The Ice Demon and the Red Skull

by Lizardbeth

Summary

For Loki, it should be a time of celebration. Steve Rogers is alive and free from the ice, and Loki has found new family in his exile. But old wounds still linger, and old enemies return to ruin the fragile peace.

Notes

It's finally here, woot! It's been a long time coming, I know. And just so you know, although I wrote this for Marvel Bang I'm going to release here weekly because I ripped out the ending again damn it and I need time to redo it, but it'll be a regular schedule release until the end.

For those of you new to the Ice Demon 'verse, *inhales* Loki was told he was adopted almost three hundred years ago. He dealt poorly and came to Midgard, and became a creature of ice and vengeance in stories told in Arendelle. He also fathered some queen named Elsa, you might have heard of her? Anyway, they had a touching reunion and he promised he'd watch over her people.

That day came, when the Nazis invaded and Loki went back to Arendelle to defend it. He became a Howling Commando with Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes, as told in the "Ice
Demon and the Hydra”. Some bad things happened, and Loki returned to Asgard after that. He only returned when he and Thor were both exiled for their behavior as told in the "The Ice Demon and the Spider". Right after, he discovers Steve Rogers is still alive and gets thawed in "The Ice Demon and the Captain."

Got all that? good. now we start where "Ice Demon and the Captain" left off, with Loki, Steve, and Natasha heading back to the US.

Comments/kudos always welcome, and you can find me at tumblr at lizardbeths.tumblr.com enjoy!
The quinjet took off from the military base in Arendelle and headed west and south, course set for
Washington.

Loki, in the chair next to Natasha, watched her pilot and listened to her explanations of the various
functions. He had decided to take more of an interest in flying and the function of the craft, figuring it
was better to know how it worked and so he could be ready in case something went wrong.

But mostly he wanted to be in the front so he could have a view of Arendelle as they left it.
Something tugged at his chest as the craft banked away from the coast and headed out to sea, leaving
the country behind.

His future was not Arendelle, he felt that was true, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be back. The
place would still be a part of him, and he always seemed to circle back to it. But not now; now it was
time to move forward, not face backward.

So it was with an unexpected calm that he looked out the front windows of the quinjet as they chased
the setting sun, and headed back toward America.

Natasha turned to direct her words to him and Steve. “So. What course? Back to DC or to New
York?”

He hesitated, caught by the question, and glanced back at Steve, who rose to come forward at the
question. “I know New York has appeal to Steven,” Loki answered, with an apologetic grimace in
Steve’s direction, “but Wanda and Pietro are near Washington. I wish to continue their training.”

Natasha nodded, unsurprised, and turned her gaze on Steve. He answered without having to think
about it, “No, I’d rather go to DC, too. There’s nobody left in New York.”

“Are you sure?” Loki asked. “We saw little of the city.”

“I saw enough. I’d rather be near people I know.” Bucky and Peggy were what he meant, Loki
knew, but then Steve’s hand closed on his shoulder, and Loki knew Steve meant him as well.

Natasha’s gaze flicked to the grip, before she turned forward, saying lightly, “Washington it is.”

Loki glanced at her and said, “You’re not surprised by our decision.”

“Yours, not at all.”

He smiled wryly. “Ah, so easily am I read.”

“Like a book,” she teased.

He accepted that with as much grace as he could muster, and settled back to enjoy the trip.

A few minutes later the phone in his pocket buzzed, and given most of the people who knew the
number were in the jet with him, he took it out to frown at the screen, hoping it wasn’t one of the
Maximoffs with bad news.

Instead, it read “Laura” and he clicked receive. “Hello?”
Laura Barton’s voice came over the line, “Hi. Are you busy?”

“Not at all, Laura.” Natasha’s gaze pinned him worriedly when she heard the name, but he held up his free hand to indicate nothing was wrong.

“Good. Can you Skype? I have someone here who wants to show you something?”

It took a moment and Natasha’s help to get the bigger screen at the rear set up, but shortly he could see Laura’s face and she could see his. Her smile broadened as a small face wormed its way under her arm, soon taking up the screen.

“Uncle Lukas!”

He couldn’t help the smile that grew on his own face at the sight. “Hello, Lila.”

She frowned. “Where are you? That looks weird.”

“I’m on an airplane, heading back to America.”

“Are you coming here?” Lila asked hopefully. “It’s been forever.”

He wanted to smile, since it hadn’t been that long, but he supposed for a short-lived young child, time probably did seem to pass differently than he experienced it. “No, I am sorry, Lila, not yet. What is it you wanted to show me?”

She stuck out her lip, pouting, before the mood cleared. She held up a piece of paper, carefully checking the image to center it as best she could. “I made this for you.”

“Two flowers!” he exclaimed. “How pretty. Next you’ll draw three flowers for me. And then four, and soon the flowers will cover the page and no one will be able to count them.”

She grinned and shook her head, laughing at him. “You’re so silly!”

“Am I?” he returned, teasing. “Very well. If you say so.”

Natasha pushed in, insistently refusing to let him keep the camera for himself. “Hello, Lila.”


Natasha shook her head once. “No, he’s not here, sweetie. But I hear he’s okay. We’re about to hit a storm edge so we’ll lose the signal, but I wanted to say hi.”

“Hi,” Lila said. “I’ll draw you a picture too, I promise.”

“I’d love that. We’ll see you for your birthday, but until then you be good.”

“But not too good,” Loki corrected, getting Natasha’s elbow in his ribs. His ‘ouch’ made Lila grin.

Natasha waved. “Say hi to your brother from us. Bye.”

Loki lowered the screen to turn it off, wishing he was going back to the Barton farm for a wistful moment.

Natasha returned to the pilot’s seat and Loki turned to find Steve regarding him with some curiosity. “Who was that?”
“Friends,” Loki answered. “I stayed with them after Sokovia.”

“Ah, the safe house you mentioned?” Steve asked and Loki nodded agreement.

“It’s a secret,” Natasha told him. “Very few at SHIELD know about them. For the family’s safety.”

“Smart. It was nice to see you relaxed,” Steve said to him. “And now I know where the picture you carry comes from.”

“We can still go to the farm, if you want?” Natasha invited, glancing over her shoulder at Loki. “Not too late to change course.”

He was tempted briefly but shook his head. “No, as much as I would like to, I think I need to return to Wanda and Pietro. She needs training, and I need to find a way to unlock his powers.” He thought of the vision the Norns had sent him. As angry as he was at them, he knew it was a warning he had to take seriously.

“Because there’s something dangerous coming,” Steve spoke without doubt, believing what Loki had told him.

“Something big,” Loki agreed. “Something… terrible.” His fingers sought the place on his abdomen where Schmidt had stabbed him in the vision. What did that mean? Some other Hydra villain attacking him as Strucker had? General warning of attack against him personally?

But that reminded him of something else he’d seen in the vision: the tesseract and the other Infinity Stones scattered against the black. He had to get the tesseract from SHIELD and away from Midgard. It had always been a dangerous lure, and with SHIELD playing with it again, it would draw attention and Midgard was not ready to defend itself.

He didn’t doubt he could find the cube, but he was wary of trying alone. Fury had likely laid a trap around the tesseract, and Loki would not underestimate the mortals’ technology nor their capacity for harm.

If not alone, then how? Steve might help, if Loki could convince him it was necessary to fight against a putatively friendly force, but Natasha was not likely to act against her employer and friends. Perhaps if she knew it could be done without casualties he might convince her.

But, the ones he needed were Wanda and Pietro. Once he’d trained them in their powers, SHIELD wouldn’t be able to stop them. He would take back the tesseract.

From the apartment that SHIELD had lent to him and Steve, Loki took the subway to the zoo, where he was to meet Wanda and Pietro. Picking out Pietro’s near-white hair from afar was easy, Wanda’s red shirt and black skirt hardly less so. Her hair was held back in a tight ponytail that emphasized her large eyes, darkly lined, and almost black lipstick. He wanted to tell her she was too beautiful to hide behind makeup, but kept silent as they saw him and bounded his direction like the energetic young people they were. He was startled into a grin as Wanda embraced him.

“You are back so soon. Did all go well?” she asked.

He thought of the ice monster, and his smile faltered. “It was taken care of,” he answered. She exchanged a frown with Pietro, but didn’t pry right there with people all around them. She tugged on his hand. “You have seen the pandas?” she asked. “I love them. They are so cute. Fluffy.” Her eyes
were alight with good humor and eagerness, so he followed along, as she led the way to the panda exhibit, along with a multitude of others.

“I have practiced,” she said to him, as they walked.

A bit alarmed, he glanced at her. “In private, I hope?”

“Yes, in private.”

“We practice focus in the open,” Pietro added. “It looks like meditation, so no one knows. But Wanda practices in her room, and I watch over her.”

“Good, I am relieved to hear it.” He worried about the people in line near them, too close not to hear and one never knew who was familiar with the language. “After pandas, I would like to see what you’ve been practicing.”

Wanda watched the antics of the pandas, exclaiming over the rotund smallest one rolling backwards off the branch. Loki and Pietro waited, tolerant of her enthusiasm, and Pietro leaned closer to murmur to Loki, “She has been worried for you. That something might happen when we are too far to help.”

Loki touched his arm. “It is my duty to protect you, not the reverse, Pietro.”

Blue eyes met his, a glimpse of a harder past and stubbornness shining there, and he said, “Family looks after each other.”

“Yes,” Wanda agreed, coming back to them. She slipping her hand around his arm. “You may not argue this.”

“Oh?” he returned lightly. “Why not?”

“Because you know it is right,” she answered, and her smile was impish at him. “Come, I will show you. It is small progress, but I hope you will be pleased.”

He reassured her, “Small progress is better than none, and truly any at all is impressive in such a short time.”

Loki had been to the zoo before, most recently when he’d been in such a mood he’d made an ice bridge for the monkeys. He’d felt better watching them finding the bridge and using it to escape, with the resulting shrieking of both monkeys and humans as the troop had launched themselves into the trees.

But after watching them find their freedom, he’d been disheartened to see several refuse to leave their cage: too afraid, or too complacent in their captivity. He’d not freed any others and left.

So it was with some familiarity that he led them to a picnic area that was deserted in the autumn heat and isolated by shrubbery on three sides.

“I will watch,” Pietro said and moved to the pathway.

Loki and Wanda sat across from each other at the table, and her lips lifted in a wry smile, as she smoothed a hand across the surface. “I will try not to ruin this one.”

Loki gave a shrug. “Do or do not, there is no try.”

Her eyes snapped to his. “You-- “ She laughed, and he eased back, pleased with his jest’s effect.
“How? How do you know?”

“I watch films,” he protested. “I also have a great expertise on storybook princesses, should you require it. But now that you are more relaxed, find your focus.”

Before doing so, Wanda cocked her head a bit, big eyes staring into his. “You seem more... at peace,” she decided on the word. “The visit to Arendelle helped?”

“As much as it could,” he answered. “I am resolved to protect Midgard. And to help those, like you two, who need training. So,” he gestured in invitation, “Show me.”

She drew in a deep breath, her eyes fluttering closed as she focused and reached for her power. Her eyes opened again, looking within as her hands rose up, scarlet threads glowing around her fingers.

He watched, as the water bottle rose up from the table and began to rotate, at first slowly and then faster until it was spinning within a ruby glow. A feeling rose in his chest, pride that another of his blood was so skilled and talented.

Something happened, a stray thought perhaps, and the bottle came apart, spraying water. Loki was prepared for a far more dangerous unraveling, so his counter-spell encircled the mess and crushed it all to frosty powder in an instant.

Wanda’s eyes flew wide, and the glow disappeared from her hands before she lowered them, expression chagrined. “Oh. I lost control.”

“Not completely. No missing table bits this time. I think we can account that a success,” he said lightly, but when she didn’t smile, he said. “No harm done, Wanda.”

“But it broke. I had done it so well, before. I am sorry it was disappointing.”

“No, not at all,” he reassured her. “It was not. I am, in fact, impressed by your control, and how much you have learned in such little time.”

“Truly?” she asked, looking up at him, and seemed very young.

“Truly,” he confirmed. “You have done well. Now, switch with Pietro, and I will take a look at his head again.”

“There is nothing to see. It is all empty space,” she teased her brother. He rolled his eyes and heaved a sigh, as he slipped past to take her seat on the bench.

“I know,” Loki said with some sympathy. “Siblings are quite annoying.”

“I’m older, but she bosses me.” Pietro groused, glowering at her, but in a familiar way. She didn’t deny it, only smirked at him.

“At least she’s not the heir to the throne. Imagine how bossy she would be then,” Loki told him and held out both of his hands, palms upward. “Set your hands on mine. And focus your thoughts.”

Pietro joined hands with him and it took some doing to get him to focus, but finally he did, and Loki could delve his powers.

That block was still there. Loki could see Pietro’s power, shining like a small sun beneath the ice, but inaccessible. He tried everything he could short of blowing it up, but nothing seemed to touch it.

Loki opened his eyes. “Damn,” he muttered and shook his head. Pietro’s face was a thin mask over
disappointment, and Loki grimaced as he let go of Pietro’s hands. He knew all too well how the young man felt, being the underpowered sibling.

“You are strong, Pietro,” Loki told him. “I see the power within you. But I have no key to open the way. You may have to open it yourself.”

“What should I do?” Pietro asked.

“I don’t know,” Loki admitted. “I don’t know why there is a wall there at all.” It was natural and Pietro himself had made it, Loki knew that much. But why? “Perhaps something happened in Sokovia? Did Strucker do something or did you feel something that made you fear a power growing within? Or,” he thought to his own relationship with Thor and wondered, “Or did you feel something but you knew your sister already had and you wanted to be different?”

Pietro’s gaze flickered, and he said hurriedly, “No, there was nothing.” And he stood up, anxious to be done with the line of questioning.

Watching him, Loki saw only himself, and wanted to sigh. Was I so obvious? So pathetic in my need for validation?

He knew he had been, and so he wouldn’t press for now. Give the young man some time to work it out for himself.

The twins looked as if they needed a break, and Loki was tired. He forced a smile. “Shall we visit the monkeys? I enjoy their antics.”

Later, having said his farewells, Loki left the zoo and headed down the long escalator into the subway, to head back to his apartment.

Loki took a solo seat on the subway car, glad it wasn’t crowded so he could lean against the window and relax a little. Helping Wanda was a joy, no question; but trying to crack Pietro’s was bothering him, because he didn’t think it should be difficult. But that block seemed impervious, and Loki needed to figure out some new way to crack it.

He opened his eyes as the doors opened. Two girls sat in the seats in front of him, chatting animatedly, but he let it wash over him, paying little attention.

The doors shut, the train started to move, and the lights flickered, carriage turning dim. He tensed, pressing against the wall. The girls fell briefly silent, but went back to their talk as the lights came back.

The car abruptly came to a stop and the lights went out.

Everything went pitch black and silent. Loki’s heart and breath froze, everything inside him sent straight back to the lightless tube Schmidt had kept him in. The metal coffin they had electrified to keep him tamed except when they wanted something from him.

His heart leaped into pounding hard in his chest, and even though he could see the lights had come back on and he could hear the passengers behind him, they seemed far away, swallowed up by the dark.

Pressed against the wall, feeling the metal tube beneath his fingertips - no it was plastic of the seat, not back there -

There was no air, no breath, only a tiny dark space that was his prison and his torment.
... nonono, not there, not there, not back, not there again, nono...

The denials didn’t work at first. The darkness clung to him, and he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t get out, couldn’t make it stop.

The present slowly reasserted itself as he realized his eyes were open and there was light. His heart rate began to slow down, and he could finally hear his own harsh breathing and try to control it. He had wedged himself between the chair and the wall, he realized, but couldn’t relax his limbs.

Not wanting to close his eyes, he fixed his gaze on the advertisement on the back of the forward wall and forced himself to concentrate on it. Toothpaste. The woman’s photo showed shiny white teeth like a shark. Mint flavoring to disguise the flouride that killed bacteria. Mint was a plant with small green leaves and made good tea.

Finally he felt more normal, but exhausted, as he stirred. When the train stopped, he didn’t recognize the name and had to look at the map to figure out where he was. He’d missed his own stop and he was going to have to change trains and go back.

He had to hold onto the rail, while climbing the steps, moving like an old man.

I hate this. That bastard is dead. Why does he still have power over me? Why is this happening?

What is wrong with me?

tbc...
Loki fumbled at the lock, tempted to shove it open but deciding against it at the last minute, as the key finally got in the slot.

Pushing the door open, he saw Steve on the sofa watching baseball. He turned his head to greet Loki, “Hey, good eve-” A frown gathered as he watched Loki approach. “You okay? You look… a bit tired,” he finished diplomatically. “Was it rough with the Maximoffs?”

“No,” Loki shook his head. “It’s fine.”

Steve glanced at the digital clock. “You sure? You’re late.”

“I, uh, was on the subway, missed the stop and had to ride back, that’s all.” But too quickly, Loki realized he should’ve lied, not told a version of the truth, because Steve’s frown tightened and he stood up.

“You missed your stop?” Steve repeated. “Did something happen?”

“No, nothing happened,” Loki replied, a bit too tartly for trying to push away Steve’s concern. “I was tired from training Wanda and Pietro and I lost track. That’s all. You need not be concerned.” He turned for the door to his room. “I do need rest.”

“Oh, wait, this came for you. SHIELD agent dropped it off.” He picked up a large brown envelope, sealed, from the dining table and handed it to Loki.

“SHIELD? Why would they send me an envelope?” Loki slipped a finger under the flap. “Oh, I bet it’s money. I complained to Natasha about --” But his voice trailed off as he looked at the single sheet of paper.

It was not money. It was a note in Maria Hill’s own hand. “After some discreet inquiries, I have a suggestion for you. This doctor is not affiliated with SHIELD or the US government, except for some referrals. He is highly respected, and he consulted on the case of Doctor Banner, which Agent Romanoff can brief you on, so he is aware of some extraordinary events and people. I have made an appointment for you to meet him tomorrow.”

Loki’s fist clenched, crumpling the paper. No, he wouldn’t do this.

“Bad news?” Steve asked.

“Garbage,” Loki managed to say and threw the paper into the wastebasket. “I feel like a shower.”

In the bathroom, he rested his head against the tile and let the tepid water run over him until the tension eased from his shoulders. *It was a moment’s weakness. A moment, only. It means nothing.*

Outside the shower, a soft knock heralded Steve wanting something, so Loki conjured a t-shirt and trousers, and opened the door.

“Hey,” Steve said, and he was holding out the paper, crumpled but now smoothed out. “Why did
“Do you throw this away?”

Loki very nearly slammed the door in his face, jaw clenching. “Because it’s trash.”

“I thought you wanted—”

“I never wanted it,” Loki interrupted, irritated. “It’s a stupid waste of time. And I won’t subject myself to mortal quacks for their entertainment anymore.”

Steve glanced at the paper and back to Loki. If he’d been the least bit condescending, Loki would have slammed the door anyway, but there was only concern in Steve’s blue eyes. “Something happened today on the subway,” he said, voice level. “Maybe this doctor can help you with that.”

“He can’t.”

“You don’t know that,” Steve persisted. “Maybe he can. They’re doing amazing things in medicine today.” Loki knew that was true, even if they didn’t have the kind of healing that Asgard did. But that just made it more obvious this doctor could do nothing -- Asgard barely acknowledged problems of the mind, and certainly had nothing useful for healing them.

Steve ignored Loki’s resistance and offered, as if this was a negotiation, “You could meet him, see what he’s like? I can go with you?”

“I do not require a hand to hold. I am not a child,” Loki snarled.

“Of course not. But there’s nothing wrong with having a friend with you.”

“You should go yourself,” Loki snapped, knowing it wasn’t his best effort at a counter-attack. “Visit this doctor. Have him dig through all your feelings and resentments for awakening in this time.”

Steve didn’t fall for the provocation, answering calmly, “Maybe I will. If you like him, I could give it a try.” Steve smiled as Loki’s expression tightened with annoyance at having his bluff called, and he touched Loki’s hand. “You know I just want to get help for you, when it’s out of my league, Lukas. You’ve dealt with so much lately - not just the shit in the war, but recently. Someone to help you sort through it has to be better than nothing, doesn’t it?”

Loki turned away, muttering sullenly, “I can do it on my own.”

Steve kindly didn’t point out that he actually couldn’t, or he’d have done it already. “I’m sure you can, but you don’t have to. That’s the whole point of having friends, and,” he rattled the paper, “professionals to help.”

Hearing it again reminded him of Natasha telling him much the same when he’d reacted to nothing at Peggy Carter’s care place. He couldn’t say he didn’t need the help, because he wasn’t that much of an idiot. Not after today had thrown it at him, again, that there was something wrong with him.

He leaned against the door frame not looking at Steve, murmuring, “The train lost power and I was… back there. In the tube Schmidt electrified to keep me weak. It was decades ago, Steven, and it felt like it was still happening.”

Steve’s grip on his arm tightened, expression sympathetic. “Tomorrow, we’ll go together. Okay?”

Loki nodded his head once, feeling exhausted and defeated by his agreement. But foolish pride was no solution either. “Okay.”
Steve squeezed and let go. “You want some dinner?” He wasn’t surprised when Loki declined. Steve withdrew and said good night, and Loki closed the door again. He stood there for a time before letting his head rest against it. Making his mind blank, he inhaled slow breaths until he relaxed.

Loki nearly backed out three times on the doctor’s -- once in the morning, when he thought about slipping into another universe during his run with Steven, the second time when he considered taking the wrong train on purpose, and the third where he stopped on the pathway up to the faux Colonial-style low-rise building where the office was.

"You can do this," Steven told him.

"Of course, I can. The question is whether I wish to," Loki replied. "And the answer is very much 'no'."

"Do you want to go back to the apartment?" Steve asked, very patiently. Far more patiently than Loki wanted, since he’d rather provoke a fight. A nice brawl in the middle of the quiet side street might ease the tension inside him quite nicely.

But faced with a question he had to answer, Loki had to admit, "No. That seems like .... giving in. And I don't want to do that either."

Satisfied that Loki wasn’t really quitting, Steve's hand closed on Loki's shoulder. "Come on."

Loki walked up the steps to the wide front porch, straight to the door without hesitating. Inside there was an entry hall that went straight to the back since he could see daylight on the other side through the small window in the far door. He could walk right through...

The door on the left had a small sign on it "reception" and Loki put a hand on it. He paused there. "I can do this," he said to Steve. “You can go back."

Luckily Steve must have read something in his face that let him nod without argument. "All right. If you're sure?"

"Yes." He almost let the reception door shut when he yanked it open again. "Steven? Thank you."

Steve gave him one of his self-effacing smiles, but a bright one, and called, "No problem. See you at home, later. Call me if you need anything."

Loki waved and turned to face the reception area. To his surprise, he was alone in the room, except for the receptionist. She was an older woman sitting behind the small desk, with sharp dark eyes and a warm smile. "Mister Rendell?" she asked.

"Was it the devilishly handsome looks that gave it away?" he jested.

It fell somewhat flat, since her smile didn't change. "The doctor is just finishing up, if you'll be seated for a few minutes."

He didn't sit down; he couldn't, he could only prowl restlessly around the room, picking up magazines and looking at gossip and pictures of celebrities without interest, examining the books on the shelf to one side without noticing any title, and handling every small decorative, polished rock or shell before putting it back.

The receptionist was inured to patient behavior, since she said nothing, only kept an eye on him in
case he broke anything. Then Loki heard a door close elsewhere and some footsteps receding, and the receptionist said, "Mister Rendell, the doctor will see you now. Go through the door."

She gestured to the door to her right that led to the next room.

Swallowing hard, Loki made himself walk to the door, turn the knob, and push it open slowly.

Loki raised his eyebrows. He’d not expected the long green hair on his doctor. The man was fairly young as well.

“Doctor Leonard Samson,” he introduced himself, and held open the door for Loki to pass inside, before shutting it behind him.

“Luke Rendell,” Loki said, since that was the name the receptionist had, then added, “or Lukas Onsdag. The Ice Demon. That one you might know, too,” he threw it out there, to see how Samson would react.

The doctor merely nodded. “I know; they told me. Come in. Please have a seat.” He gestured to the living room-style arrangement of two padded chairs across from a sofa. Loki took one of the chairs.

Samson took the other chair without comment. “It’s only fair to tell you a bit about me, if you’re curious? My father was also a psychologist, he’s retired now. For a long time, I didn’t want to follow in his footsteps. But I soon realized in school that it was still my calling, in medical school I took a specialty in clinical psychiatry and did my residency at the Veteran’s Hospital in Virginia. The reason SHIELD probably suggested me to you was because I know Bruce Banner, the so-called Hulk, and so I have some familiarity with,” he hesitated before adding judiciously, “unusual clients.”

“And you have green hair,” Loki pointed out. “So you must be unusual yourself.” He expected to find out the hair color was merely dye, but it turned out not so simple.

“There was a malfunction while I was visiting Doctor Banner and some of the Gamma radiation leaked all over me. Bruce Banner turns huge and green, I merely have green hair and some extra strength. But it does give me a bit of perspective in dealing with, what’s the word they’re using? Metahuman”? And, I guess, non-humans?”

His voice rose in a question and Loki nodded. “Yes. I am not human. I was not born on this world.”

Samson accepted that as well. Loki wished he could be so calm.

Samson tapped his finger on the arm of his chair. “All right, given that, let me ask a basic question, do you have any concept of psychiatry? Treating mental health? Or, I guess, doctors at all?”

“I’ve lived on this world a total of more than a century, so I understand physicians.”

“But not psychology?” Samson persisted.

“I know what it is. It appears to be talk, as far as I can tell.”

“There is a lot of talking,” Samson agreed. “Talking about a problem weakens its hold, and can help patients into realizations of their own emotions and behaviors. But it’s not all talk. I usually give my patients a task to do between sessions. I call it homework.”

Loki’s chest felt tight, thinking about talking about anything. He crossed his legs one way, then the other way, before leaning forward. “You realize this is futile?” Loki asked him. “You are mortal and
therefore you can’t possibly understand what it is to be me.”

Samson barely reacted to that, lifting his brows, and asking, “If that’s true, why are you here?”

“Because doing nothing was not improving anything. So I thought I would take the suggestion of my friends, but now I think it may be a waste of my time and yours.”

“It’s not a waste of my time,” Samson told him. “SHIELD has paid for four sessions in advance. So, you might as well take advantage of it, and decide whether you want to continue after?”

Loki rested his gaze on the doctor’s desk and the teddy bear sitting there carrying a little ‘get well soon!’ balloon. “They’re paying you. Does that mean you report to them?” he asked.

“No,” Samson said. “I do not report anything back to them, not even that you’re here. Though I imagine they probably know that. But to reassure you, everything you say is in confidence and restricted by doctor-patient confidentiality and privacy law.”

Loki met his gaze. “And will not end up in a book you want to write?”

Samson gave a small nod of acknowledgment. “That is an issue in the profession. But if it helps you trust me, I have super-strength. If I wanted fame or fortune, that’s what I’d use, not writing a book about you. Or Bruce Banner, for that matter.”

The last of his objections taken care of, Loki knew he had to either leave, or accept that he was staying. He should leave; he should have nothing to do with mortals and their primitive knowledge of the functions of the mind, and lack of knowledge of anything outside of themselves. It was foolish to stay, like thinking a chimpanzee could do surgery.

But, on the other hand, leaving would keep him in the same place and what would it accomplish, besides a temporary sop to pride? He’d tried dealing on his own, and nothing seemed to be helping. If anything, yesterday seemed to prove he was handling everything worse.

“All right,” he said finally. “I suppose since it’s not my money. And I will stay because I believe you are intelligent enough not to reveal my secrets and make yourself into my enemy, which would be most unwise.”

“Do you feel it necessary to threaten me?”

Loki gave him an unfriendly smile. “I want you to understand I am not human, Doctor. And I have had enough of your kind turning on me. So I will begin with this promise: betray me and I will kill you.”

Samson didn’t react defensively or puff up in prideful challenge, which Loki was glad to see. Samson absorbed the promise, head tilted a bit as he considered, and responded with a mild, “Fair enough. Warning heard and understood.”

“Good.” Loki sat back in the chair, eased by the response. “I suppose I’ll allow this. What should I do?”

“Nothing. Relax as much as you can. What I need from you is honesty.”

Loki snorted. “Honesty? You have no idea who I am.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Samson insisted. “If you’re honest with me, it’ll be easier to help you. It’ll be hard, I know that - deflection and pretence and outright lies are common, especially when we get close to
the core of the problem. But this is a safe place to be honest; I’m not going to judge you. I’m not here to make some moral or ethical valuation of what you tell me. I’m only here to help you. Okay? Heard and understood?” he prompted.

Loki wondered if that could possibly be true. How could any listener not judge? But he understood the gesture at least. He nodded. “Yes. I understand.”

“All right then,” Samson said and leaned back in his chair. “Why don’t you tell me about why you’re here?”

Such a deceptively simple question. Loki gave a brief laugh. “I don’t know where to begin. And don’t say ‘the beginning’. You won’t live long enough for that particular tale.”

“You said ‘doing nothing wasn’t improving anything.’ So how about you describe what’s happening that you want to improve?”

Loki’s gaze settled on the little bear. “I... “ he started, and trailed off, not knowing what words to use to describe something that seemed so huge and so heavy, yet trying to grab onto it revealed it was only smoke. Samson didn’t prompt him. “I’m fine,” he said finally, wanting to establish that much at least. “I can do everything I need to do. But... yesterday, on the subway, the lights went out. I missed my stop, because I forgot where I was.” He huffed a laugh. “Which sounds stupid, I know.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Samson said mildly. “But what do you mean? You ‘forgot where you were’?”

Loki shook his head. “I was somewhere else.” He flicked his gaze up to check Samson’s face. There was a narrow frown between his brows.

“Where were you instead, if not the train?” Samson asked.

*Inside my tiny prison, constantly electrocuted, pain and darkness my only companion.*

He opened his mouth to say that, but all that came out was, “Nowhere. Darkness.”

"Had you been there before?" Samson asked.

A sharp impatience hurtled through him. "You know who I am, you know the whole story. Did you watch the movie? I bet you watched it."

Samson shook his head once, his expression remaining calm at Loki’s hostility. "I don't know your story. I need to hear it from you, and you need to tell it."

Loki insisted, "Have you seen it? Or read Barnes' book about me? I want to know what you already know."

Samson leaned back in his high-backed padded chair, and apparently decided Loki needed the answer. "When SHIELD asked me if I would treat you, I read the Barnes book. I didn't see the film. So yes, I know some of your history, but very little was about you as a person, and that's who I'd like to help. And I can only do that, if you tell me, yourself."

Loki gave a hollow laugh. "I was rather hoping to skip over some of the basics."

"Just tell me about yesterday," Samson suggested. "Start again. What happened?"

“I was on the subway and the lights flickered out. Then I didn’t know where I was. Because I thought … I was back there. … and… and... “ He had to stop there, words failing, and inhale a
ragged breath. When that didn’t help much, he got to his feet with a convulsive movement. Walking to the bookshelf, he stared at the spines of the books, nothing about the letters making any sense until he shut his eyes and reopened them again, finding his focus. “Why is it so bad this time?” he asked, turning to ask the only question that really mattered. “Before, I went decades hardly aware anything had happened. I didn’t react like this, I was able to keep up the masquerade, but I just ... I can’t this time. It’s as if I feel it lurking, all the time, waiting. Why is this happening?”

He spread his hands, waiting, as Samson considered his question, before saying, “Right now, I don’t know the answer. I can guess, but that’s all it would be. But if we work on it, we’ll find the answer. And, I believe, we can ease its hold on you. Do you want that?”

He didn’t answer immediately, turning the question over in his mind. Did he want that? Of course he did. Did he believe this doctor could do it? Maybe. Did he want the doctor to try? Loki dampened his lips and finally said, “Yes.” It felt like a commitment, but one Loki felt better for having made. He wanted it, and perhaps with this mortal, he might get it.

Steve was cutting sweet potatoes when the front door of the apartment opened. A few steps later, Lukas came into view. When Lukas hadn’t wanted him to wait at Samson’s, Steve had decided to go back to the apartment and make something warm and comforting for dinner, even while realizing Lukas’ idea of ‘comfort food’ was probably nothing like Steve’s. Something homemade had to still be welcome, he figured.

Lukas looked tired, but not as thrashed as he had the day before, so Steve took that to be a good sign.

He saw Steve in the small kitchen and found a faint smile. “Are you cooking? You don’t need to do that.”

“It’s my mother’s recipe. I saw the potatoes at the grocery and wanted to see if I remembered what she did. The answer is: sort of.” He waved to the mess on the counter. “How did it go with Doctor Samson?”

Lukas shrugged and didn’t really answer. “His hair is a lovely shade of green. It seems there was an accident while he was with the Hulk, and Samson was exposed. He has super strength, too. We should have him over and join our club.”

Steve smacked his hand, which was sneaking in to steal a slice of the sweet potato. “Stop that. But that’s interesting he has powers. As I understand from Fury, the Hulk himself was created out of an attempt to replicate the serum, and it had, as he said, ‘unfortunate consequences’. He shook his head. Professor Erskine had meant well, but chasing the serum had ended up so badly for so many people.

He responded to Lukas’ light jest, “But anyway, no, I think being social with your doctor isn’t a good idea.”

“He’s not your doctor,” Lukas protested.

“No, but he’s yours and you should keep that trust with him. I’m sure I’ll meet him eventually. Could you get the butter from the fridge?” After Lukas handed it to him, Steve waved him to the living area. “Go relax. I’ve got this. Dinner’ll be about an hour.”

Lukas grabbed a beer and plopped down on the couch in front of the TV. He didn’t change the channel from the history program that was on, but paid it no attention either. Lukas had little interest in the history he’d missed, calling it more of the same.
Steve couldn’t manage the same attitude, though he’d tried. He felt that gap as a lack that he wanted to fill, even though he also felt like it was a futile thing to do. He’d missed so much he’d never ‘catch up’, but not catching up at all didn’t feel right either.

When Steve looked again, Lukas had his head back against the top of the couch, longish black hair spread across the beige cushion like a dark halo and his eyes were closed, though Steve doubted he was sleeping. But still it made Steve try to be quieter as he opened the oven and put the dish in.

But it didn’t matter much, because only thirty minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Steve went to answer, checking through the peephole warily. They’d been back only a few days, and he was still concerned the media might have located them.

But it was Natasha standing there. She had a key and could probably enter in less than thirty seconds without it, but she knew they were home, so she was polite. He opened the door. “Hey, good evening, Natasha. Come in.”

She sniffed. “Something smells good.”

“Half an hour, there’ll be plenty for all,” he offered and held the door for her.

She entered, shedding her short black jacket onto the coat rack before heading into the living area.

Lukas turned his head to smile at her. “Natalya. I wasn’t sure you would be coming over.”

Settling herself on the opposite chair, she curled up with her feet beneath her. “I wanted to see how it went with Doctor Samson.”

“Fine. I can see why Maria thought he would be acceptable to me.”

“And is he?” Natasha asked. “You’ll see him again?”

“I understand SHIELD already paid for three more sessions, so I might as well.”

She quirked a small smile, not buying his resignation. “Perhaps by then you’ll want to continue.”

“Well, perhaps by then Fury will begin paying me a salary,” Lukas returned. “Not that I don’t appreciate being kept in style,” he waved a hand around the apartment, “but if I am to be on call for him, I should be compensated, I think.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “We’ll talk to Coulson or Hill about that. I thought they were setting something up for both of you.”

“I think I shall get a channel on the YouTube and be less dependent on SHIELD’s generosity, as Laura suggested,” Lukas added, meditatively, fingers twirling the beer bottle on the surface of the end table. “I can tell stories of my time on this world centuries past and with the Howling Commandos. You should join me, Steven. We’ll be rich.” He lifted his hands as if to indicate a Broadway show marquee and announced, “Tales of the Real Ice Demon.”

Steve chuckled and shook his head. But before he could say anything, Natasha’s phone chirped.

She frowned as if the call was unexpected and slipped the phone out of her pants’ pocket. “Sharon,” she told the others, then answered, “Romanoff.”

Whatever Sharon told her on the other end was enough to make Natasha’s expression turn somber. After she hung up, she said briefly, “Sharon found something we need to look at.” Standing, she
took the laptop off the dining room table, and while she had her back momentarily to Lukas, she glanced at Steve and flicked her eyes deliberately, back toward Lukas.

Steve got the message and moved closer. This was bad news.

“What is it?” Lukas asked.

She turned the screen to face him. “She was looking at files that Sitwell accessed, trying to find connections to Hydra, and she ran across someone we didn’t know existed. It turns out, Wolfgang Von Strucker had a son.”

Lukas thumped back in his seat, eyes blanking until he blinked himself through the slip into memory. He dug his fingers into his thigh and it was with apparent effort that his voice was level as he asked, “Alive, I presume.”

“Yes,” she answered with a nod. “He uses the alias of Alexander Braun, but his real name is Werner.”

Lukas stood up and headed straight for the balcony door, staring out at the little courtyard behind their walk-up apartment.

Natasha exchanged a glance with Steve, before adding, “He entered Sokovia, presumably because he heard his father died, but left again a few days later.” She read the material on the screen. “Ah, Alexander Braun passed through Nice, on his way back to Monaco where his yacht is docked. Looks like he mostly spends his family’s money, living a rich kid lifestyle of shopping, yachts, parties, and drugs.”

Lukas seemed not to have heard her when he demanded, “How did you not know Strucker had a son?”

She didn’t flinch at the accusatory tone, keeping her cool. “He didn’t mention it when I met him a few years ago. But the real question is how SHIELD didn’t know. Because I sure as hell don’t recall reading anything about a son in his file on the way to find you.” She read further, clicking through the report on the screen. “Oh, well done, Sharon,” she murmured and glanced at Steve. “Sharon found Sitwell accessed Strucker’s file last year and altered it, to remove the connection to Werner von Strucker. So Werner’s file was still in there, but it didn’t connect to his father anymore.”

“Last year?” Lukas questioned. “But that was before... “ He trailed off and shook his head. “So his cover up of Strucker’s activities began earlier than anything to do with me.”

“Right. I would guess altering the records came at Strucker’s request,” Natasha said and leaned back in her chair, tapping the desk with one finger. “SHIELD needs to investigate. If Strucker Junior is just a rich boy, we don’t care, but if he’s part of Hydra, we should find out, and trace his contacts. I’ll speak with Maria, probably Fury too, and get a mission put together.”

“I’ll go with you,” Lukas volunteered immediately, and folded his arms when both Natasha and Steve looked at him.

“Are you sure?” Steve asked. It sounded like a spectacularly bad idea, actually, and he didn’t think Lukas was ready.

“You don’t have to put yourself through seeing him,” Natasha added. “I can take care of him.”

“With me,” Steve interjected, firmly. “We can do this, Natasha. And you,” he told Lukas, “can stay here with the Maximoffs and Doctor Samson.”
“No,” Lukas insisted. “I want to do it. Yes, it’s a reminder of things I don’t want to remember, but I was denied the opportunity to strike at Hydra. I will not forego the chance this time.”

“All right,” she agreed, with some reluctance, “if you’re sure you’re okay with it.”

He met Natasha’s eyes. “Yes. I am more than okay.”

“If you start feeling not okay, tell us, all right?” Steve insisted. “Natasha and I can handle it and there’s no need to make yourself sick over this punk.” He pointed his chin at the photograph on the screen.

He gave a tight smile. “The only one who will feel ill will be him.”

Natasha gave an approving nod and turned back to the report. “Young Werner has bodyguards, but only two. We infiltrate his circle, take him, and interrogate him. It’s a good mission to get you guys up to speed on the more covert side of SHIELD.”

Steve grimaced. “I’m a soldier, not a spy.”

Natasha shrugged. “There’s not a lot of open warfare, Rogers, not these days. It’s all spywork in the dark.” She glanced at Loki. “I assume you have no objection?”

He leaned back against the wall, smirking, “To spying? Why, Natalya, it’s as if you don’t know my talents at all.”

“Well, not all of them,” she retorted archly and stood up. “I need to talk to HQ about this and get us assigned. I don’t want this to go to any assets we have over there.”

“All right, if you need me to throw my weight around, let me know,” Steve offered with a wry grin. He didn’t especially like having a reputation that got him awed attention, but he couldn’t deny its usefulness.

“Well, not all of them,” she retorted archly and stood up. “I need to talk to HQ about this and get us assigned. I don’t want this to go to any assets we have over there.”

“Will do. And Lukas, get some rest,” she advised, before slipping out the door.

Lukas left his spot holding up the wall and returned to the couch. He flopped down, letting out a long breath.

“Are you really okay with this?” Steve asked quietly. “It’s been a rough few days.”

“I prefer doing something than doing nothing.”

“I get that.” Steve nodded. He didn’t want to prevent Lukas from going, even if he thought it was too soon. Lukas would want the Strucker kid dead, Steve was no fool about his need for vengeance, not after what had happened such a short time ago. But it wasn’t the kid’s fault, and while Steve wanted to know about Hydra, he didn’t want to punish the young man if he were truly innocent. Hopefully he could persuade both Lukas and Natasha to do the right thing.

(tbc...)

Chapter End Notes
I realized a bit too late that Samson is actually canon to the MCU (appearing briefly in the Hulk movie) but since nobody watches that anyway I like hottie, long green-haired Samson from the comics, that's who you get. Sorry if this confuses anyone.
They landed in Nice and, from a SHIELD safehouse there, acquired a car, appropriate clothes and luggage.

She was back in Monaco as Natalie Rushman, assistant to Tony Stark, since too many people might recognize a name change and waving the Stark name around in Monaco, even if Tony had no idea she was doing it, got her the best service.

No one looked twice at the bodyguards or the personal assistant, and Natasha could play her role in her sleep.

She didn’t sleep, of course, keeping an eye out. The town was still under tighter security after the events of the race and the attack on Stark which had happened right before Loki had shown up in Arendelle.

Steve acted as driver and bodyguard, because he was worried about attention now that Captain America was in the tabloids. Lukas shared some of his concern, but he also understood that they needed bait for Braun. As she expected, he slipped into the role of pampered aristocrat like a duck to water, climbing out of the car at the Monte Carlo portico with a pause to allow admiration of his perfectly fitted charcoal Gucci suit hugging his body. Some photos were snapped, but the photographers appeared to be waiting for someone and when he was unknown to them, they lost interest.

Lukas noticed and gave a wry twist of his lips as he offered his arm to her, "I know it's for the best, but I feel a bit offended."

As she accepted with a smile, she comforted, teasing, "You'll be known soon enough."

At reception, as they were offered champagne, she said to the clerk, “Someone called ahead for us. Natalie Rushman, assistant to Mister Stark.” Of course, SHIELD had arranged it, not Tony, but they weren’t going to know that.

She leaned closer to the clerk and glanced at Lukas who had taken his champagne and wandered away with Steve to look for Strucker Junior. “Mister Rendell is a potential client. Mister Stark would appreciate your good care very much.”

“Of course, mademoiselle. If you have his passport, I would be pleased to fill out the card for you.” Her eyes went to Steve, standing near Lukas. “And the other gentleman?”

Natasha’s gaze followed after and she let her lips curl upward. “Mister Rendell’s bodyguard.” Steve was built like a bodyguard and his suit was off-the-rack of an employee, but he was standing much too close to Lukas and with too much attention on his client for a real bodyguard, which anyone knowledgeable would recognize. She’d told him to be a bodyguard, which Steve was trying to be,
but his inexperience showed and she’d decided to play into it, instead of trying to teach him in the drive over.

The clerk nodded, and knew exactly what Natasha wasn’t saying. “Of course. If you should require another room, I would be happy to assist you in that, Mademoiselle.”

“I have accommodations, thank you.” The two-bedroom suite could easily sleep four, but she bet Lukas wouldn’t sleep at all. “But I have a question.” Natasha handed over the Luke Rendell passport and some gratuity. “Mister Rendell heard an old friend from boarding school may be in town. Alexander Braun. Is he a guest here?”

“Oh, Mademoiselle, I cannot say. All guests are confidential,” the clerk protested aloud, while very clearly writing on a notecard.

“Of course,” Natasha said and waited as the clerk finished checking in, and then handed a hotel-emblazoned poker chip over to Natasha. “For Mister Rendell, in the hopes that he enjoys his stay.”

She glanced at it, finding the notecard and a casino chit. It was generous enough she smiled at the clerk, “I’ll be sure to mention to Mister Stark that the Royale’s hospitality is excellent as always.”

Heading back to the men, she set her champagne down, barely tasted, and called, waving the room key, “Mister Rendell, we’re ready. If you’ll follow me?”

They followed, and she kept up a careful stream of chit-chat in front of hotel employees, remaining to Lukas’ left, so that he and Steve were pushed close in the elevator, as the operator took them to the third floor. She’d dropped the insinuation that they were together, and now she wanted some gossip to confirm that. Lover would get less interest and preparation from Braun’s bodyguards.

Finally in their room, she shut the door and locked it. Both men waited for her and when Steve opened his mouth, she lifted a hand. “Search it, first,” she told them. “Too many people want to know too many things in this hotel.”

“Search for what?” Steve asked.

“I presume Natalya worries for listening devices. She knows I can detect them,” Lukas said and moved to the middle of the foyer, raising both hands and briefly looking concerned, as he focused on what she couldn’t see. “Nothing in here. One moment.” He stalked through the suite slowly. “This is lovely, Natalya. It has been quite some time since I was here and it has improved remarkably.”

“You weren’t here with me, so,” Steve said and paused to state more carefully, “before that?”

“During my wild youthful travels,” Lukas agreed with a soft laugh. “Ah, see, they think they’re clever, putting it inside, but so easy to disrupt circuitry.” He waved a hand over the lamp. “There, that was the—” He cut himself off and flicked his eyes at the post of the bed. “Oh, now that is distasteful.” He reached up, his height letting him pluck a small round camera off the bed curtain rail, hidden from casual view by the curtains. “Someone either enjoys watching, or this is meant to blackmail the careless.” He displayed it in his palm before folding his fingers into a fist, and crushing it inside.

“Search for what?” Steve asked in dismay. “That’s… tacky.”

“And the least of our worries now that you destroyed it,” Natasha intervened. “At least I think it is. Here.” She handed the chip to Lukas. “The casino gives you this. Alexander Braun plays the tables every night according to the desk clerk, though he doesn’t have a room here.”
“He stays on his yacht. We should check it out,” Steve suggested.

“You should do that,” Lukas nodded. He played with the chip between his fingers, making it dance across his knuckles without much attention. “I think I should go play.”

“No,” she disagreed. “Steve should go scout the casino and if he’s there, we go in.”

“And if he recognizes you?” Steve asked.

“Then we will know for certain he is Hydra, will we not?” Lukas returned. “He will run, we give chase, and ask him questions.” He toyed with the casino chip between his fingers. “And if he does not recognize us immediately…. This would make for excellent seed money.”

“No. Down, boy. We’re not here to gamble,” Natasha corrected.

“You may not be. But if Werner is here to gamble, then so am I.”

“If they catch you cheating, this is for nothing,” Natasha warned. “And they’re a lot more sophisticated than they were two hundred years ago.”

He stepped back, hand over his chest as if she’d wounded him. “So little faith in the Trickster God, Natalya. I am not caught unless I choose to be, I assure you. Trust me. Piece of pie.”

“Cake,” she corrected with a sigh. “Piece of cake.”

Steve turned around and pinned Lukas with his eyes. “I told you the right phrase. I know I did.”

Lukas shrugged. “How do you expect me to remember the proper idiom when it makes no sense?”

Lukas demanded, but she didn’t buy it for one second. He didn’t forget anything.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Funny. Now can we get to the plan?”

Steve wandered the casino, trying not to gawk at the ostentatious amount of money on display and knowing he had failed when sultry women kept coming onto him, as if he was a farmboy from Kansas. But good Lord, this place was ridiculous.

Holding his beer a little too tightly and reminding himself that he was an Army Captain and he’d fought in a war these children could barely comprehend, he moved table to table, checking the young men to see whether Werner Strucker was playing yet.

Steve had made a near complete circuit, when Werner and two young male friends entered, laughing and already having had some drink obviously. Steve checked that it was him, sure it was when one of the others called him Sasha, and pulled out his phone to call Natasha’s phone.

“He just walked in,” he reported when she answered, and turned away from Braun’s group. “Two bodyguards I think. They don’t act like friends.”

Lukas’ voice came over the line, “Ah, excellent. Natalya and I will join you.”

A few minutes later, they strolled in, belonging in this crowd. Natasha had changed to a short clingy white sleeveless dress and high stilettos that she walked on with a ballerina’s grace, while Lukas wore the same suit as before, effortlessly stylish. They were both so beautiful, framed by the ornate wallpaper and columns, that Steve wanted to take a photo to paint later.

Lukas’ gaze found Steve at once and beckoned him to join them, while Natasha’s eyes seemed to
pass over Braun, who was seated facing away from the entrance at the blackjack table, but he was pretty sure she recognized him.

“That dress looks amazing on you,” he murmured to Natasha, bending to kiss her cheek and lowered his voice to confirm, “Blackjack.”

“Did you want to play or go to the bar?” she asked Lukas. “I see blackjack, if you’d like a hand or two. I heard you like that.”

“I do, very much, Natalya. Show us the way.”

Steve planted himself a few steps back from Braun, while Lukas slid into the seat vacated at the end of Braun’s table. He flipped the hotel’s chip at the dealer, and got back a small stack to join. For a man who affected such a reckless mien, he played cautiously and as near as Steve could tell, he didn’t cheat, but through careful play, started to gather a bit of a profit.

The cocktail waitress brought him champagne on the house, which he accepted with outward gratitude and a bit of a smirk when she’d left. At first, Steve didn’t get it, but realized when Lukas deliberately left it untouched despite the fact that he’d get little impact from it, that he was playing the role.

Neither he nor Braun paid any attention to each other at first, but when the last of the players between them lost his last chip and walked away, Braun looked aside and saw Lukas.

Steve tensed, ready to pursue if Braun recognized Lukas or Natasha standing there, not ten feet away, but apparently he’d never seen a photo of either of them, or at least out of context, he didn’t recognize them. His expression instead looked interested at Natasha, who smiled politely back at him. Lukas didn’t even look at him until he raked his winnings and restacked them.

Despite how much Steve knew Lukas hated Strucker, there was none of it in his face as he gave a bright grin and a nod at Braun’s stack of chips. “I hope your luck rubs off on me.”

And just like that, Braun was hooked. He scooted to the vacated stool next to Lukas. “So nice to see more young people. Alexander Braun.” He held out his hand.

Lukas hesitated to take it, jaw muscle twitching, and Natasha manuevered her way into the gap, taking his hand. “Natalie Rushman. I’m surprised to see you still here, since I remember seeing your name during the race. I work for Stark Enterprises.”

Braun froze at that. “Stark? As in Tony Stark?” he asked, eyes flickering warily. “Iron Man?”

Natasha laughed. “Yes, yes, of course. He plays his little superhero game,” she waved her hand in light dismissal, “and we do the work. I am here to woo Mister Rendell to be a client of Stark Financial.”

“So you know Stark?” Braun asked.

“I was his assistant, until I moved to my own department,” she answered smoothly. “He appreciates women who don’t sleep with him.”

Braun chuckled, a bit strained. “Ah, then you must woo me, too. Financially, I mean,” he flirted. “I have some investments I recently came to possess, that I need someone to manage.”

“Well, then, I’d be happy to talk,” Natasha leaned toward him, supple and graceful, and Braun couldn’t look away.
Lukas flipped his card and announced, “21! I win!”

He’d put a bigger bet on that hand and as the dealer counted his winnings, he stretched. “Perhaps I should cash in before my luck turns.”

“Finished so soon?” Braun asked in disbelief. “I have only started. But perhaps you do not risk much?”

Lukas let out a laugh. “Not of my father’s money, friend. I have no money tree, alas.”

“What does he do?” Braun asked.

Lukas shrugged. “Oil. Paper mill. Shipping. Random things, I don’t keep track. I have a brother for that.”

“Alexander.” Braun held out his hand and Lukas took it.


“Luke, could I offer you both dinner and drinks at my yacht?” Braun asked eagerly. “I would like to hear about Stark Financial, and I want to meet more younger people here. My friends are mostly gone for the season.”

“We’d love to,” Natasha answered.

And just like that, they had their invitation. After some exchanging of numbers and directions, Lukas took his chips, changed them, and they walked out of the casino, a bit richer than they’d walked in.

“Well, that was easy,” Steve murmured in the lobby.

“Of course it was. He’s going to try something,” Natasha said. “He didn’t recognize you or Lukas, but he definitely knew Iron Man was involved in his father’s death.”

“Good,” Lukas declared and smirked. “Let him try. I could use the amusement.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Let’s not take him lightly. We know he’s connected.”

The smile fell from Lukas’ face and his eyes went cold, glancing back toward the casino. “I take nothing lightly, Steven. HYDRA least of all.”

tbc...
Chapter 4

Steve climbed out of the taxi’s front passenger seat and opened the back door. Lukas paid the driver, got out, and turned back to hold out a hand for Natasha, while Steve looked around as the bodyguard.

As soon as the taxi was gone, Natasha murmured, “Two guards on the pier.”

“And Braun,” Steve said. Braun was easy to pick out in the pale linen suit. “He’s seen us.”

Natasha turned her head so her wide smile would be visible. “Then let’s go.”

“Do make sure you put yourselves behind me if there’s gunfire,” Lukas said in a conversational tone, as they headed down the long pier toward where the Braun yacht was moored. “I know you’re brave and strong, Natalya, but do not risk yourself unnecessarily.”

“You can be my shield,” she told him, not quite so sure she would do it. She remembered him very definitely not bulletproof, and she’d hate to depend on something that proved to be false. “Don’t drink anything he offers us, I presume it’ll all be drugged.” She was amused as Lukas and Steve exchanged a glance at that, as if the thought hadn’t occurred to them. For someone as justifiably paranoid as Lukas was, he was still not paranoid enough.

Their footsteps echoed on the hollow wood of the pier, down toward Braun’s yacht. “Bon jour, friends!” Braun called, waving from the deck.

The bodyguards stepped in the way. “We need to search for weapons,” one said bluntly.

Natasha handed her small bag to one of them and held up both hands. In her halter top and chiffon pants, there wasn’t much left to the imagination and they didn’t bother touching her. They looked perfunctorily into her bag, noting the phone, wallet, and her lipstick. They did not open the lipstick, which was actually a USB stick with a trojan on it to send all of Braun’s intel to SHIELD, or realize her gold bracelet was actually a version of her Widow’s Bite.

They patted Lukas down under the arms and were a little more thorough with Steve, still finding nothing, of course.

“They’re clean, sir,” one called to Braun in Sokovian.

“Please, come up,” Braun called to them, waving. “Welcome aboard.”

Lukas hesitated at the foot, not stepping on the ramp. “This is not very friendly,” he accused. “Pat downs? Really?”

Braun came down. “I am so sorry. They’re very protective after my father—well, he died recently.”

He looked at her as he said it, but she made sure to turn down her mouth in an expression of surprised sympathy. *Oh I know all about it, kid, but you’re not going to know it from me, right now.*

She didn’t know how Lukas managed to not make his voice sarcastic as he said, “My condolences.”

“We were not very close, but still, family,” Braun said and extended his hand toward Lukas. “Anyway, that is not important,” he added with false cheer. “Come aboard, friends.”

On the deck, he waved a hand. “Please, make yourselves at home. I have a great bar in the aft. And
my lads would be happy to entertain your… bodyguard? .. while we talk business. There is another bar and Starkbox and the galley, of course…”

Ah, trying to separate Steve as the bodyguard.

Steve knew it, too, but instead of protesting, he looked to Lukas. “With your permission?”

Lukas hesitated as if he wanted to refuse, but forced a smile. “Certainly. There’s no sense in your being bored.” Steve followed the other bodyguards toward an accessway that went below.

“Excellent, then come this way,” Braun gestured her and Lukas through a covered plush seating area and then back outside to where a wet bar had been built at the back of the horseshoe-shaped seating area.

“Champagne?” he invited. “I have a brilliant Cristal ’92 to share with you.” He poured from the open bottle into two ready flutes which he handed to Natasha first and then Lukas, before picking up a third glass that had already been poured.

“To new friends.”

“And new clients,” she returned with a bright smile, as she lifted her glass in the toast the yacht rocked abruptly.

Braun started and then offered a smile. “Sounds like someone might have slipped down the steps.” He called out if everything was alright in Sokovian, but didn’t wait for an answer. “No problem.”

Lukas exchanged a glance with her, expression tensing, since that was probably Steve fighting the other guards. She smiled back to reassure him. Steve could take care of himself, especially in the narrow confines of a lower deck corridor.

She turned back to Braun, tossing her hair back to let him have an unobstructed view down her neck, bare shoulders, and plunging neckline. “So? I have the pitch, if you’d like to hear it?”

“Ah, we don’t need business right away, do we?” Braun asked. He lifted his glass again and sipped his champagne. “Come, friends. 1992 Cristal, you must taste it.”

Natasha worried the glass itself was drugged - that was an old trick to dust the rim so even a pretense of drinking would infect the target - but Braun seemed too young and dumb to think of that. He’d probably drugged the expensive champagne instead, so she pretended to sip, touching none of the liquid.

Then to her alarm she saw Lukas sip at it and frown. “I think you were swindled, Alexander. That tastes like carbonated goat piss.”

Braun watched, and couldn’t resist a gloating smile. “Cristal is a bit overrated, I find.”

Lukas set it aside. “Might I have gin and tonic? That will wash this taste out of my mouth.”

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“Of course,” Alexander said but made no effort to move toward the bar, while watching both Nat and Lukas for signs they were drugged.

A heavier tread along darkened lounge brought another smile to Braun’s face and he greeted, “Michel, have you taken care of--”

But his voice died away as Steve strolled outside with a faint smile on his lips. “Your hospitality is
terrible,” he told Braun.

“But--” Braun retreated from him. “But you--”

“Were they trying to kill me or just get me out of the way?” Steve asked. “I put them down before they got very far, but I’m curious.”

“Just -- just to get you out of the way,” Braun stammered.

A sharp cracking noise drew all their eyes and Lukas crushed the crystal goblet in his hand and let the shards fall to the deck. He held up his hand, turning it to display his unmarked palm. “Now we’re going to have a chat.”

Braun’s eyes went wide and darted around. “Who-- who are you? What do you want?”

Lukas sauntered up to him. “You poor ignorant boy,” he murmured, “you still don’t know who I am, do you?”

Braun shook his head, dampening his lips with his tongue. “I don’t know anything. If you want to know about my father, he didn’t tell me anything. He wouldn’t. I tried to get him to tell me, let me help him, but he refused. I didn’t know much at all about the business. If you have a-- a problem, I can’t help you.”

Lukas cocked his head. “Really? I think you can.” His hand grabbed Braun by the throat and lifted him off the deck with no visible effort. “Hydra. Tell me about Hydra, Werner Strucker.”

Braun tugged at the hand at his throat, choking for air. “Hydra? I don’t... “

Lukas smiled at him. “Really? Why does everyone in Hydra think they can lie to me? It’s quite tiresome.” He hurled Braun to the deck, where he slid along the surface a little ways before crumpling against the shiny metal railing.

Lukas snapped out his hand, a dagger appearing in it, though she knew there hadn’t been one on his person.

“Now then, Werner,” he crouched down before the younger man, “we’re going to discuss Hydra. Your father was one of them, we know that, so don’t pretend otherwise. I get very impatient.”

“Lukas,” Steve warned.

Lukas didn’t look away. “Steven, I am in the middle of an interrogation.”

“Put the knife away,” Steve said, and it was not a suggestion. Natasha tensed, waiting to see what Lukas would answer, while wishing Steve had let this play out a little longer before intervening.

The hand holding the hilt tightened. “You know what this child’s father did.”

“His father. Not him,” Steve reminded him. “We’re here for information, not vengeance.”

“Maybe you are, I am not,” Lukas snarled back, but despite his words, he eased back on his heels, giving Braun some space. “Well, aren’t you fortunate my friend is here.” He stood up and the dagger vanished again, as if it had never been there. Braun blinked in astonishment at the trick.

“Who are you?” Braun asked, voice shaking.

Lukas looked down on him. “Your worst nightmare if you don’t tell my friends what they want to
“Know.” He looked to Natasha. “All yours.”

He went to the wet bar and found a sealed bottle of cognac to crack open and pour in a fresh glass as if he had no other concerns.

Her turn now, Natasha beckoned. “Stand up, Mister Strucker. We can do this more easily.” He slowly climbed to his feet, eyeing Lukas more than her. Which was fine. Sometimes she was the unhinged violent interrogator, and sometimes she was the sweet understanding one. Of course, in this scenario Steve was the sweet understanding one, so she would have to triangulate between the two of them.

“Now, why don’t you tell us what you know about Hydra?” she asked. “That would be the simplest thing to do.”

“I don’t know anything,” he protested. “Father was part of it, I do know that. That’s all. I swear.”

“Lies,” Lukas said, without turning from the bar. “I can feel you lying from here, Werner.”

Braun licked his lips. “Okay, okay, I asked him if I could join. But he said no, pushed me away like he always did,” he added bitterly.

That got Lukas turn around, poisonous fury etched on his face. “A leader of Hydra refused his own son the honor of joining it? I don’t believe you.”

She shot him a glare to let her work and faced Braun again. “So tell us what you know of your father’s business.”

“Nothing,” Braun said with an uneasy, guilty glance toward Lukas before adding sullenly, “He wouldn’t tell me.”

“Not even the weapons dealing?” she asked.

“No, of course not. Nothing illegal.”

She almost rolled her eyes at that one. “We’re not the police.”

“Do you even work for Stark?” he asked her, and she smiled.

“No. My employers are far more dangerous.”

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lukas suddenly shift his posture and his head snapped around to look past her to the water. That gave her just enough warning before Lukas grabbed her around the waist and yanked her away from Braun. She didn’t resist, moving with his arm, as they jumped back. “Steven, down!” Lukas called.

She kept her balance as the yacht deck lurched under her feet. Then before her eyes, the shiny railing that lined the prow bent and flexed, before it tore free of its posts with a ear-splitting screech. The metal rail wrapped around Braun like a lasso, encircling his arms and chest.

“What are you doing?” she demanded of Lukas, but he had his hands up defensively.

Braun’s eyes widened in sheer terror. “Help me!” he called to them. Even if she’d been willing, there was nothing she could do as Braun was yanked, as if pulled by a long string, straight off the deck. He was screaming, as he was held there, hovering above the water.

She rushed to the edge to where the railing had been torn away, Lukas at her side, to see as Braun
was pulled through the air toward a sleek, red speedboat twenty feet away in the water.

A man stood alone in the boat, dressed in a cream linen suit and a panama hat. He had a hand out, somehow invisibly controlling Braun in mid-air. The attacker dropped Braun into his boat, hard enough he stopped screaming, and then gave a mocking little wave to the three of them gaping.

“No!” Steve yelled and dove over the side.

The attacker saw that but didn’t look alarmed, as the boat’s engine revved up on its own and the boat sped away. Steve did his best, swimming hard after it, but the boat was much too fast and was soon beyond the breakwater and out to sea.

She turned on Lukas, frustrated. “What the hell? I thought your whole reason for being here was to help us stop powered threats!”

Lukas didn’t look at her, still watching after the boat. “He’s magnificent,” he whispered.

“What? Lukas, he attacked and kidnapped Strucker! Right out from under us!”

Lukas looked at her, brows up, completely unperturbed. “I’ll shed no tears for someone who wanted to be a part of Hydra, Natalya. Nor do I care what the Maximoffs’ father does to him.”

That halted her in her tracks. “That was Erik?”

“It had to be, unless there are many out there who can manipulate metal. But that,” he gestured to the missing segment of railing, “was more remarkable than I had imagined. Something is happening on this world, some flowering has begun. I fear it is my doing, but I also fear it is not, and I don’t know which is worse.”

For a moment, she looked at him, aware that he was not of her world, but something quite different. She shook her head briskly to return to the task at hand. “C’mon, I need to grab his files. Help Steve,” who was almost back to the yacht. “Then we should go.”

Lukas didn’t need to do much to help Steve get back on the boat, but it gave him something to do as she put her lipstick thumb drive into the laptop on the desk inside the lounge.

Steve rubbed his hair with a towel he grabbed off the wet bar, coming in the lounge with Lukas at his heels. “So now what? Stick around and look for them?”

“We could tell SHIELD to put an alert on the boat,” Natasha offered. “I advise against informing the local police. In fact, we should depart soon, ourselves.”

Lukas shrugged but nodded his head. “In any case, I suspect Erik will do our work for us. If he knew enough to come after Braun, he knows about Hydra.”

“So we let him interrogate the kid? Maybe murder him?” Steve asked.

“I think we are not in a position to ‘let’ him do anything,” Lukas returned. “Even if we could find him.”

Natasha turned from the desk and frowned, wondering at his words. It was tempting to take them figuratively, but she suspected he meant more literally. “Are you saying you can’t stop him?”

“In theory? Perhaps. If I knew better how it works. But it used a different,” he paused and gestured with his hands helplessly, “structure than I am familiar with. Nothing like Wanda’s, it seems. It will
not be fought easily.” Then he added dryly, “If I wanted.”

Which he didn’t, and she wasn’t sure he ever would.

“I’d much rather talk to him,” Lukas went on. ”Find out what he knows. Where’s he’s been. Why he abandoned his own children.”

Natasha re-evaluated her assumption at the last. It was said in the same tone as the rest, but there was anger there. He might end up fighting Erik over the twins. But even so, he would never do real harm to his own blood.

Glancing back at the laptop, she saw the upload was complete, and pulled the stick out. “We’re done. Let’s go.”

As they left the boat, she heard banging down below of the guards knocking to be let out. She looked to Steve, eyebrows up, “How did you lock them in?”

“Closet,” he answered with an embarrassed shrug. “And a hanger wrapped around the handles. It won’t keep them long now they’re awake.”

Lukas smacked his shoulder. “Well done.”

She wanted to laugh but settled for a smile, as they headed back down the pier to catch one of the many taxis that frequented the waterfront.

At the hotel, she reported into HQ that they’d met Braun and she’d uploaded the worm, then, glancing at Lukas, she’d edited carefully that Braun had claimed his ignorance of Hydra but an unknown third party had interfered and he’d been pulled away. “Lukas and I agree it’s not worth it to try to find him right now. Just put a tag on his file in case he pops up, but he’s a small fish.”

“If you’re done I have a new mission for you,” Maria said. “Just you, though, since you’re in Europe already. Coulson will be your handler. Best to send our screwed up boys home.”

Natasha glanced at them, a fond smile turning her lips. Steve was trying his French on the clerk, while Lukas rolled his eyes at his accent.

“I’ll send you the briefing, but we need you in Russia. Looking into Strucker gave us a lead for weapons. Maybe more exotic dealing. But should be easy in, easy out.”

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. She never liked going back, too many memories. Though maybe she’d have a chance afterward to look into her parents. But she didn’t let any of that in her voice. “Understood. With Barton?”

“No, Barton’s on task already. There’s been some odd behavior at the Phase II experimental site,” Maria added. “He’s keeping an eye on it. Fury and Coulson wanted someone we can trust there.”

Natasha grimaced. She wished Clint could come back her up, but SHIELD was a bit thin-spread on trusted agents after the Hydra reveal. “Got it.”

“Get you and the boys to Nice. You all have flights tonight.”

It was easy enough to get the two of them to head back to Nice, by reminding them that Braun was missing and they should leave town before his guards decided to go to the police. Getting them to do as they were told and go back to the States, while she went somewhere else, was a bit more difficult.
But in the end, she persuaded them it was not their problem, and in the airport, she left first, headed for a connection in Frankfurt to Moscow.

“Don’t be surly,” she chided Lukas. “I have a simple job to do, and you should go back to the twins and Doctor Samson.”

“I don’t like being so distant from you if you need help,” he returned. She eyed him and he added, a bit defensively, “I am not calling your skills into question – though I did fool you, so you are not omnipotent, Natalya. And you yourself said my Russian skills were like a native.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll meet you back in DC soon, I promise.” Standing on her toes, she kissed his cheek. “Try not to get into too much trouble without me.”

The look in his eyes suggested he intended to get into trouble deliberately, just to make his irritation known. She said goodbye to Rogers, waved at them both, and headed for her plane.

She felt oddly alone as she settled into her seat with her small bag.

_Soft, Natasha. You’re getting soft._

*

Lukas had been surly after Natasha left, and had dismissed Steve’s attempt to get him to have lunch with an irritable “I’m not eating that garbage.”

Steve heaved a sigh. “Come on, we’re going back. Natasha can take care of herself, and we’re going to Paris. Don’t you want to see Paris when it’s free?”

“We have no time to see it, if we follow their schedule and get on the death trap to DC.”

Now Steve understood. They were flying commercial, not a quinjet. “Airplanes. That’s what this is about.”

"No, this is about Natalya headed to a dangerous assignment without backup, and being sent away like an invalid," Lukas snapped.

That was all true, but Steve had also seen the look on his face when he’d seen the small passenger jets. "And airplanes," Steve insisted gently.

Lukas looked like he wanted to deny it at first, but then he glanced away, throat working in silence. His thumb absentely rubbed at his opposite inner wrist in a gesture Steve remembered all too well. “I saw the plane they expect us to fly to Paris,” he admitted. “I’m not sure I can do it. The thought of it is making me feel ill.”

Steve frowned. This reaction sounded more extreme than what he’d felt before, and Steve had to wonder if this had more to do with what else was going on in his head than any true fear of flying. “Why don’t you call Doctor Samson? See if he has some advice. I’ll go over there,” he jerked his head toward the tourist information booth, “and ask about trains to Paris.”

“You would be willing to take the train?”

Steve didn’t know why Lukas sounded so doubtful. “Of course I would. But we’ll still have to fly to Washington, so you get some tips from the doctor while I change our schedule.”

“No,” Lukas gave an abrupt shake of his head. “That’s absurd. I’m not a child. I can do it.”
Steve might have bought it as more than just stubborn pride except he knew how much of that Lukas had, and that he was perfectly capable of throwing himself into an airplane even if he spent the whole trip sick with anxiety.

“The thing is, you don’t have to. And the better thing is, our time is our own. We can spend it on trains if we want. What are they gonna do? Not pay us?” he joked, and Lukas found a smile at that.

The train was pleasant and fast, and it let Lukas relax more than a small plane would have. It was slower than a plane so they had to get different transatlantic flights, and Steve made the case on the phone with Coulson for first class since Lukas was so stressed about flying. He'd offered to pay for it himself when Coulson was reluctant, and that had seemed to shame him into pushing for it. Steve felt the cost was ridiculous, but everything in this time was and SHIELD still owed them.

They had most of the day to kill in Paris once they arrived and so they shoved the shield case into storage at the train station, and walked the central city as tourists. Lukas told him about being there centuries ago just before the Revolution.

Steve was not exactly surprised when they ended up at the cathedral. At first they stood at a distance to look at the front. "So, still the same?" Steve asked, only half teasing. He knew how old it was, and that it had changed little over the years.

Lukas wrinkled his nose. "I don't care for the spire. That's new. Come, let us peek inside."

Lukas used his trick to get them through the outside wall into a service corridor to avoid the line to enter, and Steve was about to object when words utterly failed him as he followed Lukas into the nave.

The light, the height of the ceiling, the stained glass -- it was beautiful.

Lukas glanced toward the altarpiece, made a face, and circled the outer edge. Steve tagged along, craning his neck to see everything and nearly running into other gawking tourists. Lukas seemed to have some intent and didn't stop until he'd found a small side chapel that was rather plain and ignored.

Lukas closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, almost as if he were praying. Steve moved up beside him to ask in a low voice, "I know you're not Christian, so ... what are you doing?"

"Nothing. Centering myself. This place has changed very little from what I recall when I was first here, and it was old then. I feel its bones, its history...." he trailed off and opened his eyes. "It is... a reminder, I suppose, that not everything is changed and lost."

He seemed more at ease, and it made Steve think that maybe he needed to find a place for himself that reminded him that some of his past still remained. It wasn't fair to put all that on Bucky and Peggy, nor was it wise since he was likely to outlive them both. So, he needed a place, but one that was already historical and would be kept as it was into the future, not torn down and developed into a new skyscraper.

He'd have to think on it, but in the meantime he padded after Lukas who groused about all the 'new' changes until Steve teased him about sounding like a grumpy senior citizen. Lukas laughed aloud, making everyone around them glare at them for the disrespect, and in response, Lukas pulled him past the barriers to climb the bell tower, even though it was closed. On their own, they stood shoulder-to-shoulder overlooking the city in peaceful silence.
Perhaps this place could also be an anchor for him in the years to come. The rest of the city might change, but the cathedral would remain, a witness to history as much as the black-haired inhuman visitor at his side was.

Next to him, Lukas shuddered and his gaze snapped up to the western horizon.

Steve tensed, wondering if there was a threat incoming.

"What is it?" Steve asked. But Lukas frowned and shook his head once.

"I'm not sure. Something...powerful, but far away. Too quick to trace." He took out his phone and texted something. "To Wanda," he explained off Steve's look, but a moment later his phone buzzed and the answer appeared to be negative. "She felt it, but it was no doing of hers." He didn't seem relieved, peering off into the distance as if he could see what it was.

"I suppose if it was important, we'll find out soon enough," Lukas muttered, and shrugged it off with a quick grin. "Do you want to hear about how I met the real Quasimodo?"

Steve barked a laugh. "Oh really?"

"Such skepticism. I'm wounded, Steven."

He spun a yarn that Steve didn't believe one word of, but it was amusing. He noticed though, when the tale started to merge with a very different story about Quasimodo lurking beneath the Paris Opera House. Steve pointed a finger at him and narrowed his eyes. "I know about the Phantom of the Opera, Lukas."

Caught, he only took a moment to recover. "Well, I could have known them," he protested, laughing.

"I think you know plenty that's real," Steve said. "But that's a funny story, you should write it down."

Lukas made a face. "It's just a trifle, to share with friends."

Steve leaned against the stone, and regarded him. "All right, then, you have another one?"

It was a good afternoon, feeling the breeze against his cheeks and overseeing Paris, undisturbed. But all too soon it was time for them to head out, collect the shield, and get to the airport.

As the planes came into view from their taxi, he glanced at Lukas. "Okay?"

Lukas gave a shrug. "I will manage. I wish we had a quinjet, though. Those air craft are much more convenient."

"Next time. Probably it's still cheaper than first class since I doubt Coulson will spring for that again."

Lukas chuckled with appreciation. "Not when he is such a fan of yours."

"Yours too," Steve protested.

"He doesn't have my toaster," Lukas teased, and Steve rolled his eyes. But he had pulled on Coulson's admiration for them, he had to admit at least to himself.

But as he stretched out his legs in his wide seat for the long flight back and thought of the day they'd
spent, he had to admit he wouldn't change a thing.

tbc...
On AmAir flight 313, somewhere over the Atlantic, Captain Anders had a moment’s warning from the plane’s radar, and the flight engineer exclaimed something, but Anders saw only the airplane suddenly swing into view from port, straight in front of them.

“Holy shit!” His hands tightened on the controls thinking he needed to evade. Old instincts from his Navy pilot days kicked in and his heart was suddenly pounding, but he stayed calm.

It was a quinjet, he realized. Not something he’d flown personally, but one of the Stark QN120 VTOL craft. What was it doing here? And why was it dogging him?

He exchanged an incredulous look at his co-pilot Myers.

Myers looked at his instruments and reported, "They're pacing us."

"They certainly got our attention," Anders said, shaking his head.

Since the quinjet wasn't throttling away, they wanted something, so he wasn't surprised when a sound on his headset crackled through. “AmAir 313, this is SHIELD 142. Do you copy?"

He flicked his headset to engage. “Copy, SHIELD 142. This is Captain Anders, United 313. What the hell are you doing?"

There was a pause and the voice was more clearly a feminine one as it responded, “I need to speak to two of your passengers, AmAir313. Captain Rogers and Mister Onsdag. In 2A and 2B. Put them on the line. From the cockpit, where the passengers can't hear.”

Extremely confused by all this, he exchanged another look with his co-pilot and said uneasily, “I’m going to need some authorization, SHIELD 142, to break the in-flight security door.”

“Stand by.”

A moment later the comm crackled again, and this time a male voice. “This is President Ellis, Captain. Do you recognize my voice?"

“Yes, sir,” Anders replied, straightening reflexively.

“Good. Then get those two men forward for SHIELD. The country - hell, the world -- needs them.”

“Yes, sir,” Anders answered. What else could he say? He swallowed and looked to the co-pilot.

“Tell Shelly to bring them in.”

The co-pilot got up and went to unlock the door.

The female voice said, a bit dryly, “I trust that satisfies your objection, Captain Anders?”

He answered, “We’re getting them. Stand by.”

Steve was watching the movie in the tiny screen in the back of the seat in front of him. It was an amazing invention with a vast selection of films he knew nothing about. Lukas was no help after he’d discovered “The Winter Angel” was not one of the selections, and turned to his book instead. Steve settled on a Sherlock Holmes movie since at least he knew the character.
The stewardess -- flight attendant, he reminded himself -- leaned down very close and gave him a polite tap on his shoulder for his attention.

He pulled out the earbud and looked up at her. She murmured in consideration of the others around them, "You're both requested to come forward. There's an emergency."

Lukas, of course, had noticed her pausing by their row and despite the two bottles of gin he'd already downed in a vain attempt to relax, was alert and already fisting the fabric of his trousers. "With the aircraft?"

"No, sir. Somewhere else. They need to speak to you on the radio," she explained.

Steve was glad to hear there was nothing wrong with the plane, but less so that there was something they needed to talk to someone about in the middle of their flight.

"Perhaps it is Natalya," Lukas suggested and started to rise.

That made Steve rise too and they both followed the flight attendant forward to the galley and past that to the closed door. She touched a control. "This is Shelly. I have the two here. Outside."

The door opened, and one of the uniformed pilots stood there. He gave Steve and Lukas a quick look, before turning aside and letting them in. "You're wanted. By that." He gestured to the front.

At first Steve didn't see it, until he gaped, realizing that was a plane no more than a hundred yards ahead of them. "What the hell are they doing?"

"Looking for you, apparently," the co-pilot said.

Lukas huffed a laugh. "SHIELD, so dramatic."

The pilot in the front seat turned around. "You two Rogers and Onsdag? They want to talk to you."

With the air of someone who was pretty done with bullshit he handed an extra headset to Steve, while the flight engineer handed another to Lukas.

Steve put it on. "This is Rogers."

A woman’s voice answered, crisp and military. "This is Agent May of SHIELD, Captain Rogers. I’ve been sent to fetch you and Mister Onsdag."

"Uh, we’re in an airplane headed to DC, Agent May. Arrival time is about three hours.” His voice went up slightly in a question and the pilot nodded.

"Time is not something we have a luxury of, Captain Rogers. There’s a … situation. Director Fury and Agent Hill were nearly killed,” May said, picking her words with care. “We need you and Mister Onsdag right away.”

Steve looked to Lukas, who was unimpressed. Steve doubted they'd be called like this if it weren't important, but what was the point of this? It wasn't as if they could help right this second, unless she was about to order them to turn around. “And we’d be glad to help, Agent May, but... I don’t know what you want us to do?"

"Is Captain Anders still on the line?” she asked.

Anders said, “I’m here. Go ahead, Agent May.”

"Your instructions are to descend to three thousand feet, Captain. Captain Rogers and Mister
"Onsdag will transfer from your plane to mine, through your forward door."

"Are you insane?" Anders blurted. "You want me to open my door? In flight?"

She retorted crisply, "You have Captain America and the Ice Demon on your plane, Captain Anders." Anders’ wide-eyed gaze swung around to stare at Steve and then Lukas at the news. He’d had no idea, obviously. Agent May continued, "And the Earth just had an unfriendly visitor arrive on this planet."

That got Steve’s attention, and he exchanged a glance with Lukas. "Say again, Agent May. We have an alien on Earth?"

"A very unfriendly visitor, Captain," she answered. "We need advice and we need it now."

"Understood," Steve answered.

But Lukas gave an unfriendly smile and asked, "And what is our proof of this claim, Agent May? I don’t know you, I don’t know your loyalties, and I am disinclined to risk myself and Steve Rogers on the say-so of someone who might be a Hydra agent."

There was a pause, as Agent May considered how to counter his suspicion and said, "Stand by."

Anders turned his head and offered, "I did just have the president tell me to get you."

Steve would’ve gone along, hearing that, but Lukas remained unyielding, folding his arms as he waited for proof he would accept.

The radio hissed and then clicked. A familiar voice broke in, "This is Agent Coulson. Do you hear me?"

Steve answered, "I hear you, Agent Coulson."

"Agent May’s one of the good ones, she has my trust. Mister Onsdag, Captain Rogers, this is a situation, and we need you. Right away. Over."

Steve looked to Lukas, who gave a nod, and Steve answered, "Understood, Coulson. We’re on our way."

"Good. See you soon. Over and out."

Lukas clicked on his comm. "So, Agent May, what is the plan?"

She’d apparently thought about it and answered promptly, "I will position my plane beneath to catch you. As long as you descend and keep your course, this will turn out just fine," she answered.

"Just fine?" Anders repeated incredulously. "At three thousand feet. You want them to jump out and land on your fuselage? What if they miss? I don’t have parachutes."

"My understanding is they would survive."

Steve shrugged under Anders’ gaze. "We’ve done it before."

"We can swim," Lukas said. "Agent May, I need more information on this alien invader."

"When you’re aboard and we’re on the way, I’ll give you the briefing," she answered. "Descend and hold course, AmAir 313." The airplane before them sank out of view, descending first.
“Three thousand feet?” Captain Anders said, more to himself. “All right then. Jerry, put it in. Descending to three-zero-zero-zero. You two really going to jump out?” Anders asked, glancing up, as he pushed the stick to make the plane start to descend.

“I’ve done stupider things,” Lukas answered lightly, but Steve wasn’t sure if he was joking or not. The crew didn’t seem to be either, but didn’t question him either.

Steve watched as Lukas took the microphone away from Shelly and moved to the front of the aisle. His shirt appeared to have turned into black silk, and it shimmered under the lights that Shelly had turned on. He said in a voice that probably needed no help from the speakers, “Your attention please, my fellow passengers. I am not the captain, but I do have an important announcement.”

He paused, and Steve had to fight back a smile. He was enjoying this, standing in front of a plane full of passengers.

Lukas went on, “The keen-eyed among you may have noticed that we have started a slow descent. Now, you need not be alarmed; the aeroplane is not in danger. In fact you all are having a tremendously lucky day -- you are on the same craft as Captain America and the Ice Demon. Steve Rogers,” he pointed at Steve who waved a hand, feeling awkward under the sudden attention, ”and myself.” He paused and then sounded a little disappointed in only a few shocked reactions. “Ah, Steven, how soon they forget. But in any case, unfortunately, SHIELD has urgently requested our presence, and the middle Atlantic is rather poorly equipped for landing places, so we will have to transfer to the SHIELD quinjet beneath us the more exciting way.

“In order to do that, we will need your cooperation. We are going to have to open the forward door.” He tapped the overhead bin. “As Shelly told you at the beginning of our journey, the oxygen masks will drop automatically with the shift in pressure, but don’t worry, we’ll be at such a low altitude you’ll be perfectly safe with the door open. Steven and I will leave the plane, the door will be resealed, and you all will continue your merry way to Washington, while we go off and deal with… something classified.”

He looked back at the stunned and confused faces, and smiled. “Next time, we will know better than to fly commercial. Thank you for your cooperation and I do apologize, but at least you’ll all have something interesting to post on your social media accounts, yes? Shelly, back to you.” He handed the handset to the flight attendant.

She cleared her throat. “Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this is an unusual situation. We do anticipate a strong wind in the cabin as the door is opened, so at this time, you must put away all loose items: in a case, in the overhead bin, or securely into the seat pocket in front of you, so no small items will be swept about and cause injury. Crew will come through and take all service items and trash. Please be seated, with your seat belts fastened and put your trays in the locked position. The sooner we do this, the sooner we will be on our way. Thank you all for you cooperation.”

At her words, the flight crew sprang into action in the galleys, as the passengers started to talk among themselves, somewhat agitated, but not panicked until a man’s voice said loudly, “Open the door? Are you crazy? We’ll explode!”

Shelly took a deep breath to head for him, but Lukas touched her shoulder. “Allow me.”

He headed down the aisle. “I am Lukas Onsdag, you are?”

The man took a moment to manage an answer the calm question. “Bruce… Cartwright.”
“Well, Mister Cartwright, you are wrong. Opening the door will not cause anything to explode. At a higher altitude, yes, it becomes more dangerous because the air outside the craft is much thinner and all the air inside wants to go there immediately. But at three thousand feet the difference is not so great. It will be windy, but after a moment, the air will settle. But here, let me assure you that no harm will come to anyone on this craft. Because I won’t let it.” He held out his palm and a golden-green fire formed there, first a tiny candle flame but then growing to something as large as a grapefruit.

Cartwright’s eyes bugged out, and everyone watching gasped. “What -- what kind of trick is that?” he demanded.

”Not a trick. Power.” Lukas smiled and let the flames dance between both palms, before sending the flame upward, where it crawled along the ceiling. “I am the Ice Demon. The comic book character is fictional, but I am real. I have defended this world for a very long time, Mister Cartwright. You are safe in my hands, I promise.” He said the last a little louder, and gestured to disperse the thin rivulet of magical fire. It poofed apart into a white flurry across all the seats. Several people reached up to touch it, exclaiming in delight to find it was snow. “So now, put away your things and get ready to watch something extraordinary.”

To Steve’s surprise, it worked. The deliberate theatricality of his reassurance and demonstration of power, immediately seemed to make people more excited about getting ready, as if they were about to watch a show. So they put away their stuff and let the crew take all the trash, while Steve helped Shelly with the mechanism to keep the slide from inflating when the door was opened.

Meanwhile, the plane was descending and Lukas prowled the main cabin, being reassuring and posing for selfies. Steve wanted to shake his head at it, amazed by how comfortable he seemed doing it, and reminded himself that Lukas was actually hundreds of years old, it was just Steve had met him at a particularly difficult time. But it was good he seemed to be recovering himself after his captivity.

Then, it was time.

Steve pulled his shield out of the closet and slung it over his head. “I’ll need it,” he explained to Lukas’ raised brows.

“I said nothing,” Lukas protested, with a fleeting grin.

In the cockpit the captain and Agent May finalized their positions relative to each other and they were ready to go. Lukas fought him for the dubious honor of opening the door and won, on account of being better able to survive if he was sucked out and fell, but Steve still insisted they belt him in. Using seat belt extenders, Steve wrapped the make-shift harness around him and then gripped his shoulders, to look in his face. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

Lukas tossed his hair and smirked. “Oh, Steven, it’s an adventure. Hold onto something.”

Shelly pulled the phone down to announce. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to open the door. Brace yourselves and close your eyes.”

Pulling the lever up, Lukas appeared to be straining and Steve nearly went to help him, but then the seal broke with a loud hiss. Instantly the air in the plane rushed toward the gap, a strong wind and a few blowing papers as the door cracked open. Steve held on to the bulkhead galley, keeping watch.

There was one last near hurricane force blow, and then, the airflow reversed and cold wind swirled into the cabin from the open door. A few papers, a pen, and plastic cups escaped, but that was all.
Lukas had braced himself against the fuselage and as soon as he’d pushed the door out of the way, stood on the edge and looked.

“Well, that is a long way down,” he observed dryly and narrowed his eyes. “Do not jump, Steven. If you are too far from the fuselage the air flow will pull you toward the jet intakes. That would be … unfortunate.”

Steve detached himself and moved up to peer over the edge himself, murmuring to Lukas, “Oh, God, what the hell is out there they think this is a good idea?”

“Invading alien, she said. Whatever that means.” He glanced upward, thin line forming between his eyebrows. “It was likely connected to that shimmer I noticed at the cathedral. I was right that we’d find out what it was.” He shrugged, settling himself with a skill Steve envied, and he unclipped the harness. “Well, there’s nothing for it, but do it, I suppose, I will go first. Shelly, tell Agent May that I am prepared to go.”

Shelly spoke into the phone and then, white-knuckled, reported, “She says, go when ready. She’ll track your fall. I don’t think you should do this.”

The grin he turned to her was more reckless than reassuring, and he said, “Who wants to be boring?” He stepped off the edge and was gone.

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tbc...
Loki fell. He didn’t shift his acceleration, wanting to gain some distance from the plane and test the fall for Steve.

The airflow grabbed him and threw him behind the plane, tumbling through the air. Spreading out arms and legs, he righted himself, and squinted against the air resistance to spot the quinjet. Agent May was clever enough it appeared to have positioned herself to rise to catch him, rather than fly too close and possibly miss him. It rose up beneath him, seeming too fast and too small a target against the endless blue of the ocean below.

But right on target, the jet grew larger beneath him, and he slammed hard into the top of the fuselage. Scrambling for a handhold as he bounced and slid toward the back, he touched the burning heat of the engine, yanking his hand away in reflex, and slipping farther back. But one boot caught the back fin, able to better brace himself, slowing him enough to grab one of the maintenance holds just before he fell off the back. Taking a moment to catch his breath, he kicked the outer hull and felt the jet shake and grumble as the lower ramp opened.

The most dangerous part was holding himself on the edge and swinging himself onto the ramp. A man, hooked in for safety, was at the top and offered a hand to bring him inside.

Out of the wind, Loki shook himself briskly. “Well, that was invigorating.”

“Safe aboard?” a female voice called from the cockpit.

Loki hurried forward. “Agent May?” She turned back to glance at him, tipping her head in acknowledgment. “Lukas Onsdag, pleasure to not be swimming in the Atlantic right now. I commend your flight skills. However, I need to speak to Steven before he drops.”

She nodded toward a headset hanging on the back of the seat. “Use that.”

He put it on. “This is Lukas Onsdag, safely aboard, Captain. I need to speak to Steven.”

“One moment.”

Then Steven came on the line. “Rogers. So you made it?”

“Of course, or I wouldn’t be speaking to you, would I? I wanted to warn you that the engine casings are extremely hot, so try to avoid those. If you can land near the canopy it would work better. Strap the shield to your forearm and use that to help direct you.”

“Understood.”

“I will be at the back to help reel you in. However, do not try to go to the quinjet, let Agent May maneuver to fetch you. Go when ready.”

Loki realized the foolishness of standing there, watching through the large windows at the front of the quinjet as Steve tumbled out of the airliner. His heart seized with anxiety and he had to grip the back of the copilot’s seat to force himself to not take the controls himself.

May smoothly maneuvered the jet into position, as Steve oriented himself and used his shield to give himself more drag and slow his fall. When he saw he was close, he swapped the shield beneath him to allow the vibranium to take much of the impact.
The quinjet roof thumped. “Got him!” May announced, as if Loki couldn’t tell that himself. He turned and rushed for the back, able to track the faint thumps above as Steve worked his way to the open ramp.

Brown boots dropped into view as the dark-skinned SHIELD agent headed back onto the ramp with a rope. Within a minute Steve was safely aboard, and the agent punched the ramp closed. “All aboard, we’re clear, May.”

“Understood. We’re under way.”

At which point, Loki realized the quinjet was heading… north? Why were they headed north?

Agent May had her subordinate Agent Trippler take the stick while she gestured them to the computer station. “I have video to show you,” she introduced. “This was taken from our SHIELD research facility.” Her business-like voice paused and she warned, “You won’t like it.”

Loki gathered close with Steve to watch the video screen.

At first he didn’t understand what he was seeing; the angle seemed bad, and the picture was dark and flickered with their poor frame speed, but then… it resolved into a large dim room, equipment, and something glowing with a familiar blue light.

The tesseract.

But before he could snap something irritated about its possession, the image suddenly flared, as if it exploded, the image shook, and… he knew.

“Portal,” he murmured. That was what he’d felt. Someone—SHIELD—had made a portal with the tesseract. A portal that had let in something, going by shadow visible within the glow.

The brilliance faded away, and the figure within stood up.

He knew that shape. The hairless head in silhouette.

His core froze up, chest seizing shut on his breath, and all he could think was helpless denial: nonononononono….

A hand gripped his shoulder firmly, grounding him back in the present. “Red Skull,” Steve said aloud, not taking his gaze off the screen, as Schmidt walked off the platform. “Wait, stop it,” he told Agent May, who paused the video. “How… how can this be?” he whispered. “He was dead. We saw him… he disintegrated. He was gone, damn it.”

Loki shook his head in slow dismay. “No. He didn’t die. Obviously.” He made an abortive gesture, more like a jerk of his hand, toward the screen.

“How?” Steve asked. “Maybe he’s a … copy?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Loki answered. He paused, forcing his mind to think it through, past the reflexive anxiety, until his chest eased. “Well, he might be, but … I think I was wrong about what happened. I learned about the tesseract in the last few years, in Asgard. I know what it truly is.” No thanks to Odin Allfather, who had never told him. No, he’d had to piece it together out of the lore, even though Odin knew exactly what the tesseract was.

“What do you mean? What is it?” Steve asked.
“It isn’t just power. Schmidt used it as a battery but it's always been so much more than that. It’s….\” He examined the bluish glow of the tesseract, trying to think of the term in English. He should have read more of their current scientific understanding. “The universe. No, that is too broad. It has a power over making holes in it. Portals.”

“Wormholes?” Agent May tried.

“Yes, that’s what you’d call the structure it creates. But I mean it has power over what the tunnel is made within.” He remembered the Rabbit book and snapped his fingers at how the word had been translated, “space-time. Yes. The tesseract is what’s known in the lore as the Space gem. So perhaps, what happened is instead of being ripped apart, as it appeared to us, Schmidt was transported somewhere else in the universe, and has somehow found his way back.”

“That’s swell,” Steve said dryly.

“If I had been more… aware,” Loki murmured. “I would have known he had transported away. But I thought he was dead and everyone was safe.”

“I saw it,” Steve reminded him. “It looked as if he was being burnt from the inside, Lukas. I don’t know what mystical transportation would look like, but it wasn’t that.”

“He didn’t use it correctly, but still. I could have been using this time to track him wherever he landed. And kill him.” He said the words boldly, while inside a worm of doubt wondered if he’d even have tried. The thought of confrontation stirred and pinched him on the insides, and he wanted to be sick at the reminder of his own fragile cowardice.

His hands were tightly fisted on his thighs, gathering the fabric into tight creases. He didn’t notice until Steve touched his shoulder.

“Hey, you're not in this alone,” Steve said. “And it’s not your fault.”

Loki was not in the least mollified by that. He stood up, paced away and then back. “Give us the rest,” he demanded of May.

She’d been listening, her expression neutral but with tight focus to her gaze of memorizing every word. Giving a nod, she touched the controls to advance the video.

Schmidt fought the guards, with ease, using some sort of weapon that Loki didn’t see clearly. But he did see Selvig salute as he took the tesseract, and then another familiar face, but sapphire blue eyes.

“Barton,” he blurted in recognition, before his eyes narrowed at the sight of Barton firing at his own people.

May nodded, tightly. “Red Skull did something to him, some sort of mind-control.”

“Thrall,” Loki snarled. “He put my friend in thrall. I will rip him to pieces for this.” Tempted to smash all the delicate electronics he whirled around to stalk to the back of the plane, hands clenched while rage boiled through him.

More calmly, Steve asked, “What more?”

“The facility collapsed, they escaped,” she answered. “Both Agent Hill and Commander Fury were injured, but survived. We’ll meet them soon. We know Schmidt commandeered another quinjet but it disapeared.”
“Along with the tesseract,” Steve guessed.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “He has it.”

“Does Natalya know about Barton?” Loki demanded. “Has she been told?” May frowned in confusion.

“Romanoff,” Steve helpfully added, reminding Loki that Natalya was not the name her co-workers used.

“Ah.” Loki could practically see the nickname filed away for later consideration in her eyes. May went on, “I know she was pulled from Russia and is supposed to meet us, as well.”

“Meet us, where?” Loki demanded. “Where are we going if not Washington?”

She answered, “The Helicarrier.”

Loki glanced at Steve, who shared his ignorance. They knew what an air craft carrier was, but “helicarrier” sounded special and Loki had no knowledge of it.

May saw their confusion and her smile was slight, but warm. “You'll see.”

The Helicarrier was impressive, certainly the biggest ship in the water that Steve had ever seen, as it filled the cockpit window on their approach. After landing, it felt oddly familiar to Steve, too. But it wasn't until another jet took off the flight deck that he realized why-- this was battle. Not the creeping spy stuff of the mission to find Braun, these were war planes and soldiers. He glanced at Lukas, but he was tense with anger over Red Skull and anxiety over a possible Shield betrayal, surrounded by strangers as they were.

So Steve stuck close to him, glad when Natasha came up to greet them. "You should've been in DC yesterday," she said, arms folded, eyebrows up in a question for explanation.

Lukas shrugged. "I wanted to see the city. I trust it's you who came up with the idea of jumping out of a moving aircraft?"

"You did tell me that you had no problem with heights," she retorted, eyes glinting, but then shook her head. "No, it was Coulson's plan, I just said I thought you could do it."

"At least I know who to thank," Steve said but couldn't quite finish as a slight, curly-headed man came up to them, looking all around.

"Doctor Banner," Natasha introduced, "Steve Rogers. Lukas Onsdag."

"Oh, um, good to meet you," Banner said, holding out his hand to shake Steve's and then peering at Lukas curiously. "I hear you're not from this planet? Is that true?"

"I hear you're going to help us find the tesseract, and you gave your psychiatrist superpowers," Lukas responded dryly. "I think you win."

Bruce chuckled, sounding uncomfortable. "Well, I don't know if it's winning, exactly. And you know about Doc Samson, so you know..."

He trailed off, and Steve was planning to say something polite about only caring about Banner's results, not his Hulk persona, but Lukas jumped in, "That you can turn into a powerful green monster? Yes, we know. Welcome to the club. Steven and I have meetings every Tuesday, we hope
you can join us."

Banner blinked at him, looking flabbergasted, and Steve smacked his shoulder. "We like not being the only ones, Doc."

Natasha cleared her throat. "Gentlemen, we should move this inside. It's gonna get a little hard to breathe."

Confused, Steve exchanged a glance with Lukas, who shrugged. The announcement came over the intercom to secure the flight deck, as people scurried about and ducked inside the hatches.

Natasha headed for the door, and Lukas followed her, but Steve headed for the edge as a tremendously loud clanking noises told him something else was happening.

Steve remembered what May had said about it being special and turned in disbelief. "Is this a submarine?"

Banner chuckled a little in disbelief. "Really, they want me in a submerged pressurized metal container?"

But Steve saw the giant propellers beneath them begin to spin, sucking the air downward, and his mouth dropped open as the impossible came true.

With a lurch, the carrier lifted into the air.

He heard Banner mutter, "Oh no, this is much worse."

Behind them Lukas laughed, amused that he was on yet another flying machine.

Loki followed Natasha to the interior of the Helicarrier, to an airy space with many computer stations and a standing area where Fury was waiting. While Fury greeted Steven and Banner, and after they'd all been informed of what SHIELD knew of Schmidt and Barton's whereabouts (they didn't), Natasha led Loki over to a large table in the back to where a large brown envelope was sitting.

"I hope this'll help. At least a bit. That's for you," she said. "I brought it to the Helicarrier and didn't have a chance til now to get it for you."

He knew what it had to be, and his hands trembled as he opened the envelope and gingerly removed the paper within.

It was the single page rescued from his original copy of the Rabbit's Guide to the Universe, that he'd written for Elsa and baby Birgitte.

Hot tears pricked his eyes seeing it and his breathing went ragged, before e inhaled a deeper breath and lifted his gaze back to Natasha. "Thank you, Natalya."

She nodded, expression warm with understanding, and gave his arm a quick pat.

"What is that?" Steve asked behind him, making Loki startle a bit, having not noticed the others had finished and come to join them.

Keeping his face averted until he could get his expression under control, Loki held it for him to see. "A page from the book I wrote for," he had to swallow. "Elsa. Natalya saved it from when we were ambushed in Seville by those Hydra scum."
"It looks hand-written?" Steve asked, peering at it closely. "And illustrated? Did you do that?"

"I did."

"Beautiful linework." Knowing how well Steve could draw, Loki felt a bit flattered by that. Steve glanced up. "What happened to the rest?"

"Taken by Hydra, I assume," Natasha explained when Loki couldn't quite get the words out. "It wasn't in the hangar. And neither Thor nor I saw it in Sokovia. We would've rescued it, if we'd seen it," she promised Loki, who did not doubt it. "But the castle is rubble."

"We put a cruise missile into it," Coulson added, grimacing in regret with a glance at the page. "What a loss. Which was almost the same fate as the small power source you wanted back from our research facility. It collapsed when Schmidt's wormhole destabilized it, but we were able to save some things. I did make sure the ball was one of them. It's down in one of the labs."

Loki felt some relief at hearing that not everything was lost. "Thank you, Coulson. I appreciate that very much."

"While we wait for the face trace, you want to go see it?" Natasha asked. She knew him so well.

"I would, yes."

He vanished the page for safe-keeping in his dimensional pocket. He should have done that with the book from the start, instead of clutching it to himself. But at least now he could keep this remnant safe.

Coulson stared at his empty hands and then to the table as if he'd somehow missed Loki putting it there. "What happened to it?"

Loki smirked at him, pleased to needle him. "Magic."

The humor fell away as he glanced at the high forward windows, before leaving. The sky was empty and huge, but Schmidt was somewhere out there, Barton with him.

*They'll find you, and I will get my reckoning*, Loki promised silently.

*We will meet soon.*
Chapter 7

The first indication that something was wrong was the armed police officers appearing on the second level and swarming down the balcony. They shouted commands for silence and raised their guns and night-sticks in threatening display, while the revelers in their finery stirred in confusion. The musicians stopped playing, leaving a strange nervous silence.

The police continued down the staircase, ordering everyone into a group, as the well-dressed party guests looked around and their questions about what was going on were left unanswered.

"Why are their eyes so blue?" one woman asked.

All of these new police had blue eyes, and not the blue eyes of a northern European but strangely cobalt-tinged irises, regardless of their race.

Everyone realized something was wrong about them, and with that realization, thought maybe they weren't police at all, and started pushing for the exits. But they found 'police' at the doors, keeping them inside with gun barrels pointed at them.

Someone screamed, a thin wail of terror, and like magic, there was movement on the upper balcony. A black-clad figure appeared, and the police snapped to attention with a frightening simultaneous thump.

A couple of horrified gasps announced the recognition of the scarlet skin and the mal-formed demonic visage.

He held out his hands as if to quell wild applause. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Yes, I have returned. I bear glad tidings. I have seen the truth, and I come to bring it to you. Kneel!"

There was confused milling about until the police drew nearer and started to force the people to kneel. One by one they all did, until there was only one old man in the center who refused.

"You will not kneel, old man?"

"I remember you," the old man spat. "Red Skull. Schmidt. I will never kneel to your kind."

Schmidt leveled the glowing scepter in his hand at the man and fired. He was thrown backward, dead before he hit the floor, amid the sound of screams. But they all knelt down, huddled together in terror.

"Find me Schafer," Schmidt commanded and began to saunter down the steps as the police sorted through the prisoners.

A man in a suit was thrust forward, stumbling and bewildered. "What-- what is it you want from me?" he asked as Schmidt walked up to him.

"I admire other scientists," Schmidt said. "Will you join me, Herr Doktor Schafer?"

"Join you?" Schafer stuttered, shaking with fear. "In what? What is it you want? How are you back?"

"I was torn apart, professor. Such agony, you will never understand. But then I was reborn in a dark part of the galaxy. Remade. And sent back to take my rightful place atop this world."
Schafer shook his head in incomprehension and fear, but Schmidt took it as a denial. "Ah, well, no matter. You have something I need, Professor."

"What?"

Schmidt's grin was like Satan smiling at the sinful. "Your eye." He grabbed Schafer by the necktie and hurled him to the surface of the marble funerary stone.

"Approaching the museum," Natasha reported. "There's a strong power signature inside, and-- damn it -- a crowd. Intel confirms a charity ball in progress."

A party full of innocent people. Just great.

"Ready to drop in five."

"You ready?" Steve asked Lukas who gave him a grim baring of teeth.

"Ready."

"GO!" Natasha ordered and they jumped.

The cold air rushed across his skin as he fell. He put the shield beneath him as he crashed through the skylight, Lukas just behind him.

Marble floors, of course. Does no one believe in wood anymore? he thought, as he smashed down into the bare floor and rolled amid the debris falling around him.

He was immediately under fire from high velocity rounds, and held up his shield to fend them off before seeing who it was.

Police. Well, shit. "Hey, Captain America here to see to your Red Skull--" he shouted, but they fired at him and he had to duck behind the shield.

"They're ensorcelled, Steven." Lukas called into a sudden silence. Steve peeked around his shield to watch.

Lukas straightened, drawing himself tall, without a shield. Steve tensed and then had to stare, as bullets slammed into him without effect. He did something with his hands and the ammunition inside the guns exploded in their hands, and even the most brainwashed had to drop his weapon.

"Ah, meinen Daimon, you have returned to witness my moment of triumph!" A familiar horrifying voice and Steve looked up to see Schmidt off to the left, behind some sort of stone table.

Lukas was staring at him, his face colorless and eyes so wide Steve thought he wasn't seeing the museum at all. Whatever he'd said, he wasn't ready for this, not at all.

"Lukas! I've got him, you--"

Schmidt leveled the glowing jewel of the scepter at Lukas and before Steve could hurl the shield in the way, fired. Lukas was hurled through the air into the opposite wall.

"NO!" Steve yelled, then relieved to see Lukas stir. Two guards were on him then, with batons, and he had to take them down before whirling to see where Schmidt was.

"Could really use back up!" Steve hollered over the comm and vaulted the statue of the crouching
lion in his way and went after Schmidt, while the party-goers scattered.

"Landing in the square," Natasha reported over the comm, and Steve grimaced. It might be too late by the time she got here.

Steve threw the shield to bank off the wall and ricochet into Schmidt's back, making him stagger from the unexpected direction. But then Steve was leaping on him, fists ready.

But Schmidt was powerful, using the scepter as a short bo staff right into Steve's midsection and he had to retreat, diving for the shield. Rolling, he was on his back, as Schmidt slammed the scepter on the shield and the force of it threw him back.

That gave Steve space to flip himself up to his feet, keeping a bit of space between them. Schmidt was strong, and Steve was wary of the glowing jewel at the end. And all he had to do was kill time for Lukas to get up and help.

"You will never defeat me, Captain," Schmidt said. "For I am a god."

"I know a god, and you're not him," Steve shot back. That infuriated Schmidt, who tried to stab him with the pointy end of the scepter and Steve barely managed to duck as he abruptly whirled it over to try to take off Steve's head.

Damn, he was fast.

But the shield saved him again, and Steve then used it as a bludgeon, forcing him back, until Schmidt bound it and wrenched it away to smash into a stone pedestal and send the bronze atop it to the floor. Steve picked up the cherub and threw it at Schmidt like a baseball, just to keep him back as he went for the shield.

He wondered where Lukas was, then Schmidt fired a blast from the scepter again at him. Steve braced, and the blast was deflected.

The shout "Go! Go now!" was Lukas' voice, but not to him and he glanced beneath the shield to see Lukas was ushering the crowd outside. He'd taken down some of the ensorcelled police, enough to clear the way, for the party-goers to rush toward the foyer.

Then Schmidt was on him again and Steve had to grab the haft of the scepter in both hands as it struck toward his neck. Jaw clenched, he held it back, even as Schmidt tried to force it closer.

The glare of the stone dazzled his eyes, and he felt some strange weakness flutter through his muscles, a temptation to give up, to surrender, to let go....

Yeah, I don't think so, asshole.

He let himself fall backward, abruptly relaxing, yanking on the scepter so Schmidt was pulled right off his feet, as they crashed to the floor. They rolled apart, and Steve looked for the shield, frantically. Or a gun, or something. Damn it, would this guy never go down?

Which was when the sound started, a heavy bass thrumming. Was that music?

"We've got company!" Natasha warned, only a few seconds before something golden crashed through the broken skylight and pulled up on a flash of energy blasts from boots and hands to hover in mid-air.

"Make a move, Tomatohead," the amplified voice warned over the music.
Schmidt, who hadn't managed to get to his feet, froze and lifted both hands in surrender. Steve didn't like that he seemed altogether too willing. He was over-matched now, and knew it, but still... it didn't sit right.

From his left, Lukas called, "Stark?"

Steve looked up, raising a hand, realizing this was Howard's kid. The metal suit covered him entirely like a second skin, but clearly was made with something very modern that glowed in the middle of his chest and in the rockets in each boot and gauntlet.

"Scraped another one off your boot?" Stark asked him.

"I did," Lukas agreed, lips twisting in disgust. Walking nearer, he flipped the scepter with his foot into his hand. Then before Steve could stop him, he twirled the scepter and struck Schmidt across the face. The blow was forceful enough to send him to the floor.

"Lukas!" Steve exclaimed in shock. "He surrendered!"

But Lukas glared down at Schmidt unrepentant. "When we've squeezed you dry, your life is mine, you creature. You will regret that you came back to Midgard."

Steve couldn't disagree with that. "Let's go."
On the quinjet, Loki’s hand clutched the scepter tightly and he glared at Schmidt, wishing his eyes were lasers to burn holes right through his foul flesh and murder him where he stood.

He wanted desperately to puncture that smug self-possession. Why was Schmidt so confident, heading off to be imprisoned and interrogated by his enemies? Even if he thought SHIELD was too soft to really hurt him, he should be concerned for Loki’s revenge.

Unless... of course, he thought his Hydra pals were going to come to his rescue.

Loki’s lips lifted in a smile and he chuckled to himself. “I see it now. You think Hydra will come scurrying out of the walls like the cockroaches they are to carry you to conquest and victory. You expect they’ll have bred to vast numbers in secret, awaiting your arrival. You don’t know, you’re too late. I already drew out what few pathetic followers were around and crushed them. No one is coming, Schmidt. You’ve lost.”

“Lost, my demon?” Schmidt returned, not apparently bothered by either Loki’s words or the manacles around his hands. “I think not. Do I not have the strength of a god? I drunk of your power--”

The memory of what exactly he meant sparked an instantaneous blinding rage. He lunged across the aisle of the quinjet, calling a dagger to his hand to plunge in the monster’s heart--

“No!” Steven grabbed him by the arms and held on while he struggled, trying to get to Schmidt. “No, stop it, Don’t let him do this to you, stop.”

Loki didn’t listen at first, shaking with fury. He had to kill him, kill him now, silence him so he could never speak of such--

"Lukas, stop! You can't."

Loki’s back smashed against the bulkhead, bodily held there by Steven’s hands on both shoulders. His view of Schmidt now blocked by worried blue eyes, Loki closed his eyes, panting, as he fought the desire to kill Schmidt where he sat.

Grip still tight on Loki’s shoulders, Steve’s voice turned more calming, "That's right. Remember, we need him alive."

Behind him, Stark said, “Alive isn’t really the same as unhurt, though.” Alarmed, Steven looked over his shoulder, not letting go of Loki, but loosening his grip enough for Loki to see Stark holding the repulsor of his suit in Schmidt’s face. “I think you can tank this and survive. It might even make you better looking. So you wanna try, or do you want to shut up?”

“Tony…” Steven started.

“Spangles, let the m--,” Stark deliberately paused for ‘man’ and said instead, “freak answer. What’s it going to be, Tomatohead? Shutting the hell up or facial rearrangement?"

Schmidt didn’t really answer, but leaned back in his seat, lifting his bound hands in mute surrender.
That seemed to satisfy Steven enough that he returned his attention to Loki. Who was absolutely not satisfied -- he wanted to see what Stark's weapon would do to Schmidt's face. But... Steven was right. Until they found the tesseract and Barton, Schmidt had to stay alive.

Inhaling deliberate deep breaths through his clenched teeth, he managed to calm down enough to put the dagger away.

Steven gave him a last squeeze and let him go. “Hang in there,” he murmured. “Not much longer.”

Loki nodded, but Steven didn't seem to fully believe him, tagging along behind him, as Loki went to sit as far forward, and away from Schmidt as he could. Everything in him wanted to curl up into a defensive crouch, so he held himself rigidly straight. He would not give in to that creature, he would not bend to it. Not another second.

Stark didn’t move, remaining an armored deterrent near Schmidt.

Loki barely calmed enough to focus again, and was reaching out for seidr in his habitual exercise when it flared, blinding across all his senses. He recoiled, pulling power defensively as he looked to Schmidt.

But Schmidt was doing nothing.

What in the Realms was that? It had been too powerful, very close, dark energy still skittering across the threads of seidr like a stone across water.

"Something--" he started, as a tremendous roar of thunder rattled the jet.

A familiar roar of thunder.

Of course, he thought in bitter resignation, why not now, after it mattered?

Steven grabbed for one of the bulkhead bars to steady himself, and noticed Loki’s reaction. He probably thought he was distracting Loki from his fear of flying as he teased, “Not worried about some lightning are you?”

But this time it was not the aircraft upsetting him. Loki’s lips curved in a smirk, “Not at all. Just annoyed by what comes after.”

A heavy thump on the roof made the jet shudder again and drop altitude with a sudden lurch, and Natasha shouted, "Oh hell!"

Loki waited for the inevitable.

Steve didn't like any of this. Not Schmidt on the quinjet behind them, not Lukas flipping out to kill him, not lightning hitting the quinjet, but he especially didn't like the back ramp opening from the outside, in mid-air.

The cold air swirled in, followed by… a big guy, bare arms, long blond hair, a red cape billowing behind him, and a big metal hammer in one hand.

His gaze went straight to Lukas as if no one else existed. “Brother, I am here to assist you!” he called. Calling Lukas his brother meant this was Thor. Somehow. Thor was here.

He was impressive enough, armor-like shirt across shoulders and a chest that made Steve feel suddenly twelve and skinny again. “Man of Iron! Lady Natasha!” he bellowed at her. “Well met
again!” But then his gaze found Schmidt, and his face transformed with rage. “And you - creature of darkness. You will suffer the wrath—” In two steps he had a big hand wrapped around Schmidt’s throat. “Why do you have this creature yet alive?” he demanded furiously. “You who tormented my brother, did you think you would not pay for that offense to the sons of Odin, you bildgesnipe?”

“Thor, no, wait--” Steve blurted, but Thor glared at him dismissively, dragged Schmidt out the back by the neck, and they both dropped from the plane.

Tony glanced at Lukas and mocked lightly, “No, Thor. Don’t.’ Thanks for the help. I’m going after them -- at least some of us are interested in saving the planet.” He snapped the face shield down and in a blast of repulsors, was gone.

“Natasha, swing around, we’ll drop on them,” Steve called up front. “C’mon, Lukas, we can jump wherever they end up. Your brother seemed intent on killing him.”

Loki didn’t stand up, clutching Schmidt's scepter in one white-knuckled hand. “I see no reason to save him. Let Thor do as he will against Schmidt. Better late than never,” he added bitterly.

“Lukas!” Natasha snapped. “He knows where Clint is. We’re going after them. I have Stark on lidar, ready to go in twenty seconds.”

“Come on, buddy,” Steve held out his arm. “You know it’s the right thing to do.”

Lukas looked back, eyes cold. “He dies, Steven. I will not let him escape again.”

“Understood.”

Lukas clasped his arm and they hurried to the ramp, waiting for Natasha’s go ahead.

He held Steve’s arm as they jumped, and at first Steve didn’t understand why, but the air rippled and his sense of falling shifted. They fell, but strangely, without feeling the ground rushing up to them, almost as if there was a parachute slowing their descent.

But they weren’t high so the ground came up fast, and Steve spotted the flash of Stark’s suit to the left.

“What are they doing?” Lukas demanded.

They were fighting, obviously. Stark was trying to stop Thor from killing Schmidt. Steve ripped out of Lukas’ grip and went back into normal falling pulling out th shield to break his fall.

Tumbling past some tree branches, he rolled on landing, coming up with shield in hand and started running toward the fight.

Thor got a good grip and hurled Tony into a the trees with a crash, but just as he launched his hammer at Schmidt, Steve threw the shield to intercept.

The bang was tremendous, as the two smashed together -- the shockwave put Thor and Schmidt both on their ass, and Steve stumbled back, hand up to shield his eyes.

Lukas touched down in the aftermath, light as a feather, and put the point of the scepter against Schmidt's throat. "Be still," he warned. The gem in the end glowed with dire threat. Without taking his eyes from Schmidt, he said, "Thor, if you are quite finished, we have work that you interrupted.”

"Loki,” Thor got to his feet, dusted himself off, and approached. He seemed remarkably untouched
by having taken the full blast of Tony's gauntlet. "Why would you save this... creature?"

"Well, that's a question you should have asked before you tried to kill him, isn't it?" Lukas responded coldly.

Steve retrieved the shield and gave Tony a hand to help him back to his feet. Groaning, Tony said, "You hit like a ton of bricks, Goldilocks."

Thor ignored him. "Loki --"

Loki narrowed his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"Heimdall spied this creature's return," Thor tilted a head at Schmidt. "Father sent me to assist you."

Steve smiled, happy to hear that Lukas' family was taking steps to meet with him again, remembering how bitter he had been about their abandonment during the war.

"Did he?" Lukas was not impressed. "How good of him to notice this time. But I have no need of your help." He poked the tip of the scepter into Schmidt's throat, causing him to flinch, and that finally won a satisfied smirk from him. "Get up. I trust the quinjet is near? Steven, if you and Tony would guard him? I find myself entirely too tempted to take his head off."

"Loki--" Thor tried again as Tony held out his repulsors in threat at Schmidt, and the quinjet circled for a landing to the west.

When Lukas ignored him, Thor put a hand on his shoulder, which Lukas promptly dislodged.

Thor looked hurt and confused. "I -- came to help you, brother, why--"

“What are you doing?” Lukas demanded furiously. “Why are you even here?”

“We thought to help--”

“I didn’t ask for your help!” Lukas retorted and spun on his heel to stalk several paces away, chest heaving while he tried to control his temper.

“Heimdall saw the portal,” Thor explained behind him. “Mother saw that villain. He is allied with the Chitauri, Loki, and others no one can see.”

Lukas glanced back over his shoulder, sneering in contempt. “So you thought to kill him with that question unanswered. Brilliant as usual.”

“That cretin harmed you--”

“Yes, I know that. I was there. You were not.” He conjured a blade and hurled at the boulder to Thor’s left where it shattered. “You have no right to take my vengeance from me!”

Thor flinched violently as if he’d thought the blade was sent at him, but after a moment, his shoulders relaxed and he said, his voice more thoughtful, “No, I do not. You’re right. I reacted to his presence, when I should not have.”

His lips parted and he stared, confounded by that acknowledgment. After a moment he frowned and taunted, "Who are you and what did you do with Thor? You just said I’m right. It may be a miracle.”

“You are the one who never agrees I’m right,” Thor objected.
“Because you never are.” But the lightened mood passed and Lukas sighed. “Let’s go back and leave Schmidt to me.”

Thor clasped his shoulder. “Before that, I would have you know that Father sent me to your aid. They want to make amends.”

Steve thought that sounded promising, but Lukas’ lip curled in a sneer, and he twisted away. “Is that what they want?” he asked, voice cold. "Were you bid to retrieve me, or the tesseract?"

Thor didn’t answer immediately, and the bitter smile on Lukas’ face was all Steve needed to know nothing was mended.

He gripped Lukas on the shoulder as he passed, trying to let him know that Steve was with him in this. Lukas glanced at him, making a little effort at a smile that didn’t touch his eyes in thanks, but he otherwise ignored everything else, except watching Schmidt and ignoring Thor.

They all piled back on the quinjet, with Stark and Thor keeping an eye on Schmidt while the others went forward. Lukas passed through to the cockpit where he took the co-pilot seat next to Natasha. “Let’s go.”

Steve stood behind them and glanced aft. Thor folded his arms, Mjolnir hanging ready, and glowered at Schmidt, who was watching Thor with a pleasing wariness. But there was no guarantee one of them wasn't going to try something stupid.

"I think the sooner we get him to interrogation the better."

Natasha followed his eyes, but saw something else, pursing her lips. She murmured. “He’s a little too comfortable with all this, isn't he?"

“You think it's a plan?” Steve asked, but nodded. It fit with the sudden capitulation in Stuttgart.

"Oh, I know it's a part of his plan,” Lukas said. "But what it gains him to be our prisoner I can only guess."

"Distraction?" she asked, tilting her head thoughtfully. "We have him, not the tesseract. It's with Doctor Selvig and Barton."

She said the name evenly but Lukas touched her shoulder. "We will get him back, Natayla."

"Yes, we will." Her voice was stone-cold promise, but her fingers brushed his to thank him for the reassurance as she reached for the controls to liftoff.

"If we're playing his game, let's play," she said. "Back to the Helicarrier."

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Chapter End Notes

NOTE: This fic is on temporary hiatus until my other big fic, Ragdoll, finishes posting (in summer, probably). But I do fully intend to come back and give you the rest of the alternate Battle of New York. :)

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