nuala said. “And thus Jotunheim should decide his fate, for he altered theirs. We have decided that Odin is to be given to the peoples of Jotunheim for punishment.”

“Do you all agree with this?” Nuada pressed.

“Almost,” Thrym said. “I have talked with my people. They wish that his punishment be decided by a single voice. Prince Loki will decide his fate.”

The room fell into a state of shock, waves of disbelief rippling through the crowds as discussions were made, and Loki was stared at by almost all. Eventually they quieted, and Nuada cast a long look at Loki before he spoke.

“Representatives, I beg of you, a moment of your time,” he said, motioning to the side.

The nine representatives gathered with Nuada and they debated back and forth for a while until an agreement was reached and they all returned to their places.

“It is decided,” Nuada announced. “Odin, son of Bor, you are to be stripped of all powers, all longevity, rendered no more than a mortal, as you did your sons. After that, you shall be given to Prince Loki to do with as he chooses. That is the ruling of this court. Do you have anything to say
before your sentence is commenced?”

Odin shook his head.

“Guards, you will return the prisoner to his cell while the mages prepare. Prince Vili, son of Bor, come forward.”

Vili extricated himself from the crowd and stood in the middle of the open area.

“Will you accept the crown of Asgard?”

“No.”

The whole room froze at the tiny word and even Nuada, so calm and collected, spluttered uncharacteristically.

“I will accept the crown only if it is not wished for by my nephews, the princes Thor and Loki. I will take up the crown if neither of them desire it,” Vili pronounced.

All eyes turned to the two princes. Thor sat a little taller in his seat while Loki shrunk into Steve’s side, tugging Tony closer, as if he were a blanket he could hide behind.

“Prince Thor, what say you?” Nuada asked.

Thor got to his feet and offered a small smile. “I will say now what I said then. I was asked what Asgard could offer its new king, in return for the peace I had battled for. I answered then as I answer now: with a single answer. My life. I cannot be king of Asgard. Uncle, I gladly give up my claim to the title of Crown Prince, in return for being a son of Asgard only, free to live my life as I choose.”

“I honour your choice, my nephew, and wish you happiness in this path.”

“Let the record show that Thor shall forever be only Prince and never King,” Nuada said. “Prince Loki, what say you?”

Loki opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. It was what he had wanted for so long, to be king. But things had changed. In all his schemes and machinations, he had never foreseen having a family, having two wonderful men who loved him. He compared what his life had been to what it was.

Sabrina holding his hand, trusting him to keep her safe. Natasha offering her own comfort in the form of sparing with him. Kiddo handing him blocks and smiling at him. Clint watching cartoons with him. Annie letting him feel the baby kick. Phil teaching him to cook. Bruce taking such good care of him. The return to a good relationship with Thor. JARVIS, Bucky, Skye, Jane, Darcy. Even Helix, who loved Loki giving her a belly rub.

He squirmed in his seat and felt the slight sting of his missing virginity. Steve had been so careful with him, so loving, so gentle. And Tony had ensured everything had happened the way it needed to, and then given him such pleasure. And he was so attentive that morning.

“I want to go home,” he said quietly. “Steve, I want to go home.”

“He doesn’t want it,” Tony announced. “And as his mate, I’m saying no. Being king of Asgard is not the right thing for Loki.”

At Vili and Nuada’s questioning looks, Loki nodded.
“So be it,” Nuada said. “The record will show that both Prince Thor and Prince Loki shall forever be sons of Asgard, nothing more. Prince Vili, we will begin the preparations for your coronation, to be held this evening at sundown. This court is ended.”

Steve and Tony didn’t wait around for conversation. They took Loki and spirited him away to their rooms, where he clung to them and shook.

“I don’t want it,” he demanded. “I can’t be king. I wanted it, so much. But things are different. Thrym and Helblindi, they said. I’m not meant to be a king. I’m supposed to be a queen. And if my path is now altered so the two of you are my chance at happiness, if you are my path, then how could I be king? You are both defenders of the earth, you could not rule here with me, and I need you both, I could not be without you.”

“Loki, baby, breathe,” Tony begged, his arms around his waist. “No one is going to make you do anything.”

“Listen to us, sweetheart, please,” Steve pleaded, stroking Loki’s hair as he snuggled against his chest. “You’re coming home with us, I promise you. We’re not going to leave you here without us.”

“I can’t do it, I can’t be king,” Loki babbled. “All that power? I can’t have that. No, no, it would never work. I tried it, I had power, and look what I did with it.”

“Hey!” Steve barked, sitting them up and forcing Loki to look at him. “You will NOT be king, do you hear me? The throne is not yours. Thor said no, we said no, the throne goes to your uncle. It’s been decided, there’s no going back now. Vili will be king as soon as the sun goes down. Just hold on while the sun’s up.”

“And then we’ll go home?”

“Yeah, baby,” Tony agreed. “We will leave as soon as the coronation is over. You can see that thing get shoved on someone else’s head and then we’ll take you home.”

Steve opened his mouth to give more reassurances, but he was interrupted by a giggle from the open balcony door. Sabrina was standing there, peeking in, Kiddo in her arms. It truly demonstrated her enhanced strength. She could pick up Kiddo and carry him around with no strain, now she’d figured out the best way to hold him. She’d even picked up Natasha once with very little effort.

“What are you doing here, little miss?” Tony said, crossing to take Kiddo from her. She took it as permission to barrel in and clamber up onto the bed. “Do Phil and Clint know you two have wandered off?”

“No,” she said, crawling into Loki’s lap. “Said we go play.”

Tony handed Kiddo to Steve and crossed the room, sticking his head out and instructing a passing maid to tell Phil and Clint where their children were.

“You should have told them where you were going,” Steve said gently. “They would have been worried if you’d gotten lost.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay, just don’t do it again,” Tony said as he joined them on the bed. “Tell someone where you’re going.”

“Okay,” she agreed happily. “Loki stay?”
“What do you mean, sweetheart?” Loki asked.

“If Loki king, Loki not come home. Safe at home. Loki in my bigger unit, Steve and Tony love Loki. Loki stay bigger unit?”

“Oh, baby, no,” Tony promised. “We’re not going to leave Loki here. He’s coming home with us, I promise.”

“Good. Not finish story,” she complained and Loki smiled, hugging her close.

“You’re right, we didn’t finish the story, did we?” he said. “We shall have to finish it when we go home. Maybe Annie will make us some of her cookies to have while we read.”

“Yeah! Cookies good. Not cookies here.”

“There’s no coffee here,” Tony complained as Kiddo managed to crawl across the furs to him. “Hey, little guy.” He helped the toddler to stand which he found highly amusing. He giggled and pressed his hands to his mouth, looking to Steve for approval. Steve smiled and clapped and Kiddo bounced in delight.

“When go home?” Sabrina asked.

“As soon as Vili is king,” Steve promised.

“And then we’ll have JARVIS to keep an eye on you,” Clint said as he and Phil entered and Sabrina ducked her head.

“Sorry. Want see Loki,” she said. “Make sure Loki come home, be safe.”

Phil smiled and perched on the end of the bed.

“Sweetheart, Loki is coming home with us, I promise,” Phil assured. “We’re going home with everyone we came with.”

Loki didn’t want to sit alone with his mates, he wanted more of his human family, so Loki let Sabrina take him by the hand and lead him to Frigga’s gardens, where the rest of their family was waiting. They nibbled at snacks and talked and laughed, playing games and enjoying his mother’s blooms.

He had always been happy in the gardens, always felt closest to Frigga there, always felt at home there. But it wasn’t his home, not anymore. His home was on Earth, with his family.

It had been a much needed trip to Asgard, he’d learnt so much, about himself more than anything else.

But he knew where he should be.

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The coronation was a blur of gold and food and wine.

The gathered people of the Nine Realms and beyond had come together to see a new king of Asgard take his crown. A new king of any of the Realms was a momentous occasion. Once he was crowned, there was a party, lots of people, food, drink, music playing.

Bruce leaned back against one of the huge stone pillars, sipping a goblet of fruit juice as he watched
Annie smiling and laughing with some Elves, Princess Nuala amongst them. They were fascinated by her bump. Annie looked absolutely stunning in a gown of gold and silver, red accents bringing out the shine of her dark hair and eyes. Bruce knew absolutely that there was no other woman that could even come close to being so beautiful.

“Humans have the longest carry of any Realm,” Nuada said as he joined him. “It is fascinating to them. My sister especially is delighted by the feel of the babe within Annie.”

“You don’t get to feel a baby kick like that on your world?”

“No, our carry is too short.” He held out a book to Bruce. “A gift for you. I had Nuala bring it for me.”

“Thank you,” he said as he took it, opening the cover to look at the contents. “An anatomy text?”

“Yes, Jotun biology. There is a section on the Blessing, it should aid you in caring for Loki. I hope it will be more use in your possession than it ever was in ours.”

“I’m sure it will help, a lot,” he promised. “This is a rare book, Thrym’s people are still tearing their libraries apart to find something like this.”

“My father had an uncle that married a Frost Giant. That book was given in the marriage chest. Of course, Jotunheim was a prosperous Realm then. Stories are told of a marriage chest that contained many great jewels, precious metals, fine trinkets, furs, all manner of gifts. Then the Great War put an end to all that. It does please me to see the Casket returned to its rightful place. It never should have been taken. Neither should Loki.”

“No. But he’s found his way,” Bruce said as they looked at Loki, who was laughing with Helblindi and Thor.

“As have you,” Nuada said, nodding at Annie.

Bruce grinned.

The Avengers family spent one last night in Asgard, shared one more breakfast with their hosts and new friends, and then made their way to the Bifrost chamber.

They were deposited on the roof of Stark Tower with several trunks full of gifts. Beautiful gowns, precious jewels, pretty trinkets and carved toys. The furs Tony had wanted. And the new friendship of the other eight Realms. The President was still with them, riding on a high that his first intergalactic diplomatic mission had gone exceedingly well.

Odin would remain in Asgard’s prison until Loki could decide what to do with him.

They made their way to the elevators, where President Ellis and Rhodey, who had been his bodyguard, loaded up their belongings and took the ride down to the underground garage, where Happy was waiting to drive them to the airfield for the flight back to Washington.

Once the carriage returned to the roof, they took a few trips to put belongings on their proper floors, and then they all piled in and went to the Penthouse. Helix scampere up to meet them, deliriously happy to see them. She was a little confused by Annie and spent long moments circling her and sniffing until she reared back, paws up, begging for Annie’s attention.
“Welcome home, Sir.”

Tony wasted no time in crossing the room and hugging his creation.

JARVIS hadn’t been able to go with them. It was just too far a distance for the connection to his servers to handle. He’d stayed behind with the dog, handling things for Tony and the others while they were away.

“I have missed you, sir,” he murmured as he buried his face in Tony’s shoulder.

“I know, buddy. We missed you too. Darcy took loads of video for you, and we brought a ton of gifts for you. How have you been? Any problems with the body? You’ve been eating, right? Charging? Maintenance?” Tony pressed, pulling back and cupping his jaw, looking him over.

“I have been well, sir, no maintenance needed. I have been charging as I need, every other night seems sufficient, and eating as required, at least twice every day, more often three meals, with small nibbles as I choose. Mister Hogan has checked in on me daily. We have stocked the refrigerator with leftovers of various meals. I do not enjoy take away curries. They are far inferior.”

Bruce chuckled. “You saying my curries are better?”

“Far better, Doctor.”

Sabrina finished her lap of the room and launched herself at JARVIS, cuddling close as he picked her up.

They unpacked and lounged in the penthouse before they sat down to lunch, a mix of heated up leftovers and Asgardian treats they’d been given to take with them. JARVIS was delighted to have them back, and Loki especially was happy to be home.

They were once again lounging in the penthouse, Disney’s Hercules playing, the kids cuddling and playing, when there was a commotion from the balcony. The doors slid open to give entry to a figure in red and blue spandex.

“Hey, Jarv, they’re back!” he said, flopping onto the sofa.

“Ah, yes, I had filed you in the back of my mind.” JARVIS said with a grimace. “Sir, forgive me, I was going to mention this development. May I introduce Mister Spiderman. He wishes to apply to join with the Avengers.”

“Nice to meet you all.”

Chapter End Notes

So what did you all think? Was the judgement of Odin right? Loki’s first time? The trial?

Comment below and let me know what you thought.
Chapter Fifteen

The Avengers demanded the mask come off. They wouldn’t even consider Spiderman joining them if they didn’t know who he was under it.

While the spandex covered figure debated with himself, JARVIS filled them in.

Spiderman had been using their balcony in the small hours of the morning to watch the sun come up, taking photographs for a project. Apparently, their balcony got the best view out of any tall building in the city, and it didn’t surprise anyone to hear it. He’d been visiting for months, slowly getting closer and closer to introducing himself. They’d all known about it, and had all speculated how long it would take him to actually introduce himself.

He’d finally managed to gather his courage enough the day after they’d left for Asgard. JARVIS had been enjoying daily visits from him ever since.

“You promise no one will know?” Spiderman asked.

“We promise,” Steve assured. “But we can’t have a member of the team no one knows anything about. Picture it. We get a call to assemble, and for some reason you get hurt. Who do we contact? What name do we call you by? If you have a head injury, we need to know your real name. Injuries to Thor are different than injuries to me, and still different when they’re Clint. We need to know you, aside from the suit. Doing what we do comes with a certain amount of risk, and I’m not comfortable having anyone on the team I can’t be sure of.”

Spiderman took a deep breath before he reached up and tugged off his mask, revealing a dark haired young man. Very young.

“Oh, hell, I am not getting into this one,” Annie said. She held out a hand to Sabrina. “Come on, baby girl. Let’s go make those cookies you wanted.”

Sabrina happily went off with Annie as the others looked at each other, wondering who would be the first to speak.

“What is your real name?” JARVIS asked.

“Peter. I’m Peter Parker.”

“Oh! Son of Richard and Mary Parker. Their work was very impressive.”

“What work?” Tony asked.

“Richard Parker was a renowned geneticist specialising in cross-species genetics, most notably with his wife, Mary Parker, and geneticist Curt Connors. Most notable achievements include the creation of genetically engineered spiders.”

“Oh, I know now,” Tony smiled. “And I know you. Your dad brought you to a fundraiser once when you were a toddler. You solved my Rubix cube!”

“Oops. Sorry,” Peter said, blushing.
“So if I look through the alcohol haze in my brain, you’re not even old enough to drink, kid.”

“I’m nineteen,” Peter admitted.

“No, no way, you’re too young,” Phil said. “It is against every single guideline of every single reputable agency on the planet. He’s too young, Steve.”

“Agreed, every guideline says he is too young for the work we do. But he’s old enough for military service, and I’ve seen with my own eyes that someone young can make a difference. I was only 25 when I became Captain America. Age isn’t a prerequisite for someone making a difference.”

“No, it’s not,” Natasha said.

“Maybe it should be,” Bucky argued. “Steve, we shouldn’t have been over there. We should have been at home, charming the ladies. You really wanna pull another kid into a conflict he can avoid?”

“He can’t avoid it,” Clint said, picking up Kiddo. “He’s powered, enhanced in some way. He’s in this, no question of that.”

“So the question becomes whether we give him allies or ask him to continue without us,” Sam said.

“Then it’s not even a question, is it?” Bruce said. “He’ll be safer with us looking out for him. But he’ll have to train with us. We can’t take him into a battle without training with him first, it’s asking for trouble.”

“Agreed,” Natasha said. “Phil? You okay?”

“With this? Not in the slightest,” he sighed. “But…Clint’s right. Even if we don’t bring him in, he’s still going to be swinging around the city getting into trouble. He’s safer as an Avenger, if you can believe that sentence exists. Damn it, that means paperwork.”

“I shall assist you in the paperwork, Master Coulson,” JARVIS said.

“So…I’m in?” Peter asked, a smile spreading across his face.

“On a provisional basis,” Steve said.

“Awesome! I’m an Avenger!”

Phil stood in the doorway of Kiddo’s room and watched his son sleep in his own bed for the very first time.

They had gone through the usual bedtime routine. Kiddo and then Sabrina had had their baths, and then some quiet playtime with cartoons, before they cuddled into Phil and Clint and listened to a story while having some warm milk.

As usual, they had put Sabrina to bed and then Kiddo had crawled off, as he had taken to doing. He loved being mobile, able to go where he wanted, and the adults in his life liked to let him go under his own power as much as possible. But he hadn’t headed towards Phil and Clint’s bedroom.

He had crawled off towards his own.

Sam and Bruce had both theorised that Kiddo would sleep alone when he was ready. On Asgard, he’d had his own bed but in Phil and Clint’s room. It seemed he had decided that sleeping in his own
bed was what he should do, just like his sister.

“Hey,” Clint murmured, sliding his arms around him from behind, resting his head on his shoulder. “He still asleep?”

“Out like a light. Look at him. He’s doing so well.”

“Yeah. Our special boy. JARVIS?”

“Yes, Master Barton.”

“Will you monitor Kiddo for us?”

“Of course, Master Barton. I shall rouse you if he wakes or becomes distressed.”

“Thanks,” Clint said, pressing a kiss to Phil’s neck. “Come on, baby. Time for bed. He’ll be okay, JARVIS is watching, just like he watches Sabrina. We’ll leave his door open, and ours, so he can come find us if he wants.”

Phil let him tug him away, across the hall to their bedroom. Five months of sleeping with a toddler between them, it took them a moment to get back to holding each other.

“Does this bed seem damn big to you?” Clint asked with a grin as he spooned behind his husband.

“Enormous. Who knew such a little person took us so much space?”

“Obviously not us. Phil?”

“Hmmm?”

“Think I’m being really optimistic about him sleeping in his bed if I want you to fuck me?”

Phil felt a shiver run down his spine and he rolled over, pushing Clint onto his back, sealing their mouths together. He could feel Clint smiling, and he knew they couldn’t draw it out. He didn’t want to. It had to be quick and dirty.

They used to have a lot of quick dirty fucks. Their separate missions had always ended in them, a sort of welcome home for the one who had been away. Sometimes they had requested separate missions just to be able to enjoy it.

Five months of a toddler sleeping between them; the afternoons with someone else watching the kids had not been enough.

They all but ripped off their clothes and Phil grabbed the lube from the bathroom while Clint closed the door momentarily.

“Come on,” Clint whined as he climbed back onto the bed on all fours. He sank down, resting his head on his arms as Phil climbed on behind him. His breath left him in one quick rush as Phil’s tongue circled his tight ring of muscle.

“You taste so good,” Phil moaned between licks, his hands spreading his cheeks, nuzzling lower, licking along his perineum, the back of his balls. He continued to feast as Clint wound tighter and tighter, adding fingers and lube to prepare him.

“Stop. No more,” Clint begged when Phil was three fingers deep in him and licking at the stretched flesh. “I need you in me, no more fingers, no more…anything! Just fuck me!”
Phil chuckled and pressed a kiss to each cheek before he straightened and coated his shaft, pushing Clint’s legs further open, pressing himself against the loosened hole and pushing in, going balls deep in one slow glide. Clint moaned as he was penetrated, fighting not to push back until Phil was inside.

Phil didn’t stop to let him adjust, just began fucking into him hard, gaining speed with each passing moment. Clint was gasping from the get go, demanding it harder, pushing back against the pounding.

Clint loved the feel of it, being joined to Phil in such an intimate way. They’d stopped using condoms years ago, seeing no need, even before they were married. Of course, when they had both been agents, there had been the odd mission come up that required intimate contact with a target. Fury had always diverted those to other agents.

Clint and Phil refused to share each other, not even for national security.

Thankfully, Natasha was usually more than happy to take the assignments, or find some male agent who would. Natasha had always been very aware of who was sexually frustrated, and was all too happy to help them out with a quick meaningless screw that helped with international diplomacy.

Clint used to keep a list, of all the strange and random places he and Phil had done it. Phil’s office, the one on the Helicarrier and others, of course. Medical. R & D. The engineering workshops. The firing range. The gym.

Clint never got tired of the feel of Phil. No matter which of them was penetrated, it always felt good to be touched by Phil. Clint’s experiences before Phil had either been abusive or meaningless. Phil had taught him that it was okay to want things, okay to feel things, okay to enjoy the act.

The first time Phil had actually taken him to bed, Clint had half expected it to go like all the other times. Pushed to his back or all fours, one two fingers, a little lube or spit and then impaled roughly. Phil was not like that. He had spent hours teasing Clint, taking him apart and putting him back together, showing him how good it could be, all the things he’d been missing.

“PHIL!” Clint screamed as the older man yanked him up, Clint’s back to his chest, his arms tight around him, holding him close. He let his head fall back onto Phil’s shoulder as one hand alternated between his nipples and the other fondled his dick.

“That’s it, my beautiful archer,” Phil crooned in his ear. “Take the pleasure. I want you to have it.”

“Want…wanna take.”

“Then take.”

Clint couldn’t hold on, he had no choice but to give in to the white-hot tongue of pleasure searing through his veins. He let himself go, jerking in Phil’s arms, clamping down on him, caught between one breath and the next.

As Clint was gasping and shaking, Phil laid him out on the bed, leaning over him to be able to thrust wildly, until he joined him in climax with a long, low groan.

Clint came back to himself face down on the bed, Phil draped across his back, the two of them breathing heavily and covered in sweat. Their hands were entwined, something neither of them remembered doing.

Phil rolled off him with a groan and Clint oozed across the space, laying his head directly over his scar so he could press against his heart.
“Been a while,” Clint mumbled. “Since we got wild and dirty.”

“Yup. Felt like the right night for it.” Phil stroked his hand through the damp dark blond strands.

“No complaints.” Clint managed to throw one leg between Phil’s. “We should clean up.”

“Mmm.”

As Phil had done most of the work in bed, Clint handled most of the clean-up. He stripped off the sheet they’d soiled, put on a new one, wiped them both off.

Before he climbed into bed, Clint took a trip across the hall, checking on Kiddo, and then further down, to check on Sabrina. They were both still asleep, both bathed in soft light from their nightlights.

He climbed into bed, into Phil’s arms, and felt completely at ease. It had taken decades, but Clinton Francis Barton was finally content with his life.

Steve and Tony looked over Loki’s hunched form and gave each other a worried look.

Loki had been throwing up every day for a week.

Bruce had said it was most likely a reaction to changing between Asgardian and human foods, or possibly the leftovers he had eaten the day they returned had been improperly stored. JARVIS was new to handling food, and Happy could have made a mistake.

“Make it stop,” Loki moaned, clinging to the toilet.

“I’m getting Bruce,” Tony declared.

In the moments it took for Tony to retrieve Bruce from Annie’s room, another bout had taken Loki over.

“Hey, Loki,” Bruce said, kneeling beside him as he heaved over and over. He looked at Steve and Tony. “This isn’t food. Even if it was the change in diets, his system should have evened out by now. If it was food poisoning, there would be another symptom. High fever, stomach cramps, diarrhoea, something.”

“He’s had nothing,” Steve said.

“Bruce, buddy, we trust you,” Tony promised as Loki managed to collapse into Steve. “And we get that you’re trying to care for someone who isn’t human. But I’m worried about him. It’s a week now.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Tony, I really am doing my best.”

“He knows, we all do,” Loki said, accepting the bottle of water Steve held out. “Let’s go with it not being the food. What’s the next step?”

“Okay, there’s no abdominal pain, no fever, nothing,” Bruce said and Loki nodded. “I guess a blood test is the next step. If you were human, that would be the next logical step. I can start with a finger stick, get JARVIS to look for anything obvious.”

“J? You up?”
“For you, sir, always. Shall I put on my body?”

“Not necessary, just need your mind, buddy. Keep charging. Prepare to run an analysis for Bruce.”

“Ready and waiting, Doctor.”

Loki held out his hand and Bruce took the blood and then they waited while JARVIS worked. They spent the time chatting about the latest in Bruce’s research, he was working on some new cancer treatments along with some more experiments with the super serum, and the latest of Tony’s designs for Intelli-toys.

“Doctor Banner, my analysis is complete. Would you like the usual visual summary?”

“Yes, please, on the pad.”

Bruce looked at the screen of numbers JARVIS had given him and spluttered.

“JARVIS, these numbers…what they mean…no way. I refuse to believe Loki disproves not just one but two old wives tales in a single go.”

“I am afraid the numbers are correct, as are the implications of such numbers,” JARVIS said. “Sir, what is an old wives tale?”

“A widely held traditional belief that is now thought to be unscientific or incorrect,” Tony said. “Which ones is he disproving?”

Bruce handed over the pad and Tony looked at it before his jaw dropped. “No way.”

“As I said.”

“But…but he…we…no! It can’t be!”

“The numbers are correct, sir. I have run them multiple times,” JARVIS said helpfully.

“JARVIS, as I’m not getting sense from the two resident so-called gifted men, perhaps you can tell me what you found in my blood,” Loki said acidly, clutching his stomach as another wave of nausea rolled over him.

“The levels of hormones within your blood lead me to only one conclusion. You are showing a positive result for pregnancy, Master Loki.”

All further conversation was halted as the nausea took Loki over and forced him to the toilet once more, vomiting up pure stomach acid; there was nothing left for him to bring up.

“I can’t be pregnant,” Loki gasped as he stopped. “I haven’t bled in centuries!”

“But Mengloth did unblock you, so you are fertile,” Bruce said.

“But we’ve only done it that once, just to seal the bond,” Steve argued.

“Did you wear a condom? Either of you?”

“No.”

“Loki, was there something that made you feel that it was the right time? Was there an event that happened to make you want to have sex?”
“No. It was just…time.”

“I have a theory,” Tony said. “If Loki was ovulating, his body experiencing that part of the menstrual cycle, then that might trigger the mating instinct. Jotun’s, their pregnancies, they’re only a month long. Their whole biology is to propagate the species. We looked at the mating urge as a way to solidify the mating bond, but his biology would be looking to further the species. We didn’t look at this from every angle.”

Bruce wanted to take Loki to his lab, run some more tests, do a physical exam, but Steve told him no. Tony followed Steve’s example and led Bruce out of the room.

Bruce was understanding, reassuring them that his tests could wait until later, once Loki had let the news sink in, and then making his way back to bed.

Loki curled up in the middle of the bed, gnawing at his thumbnail and hugging his knees.


Loki shook his head and Steve crawled over to him. “Come on, sweetheart,” he crooned, pulling his thumb from his mouth. “Come on.”

Loki let Steve lay him down and let out a sigh when he was cuddled into both of his mates.

“Loki, sweetheart, I need to say something,” Steve said. “And I don’t need you to say anything back. I just need you to hear it and remember it. Okay?”

“Okay,” Loki mumbled.

“Yes, I want it.”

“Tony? Do you want it?”

“You know… I actually do. I always thought any possibility of parenthood would scare the hell out of me. Which, hey, it really does. But I feel good about it too,” Tony said. “But, saying that, I’m with Steve. Loki, this is your body, your choice, and I’m with you all the way.”

“I…I don’t know,” Loki admitted. “I hadn’t thought this would happen so soon.”

“True,” Tony agreed. He sat up and leaned over Loki’s hip, resting his elbow on Steve’s thigh and propping up his head. “We were pretty much thinking of sex. But that doesn’t make this a bad thing. From what I see of Sabrina and Kiddo, kids seem a good thing to have. This can be a good thing, right?”

“Sure it can,” Steve said. “Things don’t always go to plan.”

“I want my mother,” Loki whispered.
“Oh, sweetheart, that’s the one person we can’t get for you.”

“But I need her! She’d know what to do, she’d tell me the right thing!”

“We can’t get her for you, baby,” Tony said sadly. “I wish we could. But she wouldn’t be able to make this decision for you. Loki, if she was here, what would you ask her?”

“If I should even be allowed a child. I caused the death of so many, and I know I was ill, I know all the things you would say, but I was still a part of their deaths. Should I be allowed a child, a precious new life, when so many lost theirs because of me?”

Tony didn’t dare glance at Steve. “If she were here, what would she say?”

“That one is not equal to the other. That my child has no connection to the actions of the past. What I did has no bearing on my ability to be a mother. Oh.”

“Loki?” Steve pressed at the shock on Loki’s face. “Loki, what’s wrong?”

“I…I’m the mother.”

“Yeah, baby, you are.”

Loki fell silent and they let him be. Eventually, Loki decided he wanted to go to the lab, and they didn’t argue with him. Bruce, who had been dozing, happily got back up out of bed and went with them.

Bruce first took a full vial of blood and set it into the machines, getting JARVIS to analyse it for him, and then he had Loki lay back on the exam table.

“Okay, I’m winging it again,” Bruce said. “But in theory, your uterus should be a little swollen. Remember, any pain, let me know.”

He pressed the area, feeling his way, remembering all the times he’d done it for a woman in India who had no access to adequate healthcare. He’d delivered close to a hundred babies in his time there, and he never got tired of it. Seeing that brand new life take its first breath, hearing the shriek, the way their arms spread out at the sudden space.

Annie would be the next woman he’d help deliver, and he couldn’t wait to see that baby into the world.

“Ah, there we go, definite uterine swelling.”

“Is that good?” Steve asked.

“It definitely supports the blood test. Loki, I’m not sure what would be the next step. A pelvic exam would be helpful, check your cervix, but I’d also like to do an ultrasound as well, try and take a look at what’s going on in there.”

“Can we get the pelvic done? I very much dislike those.”

“Sure thing.”

As swiftly as he could, Bruce stripped him below the waist, preserved his modesty with a sheet, performed the exam with an assurance that everything was as he expected it, and helped Loki dress again.
“Very quick. Thank you, Bruce,” Loki said as he once again made himself comfortable on the table.

“I try,” he said with a smile as he booted up the machine. “Now, this is an ultrasound machine. Do you know how it works?”

“No.”

“Okay, this part is the transducer. Once it’s against your skin, it’ll send out ultrasound waves which we can’t actually feel. But they go out, and whatever they hit, then they bounce back, and are picked up by the receiver in the transducer. Then they’re sent to the screen so we can see what’s going on.”

“Like an echo?” Steve asked.

“Exactly. Now, this is conductive gel, to make the movements of the probe smoother, and to amplify the signal,” Bruce said, picking up the bottle and uncovering Loki’s abdomen. “Most people think it’s cold, but I’m betting it won’t be a problem for you.”

At Loki’s nod he squeezed some of the clear jelly onto his skin. Loki sighed and hummed in pleasure, his skin going blue where it touched.

“May I bathe in this stuff?”

“Nope, but I can activate Helblindi’s room if you want to go cool off,” Tony said as Bruce placed the transducer.

“That sounds lovely.”

“Ahh! Clear as day!” Bruce said. “Wow, the growth is incredible. If this baby were fully human, I’d say you’re around about two and a half months.”

“Eight days, Bruce,” Steve pointed out. “We only had sex for the very first time eight days ago.”

“I know, I know! But this baby is almost done with its first trimester!” he gushed, excited by the science in front of him. “Okay, here, look. This white line? That’s a spine. And that is a leg. And there…is the heart,” he said, and with the flick of a switch, the rushing sound of the heartbeat flooded the room.

“Oh,” Loki breathed. “That’s…?”

“That’s your baby’s very healthy heartbeat. Let me take some measurements, do some math, and I’ll be able to give you a better idea of what’s going on in terms of growth and due dates.”

“Can…”

“Loki?”

“Can I listen to it? While you work?”

Bruce smiled. “Sure, absolutely. Just stay still for me. Do you want a picture print out?”

“Oh, yes, please.”

Tony cuddled into Steve as Loki drifted off into a kind of trance, listening to the whooshing sound of the heartbeat.

“On a scale of one to ten, how badly are you internally screaming?” Steve asked in his ear, low
enough not to be overheard.

“About a seven. You?”

“About the same. I am completely out of my depth here.”

“You and me both, Capsicle. But, for now, we need to keep it together. If we lose it, he loses it.”

Eventually Bruce finished his measurements and taking pictures and Loki was persuaded to let him turn off the machine. They gathered in the penthouse lounge as the first light of dawn began to lighten the sky.

“First off,” Bruce said. “Everything with Loki and the baby is fine. Everything healthy, well formed, where it’s supposed to be.”

“Which is a good thing,” Tony said.

“Exactly. Now, the only thing that’s putting me off is the speed of this. The anatomy text outlines the gestation of a Jotun to be so short so as to ensure a live birth. Nature does its part, making the baby viable outside of the mother’s womb as soon as it can. After that, it’s up to the parents to ensure the child’s survival.”

“If this is supposed to be this fast for Loki, why does it worry you?” Steve asked.

“Mostly, because I feel in over my head,” Bruce admitted. “I kind of feel like I’m monitoring my first pregnancy all over again. Loki, with your permission, I’d like to call Mengloth, ask for her help?”

“Of course, if you feel you need it,” Loki said immediately, his gaze locked on the scan picture Bruce had printed off for him. “Whatever you need to do is fine by me.”

“Wait,” Steve said, sharing a look with Tony. “Loki, sweetheart, you just basically agreed to sit back and let Bruce drive.”

“Yes. Is that wrong?” he asked, finally tearing his gaze away.

“Not wrong,” Tony said. “Just unexpected. Baby, I say this with love, but you’re kind of a control freak. Agreeing to Bruce taking control of things…we weren’t expecting it.”

“But Bruce has done this before. Should I not allow the more experienced party to lead things?”

Tony and Steve shared a bemused look before Tony shrugged and Steve shook his head amusedly. Arguing the point would get them nowhere. If Loki was happy to let Bruce guide him through the pregnancy, then so be it.

“Loki, I have to ask, purely because time is short,” Bruce began, rubbing the back of his neck. “If you don’t want to continue this pregnancy, I need to know, as soon as possible.”

“No,” Loki said firmly, cupping his lower abdomen. “I won’t let you take it. I made it, a person, I made a person.”

“Loki, honey, no one’s trying to take it,” Steve promised. “Remember what we talked about, about us being with you absolutely if you weren’t ready for this. That’s all Bruce is talking about. If that’s what you wanted, he’d need to know now, or really soon.”

“Your window for a termination is only another 24 to 36 hours,” Bruce said. “I guess we could maybe stretch that to 48, but I’d rather not. But that’s beside the point!” He waved his hands, as if
waving aside the thought. “The point is that this is up to you. You want to continue with this pregnancy? You want this baby?”

“Yes,” Loki said.

“Okay, then no more talk of terminations. Moving swiftly on. I estimate, based on the rate of growth we’ve already seen, that your baby is due sometime around New Year’s Eve, New Year’s Day, with wiggle room by two days either way. Now, keep in mind that this is based on the current rate of growth. If it speeds up or slows down then I’ll need to calculate again.”

“What about the sickness?” Steve asked. “He can’t possibly grow a baby that fast if he can barely keep anything down.”

“In a human pregnancy, the majority of the morning sickness tends to taper off around about the end of the first trimester, twelve weeks. For Loki, assuming growth speed remains constant, that is tomorrow. More specifically, the small hours of the next morning.”

Bruce outlines foods to avoid, physical stresses that probably wouldn’t be a good idea, some books Loki might like to read, and told them he wanted to do another scan in two days. Once Bruce had disappeared back into Annie’s room, Loki smiled dreamily at them.

“I made a person,” he said. “A whole person.”

“Yes, you did,” Tony agreed as Steve began to nip at Loki’s neck. “I—”

Tony sprang to his feet, pacing, running his fingers through his hair as manic energy took him over. Steve smiled at his antics and Loki watched interestedly.

“Tony, maybe you should go to your workshop,” Steve said. “Go build something, work some of this off.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll go do that,” he muttered and they could see the numbers in his head as he kissed them both absentmindedly, vanishing into the elevator.

“And you should go on your run,” Loki said. “Take Bucky. You can get it all out of your system. You’re being very wonderful, but I know that look in your eyes. Go with Bucky, get it out of your system.”

Steve ducked in, capturing his mouth and plundering it with his tongue, running a hand down to caress where their child was growing.

“Would you look at that, we made life the first try,” Steve murmured against his lips.

Loki grinned at him. “The morning after, when Thor asked me if I was unharmed, I told him that it was simply an expression of our love,” he whispered. “I suppose that this baby is physical proof of our love.”

“I like that.”

“Steve, I did mean it when I told you to go for a run. I want to go talk to Thor. I feel he should hear this from me.”

Steve chuckled and pressed another kiss to his lips. One kiss became two, became a whole slew of them, until Steve had to wrench himself away to change into his running gear.
“Oh, Steve,” Loki called as he clipped on Helix’s leash. “Could you find some of those donuts? The ones with the strawberry filling?”

“Absolutely. Anything else?”

“Some of that flavoured milk would be nice. Oh! And can we have pancakes for breakfast?”

“Maybe Bruce should check his sums, your appetite seems fine to me.”

Thor was so absolutely delighted about the pregnancy that he told anyone he came into contact with. The barista that served him and Jane midmorning; the clerk at the drycleaners; the security guards of Stark Tower; every single member of their family heard multiple times how wonderful it was. He extolled the cleverness of Loki, the virility of Steve and Tony, how amazing the child would be once it was born.

They managed to get him to settle enough to eat some lunch, and then Loki begged his mates to do something to shut him up, just for a little while. The Bifrost was quick to respond to Thor’s call, and Loki breathed a sigh of relief.

“He’s going to come back absolutely plastered,” Loki said happily.

“You’re not bothered by him toasting your pregnancy?” Sam questioned from where he was playing tug of war with Helix.

“Absolutely not. He can go tell every last soul in the nine Realms for all I care, and celebrate with them too, if it gets him to stop going on to me about my skills.”

Sam grinned and headed off to the gym where Natasha was waiting to spar with him, leaving Loki alone in the penthouse with Annie, who was laying on the floor.

“It cannot be comfortable down there,” Loki said as Helix nudged his hand with her nose, begging to be petted.

“You’d be surprised,” she said. “Something about the floor helps my back. The baby’s moved; it’s laying on a nerve. My whole left leg has gone numb, it’s the weirdest feeling ever.”

“Oh dear. Is that what I have ahead of me?”

“Bruce left that anatomy book on the bedside table,” she said as he settled on the floor with her, Helix rolling over to show her belly. Her tail started up a metronome as he began to scratch.

“The one he got from Nuada?”

“Yes. Damn good for helping me drift off. But I did read a bit last night about how big you’ll get. According to the book, you won’t get much of a bump. Your internal organs will all shift out of the way for the baby instead of the skin stretching.”

“Sounds much more tolerable than what you are going through,” he mused. “Annie, I am sorry.”

“For what?”

“For…stealing your thunder? Is that the right phrase? This is supposed to be when everyone is getting excited for you and your baby, and I seem to have taken over.”
“Don’t be silly!” she giggled. “A baby is always a blessing, no matter the timing or circumstances.” She smiled wistfully to herself. “Mrs Everley Mason. Me and Howard lived in this apartment building. Some of the time anyway. We had the penthouse, and on the floor below us was Mrs Mason. She’d had four husbands, all filthy rich, and she was a very wealthy old woman. I didn’t go to school, I was too advanced, it scared the teachers. I was a girl and I was smarter than them. So Howard found me text books and college work to do. I used to go to Mrs Mason during the day. She taught me all the things she thought a young lady should know.”

“So it is Mrs Mason we have to thank for the baking.”

“Exactly. One day, a woman moved into the apartment opposite Mrs Mason’s. I say woman, she wasn’t much more than a girl. Her name was Caitlyn, she was quiet, kept to herself. You could tell she had something to hide, she had the look. Secrets never really have a way of staying hidden, and eventually Mrs Mason got it out of her. She was pregnant, but unmarried. She’d married a man who had turned out to be married already. So there she was, knocked up and all alone. No family, they didn’t want anything to do with her.”

“Sounds terrible.”

“Life was hard for women back then, harder than it is now. Mrs Mason was a no nonsense kind of woman. She took no bullshit and could see through it in half a second. The day Caitlyn broke down and told her, Mrs Mason went to her jewellery box and pulled out one of her wedding rings, so Caitlyn wouldn’t be labelled as a ‘loose woman’, and told her to tell people her husband had died in an accident. Nothing puts people off more than a tragedy. No one truly wants to hear the troubles of others, and Caitlyn had no friends in the city, so no one would question it.”

“I like the sound of this Mrs Mason,” Loki said with a grin. “We could use her around here.”

“She’d make life a whole lot simpler,” Annie agreed.

“What happened? To Caitlyn and the baby?”

“She had a little boy, called him William. Mrs Mason delivered him. I was there, it was two in the afternoon. It was the strangest thing. As soon as he was in her arms, Caitlyn couldn’t stop crying. Kept going on and on about how she had nothing to offer him, that he would be better off with someone else.”

“What did Mrs Mason say?” Loki whispered.

“That he was a blessing, no matter how he came to be. God had given him, and God doesn’t make mistakes, so he was exactly where he was supposed to be.”

“Do you think she’d say the same to me?”

“I think she’d probably smack you round the head with a tea towel and tell you to embrace it,” she said. “You’re allowed to be fucking terrified. Believe me, Thor was less than thrilled when we found out about this little surprise. It was a shock, and so is this one, so be shocked.”

“It was only my first time!” Loki complained. “The first time I ever have sex in over a thousand years of living and I manage to get pregnant!”

“That theory of fate deciding where babies should be looks really good right about now, huh?”

“Fate has a strange sense of humour.”
“Loki, listen to me. I didn’t plan my baby, but I’m still happy about it, because it’s mine. And, on the bright side, at least you got to have the pleasurable part that goes with this.”

“I suppose. Well, yes, I did.”

“Please tell me it was as good as I hope it was.”

Loki felt the blood rush to his face. “It was…adequate,” he mumbled.

“Translation, it was fucking amazing and you’ve been replaying it in your head ever since,” she said and he grinned, all the answer she needed. “I’m sorry, really, I shouldn’t tease.”

“It’s fine. I’m counting on you and your baby to help me figure out how to actually hold mine. Feel free to tease. I’m sure you and Bruce have many happy moments to think of.”

“Actually…”

“But you sleep in the same bed!”

“I know! But he can’t. The Hulk. It makes everything radioactive and he’s not sure it would be safe for the baby.”

“And you want to?”

“Are you serious? My hormones are through the roof, all I want to do is screw and screw and screw.” She sighed. “Who am I kidding? I can barely move right now. There is no way anything is flexible enough for sex.”

“Can we change the subject?” he begged, his face burning.

“Absolutely. Uhhhh…okay! Cravings. Any cravings yet?”

“Strawberries. Anything strawberries. Do you know I ate that entire twelve box this morning all by myself?!”

“I only saw you do five. The whole box? That’s impressive.”

When Steve joined them, they were giggling about something, the floor around them littered with cookie boxes, strawberry frosting lingering on Loki’s lips.

The next couple of weeks passed relatively peacefully, as far as life for the Avengers went. They had a few calls to assemble, most notably an infestation of giant chickens that wanted to eat diamonds. Hulk had loved those so much they’d even considered keeping one for him as a pet.

Tony threw himself into turning the spare room between his room and Annie’s into a nursery. By the time he was finished, it was beautiful, all dark wood and green accents, all ready for the impending arrival.

Loki was still on track to having his baby at New Years, and he’d received gifts from all the Realms. Their rooftop had become the inter-galactic post box. Pretty trinkets, blankets, various toys. Loki’s favourite had been from his Uncle Vili; a beautiful crystal mobile to hang over the crib. It had hung in the royal nursery of Asgard for millennia, and Loki had always dreamed that one day his children would lie under it. And now they would.
Steve liked the music box Nuada had made, a pretty golden horse that played a soft lullaby when you put the little golden saddle on it. Tony liked the blanket Nuala had sent, an embroidered circle, covered in protective symbols and runes, the edge covered with a continuous daisy chain. Loki and Thor had told them it was a symbol of the never-ending love the baby would be surrounded by.

Christmas Eve dawned, and most of the day was spent decorating the tree, making various baked goods, doing prep for the meal the following day, and chuckling as Sabrina got very excited.

After dinner came still more activities, and somehow Loki ended up curled up on the sofa observing. He was, growth-wise, about half way through his third trimester, and he had a slight swelling to show for it. He couldn’t feel the baby kick, but he was assured that it was kicking, and perfectly healthy, and he couldn’t feel it only because of the structure of his uterus.

Public opinion of the pregnancy was very good, with almost all feedback being positive. Skye, who was serving as the Avengers press officer, was quick to dispose of anything negative, and even quicker to track down anyone who even hinted at a threat to any of her family.

Loki’s cravings were almost entirely fruit based, and usually it was strawberries he wanted. Tony had used every contact he could think of in that area of specialty to get him the sweetest ones flown in from warmer climates, and Steve had taken to buying anything even remotely connected to a strawberry every time he went out. The two human men were always quick to deliver anything Loki might want, be it strawberries or a backrub. They hadn’t had sex since the night the baby was conceived, but Bruce assured them that it was simply Loki’s hormones fluctuating too quickly to affect his sex drive. Loki’s body was changing so fast, he just didn’t want sex.

“Where’s Annie? Isn’t this her gingerbread house?” Sam asked, swiping a roof tile.

“I think she went to the bathroom,” Darcy said, her arms tangled in about a mile of string lights.

“She’s been in there a long time,” Steve said, adding more cloves to the water bath for the turkey. “Think she’s okay?”

“I’ll go check on her,” Bruce said, giving Sabrina the bauble he’d been about to hang. “Annie?” he called as he entered their bedroom. He followed her answer to the bathroom where she was perched on the side of the tub. “Hey. You’ve been in here a while. Everything okay?”

“I don’t know. Something’s weird,” she said.

“ Weird?”

“Tight, across here,” she said, motioning across her bump. “And I feel…heavy.”

Bruce wasted no time in crossing to her, pressing a kiss to her forehead before he dropped to his knees, feeling at her bump.

“It’s a lot lower,” he said. “How long have you been getting the tightness?”

“About twenty minutes or so.”

“Can I?” he asked, motioning to her pelvis, and she nodded.

He washed his hands, and slipped on some gloves. He’d taken to keeping a box of them in their bathroom, just in case. He never knew when he’d be called to do something medical in the penthouse. He carefully slipped a hand under her skirt and eased gentle fingers into her; Annie had taken to forgoing underwear, it was just too much hassle to pull up the million times she peed every
Bruce’s fingers came away pink, and he glanced into the toilet bowl. Sure enough, there was the smear of bloodied mucus against the porcelain.

“You’re two centimetres dilated and you’ve lost the mucus plug. You’re in labour.”

“But it doesn’t hurt. Isn’t it supposed to?” she said as he stripped off the gloves.

“Not necessarily. Some women feel it right from the start, others don’t until they’ve progressed a little. You have a pretty high pain threshold, so you’ll probably feel it later. There are some women who don’t feel any pain in labour, but I’ve personally never met one.”

“What do I do now?”

“What do you want to do? There’s still a gingerbread house that needs assembling, though it’s light a few roof tiles thanks to Sam. We could watch a movie, go to bed, play a board game. You could have a warm bath or a shower, walk around the tower, go to the gym. Anything.”

Bruce helped her stand and followed her to the lounge. Phil, Clint and the kids had disappeared for bedtime, and the remaining adults had broken out the booze. Loki was happily directing Thor and Bucky on where even more decorations should go on the tree from his little nest on the sofa, hot chocolate in hand.

“Can we watch a movie?” Annie asked.

“Sure,” Jane said. “Does this mean you’re not building the house?”

“No, I can’t sit still that long.”

“Can I have it?” Sam asked.

“Go ahead,” she said, wincing as her bump tightened. “Okay, this one doesn’t feel good.”

Bruce soothed her until it passed and then she curled up on the sofa, her head on Loki’s leg as they watched The Grinch. It didn’t take too long before she fell asleep, and then Bruce informed them that she was in labour.

“The babe is coming?” Thor questioned, and Bucky had to catch him as his knees buckled at Bruce’s nod.

“Hey,” Jane soothed, forcing him to look at her. “There’s no panic. She’s fine, the baby is fine. It’s just ready. Everything is okay.”

“Take it easy, big guy,” Bucky urged. “She’s tough as nails, she’ll be fine. And this kid is the kid of a super soldier and a Norse god. Ain’t no problems here.”

They managed to distract Thor while Annie napped by putting on an action film that drew his attention. Bruce set up everything he would need during the delivery, and most of the family disappeared off to other parts of the Tower. They had no desires to be a witness to the birth.

The only ones staying were Bruce, with Sam as his medical back up, Thor, Loki, who thought it would be helpful to actually see what a birth was like, and Steve, who was serving as Annie’s birth partner.

Annie managed to sleep until midnight with only the occasional whimper in her sleep as she had a
contraction, until a particularly strong one woke her.

“Hey, beautiful,” Bruce said as she sat up, squatting down to look at her. “How are you doing?”

“Hurts now,” she said, grimacing. “And yes, you can check. Then I want to walk around.”

Bruce donned a glove and performed the exam. Annie was five centimetres, and almost 100% effaced. Once he was done, Steve helped her up and hovered as she began to pace around the room. She managed to sip some water, and nibble at an apple, but she really didn’t want anything.

“Oh, this isn’t fun,” she complained at about half one, leaning over the breakfast bar, Steve using the heel of his hand to rub her lower back.

“Almost there, sweet one,” Thor promised. “Bruce says you are progressing very fast.”

“Good. I want it out. Steve!” she cried and he offered his hand for her to squeeze. And then he screamed, half shock, half pain.

“Annie, sweetie, let go, please, let go!” he begged and she managed to release him.

Bruce examined his hand and tried not to laugh. “I think we need something else for her to squeeze.”

“How bad?” Loki asked.

“At least four bones broken,” Bruce said.


“No problem. JARVIS, get your metal-boned self up here,” Steve gritted out as Bruce strapped his hand up. “Annie, I love you dearly, but JARVIS may be the only one strong enough to handle this.”

“I understand, really,” she promised.

Thor eased her off the counter and she grabbed his shoulders, hanging off him and rocking side to side.

Steve let Loki fuss over him and then he dashed into the elevator as JARVIS appeared.

“He seemed in rather a rush,” JARVIS commented as Thor started grimacing in pain.

“She really does have a grip,” Thor gasped.

“Miss Stark, please, allow me to assist,” he urged, easing her into his arms.

JARVIS searched through his circuits and temporarily disconnected the sensors he had that allowed him to feel pain. When she gripped at his shoulders he felt the pressure of it but none of the pain.

“Perfect solution,” Bruce said happily. “Your skeleton is vibranium, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful,” Annie groaned. “Oh fuck.”

There was a sudden gush of fluid from between her legs and Annie began sobbing, burying her face in his neck.

“It’s okay, baby, come on, just breathe through it,” Bruce soothed. “Just your waters and they’re nice
“I can’t do this!” she argued. “This…this can’t work. It can’t fit, it defies all laws of physics and anatomy and…and…God and MAN!”

“Come on, baby,” he cooed, leading her to the sofa and easing her down so she could lean on Loki’s lap, gripping the cushion he had ready for her. “That’s it, just relax. Annie, you can do this. Your body can do this. It is possible, and absolutely doable.”

She sobbed for a while, and they let her, letting her get it all out. Eventually she managed to calm down and drink some water, agreeing to another exam.

“Annie, you’re there,” Bruce said as he removed his fingers. “Fully dilated. Annie, I can feel the head, it’s right there. Your body wants this over quickly, so let’s go with it.”

“Okay,” she agreed. She leant back against Jarvis and Thor cautiously approached.

“It’s okay, Thor, you’re not in the way,” Sam promised, motioning him closer.

Thor eventually settled against the sofa, and as Annie nodded, he moved closer to her raised knee.

“You are sure you are comfortable with me seeing this?” he asked her cautiously.

“It’s your baby, you should see it come out,” she ground out. “If you want to, that is. And come on! It’s a vagina. Every woman has one. And really, the amount of times we’ve all seen what you’ve got between your legs, you can handle seeing mine for the next however long this takes.”

“It’s called transition,” Sam soothed as Thor’s mouth worked silently, his face bright red. “Women have been known to say the most hilarious things. She’ll come back to us when it comes time to push.”

“You can guarantee the asshole who put this kid in there was a man,” she said, gripping at JARVIS’ hands as Bruce placed absorbent pads beneath her. “I mean, seriously, this is a whole new level of evil. I bet they were going to wake me up to deliver.”

“Annie, you are making some really good points, beautiful,” Bruce agreed with a soft smile. “Do you think you could tell me when you need to push?”

“Okay. That’s the end, right?”

“It is. Hey,” he said, cupping her face to get her to look at him. “I am so proud of you. I love you so much.”

She hummed happily, kissing him, before she groaned again, arching back into JARVIS.

“Man, this is really fast,” Sam murmured in Bruce’s ear as he helped him put on gloves.

“I know. I’m not worried, she’s doing fine. It might be a part of her serum.”

“Ah! Fuck! Bruce!”

“Okay, okay,” he soothed, taking a look between her legs. “I can feel the baby.”

“I need…I need…”

“That’s good, that’s really good. Annie, I want you to take a nice deep breath, put your chin to your
chest, and give me a push. Can you feel this, feel where my fingers are?” he asked, pressing two fingers against her opening, and she nodded. “This is where I want you to push, right down here. Alright, baby, come on, nice deep breath and push.”

Annie whined as the pain began to build again and did as she was told, taking a big breath and beginning to push. After a few moments, she let out the breath in a half-moan, half cry.

“That was amazing, you moved the baby a lot with that one. Is the contraction still there?” She nodded. “Good. Take another deep breath, come right back at it.”

Annie kept pushing, panting between contractions. It took only four pushes for the head to begin to crown and Annie screamed. She arched back into JARVIS, who held her steady, murmuring soothing words in her ear.

“Allie! Come on, come back to me!” Bruce called. “I know it hurts, I know it’s burning! That’s the baby’s head. You need to stretch down here to let it out. It’ll pass, I promise you, it will pass.”

“I don’t want…” she sobbed, “no, hurts.”

“I know, but you’re almost done. Okay, sweetheart, just pant for me, pant while you stretch.”

“No! No, I want to push!”

“Just a few moments, just pant. I don’t want you to tear, the head needs to come gently, not all at once.”

She nodded, and Loki helped her distract from the pain by telling her of an adventure he and Thor had gone on when they were small, until she groaned.

“Bruce, I need to push,” she complained. “Please! I have to.”

“Oh, baby, okay. A few good pushes and that should be it,” he promised, cradling her stretched skin with a gentle hand.

She sobbed as she pushed, pushing out the head and then gripping at JARVIS as she cried in relief. She knew she wasn’t done, she could feel it, but the relief from passing the pressure of the head was indescribable.

Thor was transfixed. That was his child, their eyes tightly scrunched shut, their tiny nose, their pouting mouth. Oh, by all the fates, he had helped make that tiny ear. It was so very tiny. So breakable. Oh no, he couldn’t let that happen. No one could harm this child, he would destroy the universe before he let that happen.

Bruce supported the head with one hand and her stretched skin with the other, feeling the baby turn. He carefully checked for the cord, slipping it over the head, and then urging Annie to push, to finish it.

Annie was screaming, trying to get the shoulders through and panicking at the pain. There was one contraction on top of the other, pain upon pain, ripping through her nerve endings until she was sure the hell Hydra had put her through would be a welcome vacation. There was fire between her legs, pressure, burning pain, all ratcheting up and up, until there was a sudden rush between her thighs and all the pressure was gone.

Bruce took Thor’s hands and guided them down, so his would be the first skin the baby would feel, and then, as she pushed it out, together they swept the baby up onto Annie’s chest, JARVIS curling
her arms around so she could hold it. Bruce pulled his hands back, watching the baby curl into its mother.

It always amazed him how comfort seeking a new born was, how they knew exactly who would love them the most in the world and sought her out. The baby was tiny and wrinkled, covered in blood and birthing fluids, and absolutely perfect. This tiny brand new person he had guided into the world.

“Oh! Oh, hello, baby,” Annie said breathlessly as the baby coughed wetly, clearing its lungs itself before letting out a wail of protest. “Oh, I know. It’s cold and bright, I know. Oh, sweetheart. My little stowaway.”

Bruce draped over a towel, rubbing the baby to get its circulation and breathing really going. Everything seemed absolutely normal. If he didn’t know who the parents were, he’d assume the baby was like every other new-born. He covertly took a look between its legs.

“It’s a girl,” he announced and Loki gave a little clap of excitement.

Loki wrapped his arms around Thor’s shoulders and hugged him from behind. “You have a daughter, brother.”

“A daughter,” Thor echoed, staring at the baby, tears falling down his face.

“You getting hormonal on me, big guy?” Annie teased, rubbing the hand he still had on the baby’s back.

“Without a doubt,” he said. “She is perfection.”

“And she’s a Christmas treat,” Bruce said. “It’s five past two. She’s a Christmas baby.”

“If you dare say any gift you get is better than this one, I will not be held responsible for my actions,” Annie warned Thor and he chuckled. Annie noticed that Loki was wiping away some tears too. “And I thought you princes were supposed to be tougher than us mere mortals.”

“She’s a miracle, they’re allowed a moment of sheer adoration,” Sam said and she smiled as she focussed on her baby once more.

It took only a few minutes for the cord to stop pulsing, which didn’t please Bruce. That was far too fast. Everything had been fast. Six hours of labour for a first time baby was very unusual. Not completely out of the ordinary, but Bruce had known it to be a longer labour for a first time mother, and shorter the more children a woman had. It could be Annie’s age, studies had proven that younger mothers laboured for less time than an older woman.

“Something wrong?” Sam murmured, handing him a pair of clamps.

“It stopped pulsing really fast.”

“You worried?”

“A little concerned maybe. Keep an eye?”

“Absolutely.”

“I have informed the other members of the house, miss,” JARVIS said. “They are all thrilled.”

“Good,” she mumbled as the baby latched onto her mother’s nipple, suckling away.
Thor had finally removed his hand and was pacing around the room, a huge smile, rubbing at his face as he tried to process what had happened. Loki was happily curled on the sofa, watching the tiny girl nurse.

Bruce carefully tilted the baby away from Annie a little, not enough to detach the hungry mouth, just enough to place the clamps and cut the cord. He’d already agreed with Annie and Thor that he could do it.

It was all going so well, they should have been counting by the clock for things to go wrong.

Annie had finally managed to convince her arms to cooperate and hand Thor his daughter when Sam noticed the flooded absorbent pads, blood beginning to seep across the floor.

“Bruce, she’s haemorrhaging.”

Bruce sprang into action, but his actions weren’t fast enough to stop the avalanche.

Annie went into shock, her body convulsing, blood streaming from her.

Chapter End Notes

I really couldn't resist, it's so long since I gave you all a cliff hanger.

As for the baby's sex, I literally flipped a coin. And Loki's baby is already decided by the flip of a coin.

Please, comment below and let me know what you thought.
Time seemed to speed past them and stop, both at once.

Bruce pushed his own panic down, burying it, pretending the Annie was any other woman with a post-partum haemorrhage.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Sam said, staring at the readout. “Her blood pressure is fine. This much blood, there should be a change.”

“Well, she’s still gushing blood,” Bruce said as Thor handed the baby to Loki, ushering them to the nursery.

“She should not witness this,” he said, kneeling beside the unconscious form. “Let me help.”

“Hold this,” Sam directed, shoving an IV bag into his hands and urging him to stand as he attached it to Annie. “Bruce?”

“Retention of the placenta,” he muttered, massaging her stomach until he felt it detach, and pulling on the umbilical cord until it slithered out. “It’s whole.”

“Uhhh, Bruce, this ain’t normal,” Sam said, motioning to the rapidly deflating bump, the decreasing mass of her breasts.

“Wait,” Bruce ordered, waving Sam’s hands away, stopping him from administering the Ergotamine. “Stop. It’s slowing, the blood. Oh, fuck. It’s her serum. It’s trying to speed through the afterbirth, trying to end the stress her body is under. When Steve is hurt, his serum heals him but it’s often more painful than the actual injury. It’s the same thing.”

“We do nothing?” Thor asked incredulously.

“We could end up doing more damage than good,” Bruce said. “From the looks of this, her serum will take care of it all. We just wait, see if I’m right.”

They cautiously watched as the bleeding slowed and her body returned to the slim figure she’d had when they found her all those months ago. Her body flushed out the last of the blood, and the pregnancy weight, what little she’d gained, seemed to melt away. Bruce performed a pelvic exam and found no sign of pregnancy at all.

“I suppose this is an indication as to why the serum was applied to men,” JARVIS said.

“I don’t think this is what Erskine had in mind,” Sam replied as he checked her vital signs and found them completely normal.

“Soldiers in combat during the second world war were men, so it could only be a man the project used,” Bruce reasoned as he sat back on his heels.

Bruce was vaguely aware of the others moving around him. JARVIS getting basins of warm water, Sam and Thor cleaning the floor and Annie. They carefully lifted her onto the sofa, tucking her under a blanket as she slept it off, and then Sam cleared away the medical equipment and Thor went off to retrieve Loki and the baby as JARVIS curled up beside the sofa, watching Annie sleep.

Bruce couldn’t move, his limbs were so heavy, and he could feel himself fading as Hulk fought to be
Hulk was pushing against him, unwilling to believe Bruce’s reassurances, and, in all honesty, Bruce didn’t really want to stop him. It was too hard, and he was so tired. He’d seen that Annie was okay, Hulk only wanted the same.

Thor and JARVIS would keep everything under control, and Hulk loved Annie, so that would keep him in check.

“Sam,” Bruce whimpered. “I can’t stop him.”

Sam realised what he meant as Bruce’s eyes turned green. The transformation was pretty smooth, all things considered. One moment there was Bruce, sitting there exhausted, and then there was Hulk, looking around wildly, his hands stained with Annie’s blood.

“Hulk,” Thor said as he returned, Loki right behind him. “My friend. It is good to see you.”

“Annie,” Hulk rumbled.

“Annie not round.”

“Annie scream, Annie push, baby cry,” Hulk said, his gaze going between the baby Thor was retrieving from his brother and the sleeping woman. “Baby small.”

Thor approached, baby in his arms. “Yes, she is very small. Look, isn’t she beautiful?” he said with a smile, tilting the blanket bundle and showing her face to the giant.

“Pretty. Like Annie.”

“Yes, she does look like her mother,” Thor mused. “Would you care to hold her?”

“Wait,” Sam said. “He’s huge, with very huge hands. How can he hold her?”

“Like this,” Loki said, coming over and taking Hulk’s hand.

“Puny god,” Hulk said, using his free hand to poke at Loki’s little bump. “Puny Loki round. Loki baby.”

“Yes, I shall have a baby. Bruce is helping me,” Loki said as he smiled down at the huge fingertip rubbing his bump, turning the hand he held so it was palm up.

Over the months, Hulk had come out with varying frequency, sometimes to train with the other Avengers, but mostly just to be out. It seemed to make the transformations easier on Bruce and Hulk,
and it had shown the family that Hulk could be gentle when he wanted to.

He liked to pet Helix, and be used by Sabrina as a climbing frame. He liked the pool, and watching
cartoons, especially Road Runner. He didn’t like action movies, or seeing any of them with a
weapon. Such things made him think of battle, and made him want to smash.

It was still a huge show of trust for Thor to lay the newborn on Hulk’s palm. The green giant cooed,
humming in happiness. He ducked his head, raising his hand a little so he could peer at the baby he
held.

“Small pretty. Small pretty name?”

“She does not have one yet,” JARVIS said. “Annie hasn’t chosen one for her. Do you have a name
you think she might like?”

“Annie Thor baby, Annie Thor name small pretty.”

“Hulk?”

They looked at the sofa, where Annie was blinking sleepily at them.

“Annie,” Hulk hummed in pleasure, holding still so Thor could take the baby. Then he shuffled
forward on his butt so he could rest his head on the sofa, snuggling into her belly.

“Hi, big guy,” she mumbled, stroking his hair. “Are you okay?”

“Annie bleed,” he whined, actually pouting.

“I was bleeding? I don’t remember. It’s okay, Hulk, I’m okay now. Everything’s okay,” she soothed,
hugging his head.

As he calmed down, he began to shrink, turning back into Bruce.

“Welcome back,” she croaked and her kissed her, stroking her hair as she struggled to stay awake.
“My baby?”

“Here, sweet one,” Thor assured, helping her to hold the baby. “Hulk likes her very much. He calls
her Small Pretty.”

“Hi, baby,” she murmured, kissing the tiny head. “Oh, sweetheart. I’m sorry. Mommy’s here, it’s
okay, I’m here.”

“She hasn’t minded,” JARVIS said with a smile. “Though I think she may require a bath.”


Thor perched by her feet and watched mother and child interact. “She needs a name,” he said gently.
“I do not know many Earth names.”

“Hmmm. That’s right. A name,” she mumbled, losing her battle with sleep.

She whimpered slightly as Thor took the baby from her arms but she was too exhausted to fight him,
and she finally gave into sleep when he murmured soft reassurances. Bruce had finally come back to
himself and he unwrapped her from the blankets, picking her up and taking her to her bed. JARVIS
was happy to sit with her, to assuage everyone’s worries, while Bruce finally got to doing the
newborn checks.
He set up in the penthouse, laying the tiny girl down and unwrapping her from the towel she was wrapped in. She had eight fingers and two thumbs, ten toes at the end of two spindly kicky little legs. She was definitely a girl, and her hips were in fine working order.

She seemed to love the extra space she had, wriggling about and kicking, throwing her arms jerkily, letting out little squeaks and squawks.

“Oh, you are perfect, aren’t you, sweetheart?” Bruce murmured.

She let out a squeak of protest as he stillled her to listen to her heart. In fact, she hated being directed at all, she just wanted to move, and Bruce had to keep holding parts of her still to get measurements.

“Ah, but she is feisty!” Thor declared after she managed to kick her foot free from Bruce’s grasp for the fourth time.

“No question of her parentage,” Loki giggled.

Bruce finally managed to get all the measurements and chuckled to himself as he put his equipment away.

“She is very healthy,” he announced as Sam brought over a baby bath of warm water. “Five pounds and one ounce.”

“She’s a pipsqueak,” Sam joked.

“Definitely. All measurements are good, everything is where it’s supposed to be. 18 inches long, which is on the smaller side, but perfectly acceptable considering Annie’s quite small.”

“So everything is fine?” Thor asked.

“Absolutely. Good numbers, good reflexes. It’s all good. Now, she’s still covered in birth fluids, so she needs a bath. Thor, would you like to?”

Thor looked positively terrified. “Ah, no, thank you.”

“Okay. I’ll do this first one, and you can see how it’s done,” Bruce said happily and Thor was visibly relieved. Bruce picked up the baby off the bloodied towel and brought her to the tub. “Now, sweetheart, I would really appreciate it if you loved this as much as your brother and sister do, and not cry at me. I’ll make you a deal. You don’t cry and I’ll let you wriggle. Deal? Yeah. Okay, in we go.”

Bruce glanced up at Thor and gave a small smile, balancing the baby in one hand as he dipped his elbow in the water.

“You use your elbow to judge the temperature of the bath,” he said. “It should be around about body temperature.” He slowly lowered the baby in feet first, and held his breath as she startled, arms thrown out in surprise. She blinked slowly and wiggled her feet. “Ah. She likes it. That’s a good girl.”

“You must keep hold of her, yes?” Loki asked. “The book you gave me says you must keep hold of them in the tub. But skin becomes slippery in water.”

“You hold the baby like this,” he said, demonstrating. “Hand under the back of the neck, cupping the base of the skull. The tub is small, she’s not really got anywhere to go, and she’s very floppy, so she can’t fight against you.”
“You will do the first bath when mine comes, won’t you? Teach me?”

“Of course I will, Loki. You don’t have anything to worry about. I know she looks very delicate and breakable, but think of all she’s come through already. The Hydra lab, the episodes Annie had, labour, birth. She was just contracted around and squeezed out of her mother’s body. She’s tougher than she looks. And your baby will be the same.”

Loki smiled gently and leaned into Thor, who swung an arm around his shoulder and cuddled him in.

Bruce carefully washed the baby, sloughing off the blood and other liquids that had turned sticky. He kept up a commentary as he worked, using careful swipes of dampened cotton balls to wipe her dark blue eyes, and then Sam helped him by dribbling a little shampoo onto her dark hair.

“That is your chin,” Loki declared as Bruce was rinsing her hair. “And I think that is mother’s nose.”

“The ears are Tony’s,” Thor added.

“Very much so. But she is definitely her mother’s child.”

Annie woke to the echo of the breakfast warning sounding in the hall.

Bruce was asleep beside her, in their bed.

“What happened?” she mumbled and Bruce shot up beside her.

“Sorry,” he said, leaning over her, brushing back her hair. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It was a long night.” She looked around as he helped her sit up. “Where’s my baby?”

“With Thor, last time I looked. She was happily using him as a living cushion. Though, that was a few hours ago. JARVIS?”

“Yes, Doctor Banner.”

“Who has the baby?”

“The little miss Stark is currently being held by Master Thor. Breakfast is currently being prepared by Doctor Foster and Miss Lewis. They have both commented that the baby is exceedingly beautiful.”

“What the hell happened?” she asked and Bruce kissed her before he filled her in.

“Your serum decided your body had had enough. Basically, you went through about six weeks’ worth of healing in ten minutes. Your heart went berserk, and you passed out. How are you feeling? Dizzy? Lightheaded? Anything?”

“No, nothing. Tired, maybe. And a little…sensitive, down there. But nothing a shower won’t help. I feel…like I’ve exercised too hard.”

“Incredible,” he murmured and she pulled him in, holding him close.

“I’m okay,” she promised. “I’m right here.”
“F*ck,” he breathed, gripping at her. “F*ck, f*ck, f*ck. There was so much blood and it was all yours and I didn’t know what was happening and Hulk was growling and…and…”

She soothed him with gentle reassurances as he gave in and cried, soaking her shirt. He gripped at her, holding her close for the first time without a bump in the way. She was warm and whole in his arms, and it did more for him than any reassurances could do. She was okay, he could feel it for himself.

Eventually, they moved to the shower, and Bruce was quick to look away from the blood the water washed off her skin. Instead, he focussed on washing her hair, tilting her head back to rinse the suds out.

“I did the checks on the baby,” he said as she soaped his chest, scrubbing at his chest hair. “She’s perfect. Five pounds one ounce. She’s had her first bath, to get off all the…”

“The gooey stuff,” she said with a smile, pouring out more soap to move down his belly.

“Exactly. Loving baths is a Stark trait. She was less than pleased about getting out of the water. Highly pissed off baby. Thor was impressed. Kept saying how feisty and spirited she was, a worthy princess of two worlds.”

“I’ll bet.”

He sighed as she carefully soaped his genitals. He knew a lot of men would rather clean that part of themselves, and not have their partner do it. But he had spent the last few months helping her bathe and stand up off the toilet when her mobility was affected by her bump. He was pretty sure there were absolutely no physical boundaries between them.

She gave him a few kisses, no real heat behind them, and then they got dressed, heading out into the lounge. Tony was quick to sweep her into a hug, quickly followed by Bucky, then Steve and a quick procession of assorted family members. Annie had the sneaking suspicion that JARVIS had shown them the footage of what happened, or Loki had told them. Possibly both.

Thor happily relinquished his hold on the infant.

“Hi, baby,” she murmured, curling onto the sofa and cuddling her close. “See? Mommy is all here this time. Hey. Was Hulk holding her or did I dream that?”

“No, that actually happened,” Loki said with a smile as he laid the table. “He was very impressed.”

“She is mighty impressive,” Thor gushed.

“We get it, Surfs Up,” Tony said. “She’s awesome. But so is breakfast, and Christmas, both of which are happening now.”

Annie giggled and stared down at her daughter. Now, this one was hers. Kiddo and Sabrina, they never felt like this. This one was a piece of her, separate and perfect, but still hers. The baby had tiny little ears and a tiny little mouth. She had dark blue eyes that were peering at her curiously, glancing at the refractions of light moving across the room. Her tiny hands gripped at her blanket, a pretty red blanket with candy canes patterned around the edge. It made her giggle that someone had dressed her in a little onesie that looked like an elf’s outfit, complete with a little hat that had pointed ears on it.

“She’s mine,” Annie whispered.

“Yeah, this one is definitely yours,” Clint said as he settled on the sofa with her. “Oh, Annie. She is
beautiful."

She smiled happily, pulling off the hat, carefully stroking her dark hair.

“Baby?”

Clint lifted Sabrina onto his lap and Annie tilted the baby so she could see her. Sabrina’s face was a picture, her mouth falling open in a surprised O, her eyes wide.

“What do you think, squirt?” Clint asked. “Can she stay?”

“My unit?”

“She’s in your big unit, but she’s not a Coulson. She’s Annie’s, so she stays with Annie.”

“Okay. Name?”

“She doesn’t have one yet, Annie and Thor are still finding the perfect one for her.”

“Oh. Me hold? Please?”

Annie carefully handed her over, Clint guiding Sabrina’s arms so she was holding her. The baby blinked up at her, her little fist going to her mouth. Sabrina tilted her head this way and that, looking at the new member of the family.


Annie retrieved one daughter from the other and they made their way over to the table, joining everyone for breakfast. They ate and then gathered in the lounge to open presents.

Kiddo, like pretty much every toddler before him, loved the paper and boxes. Sabrina was delighted by the shiny bow from the box for her dollhouse. And Clint ended up with a screwdriver, trying to put things together.

It was all, shockingly, normal.

Aside from the fact the China, who Sam had finally let out of his floor, kept trying to climb the tree to get to the star on top, and Sabrina kept putting her in one of the stockings.

Around eleven, when Sabrina was happily shooting between the kitchen and lounge to give everyone a running commentary on the status of Christmas lunch (with China tottering along behind her on her little legs), the baby began to fuss, rooting against Jane, who was holding her.

“Sorry, baby,” she said with a chuckle. “Nothing there for you.”

Annie was stopped from releasing a breast from her shirt by Bruce.

“You can’t. Your body changed too fast this morning. You’re not producing any milk,” he said gently.

“Oh. Okay. Wait. How do I feed her?”

“I got some formula,” Tony said. “I may or may not have gone a little overboard when Loki let me shop for our baby.”

“Perfect,” Bruce said as Loki grinned.
JARVIS made up a bottle, and, though it took a few tries for her to figure it out, the baby latched on to the teat and ate with gusto.

“Ah, look! She even shows her strength in her nourishment,” Thor bragged.

“Thor, did you say something about names this morning? I’m a little foggy,” Annie said as the others rolled their eyes fondly at him.

“I did. She still needs one.”

“What do you think about Gabrielle?”

“It is beautiful,” Loki said.

“Yes, it is very lovely. Does it hold significance?”

“In Christian beliefs, the angel Gabriel is the one who told Mary she would bear the son of God,” Steve said. “Gabrielle is the female form. Kind of fitting, seeing as she was born on Christmas day.”

“If I may,” JARVIS said. “Gabrielle is the French feminine form of Gabriel, which means "hero of god" or "God is my might" in Hebrew.”

“Gabrielle Stark,” Thor said as Kiddo crawled to him, picking him up. Kiddo happily settled onto Thor’s lap and watched the baby curiously.

“No,” Annie said lightly as the baby fell asleep around the teat of the bottle. “I want her to have Frigga as her middle name.”

“Gabrielle Frigga Stark,” Tony said. “Welcome to the madhouse, kid.”

Gabrielle’s first night was fairly uneventful. She slept in the basket Tony had bought, placed at the end of the bed. She was a very calm baby, only waking twice, once for a nappy change and again for a bottle. She woke Annie and Bruce at a little before six am for her morning feed, which Bruce was happy to give.

“I was thinking,” he said as he curled up on the bed with the tiny girl. He rubbed at her cheek with the teat and smiled as she searched for it, latching on and suckling with gusto. “About what you asked.”

“Which thing that I asked?” Annie said as she emerged from the bathroom in a towel. She didn’t even have any bleeding, which was fairly incredible.

“About what I wanted to be called.”

“Oh?”

“I was thinking about maybe using one of the languages I speak.”

“How many do you speak?”

“Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Portuguese, French, Spanish, which is very similar to Portuguese.”

“What’s dad in all those?” she asked as she hopped into a pair of jeans she hadn’t been able to wear in months.
"Bengali is Baba, Hindi is Pita, Urdu is Abbu, Portuguese is Pai, French is Papa, and the same in Spanish."

"Hmmm. They’re all good. Pai sounds like the easiest for her to say. And it kind of suits you. Pai Bruce. I like it."

"JARVIS, where’s Thor?"

"I am here," Thor said as he appeared in the doorway. He smiled at Bruce and the baby. "How was her first night?"

"Good," Annie said. "She pretty much slept through. One change, one feed, and now awake."

"And off to daddy to burp," Bruce said as he held her out. Thor accepted her with a huge happy grin and threw a cloth over his shoulder. "She really does look miniscule in your arms. Either she needs to grow or you need to shrink."

"She shall grow," Thor said, settling her against his shoulder and patting her gently.

"I like it," Annie said, tugging a brush through her hair. "She’s all protected by these big strong men. And the scary Russian. Besides. Just think, when she goes to school, she is always going to win the whole ‘my daddy is bigger than your daddy’ thing."

"Thor, we were thinking," Bruce said. "About what Gabrielle should call me. You’re her daddy, there’s no question of that, and I would never want to be Daddy. That’s you, absolutely."

"But you shall be in her life, loving her mother," Thor said. "She must have a name for you, something special only she calls you."

"Exactly," Annie said. "What do you think of Pai?"

"It means daddy in Portuguese, the language spoken in Brazil," Bruce said.

"I like this name Pai," Thor said eventually, after giving it some thought. "Bruce, truly, I would never think you would try to separate me from Gabrielle. This might not be the traditional family, but none of us are traditional people. We shall make this work our way. And this little girl shall be very loved, by her Mother, her Father, her Jane, and her Pai."

The rest of Boxing Day brought a mess of visitors.

First to arrive was Peter and his Aunt May, just after breakfast. She was a huge hit with everyone the moment she walked in, probably because of all the baking she brought with her. None of them would argue with the need for a little mothering by the woman.

"This is quality," Tony said around a mouthful of Christmas cake.

"Really? This soon after breakfast?" Annie chastised as she walked in from changing the baby.

"I’m a grown up, and I want it, and she brought it special. It would be so very rude and ungrateful not to enjoy the cake that this wonderful woman baked especially for us."

"Whatever," she sighed. "I’m not cleaning it up if you puke."

"Oh, oh, oh, look at this little angel," Aunt May gushed, and Annie happily handed her over. "Oh, she is so precious! Aren’t you, baby? Yes! Yes you are! Just as pretty as your sister!"
“Good luck getting her back,” Peter muttered.

“I heard that.”

The next visitors were the Warriors Three and Lady Sif. Fandral, darling that he was, proclaimed how beautiful the new Princess of Asgard was and then devoted himself to Sabrina. Once she’d fallen asleep on the lounge floor, exhausted from the playing, he accepted a cup of coffee from Darcy.

“I know how off-putting it can be, suddenly having a new baby around,” he said, nibbling at a mince pie.

“You have siblings?” Skye asked.

“I have four, two older sisters and a younger brother. Of course, when a new baby comes in, a child can feel displaced. I certainly did. But she seems to be doing well.”

“She likes to help,” Bruce said. “Getting a fresh diaper, picking out clothes, helping make bottles. She seems to be doing really well with it.”

“I think it helps that the baby isn’t a Coulson,” Clint said. “She knows that it’s only Kiddo she really has to share me and Phil with.”

“It is a most unusual family,” Nuada said as he emerged from the elevator with JARVIS.

“Nuada, my friend!” Thor said, happily but quietly as he was holding Gabrielle. She looked absolutely miniscule in his hulking arms. “You honour us with your visit.”

“Not at all,” he said, smiling at the infant suckling at her bottle. “She is so very small!”

Once she was done with her meal, Gabrielle was passed to Nuada, who looked almost terrified.

“Relax,” Loki said as he joined them. “You won’t drop her.”

“It is a while since I’ve held one so new.” He gave the little girl a fond smile. “I think the last new babe I held was your father, little one.”

“Really?” Darcy asked, sucking on a Santa-shaped lolly pop. “That is both weird and awesome. Makes you sound like…grandpa old.”

“Shut up,” Skye said, nudging her. “He’s not grandpa old.”

“I am actually older than your grandfathers grandfathers,” Nuada said with an indulgent smile, toying with a tiny hand. “I hope it does not make you think too poorly of me.”

“Absolutely not,” Skye said.

By dinner, they had a room full of people. Phil’s sisters and their family, King Vili, Princess Nuala, several other high lords and ladies come to honour a new princess. Aunt May was quick to whip up a spread of food for the guests in a buffet-style offering.

It was the most at home the Avengers family had felt in a long time, finally getting to do the normal family thing.

Well. As normal as aliens in your lounge can ever be.
Loki went into labour at exactly midnight on New Year’s Eve.

Steve and Tony knew this because it was the moment he shoved them both out of the bed he was soaking.

“What the hell?” Tony spat as he hit the floor. “Loki? Steve?”

His questions were met by an angry hiss, like a cat but ten times scarier, and a pillow thrown in his general direction.

“Tony, back away, very slow,” Steve said quietly. “No sudden moves, just back up, right up, against the wall.”

Tony followed the order and then looked around, finding Steve in the same position against the opposite wall. Loki was kneeling in the centre of the bed, a large wet patch beneath him, eyes shooting wildly around the room. He seemed to be looking for something. When he didn’t find it (or maybe he did, who the hell knew?) he climbed off the bed and stalked out to the lounge.

“JARVIS, get Bruce out here,” Tony said. “What the fuck do we do?”

“I would suggest you and the Captain allow him to do as he needs and then assess the situation once more.”

Tony and Steve slowly edged out of the room, and found Loki pacing the space, shoving things away, pulling other things closer. They leapt out of his way as he returned to the room, removing blankets and furs and pillows from the bed and floor and carrying them back out with him. A second trip saw him stealing some of Steve and Tony’s clothes from the laundry basket and their towels.

He took his loot and began to arrange it on the fluffy rug where the kids played. The pillows and throw cushions from the sofas became a wide bowl on the rug. The bowl was then covered by the fabrics he had collected, deliberately folded and arranged in ways that made sense only to Loki. He silently began to add more to it. A sweater Natasha had left on the counter, one of Clint’s socks, Phil’s t-shirt from the pile of clean laundry waiting to be sorted. He even added one of Bucky’s knives.

Once he was apparently satisfied with the organisation of his booty, he stripped off and laid down in the middle, stroking his bump.

Bruce joined them from where he’d been looking at the puddle in their bedroom. He had the anatomy text in his hands.

“I think this is his ‘first fluids’,” he said. “According to the book, Jotun’s have two amniotic sacs. The first breaks when labour starts, it’s sort of a warning that they need to get somewhere safe to deliver. It’s clear, no clouding or pinking from blood, which is really good.”

“His little nest?” Tony asked in a whisper, motioning at the new arrangement of the lounge.

“It’s a den, a safe place the mother makes to deliver in. All the scents, the fabrics, the shape, it’s all about keeping the baby safe, and predators away.”

While they were talking, Steve had moved to the kitchen and pulled a few bottles of water from the fridge. They watched as he cautiously made his way to the den.
It was only thanks to the serum that Steve had reflexes fast enough to jerk back as Loki tried to rip his head off. He was snarling and growling and Tony rushed forward, yanking Steve back.

“Okay, let’s not go near,” Tony said. “He’s okay. Are you okay?” He pulled Steve around so he could look at him, checking for any injury.”

“I’m okay,” Steve said, wide eyed. “Fuck. He’s fast.”

“And feral,” Bruce said. “We can’t get close, he’ll kill all of us at this point.”

Loki glared at them as they backed away, and then he sent up a wall of magic as the balcony was flooded with light and a figure deposited.

“Help has arrived,” Tony said with a grin as Helblindi entered, ducking through the door and surveying the scene before joining them crouched against the wall furthest from Loki. “Very nice timing.”

“Lady Sif came to tell us Heimdall had seen this,” he said, motioning to Loki, who had settled down a little, enough to lower his protective wall of magic. “I wish to help.”

“Good,” Bruce said. “Aside from Loki, how many babies have you helped deliver?”

“Define help.”

“Actually seen come into the world,” Steve supplied.

“Seven,” he said with a fond smile. “My mate has bestowed upon me three daughters and four sons. It has been many moons since she last desired to bear, but since the return of the Casket, many have started to try breeding once more.”

“So you know what’s going on,” Bruce said with a smile. “Guide us.”

“How long since his first fluids?”

“About an hour,” Tony said.

“His second should go soon. Has he made any noise? Any cries? Whimpers? Called for anyone or anything?”

“No.”

“This is good. A birthing Jotun will only cry out when there are problems. It is a natural defence, to keep away predators. If all goes as I expect, the babe will not cry either, not until Loki makes a loud enough noise that the child knows it is safe.”

“I can’t do this,” Steve said, throwing himself to his feet and hovered, shifting back and forth. “I can’t watch him go through this with absolutely no one to hold his hand. It’s too hard.”

“And this is why a mate is usually not allowed to be at a birthing,” Helblindi said knowingly. “It is difficult for them to watch their lover in pain.”

Loki had begun to pant, once more lying in his den, rolling from one side to the other, gripping and rubbing at his bump. The bottles of water lay on the floor, just out of his reach.

“Can anyone get near him?” Tony asked as he stood close to Steve, rubbing his back, trying to calm him down.
“Thor, perhaps.”

“Master Thor has been notified, Sir,” JARVIS said without being asked.

It took a few minutes for Thor to arrive, and he took in the scene with wide eyes before joining the waiting men.

“We can’t get near him,” Steve said, chewing at his nails. “Thor, I can’t help him, he won’t let me.”

“Be calm, my friend,” Thor said. “Loki is stronger than any give him credit. He shall come through this.”

“But he’s in pain, and he won’t let me help.”

Thor pulled him in, hugging him, rubbing his back. “Peace, Steve. Have peace.”

“Helblindi thinks you might be able to get close,” Tony said. “He took a swing at Steve, he would have ripped him apart, so I know we’re asking a lot. But…please?”

Thor gave him a hug too, soothing them both with his easy way, and then he looked to Helblindi.

“Sometimes a family member can get close, offer comfort,” he said. “It might bring him back to himself to have you close. Or he might react badly and try to kill you.”

“Once more into battle,” Thor said with a grin before he slowly started to approach. “Loki? Brother?”

Loki looked at him with wild eyes, rolling onto his knees.

“I’m not going to hurt you, brother. I simply wish to help you.” He slowly picked up a bottle of water. “Would you care for some?” He took a sip. “It is good. Very refreshing.”

Loki watched him warily for a few seconds before he reached for it. Thor slowly handed it over, taking a few more steps closer and squatting down.

“That’s it, Loki,” he crooned as he guzzled the whole bottle. Loki was sweating, his pale skin slick with it.

“Hurts,” Loki whimpered as he discarded the empty bottle. “Thor.”

The big man saw it for the opportunity it was, shuffling closer, careful not to cross the edge of Loki’s den. “I am here. Come, brother. Let me help.”

Loki whined and cuddled into him, pushing his head into Thor’s great chest, tugging at the t-shirt he wore.


Thor yanked it over his head and Loki snatched it from him, adding it to his den, smoothing it into place and adjusting the tiniest folds and creases of it until he was satisfied. Then he snuggled into his brother once more, curling his fingers into the waistband of his sweatpants.

They were all hoping Loki didn’t want those for his den too.

“Thor,” Loki said, tugging him into his den and snuggling close. “I don’t know what’s happening. Why am I out here? Why did I want your shirt?”
“Easy, Loki,” Thor soothed. “You are birthing, your instincts are taking over, making it easier for you to do this. This is where you feel it is most safe to give birth. You have made this space to be for you and your baby. You wanted my shirt to add to it. I am happy for you to have it.”

“Oh, no! I tried to hurt Steve!”

“He is fine, brother,” he assured, motioning to the blond. “He and Tony are not harmed.”

“But I tried to. I…I don’t know why.”

“I got too close, sweetheart,” Steve said gently, staying where he was across the room. “I was trying to give you water, but I got too close. It was my fault, I should have stayed back. It’s okay.”

“Steve’s right,” Tony said. “He’s fine, he’s not hurt. Don’t worry about us, baby. Just do what you need to, it’s all okay.”

Loki gasped, panting as the tightening of his abdomen came upon him once more. Thor held him close, stroking his hair as he breathed through it.

“It’s so fast,” Loki said as it eased. “Should it be?”

“Yes,” Helblindi said with a gentle smile. “You are doing absolutely wonderfully, little one. You may not truly know it, but your body knows what to do. Just let your natural predispositions guide you and this will soon be done.”

For a while, Loki was himself and fairly calm. He handled the pains like a pro, panting through them, going into a sort of trance while Thor soothed him. He continued to accept water, which made his mates feel better, and Bruce got JARVIS to display some of the feeds from his security monitors so he could keep an eye on things when Loki wasn’t going to let him anywhere near.

It took about an hour for Loki to progress, and when he reached that point, he shoved Thor back away from his den. Thor backed off as Loki snarled and hissed at him, hands raised in submission, and settled with the other men, waiting.

Loki rolled to his knees, using his hands to balance himself as he swivelled and rocked his hips. Helblindi explained what was happening as it did. Loki was moving the baby down with his movements, easing it into his pelvis. All the time Loki was glancing about, watching for dangers. They stayed as still as they could, as quiet as they could, and Loki continued to ignore their presence, giving them no more notice than the sofa.

It took a few contractions, but his waters eventually broke, and they were nice and clear. Helblindi explained, in whispers, that the second sac would only break once the baby had descended enough, once the dam was at the point of delivery.

Loki widened his stance, moving his knees further apart, and felt between his thighs. Helblindi mentioned that Loki was checking the way was clear, that his testes had retracted, and that they had pulled his penis in with them, giving Loki more room for his female organs and, thus, the baby’s birth.

Bruce tilted the Pad he was holding and Helblindi smiled. Everything was as it was supposed to be. Testes separated and retracted, penis pulled into Loki’s body until nothing but the tip of it was visible.

“Very good,” Helblindi whispered. “The way is clear. He should begin to push momentarily.”
And, right as he said it, Loki’s breathing changed. He inhaled in short gasps, his exhales slow and long. He balanced on all fours for a while and then he took one last visual inspection of the room. When he was satisfied with what he found, he began to push.

He sat up, one hand on his thigh, the other on his bump, and began to bear down, his eyes fixed on the ground beneath him. He took another breath and gave another push, and another and another, all the while making almost no sound at all. All there was were the slow breaths out as he released a push, a quick gasp in as he prepared for another.

Bruce watched, his eyes flicking between the actual Jotun delivering and the video feeds of it, keeping an eye on everything while being unable to help at all.

Tony gripped at the strong arms around him, he and Steve trying to keep from falling apart completely as Loki worked to birth their child. All the things he’d survived, and watching his lover do that was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do. It was torture, being so close and yet unable to do anything. Steve wasn’t doing much better, his grip on Tony so tight Tony might fear for his health if he wasn’t so absolutely sure Steve would never loose complete control.

Loki began to grunt as he pushed, little strained sounds that indicated something was happening.

Bruce showed them the screen. One of the cameras was positioned to get a fairly clear view of what was happening between his legs. The opening to his vagina was beginning to bulge, to open, and they could see the dark shadow of the descending head.

As Loki pushed, more and more emerged, little by little, until he was crowning. Loki stopped pushing, panting as he hand reached down, feeling his progress. He touched the stretched skin, using a fingertip to stretch it a little more, and then stroked the top of the head. He began to push again, his hand cradling himself as more appeared. The birth of the head was slow, steady, and both Bruce and Helblindi were approving of the progress he was making.

Loki panted as the head finally passed, his trembling fingers cradling it, stroking its wet hair. He reached into himself, feeling for the cord and looping it over the head once and then again, feeling again and finding nothing more.

He waited, rocking his hips, and then the baby turned, positioning so the shoulders could come. Once it had gotten into position, Loki began to push once more. His straining was more audible, harder to listen to, but he was almost finished. His eyes scrunched shut, his teeth bared in a grimace as the shoulders began to stretch him. Slowly one slipped through, squeezed out, followed by the other.

Loki put both hands down, cradling the infant as it slowly emerged. He kept pushing, gradually squeezing out the arms, the chest. There the belly, with umbilicus attached, more and more, the hips and then legs, sliding out finally into Loki’s hands. He swept it up into his arms, holding it close.

Loki gasped for a few moments and then tilted the baby forwards, one hand on its back, the other on its front, holding the head steady on its wobbly neck as he swung it in an arc a few times, clearing its lungs. When he was apparently satisfied, he cuddled it close.

Loki nuzzled at it, rubbing its nose with his as he counted at fingers and toes, flexing each tiny limb. The baby, as Helblindi had said, was silent though clearly breathing well.

The Frost prince told them that the swinging of the baby was a natural thing for a Jotun, a quiet way to clear the lungs. Then, as Loki had demonstrated, the dam would check the health of the babe by checking the fingers and toes and each limb joint.
If Loki followed the expected course, as he had done for his entire three hour labour, the next step would be to get Thor involved, and then Bruce, and finally present the baby to his mates. Loki would, if all went to plan, have the baby held by the mate that had fathered it and cuddle the other one. The child would be given to the fathering mate as if to say ‘look what I made for you’. After that, Helblindi had no clue.

Loki was still examining his baby, who was silently looking up at him. Again he counted fingers and toes, his lips moving as he totalled. Once he seemed satisfied that everything was there, he guided the tiny mouth to a nipple, stroking its wet hair as it latched on and suckled. Once he was sure it was feeding, he seemed to come back to himself, looking around and blinking.

“Thor?”

“Loki, I am here,” he said, crossing the room and waiting at the edge again, until Loki whimpered at him. He stepped inside, cuddling Loki close. “Oh, Loki. Look at what you made. Perfection, brother.”

Loki seemed a little dazed but he smiled as he gazed down at the baby.

“Did I do it right? Is it okay?”

“The babe is fine, Loki,” Thor soothed, motioning Bruce over. “Look at it. Completely wonderful.”

“Loki?” Bruce said gently. “How are you doing? Is it okay for me to come in?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, you may come in now.” Loki winced. “I don’t think I am quite finished yet, but I don’t know what to do next.”

“Probably just the afterbirth,” he reassured. “Can I?” He motioned to the baby and Loki nodded.

Bruce checked the cord; it had stopped pulsing, which Bruce wasn’t surprised at. Following the natural rhythm of a Jotun birth, it was to be expected that Loki’s biology wouldn’t want him incapacitated by the afterbirth. He glanced at Loki, who nodded, and then clamped the cord and cut it.

Okay, Loki, if you can, I want you to lean back against Thor. No, it’s okay, you don’t have to let go of the baby, keep right on doing what you’re doing there,” Bruce said gently with a smile, helping Loki position his legs. “Good. I’m just going to press a little.”

Loki squirmed as Bruce palpated his uterus and the doctor smiled encouragingly as he noted the lengthening of the cord, a sure sign of the placenta detaching.

“Loki, I want you to give me a push,” he said, taking a firm hold of the cord. Loki made his grunting noise once more as he pushed, and the afterbirth gushed out in a rush of blood. “Perfect. It’s all there, all in one.” He glanced over at Helblindi. “I’m okay to dispose of this, right? Your people don’t bury it or anything?”

“No, nothing like that. We usually burn it, but only to keep the beasts away,” Helblindi said, smiling at his brother.

“Bruce?”

“Hey, Loki. How do you feel?”

Gabrielle cried.”

“Oh, Loki, no, calm down. Jotun babies don’t cry, they stay silent so they don’t attract predators. This little one is doing exactly what it’s supposed to. Can I take a look?”

“Yes. I don’t want to remove it…”

“No, you don’t need to. I can work around it.”

Bruce carefully checked the baby over as best he could, and then he gently moved a little leg aside.

“Another little girl,” he said. “Loki, you have a daughter.”

“I do?” He looked down between her legs. “I do. Oh. Thor! She’s only one.”

“What?”

“She’s only got one set, not like me. She’s only female, not both.”

Thor peered over his brother’s shoulder to where Loki was displaying the child’s genitals. As he said, there was no penis or testicles. The only thing visible were some slightly swollen labia.

“She is half human, brother. There are not beings like you here. Do not fret. She is perfect, isn’t she, Bruce?”

“Absolutely. Loki, Thor’s right. She is perfect and healthy and beautiful. Even down to those markings.”

Loki looked down at his baby, to the slightly raised marks on her face and chest and arms. They matched the marks Helblindi had. At Loki’s urging, Helblindi came forward, but stayed out of the den.

“She is marked as royalty,” Helblindi said with a soft smile. “She is not blue, but she is a princess of Jotunheim, no doubt. See the curve on her forehead? This is why we have no crowns. We are born with them.” He smiled and stroked Loki’s cheek. “She is her dam’s child, as you are yours.”

Thor and Bruce worked to clean Loki up, always mindful not to touch the baby. He let them move him from his den and settle on some absorbent sheeting while they sponged away the blood on him. Bruce showed him how to secure a pad into underwear and then helped him put them on, along with some of Steve’s soft sweatpants. Once he was clean and the den had been stripped of the bloodstained fabrics, Loki settled himself in it once more.

“Steve? Tony?”

The two men came forwards and waited until Loki nodded at them. They entered the den and settled on their knees, waiting for Loki to make the next move.

Loki carefully shifted the baby, pulling her from his nipple. She finally made a sound, a squawk of protest and then a few little squeaks, just testing out her voice. Without looking at anyone but his daughter, Loki handed her over.

Straight into Steve’s arms.

The blond was stunned as he accepted the baby, Loki fussing at his arms and glancing up at his face once she was settled, crawling into Tony’s arms.
“Loki,” Steve breathed, gazing down at the baby in his arms, who was waving hers about jerkily. “Oh. She’s so tiny. Is she really mine?”

“Yes,” Loki said as Tony cuddled him close, rocking him a little.

“She’s amazing, baby,” Tony murmured in his ear.

Steve happily set to bathing the baby in the little tub Bruce set down for him. She didn’t enjoy it, letting out thin little wails as she was bathed. Steve was quick as he could be and then wrapped her in a warm towel, drying her off. He diapered and dressed her in the little pink onesie Thor handed him.

He had Bruce talk him though all the checks she needed. She was a very healthy seven pounds exactly, and exceedingly well.

“We are so proud of you,” Tony said in Loki’s ear, kissing the soft skin behind it. “You did everything exactly as you were supposed to, absolutely flawless, baby. And look at what you’ve given us! She’s beautiful, and healthy, and perfect.”

“Oh, Loki,” Steve mumbled. “Oh, look at this little girl. She’s ours, sweetheart. Look at what you made for us.”

“Is she right?” Loki asked. “Did I do it right?”

“She is absolutely right,” Steve promised as Tony pressed more kisses to his neck and shoulders. “Just look. Her hands, her feet, that tiny little nose. Loki. She’s a gift, the most wonderful gift. Thank you, so much.”

Loki smiled sleepily into the gentle kiss Steve gave him. Loki briefly sat up on his own as Steve handed Tony the baby, and then Loki was gathered up in those strong arms. Tony was smitten, absolutely head over heels in love with their daughter.

“Watching you do this was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” Steve admitted, hugging him close. “And I have never been so damn proud of anyone in my entire life. You are so strong, sweetheart.”

“I’m tired, Steve,” Loki admitted, snuggling in. “And I hurt.”

“I know. Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

At some point the others had disappeared, and Loki noticed the light that indicated the coolers in Helblindi’s room was on. Steve carried him to bed.

“The sheets,” Loki said.

“We changed them,” Tony said, smiling at the baby. “Didn’t we, gorgeous? Yes. Your daddies changed the sheets so mommy wouldn’t have to worry. We made it all nice and clean for him, yes, we did.”

“Oh, dear,” Loki said with a smile. “I think we may have lost him to another woman. Whatever shall we do?”

“You will bow down to our little princess,” Tony cooed, holding her up so he could rub his nose against hers. “Won’t they? Yes, they will!”

“Hey,” Steve said, nuzzling his neck. “Do you want her to sleep in your arms? Or are you okay with
“A bassinet for her?”

“Oh, no, she mustn’t sleep with us,” Loki said. “What if I roll over and squash her? No. She needs a bassinet, like Gabrielle has. All tucked up safe and warm.”

Steve kissed him gently and laid him down before disappearing into the nursery and returning with a beautiful bassinet. It was completely round, all in dark wood with pure white bedding and delicate gossamer curtains that had little twinkle lights embedded in them.

Tony had built it himself. It wasn’t actually wood. It was vibranium painted to look like wood. And the curtains were actually bullet-proof. And it was tied into JARVIS’ sensors.

Steve had thought it was overkill, until the moment Loki had put that baby in his arms. Now he thought it was just enough kill.

“Tony,” Loki prompted as Steve fussed over the position of the bassinet. “Are you disappointed?”

“What the hell would I be disappointed about?” he asked incredulously, managing to tear his eyes away from the baby. “She’s perfect. What’s to be disappointed about?”

“That she’s not yours.”

“But she is mine. Mine and yours and Steve’s. She’s a part of all of us, even if she’s not mine by blood. Hey, the next one might be mine. Or maybe you’ll never conceive one of mine. And I’m okay with that. This little girl will call me daddy just like she does Steve. Or maybe papa. Or maybe something else entirely, we’ll figure it out. But I’ll love her just as much. She’s ours, baby, no matter her blood.”

Loki leaned in for a kiss. “I love you, so very much.”

“I love you too. Hey, what do you want to be called? Mommy? Mother? Dam?”

“Mommy. I live here, she will live here. I want her to never feel like an outsider. To always know where she belongs.”

“And she will. She won’t have the childhood you did, or the one I did. She is going to be loved, and cherished, and never wonder if any of her parents love her.” Tony sniggered as Steve moved the bassinet once again. “Steve, Capsicle, Loki has just squeezed this little lady out. They’re both tired. Wherever you put the damn thing will be fine.”

“You’re right, I know, you’re right,” Steve babbled. “I just want it to be perfect.”

“And it is,” Loki promised. “But I am tired, Steve. Just put it at the end of the bed, like Bruce and Annie do. She’ll be fine there. And then put her in it. And then come to bed.”

Steve chuckled as he did as he was told and put it at the end of the bed, and then Tony got up and tucked her in, brushing gentle fingers over her head and pressing a kiss to her forehead. Steve gave his own kiss and then they both joined Loki in bed, cuddling him close.

“I will make absolutely anything you want for breakfast,” Steve promised.

“Pancakes,” Loki said. “The chocolate chip ones.”

“No problem.”

“Her name is Sarah,” Loki announced. “Sarah Rogers-Stark. And I would like to give her my dam’s
name as her middle name.”

“Whatever you want, baby,” Tony said as Steve pressed kisses to Loki’s hair.

They managed to drift off for a few hours until Sarah woke them for a feed at five. Tony fought the blankets and picked her up. She was rooting against him, trying to find food, her tiny hand pressed against the reactor.

“Come on, princess. Let’s get you to mommy. He has what you’re looking for. Hey, you like daddy’s light? I’ll build you one for your room, keep the shadows away.” He climbed into bed and pressed a kiss to Loki’s neck. “Loki. Come on, baby. Sarah needs a feed.”

Loki moaned and rolled over, letting out a pained cry, which sent Steve shooting up.

“Oh fuck me that hurts,” Loki said.

“What hurts?” Steve pressed.

“My…areas. And my chest. And back. Oh, sod it, everything. Everything hurts.”

“Okay, sweetheart, one at a time.”

“I have to go,” Loki said, and Steve helped him across the room, holding him steady as he sat down to pee as his penis was still within him. “Steve,” he sniffed. “It hurts down there.”

“Okay, sweetheart, I know. Bruce told me what to do. Stay there, I got it.”

Loki tilted back when Steve asked and then yelped when he used a special bottle to squirt warm water over his swollen perineum. Then Steve applied something he called witch hazel. It stung going on, but it made Loki feel much better. Steve helped him change his blood soaked pad, and then the two of them returned to bed, where Tony was waiting with the baby and an icy gel patch.

“Bruce left this,” Tony said. “He said if you were sore then you should put it against your vulva and it should help.”

“My…?”

“Your quim.”

“Ah.” Loki shifted it beneath him, positioning it against his swollen abused entrance and sighing as it began to numb him. “That is very good.”

“I’m glad,” Tony said with a kiss, handing Sarah over.

It ended up with Loki sitting in bed alone with Sarah. Steve went off to take a shower at Loki’s assurances that it was fine for him to do so, and then Tony had to ‘talk an engineer off the ledge’, whatever that meant.

“What a very strange family you have been deposited into, my darling,” Loki murmured to her as she latched on, her little fingers flexing against his skin. “I wonder what you shall end up making of all of this. But, at the bottom of it all, I want you to know this. You, my darling girl, have been born into the most unusual of families, to the most unconventional set of parents. And you are loved without measure, without condition, without end. Mommy loves you, Sarah. As high as the sky and as deep as the sea and still I love you more.”
Chapter 17

When Steve returned from his run, he found Tony sitting in the lounge watching their bedroom door like it was about to combust.

“Did I miss something?” Steve asked, sitting with him.

“Just needed a moment,” Tony murmured, and Steve pulled him into his hold, pressing kisses to his dark hair.

“I get it. I’m right there with you. Breathe, just breathe. In and out, take your time. Take all the time you need, honey.”

“Oh, fuck,” Tony moaned, gripping at him. If Steve hadn’t been full of serum, Tony’s grip would have probably broken bone. “Steve, don’t let me fuck this up. Please? I can’t fuck this up, I can’t become him.”

“You won’t.” Steve promised. “I will never ever let you become anything like Howard. Sarah and Loki both deserve better than what you and your mom got. Sarah deserves more than what you and Loki got. And she will. She will have the best, because you want that for her.”

“You’ll make it okay?”

“I promise you that I will drag you out of the workshop when you’ve been in there too long, that I will remind you to enjoy her while you can, that I will not let you and Loki and anyone else spoil her too badly. I promise I will help you get this right. Look at me, come on, sit up and look at me. That’s it,” he said, kissing him softly. “Now, I won’t lie and say you’ll be a model parent and get every single little thing right. You’re going to fuck up along the way, we all are. But as long as we all love her and care for her then it will all turn out okay.”

“Holy shit, we just had a baby,” Tony said, shell-shocked. “A baby, an actual baby, with tiny finger and toes and little snuffy nose. A whole fucking little person completely dependent on us. Holy fuck.”

“Guess this means we’re grown ups.”
“Guess so.”

“Am I intruding?” Helblindi asked as he stuck his head out the door to his room.

“No, not at all,” Tony said. “Just…taking it all in.”

“Yes, the first one is rather monumental as events go,” the prince agreed, sitting down. “I remember well how disquieting it can be. Has Loki awoken yet?”

“He did, to feed her, but he was asleep by the time I got out of the shower,” Steve said.

“Ah. So he has not yet allowed her to be held by others, aside from the two of you.”

“No, not yet.”

“Once he does, it will be a sign that his instincts have calmed down a little. Before then, he’s still a threat to anyone that approaches the babe, aside from the two of you. This includes the little ones. Even then, he still might take it badly.”

“We understand,” Tony said. “It all has to be at his pace, we get it.”

Thor emerged from the elevator, freshly showered and hair tied back.

“Good morning!” he thundered. “Where is Loki?”

“In the bedroom, asleep,” Tony said.

“Odd. JARVIS reports that he wishes my company this moment.”
“Indeed, Master Thor,” JARVIS said. “He is sitting in bed waiting for you.”

Tony and Steve waved him off and he made his way to the bedroom, knocking softly and letting himself in. He expected to find his brother tired but happy. He didn’t expect tears.

Loki was sat with his knees to his chest, the baby asleep on the bed next to him as he sobbed his heart out.

“Loki,” Thor said gently, crossing to him. “Oh, brother. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Loki whimpered. “I just…Thor, it hurts!”

“Oh,” he moaned, climbing onto the mattress and holding him close. “Oh, of course it does. Your body went through a lot last night. The pain is to be expected. As for the pain in your heart…I know it well. I wish mother were here to meet your baby also.”

“I want to show her,” Loki sobbed, gripping at his shirt. He wondered if Thor had always been so perceptive about him and he hadn’t noticed, or if it was a new development. He didn’t mind as much as he would have in the past. He was actually kind of thankful for it. Words were so hard to find now he was mortal. “And…I can’t explain it, but I want Odin to see her, I want him to be proud of the grandchild I’ve given him, completely in awe of her, as I am. Thor, please, don’t tell Steve or Tony! They’d only be afraid.”

“I’ll not say a word to anyone, I swear it. You need not explain,” Thor said darkly. “I know the urge. Most unsettling, is it not?”

“It is. I don’t truly want him anywhere near her, I’d rather not have had her than let him near. I think…I think that I wish for the father he was. That’s what this is, isn’t it?”

“It is my belief. I do feel your wishes, Loki. But there is not anything we can do to fulfil those desires. Even if you wished it, I would never allow any child so small near him after all he has done. Oh! Having Nuada hold Gabrielle helped me. He has been there our whole lives, guiding us, laughing with us. He is as close to family as we shall get. Would you like one of us to call him?”

“Oh, yes. I’d like that very much. But later, when I’m a little more put together. I must look a fright.”
“Tired, and tear-stained, but not so bad. Though I might be a little biased, having seen you at your very worst. I shall summon assistance to help you bathe! Steve or Tony?”

“Neither,” he said, picking up the baby. “Bruce, if you would.”

“Doctor Banner has been summoned, Master Loki,” JARVIS said. “And might I offer my congratulations on the birth of such a beautiful baby.”

“Thank you. Thor, would you…I would like it if…you would like to hold her?”

“Oh, Loki, I would love to.”

The huge blond took the tiny girl into his arms as if he were handling brittle glass, and Loki chuckled at how tiny he made her look. She wiggled a little before he adjusted her and she settled.

“She is precious,” Thor said quietly, staring down at her, stroking a gentle hand over her downy hair, which had dried to a perfect fluffy blonde match to Steve’s. “She is very beautiful. And her markings are most becoming.”

“They do not set her apart too much?”

“Nay. She is perfection.”

“I have named her Sarah,” Loki said. “Sarah Farbauti Rogers-Stark. Steve’s mother was called Sarah.”

“A wonderful name,” he said as there was a careful knock at the door and Bruce poked his head in.

“JARVIS said you were asking for me,” he said as he entered.

“I am in quite a bit of pain,” Loki said. “Not just…my body.”
“Ah,” Bruce said, nodding as he perched on the bed. “That’s to be expected. Pregnancy and birth are big strains on the body, and it takes a lot out of the mother, birth especially. The physical pain will fade, you’ll heal. As for the emotional pain…that’s normal, just after birth. You’ve still got a lot of hormones going on, trying to level out. Add in that you’re tired and you’re in physical pain, plus all you’ve been through, and tears are pretty natural.”

“So I need not worry?”

“No, not at all. I’d actually be more worried if you weren’t a little highly strung right now. How about I help you into the bathroom and I’ll take a look, see that you’re healing physically, and then Thor and I will help you take a shower?”

“That sounds like a very good idea.”

“Alright. Just sit for a moment.” Bruce disappeared for a moment, returning with a bag of stuff. He laid out absorbent pads from the bed to the bathroom, and some other things in the bathroom. Then he helped Loki scoot over to the edge of the bed. “Now, just a warning, there is going to be a lot of blood. While you slept, it all pooled in your pelvis, and when you stand up, it’s all going to run out.”

“Lovely,” Loki grimaced.

“Oh yeah, the fun keeps on coming. It’s going to look like you’re bleeding to death but I promise you’re not. Okay? Ready?”

Using Bruce as leverage, Loki stood and grimaced as a whole river of blood ran down his legs, soaking the absorbent sheet beneath him.

“That is disgusting,” Loki complained.

“Birthin’ babies, one of life’s less pleasant tasks,” Bruce joked as he held him by the forearms, helping him to walk to the bathroom.

Once there, Loki eased down onto the toilet and let Bruce take a look between his legs. The good doctor was kind enough not to touch anything, which made Loki ecstatic.
“Looking good,” Bruce said. “Swollen, but that’s normal. You didn’t tear, which is really good. It’ll go down. Have you urinated since the birth?”

“Yes. It stung, and Steve used water and then witch hazel. And then Tony had an ice pack for me, which was very nice.”

“Glad to hear it. Have you opened your bowels yet?”

“No.”

“Okay. Let me know when you do. Just so I can make sure all your systems are going the way they should.”

“Very well.”

“Okay then. I’ll get Thor and we’ll get you into a nice shower.”

Loki watched through the open door as Thor placed Sarah into her bassinet and closed the drapes around it. JARVIS would keep an eye on her. Then the two men joined Loki and together they helped Loki undress.

“Now, here’s where it gets really fun,” Bruce joked. “Easiest way to help Loki shower is for you to get in there with him. So do I get to see two naked aliens?”

Thor unashamedly dropped trou’, and backed into the cubical, leading Loki in. The hot water was absolutely divine as it hit Loki’s aching back. Thor held him steady as he cleansed himself, and then Loki leant against him as Thor’s sure fingers moved through his hair as he washed it. Bruce took one of the smaller shower attachments and used a low pressure to help Loki wash his groin area. Once he’d bathed, Loki felt much steadier, able to walk on his own at least.

Eventually, Loki was clean, dry and dressed, just as Sarah woke up for a change. At Loki’s request, Thor handed her over, and Loki carried her out to the lounge, which was full of their family.
“Baby! Baby! Baby!” Sabrina sang, bouncing up to him.

“Easy, sweetheart,” Steve said, guiding her back. “Give Loki a chance to get settled, okay?”

“Okay.”

She sped off to the kitchen, where Clint was cutting up fruit.

“She’s lively today,” Loki said as he carefully sat on the sofa, positioning himself onto the frosted pillow Helblindi had retrieved from his room.

“Excited about the new addition,” Phil said, Kiddo in his arms who was looking down at the bundle in Loki’s with interest. “She wants to help, like she does with Gabrielle.”

“I see. Well…”

“Don’t worry. She knows the baby is yours and needs you the most. At the moment she just wants a cuddle, she’s still content to do things for Annie.”

“It’s not that she’s not welcome to help. I just need a little time.”

“Absolutely.”

They continued to talk as Loki unwrapped her and changed her wet diaper. It took him longer than Sarah was happy with and she began to squall at him in complaint. She didn’t settle again until Loki finished and cuddled her close.

As they were talking, Steve had wandered over to the kitchen and whipped up pancakes for Loki, Sabrina sprinkling the whole plate with extra chocolate chips.

Loki had them on a tray; the dining chairs didn’t look all that tempting. He settled Sarah into a little nest he made for her on the sofa with lots of cushions. His instincts were suddenly telling him to keep her close, that she was his. Strange, as he’d felt so good about having Thor hold her.
“How are you doing?” Tony asked, cuddling him in and pressing a string of gentle kisses to his neck and shoulder as Steve took the tray. The blond was finding such contentment in feeding Loki, some primal part of him settled by providing for his mate. He’d swapped the empty tray for a plate of cookies and a mug of hot chocolate, and Loki could see the preparations of a huge roasted beef joint going on.

“I feel uneasy,” Loki admitted. “Like…like it’s not safe. I don’t understand.”

“Well, she is pretty little and helpless, and until a few hours ago, she was pretty damn protected inside you. Maybe that’s what this is.”

“Perhaps. I just…I don’t wish to hurt anyone.”

“Oh, baby, you won’t. Everyone understands. All in your own time.”

Loki kissed him, tickling his lips with the tip of his tongue. “My sweet genius.”

Annie and Thor happily distracted Sabrina from Sarah by getting her to help with Gabrielle for a few hours, until Loki had calmed.

First, he let Thor hold her again, then Bruce, and finally Helblindi. Once he let the Frost Prince hold her, the ball of worry inside his chest loosened and he felt able to take a full breath. They all watched, amazed, as Sarah turned blue when Helblindi touched her skin. She cooed at it, letting out a contented sigh. Loki took her back to feed her, which Sabrina was fascinated by. Loki was less impressed by the cramping her nursing caused.

“Sabrina, would you like to give her a cuddle?” Loki asked as he burped her.

“Yes!” she said, hopping up onto the sofa and wiggling to get comfortable. “Me ready!”

“Now, baby girl, you remember what we said?” Clint said as he settled next to her.
“Careful with the baby, she’s breakable, like Gabby,” she recited. “Hold her head.”

“That’s right. You ready?”

Loki carefully settled Sarah onto Sabrina’s lap and the little girl put her arms around her, using Clint’s thigh to help support her floppy head. She looked at her, turning her dark head this way and that.

“Why you draw on her?” she asked as she traced a fingertip carefully over the curve on Sarah’s forehead.

“No, sweetheart, no one drew on her,” Loki said with a small smile. “She has those because I come from somewhere else, and she’s made from me. She has those to show everyone she’s made from me.”

“Oh. I like it.” She hummed to herself as she considered Sarah. “In my big unit?”

“Yup,” Clint agreed.

“Not small unit. Not Coulson. She…what the unit called?”

“Her name is Sarah Farbauti Rogers-Stark,” Loki said.

“Tony unit. Tony and Steve and Loki and Sarah. Unit. All in my big unit.”

“Very true,” Loki agreed. “May she stay?”

“Yes. Like Gabby. Good cuddle. I want to help.”

“You can help,” Loki promised. “Though, for now, she needs me the most. She’s helpless. She’s not yet ready to do anything for herself.”
“You do things for her,” Sabrina said. “Like Phil and Clint do for me.”

Tony smiled.

“Like we all do for each other.”

Nuada finally arrived four days after Sarah put in her appearance, and was immediately spirited away to a quiet corner by Loki.

“She is wonderful,” Nuada praised as he held her, her tiny fingers gripping at one of his. “Loki, I am so proud of you.”

“You are?”

“Of course I am. Loki, listen to me. You were treated abominably, and your actions, while not the smarted choices you could have made, reflected that,” he said firmly. “But now…You are happy, healthy, mated, and with a beautiful little princess to show for it.” He peered at the unsure Jotun for a moment. “Is there an archery range close?”

“Yes, a few floors down.”

“Captain Rogers, come, take your daughter,” he called and Steve dutifully accepted the precious bundle. “Loki and I are off to shoot some targets.”

“Oh, no, I can’t,” Loki argued.

“Yes, you can. She has been fed, so she will be fine in the care of your mates for an hour or so,” he insisted, tugging Loki to his feet and herding him to the elevator. “Loki, you are a mother, yes, but you are also a person. Take a breath, take a break and remember yourself.”

Steve nodded reassuringly and Loki gave in, pressing a kiss to Sarah’s forehead before he let Nuada
Steve settled himself on the sofa with his daughter. It was just the two of them, the rest of their strange family off doing other things.

She was so tiny, and so perfect. He could see Loki in her, even though Loki swore she looked like Steve. But she did look like his mother in a way that made him feel all gooey inside. His mother had often mused about his life, what it would be when he grew up. She’d seen great deeds, great loves, and a horde of beautiful grandchildren she could fuss over.

She might not be around to fuss any more, but he knew in his heart that she would be proud of him.

“Fatherhood looks real good on you,” Bucky said as he sat down, looking at the baby. “Christ, she looks like your ma.”

“I know. It’s pretty strong, huh? The resemblance.”

“God help us if she acts like her too.”

“I think together, Sarah and Sabrina could rule us all.”

“Holy…our ma’s take two. I’m afraid.”

“Nah, it’ll be fine. Right?”

“Hey, take a breath,” Bucky ordered, slinging an arm around Steve’s ridiculously wide shoulders. “You’re gonna do fine, punk.”

“How are you so damn sure of me when I’m not sure of me?”

“Because I see you when you can’t see yourself. You have never, not ever, let anyone down. You make a promise, you stick to it. And you always do what’s right, no matter the cost. So when I look at you with this little doll, I know you’re going to do the absolute best you can for her, and it’ll be
more than enough.”

“Do you ever get tired of giving me pep talks?”

“Nope.”

“Good. Because I don’t think I’m ever going to stop needing them. And I think you need to hold her.”

“What? Oh, no, she’s real comfy right there,” Bucky babbled, looking at Sarah like she was a bomb about to go off. Actually, Steve thought Bucky might be more comfortable with a bomb.

“Come on. Cuddle with Uncle Bucky,” Steve said, sickly sweet, as he deftly moved her around and deposited her in Bucky’s arms.

“Steve, the metal…I’ll hurt her.”

“Bull,” he said, adjusting her and then letting go.

As Steve had said, Sarah didn’t care she was laying on metal. She wriggled a little until Bucky adjusted her tiny body and then settled, letting out a little sigh. Bucky was stiff, unnaturally still, until he realised she wasn’t about to scream at him. He slowly sank back into the cushions and brought a hand up to her belly, feeling her grip at his fingers.

“You can never date,” he said to her. “You hear me? You can date when I’m dead, and I mean the kind where I don’t come back. Because if you date, Uncle Bucky is going to have to castrate some young men, and that will get messy. So no dating. Capice?”

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The Tower shook like the earth was collapsing in on itself, and every alarm blared to life.

Steve, Tony, Thor, Clint and Natasha ran for their weapons, Loki and Annie and Phil for their
“JARVIS, report,” Steve yelled as Bucky skidded to a stop beside him, arming his guns.

“An explosive device has been detonated in the lobby, Captain, and I am reading several more incendiary signatures. Attempting to disarm them.”

“Good work, J,” Tony said as his faceplate snapped into place.

“Okay, Avengers, take positions,” Steve said. “Tony, you and Bruce get to these devices, shut them down. Natasha, Clint, sweep the building, find who’s doing this. Bucky, Thor, you two are with me. Sweep the building, top down, evacuate civilians and capture hostiles. Capture only, people. No lethal measures, we need to question them.”

There was a chorus of agreement and they all moved off to their tasks. As they left the penthouse floor, JARVIS locked it down, protecting the children and more vulnerable members of the family.

Natasha was the first to find an enemy, a man in full tac gear, as tall as Thor, but unable to withstand her thighs around his neck. She secured him with a cable tie around the wrists and left him attached to the closest pipe.

Clint took out four who were moving in a group towards the cafeteria. There were panicked Stark Industries employees trying to make their way to the exits through the smoke bombs, and Clint used the noise of their panic to cover his approach. He took down the invaders with tranquiliser arrows. Thank you Tony.

Bucky had slipped back into the Winter Soldier. No emotions, no hesitations, just getting anyone he saw who didn’t have an ID badge into a headlock until the lack of air left them unconscious. Then he secured them with plastic ties and moved on. A few had taken some good hard swipes from his knife, and a few would lose body parts, but none would die, as his Handler had told him.

“Check in,” Steve muttered over the comm.

“Nine taken down, left them trussed up,” Natasha said. “No sign of anyone in any position of power yet. All goons.”
“Same,” Clint confirmed. “I’ve cleared five floors, and nothing but minions. I’m insulted.”

“Targets alive as ordered,” the Winter Soldier said. “Continuing sweep now.”

“Good, that’s…good,” Steve praised, shuddering at the dead tone. “Tony? Bruce?”

“These things are an insult to modern engineering,” Tony griped. “Seriously? A gold watch? I thought that went out with JFK.”

“Gotta love a classic,” Clint joked, and then they heard the twang of his bow and the thump of another body hitting the ground. “Nineteen. These guys are sloppy. S.H.I.E.L.D. would have had our hides for being this pathetic.”

“Agreed,” Natasha said. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“Tony, tell me they left a signature? Something. Anything to tell us who’s doing this,” Steve said.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was AIM, or Hammer, but they’re both shut down, I burnt them to the ground,” Tony said, his teeth obviously holding something.

“This is amateur,” Bruce said. “Tony, are you seeing this?”

“Huh. Alarm clock?”

“Looks like. Steve, this is pathetic,” Bruce said. “A lot of smoke, no real substance. It looks like the first bomb was the only one with any real firepower.”


Bucky reached the penthouse first, and found it swarmed by enemy soldiers. He didn’t pause, didn’t wait for the others, just dove in. He broke two necks before he was smacked on the back of the head
with the butt of a rifle. He went down to his knees and swept his leg out behind him, kicking his assailant in the stomach.

Annie had laid Gabrielle in Darcy’s arms and waded in, using knees and elbows and fists and feet, throwing books and plates and anything else she could get her hands on. She took out four of them before she was grabbed by the throat and thrown into the wall.

She crumpled to the floor, unconscious, just as Bruce and Tony arrived.

Hulk didn’t take kindly to it, or to the men who had swarmed Phil, Loki and the others. Both babies were screaming, Kiddo had gone silent and breathless, and Sabrina was running, scrabbling up onto the counters and then higher, up onto the top of the cupboards.

Hulk smashed his way through, pulling men in black off his family, throwing them towards the others. He seemed especially upset at the one looming over Annie’s prone form, and proceeded to smash him into the floor the way he had Loki. Once he was a sticky paste, the green fighter looked around for who to hit next.

Apparently Hulk had laid claim to Loki.

“MY PUNY GOD!” Hulk roared in the face of the man who had been choking Loki.

“How, they have Sarah!” Loki coughed, trying to pull himself up. He’d spent so long afraid of his magic, afraid of what he might end up doing, that he didn’t have enough focus to defend himself with it now. And the birth had left him too weak to fight back.

Hulk looked across the room and then jumped across, roaring at the two men who had snatched Sarah and Gabrielle. He picked up the men around the waist and carried them over to Steve, holding them until someone was free to take the babies from them.

Steve and the others didn’t really notice the sudden evacuation of people until the gunfire rained down on them, keeping them away from the balcony long enough for the helicopter to take off. The two men Hulk had been holding watched the craft leave before biting down on cyanide pills.

Steve caught Sarah as the two infants fell from dead arms, but Gabrielle tumbled to the ground, screaming as she rolled across the cushions she had mercifully landed on.
Steve crossed the room and Loki all but snatched his baby from the blond, holding her close and checking her over, growling at the blood on her arm from where one of them had cut her to take a sample. Steve cradled him close, and his scent seemed to calm Loki a little.

Thor took Gabrielle, trying to calm her down when it was clear she wanted her mother. She didn’t seem hurt. A little startled, but not truly hurt aside from the smear of blood on her tiny arm. The cry was familiar to them all. She wasn’t hungry, she wasn’t wet, nor tired. She was pissed. She wanted Annie and nothing else would satisfy her.

Bruce had changed back and checked Annie over before carrying her to bed to sleep it off. It was the first time she’d really been hurt, aside from her episodes while pregnant. If she were human, Bruce would be worried. But she was enhanced, so she should be fine.

Kiddo wouldn’t let go of Phil, but he was completely silent, just like when he had first arrived.

Sabrina refused to come down from her perch, and verbally abused anyone that came close. She didn’t appear to be hurt, so they left her alone, letting her come down in her own time.

Eventually the smoke cleared and they surveyed the damage.

The blast shutters JARVIS had lowered were cut open, splayed out from a central hole where the enemy soldiers had poured in. JARVIS’ body was laying on the floor, most of his insides on the outside; China not far from him, her tiny body shattered. Sofas, tables, chairs, ornaments, all of it lay scattered in pieces. The walls and floor and even parts of the ceiling were covered in scorch marks, deep gouges and pockmarks showing where weapons had hit. Helix was curled around Phil, trying to protect Kiddo, blood staining her muzzle where she had tried to protect her humans.

Amongst the rubble and debris, lay the still forms of Sam, Jane, Darcy and Skye.

They still had guns clasped in their hands.

The head man stood beside his second in command and the young agent he had brought into the fold
and watched through the glass as the scientists tested the samples.

“How many did we lose?” the boss asked.

“Initial reports say thirty two, but some are still being treated,” the young man said.

Why his second had brought the young man into the organisation in the first place he didn’t know. He couldn’t fathom what it was his second had seen in him. But he was glad of his unwavering loyalty to the program. He was efficient and hard-working, a combination the boss enjoyed. It was all training, of course. His second had done his job well.

“And samples were taken from all?”

“Yes, sir,” his second said. “Both infants, the toddler and the girl. We even managed to get samples from both mothers. It was successful.”

“Do we think they all have the gene?” the young man asked.

“We know the woman does for certain,” the boss said. “And the girl. The toddler may have it, his progress since transfusion is encouraging. As for the…alien. It is unlikely. But both infants…now that would be a real achievement.”

“If it’s acceptable, I’ll go get some rest now, sir’s,” the young man said.

The boss waved a hand to dismiss him but he didn’t move until the second gave him a nod. The boss watched him go with a half-smile.

“His loyalty to you is impressive.”

“I try.”

“I expect him to lead the team to retrieve the subjects that show positive tests. Knowing the risks for such an objective, do you object?”
“No. We need the subjects. The risk is acceptable. Losses happen.”

Steve reluctantly left Loki and Sarah with Tony. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust his genius with them. It was simply that it felt like leaving a limb behind to leave his mate and child with anyone.

Annie was in the kitchen baking, Gabrielle in a bassinet by the counter and Bruce hovering, holding whatever she passed to him. It helped her, making something, keeping her hands busy. The penthouse was still a wreck, but most of the debris had been cleared away.

“Eggs?” she prompted and Steve grabbed them from the fridge as he passed it.

“Can I talk to you?”

“Sure. Talk away,” she said, breaking eggs into the bowl Bruce was holding.

“I just wanted to see how you were doing. If you…I mean…”

“Stop,” she said, looking at him angrily. “If you’re trying to ask me if I’m okay, then no, I’m not okay. They broke in and tried to snatch my baby. I’m not okay. They shot my friends. I’m not okay.”

“They’re alive.”

“How the hell are you not freaking out, like the rest of us?” she snapped. “Yesterday a whole bunch of guys in armour broke in here and attacked us! They tried to snatch your daughter! They tried to take your son!”

“I know that, I was there!” he argued. “But if I fall apart, I am not getting back up. I need to hold it together.”
She sighed, leaning against the counter and staring down at her baby.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you, you’re just trying to keep it all together.” She shoved a still warm cookie into his hand. “How are they?”

“Jane’s still got the headaches, but the doctors aren’t worried. She took a table to the head, I think they’d be more worried if she didn’t have a headache,” Steve said as he poured himself a glass of milk to go with his cookies.

“And the others?” Bruce said.

“Skye came through the surgery okay. They need to do more repair on the leg, but, considering she took four bullets to it, she’s doing okay. Darcy’s still in intensive care. Two bullets to the stomach, she got lucky. It could have been a whole lot worse, but they said we got to her pretty fast.”

“And Sam?”

“Four minor fractures to the spine, they need him to stay still for a good long while. They’re worried he could be paralysed from the neck down if he moves too soon.”

“I’ll put together care packages. Hospital food can be…” she said and Bruce caught her as she started to crumble. “Oh, God. Oh, God, they came so close.”

“We stopped them,” Bruce promised. “We stopped them, baby.”

“They’re just going to keep coming,” she whispered. “They’re going to keep coming over and over, again and again, until there’s nothing between them and what they want.”

“They won’t get that far,” Steve said, stroking her hair.

“And if they do? If they get between you and me? I get taken, the kids get taken. Then what? I can’t do another seventy years as their lab rat, I just can’t. And the thought of my children going through that…”
“Hey!” Loki barked from the doorway. Tony trailed after him, Sarah in his arms, her tiny little hand against his reactor.

“Even if they manage to take you, we will come for you,” Loki said firmly. “If I have to make a deal with Thanos himself, no one will keep you from us.”

“I’m with him,” Tony said, slipping Sarah into the bassinet with Gabrielle. “I will tear this world down brick by brick if I have to. I’m not leaving you to them like Howard did. You’re one of us, you’re family. I promise, we will come for you.”

Bruce let Tony take her and hold her as she cried.

“I swear to you. We will come for you.”

Four days after the attack, Kiddo was still silent, Loki wouldn’t let go of Sarah, Annie wouldn’t leave Gabrielle with anyone, and Sabrina still wouldn’t go near any of them.

Steve and Tony had pulled Loki in tighter. One of them was always with him, he was never alone. Even when he needed to use the toilet one of them lingered right outside the door. It was usually Steve, as everyone wanted JARVIS back in his body, so Tony had to go down to the workshop to repair the damage. He kept open a video link to the penthouse as he worked.

Bruce had done the same with Annie. He kept her close, and remained out of his lab for the time being. They ate a lot of food he cooked.

The repairs on China would have to wait. Annie wasn’t in a position to work on her, and Tony had his hands full. For the moment, she lay broken in a storage box in the workshop.

Thor was torn between comforting Jane and protecting his daughter. Annie was happy for him to spend time with her, but she refused to let him take her with him when he went to Jane. Bruce took him to one side and gently told him that he would hold down the fort if Jane needed him more. Thor’s smile was relieved and his hug warm.
It was late at night when Phil heard the small tiptoe footsteps. He’d left Clint and Kiddo curled around each other, sleeping.

“Would you like to see my pictures?” he said softly.

He looked at Sabrina, hovering in the doorway.

She’d been eating, and drinking, that much he knew. They’d taken to leaving her share of food where she could get to it without interacting with any of them. The empty plates were enough to assure them. Sleeping, that he wasn’t sure about. She hadn’t interacted with any of them since the attack, not even Kiddo or the babies, and they were all missing her chatter.

He held up the photo album and tilted it so she could see it.

“That’s my mom,” he said, pointing to a picture, “I’m made from her, the way Gabrielle is made from Annie. She grew me inside her.” He turned the page and smiled. “Can you see? This is my mom and this one is me when I was little. I think I was about your age here.”

She was listening, and watching. It was the longest she’d spent near any of them since the attack.

“And see this one? That’s Maggie and Julie when they were little girls. That’s their daddy with them. His name was Daniel.”

“Where?” Sabrina whispered, creeping closer.

“Where’s Daniel?” She nodded. “He died a long time ago. And after he died, my mom met my dad. His name was James.”

“Where?”

“He died when I was little, and my mom took care of me and my sisters,” he said.
“My dad?”

“You’re a very lucky little girl. You have three daddies,” he said as she leaned against the arm of the sofa. She didn’t touch him, or initiate any kind of physical contact, but she was listening, so that was progress. “You have the daddy you were made from, which is Bucky. And then you have me and Clint, who are the daddies who take care of you.”


“I know. I know they did. But we stopped them.”

“Tried take.”

“Yes, they tried to take you. But we stopped them.”

“What if not stop?”

“If they’d managed to take you away from us?” She nodded. “Then we’d come find you.”

“Find always?”

Phil couldn’t help it. She was so damn tiny and breakable and unsure and HIS, damn it. He reached out and picked her up, pulling her into a hug. She stiffened for a moment before letting him hold her, her little fingers gripping at the collar of his shirt. He couldn’t help but notice how small that hand was, how precious it was.

“Oh, my sweet little girl,” he murmured into her dark hair. “We will always come and find you. Even if we have to take the whole world apart to do it, we will come for you.”

“Coming for me,” she whispered.

“Always.”
Bucky couldn’t shake the voice of guilt in the back of his head.

It kept up a litany of all the things he’d done, all the lives he’d taken. It didn’t matter that he’d been the Asset at the time. All his little guilt voice cared about was that it was his finger on the trigger.

He’d tried to keep up normal activities, trying to distract himself from what he’d triggered when taking on the Hydra agents that had infiltrated the building. He’d played with Kiddo, gone to the range with Clint, baked with Annie.

A week after the attack, as the infants wriggled on the carpet, he let Sabrina pull him to her colouring books. Annie and Loki had finally managed to relax enough to leave their babies with someone else. That morning, it was Bucky and JARVIS on baby duty.

Both girls had developed at a startling speed. In the two weeks since Sarah had arrived, both girls had begun to support their own heads and manage to roll over from their backs to their fronts. Their eyes were also able to track objects and Bruce was fairly certain they could both see a full range of colours.

Sarah had begun to demonstrate her blood link to Loki and use a little magic, making her mobile move above her in her bassinet and levitating her teddy bear an inch off the mattress.

Loki was worried it set her apart too much, but Steve and Tony were delighted by it.

Gabrielle had begun to show who she belonged to with a grip that had torn fabric. She could already pull off her own clothes, even if they did end up in shreds. It was something Thor was highly impressed by. Annie considered it a good thing babies grew out of clothes so fast.

Bucky was happy to listen to Sabrina babble away at him as he coloured in the picture she pointed to. He found it quieted the voice a little, and he was happy enough to colour with her.

And then he shame-facedly had to find Annie in the workshop.
“What’s wrong?” she asked as he entered. “I’ve been down here too long, I have to-”

“Nothing is wrong, Gabby is fine,” he promised. “Left the babies with JARVIS. I…need a little…help.”

“Okay. What kind of help?”

He held out his metal arm and she dissolved into an undignified snort of laughter.

Sabrina had ‘decorated’ his arm, plastering the plates with stickers and paper flowers, glitter glue and paint filling the gaps between the plates and joins.

“How did this happen?” she asked when she’d stopped laughing at him.

“We were colouring,” he said as she sat him on a stool and started to take a look. “I got distracted, didn’t see what she was doing. There was Disney.”

“Take your shirt off.”

He did as he was told and watched her as she collected some supplies to clean it up.

“Want me to take it off?”

“No, leave it attached,” she said, soaking a cloth in cleaning fluid. “Best if you can move it, check if I get it all.”

He held still while she worked, but she was different from Tony in the way she didn’t babble away as she worked. She saved conversation until it was needed, not to just fill space.

He wished he’d gone to Tony instead.
“Can I ask you something?”

“You just did, but sure, fire away,” she said, scraping away at a glob of glitter glue with a dental tool.

“How much do you remember? When they had you, the things they did, what they made you do.”

Her hand faltered and he wished he hadn’t asked.

“I remember some. Not all of it, I don’t think,” she said, peeling away at the stickers on his bicep. “I remember being cold, and afraid. There was pain…sometimes voices. Sometimes I could feel hands on the inside…the warmth of my own blood…the burn of something they pumped in. I remember being alone. I wanted to be saved, for someone to find me. And then I just wanted to die.”

“You wish you could forget?”

“Sometimes. But mostly I don’t. I like being able to remember, knowing that it happened, that it was real, that I’m not crazy. Bucky, is there something bothering you? A memory you can’t shake? If something is going on in your head that’s not a good thing you should talk to one of us about it.”

“I killed them. I planted a bomb on one of the tyres and made it look like an accident, but he was still alive when I checked. I had to, they said, and if I didn’t do what they said…I didn’t want the chair, the bit…I had to,” he said, his voice low, hating himself more than he ever had before. “I lost my mask and he saw me. He called me Barnes. My head…it was like a bullet. I had to stop him, they didn’t give me a choice. But he begged me. He begged me to save his wife. She was gone, but he didn’t know, and he talked about his son, that he’d be alone.”

“Bucky,” she said, stroking his hair away from his eyes. “Are you talking about Howard? Is that what they made you do?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Oh, God. I snapped his neck. Oh God. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, we already know about that,” Tony said from the doorway. “What unicorn shit on you?”
“Sabrina,” Annie said. “Bucky, we know what happened to Howard. It was in the big information dump that Natasha put out. There were Hydra files in there, stuff Pierce was working on, including you. It’s all out there, we know everything.”

“How?” he breathed, looking between the two Stark’s. “Like…the chair and the freeze and…”

“Everything,” Tony confirmed. He nodded to a closed off portion of the workshop and Bucky obediently followed him, too stunned and emotionally turbulent to do anything else.

“Don’t break him,” Annie said to Tony and he saluted her.

“No breaking, got it,” he said. “Now, understand that I started this way before you came to live here. Back when Steve did the whole Helicarrier thing and Natasha did her info dump, all I knew was that you were Bucky and Bucky was important to Steve. I love Steve, so it was a pretty tiny step to build something that might help Steve get the sane version of his friend back. You know, the version that wasn’t set to destroy.”

He pulled open the metal siding and let Bucky see.

The chair.

It didn’t look exactly like the one he’d been in. It was shinier, and cleaner, and had red accents because, well, Tony. But it was the chair.

“Okay, keep breathing for me, don’t pass out or break things,” Tony pleaded, waving his hands. “I’m not putting you in it or anything like that. I just haven’t gotten around to taking it apart yet.”

“Why…” he cleared his throat and tried again. “Why keep building it after you knew?”

“After I knew what you were and what you’d done?” Bucky nodded. “Simple. You’re important to Steve. And when you first arrived, your memory was patchy at best. I had the thought that maybe this could help in some way.”
Bucky staggered away, finally flopping down on the ratty oil-stained sofa Tony sometimes passed out on.

“Let me get this straight,” he said eventually. Tony was almost through a whole cup of coffee and Annie had almost finished cleaning the arm. “You knew all about the fact that I murdered your parents, and you still wanted to help me?”

“It wasn’t murder,” Tony said. “I don’t blame you, any more than I blame the bomb used, or a bullet from a gun. Bucky, you were a tool they used. You couldn’t have said no even if you’d had a mind to try.”

“It was still me on the end of that bomb,” he argued.

“Perhaps. Doesn’t make it your fault,” Annie said. “It was Hydra. Don’t blame yourself for the actions of crazy people.”

Bucky didn’t reply. It was usually a pretty stupid idea to argue with a Stark. They had so many words that they could tie you in knots with, until you were agreeing with them without realising what you were doing. How Steve controlled Tony, Bucky would never know. He got to his feet and walked back over to the chair Tony had built.

“Can I have it?”

“This? You want it?” Tony asked, surprised.

“If it’s okay. They used to have me shut down in it.”

“Shut down? You mean…sleep?”

“Yes. But is it…can it…”

“Oh, no! It’s not functional, I didn’t finish it,” Tony promised. “It’s got a few lights that work, but that’s it. I could probably add some speakers, you could hook up your mp3. Maybe a screen, have JARVIS stream things for you.”
“Maybe…the speaker thing?”

“Ha! Project!”

“Bucky, let me finish your arm while he tinkers. Tony, JUST the speakers. It doesn’t need anything more. No vibrations, no massage, no screens. No fancy fabrics or stripping it down and starting again. He wants it just the way it is with just sounds available. Think you can stick to that?”

“Party poopers.”

Sabrina hated thinking of the lab. It was cold and scary and things that hurt were done by scary men in white.

But Bruce wore a white thing sometimes. He wore it when he did his science. He said it was to keep his clothes clean, which seemed good, because clothes were good. She liked her socks with faces on, and the pink fuzzy sweater with the hood because it made naptime all snuggly and warm.

There were a lot of things she loved about her new home. She had people for stories, and moving pictures that told stories on the screen. There were cuddles and tickles and Thor to brush her hair.

The babies were warm and wriggly and fun to watch. Kiddo made funny noises and liked to cuddle too.

She had Daddy Clint and Daddy Phil and Daddy Bucky. And Annie, who had pretty hair and made cookies, and Natasha who took her to the gym and played with her on the climbing stuff. Thor and Jane and Darcy, Steve and Tony and Loki, Sam and Bruce and JARVIS. All her unit. And sometimes Peter came to play, which was fun because he could crawl on the ceiling. And Aunt May brought cakes. And Fandral always smiled at her, always.

It was a strange new life. She got to choose and no one yelled or hurt, and all these people who were always there for her.
And food.

She loved food, it was the most amazing thing ever. It made her tongue do happy things and her tummy feel warm and full. She liked sweet and salty, hot and cold, crunchy and squishy, it was all amazing.

There were beds and sofas and Helix the dog to play with. Toys to play with and games and her stuffed monkey.

But it was all very strange.

“Daddy Bucky my daddy, but not Kiddo daddy,” she said quietly as Bruce measured out spices for his recipe.

“That’s right,” he confirmed. “Bucky is your biological daddy but he’s not Kiddo’s biological daddy. Do you know what biological means?”

“Made from,” she said. “Me made from Bucky and Annie. Annie…daddy?”

“No, Annie would be your mommy, like she’s Gabby’s mommy.”

“Daddy…boy?”

“That’s right! Clever girl. Daddy’s are boys and mommy’s are girls.”

She went back to her picture, swinging her feet and dropping dog biscuits for Helix, before she thought of her next question.

“Gabby have Mommy Annie and Daddy Thor?”

“Yes.”
“And Bruce daddy? But not made from Bruce?”

“That’s right. Like you have Daddy Phil and Daddy Clint. I’m Gabby’s other daddy.”

“But…Sarah?”

“Ah. Sarah is made from who?” he prompted as he cut up some chicken to marinate.

“Sarah…grew in Loki. And…made from…Tony?”

“Not quite. She’s made from Steve, like Kiddo is. So what does that mean?”

“Sarah have Mommy Loki and Daddy Steve and other Daddy Tony.”

“And what do Other Daddy’s mean?”

“Not made from, but still take care of. Cuddle and food and bedtime and bath,” she said, absolutely sure of that part.

“Very good,” he praised. “We all look after each other here, one big unit.”

“Daddy Phil say coming for me. Bad people take me, all coming for me. Hulk coming for me?”

He wiped off his hands and sat down next to her.

“Sabrina, baby, look at me.” He swept her hair back and held her hands. His hands were warm and soft and never hurt, even though he was a doctor. But he was a good doctor, not a scary lab one, so it was okay. “I promise that if someone managed to take you, we will all come for you. You’re one of us, and we take care of our unit.”
“Hulk break bad mans who had Gabby and Sarah. And bad man hurting Loki.”

“You’re right, he did. And you know how much Hulk loves you. He will break any bad man who takes you.”

“Hulk play?”

He chuckled to himself and nodded. “Okay. Let me clean up and we can go play. Go ask Steve to come play with us.”

She slipped out of her seat and scurried down the hall, Helix following her. She stopped at the door to the room where Steve and Tony and Loki and Sarah all slept. Her Phil had taught her to knock. Adults liked to be naked alone, which was silly because she already knew what they had under their clothes. But they liked it that way.

“Sabrina,” Tony said as he opened the door. “How you doing, baby girl?”

“I good,” she said as he picked her up and carried her in. “Bruce cook.”

“Marvellous,” Loki said from where he was laying on the bed.

“Bruce say Hulk play. Steve come play?”

Steve grinned, pacing with Sarah against his bare chest. “Okay, I’ll play. Here you go, sweetheart,” he cooed, laying Sarah on the bed. “Off to mommy with you. There we go.”

Sabrina watches as Loki cuddles the baby close and it’s just like the way Clint and Phil hold her; it has to feel good, being held by her mommy. Loki gives very good cuddles after all.

Steve pulls on a shirt and takes Sabrina from Tony, kissing him, before he carries her out to where Bruce is waiting for them. They go down to the gym, which is huge. It has space to run and climb, there are heavy things to lift. There’s a space – a ring – where Bucky and Steve and sometimes Tony go to box, which is like fighting but with pillows on their hands; and a squishy square of floor that they wrestle on.
It takes a moment but soon Bruce has become Hulk, and Sabrina doesn’t have to be careful. She knows how strong she is, knows that she could hurt someone, so she tries not to forget, tries to be careful with how strong she is. But with Hulk she doesn’t have to. With Hulk and Steve and Daddy Bucky. They’re strong too. Maybe Mommy Annie, but she doesn’t know about that one.

Hulk is happy to see her, and they spend the afternoon playing. She gets to climb on the great green man, and he swings her by her hands, and sometimes holds her upside down by her feet, which makes her shriek and giggle. They play with bouncy balls bigger than she is, and they play Hide and Seek, which Hulk is surprisingly good at, especially in the bit of the gym that looks like a jungle.

Eventually they end up in the Hulk Playroom, which is filled with things Hulk can smash. There are bricks and metal sheets and even a whole car. There’s also soft things, where the snuggle up and watch cartoons, drinking the milk and eating the cookies Steve gives them.

When Bruce comes back, Sabrina is sleepy and warm and safe.

They’re coming for her.

Always.
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

I haven't seen Civil War yet, but I have seen clips on YouTube, which is where my info came from.

I'm so sorry this took so long, I hit a major wall.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Phil knew his children were different than others their ages, but he didn’t really notice how different they were until he and Clint made the decision to start them at the Tower’s day-care.

They’d talked it over, including the other residents of the Tower, and the decision had been made that the kids would do well interacting with other children. They had then met with the leader of the childcare team, Isabelle Hartley, and agreed that a stay and play session would be the best start. Clint and Phil would take Kiddo and Sabrina down to the day-care and stay while they played with the other children for a few hours. The two men would be on hand to reassure the kids, and they could run interference if it didn’t go well.

“Now, do you remember what we said?” Clint prompted as he helped Sabrina with the buttons of her cardigan.

She had chosen her own outfit for the day. Bright orange leggings, monkey socks, pink boots, a bright blue t-shirt and a pink cardigan with bunnies on it. Thor had braided her hair back so it wouldn’t get in her way, and she had her monkey in her arms.

“Go play, lots of childrens,” she said.

“That’s right,” he praised. “And you remember what to do if they do something you don’t like or understand?”

“Don’t hit. I can play with someone else. Daddy stay?”

“Yeah, baby girl, we’re going to stay. We’ll be right there, you can come find us any time you like.”
The elevator stopped at the right floor and they approached the first security point. A sealed door that only opened for verified fingerprint scans. Then the second, which took a retinal scan to get through. And finally four security guards, who were all armed to the teeth and trained to protect under-fives.

“Mr Coulson, Mr Barton.”


Alphonso Mackenzie, who preferred to go by Mack, was a huge black man with a shaved head. Rumour had it that his preferred weapon was a shotgun with an axe welded to the end, a rumour that Clint knew was 100% true and that particular weapon had been made by Mack himself. Mack had a younger brother, and loved working in the garage, which is where Clint had always found him whenever he’d gone looking for him.

“Yeah,” Mack said with a smile. “Change of pace, for sure, but it’s a great job. My fridge is packed with drawings.”

“I’ll bet. I’m sure Sabrina would make you some new ones if you ask nicely.”

The huge man squatted down so he was at her level and offered her a lolly pop he pulled from seemingly nowhere.

“Hello, Sabrina,” he said with a gentle smile. “I’m Mack and I hear you draw some very pretty pictures.”

She grinned and took the lolly, hiding in Clint’s leg and peeking out at him.

“What do you say?” Phil prompted.

“Thank you,” she said and Mack grinned at her before standing.

“How about this little man? He ready for lolly pops?”
“Not quite yet,” Phil said and Mack nodded, digging in his pocket and coming up with some dehydrated apple rings. Kiddo accepted them without delay, giving Mack a huge smile.

The playroom was almost all windows, bright daylight streaming through the bulletproof glass, lighting up the bright multi-coloured carpet. There was every kid activity imaginable laid out: books and stuffed animals, blocks, sand and water, climbing frames and slides, dolls, cars, dress up, arts and crafts, even some ride on toys like bikes and cars.

There were about two dozen kids of different ages milling around, playing and interacting, with adults scattered around the room, clearly visible in uniforms of a red t-shirt with the Stark Industries logo on the breast.

“Now, you are two blokes I was sure would never have kids.”

Phil smiled bashfully at Lance Hunter, who was the deputy manager of the day-care. He was a skinny Englishman that had been a mercenary the agency had done business with. His wife had been one of their top agents, Barbara Morse, but with the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. the two of them had needed to find other employment. In their travels as guns for hire, they had both picked up teaching qualifications. There was no easier way to get close to a target than their children. Most people would do anything for their children, and the agency had always used that to their advantage.

Phil had always been reluctant in his use of the tactic, finding it distasteful, and Clint had flatly refused to ever do it.

“Sometimes things change for the better,” Phil said, Kiddo peering at Hunter in curiosity. He was happy enough so long as he had his Phil. “Just how many Agents defected to Stark Industries?”

“All of us that passed the screening, so not that many. Tony Stark is very exact in his standards.”

“Glad to hear it,” Clint said, unwrapping the lolly for Sabrina. It turned out not to be candy but a dehydrated strawberry on a stick. She devoured it in one bite.

“I hear we have some new playmates!” Hunter said cheerfully. He squatted down to Sabrina’s level and smiled at her. “Hello, little miss. My name is Hunter.”
“Me Sabrina.”

“Sabrina! What a perfectly perfect name!” She giggled at him. “Now, I hear you’ve come to play with all the other boys and girls.”

“Yes. Play nice.”

“Well, that’s very good to hear. What would you like to play with first?”

She looked around and stuck her fingers in her mouth, clinging to Clint like a limpet.

Hunter smiled and stood up, looking around. “Oi, Bob!”

The call brought over a blond Amazon, Barbara Morse, who looked happy to see them and pressed a kiss to Clint’s cheek before kneeling right there on the floor.

“Hi. My name’s Bobbi. What’s yours?”

“Sabrina.”

“Very nice to meet you, Sabrina. And who is this?” she asked, pointing up at the toddler.

“Kiddo. My brother.”

“A brother. Wow. You know, I always wanted one of those. Is it fun having a brother?” Sabrina nodded and Phil set Kiddo down next to her.

The little boy blinked at the legs around him before he giggled and clapped. Then he tipped onto his hands and knees and took off determinedly for whatever had caught his eye. It turned out to be the crayons. The other children made space for him at the table but he was happy to pull paper and crayons to the floor, like he did in the penthouse.
“Well, he’s found something to do,” Hunter said.

“Shall we go play while your daddies talk to Hunter?” Bobbi said, holding out a hand.

Sabrina glanced up at them and then took Bobbi’s hand once they’d nodded encouragingly. She pressed her monkey into Phil’s hands and then Bobbi let the child lead her off to the sand table.

“She’s not what we expected,” Hunter said as they watched the two children.

“Is that bad?” Phil worried.

“No, not bad. A little concerning maybe. She’s behind the other children,” he said, directing them to look at their daughter.

The other kids at the table were building castles, digging holes, chattering away to each other. Sabrina was pressing at the sand, obviously trying to figure it out, silent as a grave.

“She’s not what we expected,” Hunter said as they watched the two children.

“I read the file, and his.” They looked at Kiddo, who was happily content to draw, looking over at the other kids pictures. “He’s not as damaged as she is, you can see it. It’s not surprising, she was older when rescued, spent more time under their particular brand of care. And he’s been free longer than she has. There’s nothing wrong with her, she’s just different. It just means she’s got more work ahead of her to be at a similar level to others her own age.”

The three men watched for about an hour as the two kids moved between activities and interacted with others their own ages, and as the hour went on, it became more and more apparent how different Sabrina was.

Kiddo was happy enough to play with others. He’d found another little boy about his size and the two of them ended up building with some oversized Lego. They babbled away at each other, smiling and giggling at some baby joke. It was surprisingly normal, considering how Kiddo had started out in life. He wasn’t quite on a par with the others his age, but he wasn’t lagging too far behind.
Sabrina was not so lucky. She didn’t understand the behaviours of the other children, nor did she really understand the purpose of having a large room of children if it wasn’t to experiment on them. They could see her watching the adults with wariness, looking over at her daddies every few minutes to make sure they hadn’t left.

They dreaded what might happen if anyone wearing white were to enter.

“I don’t think she’s ready for this,” Clint said. “It’s too much.”

“Agreed,” Phil said, passing him the monkey. “Your turn.”

Clint made his way across the room, dodging little people running here and there, ducking the occasional ball thrown, until he reached the climbing frame.

It was huge, big enough to take up two stories. It had nets and ladders, ropes, hammocks and swings, high perches and soft landings underfoot. He climbed up the huge tree shaped central structure to the highest point. A crow’s-nest, heavily padded with pillows and blankets.

Sabrina had all but buried herself under a half dozen layers, dark eyes peering out suspiciously.

“Hey, baby,” he said softly. “Want Monkey?”

She reached out with grabby motions, cuddling it close when she had it.

“I guess this isn’t a good thing, huh? You don’t like it here?”


“Lots of children? Lots of people?” She nodded and he levered himself into her little space. It was an excellent nest. “You don’t have to come here again. Just because Kiddo likes it, doesn’t mean you have to. Maybe in a few months you’ll want to come and play again. But for now I think maybe playing at home would be better for you.”
“Home,” she murmured, climbing into his lap, blankets and all. “Go home. Quiet.”

“Okay, sweetheart. Give me Monkey and we’ll climb down.”

She handed it over and scrambled out, climbing down fast and speeding over to Phil who scooped her up. Clint followed and they discussed with Hunter enrolment for Kiddo but delayed for Sabrina. They were happy for Kiddo to join them two mornings a week for the time being, and change it as needed. Phil or Clint would stick around with him, just to be sure he was okay.

Sabrina stepped off the elevator and ran straight to Loki, cuddling close as he nursed Sarah.

“How’d it go?” Bucky asked as they made coffee.

“He was fine, loved it,” Phil said. “We’ve enrolled him for two mornings a week.”

“And baby girl?”

“Not so good. She hated it, ended up hiding at the very top of the climbing frame.”

“Sounds like a good hiding place to me,” Natasha said, adding cherries to her tea.

“She said it was too loud,” Clint said. “We’re idiots. She’s full of serum and we didn’t factor it in. She’s used to quiet, to peaceful environments and we put her in a room full of noise and people.”

Loki left them to their discussion and self-flagellation, focusing instead on the two little girls in his care.

“Would you like to help wind her?” he asked as Sarah decided she was full.

“Me help.”
He sat the baby on Sabrina’s lap and covered her hand with his own, rubbing it up and down the tiny back until she let out a belch that was much too big for such a tiny girl.

“Goodness, that was impressive from such a tiny thing,” he said and Sabrina giggled. “Would you like to watch a film?”

“What film?”

“I don’t know. Which one would you like?”

“Ummm. Princess?”

“Which princess?”

“Clock.”

“Ah, Beauty and the Beast it is then. JARVIS?”

The screen before them sprang to life and the Disney castle appeared. Sabrina snuggled in and Sarah wriggled in excitement.

It caught the attention of the others and they watched as the little girl relaxed into the sofa seat.

“It doesn’t matter,” Bucky said firmly. “She’s fine just the way she is. And if that means day-care doesn’t work for her, so be it. I always hated school anyways. She’ll be fine.”

Bucky made his way down to the gym and watched as Natasha worked her way through a routine, gymnastics, a few ballet moves thrown in, and some random martial arts movements too. It was beautiful and deadly and just how he liked his women.
Beautiful to look at but start praying if you pissed them off.

She was obviously upset about something, but not ready to talk. So Bucky set himself up on a treadmill, running until she was ready.

“You want to spar?” Natasha asked as he hit the forty mile mark.

It was after his stay in that hellhole Steve had rescued him from that Bucky had noticed a difference in his body. He didn’t tire like he used to, he didn’t get sick so often, he never got cold. By all rights the fall from the train should have killed him. Losing an arm wasn’t pleasant, but he had walked away lightly. Physically at least.

It wasn’t until after the events in Washington and reuniting with Steve in New York that Bucky had found out that he had a version of serum pumped into him in that hellhole in Europe. The extent of it, no one was quite sure, but it did make life interesting.

They moved to the mats and started trying to pin each other. There was a general rule in the tower that pinning was the only thing allowed. Nothing deadly. Her kicks were just as dangerous as he remembered. It was like dancing with a pretty woman, something he just about remembered. The thrust and retreat, the footwork, the turns, the reacting to another person.

His memories came back in pieces. Sometimes it was just an image, a flash of something. Other times it was the whole memory with no sound, or sometimes just the sound with no picture. Memories sometimes came to him jumbled together, so he would remember something from the forties mixed with something from a week ago.

It had taken a while for the memories he had of Natasha to come back in a way that made any kind of sense. She had been a child then, and the Red Room had paid huge sums to lease him for a few months. His handlers had followed him every step he took when he trained the girls, and he’d spent increasingly more time in the chair being wiped as the mission went on. But the fiery little redhead had stayed with him somehow, buried way down deep.

He ducked a left hook, she dodged a rib punch. He blocked a kick to the groin, she ducked a roundhouse kick. The two of them were evenly matched for flexibility and skill, but he was still too new from his Hydra days to be as adaptive as she was. She fought dirty.

He was focusing on blocking her roundhouse when she leapt and landed on his shoulders. He
expected her to squeeze his neck with her thighs, so it took him off guard when she hurled herself forward. She flipped him over, sending him flying, and was pinning him before he even stopped moving.

“I give,” he panted. “I give.”

She leaned in and kissed him, hard and fierce, and he felt himself melt into it.

Sexual desire was the last physical response to return. Hunger, thirst, tiredness, restlessness, all of them had come back relatively soon after he pulled Steve from the river. It wasn’t until after the attack on the tower that he had gotten an erection. Natasha had shown him what to do with it.

Despite what his critics believed, he had not had sex with any of the girls he had trained. He hadn’t actually had sex since 1945. Hydra had never asked it of him. He was a weapon, pure and simple. His task was to kill, to destroy, occasionally surveillance, but nothing more. Anything that required an interpersonal action was not assigned to him.

She freed his sudden erection to the air and he hissed. Of all the things he loved about the way Natasha fucked him, the way she took charge was perfection. Hydra had taken charge but not the way she did. She always made him feel good, knowing exactly what he needed before he did. She forced his body to be a body again, to be something other than grizzly death.

She climbed off him to strip her lower half. He didn’t remember women being hairless in the forties, but it seemed to be something she wanted. He was all for choice over your own body. She climbed on him and sank down in one fluid movement and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Hot and wet and tight and someone touching him that didn’t hurt. When they had sex, he was never expected to do anything. Sometimes Natasha preferred if he didn’t, and that worked for him. Being able to lose himself in the sensations was freedom for him. To just feel, to just live in the moment, in the present, being all that he was and all that he could be, just him, just Bucky. A person, a human being, safe in her hands. And thighs. And pale creamy skin.

She moved, fluid arching, almost a dance above him. Her hips rolled, her buttocks against his thighs, her hands chasing her own pleasure as she tweaked her nipples and dipped between her thighs to rub. He could feel her nails scrape against his swollen cock every now and then as she moved and he groaned.
It had taken many sessions before he could make noise reflexively without waiting for her to punish him. It was something the two of them were very clear on, that punishment was not a part of intimacy. No harsh words, no pain, no humiliation. Just pleasure, just trust between them.

It was the thing that truly made him feel most human again.

She was breathless, gasping, her fingers moving faster and faster, and he moaned fully as she clamped down around him, squeezing his cock, almost ripping his orgasm from him. It was intense and burning and connection with another living being an a completely different way than any other interaction he had.

They lay together on the mat, sweat drying, her thigh thrown over his hips. He stroked it with his thumb. She had the metal arm pinned under her head, which he would assume would be uncomfortable, but she did it often, so it was something she clearly enjoyed.

“Wanna talk yet?” he asked.

“We questioned the agents who infiltrated the tower,” she said. Her fingers toyed with his hair.

“It didn’t go well.”

“No. It was unproductive.”

“Do you desire my assistance?”

“No. Further questioning is not required.”

“Reasoning for no further question is desired.”

“Hey,” she said, levering herself up on one arm to look at him. “Come back. You’re Bucky Barnes, not the Asset.”

He took a deep breath and cupped her breast. “You’re right. I slipped. I’m here. Why don’t you need
“They’re missing their tongues and vocal cords. They can’t tell us anything, and as far as we can tell, they’re illiterate.”

“Huh. Nothin’ like sending in drones to die for you.”

“It’s the Hydra way.”

He smiled and kissed her, licking into her mouth.

“You want more?” she asked as he gripped her thigh.

“I want you. I want.”

“I know what you want.” She ducked down to nip a nipple, his back arching to follow her mouth as it withdrew. She gripped his renewed erection. “You want to use your short refractory period.”

“Fuck me.”

“Gladly.”

Steve let himself into the workshop and accepted the screwdriver Dum-E gave him.

“Thank you. Where does it go?”

He let Dum-E take it back and wheel off across the room.
Tony was sat at one of his workbenches, Sarah in her bouncy chair, poking at her toes to make her giggle.

“Loki’s getting a little full,” he said. “She’s about due a feed.”

“I was going to bring her up. We were talking about the merits of anime as an art form.”

“Ah. And what is the decision?”

“It’s a very good art form. Very bright and colourful and liked by our little girl,” he declared. “She likes Spirited Away.”

“It’s a very good movie, very pretty.”

“She likes the Soot Sprites. Giggles when they’re on the screen.”

“You ordered her a toy of them, didn’t you?” he asked with a grin.

“Of course, it’ll be here Tuesday.” He picked up the baby, who gummed at the neck of his t-shirt. “Come on, sweetie. Let’s go see mommy, get you some lunch.”

“Tony,” Steve said, gripping his arm. “You need to talk about this.”

“Talk about what? That I’m suing those hacks that told me those shutters would hold out bad guys? That I’m sourcing vibranium to make my own? What’s there to talk about, Steve?”

“How about the fact that their incompetence put our daughter at risk? How about the fact that we can’t get anything from the agents we caught?”

“Then we can’t get anything,” Tony said. “And screw them, because I will protect our baby. I will secure this tower from attack so this doesn’t happen again.”
Steve let go of him and watched him leave. Dum-E chirped at his elbow, offering a smoothie.

“It is safe to drink, Captain,” JARVIS assured.

“Thanks, buddy.”

Dum-E beeped happily and danced away when Steve took a sip. He liked the kooky little guy. Sure, he didn’t really do what Tony wanted him to, but he had character.

Maybe he was worrying over nothing. He had just assumed that Tony would be handling things badly. But he wasn’t. He seemed to be doing fine with everything. Maybe the project of repairing the tower was enough to keep his mind busy.

“Maybe parenthood is enough for him,” Bucky said from the open door. “Maybe that little lady is enough to quiet that head of his.”

“From what I hear, it was never enough for Howard.”

“Yeah, but they’re two different men,” Bucky said, accepting the wrench from Butterfingers. “Thanks.” The bot poked at his arm and retrieved a cloth and began polishing his metal bicep. “Man, I love these things. They’re awesome.”

“They’ve got spirit. We probably would have won the war in six months is we’d had them.”

“Nah, ten minutes flat,” Bucky joked as Dum-E rolled up with a smoothie.

“I would not drink that, Master Barnes,” JARVIS warned. “He has used motor oil. He believes it is needed for your robotic arm to maintain functionality.”

“Well, I see the thinking behind that,” Bucky said with a grin. “Sorry, buddy. My people parts don’t like motor oil. But I appreciate the thought.”

Dum-E drooped for a moment before he clacked his claw and took the cup, wheeling off to the sink.
“You really think he’s okay?” Steve asked.

“I think he’s better than Howard in a whole lot of ways. I think he’s dealing with this in the best way he can. He’s seen a problem, and he’s working to fix it. It’s enough to keep him on an even keel. Stop waiting for him to blow, Steve. He’s doing fine,” Bucky soothed.

“You’re probably right. How about Natasha?”

“What about her?”

“Come on! Don’t try pulling that,” he laughed. “We’ve all seen it, the way the two of you move around each other.”

“I trained her, pal, of course we move well together,” he hedged, turning his arm so the bot could polish more of it. Butterfingers chirped in delight.

“Bucky, I’m not teasing,” he promised. “I’m asking. If there’s something between you, well, it’s a good thing. She’s a good woman. Scary. But a good woman. I think she could be good for you.”

“She is,” he admitted quietly. “I can’t explain. It’s like…when I’m with her…” He trailed off and moved to lean against the same workbench as Steve. Butterfingers followed and resumed polishing as soon as he was still. “When I’m with Nat, it’s like she’s peeling away this layer, and I’m under it. Like she finds all the parts they tried to get rid of and brings them up.”

“You like her bringing them up?”

“Yeah, I think I do. I’d forgotten all these things, things that used to be important to me. The double dates, the broads I made time with. I’d forgotten how much I enjoyed that. A beautiful woman, feeling something, anything, being a regular man. I know I’ll never be a regular guy again, not with a metal arm and being very well preserved for my age. But she makes me feel…better.”

Steve slung an arm around his shoulder.
“If it feels good, and it’s not hurting anyone, then why do you think you should feel guilty about enjoying the company of a beautiful woman?” he prompted with a gentle smile.

“Leftovers I guess. Maybe there are some things I’ll never really shake.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that, Buck. They had you for seventy years. Getting you out at all is a miracle.”

“I can dream.”

“We all dream about things we can’t have,” Steve said. “And that’s okay.”

“Does Tony do it for you? And Loki? Do they bring back parts of you?” Bucky asked.

“They find parts I didn’t know I was missing. They make me whole.”

The head man pushed down his smile at the excitement in his head scientist.

“It’s incredible,” he babbled. “The transfusion from the female has completely reversed the difficulties we were having with the test subject, and there’s evidence in the sample of results similar to Rebirth. And the infants! Sir, what’s in their blood…it’s incredible. Half alien DNA adds a little spice to the mix. There is something really amazing happening there. The possible capabilities of these subjects…”

“I see, you’re excited. But do you have the results I wanted?”

“Oh, yes! Yes, sir, sorry. I got carried away. Yes, sir, we’re seeing positive results on samples from both infant subjects, and major increases in output from the sample taken from RSB-39. SB81 is also holding steady, as we’ve seen in past tests. Honestly, sir, if the subjects are retrieved, there is almost no limit to what they could be capable of.”
“Thank you. You may return to your duties now.”

The scientist sped away and the head man considered what he’d been told before joining his second in his office.

“Well?”

“Confirmation of serum in all four,” he said and the man gave a fist pump of success.

“Damn. That’s incredible.”

“We need to retrieve them,” he said and the second frowned.

“Retrieval will be difficult,” he said. “Stark is known to go overboard with everything. It was just a stroke of luck we managed to find the manufacturer of those shutters. If we hadn’t, we wouldn’t even have managed the samples.”

“What is your plan?”

“No plan yet. I need some time to do some recon, to feel things out. I’m unsure of the way to get to the subjects at this time. Could be we need to wait, let them calm down.”

“I would prefer that we not wait,” the head man said softly.

“Yes, sir, I know, waiting isn’t what any of us really want. But it may be the only option. These people don’t take kindly to being infiltrated. We tried to snatch their children, we took blood, we shot a few of them. Their guard will be up.”

“Do what you must, but retrieval is of the utmost importance.”

“I understand, sir. I will do what is needed. I will get results.”
Kiddo learned to run in a single afternoon.

It was one of the days when Kiddo wasn’t in day-care, one of the early days in spring when you start to believe winter wouldn’t last forever.

Gabby and Sarah were nine and eight weeks old respectively, and both had learned to sit up unaided. Bruce was amazed at their development, but he always turned to mush when either of them smiled at him. They liked to sit and watch the world go by, gumming on whatever toy they’d got hold of, babbling at whoever was closest. Usually it was each other, and it was hilarious to watch them ‘talk’ to each other.

Kiddo was sat on the rug with the two babies, Sabrina colouring on the hard part of the floor. Steve and Annie were bustling about in the kitchen trying a new cookie recipe, Bucky all too happy to be their taster. Phil and Clint were helping taste test too, the three of them forming a sort of judgement panel. Bucky had expressed a longing for the cookies his mother used to make, and Steve had made it his mission to replicate them. So far, they were close but not right, and Steve and Annie were determined to fix the problems.

Tony and Bruce had disappeared down to the lab to do science, Thor and Jane had gone to physio with Darcy, Natasha off to visit Sam. Bruce was working on a possible treatment for his spine using Annie’s serum. JARVIS was happily watching over the children, content to play nanny.

Tony bustled in, Bruce following more slowly, and started babbling to Annie about the properties of her blood, how incredible the science of it all was. He talked about the stem cells in her blood, how they were like building blocks. He kept on, babbling away, until JARVIS firmly called him.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Sir, look.”

They looked over just in time to see Kiddo push himself to his feet. He stood and wobbled for a moment before he managed to take a few drunken steps. He plodded over to his toys, getting his feet, and grabbed one of his periodic table building blocks, before he ran over to Tony, holding the toy up to him.
“Eee, ock,” he said and Tony squatted down to him.

“Is this for me?”

“Ock.”

“Yeah, a block, I see.”

“You kept talking about building blocks,” Bucky said. “He thinks you were asking for one.”

“Thanks, Kiddo,” Tony said, picking him up. “Check you out, huh. Running and everything. Who’s a clever boy?”

He squealed and giggled, patting Tony’s cheeks.

Phil was buried in Clint’s neck, sobbing in joy, and Clint was teary eyed too.

Tony put Kiddo down and watched him toddle off. He moved to the windows and looked out over the city, and then back to the kitchen to have a nose about, and then to the elevator, where he banged on the doors with his little hands.

“Kiddo play in gym?” Sabrina asked.

“Yeah, let’s go play in the gym,” Phil said, pulling himself together. “Come on, munchkins.”

Sabrina was happy to abandon her pictures and follow her daddies into the elevator. Once in there, Kiddo held her hand, which he considered highly amusing. Once they reached the gym, the two kids bundled forwards to the mats, running and tumbling. They headed to the obstacle course, which was just a giant climbing frame to people so small.

“I didn’t think he’d be so fast,” Phil said.
“Well, you have to factor in his genetics,” Clint replied. “He is the son of two super soldiers. He was always going to be physically superior to other children. They both were.”

Sabrina giggled as Kiddo scrambled over the rope bridge, legs sticking through every step and laughing his head off as he got tangled.

“You worried we won’t keep up?” Clint asked.

“No, I always knew we wouldn’t keep up,” he assured with a smile. “I’m just worried about them being too different. I worry that they’ll be the odd ones out.”

“From all the mommy blogs, I’d say that’s a pretty normal worry about your kids. Right? Your sisters worry about that sort of stuff, right?”

“I think so. Maybe we should call them.”

“Perfect, defer to higher powers. See, this is a plan. A good plan.”

Over twenty years they had been in stasis, but the Hydra agent knew it was the way to get through Stark’s new security.

Honestly, who else would ever spend that much on a rare metal just to make some damn shutters?

Not even ants got through that security now. Laser grids, voice recognition, retinal and fingerprint scans, dual turn keys, individual key cards and security codes. He even installed DNA recognition for the personal levels.

There was no way anyone was getting close to those subjects without a little help, and it was help he was hoping to find in the Siberian wastelands. There was nothing for miles and miles, just open plains of snow and ice, winds whipping across the land.
His credentials were enough to get the doors open without too much fuss. A single phone call to the head of Hydra covered what his name didn’t. The facility was no different than other facilities in their control, other than what this one held.

Once the main training centre for the Winter Soldier program, the facility had more extreme medical equipment than most. The soldiers here were always armed, always in full tactical gear, never without their body armour.

“Sir, I am so honoured to have you here,” said the man in charge of the facility. “Truly. I hope we can deliver the results you need.”

“So do I. How many do you have?”

“Five, sir. But they are unstable. You’ve read the reports?”

“I have, I know the difficulties you’ve had with these particular recruits,” he said, following the man through the bare hallways. “Ordinarily, I wouldn’t be considering the use of them, but this is a… unique situation.”

“Sir,” the man said, turning to him. “We’ve heard rumours. About the female Stark. That she has…”

“A biological serum running through her veins?” he offered with a smile.

“Yes. Is it true?”

“It is. She has also birthed three successful enhanced soldiers. There’s also another one, the product of an alien and Captain America.”

“So the aim of using these recruits is… recovery of all the infants?”

“Hopefully, that will be the very minimum of what we get out of this. Now. Let’s see them.”

The man unlocked the storage room and flipped the lights. Inside the room was five cryostasis
containers, each holding a Winter Soldier prototype.

“Begin the thaw. Let’s see what these puppies can do.”

The thawing process took 24 hours, owing to the fact that they had been under so very long. The original Winter Soldier had only ever been down for ten years, maximum. He was easier to control.

Once they were thawed, they were recalibrated in the chair, one at a time. Then they were hydrated and given nutrient compound.

And then they were ready for a briefing.

“This is your target site,” the Hydra agent said, displaying a picture of Stark Tower on the screen before them. “Stark Tower. Very high security. There is no possibility of covert infiltration. This is a snatch and grab only.”

“Primary objective?” asked one, a male, the tallest of the five.

“These are your primary targets.” The picture changed, displaying Sabrina, Kiddo, Gabrielle and Sarah. “These children are the next generation of super soldier, and they have been stolen from us. They must be recovered, alive and unharmed. Our scientists need to achieve the best results, so they must be undamaged. Understood?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” they chorused.

“Sir. Is there a secondary objective?” the only female asked. She was small and deadly, like the Black Widow.

“There is. Look alive people, because this is what’s going to trip you up. This female is the reason we have infant enhanced available to us,” he said, pointing at the new image. “Annabelle Catherine Stark. She has the enhanced gene, something crucial to the continuation of your program. We need her back.”
“Alive?” asked the Asian male.

“Yes. Unless otherwise stated, assume we want them alive. She is of high priority. Also of special interest are these two men. You all know the Asset, the original Winter Soldier,” he said, motioning to the picture of Bucky. “And this is Captain Steve Rogers, AKA Captain America. Both these men have serum. Both these men could prove very useful to us. Retrieval is highly valued, but not top priority. Capture them if possible, disable if not.”

“What kind of human resistance are we expecting?”

“This kind. Meet Tony Stark, nephew of Annabelle. The son of the man that developed your serum. Possible carrier of the serum, but we don’t wish him taken. He’s a liability, we don’t want him on base. Also not required are these three. Phil Coulson, Clint Barton and Natasha Romanoff. She was trained the same way you were, we do not want her here. She is dangerous to the program. Also dangerous are these two. They go by Thor and Loki. They are biologically related to the two youngest subjects, and will be reluctant to cease possession of them. Kill if possible, capture if you can. Just don’t let them interfere with your mission.”

“Sir, what of these people?” male number four asked, motioning to the surveillance picture on the screen. “Combatants?”

“No. These are civilians, they’ll pose no challenge. It shouldn’t take too much to remove them from the playing field. The only one to really watch is this one,” he said, motioning to JARVIS. “Status of this individual is still unknown, but assume he’s enhanced in some way.

The picture changed to a still of Bruce.

“Be very aware of this man. Doctor Bruce Banner, who also goes by,” he changed the picture. “The Hulk. The Hulk combatant in play will make retrieval impossible. Your aim is to complete your mission before the emergence of the Hulk, which gives you about a minute from the sounding of the alarm. Once that alarm goes off, your window is closed.”

“What provisions will we be equipped with?” she asked.

“You will be equipped with a high power EMP, we will cut the lines to the Stark Reactor powering the building. You will have high calibre tranquiliser rounds and high calibre bullets. Stun grenades,
smoke bombs, strobe lights. Full body armour and high spec goggles. In short, we will equip you with anything we can to achieve this goal.” He handed out maps of Stark Tower, detailing most likely position for all targets.

“What of civilian law enforcement?” Asian soldier asked.

“Inefficient. By the time they’re alerted, you’ll be long gone.”

“Time until mission deployment?”

“Four hours to wheels up. Any further questions?”

“Sir, no, sir!” they chorused.

“Then warm up, people. Mission is a green.”

Bucky got flashes, images, moments of clarity where he came to the surface, before sedation pulled him under once more.

He was aware of someone in his room, something sharp in his neck.

He was in a vehicle. Annie and Steve strapped to boards across from him, sedated and restrained. All four kids in cages, sleeping, probably sedated too.

The rumble of a plane beneath him as Steve thrashed in his bonds, Gabby screaming.

Cold wind on his skin, a mammoth door opening. He’d been there before. He knew where they were but couldn’t find his tongue to say anything.
Bucky finally came round in the lab and knew exactly what was coming. He was restrained in the Chair, the bad one that worked, the one about to wipe him.

“Welcome back.”

“You.”

“Yes, me,” John Garrett said. “For a while there we thought that last dose of sedative was too much for you. We’ve been adjusting it while you’ve been gone, it needs some work clearly.”

“Where are they?” Bucky demanded. He had a limited window to ask questions before they got to the business part of things. He had to find out what he could and pray it stuck through the wipe.

“Your friends? Oh, you don’t need to worry about them,” he said, motioning to a bank of monitors.

One showed Steve, strapped to an upright table, med techs milling around him. He was awake, and, by the looks of things, cursing up a storm.

“Yes, such vulgarity from the figurehead of America,” Garrett said. “Impressive really, his full range and creativity.”

The second monitor showed Annie, strapped to a table, tubes and wires covering her, scientists doing…things.

“A whole new crop of subjects, and our scientists can’t wait to test her brain fluid.”

There were four monitors all in a row, each showing a child. Sarah and Gabby were screaming, he could tell from their faces. Kiddo was huddled in a corner of the clear cube they had him in. But Sabrina, his beautiful baby girl, she was glaring out from her cube defiantly, as if daring them to touch her.

“Yes, the children. Don’t worry. We’ll get results. And then they’ll begin training.”
“You son of a bitch,” Bucky snarled.

“Temper, temper.”

“How long have we been here?”

“Five days. Not to worry. Our Assets left your pathetic companions alive. But believe me when I say they won’t find you. This base is in the middle of nowhere of the middle of nowhere. On no paperwork, appears on no map. They don’t have a hope of finding any of you.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. They found us all before.”

“Tactical errors. It won’t happen again.”

A scientist approached Garrett. “Sir, we’re ready to begin.”

“Good. Wipe him, and activate programming. It’s time the Asset re-joined the ranks.”

Bucky tried pulling at the restraints, pushed with his legs, thrashed his head. But nothing worked. One was behind his head, holding him still, pressure on his jaw to open, the rubber bit forced between his teeth.

The plates lowered, pressing against his head, and the hum of power flowing to them.


He kept up his mental list as the current seared through his skull, as his synapses fired, as he heard himself scream.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading. Please please please leave me a comment and let me know what you thought.
Chapter Nineteen

The attack happened like this.

Stark tower was put under surveillance, heat reading cameras pointed at it from the street and the surrounding buildings. A week of watching gave Hydra the chance to develop a schedule to follow, a rough idea of the habits of the inhabitants.

The infiltration of Stark tower happened on a Wednesday night, in the small hours of Thursday morning.

At exactly 2:35am, divers plunged into the waters surrounding Manhattan.

At exactly 2:56am, the line connecting the reactor powering the tower was cut. At exactly the same moment, an EMP was fired. The whole of Manhattan lost power. Law enforcement hit the streets to try and keep order amongst the civilians flooding them, demanding answers. The employees of Stark tower assumed mechanical failure of the prototype arc reactor powering the building and settled in to patiently wait for the eccentric engineer to fix it, for he was surely aware of the problem. They had no idea that the rest of the island had gone dark too.

At exactly 2:58am, the five enhanced Hydra agents infiltrated Stark tower. They forced open the doors of the elevator and cut through the ceiling, accessing the elevator shaft. They ascended quickly using the cables. Stark employees that bore witness to their arrival ran for the exits, knowing they were no match for them.

At 3:02 am, they entered the living areas via doors with locks that had disengaged when the power went. They fanned out, and searched for their targets.

Natasha and Bucky were found first. They were disabled with heavy duty sedation and the Asset was retrieved. They carried him with them, over the shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

Sabrina and Kiddo were the next to be discovered. Three agents tranquillised both children and their parents simultaneously, and the children were scooped up. Two agents were needed to carry the prisoners they had taken, which left three to tranquillise any enemy combatants they found sleeping. They didn’t hesitate. Once a visual assessment had been made and the sleeping figure determined to
be someone other than a target, they were darted and left.

Thor took six darts to tranquilise fully, but he was the only one who gave them pause. It took 49 seconds to finish darting him, 49 seconds to drop him to the floor.

Finally, they reached the penthouse level. Captain America and his bed mates were sedated, as was the infant. One agent carried both. They searched the other rooms and found Annie, using a silencer on the gun to sedate her and the infant beside the bed. The dog hadn’t even opened her eyes before a dart was in her flank.

Bruce Banner opened his eyes as Annie was removed from the bed. He was hit with nine tranquiliser darts and Hulk roared in his head.

The enhanced agents were extracted from the landing pad, accessed through the powered down balcony door. A helicopter airlifted them out, flying them four miles to the transport. Once there, the targets were secured in restraints and they ignited the helicopter. The agents piled into the back with their cargo.

They drove to the abandoned airstrip and boarded the small private plane at exactly 4:07am.

12 hours later, they arrived at the Siberian facility.

It took four of them to grab Sabrina and strap her to the table. She fought and screamed every step of the way, but they were bigger than her and more numerous.

“If you just cooperated, this wouldn’t be half so time consuming,” the scientist scolded.

“Bad peoples!” she screamed. “Bad! Go home!”

“Shut it, you little shit,” he snarled, grabbing her hair and forcing her head back. “That is not your home. This is it, where you belong, here, with us. We made you, you belong to us. Now shut up.”
He let go and walked away to prepare the first round of syringes.

“Flip her.”

Sabrina’s board was flipped over and the space in it that exposed her spine was wiped with cold fluid. The huge needle was forced between the vertebrae, and they drew vial after vial of spinal fluid.

Over the next sixteen hours, they drew sample after sample from her. Blood, urine, spinal and brain fluid. They drilled into her hips and took bone marrow, took biopsies from every organ, drilled into her skull to take brain tissue.

She was awake the whole time.

She stopped screaming as they wheeled Kiddo in, about eight hours in. She didn’t want him to be afraid.


“Soon,” she promised. “They come for us. They promise. Daddies coming.”

She couldn’t look as they began harvesting samples from him.

Tony gripped Loki close as he watched the footage from the backup cameras. They were on a completely different circuit, completely independent from the arc reactor and the electricity of the city. They were experimental, their batteries encased in a shell of Stark alloy. They were the only clue they had, and the footage was severely lacking.

He watched as the Hydra scum swept through their home, taking the ones they loved.
“Here,” Natasha said, replenishing his coffee. “Anything?”

“I don’t recognise them, but they’re highly trained. Jesus, they just fucking walked in, took our people, and walked out,” he snarled as the figures on the screen entered Sabrina’s bedroom. “This was planned to the second. Hydra? AIM? Some other alphabet agency we haven’t encountered yet? How long were they working this one out?”

“Too long,” Clint said, throwing the infrared cameras at their feet. “Every roof, several offices and eight points on the street. They watched us for long enough to know exactly where we’d be. I swear, I’m going to rip their heads off.”

Tony turned away from the screen, unable to look anymore. It was the sixth time he’d watched; there was nothing there.

“Easy, Loki, come on. We will find them,” he promised, cupping his tear stained cheeks and forcing him to meet his eyes. “If I have to burn down every brick on this sorry planet, I swear to you, we will find them.”


“I know,” he crooned, holding him close.

“Hey, Loki,” Bruce said gently, crouching by the sofa. “How about you pump some milk? We can freeze it for Sarah, for when we get her back.” He held out the breast pump. “Loki, if you stop expressing the milk, your body will take it as a sign of it not being needed anymore and you’ll stop producing it.”

“No! She needs it!” Loki demanded.

“Then you have to keep expressing, keep the supply up.”

Loki nodded and Tony pulled off his shirt. Bruce helped him get it positioned and switched it on. Loki sobbed even harder.
“I know it’s strange,” Bruce soothed. “But it’s just for the moment, just while she’s away. When she’s back, you don’t have to use it ever again.”

“Bruce, you said Hulk saw them,” Phil pressed. “What did he see?”

“I don’t know, it’s tough to make out. There were two, maybe three of them. One in the doorway, he looked strange, his shape. He was…bulky,” he said. He rubbed his face, scrubbing his hair. “I think he had Bucky.”

[Come on, Hulk,] he begged internally. [What did you see? Who were they?]

Hulk roared in his head and showed him a flash of a logo and a badge.

“They wore ID,” he said. “He remembers an ID. And a logo. It was…I don’t know! It’s not clear!”

“Easy, Bruce,” Natasha urged, rubbing his shoulders. “Take a deep breath. Close your eyes. Find the join, the place where you and Hulk meet. Sink into it, see what he saw. Picture it, picture what Hulk saw.”

He let his head fall forward, chin to his chest, as he followed her instructions.

“Picture the logo. Where was the logo? Shoulder? Chest?”

“Chest, right breast.”

“What colour was it?”

“Red, it was red. A circle, a ring. Inside was…something. String? No, not string. It was…a squid? An octopus, maybe?”

“Bruce, is this it?” Phil said, showing him the Hydra logo on his tablet.
“Yes, that’s it, that’s the one,” he said, pointing at it. Tony gave him his hand to hold when his eyes flashed green.

“Easy, big guy. Hulk, you can smash soon, I promise. Lots of smashing as soon as we find them,” Clint promised.

There was a blinding rainbow of light from the balcony, and Thor strode in, Nuada on his heels.

“Hiemdall cannot locate them,” Thor growled. “He shall continue to look.”

“I assure you, I have every possible man looking for them,” Nuada promised.

“It’s not enough!” Loki screeched. “They took my baby! They took our mate!” He ripped off the pump and ran to the elevator.

Thor snagged him around the waist and held him as he thrashed. Loki scratched and hit and bit at him, desperate to get free.

“NO! Let me go! Let go! I have to find her! Thor, please, let me go!” he screamed.

“I cannot, brother. You running out of here without a plan will help nothing. Let us search, let us find them, and then you can go. But let us help you, brother. Please.” He pulled him close, put his mouth to his ear. “Loki, Tony cannot lose you also. He will not survive another loss. He needs you with him.”

Loki sagged in his grip, hanging limp from his arms as he howled in pain.

“Come here, baby,” Tony crooned.

“She’s tiny, and helpless, and-and mine,” he begged. “She’s mine, Tony.”

“I know, she is absolutely yours,” Tony agreed, kissing him and leading him back to the sofa. “We’ll find her.”
Skye shot up from her chair and hobbled across the room, grabbing the laptop from the table and the tablet from Phil.

“Screw this,” she muttered.

“Skye, what are you doing?” Phil asked.

“No one is invisible,” she said. “No one can transport three super soldiers and four children without anyone at all in the entire world not seeing. Someone saw something.”

“You want to announce this?” Darcy asked incredulously.

“Annie Stark, the darling of the media, the world’s sweetheart, is missing,” she said, wording an all-out alert to the world. “Think about it. All the things she’s done for this city. They love her. If we tell New Yorker’s that one of their own has been kidnapped, they’ll tear the world down themselves.”

She had a point. Annie kept herself busy during the pregnancy by knitting and baking, all of which went to homeless shelters, children’s homes, and veterans centres around the city. She sent care packages to every soldier deployed overseas. She donated millions every week to underfunded causes around the city, sent all the gifts she was sent by companies to those in need. Every journalist who wrote a positive story about the Avengers, she sent a gift basket of baked goods. She was happy to pose for pictures for them, and to give them pictures of Gabrielle.

She was the world’s sweetheart.

“Will it help?” Thor pressed.

“Let’s find out,” she said, and hit the send button.

For some reason the scientists and technicians couldn’t figure out, the wipes weren’t working.
In the day since he’d regained consciousness, Bucky had been wiped 7 times, and each time the memories surfaced faster than before.

“What did you do?” Garrett snarled, slapping Bucky hard enough to make his teeth rattle. “What did you have Stark do to you? Why isn’t this working?”

“Maybe you don’t have the stones to keep me down,” Bucky said.

They’d taken his arm, the beautiful one Tony had made him and were taking it apart. They’d slapped on one of their own again, and he was in pain from it. He wished the pain hadn’t come back. They had all assumed that the pain was caused by misalignment of the nerves connecting the limb to his spine. Bucky now knew it was the sheer weight of it, yanking on his flesh parts.

Garrett chuckled. “Maybe,” he laughed. “Maybe you’re not an Asset in the way we were thinking. But we can still find a use for you.”

He walked over to the monitors, showing Sabrina and Kiddo strapped to tables.

“Think how many we can make from you and your friends,” he said, motioning to the monitors showing Steve and Annie. Annie was still deep under, scientists milling around, and Steve had gone limp, samples being taken in bulk from him. “We’ve only just begun to delve into their potential. She showed so much promise before you stole her. We should have known your DNA would produce the superior subject. And him…well, now we have Annie back, we can stabilise the subjects we make from Captain America. Now that makes some interesting results. Honestly, the rate our boys are going, well, I’d be surprised if they don’t need a full load of samples again before days end. They’re excited you see.”

“You sadistic fuck! They’re children!”

“They’re subjects. We made them, us, Hydra. They are our property, and we will do with them as we see fit.”

“You kill them and they’ll be useless to you,” Bucky said, his biceps straining as he pulled against the restraints. “Just dead bodies, no use to anyone.”
“Oh, we won’t kill them,” he said with a smile. “We’ll carry on with the tests, of course. Can’t miss anything that might further our work. But, of course, tests only last so long. And then think, all the training we can give, all the lessons they can learn. Children are always so malleable, don’t you find?”

Bucky watched the door open, and in walked Grant Ward.

“I took in Grant here when he was just a young man. His family were no use, threw him away, but I saw how much potential he had.”

“You? But Skye…she said…”

“Yes, she did,” Ward said. “She’s quite the slice, isn’t she? Shame she can’t join me, but that’s the price of a life of service. Sacrifices must be made.”

He moved to the bank of monitors and flipped a switch, so Bucky could see Gabby and Sarah. They were still, too still.

“Just think,” Ward said, stroking the screen. “They’re so young, so…ready to learn. We can teach them so much. The rate they’re developing, they’ll be combat ready in…oh, about two years, give or take. Then again, they have alien DNA. Do you know what a wet dream that is for our boys in the lab? Honestly, the results they’ve gotten already…those boys don’t need any coffee, know what I mean?”

“Enjoy this while you can,” Bucky warned. “When I get out of this chair, and I will get out, I’m going to make you so very beyond sorry.”

“Oh, you’re getting out,” he said. “But not to kill us. You might not be susceptible to the wipes right now, but you will be. Soon enough, you’re going to be a good little Asset and do what you’re told.”

Ward reached into his back pocket and pulled out a sheaf of paper.

“Now, my Russian is a touch rusty, but I’ve been practicing, so this should go smoothly.”
Bucky felt the blood drain from his face and struggled anew against his bonds.


“Zhelaniye. Rzhavyy. Semnadtsat.”

Annie. Steve. No no no no.

“Stop,” Bucky begged. “Don’t.”


“No! No!”


“Gruzovoy vagon.”

The room went still, every eye watching the body in the chair.

“Ya gotov vypolnit.”

I am ready to comply.

“Good, soldier. Then we can begin.”
Steve had never really had to think about the limits of Erskine’s serum.

But if they kept taking things from his body and putting nothing back in, he was sure not even his serum could help him.

They had taken all sorts of bodily fluids. Spinal fluid had been excruciating. Brain tissue was even worse. The most mortifying was when they stuck something up his ass and forced him to give a semen sample. After the humiliation of that, he couldn’t ever see himself letting Tony or Loki penetrate him again.

“What’s happening to him!”

“Sir, I promise you, I don’t know,” babbled the scientist that Steve assumed was in charge of the tests on him. “It makes no sense. He shouldn’t be losing mass so fast.”

“Fix it!”

Steve managed to raise his head and his stomach clenched.

No.

It couldn’t be.

It wasn’t possible.

“Ah, I see you’re awake,” Red Skull said. “Tell me what you’re doing to yourself.”

“Doing? I’ve been strapped to a table for however long we’ve been here. How could I do anything?” Steve rasped. “How are you here? I saw you die.”
“Still so very arrogant,” he said lightly. “That oh so American trait. Die? I did not die. I was simply transported. I have seen things, Captain, things you would never imagine. But in this world, my goals are simple, and you will help me achieve them. So, tell me. Why are you losing mass?”

“I have to consume nutrients,” Steve said. He saw no reason to withhold the information. They couldn’t starve him more than they were already doing. “Your scientists have been taking things, samples, but they haven’t put anything back. The serum is burning through my reserves.”

Red Skull looked expectantly at the furious scientist.

“The serum should combat that problem.”

“I can’t maintain on nothing,” Steve spat. “Creating something from nothing is impossible.”

“The Captain has a point,” Red Skull said. “Try the nutrients, investigate if it works.”

“Yes, sir,” he said begrudgingly, and went off to find the nutrient packs.

“Where is my daughter?” Steve demanded. “Where’s Annie?”

“So concerned. Don’t worry so much, Captain,” Red Skull said condescendingly. “We’ll take care of them.”

He patted Steve’s cheek as the tech attached a nutrient bag to him, and then headed to the door.

“They’re in good hands now.”

Phil found Clint curled up on their bed. In one hand, he gripped Sabrina’s monkey. In the other was Kiddo’s Cookie Monster.
“Guess it’s my turn, huh?” Clint asked, snuffly through his tears. “You fell apart last time. My turn now.”

“You’re allowed,” Phil promised, climbing on and hugging him close. His fingers found the blue fur. “Our children are missing, you’re allowed to be afraid.”

“I can’t lose them, Phil. They’re ours. I can’t live without them.”

“I know. We’ll get them back. I have to believe that, I just have to. I can’t afford to believe that this will end up any other way.”

“It’s been eleven days. Everyone in the world has their eyes peeled. There is no sign. How will we get them back?” Clint demanded.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I still believe. Natasha is reaching out to her contacts, the world’s media is on the lookout. Tony is even contacting old arms dealers, calling in favours so old they can legally drink. Even alien worlds are looking for them.” He pressed a kiss to Clint’s neck, stroked his hair. “No one can hide forever.”

“You’re right. But they’re still gone,” he whispered. “It hurts, Phil. Oh, God, it hurts!”

Phil held him closer, Clint’s face pressed to his scar as he sobbed.

Phil refused to allow any other belief to enter his head. They would find their children, they had to. He didn’t think any of them would handle it if there were any other outcome.

Bad peoples really needed a JARVIS, Sabrina thought as she cracked the two glass sheets away from each other.

JARVIS would never have let Tony use something with a weak point in the joins. JARVIS wouldn’t
have let the lab be empty all night, he’d be watching. JARVIS would tell someone she was out of her cube.

But they didn’t have a JARVIS, so they would lose. Daddies and the rest of their family would come and take them home, because JARVIS saw everything. But Sabrina was tired of the things that hurt, and listening to her brother scream. She missed the skin of her arm. And her fingernails. And that part of her hair. Her head was cold without it. And her mouth felt funny without those teeth.

She hopped down from the table that held her cube and froze, watching the door. Bad peoples really needed a JARVIS, but they were too stupid to even have the security cameras that JARVIS used for eyes when he wasn’t in his body. Tony had shown her the TV’s he could watch, to see what the cameras did. These ones were bad cameras, didn’t work good. No red light, so no power in them.

Maybe she and Kiddo were boring to watch. Maybe they got bored of listening to them cry. Bruce watched boring things sometimes, but he liked them. She liked them too, but Daddy Clint said they were boring.

She scurried across the room to Kiddo’s cube and used the needle she found to crack the seal at the corner. It was easier than hers had been, because she knew no one would come in while it was dark. They never did. They went away for a long time, and came back with new clothes and coffee and complaints about Sabrina biting them again.

Kiddo tumbled to the floor and stood, hugging her around the tummy.

“Shhh,” she said to him, making sure he understood. “Be quiet. Bad peoples. We hide for Daddies to find us. Kiddo quiet?”

He nodded and put his hand in hers, trusting her to take him away from pain.

She led him to the door and opened it a crack. Not even a guard at the door. Maybe they thought she was just like other childrens. But they were very stupid. Not like JARVIS. JARVIS would know what she was doing, just like when she tried to take more cookies.

She led Kiddo down the hallway, slowly, quiet, their bare feet cold but silent on the floor. They found storage cupboards, some offices, a kitchen. She found another lab, this one empty too. It was dusty, which was bad. If you lived somewhere, you kept it clean, like Daddy Clint helped her with her room. But maybe they didn’t live in the lab, so maybe it was okay.
But Sarah and Gabby were sleeping in the lab, so they should keep it clean for them. Never mind. Home was clean.

“Silly bad peoples,” she whispered.

The cubes the girls were in didn’t even have a top. She climbed up and pulled off the wires and tubes. They hurt, she knew, and she didn’t want the girls to hurt. It was better when they giggled and made noises like talking. No, bad peoples didn’t take good care of the girls, so they couldn’t keep them. It was too easy to lift first one girl and then the other out and down to Kiddo, who laid them on the floor. Thor had taught them both to hold the girls. It was better now their heads didn’t wobble. They just had to be careful, that was all.

Sabrina looked through the cupboards, because the girls were different than her. They needed diapers and milk, and Kiddo needed diapers too. She found them in a cupboard in the corner. It looked like milk. M-I-L-K. Yes, that was the word. Oh, big jars of applesauce, and some plastic spoons. Bad peoples needed a JARVIS to tell them food belonged in the kitchen. There was even some bottles of water for her to take. There were bottles of icky brown stuff that smelled bad, so she didn’t take those.

Daddy Phil told her not to steal, that it was wrong, but the bad peoples had stole her and Kiddo and Gabby and Sarah and Steve and Bucky and Annie. That was a lot of stealing. So it was okay to take this stuff.

She wrapped it all in a sheet and made it into a little pack, like the little gnome they had on the balcony. No stick that she could see, so she just looped it around her arm. Then she put Gabby in Kiddo’s arms, picked up Sarah, and the two of them toddled off, calm as you please.

Bad peoples couldn’t hurt what they couldn’t find.

Garrett ducked as Red Skull threw a chair at him.

“Sir, please,” he said. “I understand, really, I do. But no one could have predicted this.”
“They are children!” he screamed. “You telling me, that they calmly got up and walked away to hide!”

“We will find them. They’re still in the compound somewhere, I swear it. They’re still within the fence. We just have to find them,” Garrett placated.

“Find them quickly, or you will take their place,” he hissed and then strode out of the room.

“Sir?” Ward said. “How do we find them?”

“Gather our men, the ones loyal to us,” Garrett said. “Tell them to start searching. Every room, closet, bolt hole, rat hole. Every possible place in this god-forsaken ice box. They search every inch.”

Ward nodded and left.

“Find those little brats!”

China was charging when Sabrina was grabbed.

Sabrina had missed the dangerous little AI, so Annie had repaired her. She was a little glitchy still, and her leg joints needed replacing, but Sabrina liked her funny way of walking. China had calmed somewhat after her damage at the hands of Hydra, and was happy to stay with Sabrina.

China would do jigsaws with her, colour, have tea parties. She used matchbox cars like skateboards, sat on the side of the tub and blew bubbles in the soap, retrieved Cheerio’s that escaped the bowl. China liked to get toys for Gabby and Sarah, and crayons for Kiddo. She helped him colour in, and got dried apple slices for him.

She was now the perfect childrens toy.

As stated, she had been charging when Sabrina was grabbed. If Hydra had realised this, they would
have checked Sabrina more thoroughly when they picked her up. The charging wire was yanked out, left behind, but China was in the breast pocket of Sabrina’s pyjamas.

When Sabrina was stripped of the pyjamas and put in a medical gown, China was assumed to be a simple toy. They discarded her with the clothes, leaving them in a box by the furnace.

She’d been knocked about quite a bit during the journey, and when thrown into the box. It took nine days for her backup motor to generate enough charge to fill her battery enough for proper movement. Then an hour for her to find a power outlet. She shoved her little hand into it and sat for a half day, filling the battery fully.

China looked around the furnace room she was in and wondered where her small humans were. Or her big humans. Or her canine. The place was strange. She was unaware of any room in the tower that appeared in such a way.

Perhaps she had been misplaced, as she was when she accidentally fell down the laundry chute.

She tottered on her little legs, looking around, and found the door. There were lots of grown up sized humans here, but they weren’t her big humans. These ones looked mean. She walked for hours, sneaking by the big ones, avoiding boots. As the halls got dark, she noticed they all seemed to be moving in the same direction.

She didn’t like the look of that one. Humans were not supposed to be the colour of a fire truck, of this she was absolutely certain. And he was awfully loud and angry.

Best avoided.

China was very certain she was not in the tower. So she had to get to the tower. She had no protocols for being missing outside of the tower, but it couldn’t be too hard. Voice JARVIS was everywhere. She just had to make him see her.

She found a rather sturdy desk. Maybe Tony and Bruce should get desks like this. It was metal and very smooth. She took off her shoes and skated back and forth a few times, having a grand old time. She put her shoes back on, because she was fond of them and would hate to leave them behind. The computer was much larger than the one Sabrina used, and it had a keyboard, which Sabrina’s didn’t have. The mouse took her whole body to move.
Silly big humans. Using the word GOD as a password. How foolish. It was in her base programing that a password for a computer system should be something hard to guess, something secure. A three letter word in all capitals with no numerical characters was hardly secure.

Now, how to get JARVIS to see? Not that one. Or that one. This one? No, not that one. File after file, function after function, until she found the little rainbow ball Clint used to find things on the web of information.

Hmmm. Busty Babes. She had never seen that screen before. Those female big humans needed clothes, they must be cold.

She shoved the mouse to the little bar at the top of the screen, and stepped on the letter keys to put in ‘JARVIS’. She jumped onto the arrow key Clint pressed when he wanted to search for something.

Something called google popped up. She knew this one. It was how big humans found things on the web of information. JARVIS seemed to have lots of lines of text available to click on, but none of them seemed to be Voice JARVIS. Well. If she couldn’t find Voice JARVIS, she would find where he was.

In the short bar on the google, she typed in STARK TOWER, and jumped on the arrow. It was very slow this machine. It took a very long time to connect to the desired screen.

China amused herself by skating some more. She paused to click on the right line of text and skated while she waited to connect.

Hmmm. Now which one would get her to Voice JARVIS? There were lots of lines of text to choose from. Products. Employees. Services. Inquiries. Contact.

Contact, that’s what she wanted, contact with Voice JARVIS. She clicked on it and skated while she waited. These humans were inefficient and must upgrade their system to be more productive.

The screen loaded and there was a picture of her Sabrina. ‘With information regarding the disappearance of Sabrina Coulson, or any other Avengers children, please click here.’

Well. That seemed right.
“Sir,” JARVIS said, leaning on the kitchen counter. “SIR!”

“Hey, keep it down, I just got him to sleep,” Tony snapped, motioning to Loki asleep on the couch.

Helix was curled up on the floor beside him, keeping watch on him when she had no other to watch. Her puppies were missing. None of them had ever seen a dog so depressed. They’d had to call the vet out four times to hydrate and dose her with nutrients to keep her going. If they didn’t get the kids back soon, the dog wouldn’t survive. She wouldn’t want to.

“I am sorry, sir, but I have located China,” he said. “It is…strange. She is…I am unsure, but she is on a foreign server. She requests we bring her home.”

“China?” Clint asked. “Where is she?”

“I am unsure, I am trying to locate.”

“China was in Sabrina’s bed the night they were taken,” Phil said. “We’ve been looking for her but no luck. Are…are you saying she’s with Sabrina?”

“She likes to charge in Sabrina’s pocket,” Clint said. “It’s why she wears that set so often, so she can have China in the pocket. If she was in there when they were taken, they would have just assumed she was a toy. She could be where the kids are.”


“Tony?” Loki murmured as he padded in. “What’s happening?”

“China’s contacted JARVIS. She’s lost and wants to come home,” Tony said.
“What about her homing chip?” Loki asked. “Annie said she put one in just in case Sabrina lost her at the park.”

“Accessing,” JARVIS said. His gaze was glazed, far away, wherever China was. “Access denied. Retrying…Sir, there is some sort of interference in her location, I am unable to access.”

“Show me,” Natasha demanded from the doorway.

JARVIS projected out a map of the world in the middle of the kitchen, then zoomed in on Europe.

“Processing…triangulating position…Europe…processing frequencies…filtering echoes. Query, location, processing…”

The cursor on the screen jumped. First to Mongolia, then to Nepal, over to London, and Dublin, then back east, to Tokyo, down to Melbourne.

“Signal rerouter in play, attempting to bypass.”

Algeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe. Madrid, Iraq, Iran. Serbia, Paris, Iceland. Over to the United States, bounced between Texas, Ohio, up to Canada, Montreal, Quebec, Saskatchewan, down to Washington, New York, over to Europe again. Copenhagen, St Petersburg, Turkey. Romania, Morocco, Belarus. Sometimes one spot in that country or city, other times flipping through dozens before moving on.

“Net closing…location triangulation almost complete…”

Back to Russia, cycling through cities and towns faster than they could read.

“Sir, this is the closest I could get. There is a magnetic pull in the area and some form of interference at the exact location. It is within this perimeter.”

It was 100 square miles of nothing but winter wasteland, a vast sprawl of ice and snow.
“It’s a base,” Natasha said, moving to the map. “Around about here.” She motioned to the very centre of the square. “Give or take five miles or so. It was where Ivan could be found if we needed backup.”

“Ivan?” Bruce asked.

“Bucky. When he trained us, we were told his name was Ivan. He had handlers, they kept a pretty close watch on him. We were told that if we needed support on a mission, we could call into this base, get Ivan to help.”

“Did you ever go there?” Phil pressed.

“No, never, but it wasn’t in the Hydra dump, I promise. I’ve been through all those files, I’ve never seen this one on any paperwork.”

“This base is not documented,” JARVIS said. “Shall I alert the appropriate teams, sir?”

“Damn straight. Everyone suit up,” Tony said. “Wheels up in ten minutes.”

They all dispersed. They had had a plan in place for the entire 23 days their loved ones had been missing. Clint would pilot the quinjet, and would set down five miles from the intended target.

Nick Fury had crawled out of the woodwork and offered the newly reformed SHIELD at their disposal. JARVIS put the call through and relayed the information they had to Maria Hill, who immediately began assembling teams. The Avengers would be the first wave, scatter the forces, ignite the fires, and SHIELD would back them up, forming a perimeter around whatever they found. Ground agents would follow them in, clearing combatants and civilians, performing appropriate action depending on what they found.

“How’s that feel?” Tony asked, adjusting the strap across Loki’s breasts.

The leather outfit was reminiscent of the outfit he wore when trying to take over New York. However, this one had a short coat, no horns on the helmet, and gloves with metal inserts in the knuckles to pack a little extra into a punch.
“Strange, but bearable. I should be fine until we find Sarah, but there is a pump on the jet, so all should be well.”

“Good. Hey,” he said, cupping his cheek and pulling him for a kiss. “If you feel anything…like, if you sense Steve, or Sarah, even if it’s just a tingle or something, you say it. Tell us.”

“The second I feel anything I shall speak up.”

Tony nodded and kissed him again before he reached for his under suit.

Clint checked his quiver, and the tension in his bow before he put them both on. He adjusted the strap of his quiver whilst walking into his bedroom, where Phil was in full tactical gear.

“You must realise you’re not going into the field,” Clint demanded.

“Of course, I know that,” he said, checking his bag. “But (a) I will be close by, coordinating things and (b) bad guys rarely keep their fire where it’s supposed to be. I’m just taking precautions.”

Clint nodded and then watched as Phil packed the Cookie Monster and Monkey into his bag. He left the room and returned with the two blankets made specially for their children.

“It’s cold where we’re going,” Clint said, handing them over.

Phil nodded and folded them, laying them lovingly in the duffel.

Thor folded Gabby’s blanket and placed it in Bruce’s medical bag. It smelled of home and she would need it when they found her.

“She’s tough,” Bruce said. “Daughter of the mighty Thor? She’s probably kicking their asses.”

“Strong as her mother,” Thor said soothingly. “Annie is the strongest woman I have ever had the privilege to know.”
“Yeah. We just need to find them.”

They all convened on the quinjet, each keeping quiet. Talk wasn’t needed, they all knew what was at stake.

It was the only chance they had.

Their landing site was a vast wasteland of nothing. No trees, no towns, nothing. Rocks, mountains, snow, ice, but nothing welcoming.

Nick Fury arrived 20 minutes after the Avengers touched down, as they finished checking their equipment for the final time.

The mobile command centre was very impressive, and Phil made himself right at home. Jane, Darcy and Skye worked with him, JARVIS linking into the system to provide on the ground tech support for the Avengers.

Tony, Thor, Clint, Natasha, JARVIS and Loki were all going in first, taking point. Bruce would travel with them and transform when needed. If he transformed too soon, he would attract too much attention and blow the element of surprise.

Fury’s agents would be a few minutes behind, and the command unit would follow. Jane and Dr Simmons were ready and waiting to administer whatever was needed.

They did final checks and set off, praying they were in time.

They were preparing the Asset to give another round of samples when the ground shook and the alarms blared.
“All agents, arm yourself. This base is under attack, repeat, this base is under attack. Confront enemy combatants and eliminate with extreme prejudice.”

The blaring announcement over the speaker system echoed in his head and he was quick to turn around and head to his weapons.

He swept the halls, processing agents, dismissing friendlies.

“Bucky.”

He turned and looked at the woman. She was not a friendly. He opened fire and she dodged.

She came up beside him and hit him in the face with an elbow. He cracked her in the ribs with a knee and swung up his gun to fire. She hit it with two little buttons of blue electricity. He had to drop it and go hand to hand. Her hits were hard for a human, and her kicks high. He knew her fighting style, but it was polluted, filled with disallowed movements.

She rolled, coming up in the far more open space of one of the labs, the one they had kept the two infants in before they had lost track of them. Foolish scientists. Why leave them unattended? Anything could have happened. They were important subjects, they should be punished more severely for such a grievous oversight. Thinking a child was helpless when it was proven that said child was the product of superior genetics.

A wire around his neck cut off his air supply and he slammed backwards, smashing her into a wall of glass fronted shelving. She let out a sound of pain, an exhalation of air as glass penetrated her combat clothes and pierced her skin. She took the back of his knee with a hard kick and wriggled out from behind him. Her fingers knotted in his hair and brought his head down to meet her knee.

He curled the metal fingers of the Weapon into a fist and drove it into her ribs before drawing back to crash the open metal palm into her breastbone, driving the air from her lungs again.

“Bucky, stop,” she wheezed. “It’s me. I know you’re in there. Stop this.”

“Who the hell is Bucky?”
“You are! James Buchannan Barnes!”

“I am the Asset.”

She kicked out towards his head and he ducked, hooking his shoulder under her thigh and flipping her into the table, crashing her hip into the edge. It fell with her, obscuring his view for a second. He rounded it and searched, but instead of finding her lying on the floor in pain, she leapt from above.

How had she done that? Her thighs fastened around his neck and he instinctively went to protect his neck from her squeezing them.

But she didn’t. She threw her weight forwards, flipping him, and he landed by the refrigeration unit. He hadn’t finished moving when she was astride him, strapping cuffs around him and magnetising him to the metal door of the refrigeration unit.

“How had she done that? Her thighs fastened around his neck and he instinctively went to protect his neck from her squeezing them.

“Bucky, remember,” she demanded.

Something was happening in his head, something painful. It felt like the Chair, like the wipes, but worse. Something sudden and painful was happening, and he shied away.

“No,” he snarled.

“Fine, we’ll do it the hard way.”

She shimmied back and reached for his belt. He watched confusedly, blinking through the pain, and then realised what she was doing and tried to buck her off. She yanked his belt out and nimble fingers sped over his fastenings. She freed his groin to the cold air and shoved her hand between his thighs, squeezing his penis.

“Remember, Bucky,” she demanded and slammed their mouths together.

It was like a grenade going off in his head, all the memories flooding back at once, the control
breaking into a thousand pieces, all with sharp edges that skinned him alive. Tears poured from his eyes as he grew in her hand, and pain seared along his brainstem.

“Natalia,” he groaned. “Nat. It hurts.”

“Bucky? You with me?”

“I’m here. I’m Bucky Barnes. You can’t fuck me here,” he begged. “Nat, let me up. Sabrina. They have baby girl.”

She smiled and kissed him again before she did as he asked and they dived back into the fight.

Garrett spat out the mouthful of blood and managed to gasp in a breath before Red Skull kicked him in the ribs again.

“You let them find us!” the red man roared. “We are ruined because of your incompetence!”

Garrett didn’t say anything. He was too consumed by the sight of Grant Ward, eviscerated and beheaded across the room.

Red Skull threw him around like a rag doll, and he felt bones shatter and organs rupture with every impact.

The door flew opened, and Thor filled it, lightning crackling over his skin, hammer swinging from his fist. The door at the other end of the command room flew off its hinges and landed in the pile of Grant Ward.

“You son of a bitch,” Iron Man snarled at Garrett. “We trusted you, we let you into our home.”

“It was him,” he rasped, pointing at Red Skull. “He’s in charge.”
Thor and Tony raised their hands, but something seemed to be happening to Red Skull.

His limbs moved independently of his control, his eyes filled with fear as his body was taken from his control. They contorted in unnatural ways, snapping and folding in on themselves. Under his clothes they could see his organs move, bulging out, and blood began to bubble between his lips.

Loki stepped forward and raised his hands.

“I could help you be great!” Red Skull declared.

“You touched my family,” Loki said calmly.

And then ripped him in half with his magic.

The left side of the crimson man went one way, hitting the remains of Ward, and the right side went the other, landing on Garrett. Loki raised his hand and twisted his wrist, snapping Garrett’s neck.


“We shall find them, brother,” Thor promised. “We simply must search.”

“Loki? Baby?” Tony said cautiously, faceplate up.

“I will not hurt those I love, but I do not regret killing those men,” Loki said defiantly.

“Okay, no problem, just checking. But you’re the one who has to tell Steve what you did.”

The look on Loki’s face was priceless.
Steve managed to raise his head when the technicians and scientists screamed as they died.

“Steve!”

“Hey, Buck,” he mumbled. “Service here sucks. Wouldn’t happen to have a few steaks on you, would ya?”

“Steve!” Loki cried, crossing the room.

Bucky and Natasha released him from his restraints and he sort of sagged forwards into Thor’s arms. He was sat on the floor and immediately had a lap full of Loki. His omega clung to him, kissing his face and lips and anything he could reach.

“You okay? Loki, look at me. Did they hurt you?”

“Hurt me? No, Steve, I’ve been at home. They didn’t take me,” Loki said between kisses.

“They said…fucking assholes. I’m gonna rip them a new one,” he snarled.

“Too late,” Tony said, going to one knee to kiss him hard.

The kiss left him completely dazed, and it took him a moment to process.

“What happened? Where’s Skull?” he asked as Tony stared at him and popped out the compartment on his hip, producing concentrated energy syrup. Steve took them gratefully. He could literally feel them seep through him.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Loki said meekly, looking completely contrite. “I was just so angry. I…I killed the red man. And Garrett. And some Hydra agents.”
“You…what?”

“He ripped Skull a new one, literally,” Tony said. Natasha and Bucky were searching through the samples and tossing everything from Steve on the fire Thor started. “Took hold of him with magic and just…” He mimed pulling a man apart.

“You killed the Red Skull?” Steve asked Loki, who nodded. “Good.”

Loki’s head shot up. “What?”

“That fucker tortured Bucky, me, Annie, our children! He deserved it. I hope it hurt.”

“The scream was mightily impressive,” Thor put in. “And the crack of Garrett’s neck.”

“Garrett? He was involved?”

“Second only to Skull,” Bucky confirmed.

They paused as there was a roar from Hulk outside and some terrified screams.

“He’s having a whale of a time,” Tony said, tapping away at the computer terminal to copy whatever they had. “It’s like whack-a-mole, Hulk-style.”

“Glad he’s getting some R&R,” Steve said, memorising Loki’s face and then Tony’s and then back to Loki. He could feel the syrup working, and he felt better by the second.

“You’re truly not angry at me?” Loki asked.

“Not even a little. If you hadn’t killed him, I would be,” Steve promised. He stole another kiss, taking his time, until Tony caught his attention.
“Found Annie.”

Simmons was retrieved by Tony and brought to the room Annie was in.

“It’s almost exactly the same as before,” she said. “Go, find the children, I can disconnect her. Send me Doctor Banner when he’s done having fun out there.”

Steve advanced on the lone remaining scientist. He hadn’t been fast enough to run from them like the others.

“Where are the children?” he demanded, towering over him.

“I don’t know,” he whimpered. “I swear I don’t.”

“Funny, I don’t believe you,” Clint said as he joined them. He advanced and hand a knife to his throat before anyone could stop him. “I will take you apart piece by piece if it gets me one step closer to my children, so tell me what you know!”

“I swear to God almighty,” he stuttered. “They disappeared. We don’t know where they are.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Bucky demanded. “Four children, two of which aren’t even mobile. How do they disappear?”

“We don’t know.” He screamed as Clint scraped the blade along his skin, shaving off some stubble. “I swear! I swear!”

“Clint, stand down,” Steve ordered. “He’s telling the truth.”

“Maybe,” Clint allowed. “But I’m not convinced he doesn’t know anything else.”
“Four days,” the man offered. “In the middle of the night, between a shift change. We arrived and the containment units for SB81 and RSB-39 were cracked open. The two subjects were missing. We checked in lab 2 and the two infants were missing too, along with formula, diapers and water. One of our techs said his applesauce was missing too.”

“Are you implying that Sabrina took the other three and is hiding?” Natasha pressed.

“Sabrina?”

“SB81!” Bucky roared. “My baby girl, four years old, bit you a lot.”

“Yes! Yes, that one!”

“Four days? You’ve searched the entire base?” Tony asked.

“Multiple sweeps daily. No sign of them. I swear, I don’t know where they are!”

Clint smacked him around the head, dropping him cold.

“Okay, we assume Sabrina did take the other three,” Steve said. “And we assume they’re still on base. That many sweeps…she’s found a good hiding place.”

JARVIS walked in with China in his hands.

“China,” Loki said. “Where was she?”

“Skating across the top of a desk in an office in one of the sub levels,” JARVIS said. “She is intact.”

“The desk was enjoyable,” China declared. “I needed to contact Voice JARVIS for retrieval.”

“China, where is Sabrina?” Loki pressed.
“Unknown,” she said. “I was with her pyjamas when I regained operational functionality. She was not wearing them.”

“How is she?” Bruce gasped as he skidded through the door, only half dressed.

“Much the same as she was when she was first found, Dr. Banner,” Simmons said. “But she’s bouncing back much faster this time.”

“Thank God,” he breathed, stroking back what was left of Annie’s hair.

“We must locate the children,” Thor declared.

“Okay, okay,” Bucky said. “Think about it. We know baby girl better than Hydra. If she was scared and hurt, if she needed to keep her brother and the girls safe, where would she hide?”

“Up high,” Tony said. “When she spilled the smoothie and thought we’d punish her, she climbed up on the cupboard. When they infiltrated the tower, she climbed up high. She’s somewhere high, somewhere relatively dark, secluded. She likes small spaces.”

“Right, spread out,” Steve said. “Look up high, places you wouldn’t normally look.”

They nodded and left the room, each going in a different direction. Bruce stayed with Simmons to work on Annie, and a SHIELD agent arrived to take the scientist.

JARVIS left China with Bruce, who scooped her up and popped her in his shirt pocket. She patted the material and curled up, cuddling close to him.

It was Bucky that found them.
It was the darkest, dustiest part of the base. There were footsteps in the dust, large ones made by grown men. One had a limp, he could tell by the pattern.

He wondered how stupid you had to be to miss the tiny little toe prints on the dusty crates.

“Sabrina?” he called out to the ceiling. “Baby girl? It’s Daddy Bucky. Come on, baby. I’ll take you home.”

He held his breath and waited until a tiny scuffling came from above. One of the ceiling tiles lifted the tiniest amount.

“Daddy?”

“Hi, baby girl,” he crooned, standing below her. He flipped the locator Tony had handed out, alerting them to come to his location. “Come on, let’s go home.”

“Babies,” she said.

“Do you have Gabby and Sarah and Kiddo?”

“Sleeping.”

“Are they up there with you?”

She nodded and he could hear running.

“We’ll get them down in a moment, just…let me take a look at you, baby,” he begged, holding out his hands, and she didn’t hesitate before shoving the ceiling tile away and tumbling down to him.

Steve was first to them, followed by Loki, Tony, Clint, Thor, Natasha and JARVIS bringing up the rear.
Bucky couldn’t speak, and he couldn’t let go, couldn’t loosen his grip. He had Sabrina in his arms, her face to his neck, her little hands clinging to him, and he couldn’t move. Tears streamed down his face as he stroked her tangled hair. Patches of it were missing, and he knew they’d hurt her, but she was still alive. Everything else they could fix so long as she was alive.

“Is she okay?” Clint demanded. “Bucky? Is she okay?”

“Don’t know,” he said through his tears and Natasha came over, stroking his hair, getting him to ease his grip.

Sabrina saw Clint and reached out, squirming and then fighting to get free so she could go to him. Bucky let her go to the other man, but she kept a death grip on his hair as she moved, so he wouldn’t go anywhere.

“I’ve got you, baby, I’m here,” Clint promised, his own tears flowing.

“Sabrina? Where are the others?” Steve asked and she let go of Clint’s neck long enough to point to the hole in the ceiling.

Steve leapt up onto the crates and stuck his head through and laughed. She had made a little den. The floor was covered in old dust sheets, she’d stolen an LED lantern, and made cradles out of stolen uniforms. Bottles of formula were stacked neatly to one side, as were bottles of water. Another neat pile of diapers and wipes were stacked beside a gallon container of applesauce and a bag of disposable spoons.

She’d even set up a makeshift trashcan using a helmet and plastic sheeting for the dirty diapers.

“Hey, Kiddo,” he cooed to the nearest child. Kiddo stirred and blinked sleepily before spotting Steve.

He launched himself out of his nest of uniforms and into Steve’s arms, chanting “Eeb, Eeb, Eeb!”

Kiddo’s head popped up and he looked around for Clint.

“Down there,” he directed. “Come on.”

He took Kiddo in his arms and ducked out of the hole. Sabrina had gone back to Bucky and Clint was waiting with open arms. Kiddo fell into them and melded himself to Clint’s frame.

Steve returned to the hole and carefully picked up Gabby, who startled as she was touched. He held his breath as she tracked his face and then sighed when she cooed at him.

“Hi, princess. Off to daddy with you,” he said, passing her to Thor who held her like a drowning man does a life ring.

Sarah was the last, and Steve had to pull her little nest closer before he could touch her. She woke when he started moving her and his heart broke as she grabbed her makeshift blanket, yanking it up over her head.

“Oh, baby. It’s okay, honey,” he soothed. “It’s okay.”

She twitched it down so she could look at him, and then all but tore it off when she realised it was him. Her tiny hands reached out to him, grabbing at the air, and he scooped her up. She’d grown, but she still fit in his arms. She was alive and Sabrina had kept her safe.

It took him a moment to be able to move, and then he ducked and handed her to Loki in one swift move.

Loki all but snatched her up, cradling her close and retreating to a corner to nuzzle her. Tony followed him, looking at Sarah as Loki checked her over. Steve joined them and the two humans bracketed Loki as he reacquainted himself with her. He touched each little finger, stroked her hair, rubbed his nose along hers.

She was transfixed, her blue eyes, such a match for Steve’s, locked on Loki’s green ones. She kicked and waved her arms in excitement at seeing him.
Eventually they managed to get moving, and agents met them at the front doors, offering coats to wrap the little ones in. They bundled them up and trekked to the mobile command centre.

Annie was already there with Bruce and Simmons. All her tubes and wires were gone, aside from a drip that Bruce had clearly set up. He took one look at Gabby in Thor’s arms and burst into tears of relief.

Loki walked straight up to him and shoved Sarah at him.

He looked her over and smiled as she wriggled at him. “I’m happy to see you too, sweetheart,” he cooed. “I don’t know what they did, but you look pretty good. How about a feed, huh?”

He looked at Loki, who was gnawing his lip.

“She seems okay enough. I’ll look her over properly at home, but for now, she’s fine. I think she’d probably like a feed.”

Loki pressed a kiss to his cheek and took Sarah. He retreated to a chair Tony cleared off for him and Steve helped him with the top half of his leathers.

Sarah latched on immediately and Loki winced.

“She’s starving,” he said, stroking her hair. She pressed a hand against his heart, staring up at him. “It’s okay, sweetheart. Mommy’s here. I’m right here. It’s all okay now.”

Thor managed to get his arms to cooperate and he laid Gabby on Annie’s chest. Bruce retrieved her blanket and tucked her in. Her little hands made fists by her head as she gripped pieces of Annie’s hair.

Phil accepted Kiddo as he dove for him, and cuddled him close. He wrapped him in his blanket and pressed kiss after kiss to his hair.

Sabrina was happy to stay with Bucky and Clint until she spotted Phil. He smiled at her and rummaged in his bag to produce Monkey.
“Hey, beautiful,” he cooed. “I brought him for you.”

She looked up at Bucky, then at Clint, and then back at Phil. She grabbed Bucky by the hand as she slid off his lap and dragged him over to Natasha.

“Stay with Natasha,” she ordered. “Daddy stay!”

“I’m stayin’,” he promised with a watery smile, pulling Natasha onto his lap.

“Don’t worry, moya sladkaya,” Natasha assured. “He’s going nowhere.”

She stared at the for a moment before she nodded. Then she checked on Sarah and Gabby, before she grabbed Clint’s hand and dragged him across the room with her. She shoved Monkey out of her way and climbed onto Phil’s lap. Clint settled on the floor and produced her blanket, wrapping her up.

Both kids snuggled into Phil and reached out for Clint, taking the hands he offered.

“Came for me,” Sabrina said. “Always come for me.”

Chapter End Notes

What did you all think? Did I get it right? Did you hate it?

Please comment and let me know what you thought of this chapter.
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Summary

And the final chapter!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

JARVIS was doing his pre-flight checks when Nick Fury strode onto the quinjet.

“Nicely done,” he said. “You know, aside from the fact that we can’t question anyone with any knowledge of anything.”

“Don’t you dare,” Steve snarled. “When you take the risks, you make the calls. They came in after us, not you, so whatever my team felt were appropriate actions are absolutely a-okay with me.”

“This could be one tiny cell, there could be dozens, hundreds more.”

“Get off my plane!” Tony roared. “Get off! You’re not welcome here. Your men did, oh, I don’t know… pretty much nothing! So who the hell are you to start calling the odds? Maybe if your organisation hadn’t been harbouring Hydra for decades, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Nick,” Phil said calmly. “Go away so we can take our children home.”

“You need to debrief,” Fury said.

“Later. Just go.”

Fury looked like he wanted to argue for a moment but thought better of it and did as he was told.

“The nerve of that guy,” Tony groused.
JARVIS closed the doors and the engines rumbled to life beneath them.

“Secondary heating coming online now, sir,” JARVIS said. “Please, everyone, take your seats for take-off. Sir, Prince Nuada has arrived with Prince Helblindi to clear the site.”

“Good. Give them a list of things to look for, and then I want it burnt to the ground.”

“Very good, sir. Any other instructions?”

“Yeah, tell them Fury and his people aren’t to be trusted,” Steve said. “I don’t want the new SHIELD getting their hands on anything, not even a piece of bellybutton lint.”

“I shall relay the message, Captain. The princes express a desire to visit once the task is complete.”

“That’s fine,” Steve said. “Just take us home, JARVIS.”

They all settled and the craft eased into the air. Once they were at altitude, JARVIS set the plane to autopilot and set about bustling through the cabin, getting whatever they needed. He ended up sitting with Annie while Bruce did his thing and treated what he needed to.

Annie was bouncing back faster than the last time she’d had to detox all of the Hydra crap in her system. She had no breathing difficulties, but was running a fever. Her serum was burning through her body, flushing out the foreign elements. Bruce turned up the rate of dispersal on the bag of fluids.

Steve was extremely thin, his reserves at a complete all-time low. Bruce dumped a cooler beside him and ordered him to eat everything. Everything turned out to be Sabrina’s weight in sandwiches, chips, candy bars, and sodas, packed by JARVIS. Things high in calories to offset his metabolism being denied for so long. He obediently set to it, chowing down at a steady pace, watching his family as he chewed. He could literally feel it all going to his starved muscles.

Bucky and Natasha were a little battered from each other. Natasha had a few bruises and some cracked ribs, which wasn’t a surprise seeing as she had been battered by the metal arm. Bucky was mostly unharmed from his captivity. Physically anyway. Mentally and emotionally was another story, and his flesh hand was evidence of that. He wouldn’t let go of Natasha, his hand fisted in the
fabric of her coat, and he couldn’t stop his eyes darting around, watching all of them as if they would vanish.

“Tony,” Bucky called across the hold.

“Hey, Buckaroo. Still with us?” he said, strolling across to him. He’d taken off the armour and changed into soft sweatpants and a t-shirt so he could hug whoever stayed still long enough. Sure enough, as soon as he was in arms reach, he hugged Bucky before looking at him. He stroked Bucky’s hair away from his face, looking at his terrified eyes.

“Tony, they took your arm,” he said, holding the metal one out to him. “It was…and they took it and they wrecked it.”

“It’s not a problem,” Tony promised. “I already have the bots fabricating a new one for you.”

“This one. It is. Problematic.”

“Problematic how?”

“Heavy. Hurts.”

“Want it off? You’ll be lopsided until we get home, but I can take it off now if you want.”

Bucky thrust it at him more firmly and Tony quickly retrieved a tool kit, setting to work.

Gabrielle was the first child Bruce took a look at, mostly because he couldn’t get the other three to be physically independent yet. Thor hovered while he took a look but otherwise let him strip her of the uniform Sabrina had wrapped her in. Gabrielle was a little thinner, and a little bigger than before she was taken, but relatively healthy. She was bruised, and there was some dried blood in places, but she was pretty unscathed all things considered.

“Alien DNA,” Bruce murmured.
“Hmmm?” Thor pressed.

“I think they were distracted by the girls’ alien DNA,” he said, glancing over at Sarah. “They obviously took blood, but I think the alien DNA from you and Loki made things interesting enough to distract them from taking anything more.”

“That is correct, Bruce,” JARVIS said. “Download of most recent Hydra files indicates that to be the case.”

“I think we’re all thankful for that,” Tony muttered darkly, screwdriver in hand.

“She could probably use a feed,” Bruce said. He took the onesie Thor held out and dressed the tiny girl, then picked her up and held her close, inhaling the scent of her hair. Hulk purred in the back of his head as she cooed at him. “Hey, princess. Pai missed you.” He kissed her dark hair. “Off to daddy for a feed. I’ll cuddle later, okay?”

Thor carefully took her and squeezed his shoulder.

Loki was reluctant to let Sarah go, so Bruce got him to work with him. Loki happily stripped off the uniform and diaper, using wipes to clean her off. She was the same as Gabby, mostly unharmed, a little thinner, a touch bigger. Bruce smiled at Loki and gave him the all clear. Loki sighed in relief, diapered and dressed his baby, and then crossed the hold to settle in Steve’s lap.

“Keeping me pinned down so I don’t move?” Steve joked, nuzzling his neck.

“Absolutely.”

Kiddo was happy to smile at Bruce but refused point blank to let go of Phil or Clint.

“Okay, little man, it’s okay. How about you sit on Phil’s lap and I make it better, huh?”

Kiddo considered it before he looked at Sabrina. She climbed into Clint’s lap and nodded. “Is okay. Bruce make better.”
Kiddo nodded and reached a hand to Bruce. He took it and realised Kiddo was missing his fingernails. He and Phil stripped off the Hydra pyjamas and added them to the pile of things to be burned. Kiddo had bruises everywhere, and they’d obviously taken more than just blood. But it was clear Sabrina was the one worst off. Bruce cleaned and bandaged the most serious of the wounds and then Phil dressed him in the warm fleecy pyjamas he’d packed.

“He should be fine, just needs time and TLC. Food too. Hey, Kiddo, wanna go see what Steve has?”

Kiddo looked at Sabrina and then his parents.


Phil let him down when he wriggled, and then he hovered for a moment. He put his Cookie Monster on Phil’s lap and patted his knee.

“Eew, ay!”

“Okay, little guy, I’ll stay right here,” Phil promised and Kiddo nodded before he toddled over to Steve. The blond smiled and let him rummage through his cooler. Kiddo grabbed a few sandwiches, a bottle of soda, and a banana before he toddled back to Phil. He sat on Phil’s lap to eat his bounty.

“Hey, Sabrina,” Bruce said, sitting cross-legged on the floor. “How are you feeling, sweetheart? Do you hurt?”

“Bad peoples make ouch,” she said, snuggled into Clint.

“Yeah. They weren’t nice. But you were so clever, hiding from them. Do you want to show me where you hurt?”

She patted Clint’s chest before sliding to the floor. Clint helped her unlace the hospital gown she wore and she pulled it off, throwing it to the pile.
They could see her ribs, and the notches of her spine. Deep bruises covered every inch of her. She was missing her hair on the patches above her ears and the back of her neck, and her fingernails were missing too. Her arms were scabbed and weeping, but not infected, so just growing new skin. She was missing all her molars, which she showed Bruce.

“Sabrina, honey,” Bruce pressed gently as he began cleaning wounds. “Were they angry?” She nodded. “Did you try to make them more angry, or were they just angry all the time?”

“Try to,” she said. “Make look at me so not ouch Kiddo more.”

“That was so brave of you,” he promised, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Now, I think they’re all clean. Do they hurt?” He motioned to her arms.

“No. Itch.”

“That’s good, it means you’re growing new skin, getting better. And the teeth were little baby teeth. You’ll grow proper grown up ones to replace them.” He helped her into the pyjamas Clint produced and fluffy socks. “Your nails will grow back, they just take a bit of time.”

“Hair?”

“It’ll grow back too.” He smiled and pulled China from his pocket. “Look who helped us find you.”

She grinned and accepted the doll, who promptly climbed into the kangaroo pouch of the pyjama top, peeking out.

Once Tony had disconnected everything needed, he had Thor hold Bucky steady as he pulled the arm, disconnecting it from the socket. Bucky screamed as it detached, and then slumped in relief. He kept murmuring thank you as Natasha held him close.

The flight took only a few hours, owing to the tech Tony had installed in the quinjet, and Helix wiggled free from Happy’s hold to go berserk at her puppies. Sabrina squirmed down from Clint’s arms and hugged the dog, scratching her behind the ears.
Happy had followed Tony’s request and created the mother of all blanket forts in the penthouse. The whole floor of the living area was covered in inflatable mattresses and every pillow and cushion he could find. Blankets, quilts and comforters were piled on top, and sheets were secured with a complicated system of ropes and pulleys. It deserved some kind of award.

JARVIS adjusted his lights so the whole thing glowed with a soft rotation of rainbow colours. Happy had put in fibre optic lamps, dotted across the whole space. There were no less than 20 coolers of snacks and drinks placed here and there, food within easy reach wherever they laid down, and as they touched down, the pizza delivery arrived at the front desk. The security men put it on a trolley and wheeled it into the elevator, and JARVIS brought it up.

“Loving blanket-topia,” Clint said as he flopped down.

“Agreed,” Loki said. “Very well done, Happy.” He settled down in his own chosen spot, pulling blankets and pillows to make a nest for Sarah. Steve and Tony followed him and cuddled close. Everyone averted their eyes to give them some privacy as they kissed and touched, making sure they were all there.

“No problems,” Happy said, collecting the food and bringing it to the fort.

“Daddy?” Sabrina said, poking Clint in the ribs and making him laugh. “Tickle daddy!”

“Yeah, that tickles,” he chuckled. “How you doing, baby?”

“Want bath. Please.”

“How about some food first?” Phil suggested. “Pizza first and then we’ll do baths, okay?”

“Okay.”

Sabrina managed to put away a whole deep dish family sized pepperoni all by herself before she moved onto the ribs and wings, garlic bread and onion rings.

Anyone else would consider it JARVIS going overboard when he ordered, but this was a family of
enhanced individuals. It was just about enough.

Kiddo wolfed down whatever Phil gave him, getting covered in assorted sauces.

Loki alternated between pushing more food on Steve and nursing Sarah. She kept taking breaks to sit and look at her family, checking they were still there. Tony plonked himself on Steve’s free side and tangled their legs so the blond couldn’t get up.

Thor curled Gabby in a nest of pillows and blankets, near to where Bruce laid Annie. Jane brought over a few warmed bottles of formula and they took turns in feeding her. She was obviously having the same problem as Sarah, wanting to both eat and look around, so they gave her that choice. Frankly, if she had wanted to yank out all of Thor’s hair and play with it, they would let her at this point.

Bruce was adamant that his girl would not be waking up in a lab, even if it was his lab. He’d removed the catheter and the bag of fluids. She was sort of conscious, enough to drink when the cup was held to her lips.

Annie had to be laid on her front. As she had been lifted from the gurney Simmons had moved her on, he’d realised Annie was missing all the skin of her back. He could literally see the bones of her spine. He could also see her skin literally growing back before his eyes. It was both gross and incredible. He estimated that it would be all grown by morning.

The family settled in to spend the night together, all cuddled up in groups. No one was willing to let anyone out of their sight.

Steve was the only one who didn’t sleep at all that night.

He’d spent enough time during his captivity drifting in and out of consciousness that he was pretty well rested. So he took Sarah in his arms and held her close, guided Tony and Loki to use his thighs as pillows, and watched over his family as they slept.

Clint stroked Sabrina’s hair and back as she snuggled between him and Phil. Kiddo had drifted off pretty much immediately after pizza, but she was fighting it.

“No. Me no sleep.”

“Sabrina, you have to go to sleep.”

“No.”

“Hey, Clint, take a breath,” Phil guided. “Sabrina, baby, why don’t you want to sleep?”

“Have to watch.”

“Watch what?”

“Kiddo and Sarah and Gabby. Keep safe.”

“Oh, baby, no. They’re safe, I promise. The four of you are home and safe, I promise. You know, while you were gone, Tony made all new security things. The tower is all safe now, no one is getting in the tower unless we want them to.”

“Have to watch. Could hear.”

“Hear what, sweetheart?” Phil prompted.

“Hear Mommy Annie screaming. And Steve said lots of bad words. And bad peoples maked Daddy Bucky not Daddy Bucky anymore. Was Daddy but not Daddy.”

Phil and Clint looked at each other.

“I’m okay now, baby doll. Natasha fixed me. She made me better,” Bucky assured.

“Garrett was bad people,” she whispered. “And had a bad people friend. He looked scary.”

“Do not worry, my little warrior,” Thor assured. “Loki took care of Garrett and his scary friend. They shall never bother us again.”

“Loki make them dead?”

“Yes, baby, he did,” Clint said. “They’re dead and gone, and never coming back. He got rid of all of them. And Hulk squished a lot of bad people. And Nuada and Helblindi took care of the rest.”

“Garrett supposed to be friend, but not friend. Was a bad people. Didn’t make better when they make Annie scream.”

“Sabrina,” Bruce said gently. “Can you tell me what they did to Annie? What you saw them do?”

“Sharp knife,” she whispered, picking at the seam of Clint’s trousers. “There was blood and drip on floor. Make Not Daddy watch, hold him still and make look.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Phil soothed. “It’s okay now. You’re all home and safe. And I know I said Garrett was a friend, I really thought he was. I knew him for a really long time. I’m really sorry, honey.”

“Like Prince Hans,” she said firmly, absolutely certain. “He hurt Ana and tried hurt Elsa. They think he was friend but he not.”

“Girl has a point,” Bucky said.

“Sabrina, honey, you can sleep, I promise,” Clint said. “No one is going anywhere, no bad people are getting in here. It’s okay to sleep.”
She pondered it for a little while and they let her be. She would come to her own conclusions in her own time, but she was like any Stark. Try to push them into doing something and they dug in their heels, resisted and evaded and did anything to do it their way. Eventually she gave in, snuggling down and letting her eyes close. She was out like a light.

One by one the family drifted off. JARVIS kept watch while they slept, setting his body to charge via a wall outlet. Tony had added the secondary charging method so JARVIS could charge anywhere, anytime, with just a simple wall outlet. His plug was even adjustable, so it would work in any country.

Bucky fought sleep as hard as he could, until Steve caught his attention.

“Sleep, Buck. I got first watch.”

It was less than a minute before Bucky was asleep, still one-armed and gripping at Natasha.

Steve let himself drift, still awake but not present, losing himself in the warm weight of his sleeping daughter, the weight of his mates’ heads against his thighs, the sounds of his family breathing around him.

Bruce woke when Annie did several times in the night. She was still full of the hallucinogen they had pumped her full of, so he had to reassure her every time. It was just past dawn when she was finally lucid.

“Hey, beautiful,” Bruce crooned as she blinked at him.

“Bruce? What…home?”

“Yeah, baby, you’re home. It’s okay. You’re home and safe.”

“The kids. They have the kids!” she gasped and he stroked back her hair.
“No, they don’t. We found them, and Bucky, and Steve. We got all of you out, I promise. Everyone’s home and safe, I promise.”

“Gabby? Where’s my Gabby?”

“Using Thor as a pillow to your right,” he assured, nodding over her prone form. “Careful, don’t roll over. Your back isn’t quite there yet, stay on your belly.”

She managed to push herself up enough to turn her head, and sure enough, there was her daughter, passed out on Thor. Both of them were on their backs, and she had her arms thrown up, little fingers tangled in daddy’s hair, his huge hand on her belly. Jane was pressed to his side, her head on a giant bicep.

“Hey,” Steve said. “Welcome back.”

She stared at him, looking from him to Sarah, Tony to Loki, and then the tears came. She gasped and shook and gripped at the blanket beneath her. Tony woke to it and blinked around confusedly before shooting across the space.

“It’s okay, honey,” Tony soothed. “It’s all okay. You’re home, you’re safe. So is Steve and Bucky, and all the kids. We’re all home and safe and the bad guys are dead.”

“You came for me,” she whispered between shuddering gasps. She reached out and put her palm flat across his reactor. “You came for me.”

“I promised I would,” Tony said, wiping his own tears. “Annie, I will always come for you.”

He laid down next to her and pulled her across his chest, stroking her hair as she clung to him and gasped in great sobs of relief and fear.

Sabrina raised her head from Clint’s chest and looked over.

“Daddy? Why Mommy Annie cry?”
“She’s crying because she’s glad to be home, and she was really scared. She thought we wouldn’t be able to find you all,” Clint said, hugging her close. “She’s okay, baby, I promise. She just needs some time. How about me and you go down to our floor and you can have a bath and some fresh clothes?”

“No. Stay here.”

“No one’s leaving, baby. No one’s going anywhere.”

“Stay.”

“You can use our tub,” Bruce offered. “JARVIS, could you collect clothes and things from the other floors?”

“No! JARVIS stay!” Sabrina shrieked, scrambling across to grip him.

“Oh, my little miss,” JARVIS crooned, holding her close. “I shall stay, I am everywhere in the tower. It is simply my body that shall be on another floor. And it is only for a few minutes. Shall I have a video link for you? So you can see what I’m doing?”

She considered it, little fingers fiddling with the buttons of his shirt. “Be quick?”

“I shall be very quick.”

“Come back?”

“I will be back as soon as I have the needed supplies.”


He nodded and pressed a kiss to her dark hair before he left, the screen coming to life to show him
moving around the various floors.

Slowly the family stirred, all checking on each other, making a fuss of the little ones. Sabrina plodded from one to another to another, cuddling and giggling and generally being made a fuss of. Kiddo was content to sit and giggle at them all. He refused to leave Phil’s lap, and Phil was in no hurry to let go of him.

JARVIS returned and people started to utilise Annie and Bruce’s bathroom, and the one Tony, Steve and Loki used. They went one at a time, reassuring Sabrina before they left the room that they would return in a few minutes. Steve relinquished his hold on Sarah to Loki so he could shower, and Phil and Clint took Sabrina and Kiddo to the kitchen with them to make breakfast.

Nuada, Vili and Helblindi arrived as the pancake griddle was heating. Helblindi and Nuada were without guards, as they weren’t kings, but Vili had chosen to have Lady Sif and the Warriors Three for this trip. Sabrina was delighted to see Fandral. Loki was quick to reassure his brother that the princess of Jotenheim was well and safe, and Thor showed his uncle that Gabby was fairly unharmed. Nuada accepted Sabrina’s enthusiastic hug and Bruce’s reassurances that Annie was going to be fine.

Tony finally managed to convince Bruce to go shower himself. Everyone else settled around the breakfast table, but Tony stayed where he was, Annie still draped over him.

“You came for me,” she whispered. “How long was I gone?”

“23 days. Long days, I tell you. We even got the whole of New York looking.”

“Was I dreaming, or did someone say China saved us?”

“No, that was real. She woke up in the furnace room and wanted to come home, so she hacked one of their computers and messaged JARVIS. That’s how we found you.”

“There’s so much in my head,” she said. “Some of it I know is real, and some of it I know isn’t. But some of it…”

“It gets all mixed up in there with all that shit they pumped into you,” he said, smoothing her hair. “It’ll settle, straighten out, and the rest…well, we’ll figure it out.”
“I saw Howard. I know it wasn’t real. He was in his twenties, and he had Andrew in his arms, so there’s no way it can be real. But it looked so real. And I saw Peggy. She was dancing with Steve. And Dum Dum, he was drinking a Starbucks. I know none of it was real. But it was so real to me.”

“Sounds like you had some pretty cool dreams there. Anything not so cool?”

“The parts that hurt,” she admitted. “I don’t want to talk about those parts.”

“Okay, not a problem.”

“I dreamt about Howard a lot. Memories, things I didn’t know I remembered. He always told me we were going to go on a trip someday, when the war was over,” she said. “He talked about laying in the sun, and white sandy beaches, and waters that were way too blue. Drinking out of coconuts,” she giggled.

“You want to?”

“What, drink out of coconuts?”

“Go on vacation,” he clarified. “Sounds like a good plan to me. We could all use a break. Somewhere secluded and tropical, hidden away with serious luxury.” He stroked his hand carefully over her back to check on the regrowth and was pleased to find it was mostly all there. Just a few spots were scabbed over. “How does that sound?”

“Is there a place where no one can find us?” she whispered. “Somewhere it can be just us? No reporters, no media, no fans wanting autographs, and absolutely no Hydra. Does that exist?”

“I’ll make it exist.”

Bucky disappeared after lunch, pretty much the moment Tony attached the arm. Sabrina screamed
when he left the room but he didn’t stop, didn’t slow down, which was their big clue of how much he was hurting. For him to leave Sabrina crying, it was bad.

Steve reassured her he would bring her daddy back and took off after his friend.

“Damn it, Buck,” Steve growled.

Bucky was not in any of his usual haunts, and even JARVIS couldn’t figure out where he was for a while, he moved too damn fast. Eventually they figured out where he was when one of his metal fingers twitched on camera.

“Are you kidding right now?” Steve asked, looking up at the top of the climbing wall slash obstacle wall. There he was, tucked up, watching warily as Steve began to climb. Steve levered himself up and made himself comfortable while he waited for Bucky to say something.

“Buck, I hate climbing, you know I hate it, and yet I still did. So if I have to do that, you have to talk to me.”

“I can’t stay,” Bucky murmured. “Steve, I can’t stay here.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Bucky, this is your home, your family. Of course you can stay!”

“No, not like this!” Bucky argued. “I can’t stay, not like this, not when I can’t trust myself.”

“Bucky, what did they do to you?”

“There’s something in my head, something that makes me not me anymore. It buries me, takes me deep, makes me the Asset again. I can’t, Stevie. I can’t stay here if I can’t trust my own head.”

“Bucky…”

“No. I can’t stay and put my baby girl at risk. If I can’t trust my own mind, I can’t be around her or
any of you.”

Steve sighed and scrubbed his hands through his hair. He couldn’t deny the truth in what his friend was saying, but he couldn’t accept that it was one or the other. There had to be a way.

“Forgive me, Captain, Sergeant Barnes,” JARVIS said. “I am sorry to intrude on your conversation. But I do believe Sir has a friend who can relieve this problem.”

“How?” Bucky demanded.

“Professor Charles Xavier is a telepath with great strength. He may be able to alter the changes made to your consciousness.”

“Do it, make it go away,” Bucky demanded. “Fix me.”

“JARVIS, get Tony to make a call to the Professor,” Steve ordered.

“Sir is calling, Captain. If you would join him in the penthouse?”

Steve and Bucky returned to the penthouse, where Sabrina was asleep on one of the sofas, her head on Clint’s thigh.

“She cried herself out,” Natasha said. “She was exhausted to begin with. She hasn’t slept the whole time she had the little ones. She was afraid they’d come and take them back if she slept.”

“Poor kid,” Steve lamented.

Kiddo drunkenly staggered up to them, uneven on the mattresses still being tidied away, and held his hands up to Bucky.

“Up! Up! Ucky, Up!”
“Steve,” Bucky moaned. “I can’t. I just…I can’t.”

“Hey, little guy,” Steve soothed, picking up the toddler and settling him on his hip. “Happy to be home?”

Kiddo giggled and laid his head on Steve’s shoulder.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Tony said incredulously, phone pressed to his ear. “No, wait, you don’t…no, Xavier, listen, you don’t understand….what bullshit!”

“Ony, a ad ord,” Kiddo announced.

“That’s right, that was a bad word,” Phil agreed, handing over a bottle of apple juice.

Tony shut off the call and threw the phone across the room, breaking it into a thousand pieces. Little robots shot from the skirting board to gleefully clean them up. Kiddo wriggled until Steve put him down and then he was off to investigate, poking at the beeping little things.

“He won’t help us,” Tony said angrily. “Says it’s not natural, that it circumvents every method of psychiatry and psychotherapy, that he won’t help us, and none of his telepathic friends will help either. So we need another way to deal with this.”

“I can’t, Steve,” Bucky gasped, sinking to his knees, gripping at his hair. “I can’t stay. I won’t put anyone at risk, I won’t do that.”

“Easy, Buck,” Steve soothed, hugging him close. “We’ll fix this, I promise. We’ll find a way. Just promise me you won’t leave until we’ve tried everything we can. Please, Buck. Don’t disappear on us.”

“I won’t. But I can’t live like this,” he whispered. “If I can’t trust my own head…”

“We’ll fix it. We’ll find a way.”
Loki finally managed to convince himself that Sarah was safe in her crib three days after she and Steve were returned to him. Until then he had slept propped up with her gripped to his chest. His mates had been the only ones he had allowed to hold her, but only briefly, and only where he could see her. He laid her down and tucked her in, watching her sleep while he waited for his mates to join him.

Tony was doing some final security adjustments, making sure everything was safe and secure, that everyone in their family was on the system and being monitored by JARVIS on a completely different system than the rest of the tower, completely independent, so he couldn’t be taken down again. They each had thin black wristbands, even the babies, so JARVIS had a lock on all of them, no matter where they were.

It seemed to be taking a long time, so Loki tore himself away from the crib and headed to the bathroom. The room was foggy with steam and incredibly warm, and there was the delicious sight of Steve, naked and wet, slightly blurred through the shower glass.

Loki’s mouth watered and he stripped himself down, approaching all that pale biteable skin.

“She sleeping?” Steve asked as he opened the glass door. He hadn’t even looked up, still standing braced against the tile, letting the almost scalding water pummel down on him.

“Fast asleep, and safe in her crib.”

Loki reached out and slowly dragged his fingertips through the water pouring down Steve’s back. His skin was so warm and smooth and golden in the low lighting. He followed the line of his backbone down, down, down, until he could cup one pert cheek, squeezing it, moulding himself to Steve’s back.

“I missed you,” he whispered. “I was so afraid, Steve.”

Steve turned and pulled him close, stroking his back and hair as water rained down on him. Within moments, he was just as wet as the soldier, and their chests slid against each other.

“I know,” Steve assured. “I know exactly how scary it was. I was so afraid of what they were doing.
to you. But it’s okay now. You were safe the whole time. It’s fine now.”

“My sweet alpha,” Loki crooned, dipping in to kiss him. Steve groaned as their mouths met and pushed against him, backing him against the tile.

Loki couldn’t get enough of him, kissing him desperately and gripping at his shoulders. Blood rushed down, filling his cock, and it pressed against Steve. Steve’s own interest pressed against his hip, hard and hot and ready for him.

“Steve,” he breathed. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, no,” he crooned, tasting the skin of his throat, lips sliding to taste the raised ridges of the scar he’d made their first time. “Don’t apologise. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I let Tony have me,” Loki admitted. “I was so distraught, you and Sarah were both gone, and I was…I wanted…”

“Shhh. It’s okay. You have us both, you can do what you want with whichever of us you want. Sex is about mutual pleasure between two or more consenting adults. You let Tony have you, that’s absolutely fine with me. I’m just sore I wasn’t there to watch it.”

Loki giggled, pressing their lips together again.

“I would have you,” he murmured, stroking a nipple. “I wish to have you.”


“No. In our bed. I want to be under you, as our first time.”

Steve groaned and launched into a long heated kiss, his tongue exploring Loki’s mouth, his hands constantly moving to touch this piece of flesh or that. Loki kissed back with just as much passion, the two of them battling to achieve the most pleasure for the other.
Eventually, Steve reached out blindly and shut off the water, before moving them both out of the stall and towards their bed. It took a long time. They were so consumed with touch and taste that they would stop for long stretches just to become absorbed in sensation. Loki pulled Steve in for a kiss and hopped up, legs going around his waist. Steve moaned as Loki’s slit pressed against his aching arousal.

Steve broke the kiss and hurried to the bed, laying Loki out across the sheets. His pale skin almost glowed against the black material.

“If we were doing this before my serum, I think I’d be dead by now,” Steve joked, crawling across to settle atop his lover.

“It’s too soon for those kinds of jests,” Loki complained.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t mean that.” He kissed him softly in apology and Loki stroked his damp hair.

“You are forgiven.” Loki looked to the ceiling. “JARVIS, will Tony be joining us soon?”

“Not in time for your desired activities, Master Loki,” JARVIS said regretfully.

“Save him a video of us then.”

“As you wish.”

“A video, you are getting adventurous,” Steve grinned, gripping at a thigh wrapped around him.

“It’s private, for my mates only,” Loki said firmly, cupping Steve’s backside. “JARVIS knows this. And you, my love, need a sheath.”

“A sheath?”
“Yes, a sheath for this,” he husked, hand sliding from Steve’s ass to between them, long fine fingers curling around the hard shaft and squeezing.

“Ah, you mean a rubber. Good point. I love Sarah very much, but another little princess so soon would be a bit much,” he agreed.

He pushed up and leaned across the bed, fumbling in the bedside drawer for the package of condoms he knew was in there. As expected, it was open. Tony and Loki had already started off the strip of little foil squares. He grabbed one and moved back, kissing Loki again before he knelt up.

“May I?” Loki asked gently.

“Sure! Of course, here,” he said, handing it over. Loki took it and toyed with a corner before he sat up and traced gentle fingers over Steve’s chest.

“Hey,” Steve cooed, tipping his chin up with a fingertip. “What’s wrong?”

“I might have lost you,” Loki whispered, eyes full of tears. “I might have been without this, without you. And I would have been broken by it.”

“I’m going nowhere,” Steve promised. “I’m yours and I’m here. You came for me. No matter what, the three of us, me and you and Tony, we’re all going to come for each other, every single time.”

Loki surrendered to the possessive kiss and the fire between them flared again, pulling them in, Loki’s pheromones swirling around them to encourage a mating.

Loki broke the kiss and focussed his attentions on the condom. Asgard didn’t have such things. Mating either resulted in a child or it didn’t, there was no way to prevent a child if the Norns wished it. He knew of different mixtures ladies drank or washed with to try and prevent a child, but nothing like the little ring he removed from its foil.

Tony had taught him how to put it on, guiding Loki’s hands as he smoothed it over Tony’s hard member. When Tony took him, he hadn’t felt a difference between doing it with a sheath or without one. It was still pleasure, it was still mating. Perhaps a little tidier he supposed, with only his spending’s to clean up. Yes, very tidy. Tony’s seed had been all nice and neat in the sheath, disposed of quickly, leaving more time for cuddles and less on clean-up.
Steve toyed with his hair as he took a gentle hold of his shaft, stroking it a few times.

“Please,” Steve whispered. “Please.”

Loki smirked and took the little ring. Yes, that was the right way. Like a little hat Tony had taught him, so it rolled down. Now pinch the tip, get the air out. And place it. Ooops, where did it go? Ah, there. Now, try again. Pinch and place and roll.

“There,” Loki muttered to himself, smoothing it against the base, careful not to trap any hair. “All done.”

“Very well done,” Steve praised with an amused smile. “Tony taught you that?”

“Yes. He was very patient with me. It took me four of them before I got the hang of it. I kept getting them all twisted, trying to roll the wrong way and catching hair and such.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Steve agreed as Loki laid back, thighs wide in invitation. “Mmmm, look at you. Delicious.”

“Yes, I’m aware you and Tony both like to taste me, but don’t tonight. I would have my mate within me,” Loki demanded.

Steve grinned as he arranged them, remembering all the nights Loki had let them taste every inch of him, taking it in turns to suck him or lick his slick folds. He arranged Loki’s thighs wide around him, thrown over his own, and took hold of himself, sliding the head up and down along the wet folds. Loki gasped and moaned, hands reaching blindly until the caught Steve’s shoulders and he used them to pull him down for a kiss.

“Steve. Please.”

He couldn’t deny that pretty plea. He guided himself in and thrust slow, more and more, until he was balls deep and then he remained still. Loki was hot inside and tight around him. Still so tight even after having their baby and felt absolutely perfect. He wondered if Loki fit this perfectly around Tony too.
He began to move, slowly adjusting to the pressure around him, feeling the way Loki breathed and moaned, his hips twitching, the alien trying to move but still being too new to sex to really know how. He would learn in time. For the time being, his innocence was so sweet.

Loki was letting out tiny little breathless moans as he was taken, as Steve moved in him. He hiked up his thighs around Steve’s waist, pressing them closer together, so he was rubbed in delicious ways. His hands were tangled in blond locks, and he pressed his mouth to whatever he could.

Steve curved his spine as he thrust, rolling his hips and carefully licking Loki’s nipple with just the tip of his tongue. The effect was instantaneous; Loki gasped, jerking beneath his lover.

Steve was very careful not to coax any milk. The last time he’d done it by accident when he and Tony were tasting Loki’s pale skin, and Loki had been furious. It was for Sarah and Sarah alone. If Steve caused him to let down, Loki would kick him out of bed again, and that sofa wasn’t that comfortable.

He devoted himself to the swollen skin, avoiding the nipple directly, nuzzling and kissing and licking until Loki pushed his head away, unable to take any more touch to such a sensitive place.

Loki shifted beneath him, restless, unable to know what it was he needed.

Steve kissed him and urged him to hold him tighter. Loki did as Steve wanted and wound his arms around his neck, and then let out a small questioning sound as Steve threw himself backwards, rolling so Loki was splayed above him.

“Oh,” Loki said. He slowly sat up, adjusting his legs, and felt Steve within him, the way he seemed to be so much deeper. “This is…”

“Good?” Steve asked, breathless.

“Perhaps.”

Loki braced his hands on Steve’s chest and began to rock on him, chasing pleasure he knew was there. Steve’s hands gripped his hips and guided him, teaching him how to move, how to take what
he wanted. It was different, new, and he did like it, the way he was the one guiding things along. It was quite like riding a horse, which showed him the way to move.

“What a sight to walk in on,” Tony said as he arrived, closing the door behind him. He didn’t want anyone to see this.

“He wanted me,” Steve said. “I couldn’t possibly say no when he asked me so nicely.”

“I see.” Tony grinned and stripped off. “I guess it’s only fair when I was the one he wanted last time.”

Tony climbed on the bed and crawled up to press his front to Loki’s back. He attached himself to his neck and nibbled, hands coming up to gently fondle his breasts before moving down to lace his fingers with Steve’s. He aligned their hips and moved the way he would if it were him Steve was screwing. Loki loved the way he moved, so he should learn how to do it himself, and this was the perfect way to teach him.

“You wish to have me also?” Loki breathed, nails scratching at Steve’s chest.

“No, I’m good. Too tired to do anything,” Tony assured. “But I’m all for helping you have a good time. How’s it feel, being had like this? Being on top? Does it feel good?”

“It’s good,” Loki breathed, moving the way Tony guided him to. “Feels…so good.” He whined, high and pleasured, as Tony freed a hand to cup his balls, tugging and caressing them. Tony’s other hand wrapped around his cock, stroking slow. “Tony! Ah!”

Steve surged up, sitting so he could kiss him, thrusting his tongue between the open lips. Loki gripped at his hair with one hand and back to grip Tony’s with the other.

Loki thrust down harder, losing coordination, moaning and gasping and gripping at them until he tipped over the edge, feeling his climax shoot along every nerve. Tony held him as he collapsed backwards, while Steve lay back and thrust hard and fast into him.

Steve chased his own climax and Loki felt him move inside him, hard and hot, moving in and out of his channel with slick sounds. It felt strange, to have this hard thing within him when his own pleasure had already come. The movements sent tingles along his spine, and an ache inside when
Steve pressed too deeply.

Then Steve was still, hips jerking, and then still. He and Steve were still connected and Loki wondered how to remove it from his passage.


Loki leaned back against him and Tony’s hands dipped between his legs. He urged Loki’s hips up and helped him slip Steve’s cock from himself, guiding him to move his opening smoothly, so there was no discomfort. Again, there was no gush of fluids from him, and he found it much nicer, much cleaner.

Loki slowly crawled to the pillows, laying down and carefully stretching out his legs as Tony removed the condom from Steve, tying it off and disappearing into the bathroom.

Loki considered things as Tony returned and cleaned them up. It felt strange to use his channel, to reach pleasure there. Good, but strange. He’d never been told of the pleasures a woman could achieve. They were truly pleased indeed. It was a wonder the ladies of Asgard ever let their men go off to war. To spend such energies in battle when it could be used for bed sports seemed ridiculous. The feel of Steve inside, the glide of him, the pleasure of it. It was a very addicting experience.

And now without Steve within him he felt strangely hollow, as if something were missing. As if something had been given to him and then taken. He curled into Steve and hummed contentedly when he was hugged close.

Tony cuddled to his back, his arm across them both, and Loki felt complete.

The family had eventually contacted Asgard for any possible way to help Bucky.

They had sent their healer Eir to look at him, and then she had taken him back with her. Natasha went with him, and when they returned, the fracture of his mind had been repaired, the compulsion in him removed. He still had all his memories, still knew all that he’d been made to do, but he couldn’t be controlled by anyone.
Bucky was himself, free from Hydra at long last.

They also used their healing abilities to regrow his arm. It would take time to fully come in, but all the metal had been removed and left was a stump of bone about two inches protruding from his shoulder socket. Over the next few months it would grow into a full arm. It would take time, but he would be whole again.

At the request of Thor, they also healed Sam’s spine, and he was ecstatic to be walking around again, playing with the kids.

The family were settled, feeling free for the first time in a long long time.

Six weeks after they rescued Steve, Bucky, Annie and the kids, the family piled into the limo and made their way to the airport where Tony’s private jet was waiting for them.

A vacation was well overdue.

“Happy?” Clint asked Phil.

The older man looked over at the kids, settled in their seats and holding hands, the babies in their mothers’ arms, the assortment of their family smiling and happy and laughing.

“Happy.”
The compound had burned, and all within had died save one.

The man was covered in soot, and had nothing but the clothes on his back, but he was free, so what else could possibly matter?

His head hurt, the back of his neck swollen and hot, painful to touch, and his stomach churned with every wobbled step he took.
What they’d done to him, what was real, what was mere illusion, he couldn’t tell. It all tangled together in his head to the point that he couldn’t tell truth from fiction, couldn’t say where they ended and he began.

He stumbled through the barren landscape, looking at the shrubs and rocks, the red earth beneath his feet. This was not home, but he was free.

He knew very little for certain, but he knew one thing.

His name was Howard Stark, and he had to find his sister.
Dun dun duuuunnnnn!

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