Lines In Sand; Lines In Stone

by BigSciencyBrain

Summary

A split-second decision changes the course of Steve's life and both he and Loki are hit by a sex spell. The Avengers race to save them, but grappling with magic turns out to be harder than any of them imagined and defeating the spell is only the beginning. As Steve and Loki navigate the consequences, they form a genuine bond that develops into a complicated relationship.

(There's a lot of angisting and talking about consent/sexuality. And Loki gets adopted by a mythological creature.)
Chapter 1

Steve dove for Amora as the blaze of swirling magic between her and Thor began to sizzle on the air.

“You idiot!” Loki shouted. He was a blur, knocking Thor out of the way before the fire reached its zenith and exploded.

Steve felt the magical fire hit his back with a sharp, hot blow that knocked the breath from his lungs. Suddenly, his limbs felt strangely heavy and his ears were buzzing. Amora was screeching at him, but he couldn’t understand the words, and then she was gone. With a groan, he pushed himself up onto his hands and knees and then all the way to his feet. Thor was helping Loki up from where he’d fallen.

“Thank you, brother,” Thor said seriously. “You took the spell that Amora meant for me.”

Loki yanked his arm away from Thor. “Had the Soldier not interrupted her working, I would have done nothing, but that fool has just made the situation worse.”

All eyes turned to Steve.

“What?” he asked. “She was attacking Thor.”

“She was not attacking him,” Loki said through clenched teeth. He pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead.

“Do you need a healer?” Thor asked, moving closer to Loki.

“No!” Loki spat at him. “The spell will run its course, there is no stopping it. Should you wish to say your goodbyes to the good Captain now, I suggest you do so.”

Steve blinked. Other than the strange buzzing in his ears, he felt fine. “What do you know about the spell?”

Loki shrugged, agitated. “It is meant to coerce another. Submit and find salvation, refuse and perish.”

Frowning, Steve tried to read between the lines. Loki wasn’t looking at him directly; in fact, he was avoiding Steve’s gaze completely and that was unusual for Loki. “Is there any chance we’ll survive?” he asked.

Loki stiffened and then shook his head. “No.”

“Tony,” Steve began.

“On it.” The Iron Man suit crunched over gravel as he started away, repulsors beginning to glow as he prepared to launch. “Big Green, I need Bruce as soon as you get a minute to calm down. Everyone get back to the Tower.”

Steve found his focus slipping on the way back. His thoughts kept wandering to Loki and he couldn’t help glancing toward him. Not once did he see Loki return his look, but he noticed that Loki’s hands were gripping the straps of the Quinjet jump seat so tightly that his knuckles were white.

He’d never noticed how beautiful Loki’s skin was before.
To everyone’s surprise, Loki didn’t say a word as he was lead into a containment cell and shackled. In fact, he even tested the chains around his wrists and ankles to make sure they could hold him. He didn’t protest when Bruce drew blood samples and swabbed his skin and mouth.

“That’s creepy,” Clint commented. “It’s like he’s afraid of what’s going to happen.”

Steve only frowned harder. He settled onto a chair and allowed Bruce to collect the same samples from him as well. Compulsively, he kept turning to look at the door to the containment cell. “Should we be worried about me? If Loki thinks he needs to be chained up, then,” he couldn’t finish the sentence.

“We still don’t know what this is.” Bruce pressed a cotton ball against the inside of Steve’s elbow as he withdrew the needle. “But you’ve got a point.”

“He knows more than he’s saying.” Steve got out of the chair. “I’ll try to talk to him. Since we’re in this together, maybe he’ll tell me how I’m going to die.”

No one disagreed, although none of them looked comfortable with it.

Steve felt a quiver in the pit of his stomach as he approached the door. It slid open with a whisper. He was barely through the doorway when Loki began to shout at him.

“Get out! Get out! You fool!”

“Whoa.” Steve held up both hands, sticking to the far wall. “Just here to talk. Bruce and Tony are going to figure this out.

Loki’s laughter was brittle and a little breathless. He sat down, chains rattling, and dug his fingers into his hair. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get as far away from me as possible.”

“Why?”

“So we can both die in peace.”

“There has to be a way to stop this.” Steve took a step forward. He wanted to go to Loki more than anything, though he couldn’t quite put his finger on why.

Loki recoiled away from him, eyes narrowed. “The cure is worse than the disease, believe me.”

“It can’t possibly be worse than-”

“Tell them to turn off the cameras and the listening devices or I will disable them,” Loki interrupted.

“Okay, okay. Tony?” He looked up at the camera over the door.

Tony’s voice came over the speaker. “No can do, Cap.”

“Just the audio?”

A pause. “Just the audio. You have ninety seconds. Starting…now.”

“Alright.” Steve resisted the urge to take a seat beside Loki.

“Amora is obsessed with Thor,” Loki began without preamble. “Her spell was to secure him as her own.”
“What, a love spell?”

Loki snorted. “Hardly so romantic. Since I am pressed for time and cannot hope to explain the workings of magic to you, I will be indelicate. Either we have sex or we die. It’s quite simple.”

The ringing in Steve’s ears made him wonder if he’d heard Loki correctly and, at the same time, he felt strangely upset. “You mean…we…you and me. So when I tackled Amora…”

“I assure you that I am far better option than my brother,” Loki huffed, not looking at Steve.

“And you knew…when you knocked Thor out of the way…that…that we would have to…”

“We don’t have to,” Loki snarled. “I will remain here, you will leave.”

“You’d rather die than have sex with me?”

Loki closed his eyes, exhaling a harsh rush of breath. “Perhaps your faith in your friends will prove fruitful.”

“I don’t understand.” Steve rubbed at his temple. His thoughts were muddied and he was hurt that Loki was rejecting him.

“It’s the spell, Captain. I assure you that you have no more genuine interest in me than I do in you.”

His face was beginning to burn and he wasn’t sure why it bothered him so much. “But just…once… I mean, it wouldn’t be so bad. Would it?”

Loki winced, eyes still closed. “It wouldn’t be once. Amora was very…enthusiastic. It could be days. Again and again until the spell was satisfied.”

“Loki,” Steve stopped and forced himself to turn away.

With horror, he realized that Loki was right. The spell had already begun to work its way into his thoughts and his words and he was seconds away from begging Loki to reconsider. Or worse. He ran through possible scenarios in his head, trying to find one that was better than the others.

“Everything alright in there, Cap?” Tony’s voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

“Bring in another set of chains,” Steve said, his voice hoarse.

“I’m pretty sure those will hold him.”

“Not for Loki.” Steve took a deep breath. “For me.”

He sat down on the far end of the bench and waited. A few minutes later, Bruce brought in another set of chains. They hooked into the wall first and then clamped around Steve’s wrists and ankles.

“Anything you want to tell me?” Bruce asked under his breath.

“As long as we’re both in here, no one else will get hurt,” Steve answered. He gave all four chains a good, strong tug to be sure they’d hold. “Just hurry. Please.”

Bruce looked worried. “We’ll find something.”

“And you guys might want to leave the audio off.” Steve felt his face and throat flush with heat and knew he must be bright red.
Once they were alone again, Loki spoke. “Noble to the end, Captain.”

Steve didn’t say anything. He didn’t trust his own words any longer. There was heat, strange and unnatural, beginning to churn beneath his skin. A sideways glance let him know that Loki was feeling it too. Although he was sitting perfectly still, a single strand of hair was stuck with sweat to his temple.

“Loki,” he began hesitantly.

“Try not to speak,” Loki snapped. His voice was rough and ragged, as though he was under great strain.

Steve swallowed. “Does Thor know what the spell was for?”

“No.” After a moment, Loki laughed a little. “He would’ve had you pinned to the wall with your legs spread like a whore by now.”

Steve’s mind went completely blank. Not because he was picturing the image that Loki had painted. Instead, his mind was suddenly filled with what Loki would look like naked beneath him, quivering, back arching. Leaning forward, Steve squeezed his eyes shut and tried to take deep breaths. His desire cut through him like a sword.

“At least we would’ve survived,” he ground out, inexplicably furious with Loki for refusing to be sensible about their predicament.

“Says Captain America. The symbol of all that is virtuous, good, and true.”

“Yeah, well…” Steve didn’t know where he wanted to go with that thought so he stopped. “Would you rather someone else had tackled Amora?”

“You are awfully petty when your feelings are hurt.”

“I’m not…that isn’t. I just can’t believe you’d rather die.” Steve turned to glare at Loki and saw a smirk on his lips.

Loki leaned his head back against the wall. “Would you like me to describe everything I would like to do you? In great detail, perhaps. How badly I wish to sink my teeth into your skin, to taste the salt of your sweat. How much I want to feel your muscles beneath my fingertips, to watch your body strain against me…against those chains…as you spill your seed down my throat. I would suck every inch of your cock and drink you dry, Captain, and then I would spread your legs and fuck you until you screamed my name.”

Steve’s stomach did somersaults. “Oh.”

“It isn’t real, Rogers.” Loki turned his head and closed his eyes. “Whatever you feel, whatever you want. It isn’t real. It is just a spell.”

“Will it get worse?”

“Much worse.” Loki took a deep, ragged breath. “You should not have stayed.”

“They wouldn’t have been able to keep me away.” He knew it was true; even now, the distance between them was agony. “What happens when we…when we don’t…”

“Eventually, the spell will cause our bodies to overheat, not literally but you needn’t concern yourself
with the details. We will be unconscious long before we die.”

Steve couldn’t get comfortable. His body was responding to the spell and his penis was getting harder by the second, making his uniform painfully tight. “Is there anything we can do to slow it down or buy time? That doesn’t require…you know…”

“There is nothing I know of.”

“Loki.”

“No,” Loki snapped. “Were it not for the spell, you wouldn’t even look at me.”

Steve swallowed down anything he might have dared say. His skin felt as though thousands of ants were crawling over him and biting at him, each one of them trying to push him toward Loki. He thought of Loki’s hands and his skin and his lips. He didn’t even realize that he was panting, legs falling open, until he heard Loki moan.

“Rogers,” Loki said, his voice rough. He sounded desperate and torn and ashamed.

Steve pressed his back against the wall and tried to force his body to go still. “It’s okay,” he tried to reassure Loki.

Loki arched his back, his expression clearly one of pain. “If you had…not gotten in the way.”

Steve felt it through his entire body, from the top of his head to the tip of his toes; the sound of Loki’s voice, of his desire, and he was helpless against it. He pulled against the chains but they didn’t give. His erection was physically painful at this point; he tried to force himself to think about something else.

“If I hadn’t, it would be Thor and Amora in this situation,” Steve said.

“That was the plan.” Loki grimaced, groaning as he tried to get comfortable. “It would’ve kept my fool of a brother out of my way.”

“You were behind it?” He wasn’t as surprised as he thought he should be. “Why did you need Thor out of the way?”

“Perhaps he merely irritates me.” Loki jerked against the chains; his erection was visible even beneath his armor.

Steve’s mind filled with images of promise. Of Loki’s lips around his cock, of his hands and his skin and his body. He wished the chains were gone so he press Loki up against the wall. He wanted it. He wanted it hard and fast; he wanted to fill Loki up with cum and then watch it drip down the inside of his thighs. The mental image was sickening and arousing at the same time. He realized that he no longer cared if Loki was willing or not. He didn’t care if he caused Loki pain or made him bleed; it went against everything Steve believed in, but if it hadn’t been for the chains around his wrists and ankles, he knew he would’ve torn Loki’s clothes away and taken him without the slightest shred of mercy.

“Loki,” he breathed. He couldn’t say more. He couldn’t thank Loki for realizing – for understanding – what the spell truly meant.

“Don’t.” Loki’s voice was breathless. “Don’t torture yourself over it. I want it. I want everything you’re imagining and more.” With a coy smile, Loki shifted and transformed into a raven haired woman bound in chains on the bench. She licked her lips and spread her legs provocatively. “This
body could be yours, Captain,” she said in a husky voice. “You want this; I can see it in your eyes.”

He did. It was confusing – extremely confusing – to think of Loki as both male and female. “Change back,” he said, his voice strained.

“Interesting,” Loki said as his form shifted again, his tone of voice no less predatory. “I thought your preferences tended toward women.”

“They do, but…but,” Steve couldn’t finish that sentence. Not when it came to Loki.

“It’s just the spell, Rogers.”

“If we live through this, you’d better call me Steve.” He tried to take deep breaths and clear his mind. “Maybe I should ask for a deck of cards. Something.”

“I believe there is a popular game in your realm known as strip poker.” Loki sounded amused.

“We are not playing that.” Steve said quickly. He thought better of it an instant later; naked would probably be more comfortable than his SHIELD uniform and Loki’s armor. And if he couldn’t touch Loki, he wouldn’t mind looking.

“How would you propose we spend our final hours then?”

“Hours?” Steve wasn’t sure he could last hours without going insane with lust.

“You were hoping for more? As I said, Amora was quite determined.”

Steve groaned. It was half frustration and half terror. “This wasn’t how I thought I was going to die.”

Loki only hummed in response. When Steve glanced to the side, he saw that Loki’s eyes were closed, lips parted, and he was clenching and unclenching his fists in a slow rhythm that was strangely hypnotic. There was bright color high up on his pale cheeks and all Steve could wrap his mind around was that this was what Loki looked like when he was having sex.

“Hey, Cap?” Tony’s voice felt like a bucket of ice water. “Purely a scientific question, I promise, but how are you feeling?”

“Been better,” Steve said through clenched teeth.

“Because the pheromone readings in that cell are skyrocketing. I mean, this isn’t biologically possible, but I’m looking at the numbers and-“

“Tony,” Steve interrupted, too miserable to care if anyone knew. “Loki and I were hit with a sex spell. Amora meant it for her and Thor. And if you can’t find a way to stop it, we’re both going to die.”

A long pause. “Right. We’re on it, Cap.” Another pause. “Couldn’t you just…you know…”

“NO!” Both Steve and Loki shouted in unison.

“They’ll figure it out,” Steve murmured. “We’re not going to die in here.”

“Perhaps you won’t.” Loki sounded feverish, his voice dry and slurred. “They have no reason to save me.”

“They will. You’ll see.” He didn’t bring up Thor and a potential situation with Asgard if Loki died
on the Avengers’ watch. None of that was something Loki would be willing to hear.

“I should’ve.” Loki licked his lips. “I should’ve just spirited you away and fucked you senseless.”

*I wish you had*, Steve thought. “I’m glad you didn’t,” he said instead. “It…it wouldn’t have been consensual. For either of us, not like this. You did the right thing.”

Loki barked out a laugh. “And doomed myself to die. How pathetic.”

“There’s no other way? If you had sex with someone else? If there’s someone you…that you want.”

He hated the idea that Loki might want someone else and that was confusing enough.

Loki shook his head. “The spell is binding. It has to be you.”

“I would sell my soul to touch you right now,” Steve said without thinking. Immediately, he wanted to take the words back. It was just the spell. Wasn’t it?

Loki pulled against the chains, trying to find a more comfortable position. He ended up on his back with one leg falling off the bench and the other knee bent. “No need to tarnish your precious soul, Captain.”

Steve wanted to move closer, to slide himself between Loki’s legs and press down against him. A bead of sweat dripped down the side of his face. He could see the bulge of Loki’s erection in the leather and the sight of it made his mouth go dry. If he could reach far enough, if he could curl his fingers over Loki’s hips and lift them up, then he could get even closer, press against him and –

“You’re drooling,” Loki said without opening his eyes.

“I can’t help it.” Steve meant it as an apology, but then realized what he was saying and began to laugh. He really couldn’t help it. “I can’t believe we’re going to die because…because…”

Loki lifted his head enough to look at Steve. “I admit, I am holding out some hope that the fools you call friends will present an alternative solution.”

“It’s just sex.”

“You…and of all people.” Loki’s words turned into a moan. “You would hate me once it was all over. Or worse, you’d try to make amends, you’d feel culpable. And then I’d never be rid of you.”

It was true; Steve couldn’t argue with any of it. “Do we really have a choice? Maybe it’s…maybe it would be okay.”

“Desperate rationalization.”

“So what if it is?” Steve said, frustrated.

“Once it’s over, all the convenient rationalizations in the world won’t matter. I will still be the enemy, your enemy. And SHIELD would add the rape of Captain America to my list of crimes.”

“It’s not…it wouldn’t be.” Steve couldn’t finish, partly because his head was beginning to spin and partly because he knew Loki was right. Neither of them were in their right minds and nothing would change that. “Well, they’d have to add that to my list too, then,” he said finally.

“You and I both know that you would be seen as the victim and I would not.” Loki’s voice was harsh, but not angry.
“They’d understand.” Squeezing his eyes shut, Steve tried to stop talking. He could hear exactly how his words sounded and he knew how wrong the entire situation was.

He had to have faith in his team.

He held onto that. Shallow breaths were easier and less painful. Eventually, he had to maneuver himself onto his back to ease the tightness of his uniform. His mind was filled with a constant parade of Loki; Loki as a man, Loki as a woman; with clothing, without clothing; every fantasy he’d never known he had came crawling out of the depths of his mind to explode across his imagination. In his mind, he did things that horrified him and thrilled him at the same time.

“Rogers,” Loki moaned. “Please.”

The word please was pure agony. Steve turned his face away and tried to keep breathing. It was getting harder to fill his lungs, as though his asthma had suddenly returned.

He realized that he was blacking out for periods of time when he came awake suddenly, hearing Loki pleading – screaming – for release; his back was arched with pain, hands in tight fists against his thighs. In his delirium, Steve wanted nothing more than to reach out and comfort him.

“Loki,” he whispered. It felt as though his blood was on fire. “I don’t think…I don’t think I have much longer.” He hated knowing that he would be gone first and leave Loki alone in the cell with nothing but the burning of the spell inside him.

Loki’s eyes were nearly black, his pupils impossibly wide, when he lifted his head. “Noble to the end, Captain,” he whispered.

Steve tried to smile. “They’ll find something. Hold on.” He closed his eyes and knew it was for the last time.

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When Steve woke, he felt as though he were floating in space with nothing real around him. Far away, he could hear medical equipment humming and beeping. Gradually he became aware of a bed beneath him and the tug of surgical tape holding an IV tube in place against his arm. His thoughts were fuzzy and out of focus. It felt like only seconds for him to open his eyes, but he knew from the shifted light through the window that it had been much longer. Without sitting up, he tried to look around.

He was alive.

Natasha’s face came into focus beside him. “Welcome back.”

“Loki?” Steve asked, his voice hoarse.

“Alive. Once he woke up, he didn’t stick around.”

Steve sunk back into the bed, relieved and glad that they had both survived. “How did you guys stop it?”

“Bruce is a genius. Basically, we ran your blood through a weird kind of dialysis for a few days, but I’m sure he’d love to explain the details of it when you get out of here. Several times.” Natasha pressed a hand against his arm. “Try to rest; you’ve still got a ways to go.”

He nodded and closed his eyes again. He felt like he could sleep for another seventy years.
It was another day before Bruce let him out of recovery; he was about to go stir crazy from being kept in a hospital bed. No one mentioned how he’d gotten there, although he could see it in the expressions they tried to hide and the awkwardness of their questions. The entire night had been recorded on video so everyone, including SHIELD, knew that Steve hadn’t touched Loki inside the cell. And that Loki hadn’t touched Steve either.

He was a little surprised when Tony told Director Fury that the audio had mysteriously failed to record.

When the next call came in from SHIELD – Amora and her Executioner – Steve cringed as he suited up and tried not to make it personal.

By the time the Avengers arrived at the site, both of their enemies were already unconscious. Loki was sitting on a large rock, looking very much as though he was more concerned about his fingernails than the destruction around him. There wasn’t much for SHIELD or the Avengers to do and no one seemed willing to approach Loki, including Thor, who kept casting sidelong glances toward Steve as though he wanted to say something.

Finally, Steve set his jaw and began directing the SHIELD agents to collect Amora and her lackey and take them into custody. He made his way closer to Loki, who was still not looking at him, but not running away either.

“Loki,” Steve said, his eyes on the armored trucks arriving to carry the prisoners away.

“Steve,” Loki replied tersely.

He glanced over, seeing Loki’s profile and noting the hard, thin line of his lips. As much as he wished all the feverish, spell-induced fantasies had vanished from his mind, he had to admit that they’d filled his dreams the night before.

Braving a question, he asked, “when does it wear off completely? The spell.”

Loki remained unyielding and silent. In a moment, he was gone, vanished into thin air as he always seemed to do.

Discouraged and confused, Steve made sure that everything was cleaned up, the prisoners were locked away, and he carefully wrote up his post-mission report for SHIELD. He was relieved when he could finally head back to his apartment and try to forget everything that had happened that day. More than anything, he wanted a cup of tea, a good book, and to close every curtain in his apartment in an attempt to shut out the entire city.

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The battle against the Kree reconnaissance drone was short, as battles with the Avengers went. It ended in a flash of power and heat that scorched the edges of anything combustible into blackened, curling tips.

Amidst the rubble of what had once been a parking garage, Loki picked his way through chunks of concrete and cars crumpled like soda cans. He found Thor unconscious but still breathing, with no signs of permanent damage and unlikely to be out for long. Iron Man’s power was flickering inside the suit; the faint voice of JARVIS was audible as it counted down a start up sequence to bring the internal systems back online; equally faint was the voice of Tony Stark inside, arguing with JARVIS. The mortals, Black Widow and her Hawk, were temporarily trapped within a makeshift cave of concrete beams. The Hulk, now a peacefully sleeping Bruce Banner, had followed orders and pulled
the beams down around them in order to protect them from the blast.

That left only one.

Loki saw the tip of the shield first; one curving edge rising up from a pile of shattered stone and dirt. As he began to move aside the rubble, he recognized the awkward placement of the shield as Steve’s last ditch effort at self-preservation. He’d managed to preserve enough air to allow him to continue breathing until he was unearthed.

Once he’d uncovered enough to pull him free of the concrete’s grip, he took hold of one wrist and hauled the Captain’s limp form up onto his shoulder. The shimmer on the air appeared as he walked and he felt the familiar buzz of magic stepping through the portal he’d opened. In a single step, he left behind the demolished parking garage. His destination was a long-forgotten structure of carved stone amidst wind ravaged hills in a place the mortals called the Highlands. Old magic, earth magic, still lived in the abandoned places of Midgard and Loki had been drawn to it.

He carried the Captain to one of the rooms he had reclaimed from the flora and fauna of Midgard and eased him down onto a makeshift bed of wool blankets and animal pelts. The fire had faded from the roaring blaze he’d left behind and took coaxing to latch onto another heavy log.

With the fire beginning to eat away at the chill in the air, he carefully removed the Captain’s boots and helmet. He set them neatly beside the shield. He was tempted to do more; it would be easy enough to undo the buckles and zippers and peel away the uniform to reach bare skin. The rose of the Captain’s lips was a tantalizing contrast against pale skin smudged with dirt and soot. Cautiously, he knelt down and let his hand hover just over the star of the uniform. Reaching out with magic rather than his physical senses, he searched for any lingering trace of Amora’s spell.

He found nothing.

Disappointment was sour on his tongue. He brushed it aside and left the Captain to recover in peace. No doubt, the Avengers would begin looking for him soon enough and Thor would likely show up on his doorstep, Mjolnir in hand. He’d searched his own body for traces of the spell again and again, each time finding nothing, but the alternative was more terrifying than the spell. Genuine attraction to a mortal – especially this particular mortal – was an unnecessary and foolish complication in every way imaginable. Without any remnants of Amora’s spell, it would certainly be unrequited.

He knew how foolish it was and still, he’d brought Captain America home like a stray dog he’d found wounded on the street. Frustrated, he left the castle and stalked out onto the moor in the hope that the biting wind and fresh air would clear his head.

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The room around him blinked into focus as Steve came awake. He frowned, recognizing nothing as familiar. His muscles and joints protested when he sat up. Someone had removed his helmet and boots; he saw them placed beside his shield on the stone floor.

There was a fire crackling in a wide fireplace nearby. That and a single, narrow window provided the only sources of light. He smelled earth and old wood; there were patches of lichen and moss on the walls. The stones that made up the floor looked worn by centuries. There was a stack of folded cloth near his feet that turned out to be a pair of blue jeans and a tunic style shirt made of heavy, warm fabric in a red that was so dark it was nearly black. Wherever he was, whoever had found him, he figured they would’ve killed him in his sleep if that’s what they’d wanted. He checked the pouches on his belt and found them empty; his means of communicating with the Avengers was gone.
They didn’t want him dead, but they didn’t want him calling for help either.

He stripped out of his uniform and into the more comfortable clothes. He tugged his boots on and grabbed the shield before he approached the door. It was heavy, solid wood with iron hinges that groaned when he pulled it open.

“So much for stealth,” he muttered under his breath before slipping out into the hallway.

Outside the room, it was even more apparent that he was somewhere ancient and abandoned. The earth had begun a full scale reclamation of the structure; trees sprouted brazenly from the walls and tangled masses of thick vines filled every available nook or crevice. He moved carefully, not quite trusting the integrity of the stones beneath his feet, to a winding staircase at the other end of the corridor. The carved stone steps were narrow and claustrophobic, but felt sturdy enough.

The faint aroma of smoke and cooking meat caught his attention on the second to last step, making his mouth water and his stomach growl. He followed the smell, doubling back several times when he determined he’d taken a wrong turn, and eventually discovered an open door leading to a primitive kitchen.

There were no windows; the room was lit by the fire and torches on the walls. On the wide wooden table in the center of the room were signs that someone had prepared or was in the midst of preparing a meal. Dark bread covered with large seeds was cooling on a flat stone. His stomach growled again as he moved closer to the fire. A cast iron cauldron filled with soup or stew was bubbling over the open flame. Beside it, a carcass of what might have been a chicken was slowly rotating on a spit.

“Hungry?”

Steve jumped, whirling around to bring his shield up. Seeing Loki leaning against the doorway did nothing to ease the sudden acceleration of his heartbeat. It took him a second to realize that Loki looked different because he wasn’t wearing his usual armor.

Thin lips quirked into an amused smile. “I am unarmed.”

“You’re never unarmed.”

Loki laughed. It wasn’t the bitter, angry laughter that Steve had heard so often when Loki and Thor met, but honest, genuine laughter. He felt suddenly off balance and lowered the shield, rubbing at the center of his forehead as though that would help him focus.

“Eat. You have slept for a day and a night.” Loki moved around him as surely as water flowing around a stubborn rock.

Sinking down onto one of rough hewn stools, Steve watched Loki pull a bowl and plate made of hammered metal from a shelf on the wall. His stomach churned painfully as he watched Loki fill the bowl with thick soup. Clenching his hands into fists against his thighs, he forced himself to hold still and wait. Loki placed the bowl and a carved, wooden spoon in front of him; he cut meat from the roasting carcass onto the plate and added a chunk of the dark bread.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Steve asked when Loki settled onto the stool across the table.

“I have not been asleep.” He seemed to think of something and glanced around. “I’m afraid that I have little to offer you to drink.”

“It’s okay. It’s more than okay, I mean…thank you. For this.” He picked up spoon and dug into the soup. It was still almost too hot to eat, but he was too hungry to wait. The soup was mostly carrots
and chunks of potato, with other vegetables sprinkled throughout and a rich, savory seasoning. The bowl was half empty when he realized that Loki was studying him with an oddly thoughtful expression on his face. “Sorry,” he murmured, licking his lips and hoping he didn’t have soup all over his chin.

“I take it as a compliment. I am a poor cook.”

Steve shook his head, answering through a mouthful of soup and bread. “Are you kidding? This is delicious.” It was strange enough to be in the same room with Loki and not be ducking for cover, but even stranger for Loki not to be oozing with his usual arrogant superiority; he seemed relaxed and contemplative instead. “What about the others? Are they alright?”

“They were alive when I saw them last. I did not stay long. No doubt they will be looking for you.”

“Where are we? Is there anything around?” He swallowed down the last of the soup. Now that his hunger was beginning to subside, he could slow down and enjoy the rest of his meal.

“The nearest village is some ways off. I have not bothered to learn its name.”

“Are we still on Earth?”

“Yes.”

Steve stripped away a chunk of meat with his fingers, not minding the juices that spilled out. He wondered if Loki’s unusual friendliness would evaporate when he asked for his communicator back. He wanted to ask Loki why he bothered to pull him out of rubble and bring him here; he’d wondered if the spell still lingered for Loki as well.

“Does anyone know I’m with you?” he asked instead.

Loki shrugged carelessly. “Stark may have seen me.” The fingers of his right hand began to trace lazy patterns against the top of the wooden table.

There were too many questions buzzing in Steve’s head. Technically, he was sitting at a table with an enemy and a foreign dignitary – or former dignitary – and there was a certain amount of protocol involved. He needed to be polite, but on guard; respectful, but not vulnerable. The SHIELD manual on what to do if an agent encountered Loki was nearly a novel; he couldn’t be trusted, couldn’t be believed, and an agent was advised never to turn their back on him.

“Look, maybe you should just take me back.” Steve swallowed down the last of the meat and bread, sucking the juice from his fingers.

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “And why is that, Captain?”

“Steve.”

“Does it matter?”

“You call me Captain when you want to distance yourself from me, but you called me Steve the day we took Amora in.” He watched Loki pull back from the table, his expression turning cold. He fumbled for the right words and hoped he wouldn’t sound like an idiot. “Thank you. For this. I mean it. I want to stay, here, with you, believe me, I do. But it’s not real, right? It’s just the spell talking. I don’t know when it’ll wear off and until it does, maybe it’s just better to keep our distance.”

Loki stared at him. “There is no longer any danger to our lives.”
“I know, I know.” Steve rubbed at his forehead again. “But it wouldn’t be right.”

“What care have I for right or wrong?” Loki moved like quicksilver. He rounded the end of the table and spun Steve around, pressing his back against the table edge.

“Loki.” That was all Steve had time to say before Loki’s lips were pressed against his.

He gave himself a moment. A moment to let himself sink back against the table, let Loki press against him; a moment to savor every millimeter of contact between them and imagine where it could go from there. He imagined skin against skin and the play of Loki’s muscles beneath his hands. His fingers dug into Loki’s hair. It was everything he’d imagined, everything he’d dreamed about. Loki’s lips were cool against his; his hair was soft and curled around his fingers. He let one hand settle on the small of Loki’s back, pulling him in between his legs and giving him surface area to grind against.

“Wait,” he gasped. “Loki, please stop.”

Loki stilled against him, his breath cool and light against his skin. “Why?”

“Because this isn’t real.”

“I’ve spent enough time in this realm to know that sex is rarely real for your kind.”

“My kind? What’s that supposed to mean?” He didn’t expect Loki to pull back. “Wait. I just want it to be real. Is that too much to ask? I don’t want to spend the rest of my life wondering if you only want me because of Amora’s spell.”

Loki’s expressions passed too quickly for Steve to catch. His mouth opened and then closed. He shook his head, laughing so slightly that it was barely audible. Finally he took a deep breath and pulled away completely. “You do realize the irony of your complaint, do you not? Were it not for the spell, you would not want me at all.”

“Wait, just wait.” Steve settled his hands on Loki’s hips, holding him there as much as Loki let him. "Tell me when the spell is going to wear off. We can go from there. Maybe…maybe there could be something here. Between us. I don’t know. I don’t know if this is real or not. I have to know. I have to be sure.”

“If I were to tell you the spell has no more influence over you, would you believe me?”

Steve didn’t know how to respond to that. If it was true, then his attraction to Loki wasn’t because of the spell; all of his fantasies, everything he’d imagined, were because he truly was interested in Loki.

“The spell is long since spent, Captain.” Loki held up one hand and the air began to shimmer. “Go home to your Avengers.”

Before he could respond, Loki grabbed hold of his tunic and pulled him upright. He stumbled through the shimmer on the air and suddenly found himself in New York City, standing at the base of Avengers Tower. Heart hammering against the inside of his chest, he whirled around, searching for anything that might lead him to Loki, but he came face to face with sidewalks full of tourists. He felt as lost as he had when he’d woken from the ice.

The first time, he’d lost Peggy. This time, he didn’t know what he’d lost.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Steve continues to deal with the fallout of Amora's spell.

Chapter Notes

Post-Captain America: The Winter Soldier and Avengers Tower is a thing.

“All right, what’s going on with you?” Sam panted, breathless from trying to keep pace. “You nearly mowed down someone’s grandma back there.”

Steve glanced back immediately, searching the route they’d run for any sign of someone in distress.

“Something’s on your mind, I get that. Is it something you can share or is it above my pay grade?”

He headed for the nearest shade, beneath a wide oak tree, and tried to work some of the tension out of his neck and shoulders. Glancing side to side, he looked for paparazzi and unfamiliar faces who could be FBI or NSA or any number of agencies that had edged in while SHIELD rebuilt itself from the ashes in the Potomac. He hadn’t told anyone where he’d gone when he’d disappeared from the destroyed parking garage and he’d never mentioned Loki. If Loki was to be believed, which no one on his team would ever suggest he do, then the spell was over and the heat that pooled low in his abdomen whenever he thought about Loki, and the goose bumps on the back of his neck, weren’t because of Amora’s spell. He didn’t think he was ready to deal with that or for anyone to know about it either.

“Look, you know I’m here. If you need to talk.” Sam’s expression had turned serious and his tone changed to the one he used for VA meetings. That just made Steve feel worse.

“I kissed Loki,” Steve blurted out, looking directly at the trunk of the oak tree and not at Sam.

“Well, there was the whole…magic sex spell…it’s understandable.” Sam had been lucky enough to miss that episode, but the others had filled him in on the essential facts.

“After.” Steve stared down at his feet, pretending to stretch his calves. “After the spell had worn off. After the Kree drone leveled that parking garage. He found me, I guess. He took me somewhere and took care of me.”

Either unflappable or unsurprised, Sam bent over into a stretch, pressing his finger tips into the grass. “Was it a one-time thing or is he going to start showing up with flowers?”

Steve considered that. “I don’t think he’s the flowers type.”

“Are you going to start showing up with flowers?”

“No. It’s not…I don’t know.”
“Hate to ask, but did you do more than kiss him?”

“No, no,” Steve said quickly.

“Did you want to?”

Steve gnawed on his lip, knowing his hesitation and silence were giving him away. “I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s real or just… leftover from the spell.” He didn’t mention Loki’s assurance that the spell was over; he knew Sam wouldn’t believe anything Loki said. He didn’t know what to believe.

“Sorry, I had to ask.” Sam looked genuinely concerned when he stood up, pulling one elbow up to stretch out his shoulder. “You know it’s a really bad idea. And given your history of bad ideas, which includes a few thousand tons of helicarrier crashing into the Potomac River, in case you’ve forgotten that little field trip, this is still pretty impressive. He’s a bad guy on a universal scale, Steve. Emphasis on bad.”

“There’s no idea,” Steve protested.

Sam raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical. “You nearly ran over a little old lady because you were busy thinking about Loki’s lips. Which, I’m going to assume, are also pretty impressive.”

His face burned with either embarrassment or shame, possibly both. “I wasn’t.”

“I ain’t gonna bust your chops, man.” Sam moved to lean against the tree trunk. “What you went through, I’d be surprised if it weren’t on your mind. That’s a lot of bad mojo. Might be awhile before you can get it out of your head, that’s all.”

Steve bowed his head, hands braced against the tree. “You’re probably right.”

“Can I get that in writing and endorsed by Captain America?” Sam teased, a lopsided grin spreading across his face.

“Absolutely.” Pushing away from the tree, Steve nodded toward the sidewalk. “You up for the rest of the way?”

“What can I say? I’m a glutton for punishment.” Sam was off before he finished, sprinting ahead to put as much distance between him and Steve as he could.

Steve didn’t let Sam beat him back to the Tower, because Sam would only make him pay for it later, but he kept pace until they reached the lobby doors and headed inside. They joked, mostly small talk, in the elevator. Sam always crashed on Steve’s floor whenever he was in New York, even if it wasn’t for Avengers related business.

“You’ve got first shower.” Steve waved him on as he let them both into the apartment. “You need it more than I do.”

“We can’t all be super soldiers, man,” Sam called over his shoulder, heading for the bathroom.

Steve pulled two sports drinks out of the fridge and set one on the counter for Sam, starting on the other as he checked the mail. All Avengers mail was carefully screened and inspected – which meant opened and scanned every which way by JARVIS – before it was delivered to the correct floor by one of the Stark interns. Steve’s mail usually stayed in the large basket next to the front door long enough to start overflowing; he always got a note or two asking him to empty the basket before he remembered to do it. Hooking a couple fingers over the edge, he hauled it inside the apartment and poured the entire contents out onto the floor of the living area before returning it to the entryway. He
had more, large plastic bins to sort the mail into, although several of them were already well over capacity.

Most of the pile was fan mail. He tried to get through as much as he could, when he could. Pepper had offered him an assistant to read and respond to all of it; he felt like that would be cheating but it was a tough call when he knew there were letters in the plastic bins from the day he moved in and he still hadn’t gotten to them.

All of the official correspondence went into a separate, smaller bin. Those, he was more than happy to hand over to Pepper and her army of lawyers.

The Stark PR team maintained accounts on all of the current social media platforms; they refused to give him the passwords, but they promised to post on his behalf. He’d picked up a collector’s Captain America figurine, which had been extremely awkward to purchase, that he would prop the letters against to take a picture. He sent the pictures to the PR team in an email, along with a brief message. The picture would go to an Instagram account solely for that purpose and then get linked to the @CapAnswersMail account. The minimalist requirements of Twitter kept his responses short; he wished people luck in upcoming adventures, advised them to study or practice hard, to put in that application or try out for the team, whatever he thought might help them. He never read any replies or messages sent to any of the accounts – those were monitored and screened by the PR team just as carefully as his physical mail – and he never knew if any of them ever saw his response to their letters. He could only hope that he was helping and that it meant something to the people who wrote to him.

His fingers met an envelope that felt unusual and he paused. It was heavier and the texture of the paper was smooth and silken, implying expense and high quality. There was no return address or any indication of the sender on the envelope, simply the words Captain Rogers scrawled with black ink in an elegant, slanted script on the front. Curious, he broke the seal and pulled out the single note card inside. It was made of the same heavy, linen paper as the envelope. Other than the rim of gold around the edges, it was completely blank. He turned it over several times, frowning, and wondered why someone would send him a blank card.

Further consideration was interrupted by Tony Stark, who knocked but didn’t bother to wait for acknowledgment, other than asking JARVIS if anyone was naked, before walking in.

“Where’s Sam?” Tony asked without preamble. “The new wings are ready and I need someone crazy enough to test them.”

“Shower.” Steve held onto the unusual card, tapping it lightly against his thigh.

Tony motioned to the piles of mail. “You know I pay people to do this sort of thing.”

“Some things are worth doing yourself.” Snagging the sports drink, Steve got to his feet and headed back to the kitchen. “Thirsty? I’ve got fresh lemonade.”

“Did you squeeze the lemons yourself?”

“As a matter of fact.” Steve pulled the pitcher of lemonade out of the fridge and set it on the table, retrieving a cup from one of the shelves mounted above the counter. “It’s a little on the sweet side.”

Tony took the offered cup and sipped tentatively. “Needs tequila.”

“I’ll tell Sam you’ve got a new set of wings.”

“I can wait.” Tony glanced at his watch, continuing to drink lemonade; his mind was clearly off
working on some other problem.

Off the field, the Avengers were still figuring out exactly how to inhabit the same space. It was strange that they seemed to work better when they were fighting for their lives than when they were fighting over who had left a mess in one of the labs - usually Tony - or who had woken the others up at five in the morning - usually Steve. Giving each of them a floor had been a good idea on Tony’s part, but there was enough communal space they all shared to cause friction.

“How are you doing anyway?” Tony looked up at the ceiling, squinting at one corner. “Everything good? No residual side effects or anything like that? Bruce was wondering. I mean, he’d like to do some follow up blood tests, look at your hormone levels, that sort of thing.”

“I’m fine.”

“What was it like? Clinically speaking, of course. Can’t imagine you have much experience with that sort of thing. Magic, I mean. Although, now that I think about it, have you ever been with a man? That might’ve been a shock too.” All the intensity of Tony Stark’s formidable curiosity was suddenly focused on him and he felt like an insect about to be skewered and added to a collection. “It’s too bad we couldn’t get a control sample of some kind. Since you’re all serum-ed up and Loki’s not even human. Just think what you could do if you could bottle a tenth of that. A hundredth. You’d make millions. Well, not you, you probably wouldn’t do that.”

Steve stared. He was torn between horror and the disbelief that Tony would even suggest bottling up a sex spell and selling it to innocent, unsuspecting people. It wasn’t that Tony didn’t understand the concept of boundaries, he simply believed they didn’t apply to him.

“I’m kidding,” Tony said, enunciating every syllable very carefully. “Bruce was thinking the treatment he used on you might be useful for other toxin exposures. He just wants to be sure it’s safe for normal people. No side effects, that sort of thing.”

“I feel fine.” His voice sounded as stiff and uncomfortable as he felt. “I’ll go see if Sam’s out of the shower.”

“Stop by and see Bruce some time,” Tony called after him.

It was a relief to see that Sam was already out of the shower and dressed, the strap of his gym bag slung over his shoulder. He gave Steve a quizzical look. “You okay?”

“Tony’s waiting for you.”

“Ah.” Sam chuckled a little. “You make it too easy for him to get under your skin, man.”

“Pretty sure he has that affect on everyone.”

“Well, wish me luck then.” Sam cuffed him lightly on the arm as he headed out the door. “Later.”

“Later,” Steve echoed.

He shut the door behind Sam, glad to retreat from the onslaught that was Tony Stark. The blank piece of paper in his hand; he realized that he’d forgotten he was holding it. He set it on the nearest bookshelf, propped against the books, and headed for the bathroom to shower. The hot water helped him wash away his irritation with Tony along with the sweat and salt on his skin. By the time he’d towed off and gotten dressed, he felt ready to handle another dose of Tony Stark without punching anyone.
The blank note card caught his eye as he passed. He almost kept walking, but a strange sensation at the pit of his stomach stopped him. Turning, he moved to the bookshelf, realizing immediately what was different. The card was no longer blank. In elegant, slanted script was written the name of a coffee shop several blocks from the Tower. The ink wasn’t quite black, but he couldn’t determine if it was dark blue or dark green in the dim light.

He touched the writing with hesitation, unsure what it meant or how it could have appeared. As he turned it over in his hands, he realized that he knew who must have sent it, although he couldn’t bring himself to voice his suspicions out loud. He glanced at his watch. Tony would keep Sam busy for the next several hours at least. He grabbed his jacket, tucking the card into an inside pocket, and headed out.

His heart was pounding before he hit the sidewalk. Hope and anxiety warred back and forth as he walked. Each intersection, each block, seemed to take far too long to travel. Still, even when he could see the sign of the coffee shop, his feet seemed to slow of their own accord. Anxiety began to gain ground, wreathing up his shoulders and neck until he was tense, hands clenched tight into fists in his jacket pockets. He slowed even further as he neared the glass door leading inside and veered off to the right at the last minute.

It took seconds for him to find Loki sitting at one of the small tables inside the coffee shop. He had a wide, white mug in front of him with the string of a tea bag hanging over the side. Steve resisted the urge to smile. He’d guessed that Loki would prefer tea.

The blank card in his jacket pocket had been the Trojan Horse that had gotten Loki into the Tower without Stark security being any the wiser. For what ends, Steve couldn’t begin to know; his mind raced as he considered the options. The idea that Loki had merely wanted a way to invite Steve out for a coffee date seemed so simple and so irrational, that he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around it. This was Loki and there was little enough about him they knew to be real, even less that could be trusted. He held perfectly still, frozen in place as he watched Loki fiddle with the string of the tea bag.

“Can I help you?” a female voice asked him.

Steve barely glanced at her, taking note of the uniform and the name tag. Lucy. “Um, no…no, thank you. I’m just…just.” He didn’t know how to finish the sentence.

“Are you meeting someone?”

He swallowed. Sitting at the table inside in regular clothes - for someone whose idea of regular clothes included a pair of slate gray slacks and a tailored, emerald silk shirt - Loki looked normal and human and even a tiny bit nervous that the someone he was waiting for might fail to show. It was too easy to imagine how it would go. Steve would order coffee, black. They would talk; Loki would be charming and Steve would remember their kiss in the faraway castle.

His stomach sank.

It was easy to imagine that one coffee date would turn into another. Then into dinner, maybe a show. Maybe they would find themselves in the same place, possibly on opposite sides of whatever battle was raging around them. But eventually the battle would be over, the fighting would end, and they would find a reason to stay in the same place. He knew exactly how that would end, how they would both want it to end. He knew that if he walked through the door of the coffee shop, Loki would look up and there would be a light in his eyes. He would be pleased that Steve had come.

And he would let Steve in.
Eventually, he would ask Loki to stop attacking the Avengers. He would ask him to join them, to reconcile with Thor, maybe even to visit Asgard once and awhile. One night, probably curled together in bed, he would tell Loki that he loved him and Loki might say it in return, might even mean it.

Out of all of the scenarios he could imagine, he couldn't think of single one that had a happy ending for both of them.

“Sir?” Lucy asked.

“I think I have the wrong address.” He hurried away, ducking his head low and forcing himself not to look back. He couldn’t look back.

His hands were shaking by the time he shut his bedroom door behind him and sunk back against it. Taking deep breaths, he shrugged off his jacket and pulled out the note card. Its surface was clear and blank again. He dug through the catch-all drawer in the kitchen for a pen. It took him almost an hour to gather up the courage to write a few words on the smooth surface of the card and hope that messages could go both ways.

_I can’t. I’m sorry._
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Loki takes rejection about as well as Thor thinks he does. At the same time, Steve's beginning to wonder what he can believe and what is only an illusion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clint Barton’s voice came over the Quinjet speaker, riddled with static from the engine noise. “Touchdown in two minutes.”

Tapping the communicator in his ear to activate the Avengers frequency, Steve set his mind to the task ahead of them. He slipped his helmet on and adjusted the chin strap until he got it right. The shield was a solid weight on his back.

Natasha was beside him, adjusting her wrist cuffs. “Any idea what we’ve got down there?”


Steve pretended not to notice the look Natasha gave him. He didn’t have any answers to give her. More than that, he didn’t want to think that maybe Loki wouldn’t be keeping the Avengers quite as busy if he’d made a different call that afternoon.

“You okay with this?” she asked.

He punched the button to open the cargo door. “Amora’s spell was months ago.”

“And you still twitch every time someone says his name.”

“Maybe because every time someone says his name, innocent people are getting hurt.” Natasha was fishing; he knew that. She’d figured out that there was more to the story and had been carefully edging in with strategic questions, trying to determine how much iceberg lurked beneath the surface of the water. “See you on the ground.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. Air and clouds whistled past his ears; the roar and adrenaline drowned out everything else. The sound of his shield against the ground was the sound of perfect clarity; it rang out like a clarion bell. He didn’t have to look for the direction that led to Loki; his path was laid out in blasted concrete. All he had to do was follow the chaos. Thunder rolled in the distance and he knew Thor wasn’t far away.

“Loki!” he shouted, pulling his shield tight when he rounded the corner and found Loki tossing a convertible across the street.

“Captain,” Loki drawled. The ice in his voice scraped against Steve’s conscience.

As always, Loki was striking. His armor was probably a hundred pounds of metal and leather, but he wore it as though it weighed nothing. The signature horns of his helmet gleamed in the setting sun. His every move was preternaturally graceful, like a jungle cat approaching his prey with a promise of
violence in his eyes. Steve knew better than to think Loki wasn’t a credible threat. He had to keep
Loki’s attention on him and away from the bystanders while they fled the scene.

“What do you want, Loki?” he challenged. “No one else has to get hurt.”

Loki’s mouth twisted into a sneer. “Does it upset you, Captain?”

“Loki.” He didn’t have time or breath to say more than that. A bolt of blazing energy struck him in
the chest and knocked the air from his lungs, sending him tumbling backwards. The rest was instinct.
He rolled and came to his feet, blocking a punch and throwing his own. This, he knew. This was
War and ever familiar. Loki was stronger, faster, and would last longer than he could even hope for;
he was only buying time for Thor to arrive. Every time Loki knocked him off his feet, he managed to
get back up. Loki caught him on the last roll and his grip was a vise.

“Wait,” he choked out, struggling to breathe with Loki’s hand around his throat. He heard static and
then a pop in his ear, signaling the loss of communications with the others. They’d learned the hard
way that electronics could be unreliable around Loki, especially when he was throwing magic
around.

“Will you beg for your life, Captain?” Loki snarled.

Time seemed to slow and then stand still. Loki’s grip tightened until he couldn’t breathe or speak. He
stumbled and sunk to his knees, holding onto Loki’s arm but no longer trying to wrench free.

“Any last wishes?” Loki sneered, his expression showing nothing but anger and cruelty.

Nodding, desperate and breathless, Steve was surprised when Loki’s grip lapsed enough for him to
suck down a gulp of air. If Loki was going to snap his neck in the next few seconds, then he might
as well be honest. “Yes,” he gasped out. “Two.”

Loki scoffed, his fury was beautiful and terrible. “You overestimate my mercy.”

“Let me explain,” Steve choked out. His ear piece buzzed static and he heard Natasha’s voice come
through for a second before the connection was lost again.

Loki’s eyes narrowed for a moment. “Very well.”

His throat ached with forming bruises and he knew that each of Loki’s fingers would be imprinted in
his flesh. He swallowed and licked his lips. “I stood you up. That day. Because-”

Loki’s grip tightened again and he leaned in close enough that Steve could feel his breath against his
skin. “I don’t want your excuses.”

He forced himself to meet Loki’s gaze. “Because I can’t make you happy.”

It was Loki’s turn to stare. “What?” His grip slackened until his fingers only rested against Steve’s
jaw.

“You think Thor’s bad?” He winced, laughing nervously. “I’d be worse.”

Loki’s eyes darted rapidly as he searched Steve’s face. “What do you mean?”

“I’d never give up. Ever. I’d spend the rest of my life trying to make you happy. Trying to save you.
Trying to make you see that you don’t have to do this.” He motioned toward the destruction around
them. “You’d end up hating me. We’d probably tear each other apart, but it wouldn’t matter. I’d
never give up on you. And I would give you everything, all of me, everything I am. But you can’t accept that, can you? You can’t be who you are and be with me. I get it. And I can’t ask you to change.”

Loki’s face went through a dozen expressions, all too fleeting for Steve to catch. “And your second request?”

“If you’re gonna kill me.” Steve dropped his hands from Loki’s arm, letting them fall to whatever he could reach. His fingers caught on one ridge of leather that crossed over Loki’s abdomen and he held on. “Then give me one night. I want to know what it would’ve been like to have you. To touch you. Just let me pretend that we could’ve... give me that and then you can kill me and I won’t care. Maybe it’s stupid or weak, I don’t care. Before I die, I want to know what it’s like to have you,” he stopped because Loki’s expression had turned to something like panic and he hadn’t expected that. Thunder crashed and the hair on the back of Steve’s neck rose with the electricity in the air.

Loki’s expression twisted into agony, his eyes squeezing shut. “You fool. You impossible, mortal fool.” He pulled away, wrenching free of Steve’s grasp as he reeled and then he was gone.

Steve collapsed onto the broken asphalt, reaching for the aching bruises on his throat. Thor landed with a thud and he heard the hum of the Iron Man suit a heartbeat later. Rolling over onto his back, he blinked back the darkness trying to close off his vision. He’d managed to convince Loki to stop his attack and that was a victory for the Avengers; though it might have been one of his crazier plans.

“Steven!” Thor’s voice cut through the pounding in his ears.

Steve tried to smile up at Thor, grabbing onto the solid arm that reached for him.

“Are you injured?” Thor asked, brow furrowed

Shaking his head, Steve let Thor pull him up. “I thought he was going to kill me. For a minute there.” He caught the measured look that Thor gave him and cringed.

“He does not wish you harm.” Thor kept his hand on Steve’s arm until he was steady on his feet “I know my brother.”

“It’s not like that,” Steve began, hoping to stop the conversation before it even started.

“He would have allowed me to be a victim of Amora’s treachery, but he protected you. He chose chains rather than risk harming you, though it could have cost him his life.” Thor shook him, firmly but gently, as though he felt unable to communicate the importance of what he was saying through words alone.

Steve wasn’t sure he wanted to carry the guilty weight of knowing that, for some reason, Loki wasn’t willing to subject him to the same cruelty he was willing to inflict on his own brother. Loki had known that Amora cared for Thor, in her own way, and wouldn’t have permanently harmed him, but that didn’t make it okay - not even close to okay. It made a difference to Loki when it was Steve, somehow, in some way, and he realized that Thor was just as confused about exactly why.

Thor looked torn between sadness and hope. “I had thought there were no lines left that he would not cross. I’d long thought my brother incapable of any kind of sacrifice, incapable of compassion or caring for anyone but himself. You have given me hope for my brother, hope that there is good in him still. Do not make light of that.”

Steve’s stomach churned. He didn’t think Loki wanted to be saved.
As though reading his thoughts, Thor pressed his palm against the side of Steve’s neck. “There is always hope. Even for Loki.”

For lack of a better response, he nodded and changed the subject. “There are people who need help.”

It was easier to throw himself into the rescue and recovery. Loki had left a swath of overturned cars, shattered storefronts, and blasted concrete down a three block stretch. There didn’t seem to be any reason for it other than he’d been angry and wanted to take it out on the concrete. Although there were no immediate casualties, an easy half dozen of the bystanders were headed for intensive care in nearby hospitals. Every person loaded into the back of an ambulance was another weight on Steve’s chest until he felt like he’d stepped back in time to when he’d been just a scrawny, asthmatic kid who couldn’t manage to stay out of a fight.

Natasha met him at the end of the block and held out a bottle of water. “Hell of a gamble. How’d you know it would work?”

He took the bottle with a nod of thanks. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough.” Her gaze was careful, measuring his responses. “How much of it was true?”

He drained half of the water before looking back at her. “I’m a terrible liar and you know it.”

She took a seat on the curb. The ear piece came out and disappeared into one of the pouches on her belt. “You know what this means.”

“I got the job done, didn’t I? No one got killed.”

“You were supposed to report any lingering effects of the spell.”

“Yeah, well, Loki says there aren’t any so whatever this is.” He gestured to the cracked concrete around them. “Whatever it is, it’s real.”

“Do not tell me you are even thinking-”

He raised a hand to cut her off. “I said what I said to get his attention and keep him busy until Thor got here. Yes, it was a gamble and it paid off. He’s attracted to me and I took advantage of that. I don’t need an intervention and you don’t need to worry. Nothing’s going to happen.” He felt an odd sort of desolation settle at the base of his spine, cold and creeping like fingers of ice.

The moment in the abandoned castle, when he’d let Loki kiss him and he’d kissed Loki back; it had felt as though the whole world was clicking into place around him. It had felt right. It felt right the same way that everything else he believed in felt right; the way the weight of his shield felt right on his arm. He couldn’t shake the feeling. Whether it was a higher power or grand plan that had opened up an unexpected door, he didn’t know, but he couldn’t walk through that door, no matter how right it felt or how much he wanted it.

“You need a second opinion about side effects of the spell. You can’t trust Loki.”

“If you find someone who can tell me this is all in my head, I’d love to hear it.” He knew it didn’t make any sense and part of him hoped it was still the spell messing with his mind. But Loki seemed equally thrown by the attraction between them and, although he could easily imagine Loki trying to seduce him for his own gain, he didn’t see how Loki benefited from pretending to be unsettled by the situation.

“Give me forty eight hours.”
He watched her return to the Quinjet. Maybe she could find someone who would give him a straight answer. Or maybe she’d simply find someone who would tell him what she thought he needed to hear.

“When did you get so cynical, Rogers?” he muttered under his breath.

There was a message waiting when he checked in at the Tower, telling him to stop by the medical floor and see Banner. It wasn’t a surprise. He tamped down the flame of irritation at being treated like there was something wrong with him, even though he knew it was well-meant. They understood so little about Loki’s magic, or even Thor’s magic, and that he’d gotten hit with a particularly powerful spell made him a lab rat twice over. It opened a Pandora’s box of wondering what other spells Loki or Amora, and whoever else was out there, might have at their disposal and how they could protect themselves in the future.

He changed out of his uniform first. If he was going to be poked and prodded, he intended to be comfortable. Changing clothes also gave him a chance to assess and tally up his new bruises, courtesy of Loki’s temper. His neck was already darkening to a bruise shaped unmistakably like a hand print; he had an assortment of bruises over his back and ribs, and more around his elbows and knees. None were serious, just enough to make him wince as he pulled a t-shirt over his head.

His mood hadn’t improved by the time he headed back down to meet Bruce. With a quick hello, he immediately went to the exam table, settling in to wait until Bruce was ready.

“How’d it go?” Bruce asked. He broke his focus on whatever he was examining through his microscope for a moment. “Natasha said it was Loki again.”

Steve forced down irritation again. “Yeah. He knocked me around for awhile. Have some pretty good bruises.”

“Looks like he tried to strangle you.”

“Sometimes he forgets the safe word.” He bit his lip, immediately thinking better of mouthing off to Bruce. “I’m fine.”

Bruce pulled himself away from the microscope, a wry smile on his lips. He started gathering up what he needed to give Steve a once over before dragging his stool over to the exam table. They’d done this so many times that he didn’t have to ask or direct Steve what to do next. The strip of rubber wrapped snugly around Steve’s arm above his elbow and Bruce’s touch was cool as he felt out the veins beneath the skin.

“How would you feel about a dynamic brain scan?” Bruce asked. The tip of the needle disappeared into Steve’s skin with slight sting. “Your blood work has come back within normal parameters every time, but maybe it’s not telling us the whole story.”

“Could the spell have messed with my brain?”

“It’s possible that it altered your brain chemistry in a more permanent way.” Bruce glanced up, not quite meeting his gaze. “Would you say that being attracted to Loki is consistent with your sexual orientation before the spell? Sorry for prying, I know that’s really personal.”

Steve hesitated. He’d loved Bucky, of course, but he’d never dreamed about Bucky the way he dreamed about Loki. “Maybe? I don’t have a lot of experience.”

“Have you been attracted to men in the past?”
“I…I don’t think so.” He frowned. “I mean, I’ve noticed both men and women, I guess. As much as I notice anyone that way. I don’t really think about it all that much.”

Bruce tugged the needle out and pressed a cotton ball against the spot before setting the vials of blood aside. Catching the end of the stethoscope, he settled it against Steve’s chest to listen to his heart and lungs. “There are a lot ways that brain chemistry influences attraction. There are viruses, bacteria; even tumors can change someone’s personality pretty drastically. It wouldn’t be outside the realm of possibility for magic to do the same. It’s possible that you were always flexible in who you’re attracted to.”

“You mean it’s possible I’m gay and always have been.”

Bruce gave him a look. “It’s not black and white. But given the prevailing social views, particularly the Army’s mentality, in the 1940s, I wouldn’t expect you to feel comfortable with being openly interested in men. If Loki is the first man you’ve been sexually attracted to, then it’s more likely to be a side effect of the spell. That’s all I’m trying to get at.”

If Loki’s spell had rewired his brain somehow, he could write it all off as a form of insanity. As tempting as it was to cling to that possibility, the idea also made him feel like his stomach was full of icy, jaggedly edged rocks. If the spell altered his mind, he could no longer trust his own perception of reality and his judgment would be called into question. Is that why Natasha worried? Had that been the unspoken fear of the team all along? He felt worse the longer he thought about it.

“Steve?” Bruce touched his arm, spurring him from his thoughts.

“It doesn’t feel wrong.” Steve said slowly. “But I think…maybe it should. Maybe I can’t tell what’s right or wrong anymore.”

Bruce finished the rest of his physical exam, instructing Steve to remain seated while he started the blood tests. The brain scan, he explained in a soothing, even voice, would be similar to an MRI. After Bruce attached a handful of electrodes to various spots on his head, Steve would lie still inside a chamber while Bruce asked him questions through a headset and watched the locations of activity in his brain. The first scan probably wouldn’t give them answers, but subtle changes over time could hint at an underlying change or cause. It sounded simple and painless enough; Steve didn’t ask why Bruce had such a device in the Tower. For all he knew, Tony had simply heard of one and decided he needed to have it.

The machine hummed in an alien way as it came awake around him. He tried to hold his head perfectly still inside the strangely shaped cage. Closing his eyes helped, though he couldn’t seem to let go of the tension in his back.

“I’m going to ask you a few questions. Some of them are going to be very personal. Just answer as honestly as you can.” Bruce’s voice sounded tinny and far away through the headset.

Steve’s mouth twisted. “I’m always honest.”

“What did you have for breakfast this morning?”

He thought back and listed off what he’d eaten that morning. The next question was about what he was wearing, then one about his favorite color. Question after question seemed innocuous and barely took thought to answer directly. He began to relax and closed his eyes. The questions grew more complicated, requiring him to recall specific events and reconstruct them in his mind, but none of them left him scrambling. There were a few questions about his relationship history. It was easy enough to talk about Peggy and the handful of people he’d been interested in - all women, he noted -
since waking up in a new century. Bruce asked him about Sam, Tony, Clint, even Bucky; then about HYDRA, SHIELD, and a handful of villains they’d fought as the Avengers. He was surprised that Loki didn’t come up in any of those questions, considering he’d been the very first enemy they’d faced as a team. Eventually, Bruce seemed to be satisfied.

“I think I’ve got a solid baseline. Now I’m going to ask you some more personal questions, okay? I’m looking for differences before and after the spell.”

“Okay.”

“How often do you dream?”

“A couple nights a week, I guess.”

“Would you say that you dream more often after the spell? Or the same.”

He had to think back, uncertain, and gave the best answer he could. “The same.”

“Has anything changed in your dreams? People, situations. Anything.”

“You mean, do I dream about Loki?” He forced himself to stay still even though he felt the urge to move. “Yeah, I do. Sometimes.”

“Anything else different? Anything you’ve noticed. Take your time.”

He tried to fit the right words together, hesitant to voice something that personal aloud. “I’ve had fewer nightmares since the spell. When I dream about Loki, it’s usually…nice. At least, it’s not a nightmare.”

“Is there a sexual component to your dreams about Loki?”

“I guess.” His cheeks heated as he remembered a particularly vivid dream of fumbling to get out of his uniform, Loki kneeling between his legs and urging him to hurry. He cleared his throat and answered again. “Yes.”

“Have you had sexual dreams about other people?”

“It’s been awhile, but yeah, sure.” His dreams about Peggy had been always been softer, sweeter, and never had the frantic edge of hunger that colored his dreams about Loki.

“Do you want to pursue a sexual relationship with Loki?”

“No,” Steve said quickly, but he wasn’t sure if that was the truth.

“If Loki wasn’t an enemy, would you pursue a sexual relationship with him?”

Yes. Steve swallowed. “Maybe.”

“This isn’t a lie detector, Steve, but honesty is important.”

He winced. “How am I supposed to overlook everything he’s done? I’ve got everyone I care about lining up to tell me how stupid it is to even think about him that way. You’re trying to figure out if I’ve been magically brain washed right now. But even if it is just the spell making me lose my mind, that doesn’t make it feel any less real to me.”

“How does it feel when you think about Loki?”
“It feels,” he stopped, struggling to put the nebulous feelings buzzing inside him into words. “It feels like the first day you can tell spring is coming. There’s something in the air and you just know that it’s right around the corner. Is there a word for that? It feels like staring up at the stars and thinking about how amazing the universe is and how small you are. It feels like watching the winning game in the World Series, it’s the ninth inning and the bases are loaded. It’s…it’s like coming home.” Silence stretched out until he began to think that he’d answered the question so badly that he’d thrown the entire brain scan off and Bruce would have to start over.

“I think that’s enough for now. You did fine, Steve. This will help us figure out if something’s going on.”

The machine made a few loud noises and the humming began to lower in pitch. He kept still until Bruce was there to help pull him out of the machine. Bruce’s expression was unreadable; he removed the electrodes with brisk efficiency.

Steve finally screwed up his courage to ask. “Am I gay?”

“This machine can’t tell me that.” Bruce set the electrodes carefully on a nearby tray. “That wasn’t the point of doing this. Let’s give it a month and then we’ll do it again. I’ll ask the same questions. I’m going to be monitoring the parts of your brain that show activity and see if there are changes, but without having any scans prior to the spell, it’s going to be difficult to know anything conclusively.”

It was disappointing. He’d been hoping for an answer, any answer.

Bruce led him back into other lab. He checked on a few pieces of complicated looking medical equipment before he settled back down on his stool beside the microscope. “You’re clearly conflicted about it and that’s perfectly normal. I wouldn’t expect you not to be.”

“Then you don’t think the spell messed with my head?”

Bruce pursed his lips, frowning. “Honestly?”

“Please.”

“I think there’s probably a sixty, maybe seventy, percent chance that the spell affected the neural pathways and biochemistry in your brain, resulting in a sexual and emotional attraction to Loki.”

The answer sucked all the oxygen out of the room. “Do you think it’s permanent?”

“Can’t say. There’s also still a chance that it’s not the spell. Your body was pumping out chemicals that are integral in forming emotional bonds, and you wouldn’t be human if you hadn’t formed some sort of attachment to Loki. I know it’s easier said than done, but try not to worry about it, okay? We’ll figure it out, it’s just going to take time. The best thing you can do right now is live your life normally.”

Numb, he gave Bruce a nod and left the lab without thinking much about where he was going. He ended up back on his floor out of habit. Maybe a long run would help. Evening had fallen and it would be night soon, but night runs were peaceful in their own way. Bruce was right, worrying about it wasn’t going to do him any good. He set a kettle heating on the stove to make tea and keep his hands busy for a few minutes at least. Mentally, he planned out a route through the city and tallied up how many miles he thought he’d have to go before he could forget that Amora’s spell had probably brain washed him into wanting to be with Loki. Permanently.

“Next time, Rogers, don’t jump on the damn grenade,” he muttered to himself.
Cinnamon apple tea was soothing, if only a little. He carried the mug to his desk, sitting down with the intent of working on his latest drawing, but ended up staring blankly out the window instead. What if the spell made it so he’d never be interested in anyone else? Was he going to spend the rest of his life pining after someone he could never have? He glanced over at the bookshelf where he kept the bewitched note card. It was blank, as usual. He should get rid of it; no doubt Loki assumed that he already had. But it was just a piece of paper. The worst that could possibly come from using it would be writing down something inappropriate; no one could get hurt. On impulse, he set his tea aside to retrieve the card and bring it back to his desk. He hesitated a moment, then plucked up one of his drawing pencils and began to sketch.

It was a silly, whimsical drawing. He drew himself as a cartoon character, small and childlike and sitting on a swing at a playground. Then he drew an equally childlike version of Loki, identifiable by his dark, shoulder length hair. The tiny Loki was rampaging through an imaginary New York City built inside a sandbox, toppling the buildings and stomping on them. He smiled at the drawing, amused. The lines began to fade, just as they had before, as though they were sinking into the paper itself. He was about to start a second drawing when a dark spot appeared and familiar handwriting began to scrawl over smooth surface.

Interesting choice of subject.

He answered with a drawing rather than words. This time, he drew the tiny version of himself sitting on an exam table with wires sticking out from electrodes on his head and a cartoon of Bruce drawing blood from his arm. He set the pencil down to drink his tea and watched the lines fade away.

His life was filling up with maybes. Maybe magic spells were something that humans didn’t fully recover from, like viruses that stayed in the body for years, held in check but never fully vanquished. Maybe Bruce would be able to figure it out and give him a pill - something - to fix whatever change had been made to his brain chemistry. The idea didn’t appeal to him as much as he thought it should. It was going to be difficult to get used to doubting his own mind, if he ever managed to accept being compromised.

What is the meaning of this?

The bruised skin on his neck was tender. Rubbing at it reminded him that Loki had been trying to choke him less than twelve hours ago and, somehow, that didn’t seem to matter. It should have mattered. At the very least, he should be concerned about getting involved with someone who solved their problems with violence. That felt like proof of the spells lingering effect; his brain had been damaged enough that even the serum hadn’t been able to heal him. At least, not yet. Perhaps it would, given enough time, and perhaps not.

Glumly, he drew the cartoon version of himself holding a small object shaped like a heart. He picked through his colored pencils to add red shading. Then he drew himself putting the heart shape into a box and a third panel where the cartoon Steve was burying the box in the ground at the base of a tree. Once those lines had faded, he didn’t wait for an answer. He felt twice the fool as he set aside the card. Without looking at it again, he got ready for bed, ignoring the fact that it was several hours before his usual bed time, and slipped beneath the covers. He wanted to stop feeling what he wasn’t supposed to be feeling.

Tomorrow, he resolved to burn the card.

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It was past midnight when Bruce finished scrutinizing the last of Steve’s brain scans. A dull ache had settled in his temples and his eyes were tired from staring at the screen.
“JARVIS, is Thor in the Tower?” he asked absently.

“Yes, sir.”

“Is he awake?”

“Yes. Do you wish me to request that he join you?”

Bruce hesitated, weighing his choices. “Yes.”

“Very well, sir.”

He almost had his thoughts in order by the time Thor arrived. Waving to one of the chairs, he opened up two of the scans side by side on the screen. “These are scans of Steve’s brain.”

Thor frowned. “What need have you to examine his brain?”

“On the left, he’s answering a question about Tony. On the right, he’s answering a question about Loki.” Bruce pointed at the right scan with a pen. “The primary differences are here and here. This region produces a chemical called dopamine. There’s also increased activity in the prefrontal cortex. These regions have been associated with romantic love and with lust. I don’t have scans from before he and Loki were hit with Amora’s spell and I don’t have blood work from before either, but his panels after he was hit by the spell showed high levels of oxytocin and dopamine, along with a few other hormones. Essentially, that’s what the spell did. It overloaded his body with stress hormones while suppressing other neurotransmitters, effectively short circuiting his body’s internal regulating system.”

With a deepening frown, Thor moved closer to the screens to peer at the images. “Is he in danger?”

“Immediately? No. But his brain is functioning like he’s in love.”

“With my brother.”

“Yes. I’m pretty sure that when his panels come out, he’ll have elevated oxytocin and dopamine. Not as high as before, but enough.” He waited while Thor digested that information.

“You are telling me that Steve has fallen in love with Loki.” Thor crossed his arms as he sat down. “Yet I can see this does not please you.”

“This?” He pointed at the scans again. “This isn’t real, Thor. The spell did this.”

“You don’t believe he could love Loki without the influence of the spell?” Thor challenged, a hint of stubbornness creeping into his voice.

“I think Steve needs an emotional bond to be attracted to someone. He needs to like them, respect them, share life experiences and common goals with them. He doesn’t have any of that with Loki, but his brain is still lighting up like a Christmas tree when he thinks about him.” With a sigh, Bruce set the pen down. “I’m not saying this because I think no one could ever love Loki. In this case, I think there’s a more rational explanation for Steve reacting this way to someone who nearly strangled him this morning.”

“Is there no way to be sure?”

“All I can do is keep monitoring Steve and see if anything changes.” Leaning forward, he met Thor’s gaze evenly. “Do you know of anyone on Asgard who’s been hit with that kind of spell before?”
Anyone at all.”

Thor shook his head quickly. “I have not, though I would have not had reason to. Loki would be the one who would know of such things.”

“Is it possible,” he hesitated before voicing his thoughts. “Is it possible that Loki could be similarly affected?”

Thor’s eyebrows raised. “That he may believe he is in love with Captain Rogers? I suppose it is possible. Although I believe his interest in Steve did not begin with the spell itself. I have asked myself why he would be willing to risk his life to protect Steve from the ill effects of the spell and I have few answers that sit easy in my mind.”

“Is there anyone you could ask, on Asgard? Maybe if we knew how the spell was created, that might help counteract the effects.”

“I will attempt to find answers,” Thor said heavily. He looked at the screen again, thoughtful. “Can you truly see love with your technology?”

“In a way.”

“Perhaps it is a mystery better left unseen, my friend.”

Bruce didn’t have an argument for that.

Chapter End Notes

In my new resolution to not post any more WIPS, this one is the outlier. While I won't be posting anything else until it's finished, this one is wide open and I'm really just making it up as I go. Which is kinda fun sometimes too.

Really wanted to tinker with the concept of free will and attraction with this one, thought that was fitting for the "mate or die" trope.

I also like to be mean to Steve. Because I'm evil.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Steve continues to unravel and the Avengers search for answers.

The last person Natasha Romanov expected to be waiting at the upper terrace door of the Fridge, recently liberated from HYDRA forces, was Maria Hill. Ducking against the wind and holding her hair out of her eyes with one hand, she shouted over of the roar of the helicopter. "I thought you were with Stark Industries now."

"I am," Maria shouted back, waving her forward through the repaired doors.

Inside, the relative silence was a welcome relief; it was broken by the clamor of ongoing construction deep within the facility. Natasha accepted an access badge and slipped it over her neck. "Why are you here?"

"Stark Industries has a vested interest in the reconstruction of SHIELD, especially since the Fridge doubles as a prison for subjects that are particularly difficult to contain. When they recovered the Chitauri scepter from a HYDRA base last month, this was the best option for keeping it safe." Maria led the way to a nearby elevator. A computerized voice stated her name and clearance level, then Natasha's, before allowing Maria to press a button for one of the lower floors. "But Stark Industries also can't afford to look like it's taking over SHIELD either. Stark got out of the arms business and no one wants another puppet version of SHIELD."

"So you're a consultant," Natasha finished.

A small smile appeared on Maria's lips. "Not exactly the cushy retirement option I was hoping for, but it keeps me busy."

"Rumor is that SHIELD has a new Director."

Maria glanced at her. "You know I can't tell you anything. Not yet. The future of SHIELD is still uncertain. There might not be any at all."

"It's the not yet part that makes me wonder." Natasha was used to secrets and to keeping them. She was very good at it. Not yet signified that the truth would be revealed when conditions were met or tests were passed, and that made her skin crawl. She didn't owe SHIELD anything, not anymore.

"You're out of SHIELD, remember? The Director respects your decision." She was watching Natasha carefully, clearly measuring her reaction. "If you ever want to come back, the door's open."

Natasha raised her eyebrows. "Now I am intrigued. But that was the point of making an offer, isn't it?"

"Maybe." She smiled again. "Now that the office gossip is out of the way, your message only said you needed information from a high priority prisoner. That narrows it down, but without more to go on, I'm not sure how to help you."

She turned to face the elevator doors, keeping her expression carefully neutral. "I need to talk to..."
"Amora."

"She hasn't been helpful so I doubt you'll get anything out of her. She's already refused to cooperate."

"I think this will be more interesting for her." Natasha was a betting woman, under the right circumstances, and she needed all the information she could get or trick out of Amora. "There was an incident in New York, about six months ago. Amora targeted Thor, but when it went down, the spell didn't hit the intended targets."

"I heard about that. No details. Just something about a quarantine at the Tower and Captain Rogers being out of action for a few days. The Avengers kept it close to the vest on that one." Maria shifted her weight uneasily. "Is Steve okay?"

Natasha let her concern show for a brief moment as the elevator came to rest, then squared her shoulders and set her expression to neutral. "That's why I'm here."

The corridor had clearly undergone recent reconstruction; the air was tainted with the smell of drying paint and the floors still gleamed, free of scuff marks from SHIELD issue boots. There were five doors in the length of hallway that Natasha could see, each one had a digital display above the door that cycled through data about the occupant inside.

"These are all cases where what's inside needs extra precautions, either to protect others or give them enough space. Sort of like storing nitroglycerin." Maria stopped in front of the second door on the left. "This is your stop. Do you think you'll need back up?"

Natasha shook her head. "Just came to talk."

"If you do have trouble with her, your badge is encoded with an emergency signal. Press the SHIELD logo on the back and we'll get you out." The access panel beeped and the door audibly unlocked. Maria saw her in, remaining at the door as it closed.

As prison cells went, Natasha thought this must be the New York penthouse version. It was sparse, but furnished, and without the inches of polymer resin between her and the rest of the space, it would've been indistinguishable from a high end apartment in the city. No doubt the creature comforts had been provided in an effort to get Amora to talk. She let her gaze drift over the chaise lounge, draped with furs and thickly woven throws, to the quaintly decorated breakfast nook complete with a tea set of fine china. There was a semi private bedroom and bath area to the right; she could see the outline of the bed from where she stood and it was as deeply buried in pillows and blankets as the chaise. One thing she didn't see was Amora. Rather than appear disturbed by the apparent lack of an occupant in the space, she took a seat on the simple wooden chair against the wall beside the door and waited. She didn't have to wait long.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Agent Romanov?" came a silky voice. A moment later there was a shimmer in the air above the chaise and Amora appeared, dressed in an elegantly tailored, green silk gown. She looked every inch a golden age Hollywood starlet, complete with tumbling curls of blonde hair and deep red lipstick. Maybe they'd given her a Netflix account to go with the room.

"I'm here about the spell," Natasha began without preamble. She would have to feel her way through the conversation step by step. "The one Loki helped you with, that you meant for Thor."

A frown marred Amora's lovely features, but only for a moment. "What of it?" she asked dismissively.
You know who it hit."

With a dark chuckle, Amora shivered a little. "Yes, indeed. As much as I would have preferred my outcome, there is a certain poetry to what happened. Poor Loki. He seemed quite distraught over it when I saw him last."

"When he caught you and turned you over to the Avengers."

Her smile chilled by degrees. "Yes."

Natasha inched forward on the chair, settling her elbows on her knees. "I want to know about the spell. How it works, how it's made. How long does it last?"

With an arch of one perfectly sculpted eyebrow, Amora sat up, swinging her legs gracefully off of the chaise. Her blue eyes seemed to blaze as she watched Natasha intently. "It has been some time since that night. Surely long enough for you to know the nature of its working."

"Tell me how it works."

Amora's eyes narrowed, calculating. "Loki did not, forgive me for being indelicate, take your Captain as his lover, did he? Interesting. I do not think you would not be here if he had. Then he found a way to circumvent the outcome." Red lips spread into a cruel smile. "Very interesting. He has always been a clever one."

She refused to let Amora's leer get under her skin. "Loki and Captain Rogers were confined and contained until the spell's effects could be nullified."

"Then I do not see what you could possibly need from me, Agent Romanov." Amora settled back onto the chaise, but her smile remained and it reminded Natasha a great deal of a very satisfied cat. "Your beloved Captain was saved and Loki dealt out vengeance on his, and your Avengers', behalf. Yet here you are. I am intrigued. Is it because you believe the spell has left a lasting imprint on the Captain? Tell me, what symptoms concern you? Is his strength diminished? Is he plagued by visions?"

Natasha held perfectly still, choosing her words. "How does magic affect mortals? Usually."

"Most frequently, you simply die." Amora shrugged, a casual dismissal of the consequences. "You are such dull, fragile creatures. The energy taken in by the Captain was meant for an Asgardian. Delicacy was hardly a concern in the working, I can assure you. That he lived even hours afterwards is impressive."

"Are there permanent side effects?" She knew the question would tip her hand, but took the risk. Amora seemed willing enough to talk.

"For an Asgardian? No, not permanent. No magic can last forever. For a mortal, I do not know. It's hardly a matter of serious study on Asgard. We don't treat mortals as experiments." Her mouth twisted as though the thought was distasteful, though Natasha figured that had more to do with Amora getting her hands dirty handling them than any care for the mortals themselves.

"What about other spells? Spells you have tried on mortals. What are the permanent effects of those?"

"Other than ceasing to be useful?" Amora turned over one hand, making a show of examining her fingernails. "As I told you, the most frequent outcome is death. Though I suppose you are seeking information about the manner of death. I'm afraid it has not concerned me to pay attention. It may
take days or months, I suppose. Once a mortal becomes unable to meet my needs, I simply replace them."

A shiver prickled under Natasha's skin. "What do you do with them when they're no longer useful?"

With a wave of her hand, Amora sighed. "My Executioner takes care of them. That part is dreadfully tedious."

She made a mental note to add another flag to any unsolved deaths that came to the Avengers' attention, or SHIELD's. None of what Amora had said was doing any good for the knot of coiled tension stuck at the bottom of her stomach, but it had been six months and Steve was still very much alive, if not entirely himself.

"Oh," Amora said, her lips forming a perfect, blood red circle. She smiled as she sat up, resting her chin lightly against her knuckles. "I see. Loki could answer these questions as well as I, but you do not trust him to give you an honest answer. Very wise; Loki spins lies like a spider spins its web. There is a way for me to determine what remains of the spell, but I would need to be allowed access to the Captain. If you could bring him to me."

"Not going to happen," Natasha said immediately, although she was sure of no such thing.

"Why not allow the Captain to make such a decision himself?"

"What makes you think we trust you any more than we trust Loki?" she countered.

"Consider my motives. I care nothing for your world beyond wishing Thor would tire of it and return to Asgard, where he belongs. Can you say the same of Loki? Of his desires and ambitions. Has he not sought to rule you all before?" Green silk cascaded down her legs as she stood and it whispered with each step. She stopped short of touching the transparent barrier. "When my spell was thwarted, so were my designs. I merely wanted to be rid of this Realm and for Thor to come with me without question. But you must ask yourself if all has, perhaps, gone just as Loki intended. If you question your faith in your Captain now, are you so certain that was not his goal?"

Standing slowly, Natasha met Amora's gaze evenly, despite the fact that Amora was nearly a head taller. "We don't doubt Steve."

Amora's eyes narrowed, but she bowed her head slightly and began to turn away. "I had wondered if Loki intended to betray me that night, though I could not see any benefit to him. Until now." She returned to the chaise with no sign of haste, easing down and tucking her long legs beneath her like a cat. "You must always remember one thing, Agent Romanov."

"I'm listening."

"There is only one immutable truth in all the Nine Realms that I know of and it is this, Loki is and will only ever be on Loki's side."

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Three days passed with no further message from the Captain. Three days of clouds so heavy laden with moisture they barely skimmed over the hills, leaving curling trails in their wake and pouring down a bitterly cold rain that seeped into every crack of the abandoned castle. The fire in the hearth was betwitched to burn perpetually, never requiring the addition of fuel, and Loki was certain he would have otherwise forgotten it entirely.

On the morning of the third day, he found a small pile of ashes on the narrow table beside his chair
and knew immediately that the Captain had destroyed his card. For too long, he stared down at the ashes before deciding to leave them as they were, returning to his chair and watching the fire. Which of the seething emotions displeased him the most, he couldn't say.

The disquiet over the Captain's drawings he felt most keenly, most sharply; as a needle twisting beneath his skin. He didn't understand the meaning intended or why the Captain had felt compelled to communicate in so cryptic a manner. That the images were followed by the destruction of the link between them, their only true means of unobserved communication, only increased his misgivings. All was not well with the Avengers or the Captain. His unease over not knowing was surpassed only by the growing horror that he cared.

He'd dismissed it easily enough. A passing attraction; an itch that needed scratching and once sated, could be dismissed. The Captain's rejection had stung his pride, true, but it had amused him to vent his spite on Midgard and watch the Avengers mop up the destruction. Captain Rogers seemed earnest in his attempt to explain, however muddled and ridiculous the explanation itself, that he'd rejected Loki because he couldn't make him happy. His gaze caught on the mound of ashes and he sunk further back into the chair, brooding.

It was true, they were a poor match; opposites in every way that mattered. There was no fault in the logic that he could find, although he was surprised that the Captain had thought it through and despaired, and further surprised that his dying wish had been to take Loki as a lover for a single night. Perhaps such ridiculous madness was exactly the Midgardian trait that appealed so greatly to Thor.

The Captain would not ask Loki to change, he'd said as much. He considered the idea of twisting the Captain into his own image, but found the idea unexpectedly repulsive; he had no wish to alter the Captain either and that was his own undoing. There could not be anything between them as they were; the Captain was far too good and Loki too far beyond saving.

Drumming his fingers slowly against the wooden arm of the chair, he picked his way through the possibilities. He had created the working for Amora and although he had confirmed there was no longer any trace of the spell lingering within the Captain, he couldn't be certain that magic affected mortals as it did Asgardians. Outside his failed attempt to conquer Midgard with the Chitauri scepter, he had not used magic to manipulate mortals. There could be unintended consequences, perhaps even detrimental side effects. He thought of the image the Captain had drawn of himself with strange lines connecting to his head and Banner administering to him. The Avengers would approach any strangeness in the Captain with the tools they had, however primitive: their medicine and their technology. They must believe the Captain had been altered by the spell in a lasting way.

As he considered that, he heard the faint scrabbling of rat claws against the stone, deep within the wall. The creature had, no doubt, come in search of respite from the cold and damp of the moor. Its presence gave him an opportunity and he seized it.

The rodent was as easily manipulated as any other Midgardian creature. It made its way out of a safe hiding place to seek out the temptation of food, an impulse that Loki had easily implanted in its tiny mind. Beady, black eyes glittered with firelight when it squeezed out of an impossibly small crack in the far wall and scurried, pausing to sniff at the air as it hunted an imaginary apple. The spell itself was a child's work, but the rudimentary idea was the same, weaving magic to convince the rat of its desire for a particular item. Of course, it would find no such item within the castle. With a wave of his fingers, he marked the rat's fur with a sigil that would allow him to identify the creature even among its fellows.

As he watched the rat become increasingly frantic in its futile search for the apple, he recognized the
flaw in his experiment. Amora's spell had been thwarted by outside intervention and he hadn't remained under the Avengers' control long enough to determine what Banner had done to achieve their salvation. It was possible the spell had run its natural course, despite the lack of consumation, and only the aspect of lethality had been mitigated by Banner's treatment. That would certainly be unprecedented and he had little insight into what effects might linger.

The simple experiment with the rodent would not be able to provide him the answers he needed. He would have to think carefully and he would need Banner's assistance. Since the latter was unlikely to be given willingly, and would likely result in the emergence of the Hulk should he approach Banner directly, he would have to manipulate Banner into performing the experiments on his own. He needed to know what information Banner had already obtained.

To that end, he would need to infiltrate the home of the Avengers.

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"Sorry about the audience," Bruce waved vaguely in the direction of the lab, glasses in hand. His hair looked more unkempt than usual. "Stark Industries has an outreach program to help get kids interested in STEM fields."

"STEM?" Steve asked. He glanced at the tight grouping of children following Tony around the lab with rapt attention. They looked too young to be high school kids and too old for elementary. Strangely, Tony seemed perfectly at ease surrounded by the bundles of constant energy and curiosity. Bruce, on the other hand, looked a little frayed around the edges. "Should you find another place to work, Doctor Banner?"

"STEM is science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. And they'll be out of here soon enough. It's a good program. Pepper and I talked Tony into doing it so I can't back out now. I've just been a little distracted lately, that's all. It's nothing." Bruce gave him a strained smile. "How're you feeling?"

"Fine." Steve settled on the exam table, rolling up his sleeve. Several of the kids had noticed him and were craning their necks to get a better look.

"We haven't seen Loki in awhile," Bruce commented.

"Is that good or bad? For the tests, I mean."

Sliding his glasses on, Bruce rolled his chair over to Steve's side and wrapped the rubber strip around his arm to draw blood. "Consistency is better, in general, when it comes to scientific experiments. I can't isolate variables if I don't have steady environmental conditions. It makes this job harder, but not having Loki around makes my other job easier, so I'll take it."

Steve gnawed at his lower lip, unsure of what information might help Bruce and what would only make him look crazy. There was whispering in the group of kids now and one of them was pointing as Bruce inserted the needle into his arm.

"As soon as I've got this, we'll head to the other lab. It'll be quieter there."

"Probably a good idea." Steve wondered if he was going to be fielding questions from the media about his health. "We might want to have Tony tell them that I'm fine."

Bruce looked back over his shoulder, frowning. "Oh. Good idea. JARVIS, can you run interference?"
"Certainly, Doctor Banner," came the voice of the AI.

A moment later, Tony paused in his demonstration of a robotic arm and leaned back to look at them. He clapped once, to get the kids' attention. Whatever he told them was too quiet for Steve to hear, but they seemed to settle down after that and only a few of them kept looking over. Steve waved half-heartedly, smiling in what he hoped was a reassuring way.

"And that's done." Bruce bandaged the needle mark and tucked the vials of blood into the pocket of his lab coat. "One brain scan and you'll be on your way."

Steve followed, waving to the group of kids one last time and hoping that was enough to prevent the media from speculating about his health failing or the serum failing or whatever story they wanted to fabricate that day.

He sat patiently as Bruce attached the electrodes. It was beginning to feel familiar and it was easier to settle into a comfortable position on his back with his head inside the cage. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing while he listened to Bruce's voice in the headset. Answering the simple questions was nearly automatic; he rattled off foods, colors, and daily events without having to think about it. Even when the questions became more complicated and inevitably turned toward Loki, he didn't struggle with the answers as much as he had the first time. Perhaps it was because, this time, he had less to hide. He'd burned the card Loki had sent him and hadn't seen or spoken to Loki since that day. Every mile he ran, every push up he did after rolling out of bed, he reminded himself that it was all in his head. He'd even turned over the handling of all his mail to the Stark PR team, in case another card managed to slip through the screening process. He couldn't take any chances or allow even a moment of weakness that Loki might exploit.

He answered honestly about his dreams, those hadn't changed, and answered in the negative about pursuing any sort of relationship with Loki. There were a few new questions, but most were identical to what Bruce had asked him before.

"How do you feel about Loki?"

He'd been waiting for that question. "Not seeing him for awhile concerns me. Makes me wonder where he is and if he's planning something big. But I think all of us are wondering about it. Quiet isn't always good when it comes to Loki."

"Why do you think he hasn't been around?"

He didn't know exactly how much of their last conversation Natasha had overheard and how much she'd relayed to Bruce; he tried to answer honestly. "I think it surprised him, what I said to him the last time. I don't know why, but he seemed surprised and...and a little frightened, actually. Maybe not frightened, maybe just shocked. I mean, it was just coffee. That's not much of a date, really, but he seemed to take it pretty hard that I stood him up. Maybe. I don't know if that's why he started attacking."

"You had a date?"

"Sort of. He wanted to meet me at a coffee shop and I...I went there, but when I saw him, I realized I couldn't go through with it." He took a deep breath and tried to pull himself together. It wasn't something he'd intended to tell anyone, ever. But while he was trapped inside the strange machine that could read his mind, there was no reason for him to lie about it. He waited for the next question but the silence continued to stretch out until he wondered if Bruce had gotten distracted by Tony or another project.
"Alright, we're done. I'll be right in."

He felt better about this session. The questions hadn't caught him off guard as they had the first time. Even the admission of the aborted coffee date wasn't likely to raise as many red flags as comparing Loki to the World Series. He heard Bruce enter the room and the machine began to power down. Once he could sit up, he peeled off the electrodes at his temples.

"Unfortunately," Bruce said absently, tugging at the electrode wires. "The only magic user other than Loki that we have access to is Amora. Natasha visited her, but didn't get much information."

"Wait." He caught Bruce's arm, lightly, then let ago immediately. "Natasha went to see Amora?"

"Awhile ago, yeah." With a shrug, Bruce gathered up the electrodes on a tray and started for the door. "It went about as you'd expect. Amora couldn't say much about lasting side effects of magic on mortals. Apparently most of the people she's cast spells on ended up dead, but she didn't pay attention to details like how or why."

He fell into step beside Bruce. "Dead?"

"Natasha was hoping Amora could tell her more. Thor might be able to find something in Asgard."

"Can you go back to the dead part?"

"You're still alive, aren't you?" Bruce headed for his work table. He busied himself with getting the vials of blood squared away, muttering bits of words to himself as he jotted down notes in a notebook.

Steve stood, picking at the wrap over his elbow where Bruce had drawn blood. He felt invisible and small; the sense of déjà vu sent him straight back to every medical exam room he'd been rejected in before Erskine found him. Maybe that had been the last sane decision he'd made, to follow Erskine into a world gone mad, and the sanity of that was increasingly questionable. The pace of his heartbeat sped up, his chest tightening in a way that was reminiscent of a long gone asthma attack. He knew he should call Sam. They had a deal; Sam called when he couldn't sleep and Steve called when he couldn't breathe, but it seemed childish to bother Sam over such a little thing.

He needed to get his head straight and focus on the mission, that was all. Right now, the mission was finding out what Natasha had learned from Amora. Rather than interrupt Bruce, he backpedaled out of the lab and mentally cycled through the list of ways to get in contact with Natasha when she was out of the Tower. The very last one on his list was the least palatable, but most likely to yield results.

"JARVIS, where'd Tony end up?" he asked on the way to the elevator.

"Mister Stark is concluding the day's entertainment in the fourteenth floor demonstration laboratory. It is intended for public displays of Stark Technology development projects and is well equipped with fire suppressants."

Steve swiped his access card over the scanner. "Fourteenth floor it is."

"Shall I alert Mister Stark that you intend to join him?"

"Sure. Captain America can make an appearance. Why not?"

He took deep breaths until the elevator doors opened on the fourteenth floor and put on his best USO smile. Finding the lab was easy enough; all he had to do was follow the laughter. He slipped in as quietly as he could, catching Tony's eye and waving.
"And it looks like a friend has stopped by to tell you all to eat your vegetables and study hard," Tony said with a flourish.

Steve kept his smile on. "That's right. Stark Industries is always looking for bright young minds just like yours. How'd you like to work here some day?"

The dancing monkey routine was as familiar as a well worn jacket. With kids, it was even easier; their enthusiasm was genuine and their excitement contagious. He answered questions and lifted a few heavy objects, including walking several steps with a half dozen kids clinging to his legs. Tony laughed and told jokes and the kids headed down to the lobby with wide smiles on their faces. One of the kids lingered behind; he was small for his age, with dark brown hair and serious eyes that reminded him of Bucky.

"Hey." Steve dropped into a crouch so he was closer to the boy's eye level. "You saw some pretty cool stuff today, right?"

The boy dropped his head shyly, all but dragging one foot over the tile floor in front of him. "I guess."

"What was your favorite?" He was surprised when the boy reached out with hesitant fingers and touched his shoulder. His smile felt real this time.

"What was the man doing to your arm?" the boy asked.

"Your parents take you to the doctor, to make sure you're okay, don't they? You get your temperature taken and the doc looks at your ears, makes you say ahh. I get check ups just like you." He glanced down the hall and saw that all of the other children had left. "You're going to miss your ride. Come on, I'll take you down. What's your name?"

"I'm Ben." His small hand slipped into Steve's as they walked down the hall. The tiny fingers felt cool and delicate compared to Steve's large ones. "What happens when you get sick? My teacher says you don't get sick. Not even the flu."

"I used to get sick all the time, when I was your age." He was careful to take smaller steps so Ben could keep up. "But I haven't gotten sick since I became Captain America."

"You did though. It was on the news. They said you were sleeping. They said a witch did it." His hand tightened a little as he looked up at Steve.

Steve hadn't paid much attention to how the media had covered the fallout of Amora's spell. That's what Stark's PR team was for and he trusted them to handle it. "You're right. That was sort of like getting sick. She put something in my blood and the doctor, the one you saw, he had to get it out of me."

"Like poison?"

"Yeah, like poison. My doctor has to keep checking my blood and my head to make sure he got all of the poison out."

"How will you know? When it's all out?"

Steve wished the elevator doors would close more quickly. "When you get sick, how do you know when you're better?"

"I don't feel bad anymore."
"It'll be the same for me." He pressed the button for the lobby, feeling guilty for wishing Ben would stop asking questions. It wasn't the boy's fault that Steve had been magically brainwashed into love - he stopped himself before he could finish that thought. It wasn't love; it couldn't be love. Loki was wrong; everything about him was wrong.

"What happens if your doctor can't get all the poison out?"

The question pulled him from his thoughts. When he glanced up at the digital display, grateful to see they were only two floors away from the lobby. "He's a very good doctor," he said with false cheerfulness.

With a ding, the elevator stopped on the lobby floor and the doors slid open with the barest of whispers. There was no sign of the school group in the lobby and Steve frowned, thinking the delay in talking with Ben had caused him to be left behind. Thinking to call the boy's parents or school and alert them, he started for the reception desk. He let go of Ben's hand to get the guard's attention.

"Hey, I've got a straggler from the outreach program tour that just came through. We were talking and he missed his ride home. Think we could use your phone?"

The guard nodded, standing up from his chair. When he looked over the riser, he frowned. "Where's the kid?"

"He's right," he stopped when he realized Ben wasn't standing beside him. A quick glance didn't find him anywhere in the lobby either. "Ben? Ben!" He hurried to the front doors to check in front of Stark Tower, thinking the boy had gone outside, but found only the usual pedestrian traffic and city noise. Puzzled and concerned, he returned to the guard to check for a listing of the students who'd been on the tour.

"Kids are slippery. Gotta watch 'em every second," the guard commented.

"I'll have to cross babysitting off my list of backup careers." Steve shook his head, chagrined over being unable to keep track of a single boy. "Is there a roster or something? I want to make sure he got home."

"I'll see what I can scare up, Cap. Don't worry, we'll find him."

"Thanks."

With nothing useful to contribute, he headed back upstairs resume his hunt for Tony and a way to find Natasha. The elevator started without a button being pressed, carrying him up into the restricted floors and returning him to Banner's floor. He didn't question it, assuming either Bruce or Tony had asked JARVIS to deliver him. The doors opened on the medical floor.

"Doctor Banner? Bruce?" Muted conversation caught his ears, so quiet he thought he was imagining it until he rounded a corner and saw Bruce and Tony crowded around a pair of displays.

"Still?" Tony asked. "It's been months."

"If anything, it's getting more pronounced. We can try countering it, but with the serum, he'll burn through anything I give him. And I don't think that's the right answer anyway. This is his brain we're talking about. We can't just mess around in there." Bruce rubbed at the back of his neck.

Tony's attention immediately snapped to Bruce. "Maybe it's your brain we should be worried about. Another migraine? What's that, the fifth one this week?"

"I'm fine. I'm not...it's under control, okay?"
Steve cleared his throat, hoping he wouldn't startle Bruce badly enough they'd all regret it, and tried to smile at the guilty looks on their faces. "Before you ask. Long enough. And it's fine, I get it."

Swiveling on his stool, Bruce faced him. He looked even more tired than before. "What do you get, Steve?"

"I'm compromised. That spell may be gone, the magic may be gone, but it's still eating away at my brain and, believe me, I want you to find a way to stop it. Whatever you want me to try, I'm in." He hoped neither of them could see or hear that he was terrified. "What are my options? I'm a lab rat already so you might as well throw everything you've got at me."

"Why don't you sit down?" Bruce motioned to a nearby chair. "It'll help if you'd talk about it. You haven't really...talked about it."

"What's there to talk about?" Gritting his teeth, he yanked the chair out and sat down. "Are you sure you don't want to hook me up to your machine again? Make sure I'm telling the truth?"

Tony exchanged a look with Bruce, eyebrows raised. "Why don't we start with extra strength Valium?"

"This isn't a joke, Tony," Steve snapped.

"I live in the same building with you, I get that it's not a joke. Really." Huffing out a breath, Tony caught another stool with his foot and dragged it over to the work table. "You, my star spangled friend, have been a stick of dynamite with the fuse lit for the past six months. If I could harness the tension radiating off of you all the time, I could power one of my suits for a month."

"Tony." Bruce waved him down. "You have to admit you've been tense, Steve."

"Of course I'm tense!" He raked his fingers through his hair, trying to push his emotions down and stay calm. "I know you mean well, but you all act like you're afraid I'm going to sneak out the window and run off to Vegas with him. Like I don't know...who he is. What he is. It's like you think I've forgotten all the people who died and everything he's done. Like I'd throw all that aside just for sex that I don't know for sure I even want. What kind of person does it make me, if I do want...that. Crazy? Stupid? Or worse. I don't know what's real anymore and I just want it to stop. I look in the mirror and I don't know who I am. I want it to stop." The outburst didn't make him feel better.

Tony raised his hands in exaggerated celebration. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"Are we?" Steve demanded sharply. "You've drawn my blood and scanned my brain, but what answers do we actually have? Natasha went to see Amora and Thor's looking for answers in Asgard. None of you are telling me anything or letting me help. And according to Amora, most humans who get spells cast on them end up dead. Isn't that right, Bruce?"

"We only have Amora's word on that," Bruce added hastily.

"So we just wait for me to fall over and die before we take it seriously?"

"You're not going to die."

"Amora did have a suggestion," Tony said out of the side of his mouth. Bruce cut him off. "No."

"What?" Steve jumped on the piece of information. "What was her suggestion?"
"It's obviously a trap." Shaking his head, Bruce set his glasses on the worktable behind him and reached for a bottle of water. "Amora thought she could help, but only if she has access to you. Maybe she thinks it'll give her a chance to escape. An opportunity. Maybe she thinks Loki will try to intervene, to protect you or prevent her from removing the after effects of the spell, and then she can get revenge for capturing her and turning her over to us."

Steve frowned, trying to connect the dots. "You think she's trying to set a trap for Loki? By using me as bait? How?"

"Who knows? Some sort of magical whammy tracking chip, maybe. Or the Asgard equivalent of those ear worm things from Wrath of Khan." Tony shivered at the thought. "The point is we don't know what she or Loki are capable of but we're pretty sure it's bad news. Until we have an antidote for magic or a way to protect ourselves, we'd be offering you up as a sacrificial lamb. Personally, I think the Avengers have had worse plans in the past, to be honest, and you're the self-sacrificing type. But that option has been veto-ed."

He could read between the lines well enough to realize they were afraid Amora would make him worse rather than better, either out of spite or simply because she could. "You're assuming Loki would care what Amora did to me."

Tony shrugged. "He seemed to last time. At least a little bit."

"The time he tried to strangle me?" Steve shook his head, glad for a chance to be the voice of reason in all the insanity. "Amora trying to create a chance to escape, that I'll believe. But even if she can't fix me, maybe we could use this. Use it to learn more about magic and how to protect against it."

The look on Tony's face said volumes. He turned to Bruce, grinning. "Straight from the horse's mouth."

Bruce rubbed at his eyes. "We just need more time, Steve."

Surprisingly, Tony reached back to shut off the displays and the images of Steve's brain disappeared. "Why don't we call that enough for today? Take a breather." He gave Steve a meaningful look.

Steve stayed on the chair, shaky and suddenly exhausted, when Bruce left the lab and Tony accompanied him.

Alone, the space felt more alien than before. The black displays sulked ominously on the worktable, compelling him to move to turn them back on. He couldn't make sense of the images, other than it was his brain and there were different colors that he thought must represent activity of some kind. That Bruce could look at these and gain any insight at all was something out of a science fiction novel. He heard footsteps behind him and saw Tony reenter the lab.

"Is he okay?" Steve asked before returning to the images of his brain.

"Two Avengers start to lose their mind within a few months of each other. Not a coincidence. I only wish I knew how Loki was doing it." Tony dug through a draw in one of the wide cabinets and produced a bottle of scotch. He collected two beakers from the sink. "Don't argue, just drink. I need a drink so you're drinking with me."

Frowning, Steve accepted the beaker without commenting on the time of day. "What do you mean?"

"Started about a month ago. He's distracted, gets migraines. Won't say much other than he keeps seeing things out of the corner of his eye and hearing a buzzing, like some sort of interference. But I've looked and there's no ambient noise in these labs that could be what he's hearing." Tony took a
long swallow from his beaker before setting it down. "Amora did say one thing that made us think."

"I wish Natasha had told me she was going to Amora. I should've been with her. You guys have got
to let me help. I'm the one losing my mind."

Tony brushed his protest aside with a shrug. "Amora thinks Loki did it on purpose. She doesn't think
it was an accident you were the ones who got hit by the spell."

"No, there's no way," Steve said quickly. He turned away from the screens and took a seat facing
Tony.

"Are you saying that because you're in love with him?" Tony shook his head and poured out another
measure of scotch. "Even if you are, I don't think it means you're compromised. Not forever
anyway."

He'd been ready to argue, already on edge from the previous conversation, but Tony's words took
the anger out of him. "What do you mean?"

"He got us to turn on each other before, who says he's not trying to do it again? You feel like none of
us trust you. Hell, you don't trust your own brain and that is terrifying, I know. Then he puts Bruce
on edge, we all know how well that turns out. And think about it. Loki chose chains. After Amora's
spell, he didn't even try to just grab you and run. He could've. Could've ended the spell himself, but
he didn't. That would've been the easiest option. Why not? That's what I keep coming back to. Why
didn't he just go along with the spell?"

"Because it was wrong," Steve said hollowly. A sick feeling was settling in the back of his throat.

"Right. He's good with murder but cares about consent? Sorry, Steve. I just don't see Loki not
having an angle here. He counted on us saving you and, by extension, him. He knew Thor wouldn't
let him die. So why the charade? Did he need to get into the Tower and this is just a bonus or was
this the plan all along? Make you doubt yourself, make us worry about you so we're all distracted.
Then he starts chipping away at Bruce."

Steve set the beaker on the table. If he drank any of it, he thought he might throw up. This idea was
so much worse than a spell-induced infatuation. If Tony was right, it was deliberate manipulation
intended to drive him mad.

It felt wrong, all of it. Everything Tony was saying felt sickeningly wrong, but there was logic in it
that Steve couldn't ignore. Had Loki known Steve would knock Amora out of the way? It was
possible he'd just hoped that one of the Avengers would do it and it hadn't mattered which; it was
Steve's bad luck that he'd been the one. The thought of Loki in that room with Natasha or Tony
made his stomach churn. He didn't want to believe any of it.

He forced his mouth to move. "Where is Natasha?"

"She and Clint are hunting Loki. Thor says he's on Earth somewhere. They went to check out a
couple leads."

Steve thought back to the castle on the moor and realized he could've narrowed down the search if
he'd told anyone what he'd seen. Now, he wished he hadn't destroyed the card Loki had given him;
maybe Tony and Bruce could've figured out how to use it to determine Loki's location. Guiltily, he
reached for the abandoned beaker and drained the scotch in one swallow.

"That's the Captain America I want to drink with." Tony refilled the beaker. "None of us think
you're crazy, by the way. We think you got hit by crazy alien magic and it's messing with you."
"Really?" He drained the beaker a second time and held it out for more. It was useless, but felt like a small act of defiance. "I feel crazy."

"What's it like? I've been dying of curiosity. Do you really...you know?"

With a nervous laugh, Steve swirled the liquor in the beaker. "Want to rip his clothes off? Yeah. I mean, basically. I have these dreams, almost every night, and, well. Sometimes it's...it's like I can't even think about anything else."

"Lots of cold showers?"

"Haven't had any other kind in over six months."

"That is so fascinating. Not for you, since you actually have to live through it, but think of what we could learn about the human brain by studying how something like a spell, this insane ball of energy, can change how you think."

"Glad I have scientific value," Steve said dryly.

"Anyone else would be dead." Tony rolled the beaker between his hands, seemingly fixated by the sloshing liquid inside. "I don't think Amora was joking about that part. You were pretty far gone when Bruce came up with a hail Mary. We were desperate."

He saw nothing but sincerity in Tony's eyes and risked a question. "What about Loki? I was unconscious before...before he was."

"Thor wouldn't let us keep any of the blood samples or, believe me, we'd have them." Tony rolled his eyes, irritated. "He was conscious for a few hours after you passed out. Didn't do or say anything interesting though."

"You really think he would put himself through that just to get into the Tower?"

"I think anyone who can shape shift and vanish into thin air isn't going to be held by a set of chains unless he wants to be." "Thor doesn't think he was playing us."

"Thor remembers a Loki who doesn't exist anymore." Thoughtfully, Tony tapped his fingers against the side of the beaker. "If you believe Thor, and I do, Loki wasn't always a world conquering sociopath. Whatever happened, whatever turned Loki into what he is now, no one has to tell me it's gotta be some dark shit. He's damaged goods, anyone can see that from five miles away. The difference is that Thor thinks Loki can come back from that."

"And you don't."

Tony shook his head, a touch of sadness in his smile. "I think the first step on the long road out of Hell is deciding you want to leave. Not on a whim, not half-assed, you have to know with every fiber of your being that you've got to change or there won't be anything left. I don't think Loki even wants to find that road, Steve, let alone take it. Not even to be Captain America's boyfriend."

He'd come to the same conclusion. "Does that mean he doesn't deserve a chance?"

"I'm not really into that whole philosophical debate of who deserves a chance and who doesn't. Not my thing. That's more your territory, isn't it? But, let's be hypothetical here. Say you, hypothetically, give him a chance. Go on a few dates, wine and dine him, take him to bed if you want. How does
that work? Do you kiss him goodbye in the morning and then call us up to tell us what chaos he's going to unleash that day? Do you kick each other's asses and then kiss each other's bruises later?"

"You're oil and water," Tony continued. "You're good, he's evil. You're sane, mostly, and he's not. He kills people, you save people. That's not a sustainable system. So either you'd go dark side on us or he'd see the light. I don't have to tell you which of those is more likely." He held up a hand to stop any protest Steve might make. "And that's one hundred percent because he's already proven he can mess with your head. Who's to say the next spell he throws at you won't be to make you more like him? We're not afraid you'll run off to Vegas. We're afraid he'll sink his claws into you so deep that the next time we see you, you'll be trying to kill us."

Steve swallowed. He balked at the idea, certain that Loki wouldn't do that, but he had no rational reason for believing that was a line Loki wouldn't be willing to cross, only a feeling.

"Enough serious talk. How about we get serious about drinking instead?" Tony stood up, catching the bottle with one hand. "Come on. I'll order some strippers for you."

"Tony."

"Male or female? Never mind, both. Definitely both. Long dark hair?" He winked as he headed to the door. "Don't knock it 'til you try it, Spangles. Might do you some good."

Steve rubbed a hand over his face and groaned. The last thing he wanted was to be surrounded by strangers.

Undeterred, Tony stuck his head back into the lab. "On your feet, soldier. I'm not taking no for an answer."

He drained the beaker one last time before he started after Tony. "Only because you need a designated...everything."
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Loki makes a discovery that puts him on a collision path with Steve, while the Avengers weigh their options to manage Steve's deterioration.

The cold didn't bother Natasha; she knew how to dress for cold. Clint's teeth chattering in the seat next to her told a different story.

"I told you to layer," she said mildly, not looking up from the Stark tablet in her hands. "We've got another fifteen miles of dirt road to cover before we head back to the hotel and not much daylight left. Think you'll make it?"

"How is it this cold?" He blew on his hands. "I thought England was supposed to be warm. It's an island, right?"

She raised one eyebrow, finally looking over at him, but didn't bother telling him to knock off the playing dumb routine. "It's February and we're in Scotland. England was yesterday."

He shrugged one shoulder. "Why do we think Loki's in an abandoned castle anyway?"

"That's what Thor said. Couldn't pinpoint exactly which one, because apparently Loki can appear to be in a thousand locations at once. Neat trick." It would take them another week to cover the British Isles and then there was continental Europe ahead of them.

With their route memorized, she tucked the tablet away and started the Land Rover. The roads had been rough, untraveled by anything other than wildlife. In another circumstance, she thought the landscape might have been beautiful, but the fog banks never seemed to lift and everything was washed in a chilled, dreary rain. Clint offered her a granola bar, but she declined. She'd promised herself a bowl of steaming hot lamb stew and a beer when they got back to the hotel bar.

"What's the plan when we do find him?" Clint asked through a mouthful of granola.

"You aren't going to kill him."

He snorted derisively. "I'm not going to appeal to his better nature."

"This is recon, Clint. We mark the X on the map and we go home. Surveillance only."

"Pointless."

"What if he turns you into a frog?"

"Wouldn't he have done that already? If he could."

She didn't want to speculate. Not even Thor could give them a good answer of what Loki was truly capable of; as it turned out, Thor hadn't been paying that much attention over the past thousand years. That Loki was magic and could do tricks was a fact of life Thor had taken for granted, like faster than light space travel and other impossibilities that made Tony's eyes get really wide.
"It's not like he implanted some sort of kill switch in Steve's brain along with...you know." Clint shifted uncomfortably.

They didn't know that for sure either.

Once Bruce confirmed that Steve's brain had been permanently affected by the spell, it had opened the door to a host of possibilities, each one more frightening than the next; they simply didn't know enough about how magic worked. Talking to Amora hadn't been reassuring either. Steve was unraveling right before their eyes; they could all see it and there was nothing any of them could do about it.

She edged the nose of the Land Rover over the top of a hill with a jagged swath cut from the side, as though an ancient giant had taken a bite out of it, and caught a glimpse of their destination ahead. It was over five hundred years old, rumored to be haunted, and isolated enough that a fallen Asgardian could take up residence without being noticed. The last five miles were slow progress; she had to circumnavigate gaping holes and undercarriage destroying rocks. When she finally came to a stop within walking distance of the ruins, the sun was beginning to set. Cutting the engine, she made a quick check of the equipment bag before fishing out two flashlights and handing one over to Clint.

"I hate it already," Clint groused, but he climbed out of the Land Rover and slung the strap of the equipment bag over his shoulder.

"Let's make it quick. And watch your feet. This place is probably a death trap of rotten wood and loose stones."

"Just like all the others."

"Don't say I never take you anywhere nice." She clicked on her flashlight before starting through knee high brambles and heather. It was unfortunate Tony hadn't been able to perfect a device to detect magical energy; he blamed not having a way to test his theories that didn't raise questions about whether or not the Geneva Convention applied to beings from another planet.

They made their way to one of the caved in sides of the ruined castle and climbed over the tumble of stones, cautiously testing the stability of the rocks beneath them. A surprising amount of the castle had remained intact; a testament to its initial construction. Thick moss spread over the floor and walls and the air inside was heavy with the smell of earth. Once they ducked into the remnants of the interior, enough structure remained to provide shelter from the relentless rain. Faint sounds, a squeak and the clicking of small claws against stone, alerted them to the presence of resident rodents.

"Why are there always rats?" Clint sighed.

She swung the beam of her flashlight over the wall ahead of them and saw an archway leading deeper into the castle. "If you don't bother them, they won't bother you."

Most of the interior rooms were ruined. Thick roots reached out of the earth below and walls had long since collapsed under the weight of years. They found what must have been a kitchen, with a wide fireplace still intact and blackened with ages old soot. At the end of the corridor, one of the circular staircases remained intact and strong enough to hold their weight. The second floor had suffered more invasion of the elements and only a single room had all four walls. What had once been a bed was reduced to a pile of moldering wood and dust. There was a wooden chair beside the fireplace that was unexpectedly whole, though the wood had a strange, spongy texture when she reached down to touch it.

"I don't think this chair is as old as the rest of the castle. Someone must have brought it here." She
swung the light around, taking in the decay of the rest of the room. When she didn't get an answer, she looked around for Clint and realized he wasn't in the room with her. She backtracked, following the indentations in the moss and disturbance of dust and dirt on the stones. Further down, she saw Clint crouched in a crumbling doorway, peering into a den of shadows. A different smell of decay, the kind that came from dead flesh, wafted out of the space. "Find something?"

"Bunch of dead rats." He pulled back and stood up. "Like some sort of rat graveyard."

"Odd."

"There must be some sort of predator in the area. Brings them back here and leaves the remains." He shivered. "This place gives me the creeps."

"I think we can be pretty sure no one's living here." Keeping the flashlight trained on the floor ahead of them, she lead the way back down the narrow staircase and through the debris to the gaping maw of the far wall. As they climbed out, the Starkphone in her pocket began to chirp. Once her feet were solidly on the ground, she fished it out and saw Sam's name on the screen. "Sam? What's up?"

Sam nearly shouted into the phone. "Tony Stark took Steve to a strip club. The press is having a field day. What the hell was he thinking?"

"It's Stark, your guess is good as mine." She waved Clint toward the Land Rover. "Did they set the building on fire? Or was Steve throwing out the guys who disrespected the girls?"

"There was a whole lot of the second one, according to Twitter." Sam sighed loudly. "This isn't going to help him, Natasha."

"I'll do damage control when I get back."

"Where are you?"

"At the moment, Scotland." She was glad to climb back into the Land Rover and start the engine, waiting for the heat to take the chill out of her bones. "Believe me, if I were in New York, there's no way I would miss Steve going to a strip club." She glared at Clint, who was dissolving into laughter beside her.

"I'm beginning to think you two really do need me in New York. If only to keep you out of trouble."

"You've got a place, rent free. Say the word."

"Just get back there as soon as you can."

"Doing my best." She ended the call and put away the phone. "We may need to put the rest of these on hold and head home tomorrow."

"Fine by me." Clint was peering down at his Starkphone and grinning. "You're gonna love this Nat. Tony apparently took over the whole club. And Steve really did throw a few guys out of the building, literally. That was before they closed it, private party, they're saying. This is awesome. An entire strip club and the only ones there were Tony Stark and Steve freaking Rogers. What do you want to bet he made them tea and taught them self defense?"

"Stark's PR team is going to kill him. If Pepper doesn't get to him first." There was no way the media wasn't going to paint it as an all out drunken orgy, starring Captain America and Iron Man.

"I can't believe we missed this!"
"It's not funny." But she had to admit the mental image of Steve bodily hauling a few creeps out by their necks had considerable appeal. She would've paid money to see that and then more money to give him a hand taking out the trash. "Right now, I want food, a beer, and a warm bed."

"Finally. Now you're talking my language."

**

The twin red eyes of the vehicle disappeared into the darkening fog, it's low rumble of sound fading away soon after. Loki watched from the window of the upper room in the abandoned castle, gripping the windowsill hard enough that shards of rock bit into his palms. Once he was certain they were gone, he turned away from the window and waved a hand to dispel the illusion of ruin around him. It hadn't been much of a mask, just enough to hide his presence, but effective nonetheless. He called the fire in the hearth back to life and grimly returned to his experiments.

He knew, in general if not in particular, that Banner had circumvented the spell by pulling blood from the Captain's body and cleansing it of harmful compounds - Steve had called it poison - with a machine. Apparently he had done the same with Loki's blood, and had no doubt learned a great deal about Loki in the process, though the Avengers didn't seem to be capitalizing on the fact. What Banner had done with his equipment, Loki could mimic with magic, and the results had been dismal.

He had succeeded in obtaining rats who were no longer driven to search out food that did not exist and consumed other nourishment, but none of them had lived longer than a week afterward. He could find no trace of the original spell within them, but still, like the ticking of the clock, their behavior grew increasingly erratic and, inevitably, he'd added rat corpse after rat corpse to the pile Barton had found. He had one last test to perform and one rat who had not yet expired.

With a whisper, he called it out of the stones and waited for it to come to him. He'd cast a spell similar to Amora's a week earlier, giving it the overwhelming desire for an apple, and then painstakingly kept the rat alive by maintaining its tiny body's natural balance until the force of the spell faded away. It happily scavenged for other food now, as it had done before Loki's interference, and he anticipated that it would expire before dawn if his next experiment was unsuccessful.

The subtle scrabble of claws alerted him to the rat's arrival. Ever so slowly, he conjured a single apple, a plain, red thing with a withered stem, and set it on the floor in front of the fire.

He waited, watching the creature dart along the base of the walls, behind fallen stones, and in and out of the shadows. It did not trust the fire nor Loki, but the call of food and the lack of movement eventually overrode those innate fears; it crept toward the apple while staying as far from Loki as possible. Beady eyes gleamed in the firelight once it was close enough that he could see the whiskers twitch and shiver. He didn't realize he was holding his breath until he heard the soft crunch of incisors cutting into the flesh of the apple and let out a long exhalation. The rat continued to gnaw at the apple for several minutes before scurrying away and disappearing into one of the holes in the wall.

If there was any alteration of the outcome, he would know by morning.

The night stretched long ahead of him and he couldn't bring his mind to settle on any one subject. Infiltrating Stark Tower had been no more difficult than moving unnoticed behind Erik Selvig all those weeks, nudging him in the direction that would allow the Tesseract to open a doorway. He was unable to truly interact but he had learned a great deal about Banner and his science as he'd lurked, invisible, and watched over his shoulder. No doubt Stark would be mortally offended if he realized how easily Loki had circumvented his security precautions.
Holding up his hand, he thought he could still feel the barest ghost of warmth from the Captain’s skin. It was a simple lure, though surprisingly effective with mortals, to appear as a lost child. He had deliberately avoided the Captain on all other trips to the Tower, unwilling to succumb to the desire to observe the man in his most private moments. That felt wrong, though Loki couldn’t pinpoint why.

Outside the reach of his fire, the night grew bitterly cold. He found himself unable to sleep and soon began pacing across the small room.

Should the rat live to see another day, the implications were deeply troubling. Was the Captain destined to share the same Fate as the others, despite Banner’s success in easing the symptoms? Had Banner merely postponed the inevitable? Comparatively, a week in a rat’s life was months of a typical human lifetime, and though the Captain was hardly typical, it was possible that he had no more than weeks remaining before the spell took its final toll. Perhaps humans were different enough from rats that he was worried over nothing.

"I am not worried," he hissed at himself, spurning the idea that the Captain’s welfare meant anything to him. The Captain’s death would mean one less thorn in his side and one less obstacle in his way.

Why had he not simply allowed the working to take its course?

He’d asked himself that question thousands of times. Under the influence of the spell, Steve had been willing, had been eager, and would have taken everything Loki had given him, then begged for more. It would have been over in a few lust soaked days; none would have found Steve guilty, considering the circumstances, and one more crime added to Loki’s list could hardly matter in the end. True, he had been certain the Avengers would find some way to save Steve’s life; they were remarkably creative and had an uncanny ability to cheat death.

When had he started thinking of him as Steve?

Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to stop pacing. If the rat did not survive, he would have his answer; if the rat did survive, he would have a different answer. It was as simple as that and no amount of soul searching or picking at his own mind would change the outcome of the experiment.

To pass the time, he threw himself into futile work on the space around him. He scraped moss and lichen from the stones, filled holes in the walls, and set about reclaiming one of the larger rooms on the ground floor from the creeping earth. It was tedious work that left his brow damp with sweat, but also numbed his mind to the anxiety of unknowns. Lost in the efforts of manual labor, he scarcely noticed when the first glow of day appeared outside and chose to finish the task at hand, steeling his nerves.

With a second room cleared and approaching livable, he returned to the ever burning fire and sunk wearily into the chair. Closing his eyes, he sent out an inaudible call for the rat. Dripping water was the only sound for several long minutes and then he heard the tiny squeak and claws ghosting over the stone floor.

Tension bled from his body with each breath. The rat was alive a full day after all the others had expired and, perhaps, would live a regular life. Additional study would be needed; as Banner was often heard to say, results had to be reproducible. He would find more rats and perform the same test. For the moment, the Captain seemed to be in good health, and there was time for him to be certain before concern was due. He was not prepared to face what it meant if there was truly no escaping the spell.

Out of idle curiosity, he conjured a second apple and set it on the floor for the rat to find, then conjured a variety of nuts, berries, and grubs as well. Surely so brave and determined a rat deserved
the reward of a feast.

His heart was lighter with his success in preventing the rat's death and he found himself suddenly ravenous. Leaving the creature to its meal, he went to the kitchen for his own. The local villages had surprisingly rich breads and tender meats that he had grown partial to, despite their being primitive, commoner fare. His appetite sated and still in a good humor, he continued his work on the second room, periodically reaching out to determine if the rat was still alive and well.

The day passed quickly enough, though it was difficult to tell with all of the sunlight dispersed by heavy clouds and the seemingly endless rain. Another day, possibly two, and the second room would be livable. Its wide fireplace was grander than the small hearth upstairs and he thought a proper sized bed would fit easily. Given enough time, he would be able to transform the castle into a true home; it was a strangely pleasant thought. There was a satisfying ache in his muscles as he ate a late meal and returned to the upper room for the night. He verified that the rat was still scurrying quite happily within the walls and felt a fresh surge of triumph.

On the floor of the room, he saw that the apple remained. Frowning, he ventured closer to inspect. The nuts and berries, even the grubs, had been devoured completely, but the apple remained untouched. He picked it up and examined it carefully, but found not even a single mark from the rat's teeth in the smooth, red skin.

"Interesting," he mused.

It could be a coincidence, of course, and most likely was. He made a note to add another variable to his study and ate the apple himself.

**

"CAPTAIN ROGERS."

Steve bolted upright so suddenly he nearly tumbled out of the bed. Blinking through the haze of terror, everything around him looked foreign and subtly alien, as though he'd been shifted through a dark mirror into a world that resembled like his, but harbored evil beneath its surface. His heartbeat began to steady, breath slowing from a labored pant as sweat dripped steadily down his back. The overhead lights came on slowly and dispelled the alien cast of the room, bringing it back to comforting familiarity.

"I apologize, Captain Rogers," JARVIS said. "My sensors indicated that you were in distress."

He shut his eyes tightly, forcing his fingers to loosen around mangled fistfuls of his bedding.

"Thanks for waking me up."

"May I be of service?"

"No. I...I'm fine."

Still shaking, he abandoned sleep and climbed out of bed. He started the kettle first, thinking tea would settle his nerves, and then decided on coffee instead. The clock on the microwave read three in the morning and he winced. It was far too late, or early, to call Sam. Not that he wanted to talk to anyone - ever - about his dreams of late. If they'd been disconcerting before, they were horrifying now.

Head bowed, he leaned against the kitchen counter and tried to erase the dream images from his memory. He'd been back in the cell, chained up along with Loki, with the spell coursing through his blood; except, in his dream, the chains hadn't held. It had felt real, too real; he'd dragged Loki from
the bench by his hair and forced him to his knees. There had been none of the reciprocal passion he'd felt in other dreams, there had been only hunger, raw and razor edged. Loki had looked terrified and he'd nearly choked, gagging as Steve forced him to-

He ground his molars together. "JARVIS?"

"Yes?"

"Is anyone else awake?" It was a long shot, but he needed something to get his mind off of the dream.

"Not at this time."

So much for that idea. He bit down on his lower lip until he tasted blood. It was all he could do to wait for the coffee to be ready and he was nearly vibrating out of his own skin with restlessness. He tried a shower, the knob turned all the way to cold, but that only made his teeth chatter while doing nothing for the unnatural and unwelcome burning beneath his skin. He needed to get out, get away; anything to stop thinking; stop thinking about the sound of fabric tearing and Loki's cry of pain when Steve held him down and-

He bolted from the shower with shampoo suds still clinging to his ears, chanting - stopstopstop - under his breath.

The coffee burned his tongue but he gulped it down anyway, scrambling to get dressed and pull on his running shoes. As an afterthought, he tucked his Starkphone and wallet into the inner, zippered pocket of his jacket. He barreled out the door, down the hall, and had to bounce up and down on the balls of his feet while the elevator crawled to the ground floor.

Once he hit the street, he ran without thinking where he was going. He vaulted over a taxi, startling the driver inside, and pushed himself to go faster.

Winter hadn't given up its hold on the Eastern seaboard; his breath frosted on the air and every patch of ice on the concrete was a trap lying in wait for his unsuspecting shoes to find. The cold burned and he welcomed it. He lost count of the miles well before his muscles began to tire. The city fell away; he passed shopping complexes and housing developments. He took every winding path that promised to lead him further away. Small towns flew by without registering; he caught a few of the names but quickly forgot them. When his body finally began to complain, the sun had risen and he realized that he was far north of New York City.

He slowed to a walk and looked for a place to rest. A quaint bakery that looked straight out of a New England tourist brochure caught his eye. The inside greeted him with the smell of fresh bread, so thick in the air that he could almost taste it. He ordered coffee and several large blueberry muffins, still warm from the oven, before tucking himself as far into the corner as he could. When he finished the muffins, he ordered more coffee and a half dozen raspberry scones. The woman behind the counter gave him an odd look, but didn't ask questions beyond taking his order.

Finally full, he pulled his Starkphone out and set it on the table. He would have to tell Bruce. He was due to have his next check-up, if they were calling it that, on Thursday and the thought of going through a brain scan with those dream images still in his head made him queasy. His own mind was being twisted against him; the spell was turning him into his own worst enemy. Instead of Bruce, the first number he dialed was Sam's.

The phone connected and there was a muffled groan. "World better be in danger, Rogers."
He kept his eyes on his coffee mug. "Sorry."

"It's cool. Just give me a second to wake up." There was another groan and the sound of moving around. "Alright, I've got coffee brewing so tell me what's up. Somehow I doubt a six am wake up call from Captain America means kittens and puppies are falling from the sky."

"It's nothing."

"Uh-huh. Is there a reason nothing couldn't wait until noon?"

"I told you about my dreams. That I dream about Loki, sometimes."

"A little kinky, but nothing wrong with that."

"Not anymore. I don't...I can't." He had to stop and take several deep breaths. "I don't know why but they've changed. The last week, maybe two weeks, they're different." Even the thought of admitting what happened in his dreams was too much. He didn't know how he could dream those things and still wake up needing a cold shower. It sickened him. "They're...they're violent."

"Violent in a Spike and Buffy bringing the house down kind of way?"

"No," he answered, throat tight. "It's, I'm forcing him...and I can't stop."

Sam let out a low whistle. "I'm sorry, man. That's gotta be hard to stomach. Have you told Bruce?"

"Not yet. I will...I just had to get out. Went for a run." He glanced around the bakery, looking for a sign of some kind. He'd seen a sign on the way into town but hadn't paid much attention. "I'm not actually sure where I am."

"I'm sure Stark can find you, wherever you got to. Now I want you to call home and have someone come get you. Call Nat, she's probably up, then call me back. I'll have coffee in me by then and I'll stay on the phone with you until someone gets there. Think you can do that?"

"Alright."

"This isn't your fault, Steve, and it's not real. Just gotta remember that."

"Thanks." He ended the call. It took another five minutes for him to work up the courage to call Natasha.

She picked up on the first ring, which meant Sam must've given her forewarning. "Where are you?"

"Do you and Sam do this all the time?"

"Tag teaming is more efficient. You gonna tell me where you are or do I need to sic JARVIS on you?"

"It's called Danbury, I think. There was a Welcome sign on the way into town. I think that's what it said."

"As in Danbury, Connecticut? You went for a run and ended up in Connecticut," she deadpanned. He felt ridiculous now. "Apparently?"

"Give me an hour." The call ended.
A third coffee wasn't a good idea so he got up and opted for a calming herbal tea instead. Other customers had filtered in and low music was playing in the background. He stared at the pastry case, not seeing any of it, until the person behind him in line prompted him to move forward and he flushed, embarrassed. His cheeks didn't stop burning until he was back in his corner with his tea. Captain America was hiding in a bakery waiting to be rescued; it would've been comical if he'd felt up to laughing at himself. He called Sam back, more relieved than he cared to admit when he heard the familiar voice.

"You know, the usual method of having a midlife crisis is buying a convertible."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Oh, gotta tell you about this. Read it on a website the other day."

He listened to Sam ramble on about some sort of scientific breakthrough about stars or galaxies. The words, and Sam's easy rhythm, were calming. His contributions to the conversation were minimal, answering questions when prompted but otherwise listening to Sam talk. There were periods of silence as well, which neither of them felt the need to fill.

"Hey, Steve. If you need me in New York, I'll be there. You know that."

His first impulse was to say no, but he stopped himself. "I don't want to take you away from what you need to do. But I think I might need the Avengers, all of them."

"That sounds ominous."

"There's an option. No one thought it was worth the risk, but it might be time to rethink."

"They're just dreams, Steve."

He took a deep breath. "I can't explain it, Sam, but it's more than the dreams. I don't...I'm not myself. And it's getting worse."

"I can be there tonight, leave straight after work."

"Thank you, Sam. For everything."

They lapsed back into silence broken only when Sam found something else on the Internet he wanted to share. An hour went by and he realized he hadn't given Natasha the name of the bakery, only what he thought was the name of the town. At an hour and fifteen minutes, Natasha walked through the door, red curls sticking out haphazardly from the black ball cap she'd pulled on. She caught sight of Steve, but only nodded before getting in line to order.

"Nat's here. Thanks again, Sam."

"There'd better be beer in the fridge when I get there."

"Your favorite. See you later."

His tea had long gone cold and he was starting to feel hungry again, but wanted something more substantial than pastries. The hour home was guaranteed to be awkward. Either Natasha would interrogate him or she'd be silent the entire trip, leaving him to stew in his own thoughts, and that was worse. He needed to get her on his side, convince her that Amora was their best option. They hadn't been able to find Loki; no one had even seen Loki since the day he'd left his hand print in bruises on Steve's throat. Amora was their only available option.
Natasha had a large coffee in one hand and a croissant in the other when she approached Steve's
table. She bit off the end of the croissant, taking a seat and fixing him with a stern glare. "I'm going
to tell Tony to put in a gym. With a treadmill just for you."

He tried to smile. "Sorry."

"JARVIS spilled the beans. Said a nightmare woke you up at three and you raced out of the Tower
like a hellhound was on your heels."

"Sounds about right."

She watched him intently as she ate her croissant. "You look like shit, Rogers." There was no venom
or anger in her voice, only cool concern.

"I want to see Amora."

One eyebrow rose and she paused in her assault on the pastry. "Alright. By the way, you are getting
worse. It's not in your head. Your neurotransmitter levels, hormone levels, everything. It's not bad
even though permanent damage or put you in a coma. Yet. Bruce didn't want to tell you, didn't
want you to worry. The progression is slow, but steady."

He wasn't sure if he should feel relieved or simply terrified. "How long?"

"Before you have to go back on dialysis? A month, maybe. Then we start monitoring you again. If
it's chronic, you'll probably have to do dialysis once a year, maybe more, maybe less."

It wasn't a worse case scenario. Undergoing dialysis once a year wasn't life ending; it was the other
three hundred and sixty two days of doubting his own sanity that he wouldn't be able to handle. He
wondered if they could know it wouldn't get worse, or if the need for dialysis would happen more
frequently until he ended up hooked to a machine for the rest of his life.

She popped the last piece of buttery bread into her mouth. "But, if you really want to, we can try
Amora."

"I don't want to just survive. I want my life back."

"We figured you'd say something like that."

"We?"

"Bruce wanted to wait until after your next set of tests. Something about needing more data." She
picked up her coffee and stood. "We can talk about it on the drive back to New York."

"To be honest, I expected more of a fight from you."

The look she gave him was inscrutable and she didn't speak again until they were seat belted into her
sleek, black Corvette. "We were all hoping for an option that didn't put you at the mercy of someone
who'd just as soon kill you as help you. If you were willing to try the dialysis option, just for a couple
years, I'm sure Bruce could beat this for good."

"I can't wait," he said vehemently.

Another inscrutable look. "Must've been some nightmare."

He kept silent, hands fisted in his jacket pockets, until they were on the highway back to New York.
"In my dreams, the chains don't hold me and I can't stop myself. He was screaming for me to stop..."
and I couldn't. That was my dream. That's been my dream every night for a week. Me raping Loki and...and enjoying it."

"Running seventy miles kinda makes sense now." She cleared her throat. "That's not you. You know that. Right? That will never be you. Never in a million years."

"I don't think I'm myself anymore. I don't think I've been myself since the spell."

"Amora mentioned visions as a possible side effect. Maybe this is what she meant."

"Have you all been waiting for me to finally crack?"

"We've been standing ready to catch you, no matter what happened. Even Tony, whose idea of moral support is taking you to a strip club. I don't suppose that helped at all?"

"The girls were nice. The guys too. I'm still not used to...um, wanting sex...it's different. Not bad, just different. Maybe that'll go away too. If Amora can reverse what the spell did." He wasn't sure how he felt about it either way. His sexual orientation or identity wasn't something he'd thought much about, or needed to think about, before the spell.

"Can't take you anywhere, Rogers."

He leaned back in the seat, stretching his legs out as far as the space would allow and closed his eyes. The steady thrum of the engine was as soothing as a lullaby, and the lack of sleep and long run were catching up with him. If luck was on his side, exhaustion would be enough to keep the nightmares at bay and let him rest.

"Steve. Steve, wake up."

There was a hand on his shoulder, shaking him, and it took him a second to realize it was Natasha. Blearily, he opened his eyes and sat up in the seat. "What?"

She pressed the back of her fingers against his forehead. "We're home and you're burning up. I need to get you upstairs to Bruce."

Stark Tower loomed over him when he climbed out of the car, stunned that he'd slept most of the drive home. It felt like he'd only closed his eyes for a second. His skin was warm to the touch, but not unusually so. He didn't question Natasha, staying silent as they rode the elevator up to the medical floor. Soft piano music was playing in the background and they found Bruce bent over a tablet, jotting down notes in a lab book. He glanced up when he heard them and looked relieved to see Steve.

"You should've told me," Steve said flatly, not looking at Bruce. He took his usual seat and shrugged off his jacket so Bruce could draw blood.

"Did I really need to? You knew before I did, even if you didn't realize it. Getting information about what's going on in your head is like pulling teeth. I literally need a machine to do it. If I'm going to help you, the stoic, stiff upper lip routine has got to stop, okay?" The wheels of Bruce's stool squeaked. He reached for Steve's wrist first, feeling out his pulse, and dug through one of the drawers for a thermometer, scanning over Steve's forehead. "The deterioration may be accelerating. I wasn't expecting onset of a fever for a few more days at least."

Steve took a deep breath that did little to ease his nerves. He needed to think, needed a clear head. He wondered if it was the nightmare or the seventy mile run that had triggered his fever.
Bruce returned to his stool, sitting down. Weariness was etched into every line of his face. "Can you stick close to the Tower for awhile?"

"No more runs to Connecticut."

"Or any of the other neighboring states."

"Sorry." He'd worried and frightened them; he was equally worried and frightened by what was happening. His hands shook as he waited for Bruce to get ready to take blood. He had to have faith in his team and stay focused. "I called Sam. He's going to head up tonight."

"Good." Bruce wrapped the strip of rubber around Steve's arm, tapping lightly against his veins. "Don't isolate yourself, make sure someone is with you or knows where you are at all times. I can give you something that should help you sleep."

He glanced quickly toward Natasha. "I slept on the drive home."

"Without dreams," Bruce added gently. "It's not the best solution but you need a few hours of solid sleep."

Natasha finally settled into a chair, watching Bruce work. "While Cap gets his beauty rest, I'll put in a call to the Fridge and see what we can work out as far as Amora goes."

"I don't think she's our best option," Bruce said sharply.

"What other options do we have?" Steve asked. "Don't say you'll keep testing me; that's damage control, not a solution."

Bruce met his gaze for a moment and then looked away, turning his focus to filling vials with blood. He remained silent, lips drawn into a tight line, until he was finished and pressed gauze over the needle mark. "If someone needs surgery, you don't take them to a serial killer to get it done. I know this is hard, Steve, but we have no reason to believe that Amora will actually help you. It's too much of a risk."

"Bruce." Steve placed his hand very gently on Bruce's arm. "If I can't find a way to stop this, someone is going to get hurt because of me. That's the risk I can't take."

"You are stupidly self-sacrificing sometimes." Glaring, Bruce gathered up the vials of blood and carried them over to a machine. "If you don't mind, I need a little peace and quiet. I'll...I'll let you know if I find anything important. And I'll rework the numbers. I thought you probably had a month or so left before it became life threatening again, but it looks like the time table has sped up. One of the interns can bring up some sleeping pills that will work on you, for a few hours anyway."

Steve scrambled to grab his jacket and leave the lab, not wanting to push or ask questions when Bruce was obviously on edge. Natasha followed after him, glancing back over her shoulder before they left. Her brow was furrowed in thought.

"Get some sleep." She pressed the buttons for his floor and hers. "By the time you wake up, we'll have a plan."

"Sam will help. He'll want to help."

"Good." She rocked a little, rising up on the balls of her feet as she rolled her head to stretch out her neck. "We'll keep the group small. You, Sam, me, maybe Clint. Putting Tony in the same room with Amora is asking for trouble and I don't think Bruce is in any shape for a field trip to the Fridge."
"Tony said he's been getting migraines."

She frowned, remaining silent and lost in her own thoughts after that. The elevator stopped on her floor first. She gave him a nod in parting and disappeared into the suite before the doors had closed.

He wished Sam was already there, without the noise and comfort of another person, his suite felt empty and claustrophobic at the same time. To be sure he'd stocked Sam's favorite beer, he checked and rechecked the refrigerator half a dozen times. He tried reading but the words swam together on the page; he tried watching television but it was nothing more than senseless babble. His skin felt alternately hot and clammy; he couldn't seem to focus on anything for more than a few seconds at a time.

It occurred to him that he must be going through the stages of the spell in slow motion. What had been a matter of hours before, racing through symptoms at a breakneck speed, was now being stretched out over days and months.

Slumping down on to the couch, he stared listlessly out the window, seeing nothing. He'd been so certain, sitting in the cell with Loki, that resisting the spell had been the right thing to do and this was where his conviction had led him. Loki had seemed equally certain, which Steve had taken in stride, assuming it was because Loki still had a level of fundamental decency and humanity beneath his arrogance and cruelty. He'd held onto that assumption, wanting to believe there was still a part of the brother that Thor had loved inside the angry shell Loki was now.

Everyone around him was convinced it had been an elaborate ruse on Loki's part and he wanted to believe right along with them. He wanted to believe that he'd been fooling himself all along.

He'd only imagined the nervous way Loki had toyed with the tag hanging over his mug of tea at the little coffee shop. He'd deluded himself into thinking his words had shaken Loki enough to be the reason they hadn't faced off against him in months. And he'd pretended that clinging to his routine and his normal life made a bit of difference in holding onto his sanity.

Grimly, he stared down all the lies he'd told himself over the past months. He'd put so much energy into repressing any and all feelings about Loki that he'd tangled himself up into impossible knots. Rather than face reality and acknowledge that he'd been wrong - maybe he should've given in to the spell, asked Loki to forgive him once it was over, and dealt with the aftermath - he'd buried his head in the sand and hoped it would all go away. It still felt wrong and he balked at the very thought of it, but knowing he'd done the right thing was cold comfort.

He rubbed a hand down his face. With Loki vanished, he was gambling with his life and playing what small chance there was that Amora might be able to save him.

When an intern finally knocked on the door and handed over a plastic container that rattled with pills, he managed a terse thank you and swallowed them down without bothering to get a glass of water. Rather than his bedroom, he curled up on the couch with a blanket and shut his eyes tightly, praying for oblivion.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which the best laid plans go wrong, villains escape, and Steve has to face Loki again.

Natasha hadn't moved in to Stark Tower the way Steve had; she preferred to think of it as a glorified storage space with incredible perks. The technology alone was something she'd never have access to anywhere else and that was fine by her. When she was off the clock, she didn't want to be surrounded by this world. There was a chill in the air and the apartment had the feeling of emptiness that all unloved, un-lived in places seemed to have.

"JARVIS, I need Maria Hill on a secure channel. Put it up on a screen in the kitchen. And dial up the thermostat a couple degrees."

"As you wish, Agent Romanov."

It was still early, but Maria would forgive her. She stripped off her winter coat as she walked and made a beeline for the kitchen to start coffee. The only significant change she'd made to the space was converting the dining table into a command station. She pulled her tablet from her travel bag and plugged it back into the system as the main display blinked to life.

The SHIELD logo sharpened into clarity, slowly spinning as the connection was made, and then Maria Hill's face came into focus. "Natasha. What sends you my way?"

"I'm going to read you in on Captain Rogers' condition." She settled into the chair, making minute adjustments to all of the electronics she would need to reach. "This is what we know. Approximately nine months ago, we received a tip that Amora was in New York City. She picked up a few fur coats, a diamond necklace, killed everyone in the store and didn't bother to pay."

"When we confronted her, she produced some sort of globe, made of glass or crystal, glowing gold and green, and threw it on the ground between her and Thor. Tony was able to get some data from the energy released, but not enough to characterize it. The behavior was very similar to an explosive. Before the blast, Captain Rogers took Amora down and Loki shoved Thor out of the way. Both Rogers and Loki were hit. Amora disappeared shortly after. Loki told us the spell would have to run its course and Rogers would die. We took them both back to the Tower. Loki did not put up a fight and, in fact, was fully cooperative."

"That's creepy." Maria's eyes narrowed momentarily. "What was his angle? I'm assuming this was another one of his schemes."

Natasha smiled a little. "That's where it gets strange. Loki agreed to be chained in a cell, insisted on it actually. Rogers went in to speak with him, hoping to gain information, and then requested that he be chained in the cell with Loki. Eventually, Rogers informed us that the nature of the spell had been to induce an intense physical desire between the parties involved."

Maria raised an eyebrow. "Magical aphrodisiac?"

"Except that failure to consummate would result in death. They both refused the option of us turning
the other way while they had sex. Neither seemed to consider that acceptable." It had seemed strange at the time, not to mention impractical, but they'd all been too frantic trying to find a way to save Steve to put a lot of thought into why Loki was so opposed to that outcome. "Rogers was unconscious within four hours. Loki, after nine. Bruce and Tony worked through the night to build a machine that could process and clean their blood, believing that if they couldn't stop the spell, they could at least keep Rogers alive until we found a way. After three days of dialysis, Rogers regained consciousness. It was less than twenty four hours for Loki. He simply vanished."

"Explains why you guys kept this so quiet."

"In the six months after the incident, all of us noticed changes in Rogers' behavior. It was little things at first. Irritability, changes in his sleeping patterns." Now, she wished they'd moved faster, confronted Steve sooner. "He agreed to let Bruce run blood tests and dynamic brain scans. Bruce determined that the effects of the spell were persistent, although at a much lesser degree and rate of progression. Rogers has become increasingly erratic; he's suffering from vivid, violent nightmares, which Amora told me might be a side effect. This morning, he ran to Connecticut, and I mean that literally. When I got him home, his temperature was a hundred and six and climbing. We'll have to put him back on dialysis soon."

All color had drained from Maria's face. "What can I do?"

"We can't find Loki and we need access to someone who knows more about magic than we do. Thor went to Asgard looking for information but he isn't back yet and Bruce doesn't think we can wait any longer."

Maria nodded, understanding immediately. "Amora."

"Of course, we anticipate that she'll try to use the opportunity to escape. She's also looking for revenge against Loki for turning her over to SHIELD and may see Rogers as a means to that end." She left the chair to get a cup of coffee, raising her voice so the microphone could still pick up her words as she walked. "The Fridge is the most secure location we have, except maybe the Tower. What do you think? Bring Amora here or bring Rogers to Amora."

"Transfers are the best opportunities for escape. We can't risk her disappearing before helping him. We'll clear the floor and lock it down. Once you're in, nothing gets out."

"I'm sure she won't do this out of the goodness of her heart." Coffee in hand, she returned to the table. "What are you authorized to offer her?"

Maria hesitated. "I'll have to see what SHIELD is willing to negotiate."

"Extradition? She doesn't think much of Earth."

"If Thor is willing to take her back personally and ensure she doesn't return, that could be an option."

"Alright, see what SHIELD is willing to put on the table." Tapping the screen of her tablet, she pulled up the file tree for the Fridge schematics. "Do the schematics you sent me include everything? Air ducts, mechanical and electrical access points, etcetera."

"It's all there. Anything you see, we can secure." She looked away, listening to a signal or voice off screen.

"Maria?"

"Let me put you on hold." The SHIELD logo reappeared, stark against a black screen. It was only
there for a few seconds before Maria reappeared. "The Director has authorized anything and everything to help Captain Rogers. That's a direct quote. SHIELD is fully at your disposal."

Natasha blinked. She hadn't expected SHIELD to be that receptive, especially when Steve was responsible for the pieces of helicarrier they were still fishing out of the Potomac. "How long do you need?"

"Give me five hours. And Natasha?" The cool, professional mask cracked enough for her worry to show. "Keep me posted about Steve."

"Understood. Romanov out."

The screen went black when the connection was severed. She shifted in the chair so that she could sit cross-legged, sipping her coffee as she studied the schematics. They were detailed and the lines were so small she could barely make them out on the tablet. With a brush against the screen, she transferred the display up to a larger screen mounted on the end of the table.

"Alright, JARVIS. Amora wouldn't have offered if she didn't have a plan." She didn't want to think about the possibility that Amora's plan was simply the chance to rip the life out of Steve. "If she could teleport, she would've done it already, but let's assume she can shapeshift like Loki. I wonder how small they can go."

"Conservation of mass would suggest a limitation of possible forms."

"Assuming physics applies to Asgardian sorcerers." As much as she hated having to ask Tony for his input on anything - the man never shut up once he knew he had an audience - she wasn't about to disregard an asset. "Can you call Tony and Clint? Three heads are better than one."

"I will request their assistance."

She hoped they could rule out anything that only an ant could crawl through, since it would be impossible to seal the entire floor at that scale. But there were plenty of gaps bigger than that and all of them were potential escape routes. She knew Amora could be invisible as well, which compounded the problem. The only thing worse than chasing an ant would be chasing an invisible ant.

Her Starkphone chirped and, a moment later, Sam's face flashed up on the screen. She tapped the button to put the call on speaker. "Hey, Sam."

"Did you get him home?"

"Safe and relatively sound. You heading up?"

"Be there tonight."

"Might want to try for sooner. He's scared and I don't think he's holding up as well as he's pretending." As she spoke, she heard the door to the apartment open and swiveled the chair around. "Hey Tony, can you send someone to get Sam? Sooner is better."

Tony took a seat at the table. "Tell him to head to Reagan, there'll be a plane waiting."

"Did you get that, Sam?"

"Reagan, got it. On my way."
She ended the call and motioned to the displays. "Schematics of the Fridge. We need to find the holes before Amora does. They'll have her locked down and ready for a house call in five hours."

Tony's expression was uncharacteristically grim. "I really thought we had this one licked. But it's like some sort of chain reaction. Once the spell touched him, there was no stopping it. All we did was slow it down."

"We'll find a way."

"Asgardians must not be susceptible. They must have a base level of magic, energy, whatever it is and whatever you want to call it, that acts as a sort of immune system response, keeping this type of thing in check the way the human body handles a virus."

"Focus, Tony. One thing at a time. We get Steve to Amora and make sure she doesn't stab us in the back or turn his brain into scrambled eggs."

"And if she can't stop it either?"

"If you want to talk about something, you can tell me what's going on with Banner."

With a groan, he stood up to strip off his jacket, tossing it onto the floor behind his chair. "He's convinced it's nothing. I'm convinced something or someone is messing with him, putting the Other Guy on edge. Pretty sure it's someone who favors the color green and wears Asgardian armor, but I don't know how he's doing it. I can't find anything so I can't prove anything."

"That's two of us losing our minds." She turned Tony's theory over in her mind, examining the bits and pieces that would have to come together for it to be Loki. "Why target Bruce? Why not Clint? Or you."

"Why not Clint what?" The voice was muffled. Clint had a large brown paper sack clenched between his teeth with spots of grease soaking through, keeping his hands free while he shrugged off his coat.

"Wondering why Loki hasn't messed with you lately. You being one of his favorite chew toys," Tony answered.

Clint set the bag on the table. "Don't even joke about that. Especially after I brought you bagels." He took the seat to Natasha's left and dug into the bag. "What's the word on Steve?"

"He's getting worse. And Tony thinks Loki is messing with Bruce's head."

"So we try Amora." Clint pulled out a bagel covered with seeds and bits of onion. He gestured at the screens. "The Fridge?"

"We've got five hours."

"Alright. Let's do this." Tony stood up, heading for the coffee. "Start with assumptions. Number one. Loki intended for Amora's spell to go wrong."

She zoomed in on an electrical access point on the schematic. "Why?"

"To get into the Tower. He planted a bug, created a back door, something."

Tracing an electrical access tunnel to its end, she ruled it out as a possible escape path and moved on to the next. "Amora said the only thing we could count on was that Loki was on Loki's side, so what
does he get out of it?"  

"Access to Bruce. Take us out from the inside, just like before."

"And Steve?"

"Unintended consequences." He was carrying two coffee mugs when he returned and handed one off to Clint. "Amora told you they don't study how magic affects humans on Asgard. Why would they? We're pretty insignificant to them. He probably figured we'd save Steve somehow, and him because Thor wasn't going to let us not. I doubt he cared what happened to Steve one way or another. But the side effects? I don't think anyone knew this was coming."

"Why refuse to have sex with Steve?" She was throwing questions out to prompt Tony into thinking through the problem. He could be easily distracted but, once he latched onto a puzzle, he redefined the meaning of the word tenacious.

Tony shrugged. "Who knows. For show, maybe. Drama. Loki's all about the drama. Maybe he's not into men. Though you figure the spell would take care of that. Steve's certainly flexible in that department these days. He was watching the guys as much as the girls when I took him out. Not that he made a move or did anything about it."

"Doesn't track." Clint slouched down in his chair, kicking his feet up onto the table. "Loki doesn't like unknowns. He knows the variables, calculates the odds."

That had been Natasha's impression of Loki as well. Only his arrogance seemed to exceed his cunning. "Why take out Amora and hand her over to us?"

"Sacrificing a pawn," Tony supplied confidently. "Loki's always running the long con. It's never about the move he just made, it's about the move he's going make six turns from now."

She paused, fingers hovering over another detail of the Fridge infrastructure. "What do we do about Bruce?"

"Two birds with one stone. Get Amora to tell us how Loki's been influencing him."

"She won't give up information for nothing." Even the offer of safe passage back to Asgard probably wasn't enough to secure Amora's willingness to help Steve, let alone reveal what was probably the magical equivalent of a trade secret. "And if it is Loki influencing Bruce, what are the odds he knows every move we make? What if it's not Amora setting a trap for us to walk into, what if it's Loki?"

Silence settled over the room. None of them wanted to voice those fears aloud.

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The light above Steve was disorienting. There were voices, garbled and muted as though the speakers were underwater. Sluggishness in his limbs, unfamiliar and frightening, stirred the memory of taking pills Bruce had sent him. He settled a little, holding onto that explanation rather than panic that his symptoms had advanced rapidly while he slept. At least his sleep had been deep and dreamless; a small mercy.

"Come on, sleepy head."

He recognized the voice as Sam's and started, trying to claw his way back into consciousness. He hadn't wanted or expected to sleep so long that Sam would be here before he woke. As he sat up,
blinking blearily to bring the room into focus, he saw the bottle of a sports drink in front of him and accepted it.

"You're probably dehydrated," Sam added. He made a gesture to the blanket on the couch.

Confused, Steve pushed the blanket away and realized that it was damp. His forehead felt hot to the touch and the shirt he was wearing was soaked through with sweat.

"Right," he said, clearing his throat when it came out thick with sleep. He fumbled the cap of the bottle. "When did you get in?"

"'Bout an hour ago." Sam took a seat on the other end of the couch. "We're heading out soon. Thought you might want to shower and change before we go. How're you feeling?"

"Been better." In his head, he could hear Bruce berating him for not being upfront about his state of mind. "I think I preferred the side effects of this spell the first time around. At least it was quick and I was in a coma for most of it."

"Better luck next time?"

He shuddered. The possibilities ranged from horrible to even more horrible. "I'm hoping Asgard has a few ideas about how to defend ourselves against magic."

Sam smiled, reaching out to punch Steve lightly on the shoulder. "Get cleaned up and I'll order take out. No point going to see the wicked witch on an empty stomach."

With shaky hands and still trying to shrug off the effects of the sleeping pills, Steve managed to finish the sports drink and stumble through a shower. He didn't have the energy to do more than dry off and pull on a fresh set of track pants and a t-shirt. It took several tries to tie up his shoelaces; he kept forgetting what he was doing halfway through and ended up staring down at his shoes until he remembered he was supposed to be putting them on.

Dinner was Chinese take out. He picked at his carton of orange chicken with the chopsticks, only half listening to Sam talk about politics and the weather, comfortably filling the silence with a steady stream of conversation. They'd put a dent in the food by the time Natasha and Clint joined them, letting them know that Tony and Bruce had gone back to bury themselves in the lab with a couple of pizzas. One of them managed to refill Steve's glass of ice water frequently, making it seem as though he wasn't drinking any of it, and although he caught a few concerned glances directed his way, none of them commented or asked how he was feeling.

When he noticed that the food was nearly gone, he took advantage of the next lull in conversation. "What's the plan?"

Natasha glanced down at her watch. "We'll leave whenever you're ready. Maria has Amora's floor ready for lockdown and SHIELD is sending back up. If she tries anything, she won't get away with it. Tony and Bruce are staying here, but we can get them on video if we need to. They'll be on stand by, just in case."

"Sounds like you've got it covered." Steve attempted a smile, closing up the now empty carton and setting it aside. Before the spell made him lose his mind, he would have been the one deciding on their strategy. "I'm ready when you are."

Only Sam and Clint managed to keep up the typical, good natured jibbing and smack talking that usually accompanied an Avengers mission, if they could even call this a mission. Steve kept losing track of the conversation so he didn't try to comment or interject unless he was asked a question and
had been paying close enough attention to answer it. Natasha remained silent and focused. It was strange for her to not be teasing him or slipping movie quotes into casual conversation as though playing a covert game of Trivial Pursuit and he found that he missed it. He tried not to get his hopes up that it would be over soon and his life could go back to normal.

The short flight to the Fridge passed without incident and far too slowly. Sunset had come and gone by the time they landed. He felt sluggish, either from the drugs or simply his degrading health; he was alternately too hot or too cold as his fever continued to burn.

Maria Hill met them at the doors, ushering them inside to a waiting elevator. Her expression gave nothing away and she was all business as she explained the heightened security they'd put in place. Once inside Amora's space, they wouldn't be alone; an entire SHIELD tactical team would be with them. The elevators would be disabled and all stairwells locked and secured. None of that would keep an Asgardian contained for long, but they only needed it to be long enough to regroup if Amora did try to escape. She and Natasha briefly discussed the possibility of Amora becoming invisible - the Fridge was equipped with more than just visual sensors - as they filtered out of the elevator.

Idly, Steve wondered if the Fridge would be able to hold Loki. They'd seemed to keep Amora successfully, but he'd seen Loki open up a spot in the air and turn it into a doorway. That train of thought led to wondering if magic abilities differed from person to person as much as any other talent or ability. He kept his thoughts to himself, hands fisted in his jacket pockets. Maybe Amora would be able to help him and maybe she wouldn't; he had to stop thinking about the world through a lens of Loki.

"If you're having second thoughts, now's the time." Maria held a small walkie talkie in her hand, fingers resting lightly on the engage button.

He realized that everyone was looking at him expectantly and shook his head. "I'm ready."

Maria nodded and gave the command. The lights in the long hallway dimmed briefly as power switched over to an independent source isolated from the rest of the Fridge. The tactical team was already inside Amora's cell, if it could be called a cell. Once they were all inside, that door was also secured. He glanced around, taking note of the furnishings and the half dozen guns already pointed at Amora. The polymer resin barrier shimmered before retracting into the ceiling. To her credit, the Enchantress looked entirely unconcerned by the armed men; a slow smile spread over blood red lips as she got up from the chaise lounge.

"Captain," she said. Her tone was demure and rang false.

"Amora." He nodded once in greeting. "Can you help me?"

Her fingernails were long and painted as red as her lips. She motioned for him to come closer. Around them, the tactical team adjusted their position to ensure that Steve wasn't in the line of fire.

"The spell was Loki's making." Her gaze swept leisurely over Steve, her hand still extended with her palm facing him. "He tends to over complicate his workings."

"What does that mean?" The hair on the back of his neck was beginning to stand on end.

"Be quiet. I must concentrate." With a frown, she reached out until her palm was just short of resting against his chest. A faint golden glow appeared around her hand. "The original magic is long gone, but its touch left a deep mark on you. I can see the scars it left behind."

He swallowed. "Can you get rid of them?"
Her frown deepened, creating furrows in her brow. "Perhaps. There are items that I will need. Supplies."

"Why can't you just," Sam started, gesturing vaguely with one hand. "Do what you do and make it go away?"

Amora cast him a disgusted look. "I had assumed you would not wish me to do more harm in my attempt to heal what has been done to your Captain. This is not child's magic than can be erased with a word."

"What do you need?" Maria asked. "It might take some time."

"It most certainly will. And you will need to travel to the other Realms." Amora pulled away from Steve and returned to her chaise. "There is a spring in Alfheim, its bed made of crystals. Thor will know the one of which I speak. You will need to obtain water from that spring, enough for the Captain to bathe, fully immersed."

Steve tried not to panic. "Alfheim?"

"There is a great number of herbs you will need as well, most can be found in Alfheim or on Asgard. If you have an instrument for me to write them down, I will provide you a list." She smiled up at them pleasantly, hands clasped on her knees.

"Are you sure this will heal him?" Natasha asked.

"I can be certain of nothing. But there is little else I can think to try beyond a healing enchantment, for which I need those items." She curled her legs beneath her, settling back against the chaise and brushed at imaginary wrinkles in the silk of her gown. "You should be aware that some of the items are quite rare and difficult to find. Though, perhaps the All-Mother would be willing to come to your aid. Her gardens contain many treasures."

"Then we came here for nothing." He tried not to look at Maria and Natasha, who had put the most work and effort into setting up a meeting. It felt anticlimactic, but he realized that he shouldn't have expected it to be as simple as Amora waving her fingers.

With a shake of her head, Natasha dug into the small pack she'd brought with her and pulled out a tablet. "Tell me what we need and where we can find it. Along with anything else we might need to know. No surprises. If one of the ingredients is guarded by a two-headed dragon, I want to know about it."

Amora bowed her head slightly. "Of course."

Feeling equal parts foolish and hopeless, Steve retreated. He didn't say anything when Sam put his hand on his shoulder, trying to reassure him without words. There was nothing he could do except stand in the back of the room, hands in his jacket pockets, and listen as Amora began listing off what she would need to heal the damage done by the spell. The spring water had to come from Alfheim; they needed some kind of rock from a place called Svartalfheim and half a dozen herbs from Asgard. They needed the wings of a Blood Moon Moth, which Amora told them could only be found on mountain slopes in Vanheim.

There was no way they'd be able to gather everything she was asking for in the time Bruce thought he had left and no guarantee they'd be able to find them at all. He shuddered as he thought about spending the rest of his life either on dialysis or going out of his mind. Coming to Amora had been a last, desperate option for getting his life back and even that hope was growing dimmer by the second.
He bit back an absurd urge to laugh at the convoluted melodrama his life had turned into; he'd been hit with a sex spell of all things, had one foot in the grave, and they'd come to the Fridge looking for help from the someone even Asgard thought was dangerous. The wicked witch of Asgard. That parallel made him Dorothy; he didn't even want to speculate on which of his friends should end up as Toto. Minus the room full of armed SHIELD agents, their guns still trained on Amora, he would've been tempted to burst into song.

"Hey, why don't you sit down?" Sam dragged one of the chairs over to Steve. "You're looking a little unsteady."

He accepted the chair, more grateful than embarrassed to be caught swaying on his feet. "Never thought I'd go like this. Didn't even know it was possible, for one thing. Guess it's better than...well, I'll get back to you when I think of something worse."

"Knock it off." Sam rolled his eyes. "This isn't going to beat you and you know it."

"Sure. I just need a moth from another planet, some magical spring water, and," he paused to listen to Amora describe a particular type of moss that sounded almost impossible to find. "And something that requires me to crawl through a haunted forest under a full moon." He was pretty sure Amora couldn't have found a more ridiculous list of ingredients if she'd tried. They wouldn't even be able to get started until Thor returned and who knew when that would be.

"That haunted forest doesn't stand a chance," Sam said easily.

It was small comfort, but comfort nonetheless, to sit beside Sam and soak up his confidence that this was one more battle the Avengers, specifically him, would win and walk away.

He watched Natasha and Amora, seeing them without thinking about what they were doing. Natasha tapped lightly against the tablet as Amora spoke, adding to the list and taking notes of any precautions, however minute, Amora thought relevant to obtaining the ingredient. At least a dozen had already been named and described; Amora appeared to be in no hurry to finish the list. He caught her glancing toward the armed men, though she disguised the looks with lazy gestures, like a cat stretching to appear as though it hadn't been preparing to pounce on an unsuspecting mouse.

The glimpse into Amora's behavior struck him. He focused on her, knowing that no one would think twice about him staring. As he watched, he grew certain that her casual grace and air of haughty dismissal was a deliberate front. Beneath all of that, she was cold and calculating and, the more he watched, the more certain he was that she was waiting for something to happen. Her seemingly endless list of ludicrous ingredients was merely a way for her to pass the time.

"Natasha, stop," he spoke before his thoughts were fully formed.

Natasha glanced up, hand poised over the tablet. "Are you alright?"

"She's stalling." He saw Amora's gaze zero in on him with new intensity, her eyes narrowed and all pretense of her self-entitled persona falling away in an instant. For the first time, he saw Amora as she truly was and if he hadn't been sitting down, he might have taken a step back. Suddenly, he had no doubt that Amora was every bit as cunning and ruthless as Loki.

"Steve?" Maria moved forward, hand on the gun at her hip.

He tried to force his brain to work through the haze of his fever. They'd missed something, some key piece of the puzzle and the true reason Amora wanted them - wanted him - in her cell. And wanted to keep them there. Because keeping them there would keep them away from somewhere else. He
thought of the Tower immediately, but Tony and Bruce were both there. Amora couldn't have known that not all of the Avengers would come to the Fridge.

Amora smiled, her long red nails tapping mutely against the upholstery of the chaise. "Have you no interest in your own survival, Captain?"

He fought to clear his head. She had to have known they would take precautions against an escape attempt; they were all sealed into this room until Maria gave the word. A chill washed over him as he realized the implications. "Maria, what else does SHIELD have here? Artifacts, people. Anything. What else is here?"

The harsh blare of an alarm prevented Maria from answering his question. She had her walkie talkie against her ear in an instant, ordering the tactical team to begin disarming the door. "Intruder," she told them sharply. "Tenth floor. Most of the security personnel are here with us. It'll take three minutes to get the systems back online. They'll be gone by then."

Amora leaned back in the chaise, smirking. "What unfortunate timing."

"Get her back in her cage," Natasha snarled. She was already moving, stowing her tablet and getting out of the way of the polymer resin barrier. Her weaponized wristcuffs slid on with a click. "Clint, you're with me. We'll seal the doors behind us." She glanced toward Steve and Sam.

"I've got him," Sam answered without being asked.

In moments, the cell was empty of all but Amora, now securely behind the barrier, and Sam and Steve. He kept his eyes on her, not seeing even the slightest hint of worry or concern in her careful expression. He knew her now, knew her spoiled princess act to be a mask, and he would never underestimate her again. The alarm continued to sound. He hated being left behind, without his suit or his shield, but knew he would be near useless in his condition.

Sam crossed his arms, glaring daggers at Amora. "Don't suppose you want to tell us what you've got planned."

"And ruin the surprise?" Amora arched an eyebrow.

Steve swallowed. He had a gnawing suspicion that he knew who was behind the assault on the Fridge, although he couldn't think of what Loki could be after that he needed the Avengers pre-occupied and out of the way.

"So this was all a game to you?" Sam's voice got louder.

"Sam." Steve tried to stop him.

"She's playing with your life, Steve. This isn't some fucking joke."

"She's not."

An explosion cut him off. The door blew inward in a cloud of bright blue energy that sizzled and burned on the air, leaving the smell of ozone and burnt copper in its wake. Loki stepped through the gaping doorway, fully dressed in armor that gleamed and glinted under the light.

Sam lunged before Steve could stop him; he didn't stand a chance against Loki, but Steve loved him for trying. When Sam hit the wall and then crumpled limply to the floor, Steve stumbled to his side, checking for injuries. Sam's pulse was steady and solid beneath his fingers. He'd have a good bruise and a bump on his head when he woke up, but he'd survive. When Steve looked up again, Loki had
burned a hole in the polymer resin with another energy blast from the Chitauri scepter. In another moment, a portal of shimmering air appeared and Amora stepped through it, giving Loki a wicked grin before she vanished. That left Loki and Steve alone in the cell.

"You planned this," Steve choked out. "All of it. This was your plan all along. It was always about the scepter."

Loki let his fingers trail along the curve of the weapon in his hand. "Perhaps."

"What was I? Collateral damage?" He felt like throwing up. "Do what you want to me, Loki. But leave Sam alone. Please." He put himself between Loki and Sam and stood his ground as well as he could.

Baring his teeth, Loki stalked forward. "I have no interest in your friend, Captain. But you? You and I have unfinished business."
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The spell finally comes full circle, but it's nothing like Steve expected.

Gasping, Steve stumbled through the portal. The surface beneath his feet was uneven, nearly tripping him and forcing him to reach out for something to grab hold of. Which meant that he grabbed onto Loki, who gave him a mildly amused look. Reeling back, he looked frantically for the nearest exit. The space around him was familiar; they were back in the castle where Loki had taken him before. Irrationally, he wanted to warn Loki to stay away from him, that he couldn't be trusted not to lose his grip on reality completely and have his nightmares come to life in the worst possible way. He backed away until his legs bumped against a solid surface and he saw that he'd backed into an enormous canopy bed spread with blankets and furs. Loki watched him carefully, setting the scepter on a small table and beginning to remove pieces of his armor.

"The spell," he confessed, not entirely sure why he was saying anything at all. "It might be over for you, but not for me. It...it messed with my head and it's killing me."

If he'd expected any reaction from Loki, he didn't get one. As though he hadn't heard Steve at all, Loki continued to work at the fasteners beneath his armor plates to disengage them. Piece by piece, the metal and leather came away until he wore only a loose green tunic, leather pants, and his boots. He settled into the chair by the fireplace to unbuckle his boots, leaning them against the chair. That seemed to satisfy him and he finally turned toward the bed.

Steve braced himself for the worst, expecting Loki to simply force him down, and held his breath when Loki stopped directly in front of him.

"Are you thirsty? There is fresh water. Hungry?"

"I...I...no, I'm fine. Thanks, um, for offering," he stammered.

The touch was surprisingly gentle. Loki brushed his right hand lightly over Steve's hair, as if testing, then repeated the motion, this time letting his fingers slide against his scalp. Steve inhaled sharply. The effect was electric, a sense of relief flooding through him with each stroke. Loki added his left hand to the motion, setting his fingernails against Steve's hairline and sweeping back, then down his neck; back, down, repeat. Steve swayed each time, dissolving into the touch. It felt as though it was sweeping away the cobwebs that had filled his head for so long, wiping away the deep aching in his muscles and replacing it with a different, sweeter kind of ache.

"Are you going to kill me?" He cringed at the sound of his own fear.

"You say you are dying. If this is true, then it matters little if I kill you, doesn't it?"

"Then you are going to kill me?"

His hands went still and he met Steve's gaze evenly. "I will not touch you if you do not wish me to, but your life is forfeit either way. You will not leave this place alive."

He tried to laugh but it came out a strangled whimper. "Thanks for being honest."
"It is the least I can do."

"This isn't what I expected." He nearly moaned when Loki resumed caressing him. "I didn't think you'd be..."

The barest hint of a smile appeared at one corner of Loki's mouth. "Be what?"

"Um...nice?"

"I prefer seduction over brute force."

"Is that what you're doing?" He felt light headed. "Seducing me?"

"Would you like me to?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"Would you answer differently if you were not going to die?"

It seemed a strange question and it was difficult to think with Loki's hands sending eddies of pleasure down his spine. He focused on Loki's face, trying to drink in every little detail. He noted the shadows cast by the dark curls falling down over his neck and the contrasting rose of his lips against pale skin. For so long, he'd wanted nothing but Loki and it felt right; it felt perfect and absolute; it was the only sane choice he could make in an insane world.

"No," he said, louder this time.

"That is a lie," Loki murmured. "It is the poison in your blood speaking through your lips."

"It's not," he protested, but that was also a lie.

"Your kind is irrevocably altered by magic. I did not know. I wonder if any in Asgard know how deeply it leaves a mark. Midgard is so thirsty for magic, its creatures will drink until they drown." Loki pressed his palm against Steve's cheek, letting his thumb drag over his lips. "May I kiss you?"

He nodded in answer, surprised that Loki was asking for permission, and licked his lips nervously. There had been hundreds of kisses in his dreams, in his fantasies, and now that it was going to happen - happening - it felt less real than all of his dreams. His eyes closed as Loki leaned in, breath catching in his throat, and Loki's hands kept moving, kept him swaying like a tree caught in a summer wind. There was sensation - cool, dry - against his lips and Loki's breath on his cheek; a new taste when his tongue brushed along the inside of his lower lip. They were single kisses, a touch and a release, with only the imprint left behind. Another, then another, and another, until Steve was straining forward, chasing after more. Strong fingers kneaded into the back of his neck, moving inch by inch down the slope of his shoulders. Loki's thumbs traced his collarbones and every spot he touched was beginning to tingle. A moan rose up his throat, a protest, when Loki stopped kissing him.

"May I remove your clothes?"

Stupidly, he wished he was wearing something other a frayed t-shirt and athletic pants. He wished he'd shaved and a dozen other things that he'd have to hope didn't matter. Realizing he hadn't answered the question, he reached back to tug his shirt up over his head. His skin turned gooseflesh at the sudden contact with the cool air, inducing a whole body shiver.

Loki waved a hand and the fire in the hearth burst to life, doubling in size in a matter of seconds; the
room began to warm immediately. Loki's hands came back to the steady rhythm of sliding through his hair and down his neck, continuing down his back a little more each time until he had to brace his hands on Loki's hips, arching into every stroke. He gave easily when Loki pushed against his chest and tipped him down onto the bed, then onto his back. The rhythmic caresses continued along his arms and up his abdomen and chest. Each time those fingers brushed over a line of muscle, he quaked with pleasure. Loki bent down to nuzzle against the curve of Steve's ribcage, planting soft kisses every few inches.

He buried his fingers in Loki's hair, trying not to grip too tight or pull too hard. Hot tension was building low in his belly, spreading into his lower back and down his legs, making his toes curl inside his running shoes. Loki kept sweeping his hands over his body, dragging tracks of sparks and embers that caught fire under his skin and then flared out in the next breath. By the time he felt Loki tug at the waist of the pants, he was desperate to have them gone. He kicked off his shoes while Loki peeled the pants down his legs; his half hard penis bounced against his stomach and he thought he should care about being suddenly exposed, but he didn't. He wriggled backwards, shoving at the mattress beneath him to push himself further onto the bed. His socks were the last to go.

Cool fingers wrapped around his ankles. He was ready for it, taut with anticipation, when Loki ran his hands up over his shins, knees, and thighs, circling over his hips and then back down along the outside of his legs. Gripping fistfuls of fur and blanket, he gave himself over to the steady ebb and flow of Loki's hands, an undignified whine slipping from his throat when the sensations stopped. He opened his eyes to see Loki plucking at the laced cord that hung loose across the neck of his tunic. His brain stuttered and he knew he should try to help, to reach out and tug at the fabric until he could put his hands against Loki's bare skin. He wanted to, but his hands stuck in the fur and all he could do was watch Loki undress.

In the firelight, Loki's skin was molten gold. He had a lean figure and the jut of bones beneath his skin formed interesting shadows. Steve knew firsthand how strong Loki was and how lithe he could be during a fight. Often he'd felt as though he was trying to punch a cloud of smoke.

"There's no need to be frightened." Loki moved to kneel on the bed between Steve's legs and resumed the gentle pattern of massage. "I will give you pleasure. As many times as you need."

"Seems a lot of effort if you're just going to kill me when it's over." He regretted the words as he said them, but they didn't seem to faze Loki in the slightest.

"Your request was to pretend, was it not?" Loki followed through on the upstroke and settled his hands on either side of Steve's shoulders. Dark hair tumbled down around his face; he tossed his head once, dragging it to one side before lowering himself until his lips brushed Steve's cheek. "What would you like me to be?"

His mind flashed back to Loki shifting into a female form and the round curve of his - her? - breasts. "This...you're...this is fine."

"Is there someone you wish to have? Someone from your past, perhaps. Someone you lost. I could give you that, for tonight."

Making sense of what Loki was offering took conscious effort. Was he saying what Steve thought he was saying? Could he take the appearance of anyone Steve wanted him to be? He could barely fathom the possibility, let alone consider it as a viable option. He cleared his throat a few times. "That's not really what I meant. Unless...is there someone you want to be?"

Loki kissed his way down Steve's throat. "What did you mean?"
"I meant that I...I wanted." He turned his head to expose more of his neck.

"Yes?"

"I meant pretend that we were together. That it was real and...and we were...you know." He was glad his face was turned away and hoped Loki wouldn't notice the blazing red flush starting in his cheeks.

"That we were in love," Loki said with amusement. "How quaint."

"Don't be an ass. There's nothing wrong with," he stopped, flustered. He wanted to argue that there was nothing wrong with being in love, except there was everything wrong with this.

Loki hushed him, reaching up to place a finger against his mouth. After a moment, he curled his fingertip between Steve's lips. He caught it hungrily and sucked it into his mouth. The flashes of heat Loki was pressing into his skin with each kiss were driving him crazy and the finger in his mouth only sent his mind wondering what it would be like to have Loki's cock against his tongue instead. He wanted. He caught Loki's wrist and pulled his hand away.

"I want to taste you." His face was burning. He wondered if his fever had increased; it felt like he was catching fire from the inside out.

"Do you?" Loki smirked down at him. He shifted away and moved onto his back, head against the pillows at the top of the bed. One eyebrow raised, he watched Steve expectantly. "Why don't you show me how much you love me."

It sounded incredibly indecent coming from Loki's lips.

He rolled up to his hands and knees, crawling into the space between Loki's legs. Heart pounding, he tried to think his way through the mechanics of how he was supposed to do this and suddenly wished he'd spent more time at Tony's favorite strip club. Loki wasn't hard, his penis lying in a soft curl toward his hip, and Steve felt awkward reaching out to curl his fingers around it; the skin was soft, smooth; he felt a pulse of blood against his palm.

"Tell me," he began, leaning in. "If I do something you like." He pressed his lips against the underside and kissed, lips parted just enough to draw the skin lightly between them.

"No need to be so gentle. I won't break."

"I want to be gentle." He could feel blood filling out the cock in his hand with each kiss, each time he stroked his thumb along the growing length, and he felt strangely proud that his bumbling attempts were having an affect.

"Because you love me?" The question was followed by a laugh that turned into a breathless moan.

He kept from smiling - he really wanted to smile - by wrapping his lips around the head and lapping his tongue against it, catching at the curving ridge to tease and lick. It became clear in moments that Loki was very responsive and Steve loved it. He loved the small sounds tumbling out of Loki's lips, the whimpers and moans and sounds that could've come from a mewling kitten instead of an Asgardian God.

Intent on drawing more of those sounds out of him, he was surprised when Loki caught him with both hands. One hand dug painfully into his hair, gripping tight and holding his head in place, while the other grabbed onto Steve's arm. He looked up, mouth uncomfortably full, and wondering what he'd done wrong. Loki arched up, mouth open in a soundless gasp, and Steve realized what was
happening an instant before a new, bitter taste hit the back of his throat. He let Loki slip slowly from his mouth and then swallowed.

He'd thought the act would sate his hunger, but felt a surging desire for more instead. His own cock ached between his legs, forgotten momentarily while he'd seen to Loki but now forcing itself to his full attention and he had to reach down to take himself in hand, pulling at it to ease some of the tension. Forehead against Loki's hip, he nuzzled against the nest of dark hair and wondered briefly about Asgardians' refractory periods.

Long legs wrapped around him, knees catching under his arms and pulling him up. He didn't resist, coming to rest against Loki's chest and the sudden press of so much skin against skin was heady. Loki's hands were moving through his hair and down his back again in an easy rhythm. He found himself leaning with the motion, rocking forward and back; his cock was pressed between him and Loki's stomach with each stroke. The orgasm caught him by surprise; Loki's fingers dug into his back, pulling him down, and then he was shuddering and spilling out over Loki's stomach like a schoolboy.

"Is this what it would’ve been like?" he panted against Loki's neck. "If we’d…if we’d just…you know. Before."

"No," Loki answered but didn’t explain how or why. He shifted Steve onto his side and rolled away to leave the bed.

"Sorry," Steve said immediately, realizing that he’d ejaculated all over Loki and that was probably wrong or impolite. He caught the curious look Loki gave him, blushing up to his ears as he felt his cock stir with renewed interest.

When Loki returned, he had an earthen pitcher and two metal cups in his hands. He set them on a narrow table beside the bed, pouring out water. He'd made no attempt to wipe his skin clean, which eased Steve’s anxiety over any potential failure of etiquette. As soon as Loki was close enough to touch, he reached out to trail his fingers over smooth, pale skin.

"Here." Loki offered one of the cups. He raised his own to his lips first and took a drink, his smirk daring Steve to follow suit.

"What would it have been like?" he asked, sipping at his cup.

"It would not have been gentle," Loki stopped, seeming to consider his next words. "There would have been no control. For either of us. It is not unheard of for such a spell to be deadly, even when allowed to run its course."

Images flashed through his mind and he had to drink more water, pretending the thought of Loki shoving him up against a wall didn’t send his blood racing south. He didn’t think he’d mind a little unnecessary roughness; there was a certain appeal to it. By the time he finished the cup of water, he was half hard again and wondering if Loki would be willing to try something a little less gentle. He'd be happy with gentle too. In fact, he didn't think he cared one way or another as long as he could keep touching and kissing Loki.

"We should’ve." He left the unspoken half of the thought hanging in the air between them, knowing Loki would understand what he meant.

With a smile that looked brittle, Loki set his cup aside and picked up a small cloth from the table. He dipped it into the pitcher to wet it before wiping his skin clean and setting it aside. Climbing back onto the bed, he slid behind Steve. His lips brushed over Steve’s shoulder before his hands settled on
his neck, thumbs pressing into the tense muscles stretching from his back to the base of his skull.

“That feels really good.” He groaned as Loki dug his thumb into a particularly stubborn knot. It felt impossibly good. As hard as he tried to stay upright, he sagged back against Loki’s chest. He was turning to putty in Loki’s hands, if he hadn’t been already.

“Is this what mortals do? When they are in love.” The uncertainty in his voice sounded sincere.

“Sure,” Steve answered hazily, lost in the sensations Loki was wringing out of him.

“And what else?”

“Lots of stuff. They spend time together.” He shivered when Loki’s hand slid into his hair, fingernails scraping lightly over his scalp. “You share things. Your time, your favorite things. You experience life together. Talk about dreams and the future.” He wondered if love was so different on Asgard that Loki wouldn’t already know.

“Do you wish to…talk?” The question was stilted, as though the word had stuck in Loki’s throat.

He settled back against Loki, protesting only a little when it forced Loki to abandon his neck and wrap an arm around Steve’s chest instead. “If you’re looking for ways to fill the time, I can think of a few.”

“Such as?”

He cleared his throat. “When we were both in the cell, you said something about, um, fucking me until I screamed your name.”

“I believe I promised you more than just that,” Loki whispered in his ear.

Breath went out of his lungs in a sharp exhale when his back hit the bed; Loki moved impossibly quickly. Strong hands grabbed hold of his ankles and dragged him across the bed until he reached the edge, half thinking he was going to end up tumbling to the floor. Instead, Loki caught him, pulling up on his ankles. He bent his knees and the backs of his thighs came to rest against Loki's hips. There was a wicked smirk on Loki's face when he bent down, his gaze still on Steve's face, and caught the head of his Steve's cock in his mouth. He sucked gently, his lips a dark line around rapidly reddening skin.

"That feels." The rest of his words turned into an unintelligible, senseless garble when Loki swallowed the length of him. He could feel the motion of Loki's throat constricting around him. "You've gotta," he panted, trying to maintain a semblance of self-control. "Teach me how...how to do that." His cock glistened with saliva when Loki pulled back, long enough to give him a couple long, tight strokes, and then he was halfway down Loki's throat again and thinking he was going to fall apart right then.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he fell back on the bed, trying desperately to think of baseball or the weather or anything that would help him hold on for a little bit longer. He was half relieved and half disappointed when it was Loki's fingers around him again, the grip loose enough to ease him back from the edge. Warm breath washed over his balls, followed by Loki's lips, and he arched up at the sensation, grabbing onto the furs beneath him like an anchor. Loki didn't stop there; a moment later, Steve's eyes flew open at a warm, wet touch against his asshole. The muscles in his thighs and buttocks tightened on reflex; he couldn't tell if it was pleasure he was feeling or something else. Shivers, like tiny earthquakes, started low in his back and worked their way up his spine; he tried to look down, tried to see what Loki was doing, but couldn't stay focused. He was writhing by the time
Loki eased up, smirk still firmly in place, and took Steve in his mouth again.

"Loki." His voice shook with the effort to hold on. Loki went agonizingly slow. As his mouth took more of Steve in, one hand drifted between his buttocks and his fingers pressed against his asshole.

It was overwhelming; Steve held his breath at the same time he tried to relax. The rhythm Loki set was slow and steady, his fingers working into him in time with his mouth working at his cock. He tried to relax, tried to let himself open up; Loki's fingers felt slippery and moved easily enough; he felt them curl inside him and stroke against the inside, jerking sharply when Loki found a spot that felt different.

His self-control tumbled down into ruins and he barely registered the sensation of Loki's throat around his cock, drinking down what he poured out. Loki's fingers were still inside him, still working him loose, and he felt his body, impossibly, begin to respond almost immediately. He groaned with sensation that had nothing to do with release. Every rational thought in his brain, whatever he had left of rational thought, was telling him it shouldn't work this way; each orgasm shouldn't make him want more. He should be exhausted and reaching for sleep instead of getting harder by the second.

"Don't fight it," Loki told him. His left hand slid up Steve's stomach and chest, his fingers fanning out over one of his nipples. He left tracks of a clear, slick substance over Steve's skin.

He swallowed, unable to answer. His skin felt feverish and the need to have more, to feel more, was desperate and hungry. He clutched at Loki's wrist and locked his legs around him, trying to pull him closer and feel more without knowing exactly what he wanted. A shimmer of gold washed over Loki's hand as he reached down and Steve watched him stroke his own penis, coating it in the mystery liquid.

Loki said nothing in advance, but his gaze never left Steve's face as he removed his fingers and brought his hips in line. The pain was sharp but fleeting, leaving Steve feeling stretched and filled in a way that was completely new.

Letting his head fall back, eyes closing, he lost himself and all sense of time to the sensations in his body. Vaguely, he thought he tried to speak, to encourage or ask for more; possibly, he only babbled nonsense. He came again, Loki's fingers around his cock, then a second and third time; his body felt strung out and pain from oversensitive skin bled into the pleasure. Still, it didn't seem to be enough; he clawed at the bedding beneath him and tried to grind against Loki's hips.

Trapped in the fever burn of desire, he didn't bother to count how many times he reached orgasm; it was always not enough. Before the sweat on his skin could dry, he was already reaching out again and asking for more. All of the filthy fantasies inside his head came tumbling out of his mouth; he begged for things that terrified as much as excited him. Each time, Loki kissed and soothed him in reply, keeping him safely ensconced in the furs and blankets even when he clawed at Loki's shoulders and howled to be fucked hard up against the rough stone wall.

He barely registered Loki trying to convince him to drink water, holding the cup to his lips and coaxing him to swallow. He licked his lips, wincing at how chapped and dry they'd become. Impatient, he tried to push Loki's hand away; that wasn't what he wanted. His foggy brain noted that Loki looked exhausted and there were dark circles forming under his eyes.

Loki eased him down on the bed and pressed against his back, one arm holding him tight. "It's almost over."

"Is it morning?" he asked blearily, thinking Loki must be giving him forewarning.
"Not yet."

He reached down to catch Loki's hip, grinding back against him. "I need you," he moaned plaintively. He felt Loki shift against his back and relief flooded through him when Loki pressed into him again, filling him and soothing the heat under his skin. He needed it with an intensity that sickened him; he needed it to be Loki inside him, no one else, just Loki.

"It's almost over," Loki repeated. "You're almost there."

He wanted to ask - almost where? - but nothing seemed to matter beyond the steady rhythm of Loki's thrusts. The insides of his thighs were sticky and he cried out in pain when Loki reached around to jerk him off. His orgasm was mercifully quick, as much agony as anything else. The instant it was over, his head spun violently and he collapsed into utter, boneless exhaustion, only able to move as much as Loki was forcibly rocking him.

"Steve?" Loki went still. "Steve, answer me."

Swallowing felt like acid down his throat; he tried to nod, but nothing in his body was responding. For the first time, he began to notice other things around him; the smell of the room, heavy with wood smoke and sex, and the sound of Loki's breathing behind his ear. His skin itched where there was drying semen smeared out in splattered inkblots over his stomach, chest, back, and down his legs. He shivered involuntarily when Loki pressed two fingers to his throat, checking his pulse.

"I'm okay," he managed to croak.

"Try to drink."

Cold air hit his back when Loki moved, but he couldn't bring himself to even roll over. His asshole burned, his body catching up on the past hours, and he groaned at the sudden pain. Loki returned with another cup of water and the damp cloth. He choked down the water while Loki cleaned his skin carefully and meticulously, wiping away the visible evidence of their night together.

"Why?" he asked, eyes falling closed. "Can kill me just the same dirty as clean."

"Is this not what people in love do?" Loki answered lightly. He finished with the cloth and returned to Steve's side, dragging a blanket up over both of them.

Steve had energy enough turn into the embrace, his cheek coming to rest against Loki's shoulder. Fingers combed gently through his hair. He was drifting away, sinking into the darkness. "You don't have to pretend. Anymore."

"Rest," Loki soothed. "Perhaps I too wish to pretend."

The gentle brush of Loki's fingers settled into the same, rhythmic strokes as before, drawing vague patterns over his arms, chest, and back, and a portion of the bone deep exhaustion began to ease. Loki might have murmured strange words against his skin but he couldn't be certain it wasn't his own ears playing tricks with the crackle of the fire.

"What're you pretending?" He heard his words slurring together and gave up trying to speak. Loki's answer was whispered so quietly he couldn't be sure he'd heard anything at all and he couldn't hold off sleep any longer.

"That you will still love me in the light of dawn."

**
"Again," Natasha said tersely.

"We've watched it a dozen times." Tony pushed stiffly back from the wall of surveillance monitors, still wearing all but the helmet of his Iron Man armor. "Alarm goes off, Loki waltzes in and picks up the scepter, and while we're scrambling to figure out what the hell is going on, he lets Amora out and takes Steve."

"We may have missed something," she said stubbornly. She kept her eyes on the screen in front of her as Maria returned to the time stamp where the alarms had sounded.

It had been a good plan, she ceded grudgingly. The worst thing about Loki was that he wasn't stupid. He'd thought it through; he'd been patient. He'd anticipated what their choices would be and simply outmaneuvered them. With all their attention on Amora, and what she might be able to do for Steve, he'd been able to walk through the front door and into the storage area where they kept the Chitauri scepter without any significant resistance. Most of the guards had been on Amora's floor, locked in with the Avengers and ensuring she didn't escape. They'd scrambled once the alarms went off but precious time had been lost undoing the extra precautions and the scepter was gone before they even knew where to look. Loki must've counted on that.

They'd left Steve behind, thinking he'd be safer there. He hadn't brought his shield or any of his gear; no one had expected a fight. And when Loki had come to free Amora, there had been nothing to stop him from taking Steve with him.

She didn't cringe when Loki pounced like a cat going after a mouse and shoved Steve up against the wall by his throat.

"When you saw me last, you begged for your life." Loki's words were barely loud enough for the microphones to pick up. "Do you remember you asked for? You wanted one night in my bed before I killed you."

Steve gasped, choking, and shoved futilely at Loki's chest.

"Loki leaned in closer, but his words were perfectly audible. "I have decided to grant your request."

A moment later, they'd disappeared into an impossible hole in the air and the room had been empty of all but Sam when the Avengers had returned.

She wondered if it might have gone differently if they'd brought Bruce with them rather than leaving him back at the Tower, but doubted it would've mattered in the end. Loki had outsmarted them. She didn't know if taking Steve had been part of his plan, maybe he'd seen an opportunity to finish what he'd started and he'd taken it.

"Nat," Clint said, his voice low. "Tony's right. There's nothing here."

She scowled at the monitor. "There has to be something. Thor's intel is all we've got to go on and there are too many potential locations left to check. We don't have that kind of time. It's already been too long." She felt sick at the thought of what Loki might have done to Steve in the past five hours, might still be doing to him.

Clint reached out and physically turned her chair to face him. "Whatever Loki was going to do to Steve before he kills him, he's already done it."

She flinched, fists clenched tight against her thighs.

"Cap's a survivor, Nat. He knows we'll go after him and he's smart. He asked for a night for a
reason. He bought us time. We just need to be smart about this."

Tony huffed. "Assuming we can trust Loki to honor the details of that request."

"He likes to play with his toys. He'll take his time," Clint said sharply, not meeting anyone's eyes.

"Goddamn it." Tony rubbed his eyes. "We should've known, should've...I should've seen this coming."

"It's not your fault." She looked away from the video and tried to convince herself it wasn't her fault either. Maybe they should've suspected it was all part of Loki's plan, but they'd been focused on saving Steve and she wasn't going to say that was the wrong call.

"Even magic has to have rules, limits." Tony raked his hand through his hair, looking as though he wanted to start pacing the room. "I need data. Is Bruce online yet?"

Maria swiped a hand over the surface of her tablet and one of the screens blinked out before the SHIELD logo appeared. It spun lazily several times before Bruce came into view, his glasses glinting with a reflection of the screen in front of him. He had a pen between his teeth and gestured that he needed a moment, half disappearing as he leaned away to focus on a nearby piece of lab equipment.

"I got the footage," he said without preamble, coming back into the center of the screen. He held a notebook and flipped pages as he spoke. "Do you want good news or bad news?"

"There is good news?" Tony asked, surprised.

Bruce looked up over the rim of his glasses. "Thor landed about five minutes ago. He's got a location for Amora and he's going after her."

"We need Loki, not Amora," Tony snapped. "Did he at least dig up any info on why the spell had lasting side effects?"

"That's the bad news. Or maybe good news, depending on how you look at it." He set the notebook aside to face them directly. "It turns out that Asgard doesn't experiment on humans, Amora was telling the truth there, but not because no one knows the risks. Odin hasn't encouraged visits to Earth for a reason. We don't shrug off the influence of magic the way Asgardians do, or at all, apparently. A spell like the one that hit Steve is a death sentence unless allowed to run its course. Not even Odin knows a way to stop it. That's one of the reasons they consider humans inferior to Asgardians, but it's been so long since the Realms interacted regularly that Amora probably didn't know. Thor didn't and he doesn't know if Loki was aware."

"This is good news?"

"Loki's the only one who can stop the effects of the spell and save Steve's life."

"Except for the unimportant, minuscule detail that he's planning to kill Steve after he screws him, like some sort of," Tony paused and glanced sideways at Natasha before finishing, "preying mantis."

"Thanks," Natasha said dryly. "Do we assume Loki knew?"

"Does it matter if he did?" Tony countered.

Clint rubbed at the stubble on his chin and cheek, brow furrowed. "If he knew that was the only way to save Steve, he would've just left him to die. Or he would've used it to his advantage, taunted us and tried to get something out of it. A bargain, something."
"Well, this bumps magic higher up on the threat list. A lot higher." Tony sat down with a heavy sigh, the chair creaking ominously under the weight. "Right, so we have to get to Steve after Loki saves him but before Loki kills him. Asgard doesn't experiment on humans, fine, that's good to know; what's their policy on us experimenting on Asgardians? Because we need a defense against this. What happens when Loki figures it out? I doubt his next spell will be anything so light and fluffy as magical sexy times. The only reason Amora hasn't put two and two together is that she doesn't care what happens to her victims."

"We could look for unexplained deaths in locations we've know Loki to be," Maria suggested. "Police reports, missing persons. We might be able to find a pattern."

"Then look for the pattern and find Loki," Natasha finished.

"Do we have that kind of time?" Tony shook his head immediately, getting to his feet. "I'll get JARVIS scanning reports and public records. If Loki's been burning through victims like lab rats, we'll find it. I doubt he's taken the time to cover his tracks any more than Amora did."

Natasha went still, her mind going back to one of the abandoned castles in Scotland. "Lab rats," she repeated, eyes going wide. Everyone stared at her curiously, waiting. "I know where Loki is."

**

Exactly what woke him, Steve wasn't sure; there was no buzzing alarm, no JARVIS speaking from somewhere overhead. He heard the crackling of a fireplace, but the room was otherwise silent. There may have been the sound of wind, outside, but without a window, he couldn't be certain. He was alone, nestled snugly in the furs and blankets covering the bed, and every muscle, every joint, right down to his bones, ached. Stiffly, awkwardly, he pushed himself up into a sitting position and immediately regretted it. His face flushed, embarrassed, as he wondered how long it would be before he could sit without feeling sore. But he didn't feel injured, as silver linings went, and no more worse for wear than he typically felt after a fight, if not exactly in the usual places. He wasn't naked either; his track pants had been replaced while he slept.

He found bruises, already healing, on his arms and chest. A couple of them were roughly half moon shaped and it took him a minute to recognize them as bite marks. He waited to feel guilt or shame or anything he'd expected to feel after sleeping with Loki, but it didn't come. All he felt was a strange calm, as though a hurricane had finally spent its rage and an internal sea was once more at peace. He felt clear in a way he hadn't since before Amora's spell.

He also needed to get moving before Loki returned to kill him.

Ignoring the protests and twinges of pain accompanying every motion, he folded back the bedding and eased himself to the side of the bed. His head swam when he stood, making him reach out to steady himself. Once he could stand upright without feeling as though he were falling, he hunted for the rest of his clothes. The castle was remote, he remembered that much, and he doubted the terrain would lend itself to bare feet. He scoured the room but found no trace of anything else he'd been wearing the day before. There was a pitcher of water and a plate piled high with slices of dark bread on the small table beside the bed, but the room was otherwise bare. He tried the door and found it securely locked.

He picked at the bread and drank three cups of water while he considered his options. The bed was up against an exterior wall; he'd felt a slight temperature difference in the stones. He could tell the room had been recently repaired, both the floor and all four walls, and there could be loose stones either around the door or in the exterior wall. However much time he had left, he didn't intend to spend it sitting around waiting for death.
The room was not large and it didn't take long to search the length of the exterior wall, hoping for cracks or loose stones that he could exploit. He came up short, finding nothing that seemed vulnerable to his bare hands. Since disassembling the bed, the only substantial piece of furniture in the room, would cause unwanted noise, he turned his attention to the next weakest spot in the room; the door frame.

Again, he was disappointed. Loki had done excellent work in his repairs of the castle structure. He wondered if magic had aided him or if Loki simply had a fine attention to detail. His fingers brushed over a section of stone that had obviously been repaired; the stones fit so neatly together that no mortar was needed and not even a piece of paper would fit between them. He wanted to admire the workmanship, but admiring anything Loki had done made him feel queasy. With his fingers on the stone, he felt as much as heard the motion of the latch before the metal slid back and the door began to move. He fell back into a fighting stance.

Loki was dressed in his familiar armor when he stepped into the room. His eyes darted up and down, taking in Steve's posture. There was no sign of compassion on his face; no sign of any emotion at all.

"It is morning," Loki said flatly.

Steve swallowed. After a frantic, panicked moment, he made the first move and feigned a lunge to the right, hoping to draw Loki away from the open door and give him a second to slip past him. He'd barely started to move when Loki caught him in an iron grip and dragged him bodily away from the door.

He cried out when Loki tossed him onto the bed, pinning his wrists down and straddling him to keep him from kicking. He turned his face away. "Please don't."

"Why play coy now, Captain?" Loki leaned in close enough for his breath to cool the side of Steve's throat. "I had you in every way imaginable and you begged for more. Again and again and again." His grip on Steve's wrists tightened before he pulled away, yanking and twisting Steve until he was pressed face down into the bed, hands behind his back. Tight bands that felt like rope wrapped around his wrists.

He stumbled when Loki hauled him off of the bed by his wrists. A sharp kick to the back of his right knee brought him down and he grunted when his knees hit the stone floor. Loki's grip on his hair was painful, wrenching his head back until the tendons and muscles in his neck screamed. He saw a flash of metal out of the corner of his eye before he felt a blade against his throat.

This is it, he thought. Loki was going to cut his throat open and leave him to bleed out where no one would ever find him.

The sound of wind outside grew louder.

He looked up and time seemed to stand still. The expression on Loki's face was nothing but pain. He looked shattered and his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

The dull hum of the wind grew to a roar a moment before the exterior wall exploded in a melee of stone shards and earth. A shape, enormous and green, emerged from the dust with a furious bellow. Steve saw the glow of Iron Man's repulsors and felt the hair on his arms rise with static electricity in the air. He'd never been so glad to see his team in his life.

"Loki, step away from him," Thor said with a voice that commanded the Nine Realms.

The blade fell away from Steve's throat as Loki took a step back, raising hands that were suddenly
empty of any weapon. When he slumped forward, he saw the Chitauri scepter appear on the ground several feet away, ensuring that it would be found and returned to the Fridge along with Loki.

None of it made any sense.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Fully recovered, Steve is still trying to make sense of Loki’s choices.

Chapter Notes

About half of my fics ignore Thor: The Dark World and about half of them ignore Captain America: The Winter Soldier. This one is going to ignore Thor: TDW, because I want Frigga back, damn it.

The alarm clock woke Steve promptly at five a.m.

He rolled onto his side, feet barely hitting the floor before he was up and moving, rolling his shoulders as he walked. Tank top and boxers were replaced with a t-shirt, boxer briefs, and athletic pants; he sat down to pull on socks and lace up his running shoes.

A treadmill wasn’t the same as the road, but Bruce hadn’t cleared him. Sticking close to the Tower, preferably inside of it, kept Natasha from following him and Tony from bugging his clothes, or worse. The Tower was quiet this early, even JARVIS seemed to be lulled into silence. He got off the elevator on the newly remodeled gym floor. Tony had gone over the top, of course, but Steve wasn’t going to complain about state of the art equipment and a smoothie bar run by a robot.

He warmed up with weights, then set the treadmill for a grueling pace and focused on watching the minutes tick by on the digital display.

An hour, and one marathon, later, he slowed the belt to a walk and kept going until his breathing was steady again. There was a smoothie waiting for him on the counter, courtesy of JARVIS and one of the helper robots Tony seemed to build compulsively. He felt ridiculous thanking the robot as he took the cup, but the robotic arm moved in a nodding motion as a response. He finished the smoothie on the elevator ride back to his floor and headed straight for the shower.

It felt good to stand under the stream and let the hot water wash away the tension in his muscles along with the sweat, but he kept the shower sensibly short. Coffee brewed while he dressed in a pair of khaki shorts and a t-shirt, possible now that the cold was becoming a distant memory.

Outside the Tower, winter had given way to spring; it did his soul good to see the sun already climbing into the sky and know there were budding leaves on the trees far below him. JARVIS tended to fret about maintaining temperature control and the possible invasion of nesting birds, so he resisted the urge to open every window that was physically capable of opening simply to let the fresh air in.

Coffee mug in hand, he went to collect his mail from the small foyer. There was no need to delegate it to Stark’s staff now that Loki had no chance of slipping anything in; the Fridge didn’t exactly have an outgoing mail service for prisoners. The thought of Loki made him pause, but only for a second,
before he hauled the mail bin into the living area and emptied it out to begin sorting. It felt good to be going through his own mail again, as though he was reclaiming the pieces of himself and of his life that he'd lost because of Amora's spell.

He still thought of it as *Amora's* spell, although he knew objectively that Loki had been equally to blame. The rest of the Avengers believed it had been entirely Loki's fault; he didn't argue with them.

They were probably correct; it had probably all been an elaborate scheme to get the Chitauri scepter. It could all be explained away and chalked up to a combination of Loki's mischief and Steve's bad luck. They'd won in the end, the scepter recovered and Loki imprisoned. Once Bruce was satisfied that the effects of the spell were finally gone, it would be a solid victory.

He finished the mail by ten o'clock and set out the bins for the Stark PR team. The next stop of his day was Bruce's lab, already alive with helper robots and music when he stepped out of the elevator, which meant Tony was also awake and working on a new project.

"Morning, Bruce," he said, crossing to the exam table and hoisted himself up onto it. He waited patiently for Bruce to finish up what he was working on and gather up supplies.

"How're you feeling?" Bruce asked with a smile.

"Slept fine, got a run in. I'm good."

Bruce nodded, reaching for Steve's arm to wrap the strip of rubber above his elbow. "Good to hear. I really think we're all clear, I just want to be sure. It's been three months since," he stopped, glancing up at Steve quickly. "Anyway, if the symptoms were going to recur again, we would've seen an indication by now."

He kept his smile in place as Bruce pressed the needle into his skin and began to fill the vials of blood. None of them, except Tony, seemed able to talk about it. They referred to it as the *incident* rather than say Loki had taken Steve to an abandoned castle in Scotland to rape and kill him. Tony had hired a psychiatrist for him, a dozen of them, and Steve kept finding reading material about post traumatic stress disorder and sexual assault lying conspicuously on previously empty surfaces in his apartment. It did no good to try assuaging their collective guilt. And since he'd been out of his mind and dying because of Amora's - Loki's - spell, his culpability in the experience was utterly negated.

Loki had been right after all; Steve was seen as the victim and Loki as the villain.

He kept those thoughts to himself as Bruce finished his exam and led him into the room with the brain scan machine. It was routine by now; he could nearly answer all of the questions from memory.

"How do you feel about Loki?"

It always the hardest one to answer. He didn't answer immediately, knowing that Bruce preferred him to think it through; after all, the point of the test was to determine how his thought processes were functioning. The memories of the nine months he'd been trapped under the weight of the spell seemed to get hazier each time Bruce asked.

"Steve?" Bruce prompted.

"Sorry." He tried to focus. "I don't...I guess I don't feel anything. I mean, I wonder if he'll be able to escape. I wonder how Thor is coping. And...and I feel sorry for him. He was..." He left it there and hoped Bruce would believe he'd been talking about Thor instead.

There was no point in talking about Loki. No one listened when he said anything that sounded like
defending or excusing Loki's actions.

"Alright. We're good."

He followed their routine, waiting for Bruce to come pull him from the belly of the machine and help him take off the electrodes stuck to his head. "Same song and dance in another month then?" he asked as he handed over the last electrode.

"If your tests come back the same as last month, I'd say you're in the clear and you don't have to do this again. It's over."

He kept his excitement in check, trying not to appear overeager. "That's great."

"It's okay to be happy about it," Bruce said wryly. "You've been on house arrest long enough for anyone to start climbing the walls."

"Good thing it's a big house."

"Why don't you get out for a bit? Go see a movie. If anything shows up in the tests, I'll let you know, but I think you're going to be just fine."

"Not gonna say no to that. Thanks." He didn't stick around for Bruce to change his mind.

When the elevator doors opened at the lobby and he saw the sunlight flashing off of car windows as they passed by, he nearly bolted for the doors. Unfortunately, Captain America running out of a building was likely to be noticed and cause a panic. He focused on the doors and started walking.

"Captain Rogers!" someone called out behind him. One of the security guards came around the wide desk, a clipboard in his hands. "Haven't seen you about in awhile, sir."

"Yeah, they've been keeping me busy," Steve agreed vaguely. "Did you need something?"

"About that kid with the tour a few months back. What was his name again?"

Steve froze. He'd completely forgotten about the boy who'd missed his ride home because he was talking to him. "Ben. Did he get home okay?"

"I called every family listed for the tour that day and all the kids were accounted for." The guard shrugged, looking at Steve with an unspoken apology. "But none of them were named Ben, sir. You sure that was his name?"

"It's the name he gave me."

"Maybe Ben's a middle name or something. They all got home safe and sound. Thought you'd want to know."

"Yes, thank you. And thank you for following up on that." He made note of the man's name before shaking his hand.

Forgetting to follow through on the welfare of a child was one more on a very long list of ways the spell had twisted him into a complete stranger. He wondered if he should get the list of names and check them all himself. Ben, whatever his name was, had seemed worried about him and maybe he'd want to know that all the poison was finally gone forever.

Loki had called it a poison too.
The doors of Stark Tower closed behind him and the noise of the city clamored in, wrapping him in a familiar chaos of honking horns, engines, and indistinguishable words shouted out in the distance. He soaked up the sun and considering all of the places he could go now that he had his life back; it seemed a world of possibilities now, instead of a world of too much noise and too much chaos. He walked at random until he looked up and realized he'd found his way to the coffee shop where Loki had wanted to meet him.

It was a good day to exorcise old demons, he decided, and headed into the bustling shop. By chance, the same table was open by the time he picked up his coffee and sandwich. He settled into the chair opposite where Loki had sat and stared at the empty seat while he ate. He tried to focus on what good had come from the ruin of the past year of his life.

They knew more about magic, how it affected human beings and how dangerous it could be. Asgard was even considering the possibility of allowing them to learn more. He had his mind back, his sanity, and he could think clearly again, without the constant churning of anxious desire. The same, old, ever-familiar nightmares returned once the dreams of Loki were gone; he told the psychiatrists he was glad to have them back. He could sleep and breathe easier - they all could - with Loki safely hidden away in the Fridge. They'd won in the end, even if it didn't feel much like a victory.

Confronted with the evidence, even Thor had agreed, in a heartbroken, desolate voice, that Loki was beyond hope. He'd disappeared for several weeks afterward; whether he'd gone to Asgard or not, none of them knew, and although he'd been calm when he'd returned, the quiet sadness in his eyes remained.

He finished the sandwich, remembering the coffee only after it had grown cold. The Starkphone in his pocket buzzed with an incoming message - from Bruce but not urgent - so he headed back to the Tower as leisurely as possible. He'd missed being out in the City; he'd missed being aware of the world around him and being sane. With each passing day, he realized with increasingly clarity how drastically the spell had altered his behavior and thought processes.

Expecting an update on his blood work and brain scan, he was surprised when JARVIS redirected the elevator and deposited him at the penthouse suite of the Tower, saying only that the Avengers had a visitor.

A chorus of voices greeted him when the doors opened. Self-conscious, he stepped out and assessed the scene before him. The entire team was there, along with two women, elegant and dressed in gowns that immediately marked them as Asgardian; the silver in their hair was the only tell tale sign of age. One of them had a hand tucked into Thor's arm and the careful way he handled her meant she could only be his mother, Frigga, the Queen of Asgard. She turned, as though sensing Steve's arrival, and her blue eyes were as bright and fierce as Thor's. The smile that played across her lips, however, was Loki's.

"Come on in, Cap." Tony waved him in from the bar, already filling a champagne glass. "Not every day we get to meet the fam."

Steve ground his teeth, trying to smile but not quite managing. He accepted the champagne glass, also not quite managing not to glare at Tony for his choice of words. Of course, Tony meant meeting Thor's mother and hadn't thought about what it might mean for Steve to be meeting Loki's mother. He had no idea what he could say to her, let alone what to say if she had questions.

"My mother has come to help us find a way to protect you from our magic," Thor explained, moving toward Steve with Frigga at his side. "Mother, this is the man I spoke of, Captain Steven Rogers."

Frigga's gaze flickered over Steve, almost quickly enough that he didn't notice her assessing him and
reaching a judgment. She smiled kindly before speaking. "It is our regret that you have seen only the
cruel aspect of magic. There is beauty in it as well. As with most things in all worlds, good or evil is
determined by the hand that wields the weapon, rather than the weapon itself."

He nodded, raising his champagne glass in lieu of shaking her hand. Perhaps he should bow; he
didn't know what the proper etiquette was for meeting alien royalty. He'd never doubted that
Asgardian magic - Loki's magic - was capable of good as well, though he'd never seen good come
from it.

"Thank you for being willing to help us," he said stiffly.

"I have brought Eir, one of our finest healers." Frigga gestured to the women conversing intently
with Bruce.

Steve figured that was a gracious way for Frigga to acknowledge how primitive Earth medicine must
seem to a civilization as advanced as Asgard and he felt an amused sort of affection for her attempt.
"If you need a guinea pig, I'm more than happy to volunteer. Can't get much worse than what I've
already been through, right?" He watched Frigga exchange a glance with Thor and Thor went a little
rigid. Realizing he'd said the wrong thing, he tried to backtrack. "I didn't mean...I meant magic. The
spell, that is. Not what Loki, I mean, he...um...he wasn't, he didn't...I didn't mean." He wished the
floor would open up to swallow him.

The touch of Frigga's hand on his arm was as light as a bird. "I cannot undo the harm my son has
caused you, but I can help bind up the wounds." Her fingers tightened in a gentle squeeze; it was a
maternal gesture, both comforting and bittersweet. "Would you indulge me? Your Realm is lovely
and it has been many years since I have felt the warmth of its sunlight."

Steve thought she was being kind. Again. Still, he was grateful to hand off his glass of champagne to
Thor and let Frigga take his arm, leading her out the glass door to the elaborate balcony. Landing pad
was a better word for the space Tony had created outside the penthouse suite but, like everything
Tony made, it was as beautiful as it was functional. Wind snatched at Frigga's curls, the sunlight
turning them golden amber in color, but it didn't seem to bother her. She kept her hand light on
Steve's arm and turned her face into the wind, looking out over the city.

"What I said before," Steve began, fumbling his words. "I don't want you to think."

She shifted enough to meet his eyes with a sidelong glance. "The spell my son cast is a cruel and
shameful one. It is against everything I taught him about magic and its purpose. Magic is, above all,
to protect life."

He frowned, frustrated. Every time he tried to say anything about that night, he was too flustered to
speak clearly and everyone else was too busy talking over him to listen. "After the spell hit us, he
refused to touch me. He demanded that we chain him up and didn't want me to come anywhere near
him. I was the one trying to rationalize how it would be okay, but he never did."

Turning toward him, Frigga gave him an inscrutable look, clearly studying him but giving none of
her thoughts away. "It seems his conviction did not last forever."

"No. I guess it didn't." He stared down at the patch of concrete between his feet. "But that night, I
remember him asking for permission. He told me I could say no and he wouldn't touch me if I did.
Even though he knew I wouldn't have...couldn't have...said no, he still asked. It was as consensual as
it could have possibly been under the circumstances. And, and he was kind. Gentle. He didn't have
to be. He could've." His face heated at the stirring memories of that night.
He'd been swallowing those words down for so long that letting them out left a hollowness in his chest. He didn't feel lighter or relieved; he felt a little nauseous standing with Loki's mother and talking about any of it. But he saw how the others looked at him, the way they shuddered and kept their questions to themselves about how traumatic it must have been. Whatever they were imagining, whatever depraved violence they assumed Loki was capable of, it wasn't the truth and he wanted Frigga to know the truth.

"In conquest, a man may capture his enemy and imprison them. He may be kind or he may be cruel, but the prison is still a prison." There was a deep sadness in her eyes.

He looked away. The pang of disappointment was unexpected. He'd hoped that Loki's mother, at least, would see the situation less in black and white and more in shades of gray. He had more than enough people already lined up to remind him that none of it was his fault.

"Thank you, Captain." Her grip on his arm tightened momentarily.

"What for?"

"For attempting to soothe a mother's heartache. That is why you've said these things, isn't it? Telling me that my son is not so lost that he is no longer capable of kindness. It eases the burden of my heart to know that Loki treated you as a lover. That he sought to give back the free will he'd taken from you, in the only way he could. You are kind as well, to say such things."

"Even Thor has given up on Loki."

Frigga tipped her head to the side, a gesture that was eerily reminiscent of Loki. "But you haven't."

"Well, I'm..." he trailed off, once again unsure of what to say. He'd never hoped for Loki the way Thor had; he'd assumed there was no hope to have. It was odd to find his roles reversed, with Thor convinced Loki was damned beyond all hope and Steve standing with Frigga trying to convince her that Loki had been kind.

"Would you like me to erase your memories of that night?" she asked abruptly.

"My memories? You can do that?"

A small smile played over her lips. "I can do a great many things. But it is delicate work and not without risk to your mind. I can erase them or make them seem as though only a dream, detached and distant."

He thought of the nightmares that had plagued him before that night and realized he was shaking his head. "They're just memories. But if you can do that, can you bring memories back too?" He didn't dare hope for what that might mean, if he was ever able to find Bucky Barnes again.

"It's possible. It depends on how they were lost."

"I don't really know. It was a type of brainwashing, but I don't have a lot of details." Still, he felt a surge of optimism. "Could you test it on me first? To be sure that kind of spell wouldn't do more damage. I really am willing to be a guinea pig. And Bucky...the guy who lost his memories...he's sort of like me. They gave him a version of the serum, like they gave me, so we wouldn't be all that different."

"Is there a memory you've lost and wish to regain?"

"No. But I'm willing to give up a memory or two if it'll help Bucky. Is that similar enough to getting
memories back?"

After a moment, she nodded. "It should be."

Smiling for the first time in weeks, he was happy to finally think there might be a silver lining on the edges of what had been a miserable nine months. He glanced back, watching the others through the glass of the penthouse. No doubt Tony and Bruce would want to be a part of any magical experimentation; they'd want to gather data and stick Steve back in the brain scan machine a few more times if Frigga did anything to his mind.

"Can we...can we do it now?" He cringed at the eagerness in his voice, as though he was a Labrador puppy still learning not to leap on strangers.

"If you wish." Graciously, Frigga turned toward the door and started back, acting for all the world that she'd simply had enough of Midgard's sunlight and wished to rejoin the others.

Back inside, Bruce was still in deep discussion with Eir. Tony had joined them, his brow furrowed as he absorbed every word Eir spoke. The others were seated, still holding champagne glasses in varying degrees of full, and conversing casually. It was such a normal scene that it struck Steve with visceral impact, reminding him of how much he'd lost and then regained.

"Eir." Frigga's voice carried a command that rivaled Thor's. "The Captain is willing to allow a small test of magic." With her hand tucked in Steve's arm, she led him to one of the chairs and motioned for him to sit down. "Eir will observe. She is here to learn as well as to teach."

He sank into the chair, trying to hold still as Frigga moved behind him. All eyes in the room were on him now and he felt a wave of deja vu at being, once again, an experiment. Light touches brushed over his hair and against his temples; Frigga was murmuring to Eir, her sentences short and clinical, much like a doctor looking over a patient and whispering notes for an assistant to jot down. In his peripheral vision, he could see the tips of her fingers, her hands not quite touching him, and he thought he saw a glimmer of color. It could have been a trick of his imagination.

Frigga spoke softly. "I need you to focus on a single memory, Captain. One you wish to forget. See it in your mind, bid farewell to it. Tell me when you have chosen. I will lessen its pain, make it feel far away."

He considered the possibilities. In another time, he might have chosen the memory of Bucky falling from the train in the Alps, or any number of memories from his time working for Nick Fury in SHIELD. Instead, he grabbed hold of the images from his nightmares and, although it made his stomach twist unpleasantly, pinned them still in his mind. He nodded to indicate that he was ready, holding his breath. A strange sensation washed over his skin; he couldn't say if it was cold or hot, whether it tickled or stabbed.

"How can this be?" Eir asked, her voice low but audible.

Frigga kept her hands at the sides of Steve's head and the subtle shimmer grew brighter. "Do you recognize it?"

"It is old magic. Very old. I did not think there was any left."

Frigga's hands withdrew. "I'm afraid you're a poor patient, Captain Rogers."

Twisting in his chair, he tried to read the expression on the women's faces. "Why didn't it work?"

"I doubt any magic would work on you now. You appear to have developed a defense against it,
though I cannot tell you how." She moved back around the chair and took his left hand, turning it over to gaze at his palm. "There is magic within you. When I attempted to reach into your mind, it revealed itself, just beneath your skin. You are filled with it and it protects you, shields you, from any that would alter you. It is of Midgard and it is very old, that much I can tell you."

"The serum?" Bruce offered up the only explanation any of them had. "Maybe it allowed you to adapt. A sort of accelerated natural selection."

"Immune response?" Tony suggested. He was eying Steve like an uncooperative culture in a petri dish. "We haven't seen anything out of range in his blood work or in the scans. Maybe we need to try something different, expand the net, so to speak. If he's full up with his own mojo now, we should be able to find it."

"I'm still in the room, Tony." Steve pulled his hand gently away from Frigga's grasp. "Sorry you came all this way for nothing."

"We just need a different lab rat," Tony interjected quickly. "I'll do it. Hit me with your best shot."

"Tony," half of the room said in unison.

"Not without a plan," Bruce added more gently. "We'll set the parameters, develop a hypothesis, define the experiment. Let's stick with science until we know more."

"Have any of you an injury needing healing?" Eir asked. "Would that suit your science?"

Bruce nodded, clearly thinking hard. "I think we're all in pretty good shape right now."

"Easily fixed," Tony offered.

"But I'm sure someone in this building has something that could be healed." Bruce glared Tony into silence. "I think one of the lab assistants has a pretty bad cold. That might be the perfect test case."

Steve turned his hand over several times, searching for any sign that he was as changed as she said he was. He didn't look or feel full of magic, old or otherwise. Frigga was still watching him, her expression inscrutable as ever, but he thought he saw a trace of wistfulness in her eyes. Being immune to magic, if that's what he was and if it was permanent, was more of a silver lining than he'd ever expected. It was a Godsend, long after he'd stopped believing in such things. And it wasn't as though they'd lost any chance to learn more about magic, they'd simply have to find another way.

Conversations washed over and around him. Bruce and Tony were once again with Eir, discussing how they to determine if mortal colds could be cured with magic and how they might be able to replicate Steve's miraculous immunity. He felt the weight of Thor's gaze before he looked up and made eye contact. Thor flashed him a bright smile, but his eyes were troubled.

He was, in turns, relieved and disappointed that he wouldn't be part of any trials Bruce and Tony were concocting in the name of science. The entire experience, he'd felt tossed about like a small boat in a stormy ocean. His ability to make his own choices had been taken away and he'd been at the mercy of forces beyond his control, forced to sit on the sidelines of his own life while the others frantically searched for answers. He never wanted to feel that powerless again, not even for science, but he was also now unable to play a part in finding a way to help Bucky.

Then again, during all those months of being under the spell's influence, he'd barely thought of Bucky; the fate of the Winter Soldier hadn't seemed important. He added that to the list of ways the spell had turned him into a stranger.
He'd grown used to keeping his thoughts to himself and watching the world unfold around him, choosing not to be an active participant. It felt strange to realize he hadn't been that way before the spell, strange enough that the crush of voices and people around him was suddenly overwhelming. He wanted to belong here and felt a constant need to shift or stretch against the ill-fitting isolation, but silence was a well worn habit now.

The others had grown used to it too. He'd known each of them were capable of leading, in their own way, and while they valued him as a member of the team, it was clear that they didn't truly need him. There was a pain that came with the realization, a sharp throb in his chest that made it hard to breathe, but it was gone in a moment; he couldn't fault their growing independent when they'd known they couldn't count on him. Even now, they were waiting for the other shoe to drop, not ready to believe it was truly over.

"Five am was a long time ago," he said suddenly and his voice was too loud even in the crush of other voices.

He stood up, heading for the elevator before anyone could question him. He almost told them he was going to take a nap or just pace across his living room floor thinking about useless he'd been; how useless he still was. Once he was alone on his floor, the silence was deafening. Without the distraction of other people around him or a task to occupy his mind, he kept revisiting the memories from that night. He kept asking the same question over and over again.

Why?

There were too many whys. They jumbled together and tumbled around his mind. He didn't even have words for many of them, only half-formed thoughts and feelings he couldn't trust. It was all too neat and too messy at the same time; too many coincidences and too much correlation. Maybe it had been nothing more than an elaborate plot to regain the Chitauri scepter.

But it hadn't worked.

The fact that it hadn't worked was what bothered Steve the most. Surely, if Loki was as intelligent as everyone thought, if he had worked out such a detailed plan, then it would've worked. It should have worked. And why take the time - the entire night - instead of being halfway across the universe before the Avengers knew what hit them. Loki had hidden from them for months; he could've remained hidden. All the questions, all the whys, all the bits and pieces that didn't quite fit together kept gnawing at him.

Of course, the only person who could answer his questions was securely locked in a cell in the Fridge and probably wouldn't tell him the truth even if he asked. Even if he did decide to go to the Fridge, it would probably get him a one-way ticket back to being under house arrest.

According to Sam, bad ideas were his favorite pastime.

He logged his travel plans with JARVIS and put in a call to Maria Hill. It was brief; he offered no explanation other than he'd been cleared to resume a normal life and he wanted to visit a high security prisoner. He didn't have to tell Maria who it was he wanted to see and she didn't ask questions.

The trip to the Fridge was longer by bike than by air and sunset was rapidly approaching when he arrived. He checked his Starkphone and was relieved to see he had no messages or voicemails waiting. They probably hadn't noticed he was gone yet. He realized that even if the visit was short, he wouldn't get back to the Tower until the early morning hours and he probably should've thought his plan through more thoroughly.
Two guards checked him in and directed him to the elevators. A third escorted him down to the appropriate floor. There were more guards stationed at Loki's door. Maria clearly wasn't taking any chances.

He'd expected a cell similar to Amora's, but was surprised to find it nearly bare. There was a simple bed shadowed behind a half height barrier offering only the scarcest of privacy and a wooden chair in the center of the space, facing the transparent barrier wall. Loki was lying on his back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. He turned his head as Steve stepped further into the cell. There was no rush in his movements as he sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and standing in one smooth motion. He came forward and took a seat on the chair. It seemed oddly practiced and Steve wondered why.

"I had expected SHIELD to bring you here sooner," Loki said coolly. Despite the simple, SHIELD issue prison uniform he wore, he seemed no less dangerous.

"SHIELD didn't send me." He took the chair from beside the door and set it directly in front of Loki, several feet of space and the barrier wall between them. "Why would you think they had?"

"As much as I enjoy hours of interrogation, I will tell you no more than I've told any of the others. No offer or threat of pain will change that."

Steve blinked. He couldn't say that he was surprised. Loki would be an invaluable intelligence asset, not to mention a strategic asset, and they'd made little progress in demystifying his magic. But his stomach churned as he thought of what SHIELD might be willing to do, and might have already done, to coerce Loki into cooperating. And now that he was facing Loki, he couldn't be certain why he'd come. There was only the vague shape of an idea in his mind, more hunch and intuition than any sort of hypothesis.

"Frigga is here." He watched Loki's face, trying to pay attention to the slightest changes in expression or emotion. Except for a twitch at the corner of his mouth, Loki didn't respond. "She and a healer, Eir, came to help us learn more about magic. She was going to test something on me, something that might help a friend of mine, but it didn't work. She said that her magic wouldn't affect me."

Again, Loki's expression gave nothing away. That, in itself, was a partial answer to one of the questions in Steve's mind. He'd thought maybe Loki would show surprise, perhaps even disappointment at the idea that none of his spells would ever work on Steve. But Loki remained impassive, hands folded neatly on his lap.

He remembered Loki saying he hadn't known how magic would affect a Midgardian. "Could it be a side effect? Of...of what you did."

A single eyebrow raised. "You will have to be more specific. Which particular act are you referring to?"

"I just thought, maybe...maybe it could be..."

This time, Loki laughed. It wasn't a friendly sound and there was no happiness in it. "Perhaps it is because I fucked you, is that what you think? A dozen times over. Or was it more? I admit, I lost count. You begged for it like a bitch in heat."

Steve jerked as though he'd been struck. His face flushed hot, embarrassed and shocked by Loki's words. He shouldn't be, it had all been because of the spell; he knew that and Loki knew that. A vague memory of Loki whispering that it was almost over surfaced in his mind and the contrast was
jarring. Loki had been kind that night; why choose to be cruel now? He crossed his arms, a poor substitute for his shield, and set his jaw stubbornly.

"Have you nothing to say in your defense, Captain?" Loki sneered.

Loki was trying to get a rise out of him and he was willing to spit whatever venom it took to make him angry. Whatever motive he had for trying to piss him off, Steve couldn't begin to guess. It was entirely possibly Loki was merely bored. He tried to steady his breathing and his racing heartbeat, counting out each inhale and exhale. Rather than take the bait Loki was hurling at him, he kept his arms crossed and simply stared back. No one was that good; if he paid attention long enough, even Loki would slip and give away his true intentions.

"Ah yes, that's right." Loki leaned back in the chair, lips twisted into a sardonic smirk. "You are the victim and I, the villain. What need have you for a defense when none will blame you for my assaulting your virtue?"

He'd come here for answers and only had more whys.

"Tell me, Captain." There was a lazy drawl in Loki's voice that felt barbed. "Do you lie in your bed at night and feel my hands against your skin? Do you dream about my lips around your cock?"

"No," he answered with calmness that surprised him.

There was a flash of something in Loki's eyes. For a brief moment, a tightness around his lips gave away the sudden clench of his jaw and his fingers twitched as though he was fighting to keep from balling them into fists against his thighs.

"I don't dream about you anymore or think about you all that much." The words sounded harsh, although he'd tried to speak them as gently as possible. If anything, he thought they should have been reassuring. "The effects of the spell are gone. I don't feel that way about you anymore."

Loki's expression twisted into something stricken and pained, but it was gone a moment later. "Then why come?" he hissed with icy fury. "To taunt me here in this cell?"

Steve frowned. He didn't have a good answer to that, but his disparate thoughts were beginning to piece together into a single idea. "I wanted to give you a chance to tell the truth."

"Truth is not in my nature. Surely my idiot brother has told you that much."

"I have a theory," he continued, ignoring Loki's protest. "I don't think you ever had any intention of killing me that night. Or of keeping the scepter. The scepter was a cover, a distraction, so that no one would think about what you were really after. Not the other way around." He saw Loki's eyes narrow and kept going. "You saved my life. I know that, the Avengers know that, and I think you know that too. I think you knew that was the only way long before we did. But you couldn't let anyone think you were saving my life, that you cared whether I lived or died. Because villains don't care, right? Big, bad Loki saves Captain America from certain death. Can't have that, can we?"

Loki folded his arms, his face unreadable. "Don't be a fool. It was merely coincidence that favored you."

Ignoring him again, Steve kept going. "You didn't come here for the scepter, you came for me. And this?" He gestured to the cell around them. "Giving the scepter back and staying here, imprisoned, when I know full well you could walk right out of here if you wanted to. You're letting us think that whatever precautions Tony put in place are actually working, but I don't believe it for a second. What is this? Penance? For doing what you knew you had to do. And you hate yourself for doing
He waited for several minutes but Loki remained stone-faced and silent. "You were gentle, you were kind. You asked for my consent, even though I couldn't truly give it to you. You took care of me and kept me safe, kept me alive. You gave me everything I asked for and more than I even knew I wanted. For one night, you loved me. You let yourself love me." All color had drained from Loki's face and he flinched at the word love. "Then you did...something...to me. You shielded me from magic somehow, so that nothing like that could ever happen again. So that I would be safe, even from you."

The muscles in Loki's jaw tightened. "What an imagination you have, Captain." His eyes were suspiciously bright and his hands were clenched, knuckles white.

"I came here to tell you that I forgive you. For all of it. I forgive you."

The rasp of Loki's inhale, shaky and harsh, was loud enough to be audible through the barrier. He turned his face away from Steve.

"The first step on the long road out of Hell is deciding you want to leave," he began softly, recalling Tony's words. "Not on a whim, not half-assed, you have to know with every fiber of your being that you've got to change or there won't be anything left." He stood up, hoping Loki would look at him or say something - anything - but knowing it was a long shot. "When you're ready to take that step, I'll be here. I promise you won't have to do it alone."

He left it at that and didn't look back.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Steve and Loki come to an understanding. The rest of the Avengers aren't certain they like where things are going.

A dull hum emanated from the overhead lights. It gave the silence a texture, as though frayed around the edges instead of crisp and sharp like the silence of a winter's night. At the thought of winter, Loki considered freezing the water in the pipes that ran through the wall, simply to see what chaos he could cause, but dismissed the idea almost immediately. He'd already earned the ire of SHIELD on a level no other villain had managed to accomplish. Perhaps they weren't allowed to torture him or starve him outright, but he had no illusions about their wish to do so; every one of the guards had murder in their hearts.

Such loyalty the Captain inspired, he mused. Or perhaps their hatred stemmed from any of his other numerous crimes.

He settled for making it snow inside his cell. The flakes were small and light. They disappeared the instant they touched down, but they were beautiful and he found it soothing to lie on his back, staring up into the storm.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the shift from red to green above the door, indicating that he was about to have company. It was outside the typical ritual of bringing a small tray of food once a day, always sealed and pre-packaged; he didn't know if the containers were to prevent loss or discourage tampering. He left the scant privacy afforded to him by the low wall and did nothing to dispel the lightly falling snow. His visitors were three guards, familiar but nameless.

One of the guards motioned toward the cell, his hand on the electrified baton on his belt loop. "Make it stop."

A single snowflake landed on his upturned palm. "It's harmless."

"You know the rules," the guard insisted.

"Do you fear that a little snow will enable me to escape?" With a wave, he set an eddy swirling through the air. Snowflakes danced and spun, spiraling out before resuming their lazy fall to the ground.

The barrier wall shifted and began to retract. He stayed rooted to his spot as the guards advanced, their batons sliding loose from their belts and crackling to life. The snow began to dissipate, but he knew compliance would not stop them. In their eyes, he was a vile, dangerous animal they'd manage to lock in a cage.

On his left, the guard lunged, baton held up and Loki blocked the blow with his forearm. A second guard darted behind him, digging the baton into his lower back and engaging the electrical shock. Pain bloomed out through his side and it paralyzed the surrounding muscles, forcing him to go stiff. While the guard behind him wrapped an arm around his throat and held him, the others jabbed their batons into his stomach and groin; pain whited out his mind. There was blood in his mouth where his
teeth had caught his tongue, jaw muscles contracting involuntarily with the electric shock. Moments before the lack of oxygen could render him unconscious, the pain stopped, but only long enough for him to gasp desperately for breath.

"HEY."

His muscles convulsed and he shivered violently, chest heaving. The guard released him, letting him sink to his knees and grip the floor. Shakily, he wiped the back of his hand against his mouth and it came away bloody. Several feet away, Maria Hill was standing with her gun drawn and pointed, strangely, at the guards rather than Loki. There were more guards behind her, their guns drawn as well, but lowered and pointed toward the floor.

"Stand down. Now," she ordered, her voice icy.

"He knows the rules," challenged one of the guards.

"I gave you an order. Move." She motioned with her gun. "SHIELD will get a full report of what happened here."

The guards began to move, holstering their batons. One of them glared at Maria as he passed, muttering loudly. "He fucking deserves it for what he did to Rogers."

"You're lucky Captain Rogers isn't here," Maria snapped. "Captain America may be some sort of macho poster boy for you morons, but let me enlighten you. He would not hesitate to kick your asses for this. Now get out of my sight. All of you."

Swallowing blood, Loki settled back on his heels. After months of incarceration, he had a new, grudging respect for Maria Hill. Her position at the Fridge was precarious, not part of SHIELD and yet commanding the SHIELD soldiers stationed there. There was open speculation, much of it unsympathetic, about her involvement in SHIELD’s near destruction and that did little to endear her to the others. She holstered her gun as the guards filtered out of the room, door closing behind them. With a click, the barrier wall began to slide back into place.

With her arms folded, she faced him squarely. "You know the rules."

"It was only a little snow."

A muscle in her jaw twitched. "If you're bored, there's an entire research department waiting to work with you."

"Waiting to experiment on me, you mean." He forced himself onto his feet and walked the few steps to the chair, sinking down onto it gratefully. "I have no interest in helping SHIELD devise more creative entertainments for me." He pressed an arm against his stomach, still throbbing from the batons, and wiped more blood from a cut on his lower lip.

"Those men weren't under orders."

"This time, perhaps. What about the other times?" He spoke lightly, calmly; it helped him regain a sense of control over himself and his surroundings.

"I don't believe in torture," she said briskly. "It's ineffective and damages morale."

"Torture?" Chuckling darkly, he shook his head. "I know torture. This was not that. A handful of play yard bullies, nothing more."
"SHIELD is willing to negotiate for your cooperation."

"I am neutered, isolated, unable to do anything more sinister than conjure a few snowflakes for my own amusement. An infant is capable of such minor magic. Is that not cooperation enough?"

Glancing around his barren cell, he shrugged. "What more do want from me?"

She watched him thoughtfully. "Do you need medical attention?"

"There is nothing I need that you can provide." However she chose to interpret his words didn't matter and he didn't care. If she thought he was disparaging the medical abilities of Midgard, she wouldn't be wrong, and if she thought he was asking for something SHIELD would refuse to grant him, that would be equally true.

"I'll send a doctor to look you over anyway." When she left, the light above the door changed from green back to red.

His muscles ached, still buzzing from the electrical shocks. It took several minutes to be confident that he could make it back to the bed without stumbling. When he did manage, he laid down and curled in on himself, as though it could ease the burning in his stomach and groin. He'd managed to conceal the holes in the plain cloth well enough, where the batons had burned through and left red, blistered skin underneath. If Hill hadn't seen the marks, she would never know he'd repaired the fabric with magic and the small act of defiance was a balm to his hobbled pride.

No magic was a ridiculous, ignorant rule. They may as well have demanded that he cease to breathe. Perhaps they thought if they could deprive him of it, he might be more amenable to the trials and tests they wished to perform. They wished to study him and he had little doubt that their concept of study could include dissecting him to determine his inner workings. He might have been tempted to do the same with his rats if he hadn't been able to spy over Banner's shoulder and gain knowledge without blooding his hands. Let them believe he was beaten; he would play the part as long as it suited him or until he grew bored of this game. That's all it was, a game.

From the inside, he could learn more of SHIELD's feeble attempts to rebuild and the parasite called HYDRA they sought to dig out by its roots. SHIELD agents liked to talk and, even through closed doors and solid walls, he was an excellent listener.

He grimaced, swallowing blood. The side of his tongue and his lip were beginning to swell, injuries that were not serious as much as inconvenient. He could heal himself, of course, but that would violate the rule of no magic and possibly earn him another beating. Inconvenience aside, the violence was a respite from the boredom and a perverse part of him felt satisfaction in the fresh wounds.

It was easier to close his eyes and slip into relatively peaceful sleep while pain distracted him from other, less pleasant thoughts.

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"Come on!" Clint tossed his cards onto the table. "You're cheating, Stark."

"I don't have to cheat. I am that good." Tony winked, leaning over the table to sweep his winnings out of Clint's pile of chips.

"Cap, why don't you join us?" Clint called.

"No way." Steve had a six pack of beer in one hand and an enormous bowl of tortilla chips balanced on his arm. "You two are on your own. Just be glad Natasha isn't playing. She'd wipe the floor with both of you." He put the chips and beer down in the center of the table, handing out bottles.
"Sam?" Clint asked hopefully.

"Nuh-uh. Nope."

"You guys are just gonna let Tony kick my ass?"

"Yup."

"Some friends you are." Resigned, Clint accepted a beer and leaned back on the couch, boots thunking on the top of the table.

"Ah, ah, ah! Really?" Tony raised his eyebrows. "What, were you raised in a circus?"

"Very funny."

With a grin, Tony joined Clint, his expensive sneakers a sharp contrast beside the scuffed and well-worn boots. "I am pretty funny. Don't you think? Be serious now, I really want to know."

In the corner of the opposite couch, Rhodey snorted. "Don't fall for that routine, Barton."

"Not in a million years." Clint craned his neck to look around. "Didn't we order pizzas? I could've sworn we ordered pizzas."

"They'll be here in an hour," Steve reminded him.

Thor came out of the kitchen, carrying a soup bowl filled to the brim with salsa. "If the game is no longer to your liking, I could teach you one from Asgard."

"As long as the Tower stays intact," Tony piped up. He barely waited for the bowl to touch down before he dug into the salsa. "Do you play cards on Asgard? I thought you guys were too advanced for cards."

"We are not so advanced that we do not enjoy taking another man's riches in a wager."

Clint immediately shook his head, waving off. "No more poker. Stark cheats."

A hand pressed against his chest, Tony gave Clint a shocked look. "I do not. I'm offend."

"He's counted cards since college."

Tony pointed accusingly at Rhodey. "That was one time."

"If one time means your entire Freshman year."

With an exaggerated sigh, Tony slumped back against the couch. "My own team doesn't trust me. Where's the love?"

"You're the one who plays favorites." There was a glint in Clint's eyes that made Steve wonder where he was going.

"Favorites?"

"You bought Steve strippers."

"Oh no. No, no, no." Steve shook his head. "We are not going to talk about that. Not tonight, not ever."
Tony frowned thoughtfully. "He's got a point."

"No," Steve and Pepper said at the same time. He hadn't even realized Pepper could hear them from where she was sitting with Natasha, but her sixth sense for when Tony was about to do something stupid probably worked within a fifty mile radius.

"You liked the strippers," Tony huffed.

"They were very nice people."

"And it wasn't like I knew at the time that the only option was Loki." Tony stopped, suddenly realizing he'd tread into territory they didn't normally cover. He looked to Steve first, then Thor, as though uncertain which of them might come out of their seat first. Thor shifted uncomfortably, suddenly very interested in his beer.

"Sir." JARVIS broke the silence. "This appears to be an opportune moment to inform you that you have an incoming video message from Maria Hill."

"Thank God. Put it up, J."

One of the large screen displays blinked to life and the SHIELD logo spun for a few moments before Maria appeared. She frowned. "Stark? Who else is there?"

"All here. The whole gang. Whatcha got for us?"

"If this is a bad time..."

Steve's stomach did a flip. He could think of one very good reason she might not want to have the conversation with at least three people currently in the room. "What happened, Maria?"

Her lips set in a hard line, she leaned forward, elbows on the table, and lowered her voice. "Loki was attacked in his cell. I got them out of there as soon as I could, but they worked him over. And I don't think it was the first time. There's talk between the guards, none of it's good."

That got Thor to his feet. "Is he in danger?"

"I don't know. He brushed it off." Her brow furrowed. "He implied that he'd been tortured. Not here, in the past. Do you know anything about that?"

Thor shook his head vehemently. "If he speaks truth, it did not happen on Asgard."

"My authority only goes so far here and I can't have eyes on him twenty four seven. I don't think I'll be able to prevent another attack and one of these times, he'll fight back-"

"He didn't fight back?" Steve interrupted.

"Maybe they got the drop on him, but it didn't look like he really tried. I'm sure if he had, I'd have three dead men on my hands. If something like that happens, I'm concerned the situation will deteriorate."

"What are the options?" Tony slid to the edge of the couch, counting off his fingers as he spoke. "One, we leave him there and wait for the powder keg to blow. Two, we have big brother here send him back to Asgard. Three, we find another place to hold him. Anyone have a favorite or should we vote on it?"

"Bring him here." Steve folded his arms and met Tony's incredulous look directly. "Don't even say
"Why bother? Everyone in the room is thinking it."

"This is the most secure location we have other than the Fridge. If he's not safe there, he can't stay."

"Since when are we concerned about his safety? No offense, Thor." The beer bottle clanged loudly against the bowl of salsa when Tony set it down. "Because when you start talking about Loki's safety, I start wondering about your mental health."

"We can't just ignore this. He's being attacked."

"Then send him home! He's not our problem. At least, he shouldn't be." Tony raked his hand through his hair. "You know what, Loki isn't the problem. You are the problem."

"What?"

"Come on, Steve. If there's anyone in this room who should be willing to cut this guy loose, it's you. But you're not and I've tried to understand, really, I have, but you've got to do better than the Captain America, everyone should be treated fairly bullshit."

Pepper started up from her chair. "Tony, please."

"No, Pepper. I'm sorry, but I want an answer from the Star Spangled idiot here." Tony faced Steve squarely. "Loki raped you. There, I said it. Do I need to spell it out for you too? Maybe explain how completely not okay that is? He raped you, Steve. Come on. Why are you okay with that? Because you act like it was nothing. When we broke through that wall, he had a goddamn knife at your throat. And you? You've been defending him and making excuses for what he did ever since."

Silence settled over the room. Thor's fists were clenched tight at his sides, but he was looking away from Steve and Tony. The others watched; both Natasha and Sam were poised to step in, but he could tell they had the same questions. Only Bruce, who'd been contentedly buried in a book in the corner, looked as though he'd rather be anywhere but in the same room with them.

He swallowed. "This isn't about me. What happened isn't important, it doesn't change-"

"Not important? Are you out of your fucking mind?"

He raised his voice, cutting Tony off. "It doesn't change the fact that he's been attacked and will be attacked again if he stays. Getting him out of there is the right call."

Tony stalked away angrily. "No rapists allowed in the Tower."


"Loki is as unwelcome there as he is here and could face execution if he returns."

"Good!" Tony shouted from behind the bar.

Thor glowered. "There are limits to my patience, Stark."

Making a snap judgment, Steve put his beer down. "Fine. Maria, let Loki know that he'll be returned to Asgard as soon as Thor can give them a heads up and we can work out how extradition to another world is supposed to work." He started for the elevator doors.
"Steve," Sam began.

"I'm going for a run."

He bolted, certain that he would say or do something he regretted if he stayed to listen to Tony for another second. There was no explanation he could offer that would make sense to any of them. Just as everything he'd done had been blamed on Loki, anything he said that didn't fit the mold of how they thought he should feel would be questioned and discounted. But his stomach turned at the thought of Loki being attacked and no one was going to convince him he should be okay with it.

Sam arrived while he was lacing up his running shoes, appearing in the bedroom doorway with a worried look on his face.

"If you came down to argue, save your breath," he said without looking up.

"They worry about you."

"Yeah, well, they can stop worrying. I'm fine."

"You can hear yourself, right? Do you know how crazy that sounds?" Moving forward, Sam dragged one of the chairs closer to the bed so he could face Steve directly, elbows on his knees. "Loki dragged you out of the Fridge by the throat. You were alone with him for ten hours before we found you. Ten hours. Have you even read your own medical report? You were not fine."

Steve couldn't meet his gaze. The comprehensive medical exam he'd been subjected to after returning home had been more embarrassing, in his mind, than anything he'd done with Loki. "Nothing I couldn't handle."

"You're tough, we get that. No one's saying you aren't."

"I'm not trying to prove anything."

"Right." Sam gave him the same incredulous look that Bucky always had. "No one is fine after what you went through. No one. And it's okay to not be fine."

He sagged a little, unable to stay angry when he knew how worried they'd all been. "But that's the thing, Sam. You're assuming you know what I went through."

"Alright, maybe we're wrong. Help me understand."

Instinctively, he recoiled, but it was out of an odd protectiveness rather than fear or distrust, of wanting to guard those memories and keep them from being turned into something shameful. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Exactly. You won't talk about it and as long as you won't talk about it, we're all gonna keep assuming the worst. You want me to stop worrying, then you better start talking." Sam folded his arms, glaring a challenge.

"It wasn't what you think. It wasn't...violent."

"You had bite marks."

"I wanted him to bite me," he shot back. "Is that what you all want to hear? How much I wanted it? Everything he did to me, I wanted. Begged for it, pleaded for it. I did things I." He shut his mouth, nearly biting down on his tongue, and tried to censor himself, then decided he'd had enough of
keeping quiet. "It was the best sex I've ever had and probably will ever have. I didn't even know sex could be like that. And it felt right, Sam. It felt right."

"That's because of the spell."

Steve threw up his hands. "And that's always the answer. It was just the spell. None of it was real, nothing I felt matters because it was just the spell and part of Loki's evil plan. I should feel bad about it. I should be angry and ashamed, right? That's what everyone is expecting. He gave me a chance to say no and I said yes. Maybe I should be drowning in good old Catholic guilt because I had sex with Loki and I loved it."

The expression on Sam's face stayed the same; a slight frown and his eyebrows raised, drawing lines across his forehead. Finally, he shifted, opening and closing his mouth several times before he shook his head. "I don't know what to say to that, man."

"Look, Sam. You're worried, everyone's worried. I get it. But I need you to start trusting me. I am fine. I've dealt with it, I've moved on. The rest of the team needs to move on too."

"Alright."

"Alright?"

Sam shrugged a shoulder, smiling. "You know there's a whole lot of guilt out there and it's about them feeling like they let you get hurt."

"I can't exactly convince them otherwise," Steve said wryly.

"Let me give it a shot. Now I know where your head's at and that you're okay, I might be able to sort them out." He clapped his hands against his knees. "You really going for that run?"

"I really am. Save a pizza for me?"

"No way, man. You're on your own." With a wink, Sam stood up and headed for the door. "I'll make sure Tony orders another half dozen just for you. But no ending up in Connecticut."

"Burroughs only. Thanks, Sam."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm awesome."

**

The next day, Steve returned to the Tower after a leisurely lunch to find Maria Hill waiting in the small entryway to his quarters.

"Maria." He opened the door, motioning for her to go ahead. "What brings you here?"

"Loki's gone." She sounded frustrated but also resigned. "The guards checked on him this morning and the cell was empty. No sign of how he escaped. In the surveillance video, he's there one moment and gone the next."

"That's bad news," he said carefully.

She swept her gaze over the living room, hands in her pockets, before turning to face him. "You knew we couldn't hold him."

"Not even Asgard can hold him and they know what they're dealing with."
"And you knew telling him he was going back to Asgard would convince him to disappear."

He didn't respond to that. It had only been a matter of time before Loki vanished and maybe he'd gambled on Loki being less willing to be imprisoned on Asgard than on Earth. The alternative was allowing Loki to remain at the Fridge, subjected to violence and brutality while he wallowed in his own self-loathing; that wasn't a situation Steve was willing to accept.

Maria was clearly unhappy with the turn of events. She reached into her jacket to pull out a plain white piece of paper. "This was left on his bed. It was in an envelope with your name written on it." She held out the card. "Do you know what it means? We ran every test we could think of and as far as we can tell, it's just a piece of paper. But he left it for you so it has to mean something."

Gingerly, Steve took the card. It was the same heavyweight paper, smooth as silk. "It's a way for him to contact me. Send messages. That's all. I think there must be a matching pair. Whatever he writes on his card shows up on this one and whatever I write shows up on his. He gave me one of these before. I burned it."

Her brow furrowed and she looked worried. "Steve."

"Let me try, Maria. That's all I'm asking. A chance. Maybe I can keep him off our backs and keep a few innocent people from getting hurt."

"How can you be sure you've got a chance?"

He curled his fingers around the edge of the card. "Because all he wanted was for me to still love him after it was over. Which means he knew that I wouldn't, but he saved me anyway. He loves me. For whatever reason, I don't know, but he does."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Steve."

"You trusted me before."

"You almost died that day," she snapped at him, eyes flashing.

"And it was right call."

"Goddamn it, Rogers." She stopped, visibly steeling herself. "Do not sacrifice yourself because you think you might be able to get some kind of mercy from him."

"I'm not asking him for mercy."

She rubbed at her temple. "Just tell me this isn't what it looks like."

"Magic has no effect on me. The Queen of Asgard said it herself." He tried to smile. "This is me, Maria. All me. Nothing else. And I'm taking a chance that Loki isn't too far gone to be saved. I have to take it. He saved me. It's the least I can do."

She choked out half of a laugh. "You're the patron saint of lost causes, you know that, right?"

"I already know he's not a lost cause."

"Alright. He's all yours, Rogers."

"I'll figure it out."

He ushered her out of the suite and purposefully ignored the card until she was out of the building.
He ignored it for the rest of the afternoon too, setting it on his bookshelf until he was ready. It was after midnight and after he'd spent an hour staring at the ceiling before he climbed out of bed to get it.

"JARVIS, I want you to cease monitoring anything that goes on in this room until I tell you otherwise."

"As you wish, sir."

He collected the card and a Sharpie marker before slipping back under the covers, propping it against his knees as he tried to think of what to say. Finally, he decided on the most obvious.

*I don't want to fight you anymore.*

The ink sunk into the paper and disappeared and the card stayed blank for a long time. Long enough that he began to second guess his certainty about Loki's motives and state of mind. An hour ticked by in minutes on the face of his alarm clock. The answer was a question.

*What will you grant me for peace?*

His teeth clicked against the pen cap as he chewed on the end, trying to fit his words together. Finally, he pressed the tip against the card and started to write.

*What is peace worth to you?*

The ink had only just disappeared when movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention and he saw Loki step through an invisible seam in the air at the end of his bed.

"No," Loki said immediately, his tone displeased. "I will not accept you whoring yourself to me in exchange for peace."

"I was gonna suggest coffee. Sometime. If...if you wanted to."

Loki stared at him. "But you are no longer influenced by the spell. You said yourself, you don't feel anything toward me."

"That doesn't mean I don't want to get to know you."

He shifted so he could sit cross-legged on the bed. "Can we try to be friends? I'm not going to ask you to sign up with the Avengers or anything like that. I'd rather not have to punch you or get punched by you ever again, but I'm not expecting you to magically."

He saw Loki's eyebrows rise. "Right, sorry. Just stop trying to kill me. That's all I'm asking. If you and Thor want to keep beating each other up, that's your business. In return, I'm offering friendship and...a place to go if you ever need it."

"Do the others know of this most generous offer?"

He couldn't tell if Loki was mocking him or simply amused. "No. And they won't be happy about it. I'm willing to keep it a secret if you want. Although that probably won't last long, just so you know. I'm a terrible liar."

"You do realize the flaw in your plan, do you not?" Loki turned away, fixing his attention on the bookshelves and moving to inspect their contents.

"Flaw?"

"If you are correct, which I am not saying you are, and my intentions were as you presume them to be." Loki paused to single out one of the books, tugging it off the shelf and paging through it.
leisurely. "Without the spell to turn your affections toward me, your offer of friendship is a bitter balm indeed."

"If you say the word friendzone." He grinned when Loki glanced back at him with a confused frown.

"What does that mean?"

Shaking his head, Steve climbed out of bed. "Forget it." He crossed the room and pulled the book out of Loki's hand, placing it back on the shelf. "Why don't you stay for tea? I've got plenty of tea."

Loki stiffened. "I am not some child you can order about."

"Whatever you say. Ben." Loki didn't deny masquerading as Ben, but Steve hadn't expected him to. "And no more messing with Bruce, okay? It puts the Other Guy on edge."

He headed for the kitchen and busied himself with making tea. There was no guarantee Loki wouldn't disappear while his back was turned, but he'd drink the tea either way. From Loki's reactions, he was getting the impression there weren't a lot of people in his life who good-naturedly teased him or even had an honest conversation with him. When the water was ready, he poured it out into two mugs and transferred them to the small kitchen table, taking a seat and cupping his hands around his mug. Loki stood at the edge of the kitchen, arms crossed.

"I am your enemy, you should not be so." Loki waved a hand in a senseless gesture.

"It took me a week to sit comfortably and at least three showers before I stopped smelling you on my skin. I'm pretty sure that buys me a pass to skip the formalities."

Slowly, as though expecting it to transform into a snake and bite him, Loki pulled out the opposite chair and took a seat. A moment later, he reached for the mug of tea and carefully moved it toward him.

"See? Even scary villains can sit down and drink tea with a friend."

"If the sarcasm is part of your offer of friendship, I may reconsider," Loki said dourly, but he made no move to leave.

"The last year has been intense for me. Hit by a sex spell, thought I was losing my mind, had more sex in one night than I thought was even physically possible. And my first time having sex with a man, so yeah, maybe I'm a little sarcastic." The look of horror on Loki's face surprised him. "Alright, I'll ease up on the sarcasm."

"That was your first..."

Steve shrugged. "Sex hasn't really ever been a priority in my life. I think they've even got a word for it nowadays. I'm not saying the sex wasn't amazing. It was."

"But you aren't interested in having sex with me again," Loki said pointedly.

"That night wasn't normal or about any real intimacy. It felt really good, physically, and I'm not saying I don't ever want to feel that again, but it's not a priority, no. That's not what I'm looking for with you or with anyone. It's not how attraction works for me. I'm not saying...I mean, I'm willing, with the right person, someone I love. It's just not necessary for me." He focused on his tea, aware that Loki might not ever understand. "I'm more interested in getting to know you than getting into your pants. And something like that would take a lot more than tea or meeting for coffee anyway."
Loki arched a brow. "Then you would demand more from me if I wished for sex."

"We aren't bartering for services." He wondered why Loki immediately twisted everything into terms of cost and payment. Maybe politics would be a better metaphor, one that would be clear to Loki. "For a relationship like that to work, we can't be on opposite sides. Friendship is a truce, a handshake. Sex is an alliance, it comes with commitment to a mutually established set of terms and promises exchanged. And, barring magic sex spells, I don't sleep with my enemies."

Settling back in the chair, Loki tapped his fingers lightly against the table and the expression on his face was exactly the same inscrutable, measuring look Frigga had worn.

"Tell you what, if you want to make a deal, here you go. I'll keep an open mind about us if you keep an open mind about you. Maybe you don't have to be a villain."

"You will find I'm ill suited for the mantle of hero."

"Those aren't the only two options. Deciding not to kill or hurt people isn't heroic. That's the bare minimum for just being decent."

"What makes you think I have any interest in being decent?"

Raising his mug to his lips, Steve kept his gaze locked on Loki. "Because you're sitting at my table, drinking tea. With me." And because Loki had chosen to let them punish him rather than escape with the scepter.

They continued to drink in silence. He watched Loki study him and wished he could see into the inner workings of what was going on inside that head. Loki's body language had relaxed; his arms were no longer crossed and his spine no longer straight as a redwood, but Steve couldn't be certain the calm wasn't merely a façade.

"How long have you been interested? In me, I mean." He blushed, feeling awkward and presumptuous for asking.

Loki's mug stopped at his lips. "Is this arrogance, Captain?"

"Why let us chain you up after the spell?"

Gazing falling to the mug of tea, Loki took a sip. "Is it so difficult for you to believe that I prefer my bedmates to be wholly willing? A spell is a lie, nothing more than a trick. An illusion that I would rather not rely on in the pursuit of pleasure."

"And if the spell hadn't happened?"

Pursing his lips, Loki lowered the mug. "Perhaps if you told me precisely what it is you would like to know, we could forgo the interrogation."

"Maybe I want to be sure it was something you wanted."

"Not that way," Loki said flatly.

"But you did want it."

Loki shrugged, eyes darting away rather than meet Steve’s gaze. “You are an attractive man. For a mortal. Does that satisfy your pride?”

“Pride has nothing to do with it. I prefer my partners wholly willing as well.” He waited to see how
Loki would take that, but saw no reaction. “I know this is weird. Whatever this is. It’s certainly weird for me. Maybe it’ll always be weird, but it’s our choice where we go from here, not some spell’s. We can build something good, something positive, for both of us.”

Gaze falling, Loki picked up his mug. “Your hope in my capacity for change, to be something other than what I am, is admirable, but misplaced.”

“You told Maria you’d been tortured. Will you tell me what happened to you?”

“Does your friendship require that I tell you my deepest, darkest secrets?”

Steve shook his head quickly. “No. If you want to talk, I’ll listen. If you want to go bowling, we can go bowling. We can watch movies. I’m open to suggestions. I want to spend time with you.”

A ghost of a smile, sad and wistful, appeared on Loki’s lips. "Thank you for the tea, Captain."

"Still not gonna call me Steve?"

"I would not show you such disrespect. But should you find yourself in my bed again, and should you truly wish to be there, I will call you Steve." He pushed the chair back and stood up.

"I meant what I said. If you ever need a place." He gestured to the kitchen. "You'll always be safe here. I want you to know that."

Loki pivoted, so graceful it was nearly a pirouette and let his hands rest on the back of the chair. "Safe from what, Captain? From the brother who has sworn to defeat me? From the Avengers, who wish to lock me away and forget I exist? From Asgard herself? I have naught but enemies in the whole of this universe."

"Well, now you have a friend."

The laugh was in motion only; Loki made no sound, only shaking his head and smiling. "Goodnight, Captain."

Steve nodded. He waited until Loki had disappeared through another impossible portal in the air before he spoke again, his voice echoing in the empty room. "JARVIS, you can resume monitoring now."

“Thank you, sir.” A pause. “Mister Stark is aware of the gap in my situational awareness of these rooms. He has requested verbal confirmation of your status.”

He glanced at the clock and saw that it was nearly two in the morning. “Where is he?”

“In the robotics lab, sir.”

“Tell him I’m on my way.”

Resigned, he carried the mugs to the sink. It would be better to deal with Stark as soon and as directly as possible. They’d managed to achieve a peace of sorts within the team and there’d been no mention of the conflict from game night; he knew well enough to give Stark his space. He whistled a broken, half tune on the way to the robotics lab and wasn’t surprised to be assaulted by blaring, classic rock music the moment the elevator doors opened. Following the onslaught of sound, he found Tony at a workbench with a soldering iron in hand and surrounded by a half dozen empty energy drink bottles. He turned down the volume on the music dock before dragging one of the stools over to Tony’s side.
“Hey,” Tony said without looking up. “I was listening to that.”

“You were doing permanent damage to your hearing, not listening.” He took a seat, trying to get a better look at what Tony was working on.

“Make yourself useful. I need a capacitor. Ten picofarads. They’re in the blue bins.”

Steve turned to the blue plastic cabinet against the wall behind the worktable. “How do I…”

“It’ll be a small round thing. Brown. With a ten on it.”

“Easy enough.” He scanned the labels on the drawers, finding the one that contained the range he was looking for and tugging it open. “How many?”

“Just the one for now.”

He fished the tiny component out and set it on the table beside Tony’s work station. “Anything else?”

“How about you tell me why you turned JARVIS off. Or am I going to have to guess.”

“I had a visitor and wanted a little privacy.”

“Your visitor didn’t happen to be tall, dark, and Asgardian, did they? And do not even think about lying to me. I am not in the mood.”

Steve folded his arms, feet hooked behind the bars of the stool for balance. “It was Loki. I didn’t want to send the Tower into DEFCON one for no reason.”

“What did you guys do? My roof, I have a right to know.”

“We talked.”

“Nothing else?”

“I made tea.”

Tony huffed out a breath, shaking his head slightly. “Is it Stockholm Syndrome or something?” He pulled back and set the soldering iron in its cradle. “I’m trying, okay? Sam gave me the lecture. We don’t get to question how you deal with your trauma or invalidate the choices you make in your own recovery. You know yourself better than we do and as long as you’re not endangering yourself or anyone else, we’ve gotta trust you’re okay.”

“Sam said all that?”

“He called me a few names too. Said something about privilege and entitlement and he’s not wrong. He’s really annoying that way, you know, the not being wrong part.” Tony swiveled toward Steve. “He also said you really are okay. Although having tea with Loki counts as endangering in my mind.”

“I am okay.”

“And I need some boundaries with this Loki thing, if he’s going to be popping in and out. As in, I’d prefer he not.”

Steve nodded. He could still spend time with Loki outside of the Tower. “One condition. If he’s in
trouble and comes here for help, you ask questions first and shoot later.”

“I’ll accept a sanctuary clause if you find out how he was screwing with Bruce’s head and make him stop. I’d rather not rebuild the Tower because of him. Again.”

“Already working on it.”

“I still think you’re insane.” Tony shuddered. He spun back to his project. “But I’ll let you figure that out for yourself.”

“Have you thought about getting some sleep?”

Tony gave him a look. “I’m a big boy.”

“JARVIS?” Steve got up, pulling the stool out of the way. “Keep an eye on him and let Pepper know if he goes more than forty eight hours without sleep. No point in letting him end up like he did last time.”

“I would be happy to, sir.”

“Thanks a lot, J,” Tony muttered. “Traitor.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

After a visit to the Tower, Loki sets out to find a place to live. An impromptu dinner doesn't go the way Steve wanted it to.

Chapter Notes

My French is terrible (so sorry). Huge thanks to Lena7142 for the French and HTML save!

Loki found the space unsettling.

Walls had been moved and reoriented to allow for columns and a feeling of openness, although only the barest differences of shading in the paint gave away the changes. Stone and wood slat floors were strewn with thick rugs, all in deep, rich colors reminiscent of wine, pine forests, and gold veins hewn from the earth. He walked lightly, touching nothing, as he inspected the oversized, sturdy furniture, all piled with blankets and pillows as though its occupant had a dreadful fear of the cold. There was art on the walls, colorful and vibrant, and even a tapestry that was far too old to have been woven by a mortal. He found bookends of intricately carved stones on the shelves, which were not surprisingly full of more odds and ends than they were books; those must have come from Asgard as well. Framed pictures, taken in various locations on Midgard, took up most of the space.

As much as there was a sense of Asgard in the space, there was an equal claim made by Midgard. There was an enormous flat screen television on the wall and a video game console. In one corner, he found an iPod plugged into a charging station beside a tablet computer. There was a woman's touch, perhaps. Fresh fruit in a wire basket on the kitchen counter beside a small wine rack and a crystal vase of delicate lilies on the dining table. He found a sensible amount of vegetables in the refrigerator, along with an entire, still intact salmon carefully wrapped in paper, and there was a well tended collection of knives meant for cooking in one of the cabinet drawers.

Whatever he'd expected to find when he'd gone snooping through Thor's quarters within the Tower, it wasn't this. He'd intended to see his fill, confirm his belief that his oafish brother was no less the spoiled child he'd always been, and then leave. Finding the space elegantly decorated and neatly maintained left him unsatisfied. Irritated by the lack of opportunity to gloat over his brother's failure to assimilate within the culture, he yanked open the refrigerator once more and retrieved a bottled ale.

Of course, he'd always known Thor was capable of adaptation. He'd seen it well enough on the battlefield. It was outside the realm of battle that Thor had never been bothered to care. Loki had prided himself on the difference, on being more flexible and fluid than Thor. Where Thor stood inflexible as a mountain, Loki had been as the wind.

Settling in the armchair, he let the bottle roll against his fingers. Even the art wasn't what he would have assumed to find. There were no scenes of war; there were seascapes, architectural cityscapes, and prints of snow dusted mountain peaks. He considered rifling through Thor's closet, possibly
filling his shoes with sand, but tossed aside the idea in favor of remaining in the armchair with his drink. He'd chosen to inhabit an abandoned, moldering castle, isolated from the noise and chaos of a world he despised, while Thor had built a home. He'd filled it with as many hopes for the future as he had memories of the past. Thor had kept moving while Loki stood still.

Without thinking it through, he let his illusions fall away and continued to drink from his beer. If nothing else, it would give him an estimate of the Avengers' response time and he was unarmed, currently, which meant Thor would hesitate before killing him. Probably. He drummed his fingers against the armrest, waiting.

"Is Thor alone, JARVIS?" he asked when he heard the elevator.

"Yes, sir."

"Where are the others?"

"I have been instructed not to tell you anything, sir."

He raised his eyebrows. "Tell Stark I can override his commands."

There was a pause. "Mister Stark says he would like to see you try."

Grinning, Loki took another swallow of beer. The conversation was cut short by the door opening. Thor came through, broad shoulders brushing against the doorframe. He wore armor, though not all of it, and Mjolnir hung loosely from his fingers, as though he'd only casually picked it up along the way.

"Loki." Thor kept his gaze on Loki as he walked, setting Mjolnir carefully on the floor.

"You don't sound happy to see me. Brother."

Thor smiled slightly, then moved to the refrigerator and retrieved a beer. "Your visits do not usually herald good fortune. For me or my friends."

"I have not harmed any of them."

"Should I be grateful? Did you come here for my thanks?" Thor took a seat on the sofa across from Loki.

"I did not," he answered, faking a smile.

"Why did you come?"

He considered honesty, but only for a moment. "I will not return to Asgard. That should make Odin happy."

"And mother?"

"Your mother." He raised the bottle slowly to his lips.

Thor sighed heavily and peeled off the bottle cap of his beer. He took several swallows before speaking again. "Loki. What you did."

"Don't presume to know what I did," Loki spat, anger bubbling up his throat.

"Steve does not blame you. He bares you no ill will." Thor's expression darkened. "But were it not
for Sam's insistence that we allow Steve this forgiveness, I would challenge you myself on his behalf. There is no honor in what you did."

"And what of my honor, brother?"

"What do you know of honor?" he scoffed.

Glass cracked and Loki could feel how near the bottle was to shattering in his hand. He'd known it would be no different. For all of Steve's bright hope that Loki had a choice in the matter, he knew better. Even if he wanted to change, wanted to be more than what he was, there were too many who preferred him in the role they'd cast for him. They would never let him change.

"He doesn't know me like you do." Tipping the bottle in a mock toast, he met Thor's eyes defiantly, daring him to disagree. "You really should warn him. I am not to be trusted."

"The brother I loved is gone," Thor continued, his tone softening. "He fell into darkness and never returned. Whoever you are now, it is not him."

Loki continued drinking, swallowing down howls of protest and angry barbs in the same mouthful. That he was sitting in Thor's home and not actively trying to drive a blade through his brother's heart should have been proof enough that he was no longer what he'd been before the spell. Entertaining the idea of accepting Steve's foolhardy offer of friendship was going to lead to betrayal and regret, he had no doubt of that; he was less certain who would end up betraying who.

"Why did you come here, Loki?"

He set the beer carefully on the low table between them, noticing it was frosted with a layer of ice in the pattern of where his fingers had been. The ice, and the cold power that came with it, had come easier, even unbidden, since that night. He didn't understand the connection or how the hours he'd spent weaving the ancient, steady magic of Midgard into Steve's bones and blood had awoken the dark magic of Jotunheim within him as well. There was a puzzle, and too many questions, he was unprepared to face. Without access to Asgard, or anyone who could teach him of Jotunheim, he would have to approach the change as scientifically as he had the spell's lingering effects on Steve. How those on Asgard would laugh - master of magic indeed - if they knew he was merely guessing.

Pretending not to notice the ice, he shrugged. "Nothing more sinister than curiosity."

Thor frowned. "What so piqued your interest that you would willingly come to visit me?"

It was a neat trap he'd laid for himself; he refused to give Thor any of the credit. Whatever answer he gave would either be construed as plotting against the Avengers or interest in Thor himself. The former would likely result in being attacked and the latter would give Thor, and possibly Steve, the idea that Loki did, in fact, wish to change.

"I thought," he began, looking down at his hands and feigning discomfort. "I thought Frigga might still be here. If there was a chance I could see her." He glanced up long enough to note Thor's expression and knew his brother did not entirely believe the lie, but was not ready to dismiss it either.

"I will tell her you wish to see her."

"No, it's...there's no need." He stood up quickly, preparing to leave. Staying any longer would only be hazardous to his health. "It was a whim, nothing more."

"Loki, wait-"
With a small wave, he left a harmless surprise for Stark before stepping through the air into a small clearing of trees some distance away from Stark Tower. Whatever Thor had meant to say would only have resulted in a quarrel he had no stomach for. He'd accomplished his goal of seeing how well Thor was adapting to Midgard and it turned out his fool brother was surpassing expectations. The thought of it pricked at him, knowing Thor was comfortable and welcomed and once again proving himself to be better at everything than Loki.

That simply wouldn't do.

**

"Bonjour, Monsieur Rogers," JARVIS announced.

Steve paused, hand still outstretched to press the button for his floor. "Is Tony in a French phase?"

"No, Monsieur. C'était Loki. Il a fait quelque chose pour ma programmation."

Biting back laughter, Steve pressed the button for Tony's lab instead. "Tony ne parle pas français."

"Pas encore, Monsieur."

"Un peu d'éducation ne sera pas lui faire de mal." He heard a pop in the overhead speaker and Tony's voice came through.

"You speak French? Of course you do, you bastard. Was this your idea?" There was muffled cursing in the background. "And don't encourage him or next time I get home, JARVIS will be talking in...some other language I don't know. I'm going to have to wipe the language module completely and start over. Do you have any idea long it takes to build that module?"

He grinned. "Je suis innocent."

"This means war, Rogers." The speaker popped again before going silent.

**

It took Loki a month to find an apartment in the East Village that felt like home. By Asgard's standards, the five story walk up was pitiful, but he was supposed to be blending in. The tall windows in one corner had caught his eye and the way the sun came through, bathing the space in a soft, yellow light, appealed to him. The view, what little of it there was, was pleasant enough; there weren't enough windows that he felt exposed to the outside world. There was a large fireplace, long since converted to gas rather than using wood as fuel, and a kitchen that the broker who made the arrangements described as 'extravagant'. Loki was fairly sure the poor man didn't know the meaning of the word.

The day he moved in, providing expertly forged documents for one Loki Laufeyson, accepting the key, and closing the door on the apartment that would now be his, he felt an odd disassociation. He should feel something, some happiness or excitement or even dread, but instead, he felt vaguely ill.

Looking around, he realized he'd brought nothing with him other than the clothes he wore and found himself reluctant to return to the faraway castle. Even the thought of returning to that place, to that bed, turned the pit of his stomach to ice. No; this was supposed to be a fresh start for him and that meant starting over. It wouldn't be the first, or the last, time he'd had to remake himself from whatever ashes were left behind. His footsteps echoed in the empty space as he moved to the fireplace, reaching into his jacket to retrieve the charmed card. He set it carefully on the mantle, considering.
The broker had asked him about celebrating his first New York City apartment and he'd given no answer, uncertain about this particular custom or what it pertained. But if it was something the people of Midgard did, then he supposed he should determine what it entailed. In another pocket was the Starkphone he'd stolen from the Tower when he'd visited Thor. Thus far, Stark hadn't tried to follow or track it to get to Loki, but it was entirely plausible Stark hadn't noticed its loss. The only numbers currently stored were brokers and apartment managers, all carefully collected during his search for a home.

He settled down in a patch of sunshine on the hardwood floor and used the phone's internet to determine what he was meant to do in celebration. The ritual was simple enough and seemed to consist primarily of providing food. It assumed that he had friends to invite for such a celebration. He glanced up at the card on the mantle. There was one; if the Captain was to be believed, of course. And if Loki was willing agree to his terms. Though it seemed the Captain had precious few terms to speak of. He'd asked that Loki cease trying to kill him, which he'd long since done, and to not bother Bruce Banner, which he no longer had any need to do. He felt adrift, unmoored and at the mercy of the tide, without a bargain, without terms to meet and payment to be made.

Nothing was given freely and every kindness had its price; Loki knew that unwritten law better than most. He'd been the one to extract that price in betrayal and blood often enough. Still, he felt an itch in his fingers to reach for the card and draw words over its surface. He could invite the Captain to see his new home and show him-

What, exactly, was there to show?

He set the phone on the floor and looked around the space, suddenly feeling as hollow as the emptiness around him. He'd thought to prove something with this, something even Thor had managed to accomplish, and now it seemed utterly inconsequential. He would be a child rushing to show off a precious jewel only to find it was nothing more than a plain stone.

With no terms to bind him, no impossible requests of reparation or altruism, he couldn't understand what the Captain hoped to gain from his offer of friendship. Nor did he trust that it was as simple as an outstretched hand. If he did invite the Captain to celebrate his pathetic apartment on this pathetic world, he had no idea what they would do other than stare awkwardly at each other. The Captain wasn't interested in sex and Loki didn't know what else he could possibly have to offer. How could he bring him here? Into the hollow shell of a home that was still so much more than he deserved to have. Showing it off as though he should be proud of turning coward and slipping SHIELD's leash rather than letting Thor return him to Asgard, rather than waiting for the night a guard slit his throat while he slept. This was one ritual of Midgard that he could not - would not - honor.

When a dull ache had settled into his limbs and the sunshine was long since vanished, he stirred himself enough to move. At minimum, he would need furnishings of some kind. He would keep it simple; he would not get attached to this space or call it home. It was only a place, a pause, until he shook himself of the sickness that had crept into his heart and mind. Once he was himself again, he would leave this Realm and its heroes behind.

**

"What are these things?" Clint shouted, ducking out of the way as one of the small, winged creatures dive bombed his head. "Some sort of pixies from Hell! Where'd they come from?"

"Less bitching, more shooting," Tony answered tersely. A blast of energy disintegrated another pixie as it barreled toward the back of Thor's head.

"What kind of sick freak," Clint continued to rant, firing off arrows at the same time. "Lets loose a
few thousand of these." He yelped as one caught his ear and bit down hard, swearing under his breath and stabbing at it with an arrow, trying to dislodge the creature.

Steve swept his shield through a small cloud of them, sending them scattering and careening like deranged, vicious bats. Shield held up in front of him, he charged forward to clear as many as he could from the air above where Clint was hunkered down. When he glanced up, he saw the creatures begin to regroup, gathering in a cluster about twenty feet above the ground. Beneath them, the tourists and New Yorkers who had stuck around to watch the Avengers in action were now shouting and running for cover, many of them being pelted with whatever small objects the pixies could carry and throw.

"Guys, they're swarming again." He adjusted his grip, preparing to hide as much of himself as he could behind the shield.

Tony landed at Steve's side, repulsors at the ready. "They'd be cute if they weren't so bloodthirsty. We should catch one. For Bruce. You know, as a pet. Think they'd make good pets?"

"If you want tiny flying monsters with claws and teeth like a freaking shark all over the Tower." Clint tossed the one he'd pried off his ear and tried to kick it where it landed. The pixie barely hit the ground before it was airborn again, screeching furiously and buzzing away to join the growing cloud above them. The screeching ebbed and then began to climb in volume again, the cloud turning into a swirling mass of pixie wings and limbs.

"Here they come," Steve warned, bracing himself.

High pitched howling reached a crescendo and then abruptly stopped. The pixies jerked and stiffened, tiny wings coming to a halt. They began to fall, raining down onto the street below in a flurry and hitting with a patter of dull thuds, like birds striking a window on a clear day. When the last of them hit the ground, Steve moved cautiously forward and lowered his shield to prod at one of them. It was stiff as a statue and the brownish green skin had taken on a deep violet tinge.

"Nasty creatures, aren't they?"

Steve jerked his head up and saw Loki standing on the sidewalk, nudging one of the fallen pixies with his boot. He had a brown canvas sack slung over one shoulder and he was wearing normal clothes. His hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail. Blinking, Steve couldn't be certain it even was Loki.

"Did you do this?" Tony demanded.

One eyebrow raised before Loki responded. "Sprites are worse than pigeons. And I hate pigeons. Though they aren't usually violent. The sprites, that is."

"I've had just about enough of your crap." Tony raised an arm.

Steve caught Tony's gauntlet and shook his head. "Stand down, Tony. Loki just helped us. Thank you, Loki." He wasn't sure who looked more horrified, Tony or Loki.

Tony jerked his arm away. "I'm going to go wash...sprites, you said? Whatever. I'm covered in bits and pieces of them. Barton?"

"Wouldn't say no to a ride."

"Wait, guys. We can't just..." Steve trailed off when Iron Man blasted off with Clint and the whirring thrum of Mjolnir kicked up dirt before Thor launched himself into the sky. "We can't just leave them
"They're not dead. Once they thaw, they'll fly away." Loki turned and started down the sidewalk.

"I can't let them do that either. Someone could get hurt." Or worse, a kid might take them home and try to keep it as a pet. Loki had already turned the corner, obviously not listening or caring.

He looked around for something large enough to hold them all. If he could trap them while they were immobilized then he could keep them away from the public until they figured out where they'd come from and what to do with a tiny army of vicious sprites.

The nearest, large container he could see was one of the blue recycling bins provided by the city of New York. He hooked his shield onto his back and hauled the bin closer to the mound of sprites. Carefully, he began to pick them up, trying not to damage them. They were cold to the touch, with a dusting of frost over hairless skin and bald heads. Up close, they looked cartoonish, with long, skinny limbs and comically knobby knees and elbows. Their wings were like dragonfly wings, shimmering and iridescent. Those, he was extra careful not to break or bend in their frozen state.

"You needn't worry about harming them."

Steve jumped, startled by Loki's voice and reappearance."I don't want to...I mean, they look fragile. And things get brittle when they get cold."

"Their wings grow back." Loki set the canvas bag down beside the bin and reached down to grab a handful of the sprites, tossing them into the recycling bin. "It takes a few weeks, but they're none the worse for it."

"Oh. Okay." He still couldn't bring himself to simply toss them the way Loki was. "How do you even know that?"

Loki hesitated. "Ground to a powder, the wings are a common ingredient in certain types of spells."

It was Steve's turn to be horrified. "You use parts of them in spells?"

"Their wings and their hearts, yes. They don't have much blood in them so that isn't particularly useful. You would need a great number of them. An entire hive, I suppose, to get enough sprite blood to do anything meaningful." He frowned at the sprite in his hand. "Perhaps that is why there are so many of them. They don't normally gather outside of the hive and they don't swarm unless threatened. At least, I've never seen them behave this way. They're more a nuisance than anything else."

"You said they weren't normally violent either. Could someone be manipulating them?"

"It's possible." Loki eyed the sprite for a moment before he reached into his canvas bag and pulled out another, smaller one. He wrapped the sprite tightly in the bag and then added it to the sack. "Once it thaws, I will try to determine why they've left the hive." He glanced up quickly. "I am not helping. I am merely curious."

"Of course." Steve managed not to smile.

Surreptitiously, he snuck a glance into the canvas sack as he continued to load up the recycling bin with frozen sprites. He was surprised to see it was mostly filled with food. There were onions, celery, and red potatoes, as well as a bag of what looked like lentils and several small spice jars. Had Loki been out shopping for groceries? The idea seemed as foreign as seeing Loki in jeans. Unbidden, the
memory of the savory stew Loki had fed him the first time he'd visited the castle in Scotland returned and his mouth watered.

"What's for dinner?" He motioned to the bag, trying to act casual.

"Why," Loki asked sharply. "Does Stark not feed you well enough?"

He shrugged. "Just curious. That stew you made was amazing."

Loki didn't look as though he believed him. He continued to transfer sprites into the bin; they'd nearly made it halfway through the mound of fallen creatures.

Undeterred, he tried again. "Do you live around here?"

"I suppose you would like to tell SHIELD where they can find me."

"Loki." He stopped, frowning. "I thought we were past this."

"The organization you work with would like nothing better than to regain control of me. That is a simple truth, not something I can get past." He dropped another handful of sprites into the bin before reaching down for the canvas bag. "You should hurry. They will begin to thaw within the hour and are unlikely to be happy about being trapped in a cage. Most creatures don't enjoy such an existence."

"Thank you. For helping us," Steve called after him, both perplexed and frustrated.

It took him the better part of an hour to get the remaining sprites into the bin. They were beginning to stir, luminous black eyes blinking dazedly. By then, the SHIELD sweeper team had arrived to help clean up the damage left behind and Maria Hill joined them on site to size up the sprites.

Steve filled her in on the events of the afternoon. "They'll need some sort of habitat. Loki seemed to know about them."

"Don't suppose he shared. What do they eat?" She peered through one of the cracks in the bin's lid. "Tell me it's not anything gross."

"I didn't think to ask." Now he felt ridiculous. He'd been too preoccupied by the contents of Loki's grocery bag to think about the logistics of what SHIELD was going to do with a bin full of angry, buzzing sprites.

"SHIELD isn't running a zoo, but until we know what to do with them, we can't just turn them loose."

He nodded. "I'll see what I can find out."

She straightened up with a sigh. "We were kinda hoping he'd skipped town."

"Guess not."

"Maintain situational awareness, that's all I'm asking. If you do get anything useful out of him, let us know." With a brisk nod, she turned to the nearest SHIELD agent and motioned him forward. "We need something to secure the lid. Until we know they can be safely reintroduced, we can't risk any of them getting loose."

One of the SHIELD teams gave him a ride back to the Tower. His mind was preoccupied; Loki had been out getting groceries and he'd been on foot, which meant he lived within walking distance. That
meant East Village. He was surprised Loki hadn't found another abandoned castle in the middle of nowhere. Mentally, he went through a map of New York City while he changed out of his uniform and showered, trying to narrow the area down based on what directions Loki had turned. He hadn't seen any labels or tags that would indicate which market Loki had used. He glanced at the card a dozen times while he got dressed.

"Easy, Rogers," he muttered under his breath. "He probably wants space. And there's the fact that you told him you..." he trailed off.

After Loki had come to the Tower to see Thor, and not Steve, he'd wondered if his offer of friendship had been a slap in the face for Loki. Maybe he'd only made it worse by telling him he wasn't interested in sex. He hadn't said never, at least, he hadn't meant to say never, only to let Loki know it wasn't his motivation, that he wasn't trying to be his friend just to get him into bed. For all he knew, with sex off the table, Loki was no longer interested and that stung, but he could understand.

He fell back on the bed, breathing out through his nose as he tried to calm down. "I suck at this. This is why Bucky had to do all the talking."

If Loki would just talk to him.

Bare minimum, he needed to ask Loki what to feed the sprites. Scrambling off the bed, he retrieved the card and took it to his desk.

What do sprites eat?

It was a legitimate question and the answer wouldn't give anything away Loki didn't want Steve to know. Unless of course, Loki had been behind the sprite attack and intended to use their wings, or hearts, in a spell. His stomach lurched uneasily.

Come see for yourself. Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes. Try not to be late.

Beneath that appeared an address on East 12th Street. He nearly knocked the chair over in a rush to grab his jacket. Already calculating how long it would take him to walk versus his bike, he decided against fighting traffic and left Stark Tower on foot. He made one stop near Union Square to pick up a bottle of white wine and turned down 12th just over fifteen minutes.

The building was older, with a deep yellow paint over the plaster exterior and dark brown on the trim and window ledges. It was probably brick underneath, with the plaster added during the 1970's. He stopped at the front door and scanned down the directory for a familiar name, realizing he had no idea if Loki would be using his real name. Near the bottom on the right was was a neatly printed label for L. Laufeyson. It was the only one with a first name starting with L so he pressed his thumb against the intercom button and waited. Seconds later, he heard the lock on the door release and let himself in.

Inside, the small lobby area was clean and well-maintained, with mailboxes along one side and a few artificial plants in decorative pots. There was no elevator so he headed for the stairs. Of course, Loki wouldn't have cared about it being a walk up if he could simply transport himself into his apartment. Rich aromas of people cooking dinner reached him on every floor. His stomach was growling by the time he reached the fifth and top floor. Loki's number was at the far end from the stairs, the corner apartment on the right. He brushed at his hair a little nervously before raising his hand and rapping his knuckles against the door. A moment later, the lock disengaged and the door swung open, but there was no one behind it.

"Loki?"
"Kitchen."

He stepped inside, closing the door behind him. The apartment looked unoccupied. From the small entry way, he could see the living room, with windows along one wall to let in the afternoon sun and a good-sized fireplace with a generous mantle. There was no furniture at all in the space. The only object in the room was a familiar white card on the mantle. He left his shoes beside the door. The kitchen was large by New York City standards, with a bar that created the border between the kitchen and the living room. There were two bar stools and he decided they must've come with the apartment. The kitchen itself was sleek and modern, with deep espresso cabinets and stainless steel appliances. A backsplash of dark brown, red, and white tiles added a little bit of color. There was a stacked washer and dryer set the right, beside what looked to be a bathroom. Beyond the kitchen was what must be the bedroom, though he couldn't see any furniture there either.

"I, uh, hope you have a corkscrew." He held up the bottle of wine. "It's not chilled. Want me to toss it in the freezer?"

"No need." Loki pivoted away from the counter and reached out to grip the neck of the bottle. Ice began to form beneath his fingers and Steve could feel the heat leave the bottle.

"Could you always do that?" He set the wine down once Loki let go.

Loki turned back to the narrow stovetop and resumed stirring. "I've been practicing."

"Anything I can do?"

"Glasses are above the sink."

There were exactly two clear glasses in the cupboard. He took them down and set them on the bar beside two dinner plates already prepared with mixed greens. He had the sneaking suspicion Loki didn't actually live here and was only hijacking an apartment for the sake of dinner.

"Corkscrew?"

With a flick of Loki's wrist, the foil over the top of the wine bottle tore neatly down the side and the cork began to slide out of its own accord. Steve set foil and cork aside and poured the wine. He couldn't exactly ask if Loki was merely borrowing the apartment. Maybe Loki truly was worried that Steve would alert SHIELD to his location, hence the ruse. He settled on one of the bar stools, watching Loki chop up celery stalks and add them to the pot. After a moment, he noticed a dull tapping sound and frowned, trying to determine where it was coming from.

"Dryer," Loki told him absently.

"What?"

He nodded toward the dryer. "The sprite."

Steve realized he could see a tiny creature through the clear dryer door, buzzing around inside as it looked for a way out. "Can it breathe in there?"

"There is enough air for an hour or so." He shut off the burner and spooned a mixture of celery, onions, and lentils onto the plates. Once he was satisfied with the portions, he set the plates on the bar top and added forks. "I'm going to let her out now. You may want to be prepared to duck."

"Her? How can you tell?"
The instant the dryer door began to open, the sprite was already struggling to get free. She darted out 
and began buzzing madly about the living room, crashing into the windows in a desperate bid to 
escape. The frantic activity didn't seem to both Loki in the slightest. He turned an empty can over on 
the bar top and set a small measuring cup beside it.

Steve pulled a face when he looked into the cup. "Are those cockroaches?"

"And a few moths. You asked what they ate. Here is your answer."

"Bugs. Huh." He waited for Loki to sit down before picking up his fork and tried to ignore the tiny, 
shrieking creature behind them. "Is she going to hurt herself trying to get out?"

Loki shrugged a shoulder. "She'll get tired eventually."

"You're not worried?"

"They aren't exceptionally bright creatures." There was a blur and then the sprite was grabbing two 
tiny handfuls of Loki's hair and yanking as hard as it could. The attack barely phased Loki, who 
sipped at his wine glass, head barely moving.

"I think she understood you," Steve said softly.

"Then she can also be intelligent enough to sit down and eat properly. As a guest. I have provided 
er her a meal, it is only polite." The hair pulling stopped. She darted past Loki's head and tentatively 
investigated the cup of dead insects. When she sniffed at them and gave Loki a look, he sighed. 
"They are fresh enough. I can't very well keep living insects in a dish while you dash about in a fit of 
temper."

Apparently mollified, the sprite took a seat on the can, her long, splindly legs and feet hanging over 
the side. She pulled the cup up onto her lap and dug a hand into the conglomeration of insects, 
retrieving one of the moths and biting down on its head with dozens of needle sharp teeth.

"Manners," Loki reminded her. She made an irritated chirping noise at him in return.

"How on earth are you communicating with her?"

Loki glanced sideways at him. "You can't hear her?"

"Should I be hearing something other than screeching and rattling?"

"I suppose not. I assumed you would be able to. Your mythology knows them as tricksters who lure 
children off of trails or out of their bedrooms at night. That would imply a form of interaction you 
could hear."

Before Steve could ask another question, the sprite looked up from her bowl and opened her mouth. 
This time, instead of shrieking, she produced a series of clear, bell-like tones that resonated inside his 
skull; it was beautiful and haunting, with the barest suggestion of a lullabye. He watched the slow 
flex of her wings, wondering how many legends were similarly based in actual creatures like this 
one.

"Enough," Loki said sharply. "It won't work on him so don't bother."

Steve blinked a couple times. "That was beautiful. Thank you for showing me." He gave her a slight 
nod, trying to be respectful. "Why don't we see them all the time?"
"They don't like to be seen."

"The people who got attacked on a tour bus this afternoon would disagree with that." At the mention of the attack, the sprite grew agitated and the singing turned back into tiny, enraged shrieks. "What's she saying now?"

Loki frowned. He held out a hand, gesturing for her to calm down and continue eating. "Her hive was destroyed. Thousands of sprites were captured. She says hives all over Midgard have been attacked."

"Who attacked them? Why?"

"She does not know."

Eventually, the sprite calmed down and slumped on the can, wings falling to her sides as she picked desultorily at the insects in the cup. The chirping noise from before took on a lower, somber tone that made it sound more like a whimper, if crickets or cicadas could whimper. Steve felt suddenly guilty about the sprites he'd smashed with his shield and the ones who'd been vaporized by Tony. Unable to do anything about that, he fished his Starkphone out of his pocket and sent Maria a message about what kind of meals they should provide for the captured sprites.

He saw Loki watching him when he put his phone away. "Just letting Maria know what to feed them, nothing more. SHIELD isn't going to starve them."

"I am well aware of their hospitality," Loki said dryly.

Steve let that comment lie. He dug into this meal, pleasantly surprised by the delicate spices of the dish and the contrasting crunch of the sweet peppers. The wine was a decent enough pairing; he was glad he hadn't gone with a red wine. He'd barely cleared his plate when Loki pulled it away and piled on more of the lentil mixture. "Thanks. It's really good." He accepted a refill of wine as well. "So, do you move from place to place? Just come and go?"

Holding his glass of wine loosely, Loki looked at him strangely. "I live here."

"But there's nothing here." Steve glanced around, thinking he must've missed something. The walls were bare, the living room empty of all but the card, and his own shoes were the only items in the small entryway. He swallowed. "Don't you have furniture?"

"I've no need for it."

"Do you sleep on the floor?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "Of course not. Don't be foolish."

"I didn't see anything." He slid off his chair and headed for the bedroom.

"Wait-"

The overhead light sprung to life when Steve flipped the switch and he stared. Nearly as large as the living room, which was unheard of for East Village, the bedroom was bare as well. The sole piece of furniture was a narrow, Army style cot pushed up against the far wall. At one end, a small pile of neatly folded clothes sat beside a pair of boots. He knew Loki could change his appearance at will, summoning whatever clothing he desired with magic, but the emptiness of the apartment cut him to the core.
He turned back slowly. "Loki."

"I have everything I need to sustain myself," Loki said coolly.

"You can't live like this."

"It's more than I had in SHIELD's cell."

There was venom in Loki's voice and it stunned him, leaving him scrambling for something to say. He knew it couldn't possibly be what Loki wanted. In the old castle, his bed had been enormous and piled with rich fabrics and furs. An Army cot was uncomfortable, he knew from experience, and he didn't believe for a second that Loki could be satisfied with it. Walking back around the bar, he looked Loki over more closely, noting the worn tennis shoes and jeans, along with the t-shirt that probably came from a thrift shop. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

"What's going on, Loki? Are you afraid SHIELD will come after you?" It was the first reasonable explanation he could think for why Loki would have so few belongings and none of them anything he would care about if lost or destroyed. "Because they won't."

Loki's lips curled into a smirk. "Because you are my friend?"

"Because they know capturing you is pointless when you can walk out any time you want."

"Then they simply mean to kill me on sight. Yes, that is very reassuring, Captain."

"That's not what I meant." He returned to his seat but his appetite was gone. "They're not coming after you to kill you or capture you or anything else."

"So long as I remain quiet and unseen and do nothing."

"Do you really believe I would let them take you? I told you, you're safe with me, and I mean it."

Loki carried his plate and glass to the sink. "You've given me doubt as to your ability to feed yourself properly, Captain. If you are so eager for such a poor meal as I am capable of providing."

"Wait a second."

The fork clattered loudly against the bottom of the sink before Loki whirled around and shouted, "what do you want from me?"

"I don't want anything."

"Exactly. You want nothing. You offer friendship and kindness when there is no way for me to repay you, when there is nothing I can do or give you in return. I have nothing that you want, nothing that is of value to you. But still, you expect me to accept your pity and your charity."

Heat flooded Steve's face. "That's not...Loki. I only want-"

"Just go." Loki turned around, shoulders hunched. "Take the damned sprite with you."

Steve glanced at the sprite, who was watching them with wide, black eyes. She turned her head toward Steve and bared her teeth, hissing at him. "I don't think she likes me."

"That makes two of us," Loki mumbled.

"Please don't do this."
"Leave."

Steve backed away, making a wide berth around the sprite, and went for his shoes. His hands shook as he did up the laces and he shut the door a little too hard behind him. That had been a disaster and he didn't understand how it had gone so wrong so quickly. Hands shoved in his jacket pockets, he ducked his head low on the walk back to the Tower. Maybe he didn't understand Loki at all.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Steve lays out terms for Loki. Sometimes peace is about houseplants and pasta.

Even in the evening, Washington DC was a furnace blast of humidity that took Steve's breath away. Days like this were strong reminders that the city had been carved out of an insect ridden swamp, for better or worse. There was a layer of sweat beading on his skin and sliding down his back before he was halfway to the community center building where Sam led one of his weekly group sessions. He ducked gratefully into the building, and its air conditioning, wiping at the sweat on his forehead. The low rumble of Sam's voice was easy to follow. It seemed a lifetime had passed since he'd first come here, searching Sam out for reasons he hadn't fully understood.

Sam saw him immediately, but gave no indication other than a shift in his posture. His focus was on the group of returned soldiers in front of him.

Hanging back, Steve tried to stay out of view of the room as much as he could. Sometimes people recognized him and sometimes they didn't; he had no control over that. He could only control his own positioning and hope his presence didn't disrupt the session. Once it was over, he waited patiently as Sam said his goodbyes and walked people out. According to the schedule, there was another session in an hour so Steve had time. He took a seat in the room, putting himself in the same place as a soldier who'd been there minutes before.

"Hey, man." Sam smiled as he came back into the room. "They have these incredible modern inventions, you know? They're called phones. And I am pretty sure you have one."

"I should've called, sorry."

"No worries, man. What brings you back to my neck of the woods?"

"I need your advice."

Sam's eyebrows raised. "I'm afraid to even ask." He turned one of the folding chairs around and sat across from Steve, arms on the back of the chair. "Alright. Lay it on me."

He fumbled at first, but managed to tell Sam everything. He told him about visiting Loki at the Fridge, about the card and the conversation they'd had over tea, the sprites, and the dinner he'd ruined two nights before. Sam took all of it in, his expression serious and thoughtful while he listened.

When he was finished, Sam took a deep breath. "You know I haven't even finished my degree yet, right? I am not qualified to deal with anything like this."

"If I could just get him to talk to me. He's so closed off. I feel like the only time he was open with me was that night in the castle and even then, it was like he holding back, biting his tongue, you know?"

"I don't think he's going to talk to you. He's gotta trust you first."

"How can I get him to trust me if he won't talk to me?"
Sam blew out a breath, rubbing his hand down his face. "You know, sometimes I think my life isn't even real. Because this is a conversation I didn't think was even possible. Can we go back to looking for your crazy assassin best friend? That makes a whole lot more sense than this."

"I'd be sitting here asking the same questions about Bucky."

"I know you would, that's the weird part. You just can't help yourself." He turned thoughtful again, frowning. "Alright. So, there's a couple things, just off the top of my head. First, it sounds like that spell messed you both up, but in different ways. Remember that time you ran to Connecticut?"

"Yeah."

"Remember why you did it?"

Steve shuddered. He'd done everything he could to forget the nightmares that had driven him to run seventy miles trying to escape them.

"Now think about how you'd feel if they weren't just dreams."

His stomach churned. He knew where Sam was going with this. "But he didn't force me to do anything that night."

"Didn't he?" Sam countered pointedly. "You said yourself that willingness and consent seem to be a pretty big deal for him. Think about it. When you first got hit, he didn't know the Avengers would pull through, did he? Maybe he hoped they would, but he didn't know for sure. No one knew for sure. And he didn't run then, didn't grab you and go."

"The others think he just needed to get into the Tower."

"Man walks through thin air on a regular basis and he needed you guys to roll out the welcome mat? What is he, some sorta vampire?" Sam shook his head. "Do you really believe that's why he let you chain him up?"

He bit at his lower lip, dropping his gaze to his shoes. "No."

"Then we can say with relative certainty that he would rather have died than rape you."

"It wasn't like that."

"For you, maybe. But I'd be willing to bet my not so impressive paycheck it was pretty traumatic for him to do something like that, whether it was to save your life or not. He didn't have any more choice than you did, not really. Say no and let you die or go insane? We knew the spell was messing with your head. Did we ever ask how it might be messing with Loki's head? Sounds to me like you read him exactly right. He hates himself. But I don't think the self-hatred started with you or the spell or any of that. I think that might be Loki's deal in a nutshell. This just multiplied it by, like, a million."

Steve dug his fingers into his hair, trying to put himself in Loki's place and see his perspective. "Did I say all the wrong things? Telling him that I forgive him, that I wanted to be his friend. Was that wrong?"

"No, man, nothing wrong with what you've said. But you need to consider whether or not Loki was ready or able to hear it."

"What can I do?" He looked up imploring. "How can I help him?"
"Stop trying to help."

"What?"

"Either you're his friend or you're not. Stop trying to fix him or get him to deal with this the way you want him to. Just be a friend. Be there." Sam grinned, shaking his head. "You know, I think I gave this lecture to a bunch of Avengers awhile back."

He winced. "I'm an idiot."

"Hey, I'm telling you to be a friend to someone who's tried to kill you and take over the entire planet. In no position to throw stones here."

"Alright. Be a friend. I can do that." He sat up straighter, already glad he'd come to see Sam.

"Anything else?"

"If you can get him into therapy, do it. Dude clearly needs professional help. And hey, maybe a little couch talk will keep him out of trouble."

"Maybe I'll start with a houseplant." He didn't think there was a chance in Hell of getting Loki in to see a therapist.

"There you go. Start small."

"If he'll ever talk to me again."

"He seems big on self-punishment so being around you is going to be right up his alley. Otherwise, he would've just left." The puzzled look on his face must have been obvious and Sam continued, ticking off his fingers one by one. "He let the guards at the Fridge beat him up. He stayed in New York, where he is most likely to have a very bad day, and he's isolating himself to an extreme. He got a place but turned it into a jail cell. Even lentils are prison food, man. He's making his entire existence as miserable as possible, probably thinks he doesn't deserve anything better. It's pretty classic self-destructive behavior."

"And talking to me?"

"Pouring lemon juice on a paper cut. He knows you don't hold it against him. I'm sure he thinks you should. And you've got all the power in this dynamic, all the control."

Steve's mouth almost dropped open. "What?"

"You forgave him, dude, and actually told him about it. Out of the blue, just boom. Which is totally you, but look at it from his side. You didn't give him a chance to earn it, didn't give him a way to feel like he deserved it. Just tossed it out there like you've got forgiveness to spare and then you want to be his friend, you want to be on his side and to help him. Doesn't sound like Asgard's really that kind of place from what Thor says. What you did made sure he'll feel like he owes you for all eternity but never have a way to balance the scales. You took all the power. I'm willing to go out on a limb here, guy tries to take over a planet? Power's probably a big deal for him."

He swallowed, suddenly feeling sick because it made sense. "I am such an idiot."

"You're a good guy, Steve. Nothing wrong with that. Maybe you gotta adapt your strategy a little. If you're still serious about this."

"I am. I just made things worse, I've got to make it right."
"Think of something he can do for you. Something simple, low pressure. That way he feels like he has a say in all this, at least in this one small thing," Sam suggested. "See what he does and go from there. Careful not to ask for too much though, nothing you don't know for sure he can do, or he might self-destruct on you. None of us want that. We've been there."

Nodding, Steve leaned back in his chair. "I owe you, Sam."

"Good, because you're gonna buy me a nice, juicy steak for dinner."

"And a beer."

"Definitely a beer. I need the damn beer after the crazy you're always draggin' in here," Sam stood up and began straightening chairs for the next session. "I oughta start billing the Avengers for therapy, that's what I oughta do."

"I'm sure Tony'd take you up on it."

"Why don't you stay? Listen in. Plenty of war stories and bad dreams to go around. Might do you some good."

He wondered if he'd ever be able to convince Loki to come to one of Sam's sessions. "Wouldn't miss it."

**

One week after the disastrous dinner, Steve stood at the door of Loki's building, looking up at the top corner windows and crossing his fingers. He took several deep breaths, reorganized the contents of the large cardboard box at his feet for the seventh time, and finally worked up the nerve to press the call button. When he didn't get an answer immediately, he waited for a minute and tried again.

"What do you want?" Loki's voice sounded tinny and scratchy through the speaker.

"Loki." Jumping out of quinjets was less stressful than this. "I brought dinner."

There was no response and he was about to give up when he heard the door unlock. He hurried to grab the box and get inside, heading for the five flights of stairs at a jog in case Loki changed his mind in the time it took him to get to the top floor. His t-shirt, which had already been clinging to him with the humidity outside, was plastered to his back by the time he arrived at Loki's door. He didn't have to knock, which was a good thing because he had his arms full; Loki stood in the doorway, eying him suspiciously.

"Since you don't think I can feed myself. I'm going to prove you wrong." He pushed past Loki and headed for the kitchen. "Hope you like Italian."

"And if I don't?"

"Too bad. You're going to eat it, even if it's terrible." Internally, he was writhing at making such a ridiculous demand, but it was the smallest thing he could think of. "Which it might be, fair warning. You're going to be my guinea pig." He emptied out the contents of the box onto the counter, saving the strangest one for last. "And I brought you something for the apartment."

"You brought me a plant."

"It's a Golden Pothos. They're really hardy and don't need a lot of sun so they're perfect for apartments."
"It's a plant," Loki repeated.

"It's a traditional housewarming gift." He set the plant carefully on the far end of the bar top, against the wall. It was still small, its bright green leaves marbled with yellow. "And I didn't know what you had already so I brought everything we'll need. Come keep me company while I cook."

He forced himself to work on cooking and not stare at Loki. A few quick glances confirmed that Loki was wearing the same worn jeans as before. The t-shirt was different, but equally worn and ragged at the neckline. He was barefoot and his hair was a tangle of soft curls. Steve did a double take when he saw a tiny leg sticking out from Loki's hair and realized the sprite was perched on his shoulder, hiding.

"Hey, I brought something for her too." He picked up the small tin box with holes punched in the top. Inside, there was a faint scuttling sound. "Fresh cockroaches." The sprite darted out from Loki's hair in a blur, racing to the box and scrabbling at the lid to get it open.

"You'll spoil her." Loki took a seat at the bar, sitting stiffly with his gaze stuck on the plant.

"Does she have a name?"

"I doubt you could pronounce it."

"Nickname?" Steve shucked the skin off of a fat yellow onion before setting it on the cutting board. Running on the assumption that Loki had only bothered to procure the barest amount of anything, he'd brought the cutting board, knives, a large pot and strainer, and a frying pan, along with more than enough ingredients for a single meal.

"If she has one, she hasn't informed me."

"We should think of something to call her. If she's going to be staying."

Loki glowered at the sprite. "She refuses to leave." The sprite made an undignified rattling noise at him, her mouth full of cockroach and legs sticking out between her teeth. He rolled his eyes. "I should have drowned you. Ungrateful beast."

"As long as you won't get in trouble for having her. What's your lease say about pets?"

"They aren't allowed." Loki didn't sound as though he cared what was in the lease.

After another glance, Steve decided to double the amount of spaghetti noodles he'd planned to use. The t-shirt Loki was wearing may have been too large, but he looked like he'd lost weight, his frame leaner than usual. The large pot went onto the stove top for the water to heat while he chopped the onions and garlic, adding them to the frying pan with a generous amount of olive oil.

"You know," he said. "I've been thinking of switching up my running path and coming down this way. I could stop by and pick you up."

"Having difficulty finding someone who can keep up with you, Captain?"

"With your legs, you're probably faster than I am, but yeah. Sam's the only one who's willing to run with me and he's in DC most of the time." He shrugged, downplaying the offer as much as he dared. "You'd be doing me a favor."

Loki reached out one hand to stroke a finger along one leaf of the plant. "I suppose I could join you, if it would not be at some unfortunate hour of the day."
"I usually head out at dawn." When Loki gave him a sour look, he grinned. "Suck it up. I'll send you a message before I leave the Tower. Shouldn't take me long to get here. Figure we could head south, maybe do a loop down through Battery Park. It's a great way to see the city. I always find stuff I want to go back and get a better look at. Museums, art, cool old buildings, markets. You never know what you'll find."

"Very well," Loki sighed.

"Did you know there's a bakery a few blocks from here that makes the most amazing babkas? I'll pick some up next week."

"Next week?"

Steve kept his attention on the frying pan. "I figured I'd try cooking seafood next. What do you think about shrimp gumbo?" He ignored the silence, pretending it didn't matter if Loki answered or not. It was nerve wrecking; he felt like a bull in a china shop.

"You intend to make this a regular occurrence," Loki finally said.

"It's not like I'm going to learn how to cook in a single night," was the answer he'd carefully prepared. "It could take months. And I need feedback. Bucky used to joke that I'd eat anything a goat wouldn't, so I need someone else to tell me if I'm getting better or not. I figured you have a lot better taste than I do, so if I can make something that you think is good, then I'm doing it right."

Loki still looked suspicious and his tone was guarded when he replied. "I suppose I could provide useful feedback on your attempts."

He checked on the noodles, turning the burner to simmer and noting the time. Quick and easy had been two of the criteria for his meal choice. "We'll probably have time to kill on some nights, while the food is cooking. Do you like games? What about a puzzle?"

"Captain," Loki said slowly. "Whatever you hope to accomplish."

"Just making dinner." Picking up the bottle of rose wine he'd brought, he held it out. "And I completely forgot a corkscrew again. Do you mind?" Once Loki had opened the bottle and removed the cork, he handed the bottle back for Steve to pour the wine. "I have one more favor to ask." Loki visibly braced himself, expression turning distant and cold in an instant. "Stop looking for the angle. There isn't one. I'm making dinner and I want you to tell me how it turns out, honestly. We're going to eat dinner together once a week until you're satisfied that I can feed myself. And since I'd rather not rely on my conversation skills, I'm going to bring something for us to do if the meal needs to cook for awhile."

Eyes narrowing, Loki folded his arms. "And if I don't wish to be your culinary lab rat?"

It was the question Steve dreaded; if he said the wrong thing, he might ruin his chance to make anything right with Loki. He swallowed, sipping at his wine. "After everything you've done, going running in the mornings and eating dinner with me once a week isn't too much to ask in return. Is it?"

Loki flinched but his expression stayed neutral. "I see. Very well, Captain, I accept your terms."

"Great." He smiled, hoping his relief wasn't too obvious. "And I hope you're hungry, because I made a lot of spaghetti."
“This is from New Mexico.” Natasha moved close enough to read the news article pinned up on the wall of Steve’s living room. "What does this have to do with the Winter Soldier?"

"It doesn't." He handed her a fresh cup of coffee. "That side of the wall is Loki."

Her brow furrowed and the corners of her mouth turned quirked. "We know where Loki is."

"Consider it a hobby."

The box at his feet was full of fresh material that needed to be sorted, all of it gleaned from SHIELD’s exposed secrets or identified by Tony's algorithms as potential Winter Soldier activity. It had been the only strategy Steve could think of that didn't require him to chase Bucky around the globe without any guarantee of knowing what he'd find. He'd do that too, eventually, but he wasn't about to face off against one of HYDRA's most valuable assets without a plan. Some of the materials were about Thor and Loki; he'd started collecting those as an afterthought, tracing out the trajectory of the Tesseract as much as Bucky's.

She crouched down beside the box, pulling out a glossy black and white print that had come from a surveillance camera in Washington DC. "If you're not trying to find him, what are you trying to answer?"

"What to do next."

Carefully, she pinned the print to the wall and stretched a length of red thread to tie the photo to the timeline he'd painted as a horizontal line. "Can't leave well enough alone, can you?"

"Apparently not."

"Why do you care what happens to Loki?" Her tone was light, nearly disinterested, as though discussing the weather.

He knew her well enough to know when she was feeling her way through an interrogation. "Is there an answer I can give you that won't make you question my sanity? If I say I'm worried about him or want to understand him, understand why he did what he did, Bruce will stick me back in that damn machine every three weeks. But anything else would be a lie and you'd see right through that."

"Point taken." She fished another piece of paper from the box and drifted back to the Loki section with the spool of thread. "If you're right about him, which I'm not saying you are, then the rest of us were wrong. I don't like being wrong about a target." She hesitated. "Not that wrong anyway."

"You weren't wrong on the Helicarrier."

"I only had one objective. Didn't much care about his health then." Stepping back, she scanned over the printed news articles and photographs. "What do we actually know about what happened on Asgard?"

He picked up a copy of a news piece on the battle of New York. "Only what Thor has told us, but that's not what I'm looking for." The article went up on the wall and he let Natasha run the thread down to the timeline bar. With one finger, he drew a circle around the gap in time between New Mexico and when Loki had appeared through a doorway in time and space. "Here. Thor can account for Loki before New Mexico. And we can account for him after he showed up on Earth. No one can account for where he was or what he went through between Asgard and Earth. No one but Loki."

"Then you believe that he was tortured," she said skeptically.
"I know trauma when I see it." He tapped a stack of printouts pinned nearby. "These are debrief reports. Barton, Fury, Selvig, anyone else who survived the research facility. It's sketchy but they agree that Loki came through looking pretty rough. Almost sick."

She leaned in to read, flipping up the pages up as she went. "There's not a lot to go on here. You're speculating."

"We speculate all the time. I'm speculating there's more to this gap in time than we've guessed and it's important. Something happened to him. Turned him into what he was when he came here."

"And you think he's changed."

"Look it the evidence." Sliding past her, he tapped a spot on the timeline marked with a large circle. "This is the spell. Before that, we dealt with him every few weeks. I'm marked injuries and fatalities for each time we went up against him. After the spell, he escalated, probably because I stood him up, until here, when I fought against him in Georgia. Then he drops off the radar. There was a hand drawn image of the castle in Scotland on the wall."

"He was still messing with Bruce."

"He came into the Tower, knew what we were doing, knew Bruce was monitoring me and knew I was getting worse, but he didn't cause any damage. He could've taken us apart, so why not do it? He was using what he learned from us to experiment on the rats. I remember him saying something about the creatures of Midgard being marked by magic, permanently." He moved to the next circle on the timeline. "This is the Fridge."

"Where you think he came for you, not the scepter."

"Why let us get it back if that's what he was after?"

"Why the pretense of kidnapping you if it wasn't?" she countered.

He shrugged. "Pride? I don't know. That's one of the things I'm trying to understand. He doesn't deny that he was there for me, but he hasn't explained anything either."

She rolled her eyes. "You're expecting a straight answer from the God of Lies."

"Come on, Natasha. You can't tell me you don't think there's more to this."

Biting at her lower lip, she folded her arms over her stomach. "Are you sure it's safe to start lifting up those rocks? If we were that wrong about Loki then we're back at square one in profiling and predicting his behavior. I'm with Tony, someone who's fine with invading a planet isn't going to care about breaking a few eggs."

He couldn't wrap his head around the steadfast way the others maintained their belief that there was nothing good or redeemable about Loki. "What about Bucky? I could look at everything he's done as the Winter Soldier and write him off. HYDRA turned Bucky into the Winter Soldier, but the guy I knew is still in there somewhere. He has to be. Why is it such a leap to think the Loki that Thor used to know is still there too?"

Sighing, she turned away to settle on the sofa, sipping at her coffee. "I can't tell if you're transferring your feelings about Bucky onto Loki or the other way around. We know a little about how they created the Winter Soldier. Barnes had no choice."

"That's my point, we don't know what happened to Loki. Maybe he didn't have a choice either." He
tapped the unknown region of time for emphasis. "If he was tortured before he came to Earth, tortured into coming to Earth, that changes everything."

"What does it change, Steve?"

"I keep thinking back to Germany, about what Loki said there. About freedom being a lie and only knowing peace once you give it up."

"I'm following."

He took a seat in the armchair, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "Does that even sound like Loki? The Loki we know now. The Loki who is more stubbornly independent and self-determined than anyone I've ever met. Does that make any sense to you? Loki doesn't take orders from anyone. It goes against everything he is."

She shrugged. "It was a speech."

"That he didn't believe."

"Not so different from any other political campaign." She held up a hand, forestalling the protest he'd been about to make. "I will agree that Loki is full of contradictions. At best, we've oversimplified him. At worst, we've been off base from the beginning. I'm not questioning that."

"It's not the spell," he said, irritation slipping into his voice.

"That's the problem. You're emotionally invested in Loki and that raises a lot of questions. I don't know what you'll find when you go digging around in Loki's head. I don't know how bad it's going to get or if he's going to turn on you."

He wanted to keep his current involvement with Loki to himself. Dinner once a week and running wasn't anything serious; it didn't warrant Avengers scrutiny. At the same time, they deserved to know. He sighed as he leaned back in the chair, thinking of the months they'd spent not knowing if they could trust him. "I talked to Sam about this and I think it's the right thing to do. I gave Loki some conditions. Terms he had to meet. We have dinner once a week and we go running in the mornings."

"You," she stopped, eyebrows rising. "Have you lost your fucking mind?"

"Natasha-"

"Are you going to bother telling us when you start fucking him?"

"I'm not going to!" Forcing himself to take a deep breath, he tried to lower his voice. "I'm not interested in sleeping with him or anyone. I'm not interested in sex, okay? I want to understand Loki. I want to know what happened in that gap of time that no one seems to care about but me."

"And if he wants sex?"

"Why do you need to know that?"

She frowned at him, then turned her face toward the wall. "He killed or caused the deaths of hundreds of people. He took control of Clint's mind and used him. I want nothing more than to know he's gone and never coming back."

"Nat, I'm sorry...I didn't-"
"You're right." Taking a deep breath, she stood up and moved back to the box, pulling out the next piece of paper. "Who you love and who you fuck, or don't fuck, is your business. I have to trust you. You're going to make the choice you need to make and we'll have your back no matter what. That's what matters."

"I would never let him hurt any of you."

She paused, glancing over her shoulder. "But you'll let him hurt you. Any of us would take a bullet for you, Steve. You're just too busy taking the bullets for us to realize that."

**

Loki barely opened the front door before Steve was coming through. That was normal; Steve always seemed to barrel through the door as though afraid Loki would change his mind and shut it in his face. This time, however, Steve was followed by three young men wearing t-shirts emblazoned with the name of a furniture store. They were carrying a long, cylindrical object wrapped in plastic and a small table made of darkly stained wood.

"Middle of the living room is fine, we'll take it from there," Steve directed, carrying his usual box of surprises straight into the kitchen. The men brought the objects in and deposited them in the living area. Steve shook their hands, thanking them as they left.

Prodding the object with his toe, Loki knew it could only be a rug, but why Steve had brought him a rug, he had no idea. "I do hope you aren't going to tell me we intend to eat this."

Steve laughed, shaking his head. "Tonight is swordfish steaks, pasta salad, and cheesecake. And I brought a puzzle, thought we'd get it started at least. But there is no way we're working on a puzzle on your hardwood floors. Me and my mortal knees are saying no." He began unpacking his box. "Where's Una? I brought her a treat." A flurry of wings and limbs streaked out from the bedroom at the word treat and the sprite all but pounced on the jar in Steve's hand. "Careful, they might be hot. Or maybe spicy. I don't know how bugs work for food. They're fireflies."

"They might be poisonous," Loki cautioned.

"She'd tell me if she couldn't eat them, right, Una?"

The sprite answered him with a single, bell-like tone they'd determined meant yes or possibly just feed me. Her true speech was only slightly more intelligible to Loki, though she managed to convey her ire well enough despite the language barrier.

He half listened as Steve began preparing the fish and talked about sports teams he didn't know - entire sports he didn't understand - and whatever else he felt inclined to ramble on about. The idle chatter was oddly comforting, like the white noise of a coffee shop. He thought back to the afternoon he'd waited for the Captain, hopeful and naive, still believing the spell had been defeated and not knowing he'd end up longing for the version of Steve as he'd been under the influence of the spell; the version who had wanted him and loved him and looked at him as though he was the sun, the moon, and all of the stars combined.

"Loki?"

Shaking those thoughts away, Loki realized Steve was waiting for him to open and pour the wine. He saw two elegant wine glasses on the bar top beside the bottle.

"Since you didn't have any," Steve said as explanation before turning back to the marinade.
Loki didn't understand Steve's compulsion to fill his apartment with objects. He always seemed to leave more behind each time he came, whether it was food, plants, dishware and cookware, and now he was having furniture delivered. Each item came with a casual explanation; Steve had wanted it or needed it and Loki didn't have it. A strange pattern, to be sure, but he couldn't see what Steve could possibly gain from doing it. He poured out the chardonnay, stopping when Steve plunked down a shot glass beside the wine glasses.

"For Una," he said, winking conspiratorially at the sprite. She whirled excitedly around the kitchen. Steve had named her after a character from a movie and she'd taken to the name, and Steve, ever since.

"You should go home with him if you like him so much. I'd be overjoyed to be rid of you," Loki snapped mildly, but he filled the shot glass halfway with wine. The presence of the sprite had irritated him at first, but he'd grown strangely attached to the creature over the past weeks. Not that he would admit it to anyone.

Taking his wine, he returned to the rug and cut away the protective wrapping. He'd half expected red, white, and blue, but the Persian rug that rolled out over the floor was done in muted, tonal blues and silvery gray. The result was subtle and delicate. It was surprisingly thick and soft to the touch. Against the rug, the deep stain of the wooden table was radiant. He positioned it in the center of the rug and retrieved the puzzle box. After some study, he realized the image on the puzzle was an abstracted version of New York City, done in vibrant but smudged blocks of color that gave it a blurred, indistinct quality.

"What do you think?" Steve called.

"It's evocative."

"Before the serum, I was colorblind. Guess I'm drawn to colorful things now. I don't think I'll ever get tired of seeing the red stripes on my shield."

Carefully, Loki opened the puzzle box and began to sort through the pieces, looking for edges. The activity caught Una's attention. She flew unsteadily with the weight of the shot glass clasped in her arms, coming to rest on one corner of the table. Sitting cross-legged and curled around the glass, she dipped one of the fireflies, and her entire hand, into the wine before eating it. The scale of notes she made, like the trill of a bird or feline, was melodic and content. He bit back a scathing remark that she shouldn't get her hopes up; Steve would never love her either.

He'd finished sorting out the edges and had started on building up piles of similarly colored pieces when Steve joined him at the table.

"They need to marinate for an hour." Steve glanced at his watch. "We can probably make a pretty good dent in this while we wait." He started on the edge pieces, picking a corner and working out from there. Occasionally, he would respond to Una's sounds as though carrying on a reasonable conversation. It amused Una a great deal, though Steve was not far off in interpreting her nonsensical, musical language more often than not.

Loki caught her engaging their luring technique, which he'd come to realize was a form of magic. It intrigued him that there were any magical creatures left in Midgard. He saw her lure as the barest wisp of color, a shimmering trail of violet energy that reached out and coiled around Steve's hand.

"I told you not to bother," he said, casting her a gimlet look. She chirped at him in response and resumed munching on her firefly.
"What was she doing?" Steve glanced between them.

"Attempting to hypnotize you."

"Like they do with children?"

"Yes."

Steve eyed Una thoughtfully. "Why do they lure children away? What do they do with them?"

"They eat them."

With a furious shriek, Una darted from her corner and dove at Loki's head, though he noticed she'd been careful not to spill her wine. Her tiny clawed hands tugged at his hair while she scolded him.

"Alright, alright." Loki tried not smile. "They don't eat children. When the hive goes into a resting state, they need a heat source. The children are unharmed during the process, though some may not return to their families until years have passed, having not aged a day while the world grew older around them. Hives can be dormant for centuries and, if they are large, they may require dozens of children. I imagine it's disconcerting for the child, but not physically damaging. With all the heat your civilization puts off now, they no longer need to use children, they merely need to find a cozy spot in a subway tunnel or basement."

"Guess that's why we don't see more sprites." Steve kept watching Una while she resettled on her corner.

"You also generate a great deal of heat, Captain. She is merely looking for suitable resources to ensure her survival, nothing more. Capturing you would be quite the boon for any hive." He ignored the sour rattling noise Una made at his words - in her own way, she was genuinely fond of Steve - and the strange look Steve gave him.

Steve leaned closer to Una, lowering his voice. "I'd be honored to keep you warm, miss." Her wings fluttered as she trilled joyously back at him.

Irritated, Loki flicked a puzzle piece at her.

"Hey! Don't want to lose any of these." Catching the piece, Steve dropped it into the matching color pile. Humor sparkled in his eyes but he didn't say anything further, turning his attention back to the puzzle.

They worked quietly until the fish was ready to go into the oven. Steve lamented the lack of a grill, which made Loki wonder if that would be the next object he'd find cluttering his apartment. He already had three houseplants, one of them, the banana tree, could apparently grow to an alarming size if the information he'd found on the Starkphone was accurate, and the contents of his kitchen expanded with every visit.

Wine bottle in hand, Steve returned to the table and refilled all three glasses. "That'll be another thirty minutes. The pasta salad won't take long to throw together, but we might want to save the cheesecake for another day."

He continued working at the puzzle, trying to concentrate on colors and shapes rather than the delicious aroma coming from the kitchen. Although he would never admit it, and contrary to Steve's insistence, Steve hadn't made a single dish that hadn't been delicious. His focus snapped when he placed a piece near where Steve was working and the side of his hand brushed against Steve's. A jolt of heat went up his arm at the unexpected contact and he pulled his hand away as though burned.
"You okay?" Steve looked concerned.

Swallowing, he reminded himself fiercely that Steve was not interested and, even if he could reciprocate, Loki certainly did not deserve to ever touch Steve again. He'd forfeited that the moment he'd agreed to help Amora with her plan to bed Thor.

"Loki?" Steve prompted.

"Have your Avengers found Amora yet?"

"She's back in Asgard. Don't know much more than that. Thor didn't say much other than she wouldn't be coming back to Earth any time soon."

"It seems so trivial now," Loki began. His fingers trembled as he worked at one of the pieces, certain it belonged but unable to get it to seat properly. "I wanted Thor to miss one of Odin's feasts because I thought to raise doubt about his loyalty to Asgard. Had I known." He stopped when Steve reached over the table and helped slide the piece into place.

Steve's skin was impossibly warm and Loki wanted nothing so much as to feel more of it, as much as he could for as long as he could; to let himself burn away in the heat of Steve's body. He felt his face flush at the memories and pulled away, busying himself with his wine glass. Only the spell had allowed him to have that night, as perfect and terrible as it had been. He should be used to the cruelty of Fate by now, but part of him wanted to burn the Nine Realms to ashes for giving him a taste of what he could never have again.

It would have been kinder if Steve had merely wanted to use him, however degrading or perversely, for his own pleasure; he would've taken even that inferior substitute over nothing at all.

"Loki," Steve said softly.

The kindness in his face was unbearable and the impulse to lash out in rage against it swelled up in Loki's chest. He could twist that kindness into disgust, or at least, he could try. Leaning back from the table, he turned his gaze toward the window instead. Steve had asked for so very little compared to what Loki had taken from him and the simple truth was that Steve was kind; it was as much a part of him, as deeply embedded in his blood, as the magic Loki had put there. This was the price Steve had levied in return for his kindness and his forgiveness; wanting and not having, and being willing to accept his loss, was the debt he owed.

Between the puzzle and dinner, they spoke very little after that. Loki remained in the company of his own self-loathing, pretending not to notice the concerned glances from Steve. He dreaded the inevitable questions; was he alright and did he want to talk about it; no and definitely not. However well meaning Steve might be, the questions would be unwelcome and strain his ability to maintain the facade of acceptance. Every thought of Steve, every stolen glance at his hands, fingers calloused from handling his shield, and every sliding gaze outlining his back, down his hips and legs, made Loki clench his jaw a little tighter to keep the desperate anger trapped inside.

As the evening deepened, the muscles in his shoulders and neck began to ache from the tension. A dull throb settled in behind his eyes and the puzzle pieces lost meaning and interest for him. Dark, abominable thoughts began to slither through the back of his mind, taunting him. His magic would not work on Steve - he half regretted protecting Steve so thoroughly - but there were other means of coercion. He could still take what he wanted. That he was even considering those thoughts made him physically ill.

"It's getting pretty late." Steve's voice snapped him back to the present. He was standing at the end of
the kitchen bar, drying his hands.

Loki realized Steve had washed the dinner dishes and tidied the kitchen and silently berated himself for being so worthless he was not capable of even that much. "I suppose it is," he managed to force out through clenched teeth.

"See you tomorrow then, bright and early. Ten miles sound good?"

"Of course." Loki stayed seated on the floor by the table, afraid of what those dark thoughts might tempt him to do if he got anywhere near Steve.

"Great. Goodnight."

The moment the door closed and Steve was gone, he slumped, leaning forward on the table without caring if he dislodged any of the puzzle pieces. He heard Una chirp querulously and a small, clawed hand brushed at his arm.

"Go away," he snapped. Una rattled at him, unimpressed. "They have a phrase here on Midgard," he told her as he got up from the floor. "He's just not that into me."

Thus far, none of Steve's surprises had ended up in the bedroom and Loki found himself grateful for it. He sunk down on the cot in the nearly barren room to stare at the ceiling until sleep finally found him. Una followed, hauling one of his discarded t-shirts up from the floor and pulling it along after her. She wrestled it into a circular mound on his chest, ignoring his protests when she walked over his stomach, and then worked her way into the folds of the fabric. Her wings flexed slowly, the only part of her not tucked into the shirt.

"I will toss you out into the gutter tomorrow, irksome creature," he said mildly. She merely chirped, not believing him. He'd told her the same thing night after night for weeks and somehow, hadn't yet been able to bring himself to get rid of her in the morning. He blamed Steve for his weakness.

Minutes ticked by, but rest didn't come. He dozed fitfully, but never for very long or deeply enough to ease his fatigue; his muscles and joints began to ache from lying on the narrow cot. The greater torture was wondering when Steve would grow bored of cooking dinners and steadily filling Loki's apartment with trinkets. It was inevitable; eventually he would realize Loki was irredeemable and SHIELD would descend upon him. Worse, Steve could decide to rid the earth of Loki himself. It was difficult to imagine the kindness that so embodied Steve slipping away, but Loki had also seen Steve in combat and knew there was ruthless efficiency in him as well. And Loki would slip up in the end, he would do something wrong, something that made Steve realize no amount of forgiveness mattered; Captain America getting rid of Loki as a distasteful, but necessary, duty was much easier to imagine. No doubt, he would make it quick and as painless as possible, perhaps a blow to the head with his shield - those red stripes he loved so much - and then Loki would no longer be a threat or a burden.

He could run. He could slip through the cracks in the universe as he'd done before and find himself far away from Midgard and Asgard and all of his sins. Perhaps he would find an oblivion so complete that he could lose himself forever, but there was the chance of stumbling into the Chitauri and their dark Master again. Cold fear washed over him, sending a shiver down his spine and raising his skin into gooseflesh. Those memories were a deep chasm he stepped carefully around whenever he looked into his own mind; no good would come of gazing too long into the darkness. His rage at Asgard - at Odin, at Thor, at the Norns themselves - had carried him through the pain and the pain had brought him to Midgard, spouting dogma that had never been his own.

Una chittered at him and he realized that his fingers were clenched tight around the long poles of the
cot, his breathing turned quick and shallow.

"You should leave," he murmured. "You and the Captain both. There is nothing here worth keeping." She made a soft, mournful sound before she began to sing. Violet tendrils of energy reached out and began to curl over his chest, spreading a cool, tingling sensation as they went. "Don't be foolish. You can't lull me into a stupor as you do the mortals." Not to be dissuaded, she continued to sing the lilting, haunting melody meant to lure innocent children into her hive.

That was the missing piece; that was why her magic could not soothe him. He was no innocent; there was blood on his hands and his soul was stained charcoal from the hate and rage he'd unleashed. He'd been willing to set himself on fire to seek vengeance for his broken heart and there was nothing left but bitter ashes.

"I should not have survived," he whispered to Una or the empty room, it didn't matter which. "If I'd been stronger, less of a coward, I would have done it myself, would have found a way to end it. If I had been worthy," he trailed off, once again veering away from the gaping chasm in his mind.

Even his old rage, familiar and sharp as a blade, would be easier to bear than the desolation he felt now. This emptiness cast his world in a dull gray; he wondered if that's how Steve had seen the world before the serum had given him the color red. Sorrow, anger; he would take anything over endless nothing, but even as he wished for relief, he immediately berated himself for wishing and winced under an onslaught of hateful barbs directed at himself. He did not deserve to wish for better, not here, not now, not ever.

Una kept singing and he closed his eyes. Morning would find him exhausted and drained, but Steve would find him waiting on the sidewalk and they would run ten miles side by side. It would be punishing and still not enough to silence the screaming in his head.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Loki and Steve explore a compromise in physical intimacy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The blocks between the Tower and Loki's apartment flew by for Steve. It was early enough that he didn't worry too much about knocking over pedestrians and although the heat of late summer was baked into the asphalt and pavement, the air cooled enough overnight to be refreshing.

Running with Loki had quickly become one of his favorite routines. They never talked much, but it didn't matter. He didn't have to worry about running too fast or losing Loki in the crowd; he'd been right about Loki's long legs giving him a speed advantage. Loki always seemed to anticipate a change in direction before he even thought to signal. In fact, the way they meshed so well while they ran made him wonder how they'd be in a fight, if they were together and on the same side. Fighting with Loki rather than against him held enormous appeal and he felt he understood Thor's loss better now; Thor had grown up with Loki at his back and the two of them had undoubtedly been a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield. He kept those thoughts to himself; dinner once a week and running already seemed to be as much as Loki could accept.

Thoughts of the previous night made him frown. Whatever had turned Loki's mood, he would probably never know, but the way Loki had reacted disproportionately to an accidental touch was worrisome. Being bitten by a snake might've gone over better. He hadn't pushed physical contact, recognizing that Loki struggled with simply being in the same room with him. Still, he'd hoped it would get easier with time spent together. He consoled himself with the knowledge that he'd seen the turn in Loki's mood for what it was and backed off rather than press him until he lashed out, a lesson he'd learned the hard way. A good night's sleep and a solid run could be all that Loki needed to steady out again.

Una had been a blessing in disguise. She stubbornly refused to leave Loki's apartment and, although he couldn't understand her, he recognized sass in any language. It was good for Loki not to be alone. If he could just get Loki to talk about what was going on inside his head. The night before had been the first time Loki had even indirectly referenced the spell, and why he'd done it in the first place, in a way that wasn't overtly challenging or deliberately meant to push Steve's buttons. He counted it as a victory and progress toward getting Loki to trust him enough to open up. He hadn't realized the depth and extent of Loki's distrust until he'd spent time with him; Loki expected the entire universe and everything in it to kick him in the teeth at the first, and every, opportunity.

Thor might be able to shed light on where Loki's internal land mines might be, but Steve wasn't ready to have that conversation. For now, he had to care about making sure Loki was eating at least once a week. He'd lost weight since leaving the Fridge; the second hand jeans and t-shirts he wore hung looser on him now and his cheekbones seemed more prominent. He'd thought running in the mornings would help Loki sleep, though the dark circles under his eyes never seemed to lessen, and he kept adding brightness and color to the apartment in hopes of sparking Loki's will to do more than merely subsist.
He wasn't going to give up, no matter how hard Loki tried to push him away.

Slowing as he rounded the last corner, he saw Loki standing on the sidewalk in the athletic pants and shirt Steve had given him. He looked as though he hadn't slept in days, but the stubborn set of his jaw kept Steve from saying anything.

"I thought we'd do the Battery Park loop," Steve said. Loki nodded, falling into step, and they were off.

Running was freedom for Steve and normally he savored it, but not this time. After six blocks, he saw Loki nearly stumble and bit his lip to keep from asking. If he said anything, Loki would only put up his defenses, and if he slowed down, Loki would challenge him. Instead, he held the pace steady and tried to stay close enough to intervene if anything happened. They were forced to stop near the waterfront, waiting for a run of trucks lined up in the street to unload their contents, and Steve waved Loki toward the park. It wouldn't hurt either of them to take a breather and enjoy the view over the river.

"Did I tell you about the time I ran to Connecticut?" he asked, leaning over to stretch out his hamstrings. "Woke up at three in the morning after a nightmare and all I could think to do was run. Didn't care where I was going or how I'd get back again, just ran until I couldn't think anymore." Loki was listening, he could tell that much despite the fact that Loki was facing the river. "It's a funny story now. Natasha had to come get me."

Loki shifted minutely. "What was the nightmare?"

He kept his voice low. "I dreamed about the spell, right after, when we were both chained up. It was pretty upsetting." Loki stiffened, turning his face away. "It was just the spell. Turning me into someone I'm not." He laughed a little over the double-edged frustration of those three words - just the spell.

"And when you run with me, can you forget your nightmare or do you do this to be reminded of it?" Loki asked harshly.

"Whoa. That was not where I was going with this. Not at all. That has nothing to do with us running together." He forced himself to take a deep breath. "I sure as hell don't run with you because I want to think about hurting you like that. I would never do that." He knew it was the wrong thing to say as he said it.

The anger he expected, an outburst or explosion, didn't come. Instead, Loki seemed to crumple under an impossible weight.

"Loki, I didn't," he began. So much for talking about the therapeutic benefits of running.

Loki's gaze snapped to him. "You spend far too much time with your rapist than is healthy, Captain." He turned sharply and started walking.

"Come on, Loki. That's not...it's not black and white."

Loki picked up his pace and began running, nearly sprinting away. Steve caught up within a block, panting from the exertion and probably only because Loki was clearly exhausted. Loki's mouth was set in a grim line and he refused to acknowledge Steve's presence. Silently, he cursed himself for putting his foot in it and setting back weeks of progress in coaxing Loki out from behind his defense mechanisms. They kept the grueling pace through Soho and the Village, sending other early risers reeling in their wake as they raced through the streets. This kind of pace would draw attention.
Captain America jogging in the morning was typical enough to be unremarkable and the city had barely noticed when he'd picked up a running partner, but he knew they'd raise questions if they kept going. Before he could shout to Loki to slow down, Loki darted ahead and into the street.

In the movies, accidents happened in slow motion. In real life, it only took a second.

He heard the crunch of plastic and metal, the squeal of brakes as the laundry truck that had whipped around the corner braked too late to avoid hitting Loki. There was damage to the front grill of the car; Loki hit the asphalt with an audible thud, his head cracking against the street. Two men climbed out of the truck, shouting at Loki and starting toward him. Bright, green-gold energy began to shimmer along Loki's skin.

"Loki! No!" He raced to get between Loki and the two men, adrenaline surging.

When the blast of magical energy came, it was a wash of cool air over his skin, light as a feather. The two men were thrown back against the truck like rag dolls; the windows in the surrounding buildings blew out as though a bomb had gone off. Anything not anchored to the ground was swept aside, twisting or shattering under the force of the blast. At the center of the destruction, Loki rose to his hands and knees. Blood dripped from a cut on his forehead and another on his upper lip. His left cheekbone was scraped raw from the impact. He expected to see anger in Loki's face, but there was only terror.

Torn, he hurried to the two unconscious men first and pulled out his phone to call 911. Both were breathing and their pulses felt strong. With a sigh of relief, he gave the dispatcher a description of their injuries and the damage to the location. Loki was still on his knees in the street when he tucked his phone back into his pocket. They needed to get out of the public eye before the first responders arrived. There were too many questions he didn't want to answer and he didn't think Loki was in any condition to deal with the press.

"We need to get to the Tower," he said when he reached Loki, voice low.

Loki's eyes were wide and panicked, but he nodded shakily. "Not there. Please. Just...not there. Don't take me there."

"Your place then."

Taking Loki's arm, he helped him up and got them both out of the street. He stuck to side streets, putting distance between them and the incoming sirens. In his grip, Loki was trembling; he stumbled over inconsequential gaps and rises in the pavement. Uncertain of what he could say and since he'd managed to screw everything up so far, he kept his mouth shut all the way to Loki's apartment.

In the bedroom, he took one look at the cot and wished he'd insisted on the Tower. "You need a real bed."

After a moment, Loki nodded stiffly, but Steve wasn't certain he knew what he was agreeing to. He kept one hand on Loki's arm, just behind his elbow, as he led the way into the bathroom. Gnawing at his lower lip, Steve considered calling Bruce, but decided to wait. He left Loki leaning against the sink counter to start the water running in the shower. Letting the water warm up, he fetched a change of clothes for Loki, setting them on the vanity. Loki hadn't moved.

"Do you have a first aid kit?" He wet the single washcloth Loki had in the bathroom and dabbed gently at the blood on Loki's face. Loki shook his head. "Do you want me to help you get into the shower?"
Loki nodded once.

Taking care to keep his movements slow and unthreatening, Steve helped Loki pull the shirt up over his head and set it aside. Kneeling, he untied the sneakers, placing them against the wall, and tugged Loki's socks off. It reminded him of caring for a child; Loki gave no resistance, letting Steve pull or push as needed. He had to shift his weight to allow Steve to strip away the athletic pants. Once he was completely naked, Steve could count the lines of each rib and his hipbones jutted out prominently. Loki had definitely lost weight since the night in the castle.

"Have you been eating? When was the last time you got a good night's sleep?"

Loki licked his lips. "I don't remember."

He kicked himself for not noticing how far gone Loki had gotten. He'd thought things were improving, that Loki was beginning to trust him, but he'd just been masking how bad it truly was. "I'll fix us something to eat after you get out of the shower. Tell me if it's too hot or too cold, alright? Can you do that?"

The water was tepid to Steve, but Loki didn't say anything as Steve helped him into the shower stall. He wished Loki would allow him the same intimacy under normal circumstances, not only when he was too tired to protest.

"I'm going to get you some water."

He left the bathroom door open so he could hear the shower while he filled a glass from the tap. When he returned, he found Loki sitting on the floor in the shower, arms wrapped around his knees and shivering under the steady stream of water. The half idea that he'd dismissed earlier suddenly seemed like exactly what he needed to do. He stripped off his own clothes and adjusted the water to a more comfortable temperature as he climbed in.

Settling behind Loki, he positioned himself between the tile wall and Loki's back. Water pounded down over his side and legs. Gradually, he felt Loki's shivering begin to subside. "If you want to talk, I'm here."

Loki's throat worked. "What is there to talk about?"

"I didn't mean to upset you earlier. Didn't mean to make you feel like you had to run away from me."

Expression twisting into a grimace, Loki opened his eyes. "You said nothing that wasn't true. You would not have done the same, had you been in my position."

"Of course I would've," Steve countered. "If it had been the only way to save you, I would've done exactly the same thing. Absolutely."

"Lies don't suit you, Captain." There was no bite in his voice but he sounded closer to normal.

"I'm not lying. I wouldn't have pretended to want to kill you or kidnapped you in order to do it. But I would've saved you, no matter what it cost me. And I would've tried just as hard to make it as easy for you as I could," he said, grimly aware of how difficult it would've been to look himself in the mirror afterwards. "I don't think of you as my rapist and I'd rather you didn't think of yourself that way. It's not that simple and it won't help either of us to pretend it was."

"That's right. You've forgiven me," Loki said bitterly.

"I have. Because it's what I needed. I didn't really think about what you needed and I'm sorry for
Loki's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I forgave you because I needed to. For me to come to terms with what happened that night and to get past all those months of feeling like I was losing my mind, I needed to forgive you." He shifted his position, combing Loki's hair back from his face before he reached for the shampoo. He went slowly, taking his time working the shampoo through Loki's hair and into a thick lather before tipping Loki's head to the side to let the water wash away the suds. "The hardest part of that spell wasn't the sex. It was watching myself turn into someone I didn't know. Even loving you, wanting you the way I did, it felt like a sickness, like I was possessed. Forgiving you before you were ready to forgive yourself was selfish." Once he was satisfied that he'd washed the shampoo and tangles from Loki's hair, he reached for the soap.

"Why," Loki asked hoarsely.

He worked the soap into a lather, scrubbing lightly at Loki's shoulders and back. "Why what?"

"Why...any of it? The food, the things you bring me. All of it. Why this?" Loki brushed a hand through the water, splashing the side of the shower. "What do you get out of doing any of it? You take nothing in return. No pleasure, no pain, no punishment, not even revenge for what I've done to you or your friends. If you wished to beat me, use me; if you asked me to bleed for you, I would do it gladly. Anything. All that I would understand. You ask for so little, yet give so much, and I do not understand why."

Steve's heart ached. Loki was confirming his worst assumptions of how Loki viewed himself. "What makes you think I don't get anything out of spending time with you?"

"What could you possibly get in return?" Loki twisted to look at him, desperate confusion in the lines of his face.

"I know you're eating at least one decent meal a week, for starters. Which I'm beginning to think is all you get." He scrubbed a little too hard at a nonexistent spot on Loki's back, but Loki was clearly pulling out of his mental fog and as long as he was careful not to send him spiraling back, he thought they'd be okay. "You think that you don't give me anything of value because we're not having sex. That says more about what you value than what I value."

Loki frowned, saying nothing as Steve continued down his arms with the bar of soap. He spent far too long on Loki's hands, circling the soap over his palms and working lather down each finger. Loki watched every motion with fascination and he didn't try to pull away or cover himself when Steve started on his chest. Fantastically, Steve wondered if he could scrub away all of Loki's self-hatred and wash it down the drain as easily as he could sweat and dirt. Loki moved to his feet without prompting, allowing Steve to continue working down his sides and abdomen. He stopped as his fingers traced over faint scars on Loki's stomach.

"SHIELD," Loki said simply.

Eyes averted as much as possible, he kept his touch gentle and pretended not to notice the way Loki's body was responding. "You could have stopped them." He moved lower, walking a fine line and hoping Loki would understand that it was about intimacy rather than sex. Allowing himself to be naked and exposed was an act of trust for Loki and he wanted to be sure Loki understood that he wouldn't take advantage of that; he would treat that trust with as much care as he was giving Loki's body.
"It was less than I deserve."

Steve bit down on his lower lip, not wanting to start an argument. He ran the soap down the front of Loki's legs and then up, tracing the muscles underneath. "Tell me who tortured you. You don't have to tell me what they did to you, just tell me who it was."

"His name is Thanos."

Steve frowned, scrubbing over Loki's right ankle and down the arch of his foot to his toes. The name was unfamiliar, though he had no reason to expect it to be someone he knew.

"The Chitauri worshipped him as a god."

"Did he make you come after the Tesseract?"

Loki sighed. "It is not so simple as that, Captain. You cannot absolve me of all my sins with your forgiveness and a bar of soap. I am no one's puppet, not even Thanos'."

He set the soap aside and stood up. There was more to that discussion, but Loki was being honest with him in a way he'd never been before and he knew it could be a fragile, fleeting thing. "Are you ready to get out?"

"I am clean enough," Loki said.

Hurriedly, Steve ducked under the water to rinse himself clean of sweat from their run and fumbled the water off. Following Loki out of the shower, he grabbed the towel and wrapped it around Loki's shoulders, rubbing lightly at his arms before letting Loki take over.

"Do you mind me being naked while I throw our clothes in the wash?"

Mutely, Loki shook his head; he was looking away, his gaze fixed on the wall. Gathering up their running clothes, Steve left Loki to dry off and tried to drip as little as possible on the floor. A soft chirp alerted him to Una's presence and he saw her peering down at him from the top of the washer. He loaded the clothes and set the wash cycle going before holding out his hand, gesturing for her to come down.

"I wish I could understand you," he whispered as she dropped down onto his palm. "I bet you've been trying to tell me how bad he's been and I just didn't know it."

He transferred her to his shoulder before heading back to the bedroom. When he stepped through the doorway, he froze. The room was no longer empty except for the Army cot; it was nearly filled with the enormous canopy bed from the ancient castle, still piled deep with furs and blankets. Loki was leaning against one side, the towel wrapped around his hips. Una darted away to alight on one of the canopy posts, chattering excitedly while she investigated the new piece of furniture.

"I thought it fitting," Loki said, not looking up.

"Beats buying a new one and hauling it up five flights of stairs. Remind me to call you the next time I need to move."

Loki shifted his weight and picked at the palm of his left hand. "If you intend to...I would rather you. Not with Una here. Take her away first, before you." He didn't finish the thought and his words were so fractured that Steve didn't know what to make of them.

"Um, okay? I was going to heat up some of the leftover swordfish from last night first. I don't have
any fresh bugs for her." That seemed to be the wrong thing to say - again - and he could see Loki's agitation grow.

"Do you intend to make me suffer further?" Loki snapped.

"Suffer? Why would I want you to suffer?"

"Then get it over with."

"Get what over with?" He kept his distance, uncertain if getting closer would only add more distress.

"Even you must see now there is no hope for me. I will never be anything other than what I am." Loki's eyes were suspiciously bright when he looked up. "I am no better than a rabid dog needing to be put down. You lead the Avengers against enemies far lesser than myself and you do not hesitate to end their lives. Why are you hesitating now unless it is to make me suffer? I ask only that you don't kill me with Una as a witness. I thought." He gestured to the bed behind him. "I thought this would help you. Make you remember what I did to you. And you would finally do what has to be done."

Steve realized his mouth was open, his voice frozen with shock. He started toward Loki and Una dove down from her perch to hover between them. She bared her teeth, claws out, and screeched in a way that was unmistakably threatening.

"Easy," he said, holding up his hands. "Loki. I am not going to kill you."

Loki's face contorted. "I am too much a coward to do it myself."

He started forward, hands up, and following the sharp, sudden movements of the angry sprite between them. "Goddamn it. Una, please. I'm not going to hurt him, I promise."

She let him come closer, but her sharp teeth remained bared. He let his fingertips rest lightly on Loki's shoulder and waited to see if he would pull away. When he didn't, he closed the last foot between them and wrapped his arms around Loki, cradling the back of his head with one hand. Loki resisted at first, but after one long, whole body shudder, he relented and let Steve hold him. It felt like holding a bundle of tightly coiled springs, as though he'd lose his grip any moment and the chaos would erupt.

Easing back, he combed his fingers through Loki's wet hair; it was a striking parallel to what Loki had done for him that night. "Is that what you've been afraid of? That I would decide to kill you?"

Loki nodded, his gaze downcast.

"I'm going to make us breakfast and murder would really ruin my appetite." Catching Loki's chin against his knuckle, he lifted his face to make eye contact. "You are going to get into bed and wait for me. Una's going to stay and watch over you, right, Una?"

The sprite buzzed enthusiastically. She zoomed past Loki's head, then returned to tug at his hair, trying to get him into the enormous bed.

"Why?" Loki asked, searching Steve's face.

"Because you took care of me. I was out of it, but I remember that you took care of me. Now it's my turn to take care of you."

Loki shivered. "Is that what this is?"
"I enjoy spending time with you. Cooking, running, working on that puzzle. All of that has value to me. This has value." He settled his hands on Loki's shoulders, rubbing his thumbs along the sharp peaks of his collarbones. "Sex isn't the only form of intimacy, you know, it's not even the only form of physical intimacy. It's not the only thing two people can share that's valuable. You think the only thing of value you can offer me is your body, but it's not. At least, not to me. It's okay if sex is important to you, that's fine, I'm not saying it shouldn't be. I don't want you to think that if I don't want sex, there's nothing else you can give me that matters to me. That's not it at all."

"It seems you've thought about this a great deal."

"I spent months going out of my mind. Then more time trying to decide how I really felt about sex. In a way, it was good. It forced me to figure myself out."

Loki frowned. "I never wished to hurt you. When I realized there was no other way, I...I thought it would be easier for you if you believed I intended to kill you afterward. It was what you had asked for."

"How was that supposed to be easier," he asked, stifling a laugh.

"It's not as though I could have walked through the front door and simply told you we had to have sex."

"Breaking into a secure SHIELD facility to steal something you didn't want and kidnap me. Yeah, that sounds much easier," he teased. Slipping his arms around Loki's waist, he rested his chin lightly on his shoulder. "Was setting Amora loose what she wanted in return for stalling long enough for you to get the scepter?"

Loki hummed thoughtfully. "You are frighteningly perceptive sometimes, Captain."

"I can be pretty oblivious sometimes too."

His fingers brushed tentatively over Steve's lower back, reminding him that the only modesty between them was a towel. "And what do we do now?"

"First, we're going to eat. After that, if you want to talk about what happened this morning, I want to understand." Pulling back, he smoothed Loki's hair with one hand. "And if you think you can get some rest with me here, that's a good idea."

"I am weary," Loki admitted. "Sleep has eluded me of late."

"Una, convince him to get into bed while I grab us some food. Do you have anything for her?"

"There are always cockroaches in the stair well."

Steve pulled a face. That would require clothes and his were in the washer. "If I let you out, can you get your breakfast without being seen, Una? I'll make it up to you, promise. Extra juicy bugs next time I come over." She chirped in what sounded like a positive, still hovering close to Loki's shoulder. "Get him into bed first, okay?"

He left her rattling and chittering at Loki like an overprotective squirrel. There were plenty of leftovers in the fridge, although he quickly realized that many of the containers held weeks old food long gone bad. Loki truly hadn't been eating when Steve wasn't there to ensure that he did. He loaded up two plates with pasta salad and the last of the swordfish steaks. It wasn't exactly a typical breakfast, but calories were calories. By the time he had two plates ready, Una was buzzing near the door, waiting to be released to hunt for her own meal. He let her out, leaving the door cracked so she
could slip back in once she'd eaten her fill.

Thankfully, Loki was in bed when he returned with two plates. He was sitting against the headboard, a blanket over his legs, and he looked frighteningly breakable. Sliding into place beside Loki, Steve handed over one of the plates and a fork. He watched Loki eat out of the corner of his eye, determined to make sure Loki ate every bit of food on the plate. Once they'd finished, he took the dishes back to the kitchen and checked for Una. She came whirring through the crack in the door with an armful of cockroaches, most of them with their heads already bitten off.

Before returning to the bedroom, he took time to transfer their clothes to the dryer and checked his phone for messages. He had several from Tony. Apparently he'd made the news. He texted back that he was safe and would return to the Tower later that day.

Loki had laid down and seemed to read his mind. "If you need to go."

"Nope." He climbed into bed and slipped under the blankets, settling in with one arm around Loki's waist. "Does this bother you?"

"No." Loki shook his head. "If it is what you want."

"It's more important that you're comfortable with it. You haven't let me touch you since that night."

"I didn't think you wanted to." Loki curled inward a fraction, arms pulling tight against his chest, and settled his head on his hands. "It is difficult for me to understand that you would wish to hold me like this but not wish for physical pleasure."

"This feels pretty good to me." It was the truth. It felt good to have Loki in his arms. He felt warm and safe. He hadn't realized how much he missed the smell of the furs and Loki's skin until this moment. "Would it help?" he asked hesitantly. "Would sex help? If you knew it was one hundred percent consensual, would that help?"

"You don't want it."

"If it would help you." He had to shift when Loki rolled over to face him.

"Would it be any less of a lie if you were to consent to sex only to ease my suffering? I don't want your pity, not in my bed. Not in this bed."

Steve backed down, sensing another hidden land mine. "Just thought I'd offer."

"If you feel no sexual attraction to me, how can it ever be consensual?"

He ignored the sharpness in Loki's voice. "I'm pretty sure I get to decide whether I consent or not. Just because I don't want sex the way you do doesn't mean I don't think you're beautiful. Doesn't mean I don't want to touch you and hold you and make you feel good. If you need sex to be intimate, I can understand that. But I don't want you to use sex as a substitute for intimacy."

"You ask for something I don't know how to give," Loki said, frustrated and perplexed.

"Hey." He cupped his hand against Loki's cheek. "You're overthinking it. Just be here, with me. Can you do that? Can you just enjoy this as it is?"

Loki's eyes fell half closed, breath catching audibly, and Steve felt him shudder. Intuitively, he knew that Loki was a creature of touch and sensation; he was provocative and sexual and part of Steve wished he could reciprocate in kind. As he traced Loki's lip with the side of his thumb, he felt him
tremble. The memories of what it had felt like to want stirred in the back of his mind, natural and alien at the same time. It was an unfair advantage; he'd had the opportunity to experience a perspective outside his own, both the pleasure and its price.

"You can choose," he whispered. "Choose this, choose me." Under his hand, Loki was shaking like an Aspen leaf and it felt like he was going to fly apart.

"I can't," Loki choked out. "I will burn you."

"I can take the heat."

Rolling onto his back, Loki kept his face turned, cheek pressing against Steve's palm. His hand slid down his stomach, beneath the covers, but stopped; his cheeks colored and he began to withdraw his hand.

"Hey, hey, don't stop." If nothing else, Steve figured it would help Loki sleep. "Do you want me to give you some privacy? Or is it...would it be okay if I watched?"

Loki made a strangled noise low in his throat. "You want to watch?"

He tugged the covers down to mid thigh and gently unwrapped the towel around Loki's waist. Shifting up onto his left elbow, he slid his left hand beneath Loki's head, weaving fingers into his hair. The position let him see Loki's face and the length of his body at the same time, and Loki could look up if he wanted to make eye contact. He rubbed his thumb against a point behind Loki's ear, brushing the knuckles of his right hand along his cheek and down his neck. As his fingers trailed lightly over Loki's collarbone, he noticed bruises beginning to bloom over his shoulder and side. Loki's hands were clenched at his sides.

"You're so beautiful." The subtle shadowing of bone and sinew in Loki's chest and arms was gorgeous. "Look at you...so beautiful. I could draw you for hours." He skimmed his hand down over Loki's stomach and up along his arm, keeping his touch light. "I remember wanting you so much I thought I'd die if I couldn't have sex with you, but this is so much better. So much better. Seeing you like this, touching you without the spell screaming in my head. This is real."

Hesitantly, as though expecting punishment or reprisal, Loki uncurled his fingers and reached for his half hard cock, arm moving as he began to jerk himself off. Steve tried to memorize every micro expression and wrinkle in Loki's face. His heart pounded, swelling inside his chest until he thought he might burst with the intensity of his emotions.

"That's so good. So good," he murmured against Loki's hair. "Thank you for doing this for me, letting me see you like this. See how beautiful you are and the effect I have on you. I like knowing you want me like this, makes me feel good too."

A whimper escaped Loki's lips. His hips canted upwards, the rhythm of his strokes quickening and Steve could see his skin was slicked with whatever lube Loki seemed to conjure out of thin air. He reached up with his free hand to grip Steve's arm, arching up from the bed with a moan that sent a warm shiver of pleasure down Steve's spine. This was good; he pressed his hand against the side of Loki's neck, soaking in the rare image of Loki open and unguarded. He looked younger, sharp edges softening and green eyes wide.

"Gonna be so good when you come," he whispered. "All that tension will just fade away. No thinking, just let yourself feel good. I want you to feel good. Good and safe. 'Cause I've got you and you're safe with me. You don't have to run or hide or be anything you don't wanna be, not anymore. Let go. I'm not gonna let you fall." Loki's eyes slammed shut, his body going rigid. "Open your eyes.
Loki obeyed with visible effort. His grip on Steve's arm tightened and he cried out, but didn't look away as his orgasm washed through him. Steve watched it happen with rapt fascination, the flashes of expression almost too quick to catch; pleasure and fear and relief all tumbling over Loki's face and in his eyes. Maintaining eye contact was intense, he felt nearly as drained as if he'd been the one getting off. Little by little, Loki began to relax against him, sinking into the bed and letting his hands fall open at his sides. Steve used the damp towel to gently wipe Loki's stomach clean, tossing it toward the bathroom door before he pulled the covers back up over them.

He followed when Loki rolled onto his side, pressing against his back and hoping his body heat would keep Loki loose and relaxed. After several moments, he realized Loki was shaking and pushed up, pulling Loki's hair back to see his face. There were heavy tears on his eyelashes and sliding down his nose. He laid back down and held Loki as he cried himself to sleep.

When he woke again, it was after noon and Loki was sleeping soundly beside him. Careful not to disturb him, Steve slipped out of the bed and took the clothes out of the dryer. He folded Loki's and set them on the counter, slipping into his own. Behind him, Una made a soft chirping sound and he saw her wings sticking out of the plant on the bar top. Her luminous black eyes followed him intently while he filled a glass with water, then filled the shot glass for her and set it on the bar as he sat down. She crept out from the leaves and took a seat beside the shot glass, her knobby legs dangling over the edge. It was too bad he couldn't hear her the way Loki could. Her wings flexed slowly, lowering to her sides. He wondered how the other sprites were faring and made a mental note to put in a call to Maria and find out. He listened to her chirp and rattle, telling him a grand story he couldn't understand. As long as he seemed to nod in the appropriate places, she didn't seem to mind his ignorance.

Movement out of the corner of his eye alerted him to Loki standing in the doorway. He was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans; his hair was a glorious tangle of riotous curls gone wild as they dried.

"She is telling you of her homeland and how she got here by hiding away in the belly of a large wooden ship," Loki explained. He got a glass of water for himself, leaning back against the kitchen sink as he drank. "She is nearly three hundred years old. Quite young for her kind."

He tried to imagine three hundred years being young, then wondered exactly how old Loki was for there to be centuries old myths written about him. "Did I wake you?"

"It was this infernal creature who has infested my home with her noise." The corner of his mouth quirked when she chattered haughtily at him.

"Where is she from originally?"

"Originally?" He cocked his head. "Alfheim. By way of Wales. She was born here on Midgard."

"You mean sprites came from another planet?"

Shrugging casually, he set the glass of water down and stuck his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "There used to be a great deal more traffic between the Realms."

"What happened?"

"War," he answered, voice hollow. "Your world became a battleground for monsters you can only imagine."

"We seem to have a habit of doing that." He smiled, hoping that would make it clear that he wasn't
trying to cut open old scars.

Although Loki looked and sounded more relaxed, there was a raw, fragile quality in his voice and face. He'd stripped away enough of Loki's defenses to leave him bleeding out with vulnerability. Resisting the urge to talk about it, he contented himself with the glass of water and allowed Loki to steer the conversation where he needed to go. After several minutes of silence, Loki took a deep breath.

"Captain," he began.

"Weren't you going to call me Steve? I definitely wanted to be there."

Loki's smile was quick, lasting a bare handful of seconds, but it was soft and genuine. "Perhaps you are right. It is an old habit, I suppose. I am a creature of many bad habits. I lie, I cheat, and when I cannot win by deception or tricks, I kill those who stand in my way. I have only ever pursued what is in my own self-interest." He spoke lightly, not lingering on the darkness of his words. "I am not telling you because I wish to confess my sins and seek redemption. I am telling you what I am as I would tell you the colors of your shield. This is who I am. A creature of darkness, who spins webs and traps with words. There are, I think, some lies I've told so many times that even I believe them now. I can no longer tell the difference between my truth and the stories I wove to achieve my own ends."

He swallowed, waiting for Loki to reach the point he wanted to make and hoping it wasn't the same dark place he'd been earlier.

"I have no desire to join your crusade against evil. No desire to see the world as you do, however I may respect your commitment to those ideals you strive to uphold. It is not in my nature to be kind and self-sacrificing, as it is in yours. My temper is quick to burn and I am slow to forgive even the smallest of wrongs." He reached up to touch the road burn on his cheek and the cut across his forehead. "It is also true that I did not intend to hurt or kill those men this morning. As true as it is that I would not have felt guilt if I had hurt or killed them. Fear that you would see fit to kill me as punishment, yes, but not guilt for harm I had caused them. You and I, Captain, are very different."

"You reacted to being hit by a truck. I wouldn't ask you to feel guilty for that. Empathy, yes, not guilt."

The soft smile flashed again, gone in an instant. "You are a good man, Captain."

"Why am I sensing there's a but at the end of that sentence?"

"Perceptive as always." He seemed to pull in on himself, hands in his pockets again and looking away rather than at Steve. "I will not be able to run with you tomorrow morning. Or the morning after that. Or for some time, actually."

"Are you going somewhere? Loki, you're not in trouble. Not with SHIELD or the Avengers or anyone."

He shook his head, sadness coloring his expression. "I don't intend to go anywhere."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I am sorry. You've asked for so little and it is still too much." His shoulders slumped dejectedly. "I am asking you not to return here. Perhaps not forever, but I cannot tell you how long it will be."

The pit of his stomach turned heavy and cold. He'd messed up again and this time, he'd messed up
big. The morning run, the shower, pushing Loki to let him watch such a private act; he may as well have flayed Loki open and dumped salt over him by the barrel. He'd messed up so badly that Loki couldn't bear to be around him at all. His throat felt tight when he tried to swallow. Mind racing to think of a way to make it right, he forced himself to hold still and stay quiet. He'd hurt Loki without meaning to, because he'd only been thinking about himself and what he wanted, how he wanted Loki to feel. Anything he said or did now would only make it worse. His face burned with shame.

Finally, he forced his tongue to move. "Alright. I won't come back. If you don't want me to."

"I don't."

"Okay." His voice broke. "Look after him, Una, will you? Make sure he eats."

Una trilled softly. She darted up from the bar top and pressed a tiny hand to Steve's cheek, singing a few mournful notes of her lilting song. He nodded, assuming that was her way of telling him yes, and looked around, making a show of being certain he wasn't leaving anything behind. Once he'd made sure he had his phone, he started for the front door. Loki followed to let him out.

"Take care of yourself," he said, turning to look at Loki one last time.

"And you as well, Captain." Loki closed the door and Steve heard the bolt slide into place as he locked it.

The walk back to the Tower was too much heat and too much noise. He hurried past a group of tourists who recognized him, refusing to answer questions or autograph any of the proffered objects. Once he was there, he didn't know if he wanted to pound holes in a few punching bags or crawl into his own - empty - bed and never get out again.

He found himself on Thor's floor, knuckles rapping against the door, and realized he didn't know what he was going to say.

Jane Foster opened the door. "Steve! I mean...Captain Rogers. Do you go by Captain? I mean, Captain America. Am I not supposed to call you that when you're not on the clock? I really don't know how to salute. If I'm supposed to. Do that. Am I supposed to do that?" She smiled self-consciously.

"No salute necessary, Doctor."

"Jane. Jane is good."

"Steve is good too. Is Thor around? I can come back. I don't want to interrupt."

"No, no! Come in." She took his arm and tugged him inside, closing the door behind him. "We were just relaxing. I'm only in town for a conference and we're debating what Broadway show we wanted to get tickets for. Try to get tickets anyway. I mean, Pepper offered but that doesn't really feel fair."

"She buys tickets for every show and gives them away all the time. Easier than having Tony decide he wants to see one five minutes before it starts. Don't worry about it." He waved to Thor. "Hey."

Thor beamed at him. "Steven, what brings you to my home?"

The knot in Steve's throat felt as though it grew five sizes, but once he opened his mouth, it all came pouring out. "I messed it all up, Thor. I'm so sorry. I thought I could help him. I thought...if he could just learn to trust me. But I really fucked up. I pushed too hard and I, I was stupid. He told me not to come back and I think I've lost my chance at helping him. I'm so sorry. I really thought I had a
chance to get your brother back." He dropped onto the sofa, head in his hands.

Beside him, the cushion shifted as Thor sat down. "That you tried at all means more than I can tell you. Thank you."

Steve tried to smile, tears burning his eyes. "I wanted him back too."

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to end this at chapter 8. Then 10. Then 12. Now I'm going for 13, but should probably just leave it as unknown because this fic will not END.

Also, I am really trying to reflect all the nuances of Steve's sexuality as honestly and respectfully as I can. Really hoping people reading this are okay with how I've written him. I've deliberately avoided labeling him because I wanted to leave as much open to interpretation as possible.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

While investigating the fate of the sprites and their lost hive, Steve makes a surprising discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For a long time, Loki sat on the floor with his back against the door, staring blankly at the rug on his living room floor. Time skipped past, slippery and uneven, and it was dark outside when Una settled on his left knee, cooing and twittering at him. He felt drained, empty, but also lighter, as though he'd reached a strange semblance of peace.

"Yes, I know," he told her with a weary smile. "I am a fool. A ridiculous fool."

Everywhere he looked, he saw Steve, in the objects and changes he'd left behind. The metaphor was inelegant, but suitable. Steve had left as many imprints in his head, changing Loki as quietly and subtly as he'd changed the apartment. What had started with a spell, his aims so inconsequential now they were laughable, had become so much more; this was a magic against which he had no defense. Slowly, he got to his feet, settled Una on his shoulder and went into the kitchen.

"Are you hungry?"

Una answered in the negative and flew out to perch on the curve of the sink faucet, watching him hunt through the fridge.

He went through the various containers of food, setting aside what had spoiled so he could dispose of the contents later. Once he'd started, the momentum of taking action kept him going. He removed everything from the fridge and wiped the inside clean before replacing what he wished to keep, absently picking at the remainder of the pasta salad. After the fridge was clean, he took care of the dishes and wiped down the counters, then scrubbed the kitchen floor as well. While he tended to the plants and cleaned the living room, Una amused herself by working on the puzzle. She made a jingling noise when she caught him holding the blank card.

"I expect he will burn it as he did before. He has no need to keep it." He set it gently back on the mantle and continued to clean. "He was right. All along, he was right. He would give me everything but I can accept none of it. I cannot be who I am and be with him. He is too good and I am too..." he let his words fade into the silence.

The apartment was not large and although he put off the bedroom to the very last, it was not long before he had to face the bed. How Steve would laugh to know he'd vanished it from his chambers on Asgard; a foolish and sentimental decision, compounded now with too many memories of Steve. He stripped the furs and blankets, then loaded the linens into the washing machine. While he waited, he polished the carved wood of the bed frame to a soft, warm luster. Most of the bedding, he folded neatly and stowed beneath the bed. There was no need for the extra covering during hot summer nights. Dawn was beginning to peek through the windows by the time he'd finished cleaning the apartment and settled on the bed with freshly laundered linens and the Starkphone. He started a list of
items he thought would be useful to have, more odds and ends than anything particular. Una curled up on the pillow beside him, blinking and flexing her wings slowly. He thought of Steve watching him in the bed, how he'd murmured praise and encouragement, and his offer of sex he didn't want if it would help.

"I do not understand him," he told Una. "But perhaps," he paused to add an item to his list, tapping it out on the phone's screen, "do you believe him? That he finds value in time spent with me." Of course she believed him. "Then I suppose the question that remains is if it is enough. If I could be satisfied with what he has offered; if I can give him the intimacy he seeks. And I do not know the answer to that." He didn't even know how to figure out the answer; sex was the smallest, easiest piece of it. As it had always been for him, sex was no more or less a business transaction than any other service.

Sighing, he set the phone aside. "Mortals are fragile and they live brief lives. Even you will outlast the longest-lived of those alive today."

In that perspective, it seemed a small thing to forgo sex. He would outlive Steve by millennia and he would have other lovers once Steve was gone. In fact, there was nothing stopping him from taking another lover now, one with more similar sexual appetites and desires. He considered the idea, but it raised more questions than it answered. Steve had a strange hold over him and he was not so foolish as to lie to himself by thinking another lover would sway that influence.

When Una buzzed at him, he shook his head. "I know he is willing, but it is not the same as wanting. It is not enough that he wishes to please me, I need him to want me as I want him." As he said it, he felt uncertain of its truth. "Perhaps I do not know what I need or want any longer. And you are not helping."

She told him in no uncertain terms what she thought of his decision to exile Steve and he scowled at her.

"I sent him away because of this, because I do not know if it can be enough. What if it isn't? What if I cannot find satisfaction in what he offers? I do him no favors by pretending and I do not want him to lie on his back and spread his legs simply because he wants me to feel better. How is that any less vile than the spell?" He stopped, clamping his mouth shut.

He did want it, wanted it desperately, but he wanted Steve to want it and to know he was giving Steve pleasure, giving him what he craved and satisfying his desires. Instead, Steve wanted to cook and assemble puzzles and to watch Loki take matters into his own hand. He would never be able to pull Steve aside after a battle and unbuckle just enough of his uniform to get his mouth on his cock, or have Steve press him up against the kitchen counter at the end of a long day and erase all the tension from his muscles. He wanted that and, willingness aside, Steve didn't.

Those thoughts brought him full circle. He didn't wish to change Steve in any way, nor did he believe he could change himself enough to make them compatible.

"We are too different," he told her. "It is better that he is gone."

She made a sad sound, wings shivering as she adjusted her position and pawed at the pillow to form it into just the right shape. She wanted to know what he planned to do without Steve. He didn't have an answer to that. Since the spell, he hadn't had any answers.

"The first step on the long road out of Hel," he said softly. "Is deciding you want to leave."
Following up on the sprites gave Steve the excuse he needed to get out of the city. He didn't want to answer questions about the alleged bomb that had gone off in Chelsea the week before and how he'd been seen helping the victims; he definitely didn't want to deal with anyone on the team telling him 'I told you so' that things hadn't worked out with Loki. None of that was Loki's fault. Steve was the one who'd been needy and taken more than Loki was ready to give.

He didn't want to talk to Sam about it either because he'd probably screwed up even more than he thought he had and he didn't want to deal with that, at least, not yet.

A young Agent named Jemma Simmons met him at the door, beaming so brightly she looked like she might burst into a ball of sunshine. She held out her hand and gave him a professional nod before escorting him into the Fridge. His access badge was ready to go; he noticed this one was colored differently than before and asked about it.

Agent Simmons' eyes lit up. "It's coded for the maintenance areas. I think you'll be amazed at what's happened. The opportunities to learn about these creatures, it's unprecedented."

"Anything we can do to help them?"

"We're optimistic. Is there anything else you can tell me about them? Agent Hill...sorry, it's not Agent anymore. Maria said you knew someone who was familiar with sprites and could communicate with them?"

He turned his face forward and considered lying. "Loki. Thor's brother."

"Oh. Right." The embarrassment in her voice was clear. "Captain Rogers. I am...I mean, I was read in on what happened. To you. And what happened here, to Loki. Before he...before he escaped."

"Not really interested in talking about it," he said brusquely.

"No, of course not. I wasn't, I just...just," she stammered nervously. The doors opened and she hurried forward, bent over her tablet. "I'm sorry, that was entirely inappropriate. Please forgive me."

He started after her. "Agent Simmons, wait."

Turning abruptly, she hugged the tablet to her chest. "You are a man of incredible compassion, Captain Rogers. That's all I wanted to say."

"Oh. Thank you."

Her smile returned. "Come see what they've created." She dug into her jacket pocket and pulled out a small plastic bag containing disposable earplugs. "You'll want these."

"I'm good actually. Their magic doesn't work on me." He saw her expression shift and wondered if he should've kept his mouth shut, because that was the look of a scientist who'd just stumbled onto a particularly interesting problem. It was the same look Jane Foster got when Thor started talking about how the Bifrost worked. "I, uh, can't explain it. It was something Loki did to protect me. Something to do with the magic in the Earth."

Her brow furrowed, the look of intense curiosity not lessening in the slightest. "Something Loki did to protect you?"

"It's...we're." He took a deep breath. "We're really complicated."

"Too bad we can't replicate it. We're buying earplugs by the case." She grinned as she opened up the
plastic and put the earplugs in her ears. "Sorry if I shout at you, I'll try to remember you can hear me."

They went through a metal door labeled Maintenance Access and down a set of concrete steps. The air around them warmed several degrees and he could hear a dull buzzing sound, but couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from. Ductwork and pipes criss-crossed the ceiling above them, running down the walls and disappearing.

Simmons led the way through the maze of equipment. "This is the brain and the heart of the Fridge. It's sectioned into areas. Heating and cooling, power and communications, back up generators, and the central computing bank that maintains control of the infrastructure systems. You'd be surprised at how much it takes to keep a place like this functional."

A wide archway led to another room, much warmer than the second, and his eyes widened as he saw the source of the noise. Thousands of sprites milled about the room, darting about and chattering with each other as they worked to construct their hive. The hive itself was beginning to fill the spaces between several large metal housings for the heating and cooling system. It was made of an odd, shimmering material, similar to their wings, and although the only parallel he could draw was a beehive, it was far less geometric in its structure.

"We've been able to stop contracting for pest control services," she said with a wide smile. "No more pesticides, no more traps, just these wonderful creatures. We haven't observed anything that appears to be a reproductive cycle, although we're assuming that must be part of the purpose of the hive."

He raised his voice to be heard over the noise of the sprites and her earplugs. "They go dormant. Sometimes for centuries. Loki's sprite is three hundred years old and she's just a kid."

"How can you tell the males and females apart? We haven't observed any significant physiological differences."

"No idea. I think she just told him." He could tell Simmons wanted nothing more than to get a shot at talking to Loki. "They need a heat source while they hibernate. That's why they used to lure away children." Their presence had been noticed by the sprites and he heard the familiar bell-like tones of their singing as several tried to lure them in. After a minute, they seemed to realize it wasn't working and gave up.

"They haven't shown any aggressive behavior since establishing the hive." She motioned for him to follow her and turned back the way they'd come. "I think their original hive must've been near where they attacked. Perhaps it had only recently been destroyed when the Avengers found them. They must've been disoriented and frightened."

He frowned, thinking he should've made a more thorough check of the scene that night. He'd been distracted by Loki and it hadn't occurred to him to go back to investigate. Considering how protective Una was toward Loki, he could easily see the behavior of the swarm being a reaction to whoever, or whatever, had destroyed their hive. His ears were ringing and he half regretted turning down the earplugs by the time they emerged from the access door back into the brightly lit hallway. Now that he thought about it, Una always seemed to be making noise of some kind and an entire hive of sprites had been deafening.

"We're learning so much by observing them." Simmons tucked her earplugs into a pocket. "And they're safe here. Much safer than they would be in an urban environment. We're thinking of attempting to establish hives at the Hub facilities as well, sort of a symbiotic relationship between the sprite community and SHIELD. Do you know if they have any natural predators?"
"Other than people?" He felt a little nauseous as he thought about what Loki had said sprites could be used for. "Their wings and hearts are ingredients in spells. Loki said they don't have a lot of blood so you'd have to have a lot of sprites to get enough."

"That could explain why the hives are being targeted. There is a considerable market, legal and otherwise, for exotic herbal remedies. Entire species can be driven to extinction because people believe in their healing properties or other such nonsense."

"And if the creatures really are magic?"

"I imagine they would be extremely valuable." At the elevator, she stopped before getting in. "Would you be interested in seeing my lab? While you're here."

Since the alternative was going back to the Tower and dealing with reality, he said yes. He half listened to Simmons tell him about how they were monitoring the sprites behavior, trying to discern how they communicated and the hierarchy of their social structure. They gave off very little heat, making them invisible to infrared sensors, and she had several theories of why they built their hives around a heat source.

The research lab was clean and brightly lit, buzzing with nearly as much activity as the hive deep in the heart of the Fridge. They passed a display screen that showed the Chitauri scepter inside a small, well secured vault; the sight of it made him shiver.

One corner of lab space had been dedicated to observation of the sprites. Simmons pointed out each of the displays in turn and explained what they were measuring in terms of physical characteristics; heat, humidity, fluctuations in activity inside the hive; all variables that would help them adapt the environment to create the most suitable habitat for the sprites. Her passion for studying them, and taking care of them, was obvious in her enthusiasm as well as the piles of neatly taken notes on their behavior.

"They sleep very little. Deep sleep, that is. They're more like cats, with short naps throughout a period of twenty four hours, lacking the kind of regulated sleep cycle of human beings." She blushed, turning sheepish. "I'm afraid I can get a little carried away."

He wondered if Loki might've been more willing to help them learn about magic if he'd known about Agent Simmons. She was a far cry from the cold, clinical scientist armed with a scalpel and a dissection table that Loki expected. "Have any of them taken a liking to anyone here? Una, Loki's sprite, seems to have bonded with him. She refuses to leave him."

"Not so far, though we've kept our distance. Now and then, they play tricks on the maintenance workers. Nothing malicious, harmless pranks really."

That was in line with what he'd seen from Una, who was bossy and a little hot-headed but generally good-natured. He nodded, glancing around the busy lab. There were other projects in the laboratory as well; the number of strange artifacts SHIELD had discovered, or recovered from HYDRA, was disconcerting. He winced when Simmons told him about the Centipede project and its super soldiers. Although he knew others would have pursued Erskine's dream, had even been pursuing it before and at the same time as Erskine, he felt the weight on his shoulders grow heavier with every attempt that failed.

"There is one more thing you may be interested in, Captain." She waved her badge over the scanner of a locked door. "We recovered it from an underground vault after the Triskelion was destroyed."

Inside the room was a chair fitted with restraints and attached to a bank of electronic equipment. A
SHIELD technician in a white lab coat was working with a tablet, taking notes or readings of some kind as he adjusted knobs and dials. Steve walked slowly around the chair, wondering why Simmons had thought he would be interested. The chair made him uneasy; he doubted HYDRA had any good uses for it.

"It's consistent with the apparatus described in the Winter Soldier file," she said quietly. "This would be what they used to condition him."

He swore under his breath. "What does it do?"

"We're still running tests. But once we understand the device, we'll have a better idea of how to counter its effects. That your friend survived repeated durations of cryogenic stasis means they must've given him a form of the serum, but without blood samples, we can't compare it to yours and determine the differences."

"Do you have any of my blood in storage somewhere? The SSR took plenty back in forty-five."

"There is some debate about what happened the vials collected by the SSR, but SHIELD believes they were all destroyed after the War."

He had mixed feelings about the vials being gone. Not having access to his blood clearly hadn't stopped anyone from attempting to replicate the serum, with disastrous results, but not having to worry about who might or might not have gotten their hands on his blood was a small victory. His throat felt tight when he looked at the chair again. "Bruce Banner has taken plenty of mine in the past year so that won't be a problem, if you need it. Thank you, Agent Simmons. If you could keep me updated on this, I'd appreciate it. When I find Sergeant Barnes, I'll need all the help I can get."

"Absolutely." She smiled brightly all the way back to the ground floor and collected his access badge, encouraging him to return whenever he wished.

Confident the sprites were in good hands eased his mind and he felt more optimistic about his chances once he found Bucky again. Knowing what HYDRA had done to create the Winter Soldier was an unpleasant but necessary piece of the puzzle. Dwelling on Bucky was as painful as thinking about Loki; he'd failed them both and had no way of making it right.

He parked his bike at the Tower and left on foot to revisit the location where the sprites had swarmed. He walked the length of the block, once down each side, looking for any remnant of sprite activity. They would seek out heat and isolation; he didn't think they had any difficulty seeing in the dark and with the constant stream of noises they made, he wasn't going to rule out echo location or other inhuman senses. On his second time down the sidewalk, he found himself staring at one of the many vents rising up out of the street from the New York City steam system.

Bingo.

Since he doubted the city of New York would smile on him invading the inner workings of the steam system, he pulled out his phone and called the best infiltration expert he knew.

"You busy?"

There was a pause and he could hear wariness in Natasha's voice. "Why are you asking?"

"Wondering if you were up to a little field trip? Tourist stuff really."

"Uh-huh." She didn't sound like she believed him.
"I'm trying to find the hive those sprites were from. What's left of it anyway. About three months ago, remember?" He glanced around before lowering his voice. "They like heat so I'm thinking steam tunnels."

She sighed. "You're going to owe me dinner."

"I'll throw in a bottle of your favorite wine."

"JARVIS can find us an access point. I'll be there in ten."

"Bring my shield," he added as an afterthought. They had no idea of what or who had been destroying the sprite hives and it never hurt to be careful.

A minute later, Natasha texted him the coordinates of a location several blocks away. He found himself in an alley with a nondescript metal door halfway down. It was locked and marked for authorized personnel only. Loitering near the door would look suspicious so he pretended to be window shopping at nearby boutiques while he waited.

"See anything you like?" Natasha kept walking, holding out a circular black bag he used to store his shield.

"Thanks." He slung the strap over his head, settling the weight low on his back. It wasn't as accessible as the hook on his uniform, but it was better than nothing. He followed her into the alley, standing in the line of sight between her and the street while she picked the lock on the door.

"This is illegal," she said dryly.

"Sorry."

"We could've put in a request to the city for access."

"How long does that take?"

"Six to eight months. There's a process with a hearing. Kind of like getting a warrant, only for Avengers stuff. Stark Legal worked it out."

He frowned. It had already been long enough since the sprite attack that he couldn't use expediency as an excuse and he was only focused on this now because he didn't want to think about Loki.

Before he could say anything further, the lock slid back and Natasha smiled as she opened the door. "But this is much faster." She waved him in.

"We're just taking a look around. We won't break anything."

Slipping inside as quickly as possible, he squinted until his eyes adjusted to the low light once Natasha closed the door behind them. They stood, listening, in a utilitarian room with peeling paint flaking from the brick walls. To their left was a set of narrow concrete steps leading down. Natasha's hand hovered near the small black bag over her shoulder. It didn't look like a weapon case but he knew better than to assume Natasha wasn't armed to the teeth at all times. They crept down the stairs and made a sharp turn to the right. Sparsely placed bulbs along the walls gave off a sickly yellow light.

Inside the tunnel was dark; the stale, foul air grew heavy with humidity as they continued. Natasha moved so quietly beside him that he wouldn't have guessed she was even there. He swapped his shield from his back, stripping away the light fabric case, and slid it onto his arm.
"Expecting trouble?"
"Works on cobwebs as well as bullets."
"What are we looking for anyway?"
"What's left of the hive."

Another narrow staircase lead them deeper into the earth and, at the bottom, the space opened up into a wide tunnel with pipes running along the walls and down the center of the floor. The smell of mold and damp stone grew stronger.

"Good thing I brought a map." Natasha pulled out a tablet, holding it up as she looked around the space. "There's utility work a few blocks down but it's in the opposite direction so we should be able to keep out of sight. And, flashlights." She fished two small flashlights out of the bag at her hip and handed one of them over. "You'd be lost without me."

He clicked on the light and swept the darker spaces beneath a bundle of pipes as he headed east down the tunnel. "The hive at the Fridge looked sort of like blown glass. It was big, maybe ten feet in diameter. If Una's hive was here, we should be able to find pieces."

"And then what?"
"Maybe a clue of what happened to them."
"It's a long shot."
"Long shots are all I've got these days," he muttered. His track record on those wasn't good either.
"Do you want to talk about Chelsea?"
"No."
"None of the injuries were serious. Looked like an accident."
"It was."
"Then why the break up?"
"Natasha. Focus."

He didn't want to talk about Loki. He couldn't think about that day without remembering Loki naked and shivering in his arms, or naked and crying for a reason Steve couldn't comprehend. His brain hurt from trying to put himself in Loki's place and understand where Loki was coming from. Surely, it couldn't be that difficult for Loki to accept their differences in sexual desire. It wasn't as though Steve was broken in some way or that his body wouldn't respond to physical stimulation; he was fully capable of giving Loki what he wanted and clearly sex was very important to Loki. He'd even offered, but now it seemed Loki couldn't accept it or maybe he still wanted sex, just not with Steve.

Rubbing at his forehead, he felt a nagging headache begin to return. This was why he'd decided to get out of the Tower; he didn't want to think about why Loki wanted him and didn't want him at the same time. He didn't want to think about it and he didn't want to talk about it.

"Steve," Natasha said quietly. She directed her flashlight toward a nearly concealed niche along the tunnel wall. "Looks like someone's been living down here. Does that seem strange to you?"
Frowning, he added the beam of his flashlight and saw immediately what she meant. There were the usual signs of habitation; old food wrappers and two plastic water bottles stood neatly beside a bundle of cloth bound by a strip of black leather with a tarnished buckle, too small to be a belt. There was a hard plastic gear box, military issue, tucked into the corner. It was neatly organized and there was a single set of boot prints, as though someone had stood in one position long enough for the dust to settle around them. He swung the light over the space a few more times. It was a good location if the resident wanted to know someone was approaching long before they could be discovered, with solid walls on three sides and ample cover from the pipes.

Moving on, he led Natasha deeper into the tunnels. The search felt increasingly futile and he was about to tell Natasha to turn back when he saw a shadowed access door slightly ajar on one side of the tunnel they were exploring. There had been a padlock on the door latch, but it was lying open on the ground. When he nudged the padlock with his foot, a shimmer in the dust caught his eye. It was a sliver of material that looked like blown glass, thin and opalescent.

"In here," he murmured. As quietly as possible, he pulled the door open far enough to slip through.

The access door led to a narrow corridor lit only by their flashlights and thick with the smell of damp earth and mold. His shield scuffed against the wall, ringing out before Natasha muffled it with a touch of her fingertips. He caught sight of a boot print, the same tread as they'd seen in the alcove, and silently pointed it out to Natasha. There were more glittering shards at their feet, many of them crushed to a fine powder beneath the weight of whoever had worn the boots.

"You should've let me go first," Natasha whispered.

"We're not here to shoot anything."

There was a long silence before she answered. "How did you know I brought a gun?"

"You always bring a gun. Now put it away." He spared her the lecture on discharging firearms in close quarters and too little light, mostly because he trusted that she'd hit her mark.

They followed the trail of crystal shards and glittering dust deeper into the maze of utility tunnels. It grew warmer; the air grew thicker. A sharp crunch beneath his right boot was the first indication that they'd struck pay dirt. Flashing the light down, he saw a large chunk of the glass-like material. He'd broken it in half when he'd stepped down.

"We have to be close." He swept the beam of the flashlight around them and sure enough, along one corner of the small room was what remained of Una's hive.

Support pieces where the hive had joined the concrete walls were all that remained intact, jutting out in sharp angles and fractured shapes. A cascade of ruined hive segments cluttered the corner. He half wished they'd brought floodlights rather than flashlights. He started with the corner and began to sweep out, looking for anything amidst the wreckage of the hive that might serve as a clue to its destruction. It was obvious the damage had been intentional; this wasn't merely a structural collapse. He found marks on some of the scattered shards from an unidentified blunt instrument that had been used to break the hive apart. There were partial boot prints in the dust, although he couldn't be certain they weren't his or Natasha's. The two of them were hardly equipped for a crime scene investigation so he'd take what he could get. If there were more destroyed hives and displaced sprites, SHIELD might be able to locate them and do a real investigation.

"Steve," Natasha began. "I don't think we're-"

Before she could finish, a gun shot exploded with an ear splitting crack in the small room. He felt
and heard the bullet hit the shield slightly off-center, pinging against the concrete an instant later, and he pivoted, swinging the flashlight toward where the bullet must've come from. Natasha returned fire before pulling close to Steve and behind the cover of the shield. Their assailant's second shot went wide and embedded the corner, bringing down a fresh cascade of shards from what was left of the hive. Uneven footsteps faded down the long, twisting corridor they'd followed.

"I grazed him at least," Natasha said, speaking loudly enough to be heard despite the ringing in their ears. When he moved to pursue, she stopped him with a hand on his arm and shook her head.

"They're getting away, Natasha," he snapped. He couldn't hear footsteps any longer and each passing second lessened their odds of catching up to the shooter. The surge of adrenaline had jangled his already worked up nerves, making him eager to chase after the unknown gunman, but if Natasha was hesitating, he knew it was for good reason.

"He's hit. He'll leave a trail...something we can follow." The beam of her flashlight stopped on a series of dark spots on the dust. "Did you get a look at him?"

"No. You?" He let her take the lead, sensing she wanted him to hold back and wondering why. There were drops and splatters of blood they could follow; it was a safer option than a firefight in the tunnels. They'd been lucky none of the bullets had ricocheted and turned deadly.

"I got a glimpse." Stopping to sweep the light over the floor, she reached out and found Steve's hand in the dark. "Promise me you won't go running off half cocked? You'll stay and think about this."

"Natasha, whatever you want to tell me, just tell me."

"Promise."

"I promise."

She gave his hand a quick squeeze. "He had a metal arm. I'm not saying it was Barnes."

"But how many metal armed assassins can there be?" He tried to keep his voice light. Blood was pounding in his ears - that was Bucky's blood on the ground - and he knew exactly why she'd made him promise not to run after him. "We have to find him. Could you tell where the bullet hit?"

"Leg, I think." She pulled her hand away and started moving again, more quickly this time. "He'll survive. I didn't miss, but I didn't have a good shot either."

He flashed back to the narrow alcove where it had appeared someone had been hiding and the single set of boot prints in the dust. It was impossible not to be impatient. When they squeezed through the access door, he pushed past Natasha and went immediately to the small space. It was empty now, the water bottles, cloth bundle, and gear box cleared away.

Natasha was crouched several feet away, studying the ground. She motioned with her flashlight. "This way."

"What was he doing down here?" He couldn't think of any link between Bucky and the sprites or even HYDRA and the sprites, but it cast an entirely new light on the destruction of the hives. Had Bucky destroyed the sprites' hive? "Maybe he's been in New York all this time. Right under my nose and I didn't even know it."

"You've been a little busy," she murmured.

He ground his molars together to keep silent. All that mattered now was that Bucky was somewhere
in New York City with a gunshot wound. He doubted Bucky would go to a hospital or clinic for help; he'd want to stay under the radar. The steam tunnel complex was extensive and he could search for weeks down here with no guarantee of finding a trace, but Bucky had been spooked - bullets tended to do that - he probably wouldn't be back and would disappear into the city, or even leave altogether.

"Steve." Natasha caught his arm. They'd returned to their starting point and he hadn't even noticed. "We'll find him. We know this city. There are plenty of cameras that JARVIS can access in a ten block radius, we'll find him."

Nodding, he followed her up and out into the alleyway. She locked the door behind them. Her gun disappeared beneath her jacket and she helped him slip the shield back into its case so it wouldn't draw unwanted attention. His mind was still racing, still struggling to come to grips with the fact that Bucky had been here - was here - and he hadn't known.

Easily, she fell into step beside him."You okay?"

"I need to call Maria." He didn't know what he was going to say, but finding Bucky at the location of the destroyed hive couldn't be a coincidence. It meant something, he just couldn't see the connection. Mentally, he was already trying to figure out what he would put up on his wall, how he would build the link of the sprites. The idea of blurring the boundary between Bucky's section and Loki's section made him uneasy.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, telling SHIELD the Winter Soldier is here. The Avengers can handle this."

She was right and he knew it. The Winter Soldier was very much in the murky gray area of unknown intent; an enemy to SHIELD, an asset of HYDRA who had assassinated Tony's parents, and possibly still, but possibly not, the childhood friend of Captain America. No one knew with any certainty which one of those was the case or if Bucky was managing to be all three at once.

There was nothing within range he could punch hard enough to vent his frustration.

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The evening was sweltering; the kind of heat that made Loki nostalgic for Jotunheim, if Jotunheim had been utterly devoid of monstrous creatures who would try to eat him. He supposed that applied equally to the Frost Giants and their enormous beasts. The lettuce had been crisp when he'd purchased it, but it was already wilting in the cloth bag slung over his shoulder. He didn't care for lettuce anyway. He'd just unlocked the door to let himself in, hand still on the key in the lock, when he felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle.

Glancing sharply to the side, he saw a man limp out from the shadows at the corner of the building. He looked furtive; dark, greasy brown hair fell like curtains around his face, his clothing could barely be identified as such, and he smelled of blood and filth. The man stopped several feet away. There was a slick patch on the dark fabric over his left thigh that was most definitely blood. He'd attempted to wrap the wound with rags and the way he was holding his left arm, also wrapped in rags from what Loki could see extending out of the sleeve of his heavy jacket, indicated the hole in his leg wasn't his only injury. And that was far too heavy a jacket for the heat of summer.

Loki wrinkled his nose, watching carefully as he approached. It was clear the man had been waiting for him, though Loki didn't have the slightest idea as to why. He waited for the man to ask for spare change or perhaps food, wondering why he wasn't stumbling his way to one of the various healing establishments the city had to offer.
"You know him," the man said flatly, his voice utterly lacking inflection or emotion.

He must be desperate, that much was clear from the blood and the gauntness of his face, but he held himself very still. It wasn't an plea for help. There was a sense of formality, as though Loki was merely one door the man had tried, patiently moving on to the next until he found what he was looking for.

Loki frowned. He was about to tell the man to elaborate when he realized there was only one person whose mere association would imply that Loki was someone safe to come to in a time of need. Whether he was annoyed or amused by the mistake he wasn't entirely sure, but instead of turning the man away, he pulled the door open and nodded him inside. He felt a moment's pity for when he looked up the five flights of stairs, but made no offer to ease the climb. Still, he kept his pace slow enough that the man didn't fall behind. Beads of sweat appeared on the man's face from the exertion and pain, but Loki kept silent.

"Try not to bleed on the rug," he said mildly as he opened his front door and let the man in. "The bathroom is to the right, through the bedroom." The man only nodded in reply, limping toward the bedroom.

He put the groceries away first. Una was conspicuously absent, likely unnerved by the appearance of a stranger in their home, and he finally found her hiding behind one of the corner finials on top of the canopy bed. Her black eyes remained focused on the bathroom, wary and watchful. Water was running and the door was open, unexpectedly. Casually, and curious, he moved to the doorway and leaned against the frame, arms folded.

The stranger was seated on the toilet. He had stripped down to a worn pair of black undergarments and was prodding gently at a wound in his left thigh. More striking than the blood spilling out over his fingers was the fact that half of his fingers were made of a bright, silvery metal. The arm was layered, almost scaled like a serpent, and Loki could hear minute sounds of gears as the internal components worked. There were pings and the occasional whirring or grinding noise that seemed out of place with such a delicately crafted device; he saw damage and weapon marks in several places along the metal arm. The man glanced up, noting Loki's presence with casual indifference before returning his focus wholly to the wound in his leg. He took a bundle of rags and wedged it between his teeth before reaching for a slender knife set on the sink counter, clearly intending to dig out whatever had become lodged in his leg.

A bullet, Loki realized. The man had been shot. "Wait," he said without thinking. "I have neighbors and would prefer not to explain any screaming."

The man's brow furrowed, but he hesitated long enough for Loki to come closer, moving slowly and carefully. Keeping his hand several inches above the wound, Loki reached for the embedded bullet with his magic, a green-gold shimmer of light, and gently lifted it free of the damaged tissue. Blood bubbled and popped as the bullet came loose, floating up to Loki's fingers. Setting it aside, he turned his focus to healing and set the torn skin and muscle knitting back together.

Sucking in a sharp breath, the man stared down at the wound as it healed. Once Loki pulled his hand away, he gingerly mopped up the blood, revealing a faint red circle where the open wound had been.

"You're not like us then," he said in the same flat tone of voice as before.

"Like you and Steve," Loki said quietly. "No. Not quite."

He saw the man flinch at the mention of Steve's name, but he looked pained rather than worried, as though Steve was a difficult memory or burden he carried. It was confirmation enough that Steve
was the reason he'd sought Loki out. Loki hadn't known of any other super soldiers, no other men
like Captain America, but then he'd never thought to ask how many of them there were. Certainly
this one did not seem to be as beloved as the Captain. From the smell of him, he'd likely been living
on the streets for some time and someone had tried to kill him, or at least maim him, quite recently.

"Bathe. You may borrow clothing while yours are laundered." He retreated quickly, motioning for
Una to follow after him.

In the kitchen, it felt odd to be preparing a meal for more than just himself and Una. He decided to
replicate one of the simpler dishes Steve had made for him, setting out spaghetti noodles and filling a
pot with water to heat. Una darted about the kitchen, attempting to help him in his meal preparations
but limited by her size. As he browned ground meat to add, he wondered if he ought to send Steve a
message about the wayward super soldier; the man's reaction to Steve's name kept him from doing
so.

The noodles were nearly done when the man emerged from the bedroom wearing a borrowed t-shirt
and jeans, both of which were ill-fitting and too tight on his wider form. Loki fixed that with a flick
of his wrist, earning another wide eyed look from the man. Awkwardly, he loaded his soiled clothing
into the washer with his right hand, leaving the metal arm pressed uselessly at his side.

"Are you unable to repair your arm?" Loki filled a glass with water and set it on the counter.

"No tools," the man said roughly, all of his focus on the washing machine.

"Would you like me to take a look at it as well?"

Strands of dark hair, still damp from the shower, crossed the man's face when he looked back over
his shoulder. "Why?"

Loki shrugged. "It's an interesting device. I've seen nothing like it here on Midgard." At the blank
look on the man's face, he amended the statement, "here in New York City."

He noted that the man was ignorant of the Nine Realms and likely ignorant of who Loki was,
beyond the fact that Steve knew him. If he knew Steve but not Loki, then he must have observed
them together, must have observed Steve coming and going from Loki's apartment building without
knowing any of their history. He felt a strange relief in the anonymity; he was neither villain nor
monster to the stranger with the metal arm, he was merely Steve's _friend_ and that seemed entirely
sufficient.

The man set the washer going and rounded on Loki with sudden intensity. "Can you fix it?"

"Perhaps." Loki watched him thoughtfully. "What's your name?"

The man blinked owlishly at him for several moments, jaw working as though he was struggling to
form the right sounds. "Bucky," he said finally, and then repeated it with more certainty, "Bucky."

"Pleased to meet you, Bucky. I am Loki."

"Did they...did they make you?" He seemed to have trouble focusing on the words and putting them
together. "They made me."

"Who?"

He looked away, eyes darting back and forth as he thought through his answer. "HYDRA." But he
sounded uncertain. "There were...others. They could...they were different. Like you."
Uneasy with the implications of what he was being told, Loki motioned for Bucky to take a seat at the bar and turned his attention back to their meal. He knew of HYDRA, knew their connection to Captain America, but he had not known HYDRA was in the business of creating super soldiers and other beings. Beings with abilities similar enough to Loki’s magic for Bucky to draw the comparison. With so few truly magical creatures left on Midgard, he wondered at the ramifications of forcing magic upon them, although he supposed there was little difference between that and what he’d done to Steve.

"I was born as I am, not made," he answered, though he didn't know if that was entirely the truth. "I'm not, as you say, from around here."

If Bucky had further questions, he didn't voice them. Loki watched him out of the corner of his eye while he finished preparing their meal and set a plate piled high with spaghetti on the bar in front of him. From the hollowness in his cheeks and the cast of his skin, he doubted Bucky had been eating much better than he had before the Captain's last visit. They began to eat in silence, which was unusual enough that Loki realized Una had gone into hiding again.

"There is another who lives here with me," Loki said evenly. "Do not be alarmed. She will not harm you and she is under my protection."

Bucky's head jerked up and he looked around, blue eyes moving rapidly as he searched the space.

"Una?" Loki called.

A tiny chirp came in response and Una emerged from her hiding spot within the plant on the bar. She kept her wings flattened against her back, moving forward along the bar top on her toes and the tips of her extended claws. Had she been a cat, Loki thought her back would have been arched and tail bristled, straight as a lightning rod. Bucky's eyes narrowed for a moment and the muscles of his jaw worked, but he made no move to reach out for Una or to move away from them. He stared openly at her and he didn't seem as surprised to see a sprite as he had to see Loki wield magic.

"What is it, Una," Loki asked thoughtfully.

In a series of chirps and rattles, she informed him that Bucky smelled of blood. She did not like him and she didn't believe he was anything like Steve. He ignored her protest that he was attempting to replace Steve with an inferior substitute. Perhaps he had grown lonely without Steve's company, whether he had or hadn't was not the issue at hand.

Bucky's gaze shifted to Loki. "Never seen one of these alive before."

A chill went down Loki's spine. "But you have seen them."

"Crates of them. All dead." Bucky turned back to his plate of spaghetti and continued eating.

Loki's fingers itched for a pen and the blank card on the mantle. He could tell the Captain that HYDRA was behind the destruction of the hives and wholesale slaughter of the sprites. Una leapt to his shoulder and burrowed into his hair, clinging to his neck and t-shirt collar. She was shivering with fear and he wondered if, perhaps, it was not human blood Una smelled on him, but the blood of sprites. He didn't think Bucky had destroyed Una's hive, but he had information.

Getting that information out of Bucky was likely to be a challenge. As he watched Bucky eat, his first impressions grew increasingly firm. He was unfocused, scattered, as though moving in and out of time and reality without anything to anchor him. Spoken words, a question, could pull him out of the chaos for a moment, long enough for him to gather up an answer of some kind, but then he
slipped away again. Loki had seen similar behavior, usually in victims of a misguided spell that had broken the poor soul loose from the present. In such a state, the past and the future happened simultaneously and the end result was inevitably madness. Whatever HYDRA had done to Bucky had dismantled his mental functions in a similar fashion.

"Why did you come here," Loki asked.

Bucky paused, the fork buried in his spaghetti. His brow furrowed in concentration. "Need repairs. Rest. He...he found me. I ran. There was no where else I knew."

There was very little in the answer that made sense to Loki except that Steve must know Bucky was in New York. "Does he know where you are now?"

Bucky shook his head slowly. "He was my mission." He set the fork down and seemed to withdraw into himself, settling into an unnatural stillness. "HYDRA. That's who they are. I remember now. What that means. Who they used to be. They found me. Before."

"They sent you to kill him." He knew he'd guessed correctly even before Bucky nodded. "Why didn't you?"

"I knew him," Bucky said simply. He held up his left arm to stare at the metal hand. It made quiet grinding noises and layers of the scales stuck or stuttered, not moving as they should have. "Before. I knew him before. But he was...smaller. Brighter." His gaze drifted away but Loki didn't think he was seeing the apartment at all; his mind had drifted along with whatever memories were tugging at him. When he spoke again, his voice was a whisper. "I knew him."

Somehow, Loki thought, Steve had managed to bring him another puzzle. This one was in the shape of a broken man with a metal arm.

"Eat," he prompted lightly. "And rest. If I can help you with your device, I will."

"Are you," Bucky stopped, blinking as though suddenly seeing Loki for the first time. "Who are you? What are you? To him."

If not for the last two words, Loki had a ready answer to give. He was Loki, outcast Prince of Asgard, Fallen Son, monster and villain, but within the context of Steve, he no longer knew who or what he was. He thought of the last time Steve had been there and how the heat of his body had lulled him to sleep; he thought of the abandoned castle. None of that gave him an easy answer. He saw Bucky watching him, patiently and expectantly.

"I love him," he said finally, unable to think of a better explanation, and it felt like a revelation.

To his surprise, Bucky almost smiled, apparently appeased by that answer. He picked up his fork and resumed eating.

They finished the meal without further conversation and Loki cleared away the dishes, Una still clinging to him. He could see the exhaustion in every line of Bucky's face and offered him the bed before he settled in the living room to work on the puzzle. When it had been long enough to be certain Bucky was asleep, he checked and found him curled on the floor between the bed and the wall with a haphazard collection of furs and blankets he'd pulled from underneath the bed. Retreating to the living room, Loki turned to the Starkphone and searched for information about his unusual guest. If he knew Steve, or had known him in the past, then it was possible there was information about him on the internet.

His search for Captain America and Bucky returned tens of thousands of results and, with a growing
sense of bitter irony, Loki began to realize exactly who it was he'd let into his home.

Chapter End Notes

I really struggle with Bucky Barnes. He gives me fits. But his voice is starting to come together in my head and it's not what I thought it would be nor what I wanted it to be. Oy.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Steve takes a vacation - Tony doesn't let him go alone - and Loki offers Bucky a place* to stay.

*He makes no promises of safety

"It's two in the morning." Natasha set a cup of fresh coffee down beside Steve before she settled on the floor with her own.

He dragged his hand through his hair, leaning forward to brace his elbows on his knees. Knowing Bucky had been there, that he'd been so close and still nowhere nearer to actually finding him, was maddening. "I know, it's just...there has to be something." But he knew there wasn't. He knew they'd pulled everything they could get their hands on and it wasn't enough. There was a single grainy photograph of Bucky leaving the alley behind, but they couldn't even be certain which direction he'd gone. Anything further would require accessing sources that would be noticed by SHIELD or worse. As much as he consoled himself that New York City was a smaller haystack than the whole planet Earth, it was still a pretty damn big haystack.

"Walk me through what we've got."

"There's nothing. I've got nothing." Shoving away from the materials, he snatched up the coffee and it splashed over the rim onto his hand.

"Then talk to me about Chelsea." She smiled over her mug when he glared at her. "An Avenger was engaged in a possible terrorist attack and has nothing to say about it. Do you have any idea how much overtime Stark PR puts in on you alone?"

He scowled harder, knowing she was right and angrier for it. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

"What happened?"

"We were running, Loki ran out in the road and a truck hit him."

"Wasn't watching where he was going?"

"We were going pretty fast." He turned his face toward the wall. Maybe if he could find something else to talk about, he could dissuade her from following this particular thread. He was tired and his head ached. His neck and back ached; he knew he should either get up and stretch or lie down and sleep, but neither of those would help him find Bucky.

"How badly was he injured?"

"Banged up a bit. Bruises and road burn." His thoughts flashed back to washing Loki's skin clean of dirt and blood. "He has scars, you know, from what they did to him at the Fridge. I didn't know Asgardians could even get scars."

"Sounds like you got a good look, up close and personal."
He rolled his eyes. "I have seen him naked before."

"And there was no sex? This time."

"I offered. He wasn't interested."

"What do you mean...you offered." There was something in Natasha's voice that meant he wasn't going to like where this was going.

"Do we have to do this?" With a sigh, he left the floor and moved to the couch. He may as well be comfortable while she gave him the third degree. "Yes, I offered. He thinks that's all he can give me that's of any value so I figured why not. If he wants it and it would make him feel better, then it's worth it. I don’t have a problem with sex." She didn't say anything to that and continued to study him, her expression neutral but thoughtful. Minutes grew and compounded until he felt like an exhibit on display in a museum.

Finally, she moved to sit on the couch beside him, head cocked to the side. "How does it work for you? Sex."

"The same way it works for anyone else."

"Would you offer to have sex with Sam if you thought it would make him feel better?" She raised her mug to her lips slowly, never taking her gaze from him. "What if I offered. It's late. You're tired and upset. Maybe it would help you get some rest."

"Natasha," he started.

"I'm serious. Would you say yes if I offered to have sex with you, so that you could relax and get some sleep."

"I know what you're trying to do."

She shrugged one shoulder. "That isn't an answer."

"Of course I wouldn't. It wouldn't be-"

"Wouldn't be right? We're both adults, we both have needs, both capable of consent, and I think we're friends. Just two friends trying to help each other out."

"It's not the same."

She took a slow sip of coffee. "From where I'm sitting, it doesn't look that different. So help me understand how this works for you. Help me understand how it's different than what you offered Loki. Maybe he turned you down for the same reasons you're turning me down right now."

Shifting uncomfortably, he couldn't meet her gaze. "You're not really offering."

"Now I am. Offer's on the table, Rogers. If it'll get you away from this wall and help you get some rest." She gave him an openly speculative look. "Can't say it'd be a hardship."

He frowned at her. "How can you be so casual about it?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Because we're not...you and I...we aren't." He felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Too late, he realized this was the web she was spinning around him with invisible threads. He sighed
heavily. "We're friends. You're one of my best friends, Natasha. And if you really are offering then I sincerely appreciate the offer."

"But?"

"I don't feel that way about you."

"According to you, you don't feel that way about Loki either. So why does he get special treatment?"

He dug his fingers into his hair. "I really hate you sometimes. Like right now. Why are you making me think about this at two o'clock in the morning? I'm going to get it wrong or say something stupid."

Her hand was warm on his shoulder. "There is no wrong and there is no stupid. There's just you and me. You keep saying you don't want sex; that that isn't what you're looking for, but you made the offer and it hurt you when he rejected you. Maybe it's not the sex he was rejecting, or you. I'm making you think about it because you've gotten trapped in kicking yourself over it instead of trying to understand it."

He looked sideways at her. "Would you really have sex with me?"

"Sure." She waited a beat. "I'd also hit the mat a few rounds if you think sparring would do the trick. Or we could watch infomercials and pour vodka over our ice cream. It's all the same to me. If you need something and I can give it to you, I will."

"That's exactly how I feel with Loki. I just want to give him what he needs and if he needs sex, I'm fine with that."

Her smile was fond and a little sad. "And he sent you packing. What does that tell you?"

He rubbed a hand down his face and then tried to work out the knots in his neck. "That I have no clue what he needs. I guess...I thought, I thought I did."

"Right now? He needs space. He's made that abundantly clear."

"I can't stay away knowing he's probably starving himself to death."

Reaching out, she worked at the tension between his shoulder blades with her knuckles. "You can't save everyone. And that goes double for Loki. You did what you could and now you have to let it play out. I can give you all the platitudes in the world about what's not meant to be, that won't make it easier. You said you wanted to give him what he needs, so give him space."

"I think I still love him." It felt surreal to say; it sounded surreal hanging in the air between them, like deja vu.

"I know." She wrapped her arm around his shoulders. "He didn't think you would, right? After everything."

"Yeah."

"Then why do you?" Gently, she brushed his hair away from his forehead. "Maybe that's what you should be trying to figure out. Take some time off, go on vacation, do some soul searching. I'm sure Tony has a cabin in the woods or a beach house he could loan you for a few weeks. Go chop wood or learn how to surf, get your groove back. Something other than work on your wall and brood about your exes." She anticipated his next protest and ruffled his hair playfully. "I'll keep looking for
Barnes and I'll let you know the second I find anything."

He pulled back to look her in the face. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"I'm trying to convince you to spend as much time on your own health as you do Loki's." Lips twisting into a wry smile, she swatted him lightly on the back of the head. "Thought you would've figured out how to do that by now."

"Alright, alright. It's not a bad idea." He glanced at the wall, hating the idea of leaving Bucky behind. "Do you think he knew it was me? Us, I mean."

Fingers combed softly through his hair. "Possible. The first shot hit your shield dead on and there was enough light for him to see what it was. The second went wide by at least six feet."

"Because you shot him," he reminded her pointedly.

"I only wounded him. Trust me, he missed on purpose."

"Then how am I supposed to leave now?"

"And then he ran away."

"Because you shot him," he repeated.

"He shot me first." She gestured toward her side. "One teensy bullet to the leg is barely even as far as I'm concerned. Besides, didn't he shoot you three times on the helicarrier?"

"I'm not keeping score." He caught the pillow she half-heartedly tossed at his head. "You may have a point, about getting away, clearing my head. But I can't leave without knowing where Bucky is and that he's okay."

"You can leave him in the capable hands of your best friend."

"Sam's in DC."

Her eyes narrowed and she reached for the next nearest pillow. "Very funny, Rogers."

"How do I know you won't shoot him again?"

Tucking her legs under her, she hugged the pillow against her stomach. "You'll have to trust me."

Every instinct he had was telling him that he couldn't leave Bucky or Loki, not for anything. At the same time, he felt exhausted. Emotionally, dealing with Loki had wrung him out and Bucky's sudden appearance on top of that only added to the sense of being spread too thin. He could stay here and keep beating against brick walls that were never going to let him in, or he could take a step back and find his balance again. It wasn't as though he was promising never to return or to give up entirely and it wasn't all that different than an Avengers mission taking him away from New York.

She leaned to the side, eying him. "I'm sensing a...yes, Natasha, you're right, Natasha, I should've saved myself the trouble and just agreed with you twenty minutes ago, Natasha."

"You're not expecting me to be gone more than a few days, right?"

"Two week minimum. Scientifically proven. Has to be at least two weeks." Holding up a hand, she cut him off with a shake of her head and a stern look. "Bruce will back me up."
"Fine. Two weeks. And you call me the second you find anything. I mean it."

She grinned, unusually bright and warm. "It's a deal."

When he glanced back at the wall, he felt too tired to get back into it, even with the coffee. He held up the cup and looked back at her. "You gave me decaf, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. And before you ask, no, I didn't drug you."

"How is it you're so perky?"

Raising her cup a little, she smirked at him. "Mine's not decaf. We can't all be super soldiers."

"Well, if you're going to be up anyway, why don't you stay the night?" He leaned back against the couch, stretching out his legs. "And I don't mean sex. It'd be nice to have some company. At least until I pass out on the couch. Just hang out or watch TV. Whatever it is you do in the middle of the night when the rest of us are asleep."

Shifting her position, she motioned for him to stretch out on the couch while she hunted for the remote control. "I can't believe you made Tony get you a remote."

"I like changing the channels by myself. JARVIS shouldn't have to do everything."

He kicked off his shoes first and settled on his side, back against the cushions and a pillow wedged between his arm and his head. It was a surprise when she slipped off her shoes and laid down in front of him, her back against his chest. There was some shifting, trying to sort out where limbs needed to go and making sure he wasn't going to catch her hair if he moved, but they found a comfortable position easily enough. It felt new and familiar at the same time.

"Cop show rerun or ocean documentary," she asked.

"Ocean. Maybe it'll give me vacation ideas. Some deserted island with nothing but peace and quiet and coconuts." There was a subtle scent of lemongrass in her hair. He nestled deeper into the couch, curling around her like a puzzle piece, and his eyes were closed before the narrator finished the opening segment.

**

The night was quiet. Not silent; Bucky could hear the man in the other room moving around, soft footsteps on the wood floor.

Loki.

There was a tug of familiarity in the name. He couldn't pin down which piece of it stuck and vibrated, there was an aching sense of an unknown that should've blazed across his mind like a flare. Maybe it was in the curl of his tongue as it formed the L or as it curved up to the roof of his mouth before the K turned into the wisp of a smile. Beyond that, there was nothing. This man was blank. There was none of the swirling chaos, no clawing of unseen hands at his legs and arms and up his throat to dig into his tongue and eyes.

He relished the lack of it; the peace of not having another voice inside his head. There were no memories of Loki.

Rolling onto his back, he looked up into the darkness. Near the top corner of the canopy bed, he saw the gleam of two bright, black eyes staring down at him. Una, the man called Loki had called her. He
tested it out, feeling the tug of his cheeks when his lips puckered to form the U.

*Usurper*, she hissed at him from her perch.

More Us. He tried this word too, mouthing it without making a sound. It was a hollow word and no wake of meaning trailed behind the path it took through his lips. There were too many words; each a grenade that went off in his head.

"Bucky," he told her softly. That was the worst word of all, but he'd grown used to the shock of it against his teeth. She'd told Loki that he smelled of blood. That was a word he knew well. It filled and choked his throat; hot and slick, sour as bile, and dry as ash.

She dropped down in a flurry of wings, staying just beyond his reach, if he had wanted to reach for her. He blinked - *metal screamed and wailed around him as Insight burned* - and the edges of her wings glinted silver when they caught and amplified light too faint for him to see. Slowly, he reached up and wondered how heavy she would be if she landed on his fingers. If he closed his hand around her, maybe the wings would shatter and her tiny bones would snap like twigs. She darted out of reach, still hissing at him.

"Let me rest," he grunted.

He tried to turn away but the weight of his left arm, nearly useless now, drove daggers into his upper spine. She was angry but he didn't think she could do more than scratch, as long as he kept her away from his eyes. A question nudged vaguely at him from the shadows, but he couldn't pull it forward and pour it into words. He'd been following something - someone - but now he couldn't remember why.

*You're my friend.*

The voice faded away when he reached for it. There was a face; familiar blue eyes and flat blond hair that stuck up at odd angles when it dried without being combed. But every time he grabbed hold of the image, it froze and dulled like a photograph and he lost the purpose behind it, the voice going quiet. Once it was gone, there were others, but they were equally slippery and stuttered to a halt when he tried to hold onto them.

*I love him.* That's what Loki had said.

He traced it out over his tongue in the darkness. *Love.* It felt like the right word; it had a solid, familiar weight in his mouth. He'd been looking for this word; he'd hunted for it in the flat, gray images inside his head, but it was a word HYDRA had no use for, so they'd dug it out long ago.

Tentatively, he tried it out for himself. "I love him."

It felt right but also awkward, as though his mouth didn't remember saying it. He'd always said-

Anger blazed up from nowhere. Mechanisms ground out complaints in his left arm as he stiffened and clenched his fist. He shut his eyes against the scarlet rage filling up his vision but didn't try to do more than breathe while it washed over him, heavy waves of fury curling and tugging at him. It would drown him if he let it, soaking into his lungs and into his blood until it was all he breathed and all he could taste.

*He's unstable.*

They'd told him Steve was dead and he'd believed it.
Pain in his cheek yanked him up out of the fractured memories, eyes flying open as he tensed, ready to lash out at his attacker. The sprite was standing on his chest, one tiny, clawed hand raised to strike him again. She was too small and too delicate to be a threat; his eyes were immediately drawn to the silvered lines of her wings. Attention riveted to the gleam, he reached out slowly to brush his fingertips against the very tips. They were slight, like whispers of spun sugar.

"One ride on the Cyclone. We gotta try it."

"I just ate, Buck. I'll throw up." Steve sucked bits of pink cotton candy from his fingers.

"You'll be fine. Come on."

He blinked and the memory vanished. Una was watching him with dark, liquid eyes like two holes in the night, her head making slow arcs from side to side as she studied him. A moment later, she seemed to make a decision and sunk into a crouch on his chest, still watching him. Then she began to sing a lullaby, sad and lilting, and it reminded him of before. She sang of lost homes and cold comforts and he felt his eyes and limbs growing heavy.

There was no word for what had brought him here to Loki. Something he'd seen, something he'd felt; an instinct speaking so quietly he couldn't hear it. He'd known, somehow, that he would find something here, whether or not he had the words.

Steve had come here, had come and gone and he smiled on the days he came here. That was important.

Sleep, Una sung quietly.

His eyes fell closed as he tried out that word for the first time since Insight had plummeted out of the sky. It felt right sliding over his lips, felt good and warm and tasted like sunlight. "Steve."

He wanted to feel that again. He'd been chasing after those feelings, stumbling through the chaos. There were answers, somewhere, there had to be. He had to believe that James Buchanan Barnes was worth searching for. In another minute, he would lose his grip on what it meant, but each time, he managed to hold on a little bit longer.

Under the influence of Una's strange song, he drifted untethered through memories and dreams, uncertain of which were which.

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It took less than five minutes for the words Steve’s going on vacation to morph into the words Avengers Retreat.

Natasha demurred, claiming the idea of having the Tower all to herself for a couple weeks was near enough to heaven, but Steve heard her calling Maria as she slipped out of the penthouse. Tony was still waxing poetic - in true Stark fashion - about Tahiti or Fiji or somewhere else that had plenty of rum and tiny umbrellas.

"What of Asgard? Or any of the other Realms you may wish to see," Thor suggested. He grinned widely at the surprise on their faces. "You have been generous enough to allow me to call your world my home. It is only right that I share my world with you as well."

"Whirlwind tour of the Nine Realms. I like it." Tony nodded, openly delighted by the idea. "How do
you pack for that? Hot, cold? Strange customs we need to know about? What's the food like? Passports?"

Steve frowned. "I don't know. Most of us gone at the same time isn't such a good idea."

"Natasha can hold down the fort and SHIELD two-point-oh has its training wheels on already. Come on, Cap, live a little."

"Is there any way for Natasha to reach us if there's trouble?" he asked Thor.

"Of course. She need merely to call for Heimdall and he will send word to us." Thor had his phone out and was tapping against the screen. "I will ask Jane if she wishes to join us."

Tony arched an eyebrow. "You're asking if the astrophysicist wants to go on an inter-dimensional road trip? Big Guy, this is so up her alley they named the street after her. But that reminds me. Pepper will murder me in my sleep if she's not invited. Gentlemen." He headed for the elevator.

"Will she need a fancy dress or anything?"

"Pack lightly," Thor answered, briefly covering his phone with one hand. "We will make preparations and gather supplies in Asgard." He left a short voicemail message for Jane, asking her to call him back when she got a chance.

Steve hoped his trepidation wasn't obvious. "Are you sure this will be all right with Asgard?"

"No need to fear, I am pleased to open my home to you." Thor's excitement tempered slightly, his expression softening. "Perhaps Sam Wilson would also like to join us in this adventure? And you needn't worry of Loki, he will manage. Whatever mischief he may cause while we are away will be set right on our return."

Loki causing mischief was the last thing on Steve's mind. He spurred himself to answer. "I'll give him a call, see if he can get away." There was no doubt Sam would jump at the chance to see the other Realms.

From then on, the general atmosphere in the Tower was one of buzzing excitement. Pepper and Tony both had phones nearly glued to their ears as they rearranged, postponed, or cancelled everything they'd had planned for the next two weeks. Sam was packed in fifteen minutes and Thor offered to pick him up and bring him to New York City. A swarm of interns surrounded Bruce while he laid out careful instructions for laboratory operations in his absence; it reminded Steve of a mother duck trailed by her brood of ducklings.

When he couldn't put it off any longer, Steve retreated to his room and packed a small bag with the essentials. He lingered over the white card, with its mystical connection to Loki. He'd intended to take it with him, but that had been when he'd planned to stay on Earth. There was no guarantee it would work from galaxies away and he had a distinct feeling Thor's idea of adventure might not qualify as safe or unlikely to catch fire. Scooping up the card, he grabbed one of the books he was reading from the bedside table and tucked the card into the pages. He felt better knowing it was safe and sound, waiting for him to return.

He'd already half decided to look for something to bring back for Loki; a trinket or a souvenir from his home, whatever he could find that Loki might enjoy. It would give him a reason to get the card out again, and an olive branch to extend to see if Loki was ready to talk to him. Letting that thought cheer him, he finished packing. He grabbed his shield as an afterthought; they might have time and enough open space to work on a few of the tricks he and Thor had been developing.
"I'm really doing this," he told the empty room. "I will probably regret it, but I'm really doing this." He took another deep breath, his attention going to the research wall. "Forgive me, Bucky. I'll be back as soon as I can. Hopefully with my head on straight. Please just...be okay. I really hope you're okay." Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention and he turned to see Natasha in the doorway.

She shook her head slightly. "Talking to yourself. Never a good sign."

"You won't be able to contact me in Asgard, but if anything happens, call for Heimdall."

"Relax. This is what I'm good at, trust me to do my job. I'll bring him in."

"I trust you."

She crossed her arms over her chest, but her smile was fond. "You have control issues and don't like to delegate."

"Among my many faults, yes, guilty as charged." He hoisted the strap of his bag onto his shoulder and headed for the door. "Bucky's tough. Depending on how badly he's hurt, he'll go to ground, dig in. Check the homeless shelters, walk in clinics. He won't ask for help but he'll probably sneak in a back door or a window, take what he needs." She knew all this but it made him feel less like he was abandoning Bucky in his time of need. "Heimdall's only a call away. If you bring him in, I'm coming home."

"Try to have some fun."

"Don't stay up late watching Netflix and eating ice cream every night."

He locked the door behind them and they rode the elevator up to the penthouse together. The others were already there, even Sam, looking no worse for having made the trip from DC to New York with Thor. Pepper was still on her phone, two assistants hovering around her with paperwork that needed signatures and couldn't wait for her to return.

A small pile of bags sat out on the Tower balcony. He added his to the collection, choosing to stay outside and look out over the city while the others readied to go. After a moment, he heard footsteps and nodded when Thor came to his side.

"Every time I leave Earth, I wonder if Loki will still be here when I return," Thor told him quietly. "And if he will try to kill me when I see him next."

"Ever get used to it? Not knowing."

"I've given Loki a thousand chances." Thor sighed heavily, leaning forward to rest his arms against the railing. "And I would give him a thousand more if I thought he would want even one of them."

"I know the feeling. Does it ever get easier to leave?"

"Never." Thor smiled wearily. "But it does get easier to believe he will be here when I return. My brother is many things. Easily vanquished is not one of them, neither in body nor in mind. I have faith in his stubbornness and refusal to accept even death without attempting to talk or trick his way out of it. In the end, he will probably outlive me."

Bucky's name was on Steve's lips, about to come tumbling out in a disjointed attempt to explain or maybe convince Thor that an Avengers retreat to Asgard wasn't a good idea after all, when laughter interrupted their conversation and the others came out to join them. There was joking and bustling as
they gathered. Pepper wanted to know if cameras were allowed; Tony was asking about the transport capacity of the Bifrost. In the back, Jane was walking Bruce through how the Bifrost worked and what it felt like so he knew what to expect. Beyond them, standing in the doorway, Natasha gave him a small wave.

"Are you ready, my friends?" Thor's voice carried loudly over the wind and melee of voices. "Hold onto each other and brace yourselves."

He retrieved his bag and moved in close, Thor on one side and Bruce on the other. For better or worse, he was leaving Loki and Bucky behind and praying for the best. They would both be here when he returned. It was even possible Natasha would be able to bring Bucky in and Loki would want to see him again; he was going to be optimistic.

"Heimdall," Thor called. "We are ready."

Steve held his breath.

The Bifrost was light and energy - cold wind rushing past his ears and biting at his skin as he soared down the zip line toward the oncoming train - and he squinted against the flashing rainbow around them. It could have lasted seconds or minutes, he lost his sense of time passing until he realized he could see the end approached, like a spot against the sun. He barely had time to blink before it rose up ahead of them and the spot became a place with depth and three dimensions. Wind and light tossed them out into the space; he found his footing before reaching out to stabilize Bruce.

They were standing in a giant observatory, if that single word could encompass everything around them. Steve stared openly at the intricate metal work and views of the universe spreading out to infinity. He was speechless in the face of the enormity of the view, incredibly small standing amongst the stars.

"Welcome to Asgard." Thor looked more at ease than he ever did on Earth.

Tony was the first to pull himself together. He slung one arm over Bruce's shoulders and the other around Jane's, giving both of them meaningful looks. "Shall we, my fellow science minded companions?"

"Come, there is much I wish you to see." Thor led them toward a crystalline, rainbow bridge, nodding to Heimdall as they passed.

Asgard was every fantasy kingdom Steve had ever dreamed of while he read cheap dime novels or watched clouds floating overhead, his mind wandering in thoughts of paradise. There a sense of tradition steeped into very stones; he saw warriors training in open air courtyards and men and women dressed in beautiful yet functional clothing as they bustled about their work. Every time he caught himself gazing at a piece of carved stonework and thinking it looked old-fashioned, he inevitably realized that it was either floating in midair or serving as cover for a device not even Tony had dreamed about. It was Asgard who'd left her mark on Earth's history, not the other way around.

Thor saw to it they were all settled in a series of interconnecting guest rooms, each of them with breathtaking views of the kingdom, before leading them into a grand banquet hall for food and drink. He introduced them to his friends, the Warriors Three and the Lady Sif.

Sam came to stand beside him, eyes wide as he tried to take in their surroundings. "Consider my mind blown. We're on another planet."

"Just a day in the life of an Avenger," Steve mused.
He watched Jane wave Tony and Bruce over to take a look at the metallic object she was holding. Clint and Hogan seemed to have hit it off and appeared to be deep in conversation over one of Clint's arrows. Now that Steve thought about it, he hadn't even realized Clint had been armed or he would've stopped him from bringing his bow. No one from Asgard appeared to mind and after another look around, Steve saw that everyone, even those who appeared to be servants, carried a weapon of some kind. Pepper was talking with the blond man named Fandral; Steve heard the words 'trade agreements' and 'intellectual property' a few times.

A buzz of hushed conversation from the men and women working in the hall caught his attention seconds before the doors opened and then Frigga entered. She was wearing a gown of blue brocade with shaped armor over her chest and sides. Like the others, there was a short sword in a decorated scabbard at her waist. She held out her hands to greet Thor and kissed his cheek.

Steve was content to follow what social cues he could identify, watching Frigga interact with the others. There was discussion of preparations for a journey, of waterfalls, great forests, and fantastical creatures that must be seen when in Asgard. A great feast would be held that night to welcome them, though Steve had the distinct impression that a sunny afternoon was reason enough for a feast.

"Captain," Frigga said warmly. She held out her hands for him to take and kissed his cheek, as she'd done with Thor, and Steve saw many of the Asgardians look at him with new interest.

He ducked his head respectfully. "Your majesty. Thank you for such a warm welcome."

"Has Thor shown you the libraries yet?"

"No, um." He glanced back at Thor, but he was deep into a story of grand adventure with Volstagg and Sam. "He probably figured I wouldn't be able to read any of the books."

"There is more to our libraries than books." She hooked her arm through his and turned him toward the door. It was a polite way of making it clear he had no option but to follow her to whatever she wished to show him. Once they were in the hallway and the doors of the great hall closed behind them, she leaned in closer and lowered her voice. "Have you news of Loki, Captain?"

Nervous sweat broke out on his palms, his mind racing for what answer he could possibly give her. He settled on the truth. "He's struggling and...and I haven't been able to see him for a while."

She nodded slowly. "He has ever been one to withdraw into his own mind, his own world. He isolates himself rather than seek help."

"I'm not going to give up," he added quickly.

"No doubt you have learned he is quick to lash out when pressed. I beg your patience with him, Captain." Her expression shifted to a bright smile once again. "Enough serious talk. Thor has brought you here to show you our wonders, not our sorrows. Have you given thought to what you wish to see while you are here?"

"I'm still waiting to wake up and discover this is all a dream. Asgard is beautiful, beyond beautiful. Anything I try to say will come up short."

A set of dark wooden doors with inlaid metalwork and jewels began to open at the end of the corridor. Frigga led him inside. It took him a moment realize what he was looking at; it was a tree, its twisting trunk and roots covered with rich, green moss; the tree rose up toward a ceiling so distant Steve couldn't see it. Branches towered over him and they were filled with spiral galaxies and beams of light. Along the walls, he saw shelves of more traditional books and scrolls. Additional corridors
led off of the main room and there were several wide alcoves with tables and chairs for closer study.

"Wow," he breathed. "This is a library?"

He barely registered when Frigga let go of his arm, allowing him to move freely among the columns of light. Holding out his hand, he let his fingers trail through the shimmering blue and a piece of light seemed to solidify, cool against his skin. There was a sense of expectation, of waiting, and then light began to pour out of the surrounding columns into a three dimensional image standing between them. It was Loki; his hands bound with a clockwork device and chains between his wrists and ankles. His head was high, his expression openly defiant.

"How?" He glanced around for Frigga, pulling his hand back from the light. The image of Loki faded away.

"That was day he was returned to Asgard after causing such destruction in your world." She came to stand beside him, looking up into the branches above. "You need only think of what you wish to find here and it will come to you. While you are here, this place is open to you whenever you wish."

He wondered if the tree, however it worked, could answer his questions about Loki. That it had plucked Loki from his mind even when he hadn't consciously been thinking about him was disconcerting.

"There is one more place I wish to show you before I return you to your friends." Frigga took his arm again and turned him toward the doors.

"I would like to come back. This is amazing." He tried to get a last look at everything in the library before they left. Suddenly, he was certain a couple weeks on Asgard wouldn't be nearly close to enough time for everything he wanted to see and experience. He would probably only have a few hours each day before he was overwhelmed with sights and sounds and certain to miss everything that came after.

They walked in companionable silence through the grand hallways. Frigga was occasionally greeted by others moving about their business and they gave him strange glances, no doubt uncertain of why he was in the company of their Queen. She led him past open gardens that perfumed the air with their flowers and into a quieter section of the palace. The stonework seemed older here, though he had nothing to justify the impression of age. Time felt slowed, perhaps by the lack of background noise; there were no footsteps of servants coming or going. They approached a set of dark wooden doors, their metalwork considerably simpler than the library doors.

"Are all the doors automatic here?" he asked as they began to open.

She gave him a small smile, full of mischief. "For their Queen, they are."

Stepping inside, Steve immediately felt like an outsider. The rooms were clearly someone's personal quarters. He saw bookshelves filled to overflowing and more books piled on every available surface. There were plants of every kind in pots of all sizes, some of them bowing beneath the weight of their flowers. Thick rugs covered the stone floor and one of the alcoves near the balcony was nearly filled with a comfortable looking chaise. As he looked around, he noticed a large empty space in the room. The floor and nearby wall were bare, which was a marked deviation from the rest of the space. While he stared at the space, his mind filled in a dark wood canopy style bed and the room around him snapped sharply into context.

"His bed disappeared some time ago," Frigga said lightly.
He swallowed. "I think I know where it is." He was hesitant to step any further into the room, but an idea occurred to him and he seized the opportunity. "I thought I might take something back to him. Something he might want to have, something he might miss."

"Anything in these rooms, you are welcome to take with you. These are his things and they will remain as such for as long as he is my son."

Moving slowly into the room, he brushed his fingers over a pale yellow blossom the size of his hand. "I brought him some plants for his apartment. One thing I managed to get right, I guess."

Loki’s New York apartment could easily fit inside the room he was standing in and he could see adjoining rooms through stone archways. It was no wonder Earth was such a come down for Thor and Loki both, though Thor had taken it in stride the same way Tony did when he had to "rough it."

"If you would like to be alone, I can send a servant to collect you for the feast."

He didn't realize he wanted to stay until she offered. Nodding quickly, he breathed in the scent of a flower very similar to jasmine. "Thank you. This is his space and it's so...him."

She inclined her head slightly, a faint, wistful smile on her lips. The dark wood doors closed behind her when she left. Then there was nothing but the silence of the room around him. If the bed had been there, his first impulse would've been to crawl into it and bury himself in the furs and smell of Loki. Without it, he settled for making a slow circuit around the room, touching only lightly and trying to get a feel for it before he began a more thorough investigation. The entire room felt like an open diary he'd stumbled into, giving him glimpses into the aspects Loki that he only rarely saw, if he'd seen them at all.

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Loki took the card from the mantle to stare at it.

Informing Steve of his friend's return was the right thing to do; he recognized that with cold, calculating logic. Barnes was a stranger to Loki and he meant nothing more than any other wounded mortal who might have appeared at his door; he was a curiosity, certainly, but also a liability and possibly a threat.

He sat stewing in indecision well into the morning, a pen within easy reach but never quite able to bring himself to pick it up or write the words. What would he say?

Would Steve even believe the man he truly loved was alive, if not entirely well, and lying on the floor in Loki's bedroom. Back in his time, he'd gone after Barnes, by himself, and tread deep into enemy territory to pull him out. It was easy enough to imagine Steve doing it, against all common sense and reason and anyone trying to talk him out of it; the sheer stubbornness of the act was irritatingly, infuriatingly Steve. Loki envied it and that jealousy gnawed at him. He wanted the easy laughter and familiar camaraderie he could see between Steve and Bucky in every photograph, every snippet of grainy film footage, and every account from those who'd known them both. It didn't take a genius to recognize that Bucky had meant everything to Steve.

In the end, he plucked up the pen and scrawled a simple message. Barnes is here. I will help him if I can. Steve hadn't used his card, but that didn't mean he hadn't simply thrown it away rather than burning it. If he didn't respond, Loki would know he'd finally gained some sense and determined to stay well away.

A dark, slithering desire that tasted bitter in the back of his throat made him think about cutting
Bucky's throat while he slept. Or covering his face with a pillow and smothering the life out of him. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to hate Bucky, for all his jealousy. He felt a kinship, a common bond in wanting what Steve could not give either of them, and he wondered if Bucky had yearned for it just as much as Loki did now.

The card went back onto the mantle and Loki was drinking coffee at the bar in the kitchen when Bucky awoke, appearing in the bedroom doorway some time later. He'd made no noise as he walked and he eyed Loki warily, uncertain. Loki supposed that it was still easier to trust a stranger when the alternative was being torn between HYDRA and SHIELD.

"There's a key on the end of the bar. You may take it." Loki turned back to his coffee. There was a flicker of understanding, or curiosity, in Bucky's eyes. He came forward slowly and reached for the key with his right hand. "He will, no doubt, be looking for you." Loki glanced up, watching the flashes of fractured emotions that came and went. "You are not yet ready for him to find you. That is something I can understand. But you will not be able to run from him forever."

"I'm not," Bucky said and Loki had no idea if it was an answer or not. He tapped the screen on the Starkphone to activate it and then slid the device across the bar top. An old picture of Bucky from World War II came into focus on the screen. "James Buchanan Barnes. This is you. His friend. Were you more than that? Before HYDRA made you what you are. He has believed you dead, all this time, and now Fate has brought you back to him. How wonderful for you." He didn't quite manage to keep the bitter edge out of his voice.

"I'm not," Bucky repeated blankly and, again, Loki didn't know if it was an answer. His eyes were fixed on the image of himself.

"Perhaps not." He retrieved the phone, holding it up as though comparing the man to the image. "Did he love you?"

Bucky blinked rapidly. The metal arm whirred as his left hand clenched into a fist. "I knew him."

Loki suppressed a flash of irritation. The conversation was as useful as a battle where only one opponent was armed. He wanted to know - he needed to know - if Bucky Barnes was the reason Steve could not love him, but he would get nothing from him while he was still fractured into pieces from whatever HYDRA had done. And he had to be careful not to spook Barnes; the snare had to be subtle.

"Take the key. Should you need to return, should you need aid, I will be here." He set the phone down and tried to ignore the image. He could be patient. "There is also coffee, if you would like."

Bucky stood stiffly for some time, his eyes unfocused as he stared into space or nothing at all. Eventually he blinked and turned, stuttering in his movements like a malfunctioning robot, and he started toward the coffee maker. Slowly, deliberately, he picked up the mug on the counter and filled it with coffee. He stared at the mug for a while and Loki realized that he was trying to remember which hand to use now.

"Can you detach your arm?" he asked gently. "It might be easier to repair."

Pale, human fingers curled around the handle of the mug. Bucky carried it gingerly around the bar and took a seat beside Loki. "I don't know."

"I know very little about electronics, but I know where we can find suitable tools." His mind was already churning through ideas of how to distract the Avengers and draw them away from the Tower
long enough to gather what they might need. He brushed away the twisting sensation in the pit of his stomach at the thought of challenging the Avengers now, but the alternatives were SHIELD or Asgard, and he had even less desire to pursue either of those options.

"Why are you helping me?" Bucky asked suddenly, with surprising lucidity.

Loki glanced sideways and sipped at his coffee. "You appear at my doorstep bloody and ruined, would you expect me to do anything else? That is why you came here, isn't it? For help."

"I don't know you. Didn't. Before." He frowned, deep furrows appearing in his brow. "It's easier. There's no...noise. With you."

"Then consider me your guardian angel." He ignored the skeptical reprimand given to him in a series of indignant, wordless screeches from the top of the clothes dryer. Una knew he was not being entirely honest; she could hear darkness beneath his words and she voiced her displeasure at another invading their home. "Though, perhaps, you might have done better," he ceded, one eye toward Una's black, flashing eyes. "I am a poor choice for anyone's companion. You may stay as long as you wish. I have little enough to offer, but if it will serve you, I give it gladly. And when you are ready to face him, I will aid you in that as well." He did not elaborate as to how he intended to help Bucky in that endeavor, mostly because he hadn't decided.

Bucky's throat worked and it took him several minutes before he could speak. "Thank you."

"And once we have repaired your arm, we will work on your mind." Blue eyes went wide again and Loki smiled what he hoped was a kind, benevolent smile. But he had baited the trap well, now he had only to wait for it to snap closed. "Oh yes, I can help you with that as well, but only if you trust me. It will take time and patience. And it is not without danger to you. The choice is yours."

"Anything," Bucky breathed. "I want...I want him back."

Loki felt his smile turn brittle. "Of course."
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Steve embarks on a journey that may lead to more danger than answers, while Loki steps into a new role in order to help Bucky.

Aching muscles warmed by mead made Steve wish fervently that Loki hadn't spirited away his bed. There was a perfectly good bed in the rooms set aside for him, but he found Loki's space more peaceful after trying to keep up with Thor all day. Thor and the others would be celebrating well into the night, while the mere humans begged off for sleep. If anyone minded that Steve occasionally slipped off to spend time in Loki's room or the library, they hadn't said anything.

It had only taken him one night on Asgard to realize why Loki must've chosen these rooms, with their relative distance from the bustling center of the palace. They were nearer to the library, that was true, but he'd only had to step out onto the balcony as the sun began to set over the distant horizon and he knew. Glittering ocean swept out to the right like a thick rug encrusted with blue diamonds and this arm of the palace extended toward a ring of mountains. In the sunset, gold and blue lit up the mountains in a blaze. Further off, he could make out the gargantuan carvings of old kings guarding an impossible pass through the rock. The balcony fell off into a deep ravine, thick with greenery and the sound of a rushing river far below. It was an interesting view of Asgard, away from her heart and her city center; a sideways view into her shadows and her secrets.

Wind from the mountains and wind from the ocean met overhead and came nearly to a standstill. Branches laden with blossoms swayed all around him but the balcony itself was a pocket of stillness. He wondered if Loki had stood where was now, looking out over Asgard. There were a couple of the potted plants he thought might be small enough to carry with him, but bringing plants from Asgard back to Earth might have disastrous results even if Loki did want them.

Turning slowly, he let his gaze wander over the room, looking for anything that hadn't been there before. The first time, he'd thought it was a trick of the light catching something he'd overlooked, but that had only worked on him the one time. Loki's entire room was laid out like an intricate puzzle; there were pieces of him hidden in space, behind locks and inside boxes with no hinges, but there were secrets hidden in layers of shifting time and light as well, only revealed or obvious with certain angles of the sun. Every time he came into Loki's room, it felt like a treasure hunt. Nothing he'd found seemed to have reason to be hidden, other than Loki must've enjoyed the cleverness of his secret places for that virtue alone.

A gleam from one of the bookshelves caught his eye and he smiled. Not looking away from the spot, he made his way to the shelf and traced his hands down the edge. There was a thin snake carved into the dark wood, with a dark red jewel set in for its eye. He pressed lightly against the jewel first, since that was the most obvious point, but nothing happened. Undeterred, he dragged the pads of his fingers along the outer edge of the snake and felt the slightest give in one of the middle segments. A thrill went through him when a mechanism deep in the bookcase engaged - click - and then the entire shelf rolled back into the wall several inches.

The gap was wide enough for a fist. When he reached into it, he felt leather and parchment. Piece by piece, he pulled out several bound volumes probably older than he was by several hundred years,
and a bundle of loose papers wrapped in a thick black ribbon

He hadn't been able to bring himself to clear Loki's desk of the stacks of books and scrolls, not wanting to disturb it that much, so he settled in the empty space where the bed had been and began to sort through his find. He could only guess at the value and meaning; the script was always in a language he couldn't read and the small charms or stones were merely baubles to him. But that didn't diminish the joy he found in sharing these small secrets with Loki, although his conscience occasionally pricked at him over Loki's ignorance that they were being shared; when it came to understanding Loki, he didn't have a lot of options.

The parchment sheets were covered with sketches of a left hand and portion of the forearm. The shape of the hand was hastily drawn, but the detail of patterns on the skin had been thoughtfully captured. Nested chevrons pointed along the line of bone, over the wrist and peaking at the knuckles. He recognized some of the notations as Loki's writing, but couldn't read any of the symbols. Some of them were scratched out and replaced with other symbols; it seemed Loki had been working on a puzzle of his own. Turning to the books, he leafed through them slowly and barely noticed when night fell and the warm light of the wall sconces came on of their own accord. He couldn't read the language the books were written in but he began to pick out frequently used words that seemed important. *Jotunheimr* was one of them; he recognized that as the name of one of the Nine Realms. Near the end of one of the books, there was a portrait of a creature he guessed was a Frost Giant, or Jotnar, and he noticed similar geometric designs its face. Glancing back to the sketches of the hand, he wondered if Loki had been attempting to decipher the markings on the Frost Giant's skin.

It was unlikely he was going to solve a mystery Loki couldn't, but he was intrigued. Books about another Realm didn't seem to be worth hiding in a secret compartment. He committed the sketches to memory before studiously replacing the items back where he'd found them. A little reluctantly, he made his way to the library in hopes of finding more about Jotunheim.

Jane could pluck bits of light from the branches as easily as reading a card catalog. He was a far cry from that, but he'd gotten more comfortable with holding out his hand and focusing on what he wanted to know. The library was quiet and empty, everyone else pulled away to other areas of the palace. He mouthed the word *Jotunheim* as he focused on that single idea. It wasn't necessarily, but it helped him hold his thoughts still.

Every beam of light surrounding one of the immense galaxies above him activated, streaming out bits of energy to display a landscape. Moving closer, he could see craggy mountains and swathes of glaciers with deep, black crevasses through them like veins. It was dark and he saw no trees or signs of living creatures, only endless ice. He could interact with the display, pulling and rotating it as if he were viewing the Realm from an airplane. After dragging the landscape along, he saw what looked like roads and even structure in the distance, dark and bulky against the lee of a great mountain. The image didn't resolve when he tried to pull it closer, leaving him to wonder how often Asgardians updated their maps.

"So this is Jotunheim," he said aloud, thinking. "Why was Loki investigating Jotunheim?"

He waved away the landscape display with a brush of his hand, closing his eyes to picture the markings Loki had drawn with as much detail as he could remember. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised to see an enormous figure displayed in front of him. It was huge, possibly male, with bone spurs jutting out in a line along the collarbones and plated armor that nearly melded with dark blue skin. Raised markings and dark scars or war paint covered the face, chest, and arms. Was this where Loki had seen the markings? A closer look at one of the forearms revealed a similar, but not wholly identical pattern, although much of it was hidden beneath more armor.
"Frost Giant?" he asked the empty library. He thought the giant must easily be over twenty feet tall and the eyes were dark, though not entirely black, perhaps red.

The library provided closer investigation of the armor and a few details of Frost Giant physiology and known abilities; they could control ice and cold. He wondered if that's why Loki had been researching them, if he'd learned to adapt his magic to mimic the Frost Giants' ability to manipulate heat. Most of the history texts were beyond him, but he could understand the big picture. The Frost Giants had attempted to conquer Earth before Asgard stopped them. That had been hundreds of years earlier, back when creatures like Una still traveled between the worlds. These were the monsters Loki had spoken of, the ones who had brought war to Midgard.

A faded side display caught his attention and he pulled it around to the focus. The enormous Frost Giant reduced in size and slotted into place within the diagram. Steve shifted and adjusted the display over and over again, tracing out the lines as he tried to make sense of them. His eyes were dry and growing weary when he determined it was a genealogy map, with the Frost Giant associated with the markings as the patriarch of a dead line. There had been a single child, a son, but the library contained no information about him. His fingers dipped through the light in the spot where the child's image and identity should have been stored.

"What answers do you seek, my friend?"

Steve whirled around, startled and feeling guilty without knowing why. He saw Thor standing in the library doorway. "I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't...I was just curious. About the other Realms."

"And what is it about Jotunheim that you wish to know?" Thor came slowly down the steps. "The Frost Giants are enemies of Asgard and of your world."

"I figured that part out." Turning back to the genealogy map, he tried to think of a way to explain his search without giving away his source, but Thor was looking at him with an odd scrutiny.

"That is Laufey," Thor said suddenly, nodding toward the enormous Frost Giant. "He was their King."

Steve caught the inflection. Was. He pointed to the empty space at the end of Laufey's line. "He had a child, I think. I can't really read much of this. Any of it actually, but the tree sort of reads my mind half the time anyway and knows what I'm looking for. Even when I don't really know what I'm looking for. I found some books and sketches in Loki's room, about Jotunheim."

Thor's look turned sharp, brow furrowing. "Show me."

"I'm sure they're musty old history books." He could tell that wasn't going to sway Thor in the slightest.

As they walked, he tried to think of a good way to let Thor know he could return to the feasting and festivities, but he'd been found looking into Jotunheim and he was committed now. They passed no one on the way to Loki's room, the dark wooden doors swinging open as usual. Steve headed for the bookshelf, lights coming to life along the walls as he walked.

"There's a secret compartment in the shelf." He felt along the carved snake for the segment and it engaged, sliding the shelf back.

"How did you find this?" Thor frowned as he came forward, reaching with one hand to feel inside the inner compartment. His fingers barely touched the wood when there was a bright flash and a bang and Thor was thrown several feet, landing on his back in the middle of the room.
Startled, Steve hurried to make sure Thor was unharmed. "It didn't do that before, I swear."

Thor grunted, feeling out the back of his head with one hand. "You are able to reach inside?"

"Yeah. Nothing like that happened before."

Thor nodded toward the shelf. "Try it now."

Hesitantly, Steve returned to the bookshelf. He held his breath, but felt nothing as he lowered his hand into the compartment. Carefully, he collected the books and parchment again. As he swept his hand along the back of the inner wall, he encountered a small, hard object and pulled that out as well. It was a chunk of dark green rock the size of a golf ball. He carried the objects to show Thor, who was frowning intensely.

"How is it you found his rooms?" he asked as he took one of the books and began to look through it.

"Your mom showed me. First day here."

His frown deepened. "I will have words with my mother. She should not have taken such a risk with your life."

"I think Loki'll be okay with it. That I was here, I mean. He might be a little annoyed, yeah." He stopped when Thor gave him a sharp look, withering under the weight of it. "I just wanted to take something back for him."

"That is not what I mean." With a heavy sigh, he closed the book. "We have left these rooms as they are because they are filled with traps to prevent others from prying into his secrets. You saw for yourself, these rooms are not safe."

"But I've been coming in here for days and nothing's..." he trailed off, beginning to understand. "I'm protected from Loki's magic."

"Which my mother knows well."

"I'm sure she didn't think." Unable to finish, he stared blankly at the chunk of green rock. It didn't seem worth the kind of trap that would throw Thor halfway across the room. A few books on Jotunheim, the sketches of the skin markings, and a rock; he remembered Loki chilling a bottle of wine with a touch.

"You would do well not to underestimate the Queen of Asgard. And Loki is our mother's son, after all."

"Except he's not. Not really." Slowly, he reached out and pulled one of the sketches from Thor's hand, tracing a finger along the chevrons. "These are hereditary. Family or clan markings. That's why the library showed me Laufey when I searched for them. And this...this is Loki's arm, isn't it? He drew this because he was trying to figure out what they meant. He's not a Prince of Asgard. He's a Prince of Jotunheim. He's Laufey's son."

A sound like a whisper of silk on stone caught his ears. He and Thor looked at the same time and Steve suddenly had the feeling he hadn't been as alone in his free time as he'd believed. Frigga stood in the doorway, still dressed in her bejeweled golden gown from the feast.

Thor held up one of the books. "This is not a game, Mother."

She spoke clearly, with conviction tempered by kindness. "Loki was ever one to keep secrets. Even I
could not get past his defenses. Not here, in his place."

"You could not have known Steven would not be harmed."

She raised her chin in open challenge. "The only thing that may harm him in this room is the truth. The truth we kept from Loki, and from you, for far too long."

"Hey," Steve interrupted. "It's okay. Really." Thor didn't look like he thought the conversation was over, but he gave Steve a small nod.

Frigga turned her gaze to Steve. "Loki was Laufey's son only briefly. His mother is unknown to us, though I believe she must have been Asgardian. It is rare enough but it has happened before. I raised him, held him to my breast, and carried him on my hip, in my arms. He is my son and will be as long as I draw breath. I never knew how it was he discovered the truth. I thought he may have hidden it away, among his many secrets."

He should've known Loki's whole family would run circles around him more often than not. "And you wanted me to find it."

Frigga's expression softened. "I thought you would wish to know. And if you were to discover for yourself, he might not believe we had attempted to poison you against him."

He frowned, fingers closing around the rock. "Why would he think that?"

Still smiling, Frigga glanced around the room as though deciding what color to paint the walls. "Thor, why don't you take Steve out into the city? It is early for a young man, there is still much our fair land can offer him before dawn comes. There are still tales to be sung beside the hearth. Please do be careful to put everything back where you found it. I am certain Loki will wish to have his things when he returns." She was no less regal or silent in her retreat, leaving Steve wondering if coming to Asgard had been Thor's idea after all.

"Enough books for tonight." Thor clapped a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Though I will leave these for you to return to their place."

"No problem." He hurried to replace the books and sketches, slipping the rock into his pocket on a whim, before closing up the bookshelf once again. Now that he knew Loki's room was actually full of magical booby-traps, there was an almost sinister feeling to the space. "Should we grab the others?"

"Perhaps not this evening." Thor led the way.

The night was warm, rich with the aromas of food and flowers, and the stars overhead were dazzling. He caught sight of an insect similar to fireflies, though they were larger and seemed to come in a wide variety of colors. In the borrowed clothes he'd worn since arriving in Asgard, he nearly blended in as they walked through twisting streets and stone pathways. Their destination was a tavern. A blast of laughter and shouting met them at the door, along with a wave of heat that smelled of roasting meat and hops. A few familiar faces appeared in the crowd, but it was mostly filled with strangers. Thor chose a narrow table in the corner, near a window that looked out into a garden, and ordered enormous mugs of ale for both of them.

They drank the first round in companionable silence. Steve half listened to the voices around him and half watched the stars out the window, wondering if he could see Earth from Asgard.

"This tale may interest you," Thor said suddenly. He gestured to a nearby table before calling out to the men, asking them to sing their tale loudly.
Steve listened, enjoying the simple harmonies and smooth baritone voices. After the first several verses, he realized they were singing about the war against the Frost Giants and a great battle fought on Jotunheim. They sang of the Frost Giants’ ferocity, their terrible size, and their fearsome beasts. He held off on the second mug of ale, paying close attention as the song ended with Odin defeating the Frost Giant King and stripping him of his power. Afterward, there were several rounds of raucous cheering and several more songs and battle stories were recounted, all of them resulting in Asgard's victory over the Frost Giants. One man dramatically told of a wizened old Frost Giant who spirited away babies from their cradles and ate them. While the celebratory tone of the tales never wavered, the content veered away from anything he would consider a calming bedtime story.

"I'm guessing Frost Giants aren't exactly welcome on Asgard," he said finally, turning back to the window and the stars outside.

"There was a time I sang those same songs. Reveled in those same stories. As did Loki." Thor gazed into his mug, holding it lightly between his great hands. "I have been to Jotunheim only once, with Loki at my side. I was young, foolish, seeking the glory of battle. It is the reason I was banished to Midgard. It is how I met Jane."

"Did he know?"

Slowly, Thor shook his head. "Not then, but soon after, I believe. Perhaps he discovered the truth while on Jotunheim, perhaps after I was gone. He never confided in me how or when."

"Why did you go to Jotunheim? Doesn't seem like something people do for fun around here."

"No. In fact, it is strictly forbidden." Turning to look out at the stars, Thor's brow furrowed in thought. "Loki found a way to bring Frost Giants into Asgard, allowed them into the weapons vault to reclaim the Casket of Ancient Winters. Perhaps he knew they would not succeed. Perhaps he merely thought it a good joke." He went silent when the barman came to give them two fresh mugs of ale and collect the empty ones, nodding his thanks. "Our visit to Jotunheim could have ended peacefully, had I not let my pride get the better of me. King Laufey allowed us to leave."

There was more to the story, Steve could hear that much in the careful way Thor was speaking. He had the sense Thor was puzzling something out as he went, feeling his way through his thoughts as he did his words.

"That day, Laufey spoke of the cost of war," Thor continued. "He called my father a murderer and a thief. Easy enough to dismiss those words then, when I did not know his son stood at my side. When he did not know. But now I wonder. He gave me, the son of his enemy, a chance to leave without bloodshed. Now I wonder if the regret, the loss, he spoke of, was that of a father, not of a king."

"I'm guessing you can't exactly ask him."

Thor leaned back heavily in his chair, meeting Steve's gaze directly. "Loki killed Laufey in cold blood. My mother was witness to that much."

"Do you think he knew about Loki?"

He considered that for a long while before answering. "The truth can be a weapon, as much as any lie. I have wondered why Laufey trusted my brother as much as to turn his back on him even for a moment."

Steve shivered and pulled his mug closer. "Why are you telling me this?"

"After Loki murdered Laufey, he attempted to destroy Jotunheim and he very nearly succeeded."
Stopping him came at a great cost to Asgard and the other Realms, including yours." Thor gestured to the room around them, with its cheerful firelight and laughter. "These are the tales we were told as children and those are the tales told of Loki now. Some believe he was born a monster. Others believe that he has become one."

"What do you believe?"

A quick smile flashed over Thor's face. "That he is my brother. I love him, but I do not trust him."

"And you're telling me not to trust him."

Thor nodded somberly. "Asgard has suffered, Midgard has suffered. Even Jotunheim, in all her darkness, has suffered. Many believe the Realms will continue to suffer so long as he lives. You believe he can be redeemed and I am grateful with all my heart that you see good in him, but when I am here, when I am surrounded by..." he trailed off and took a long swallow of ale. Holding up the mug, he made a toast. "I hope you do not live to regret giving Loki a chance, as I have. And may he not betray you as he has done me and many others."

Self-conscious, Steve raised his mug and accepted the toast, though he had no answering words. By the time they finished the third mugs of ale, the barkeep sent over a tray of bread and roasted meat in a bed of vegetables. They ate and listened to stories well through the night, finally making their way back to the palace in the early morning hours.

His head swam with the songs and stories from the alehouse, with everything Thor had told him, and the knowledge that even the Queen of Asgard herself had had an ulterior plan for Steve; he felt like a pawn being moved around on a grand chess board. Loki's rebellion here had political implications and overtones; nothing on Asgard was done by halves and the ripples went outward to impact all the Nine Realms. Maybe that had been Thor's goal all along, to impress on him how little hope there truly was for Loki.

Stubbornly, he refused to believe Loki was beyond reason, but he recognized more clearly now how much momentum was behind Loki's rejection of Thor and of Asgard. And how different was Loki's attempt to destroy Jotunheim from Hitler's crusade during the War? He hated the comparison; hated that he'd been able to draw it so easily. If he was wrong about Loki, if he'd been wrong all along, then it was only a matter of time before he would also bear the heavy burden of Loki's bitter legacy, as Thor did now.

He bid Thor goodnight at one of the intersecting corridors and knew he wasn't imagining the glimmer of nascent hope in Thor's eyes when he saw that Steve was headed in the direction of Loki's room. Even as he returned, everything as he'd left it, he didn't know if he'd come to say goodbye or not. He crossed to the balcony to watch the reflection of the stars glitter across the ocean.

He'd believed that one man, the right man, in the right place at the right time, could be more effective than an army; that had been the gamble of the serum. If he could just understand Loki, understand how he thought and what motivated him; if he could do that, he'd thought he could change Loki's fate.

Maybe Loki was right; maybe he and Loki were too different. He didn't know how long they could continue their dance of trying and failing to make something work between them. There was no doubt in his mind that Loki was more than the monster Asgard believed him to be and more than the damaged brother Thor knew him to be; he knew there was potential for good in Loki. But he was losing faith that, this time, he was the right man for the job. He could love Loki and Loki might betray him; Loki might love him and that love might be twisted first into resentment, then into hate, if Steve kept trying.
Worse than that, he realized, his obstinate refusal to give up on Loki was affecting his team – his friends – nearly as much as the spell itself. A wave of regret swelled up, making his chest and throat go tight. He’d forced Sam to listen to his problems – problems he had no one to blame for but himself - when he knew full well that wasn’t Sam’s job or even a fraction of what Sam had to offer. Of course Sam hadn’t complained, hadn’t said a word, because he was a good man and a true friend, even while Steve was bleeding all over him. He thought about the months of tests that must’ve cost Bruce countless late nights and the even later nights of Natasha guiding him through his own personal field of land mines. He’d done that to them, pushing his problems out onto them because he couldn’t handle the weight, and they’d taken up the slack because they loved him. Even Thor had been trying to tell him, with far more kindness and delicacy than he deserved, that he was failing his friends. In that moment, he’d never felt more loved in his life and never felt more sick at the thought of how selfish he’d become.

A yellow blossom detached from the branches above him, floating down and brushing against his shoulder on its way. He caught it. In these rooms, there had been a Loki who grew flowers and loved books; surely a ghost of that Loki still remained. Dejectedly, he wondered how many of the plants around him were poisonous.

He dropped the blossom over the edge and watched it drift toward the shadowed river below, but it disappeared well before then, vanishing into a shimmer on the air below the balcony.

Frowning, he searched the rooms for something he could use as a rope, settling on a sturdy drapery cord he pulled down from one of the windows. He lowered one end slowly down until it disappeared as though swallowed up by nothing at all. There was no change that he could feel in the rope, no indication that it had struck a surface and stopped. When several feet had been eaten up by the portal, he began to pull the cord back. The section of braided cloth that returned was stiff with cold and crusted in ice.

The piece of green rock in his pocket felt suddenly heavy and he wondered if Loki’s biggest secret of all had been right under their noses.

He was moving before he’d even realized that he’d made the decision. His first stop was to the rooms he’d been given to stay. They were smaller and more serviceable than Loki’s, but still impossibly opulent. He threw open the wardrobe and hunted through the contents. Thor had told them they’d find everything they needed on Asgard and it was mere minutes to pull out heavy clothes and furs meant for winter, including several leather satchels for carrying necessities. He collected what he thought he’d need and carried them back to Loki’s room, then detoured to the great hall. There was always a selection of food laid out on the enormous banquet table, serving as refreshment for all those in the palace as they came and went about their business. He filled one of the satchels with items he thought would keep well and didn’t require cooking or heat.

Back in Loki’s rooms, he layered on the heavy outer wear, covering his head and neck, and secured the satchels on his back along with his shield. He found a strip of leather and used it to bind the green stone, hanging it around his neck rather than having it loose in a pocket. There was a blank piece of parchment along with a feathered pen on Loki’s desk; he wrote a simple note that he would return soon, leaving it on the desk beneath a small metal paperweight.

Dawn was beginning to peek over the edge of the world when he came back to the balcony and looked down into the shimmer on the air. Part of him wanted to go to Thor or Sam and ask them to come with him, but he’d already asked too much and taken too much from all of them.

This, he would do alone.
Avengers Tower was quiet. Only JARVIS and the hum of electronics kept company in the middle of the night. Loki had come alone first and quickly determined that the Avengers were wholly absent. The relief he felt at finding it relatively empty was only because achieving his goal would be far more convenient without having to create an elaborate charade to accomplish his goal.

It took considerable coaxing to convince Barnes to accompany him through the portal, stepping in one instant from the apartment to Stark's laboratory.

"Remove your shirt," he directed softly. "Take a seat over there."

Barnes followed, his gaze moving rapidly over the space around him, trying to take in the various tables and workstations. He stripped off the shirt as he sat down. With Loki's aid, he extended his left arm over the table beside him.

"JARVIS, if you would be so kind as to take a look," Loki said smoothly.

"I am unable to comply-"

Loki waved his fingers lazily.

"Of course, Doctor Banner."

One of the robotic arms dropped down from the ceiling, whirring along the track as it came into position above the table and began to scan the metallic arm. Nearby displays lit up with flashing images of the results; circuitry and schematics, with flashing red and white to indicate areas of damage and possible malfunction. It made two passes up and down the arm before it retracted. Loki picked up one of the tablets and took a seat at the workstation, reviewing the auto generated report.

"It does not appear to detach easily, though it could come off," he told Barnes offhandedly. "There is blunt force damage to the bicep area, broken gears. The internal mechanisms are more delicate than I thought."

"Can you fix it?" Barnes asked, his voice taut. He was watching the ceiling with suspicion.

"I can't. But it can." Loki pointed upward. "JARVIS, provide a plan for repair of the device and an estimate of the difficulty and how long it will take."

"I believe I have adequate parts on hand, sir. It should take no more than two hours." A pause. "I am not familiar with this model. Are schematics available?"

"It's one of a kind. You may record the result of your scans for Captain Rogers' eyes only."

"Very well, sir. If you could relocate the device to the staging area."

Barnes took more convincing to trade his seat for another one at a different workstation. Tension was showing in the muscles of his neck and jaw. As soon as his arm was still on the table, a host of smaller robot arms unfolded from the top of the table and came at his arm.

"Hold still," Loki commanded, using one hand on Barnes' shoulder to keep his arm in place. He could see panic beginning to set in. Barnes' eyes were wide and unfocused, breathing growing increasingly rapid as the tiny robots set about opening up the metallic segments of his arm. Loki thought he might have seconds, possibly less, before Barnes melted down and potentially destroyed the lab. Since this might be their only chance to have the Tower resources to themselves, he gambled on a possibility.
"Bucky." His voice lowered as his features shifted and a shimmer of gold washed down his body. Shoulders and chest broadened; black hair shortened and turned blond. Barnes went stiff and still, frozen by the change. His only movement was to blink. Loki spoke with Steve's voice, "I need you to hold still, Bucky. Can you do that? Can you hold still?"

Barnes nodded jerkily and started to breathe again. His gaze stayed riveted on Loki - now Steve - as the robotics found the release mechanism and began to open up his arm. The focus of his eyes came and went, oscillating between terror and a desperate sort of longing. It had been enough of a shock to short circuit his runaway panic and once the robots began removing the outer plates of the arm to get to the damaged parts beneath, Loki shrugged off Steve's form.

"Wait," Bucky protested. His brow furrowed and he licked his lips; his expression had a sharp, hungry cast. "How?"

"It's merely a trick."

"Who are you?" His voice shook.

"I am the one trying to help you repair your arm." That's what mattered, he supposed. He moved away from Barnes, but kept watch out of the corner of his eye.

The staging area was where Stark built and repaired prototype sections for his suit; Loki had seen it while he was shadowing Doctor Banner. A robotic arm maneuvered a tiny probe into the arm and a small number of sparks flew out a moment later as it cut through damaged internal components to remove them. Several of the gears had been bent inward, crushed by impact against the arm, and most of the damage was in that localized area. Watching the robots work made him curious as to how HYDRA had maintained Barnes; he had the impression that sitting motionless amongst machines wasn't unfamiliar.

Grudgingly, he ceded that he needed to be more careful with the fragile state of Barnes' sanity. Steve had been kind when no kindness was warranted and, if Loki could not give him anything in return nor be who Steve wished him to be, he could still play the part for a time. In this role, he would be healer and guide for the lost Bucky Barnes, however distasteful and against his nature it may be, and he would keep this role until he saw Barnes safely where he belonged.

With a sigh, he turned away from the robots and saw Barnes watching him intently. "I'm sorry. I needed you to stop focusing on the robots. I thought that might get your full attention."

"It worked," Bucky said through clenched teeth. He blinked and then his focus was gone; Loki could tell he was lost in a memory.

As intricate as the delicate electronics of his arm, Loki knew the mind would be a far greater challenge. He had yet to get a look into the damage HYDRA had done and he would have no JARVIS to rely on for expertise while he worked. Briefly, he weighed the idea of simply lulling Barnes to sleep and completing the task without his knowledge, but the thought left a sour taste in his mouth.

"Barnes," he prompted, but there was no indication that Barnes had even heard him.

Wheeling the chair around in front of Barnes, he reached out to take his right hand. The touch seemed partly successful in drawing him out of the quicksand of memories; he quickly took in his surroundings, frowning at the robots working on his arm, before facing Loki.

Loki spoke slowly, gently. "I told you I could help you with your mind, do you remember?" He
waited for Barnes to nod. "It will be much like your arm. Except I will reach into your mind with energy. You may call it magic if that is simpler."

Another nod.

"I will create a way for you to hold the memories still. This will prevent you from being overwhelmed by them, as you are now. There may be gaps, places where HYDRA has damaged your mind and taken knowledge from you. That, I cannot repair, but I can make it easier for you to accept the loss." He kept his touch light against the back of Bucky's hand, turning it over to tap a finger against the inside of his wrist. Bucky flinched minutely. Turning his hand over again, Loki brushed his fingertips over the scarring on his knuckles and fingers. Under the lights of the lab, Bucky's skin was sallow, as though he hadn't seen the sun in far too long, as though HYDRA had merely kept him locked up until they had use for him. Loki chuckled mirthlessly at the parallel.

"JARVIS. What do the Avengers know of Bucky Barnes?"

"James Buchanan Barnes, also known as the Winter Soldier," JARVIS answered immediately. The voice in the walls rattled off a collection of facts, both of Bucky's life and disappearance and what had been gleaned from SHIELD's internal files about the Winter Soldier's activities. At the mention of Howard and Maria Stark, Bucky gripped Loki's hand tightly, fingers trembling, but he said nothing. In the end, Loki determined the Avengers knew precious little that was useful about the Winter Soldier, but he needed a skeleton timeline in order to build a construct and what JARVIS provided was suitable enough.

"Will he know I was here?"

"Only if you wish. The computer will retain records of your arm, but for the moment, all its eyes and ears are telling it that I am Doctor Banner and I am here alone, with a device of my own making. I control what it sees and hears, just as I can change what you see and hear." The illusion wasn't simple and he would inevitably have a splitting head in the morning. He didn’t mention the message he’d sent to Steve.

Bucky nodded. He looked down and seemed to realize he was holding onto Loki's hand. Stiffly, he opened his fingers, withdrawing his hand to clench it tightly into a fist against his thigh.

“One thing at a time,” Loki said gently, motioning to the exposed metal arm.

With Bucky relatively soothed, they lapsed into silence, watching the robots work meticulously at the inner components of the arm. Loki’s thoughts drifted to the codename JARVIS had used – Winter Soldier – and he gazed down at his own arm, imagining raised markings against his skin. Perhaps they weren’t so different. Bound up in ice and darkness, they were both shadows against brighter counterparts, whether it was Thor or Steve; they were raised together, had played together, fought together. He felt a stirring of what might have been compassion and allowed it to remain; this was the role he’d chosen to play, after all, no more or less real than the other roles he’d played.

Brother, son, trickster, villain. He’d worn those masks, and more, and discarded them whenever he grew weary of their weight. This new role, this new mask, of friend did not quite fit him, did not quite settle on his shoulders as the others had, but perhaps it would in time. He’d grown into the role of villain, he thought, piecing it together with shattered hopes and humiliation.

And there had been others: false King, lost Prince, prisoner, murderer, rapist.

His expression twisted into a grimace. For every line he’d held, he’d crossed thousands more; thoughtlessly, effortlessly. This kind of introspection was counterproductive, he knew as much, but Steve, with all his goodness and earnest desire to understand, had wormed his way through Loki’s
defenses and set him asking questions he’d long dismissed, as though holding up a mirror Loki couldn’t look away from.

*This* is madness, he thought.

Barnes was watching him. He sat still, compliant and patient while the robots worked. His blank gaze was settled on Loki with all the calm acceptance of an animal in a slaughterhouse.

A wild, frantic thought urged him to warn Barnes that *Loki* was not safe, not a friend, and above all, never to be trusted. He was a monster of ice and darkness and even the darkness of Jotunheim was blazing day compared to the black in his own heart. If Barnes knew – oh, if he *knew* - how it was Steve had come to visit Loki those nights, those metal fingers would be around his throat in an instant. Barnes would not forgive; he was not *Steve*.

He would ensure Barnes did not discover the truth until his arm and his sanity were repaired. And then? He slumped under the heavy weight of relief. When Barnes was whole again, Loki would tell him everything.

This *friend* - would be his final mask.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Let me be the first to say that the Loki/Bucky dynamic here is a little bit messed up. And by a little, I mean whole heaping amounts of unhealthy and a very bad idea.

It wasn't the cold that surprised Steve, it was the stillness.

He felt the change in temperature sliding up his body as he lowered himself down through the portal, like slipping beneath the surface of an icy lake; he closed his eyes the last second before his head was swallowed up. An instant later, his arms and hands still in the warmer air of Asgard, he opened his eyes and looked around.

The shadows were thick, deep blues and greens and inky black, but there was diffuse light from an unidentifiable source keeping it from being pitch black. With no movement in the air, he guessed he'd emerged in a sheltered area, perhaps a cave beneath the snow. He could see indistinct outlines and shapes, enough to hope there was solid footing several feet below him. He took a deep breath, prayed, and let go.

His boots thudded and the surface beneath him didn't waver or shift under his weight. Stone then, rather than ice or packed snow. He took time to carefully adjust one of the woolen wraps around his neck and face, and pull on a pair of heavy gloves. One step at a time, he felt his way with the edges of his boots, occasionally reaching down to explore with his fingers; he moved cautiously toward a section of shadow that seemed lighter than the others. How far he would go and how long he would stay were questions without answers; he focused on discovering what lay ten feet ahead of him, and then the next ten feet, and figured he'd decide when he came to an obstacle or fork in the path.

Gradually, he became aware of a steady upward progression. The light expanded ahead and above him, growing bright enough that he could identify the narrow path as the base of a deep chasm cutting through solid walls of ice and rock marbled with familiar green stone. It grew narrower and narrower, until his shoulders were too broad to go further and his only option was to climb. There were no handholds or footholds, but it wasn't difficult to leverage his weight back and forth, wedging himself up a few inches at a time.

With all of his focus on keeping moving and not sliding back down into the chasm, he barely registered when he'd reached the top. Gaping, he stared up into an open sky blazing with stars that put the Milky Way to shame. Several minutes later, he wrestled his way out of the fissure and onto the flat, wide expanse of a glacial bed. He laid on his back, wide eyed at the wonders above him, until his body cooled from the exertion of the climb.

Ringing the vista of open sky were jagged mountains like a great maw of broken teeth trying to swallow the stars. The peaks glistened blue and green over patches and beds of snow, while stone filled dark veins through the ice pack. It was perfectly still; he could hear the far off howl of wind through the peaks but it was a peaceful, heavy night in the heart of the sheltered valley. The harsh, cold beauty of the landscape was humbling. He dug through his satchel for a bit of salted meat and bread, warming them as much as he could in his hands before eating them.

He considered his options as he chewed. This world was not meant for humans and he could feel the
cold worming its way into his skin, chilling him bit by bit. If he got lost, he wouldn't last long in a
desolate, eternal winter, but he wasn't ready to turn around and go back to Asgard.

His courage buoyed by the food and a brief rest, he pulled the chunk of rock from around his neck
and used it to scrape a series of deep grooves into the surface of the ice to mark his exit point. The
gaping maw of the chasm led back toward a join of mountains with the potential of a pass between
them. He wrapped the leather strap around his wrist to keep the stone handy for additional markings
as he went and followed the jagged line of the crack in the glacier.

Time felt suspended in the cold night air. The crunch of brittle ice beneath his boots and the rasp of
his breathing were the only sounds. He wondered if Jotunheim ever saw daylight, if it even had a
sun, and how any creatures at all had evolved to survive in such a place. Surely the Frost Giants had
to eat and if the tales were true, they were fearsome warriors; those skills could've been developed
hunting equally as well as in battle, but he had a hard time imagining any form of life surviving in the
world around him. The tavern songs had mentioned a Casket, an object of power taken from the
Frost Giants. Perhaps Jotunheim had been different when the Casket had been here, maybe even
thriving; he could be seeing the ruins of an old world. He didn't look too closely at that line of
thought. Interstellar politics were most definitely not his expertise.

The stars were moving, he thought, gradually making their way across the vast sky; Jotunheim must
be orbiting a star of some kind, like Earth. He wouldn't have time to make a study of it, but it was a
familiarity he could grasp and hold on to as he walked. The mountains grew nearer as well, slowly;
their enormous size made them seem much closer than they really were. He left markings at each
spot where the chasm sealed over with snow or he had to double back to work around a secondary
cut in the ice, hoping it would allow him to retrace his path. The silence was meditative; it was easy
for his mind to drift to memories of Switzerland - *Bucky screaming as he fell* - and the Arctic ice
closing in around him.

They were just memories now. He'd replayed them a thousand times, dreamed them a thousand
more, and they'd begun to dull beneath the noise of the modern world, even the memories he didn't
want to lose. He wondered idly if Natasha was having any luck finding Bucky and whether or not
Una was succeeding in scolding Loki into eating three square meals a day.

There was a strange knot of emotion in his chest, where his feelings about Loki collided with his
feelings about Bucky, and he didn't want to look too closely at that either. It would've been much
simpler if he'd known how to land a damaged plane and could've had that dance with Peggy. He
smiled at the thought of it; a brief, wistful moment of longing for believing it could've been as easy as
a dance, a marriage, and a family. They would've had a good life, he knew that, and there would've
been no spells to tangle up his mind, no Loki to tangle up his heart, and no Bucky to make him
wonder how it had all gone so wrong.

His boot scraped over a rock and the sound of it pulled him from his thoughts. He'd reached the
edges of the glacial field, marked by roughhewn boulders jutting up through the snow. Packed,
frozen earth was firm and unforgiving beneath his boots as he picked his way through the boulder
field toward the gap in the mountains, which meant he could set aside fears of the ground suddenly
splitting open beneath his feet.

When he reached the opening between two sheer cliffs, his breath was harsh and ragged. There was
more uphill ahead of him and he set himself to it with the same stubborn determination that had
gotten him through winter marches across Europe. One step at a time, one boulder at a time; he
focused on what was right in front of him and held off thoughts of what might lie further ahead. He
found pockets of stone that crumbled easily under his grip and he learned to avoid them, seeking out
the darker slate grey of the sturdier stone. The veins of green stone were treacherously slick. He
thought there might be a temperature difference between the green stone and the surrounding gray but didn’t want to strip off his gloves to test it. To his merely human hands, cold and colder would feel the same.

His mind disengaged as he climbed, physical exertion muffling his thoughts like a heavy woolen blanket, and when he finally pulled himself up onto the top of the rocky ridge, he could only stare numbly at the landscape in front of him.

Geometric patterns of stonework, too regular to be anything but deliberate, sprawled over the valley below. He’d expected Frost Giant cities to be squat, blocky, and functional, intended as protection against the elements, but even at this distance, he could see gargantuan columns and flying buttresses as graceful as any of Earth’s cathedrals. From the densely packed center, wide avenues bordered by tall stone buildings jutted out on six sides. It looked to Steve like an enormous snowflake carved out of stone and pinned down against the ice. Within the structures, he saw pinpricks of green and gold light, some flickering or winking in and out. A couple hours at a good pace down the sloping snow field would bring him to the edges of the city, but he knew it would be unwise to venture near enough to be seen. Still, he eyed the outer reaches speculatively, looking for a way in with adequate cover.

There was a sharp wind here, coming down off the mountain peaks and whistling into the valley. He found a place in the lee of an outcropping and tucked himself between stone and ice. The sloping mountainside was peaceful; there was none of the bustling life and sound of Asgard or even Earth. He dug out more of the dried meat, warming it enough to chew. It was possible that Asgard's tales of the Frost Giants were biased, even likely they were more wartime propaganda than anything else, but he couldn't see a way to determine the nature of the Frost Giants on his own. He could infer a few characteristics from the barren world itself; they would have to be extremely tough and durable to live here. They'd be adapted to the cold, with low core temperatures and a different metabolic mechanism than was familiar to him, which made him wonder how much food Loki truly needed. If there was no daylight, he could assume they had far better night vision, probable infrared sensitivity, or relied strongly on other senses as well. There was no visible plant life and he could only guess wildly on what kind of functional food chain might exist here, unless the snow and dirt on Jotunheim had nutritional value.

Lost in thought, he wondered if Loki had come here, if he’d seen the great city below and what he’d felt. The entire Realm reminded him of Loki, with its quiet hostility and secrets buried beneath an impenetrable barrier of ice. He felt a momentary, knee-jerk reaction against thinking about Loki, since it was becoming more and more of a certainty that it could never end well between them, but figuring out how he felt about Loki was the reason he’d left Earth in the first place.

Trying to put his finger on what he wanted from Loki was frustrating. He’d enjoyed the dinners and the time spent together, but he’d done that out of misguided arrogance, thinking he was helping Loki. There was a sense of potential, of what could be with Loki and that tantalized him. Maybe it was the feeling people attributed to chemistry. He wanted the physical contact too; holding each other, the casual touches that came with intimacy and familiarity. He wanted to come home, strip off his uniform, and have that physical comfort to ease away his tension from the day; he wanted to just be Steve. Some of that, he’d had with Bucky and he'd missed it after the serum and the War had taken Bucky away from him. Of course, Bucky had never wanted him the way Loki did and maybe that made all the difference.

Steve wanted to believe they could at least remain on friendly terms; they could still be allies instead of enemies. Loki had already surpassed his wildest hopes in terms of no longer wreaking havoc on Earth and making the Avengers chase him around to clean up the mess. That was a victory in itself,
however small compared to Loki's litany of crimes against the Nine Realms. Growing up with Asgard's tales of the Frost Giants and then discovering he was a Frost Giant could very well be the fuel behind Loki's deep self-loathing and, in turn, his aggression; if Steve could make headway in helping Loki stop hating himself, it would all be worth it. He couldn't change what Loki was, but he could try to counter the hundreds of years of internalized hatred toward Frost Giants.

To do that, he needed to know more about Jotunheim. He needed to know what wasn't in Asgard's library, whether through ignorance or deliberate omission. With renewed determination, he crept from the shallow shelter of the outcropping and picked his way slowly down the slope toward the nearest outreach of buildings. He set his sights on a segment of darkened structures, hoping the lack of lights meant they were unoccupied.

The exertion shook off the cold stiffness that had settled into his limbs while he'd been sitting. It felt good to be moving again, getting his blood pumping and raising his heart rate. The cold air was biting and exhilarating, making him feel starkly, utterly alive. He stayed in the shadow of the mountain, moving from boulder to boulder, both to keep out of the wind and to minimize visibility. As he neared the city, additional details became clear and the architecture was even more delicate and otherworldly than he'd surmised. Many of the columns had toppled; archways had broken and fallen in. If it weren't for the flickering lights, he would've believed the city deserted. He reached the nearest ruins and slowed, skirting collapsed and tumbled stone. Up close, he saw more of the green mineral carved in sharply defined polygonal crystals extending upward a hundred feet or more. The stone of the fallen columns was carved in similar geometric designs as he'd seen on the skin of the Frost Giant kind, Laufey, and the sketch of Loki's arm.

Would Loki have those markings all over his body?

He wiped a hand through a thin layer of frost covering a series of engraved curves, trying to imagine what Loki looked like with blue skin covered in art. It must be another form he could choose to take, just as Loki had been able to shape shift into a female form after Amora's spell hit them. He wondered how much convincing it would take for Loki to show him this form; he wasn't going to hold his breath.

Further into the ruins, there was still no immediate sign of Frost Giants other than patterns of disturbance in the ice and snow that might have been recent. Pressing on, he grew increasingly confused by the emptiness of the stone structures. If this was a city, who lived here? Had it been abandoned? He wished he'd asked Thor for more details about Loki's attempt to destroy Jotunheim. Was it possible the empty city was a result of what Loki had done? Those were uncomfortable thoughts, jarring roughly against his warmer thoughts from earlier.

It would always be that way with Loki, he thought. Never entirely good or bad, never one thing or another; he had an infuriating ability to walk entirely on the lines between opposing ideas. Amora had told them Loki was only ever on Loki's side. He hadn’t truly appreciated the breadth and clarity of her insight into who Loki was until now.

He ventured deeper, growing bolder. A flash of green light ahead, sudden and bright, brought him up short. He ducked behind a tumble of fallen stone, holding his breath. Beyond the pounding of his heart, there was nothing but silence. He waited far longer than he thought necessary before creeping along the broken column to peer around the end. The flash of light came again; a steady pulse against the dark sky. It was emanating from the tip of one of the columns of green stone and when the next pulse came, he realized the light must be traveling up through the stone itself, like the fiber optic cables that ran throughout the Tower.

Cautiously, he made his way to the column of green stone and studied the base where it disappeared.
into the snow. He dug clumsily with his gloved hands, using a shard of stone to chip at the ice, until
he’d revealed enough to see the green column disappear into a precisely cut hole in the stone
underneath. What he could see of the columns were only their tips, like the canopy of a forest. He
saw the ruined city around him in a new light. It made sense - as much as a planet where he was the
alien could ever make sense to him - that the Frost Giants would live within Jotunheim rather than on
its barren surface. He searched the snow for tracks, even bits of broken ice, and followed what he
hoped were footprints toward a cluster of stone columns with a deeply shadowed archway in the
base.

A draft of warmer air swirled around him when he reached the archway. He kept near the right wall,
one gloved hand skimming over the carved rock, as he moved deeper into the shadows. There were
enormous steps chiseled out of the ground, intended for much larger creatures, and he had to
scramble over each edge, dropping down as quietly as possible. The steps curved sharply to the right
and wound down in a spiral with periodic sections of flat stone where the air formed eddies of
curling heat. In the walls, bursts of light traveled up through deep veins of green crystal and briefly
illuminated the darkness. The further down he went, the more residual light seemed to be contained
inside the crystal and soon the curving stairway was bathed in a pale blue green light.

The air grew steadily warmer, if only in comparison to the subzero temperatures of the surface, and
gradually, he saw a shift in the geology as well. More veins of the soft, crumbling material appeared,
bits of the lighter grey dirt falling away whenever he brushed near them. The sharp geometry of the
constructed artifices morphed into curves and rounded edges more organic in nature. These shapes
reminded him of lava flows edging and rolling at the boundaries, as well as internal cavern structures
laid down layer by mineral layer from the steady drip of water. There was a new scent in the air as
well, the smell of damp stone and earth. He passed sections where the rock walls glistened with
moisture.

Unfamiliar noises started quietly, growing in volume as he continued down into the heart of
Jotunheim. Snatches of sound took on familiarity; the ring of metal against metal, the rhythmic thrum
of footsteps, and a dull, low hum that might have been voices. He kept a lookout for places to hide,
calculating how many steps it would take to get behind the nearest sizable boulder or jut of stone.

He wasn't expecting the blast of humidity that assaulted him when he rounded a corner. The corridor
he'd followed down widened suddenly and opened up into an enormous cavern. He barely
remembered that he wasn't supposed to be there in time to scurry into a narrow gap between the
cavern wall and a ring of jagged, broken stalagmites. After he was certain he hadn't been spotted, he
crept along the edge of the path to a gap in the slick, pale gray stone where he could peer out into the
cavern.

The cavern itself stretched farther than he could see, easily large enough to swallow up the city of
New York from riverbanks to the tips of her skyscrapers. Columns of green stone ringed the edges
and spanned outward in snowflake lattices to light the interior with their pale green light. A softer,
orange glow emanated from far below him and there was a steady current of warm, wet air rising and
pouring over the edges of the carved walkways. Hundreds of walkways like the one he was on had
been carved out of the cavern walls and hundreds more crisscrossed the open space ahead. Many
were suspended from the top of the cavern far above, others anchored to stalactites the size of the
Empire State Building, and seemingly delicate bridges of stone and rope swayed between them.

He heard the bellow of a great animal in the din of voices, footfalls, and a cacophony of clanging
metal, creaking wood and leather, and the rough scrape of stone against stone. Heavy footsteps grew
near enough to shake the stone beneath him. He hunkered down behind the stone, holding his breath
and making sure his shield was clear. The last thing he needed was to catch the edge on a bit of rock
and announce his presence like he'd rung the Liberty Bell.
The Frost Giants were, indeed, giant. He thought he might stand as tall as the waist of the smallest one who passed by his vantage point and one of their mammoth hands could easily crush his skull. Their blue skin was thickly ridged along the geometric designs; they wore startlingly little clothing and were barefoot. More of the multi-functional green stone was fashioned into clasps for thick fabric or animal skins wrapped around their hips and slung loosely over wide, barrel chests. Stone and metal alike had been used to create decorative circlets and armor plates for their limbs. Functional tools made of stone, knives and hammers, hung casually from belts around their waists.

He tried to wrap his mind around the idea that any part of Loki was the same as the gargantuan figures fading from his view. Frigga had said that Loki was only half Frost Giant, which must be the reason Loki wasn't twenty feet tall and as wide as a city bus.

Curiosity eventually got the better of him and he slipped out from his hideaway to creep toward the edge of the walkway. The sights and sounds below and around him nearly took his breath away. There were thousands of Frost Giants, many of them so far away that they appeared little more than blue dots in the distance. They were hauling bundles and wagons filled with all manner of cargo, most of which, Steve could only guess at their purpose or source. There were beasts as well; some were smaller than the Frost Giants and some were enormous creatures that would've dwarfed Earth's blue whales. Larger beasts were slung with saddles and harnesses to pull heavy loads, even gigantic chunks of rock, behind them. Much of the vocalizations he could hear were the riders calling out commands to the beasts, answered occasionally with deep bellowing from the animals. Spread throughout the cavern were plateaus of flat rock covered with a thick bluish gray layer that must have been a plant or type of fungus; he could see many of the Frost Giants laboring to cut patches loose and load them onto wagons. Smaller beasts roamed over the plateaus, their heads bent as though grazing.

Along the sides of the cavern, he recognized machinery jutting out from the rock. There was a complicated system of pulleys, levers, and gears, all creating a transportation system from the depths of the cavern below to the upper levels. In the depths of the cavern, he could see smoldering red, like the glowing of hot coals, and jets of scorching steam; Jotunheim's heart was molten fire.

Lost in awe, he didn't notice the tremors in the rock beneath him until almost too late. Glancing around, he saw no signs of approaching Frost Giants and frowned, wondering if he was feeling tremors from one of the walkways above or beneath him. As he scanned the surrounding area, a large drop of viscous, foul liquid dropped down from the ceiling above him with a wet plop. He stared at it incomprehensibly for a moment, then looked up.

He looked up into the jaws and face of one of the great beasts. It was small, though easily as large as a mini-van. Nostrils flared; the creature's skin was hairless and rough, with a rock-like texture patterned in gray, rust, and deep green. The tail moved with surprising agility, curling and wrapping around bits of stone as the creature shifted. Enormous black claws, glittering like obsidian, were dug into the stone, allowing it to hang above him as it inspected him with blinking yellow eyes.

"Easy, boy," Steve said softly.

The creature opened a mouth filled with enormous curving teeth and gave a bleating roar that rang in Steve's ears as much as it echoed throughout the cavern. Answering bellows came from nearby animals and he heard shouting. He braced himself against the rock, eyeing the creature above him, and then took off in the direction of the animal's tail. The direction gave him a few seconds head start, no more, as the creature spun around to chase after him. He thought better of trying to go back the way he'd come. Climbing the steps would be slow going and he'd inevitably be caught. Instead, he zigzagged down the walkway, deeper into the cavern. Behind him, the creature howled and scrambled after him, leaping from the ceiling to the wall to the walkway, black claws scrabbling over
Another corner brought him up short when he saw two Frost Giants headed his way. They saw him and their hands went to the knives at their belts. He could see their red eyes burning even at a distance. Unable to slow down without becoming a snack for the creature behind him, he took the only remaining option.

Hot air blasted up against him as he launched himself over the edge and into the open air of the cavern. He twisted, rolling as he fell, and wrenched his shield free to bring it around beneath him. Mentally cursing himself for venturing into a strange planet without even the possibility of back up, he braced himself for impact and smashed into one of the walkways below. It swayed and groaned, but it had been built to carry much greater weight and absorb more force than he could generate. Wheezing from having the breath knocked out of him, he rolled to bring his feet under him and took off down the walkway in the first direction that looked clear. There was more shouting all around him. He pushed himself to run faster, his boots ringing out against the stone, but he knew this was a race he'd never win. He had to find a place to hide, somewhere small enough that none of the giants could follow him. Scanning the side of the cavern as he ran, he looked for fissures and gaps in the stones, hoping he wouldn't accidentally choose a thermal vent and end up boiled alive by the steam.

Halfway between the level he was on and the level below, he saw a crack in the stone that looked promising. More of the bluish flora grew around the edges and he couldn't see any telltale signs of a steam jet. There were Frost Giants on either end of the walkway now; he could see them ahead and feel the quake of their footfalls behind him.

He waited until the very last second before he dropped, sliding on his left thigh and hip like he was coming into home plate, and skidded out into open air. Rather than try to catch the anchor line below with his hands, he hooked it with his shield. Every joint in his arms screamed as he jerked to a stop, swinging precariously for a moment before the shield began to slip down the line and he was racing toward the cavern wall with frightening speed. He swung his weight back and forth like a pendulum, all his focus on the gap in the stone. He held his breath when he let go, the momentum of his swing bringing him into an arc down toward the gap. His shoulder hit the edge on the descent and dislocated with a painful, sickening pop. He twisted away and thudded against the stone, bouncing like a pinball between the sides of the fissure until he finally came to rest, gasping and shaking. Pressing his forehead against the cool stone, he tried to recover his breath enough to think. This only bought him time. The Frost Giants would've seen where he'd gone and although he didn't think they could reach him, they could still starve him out.

First things first; he stripped off one of his gloves and set it between his teeth. He wedged his shoulder against the rock, grimacing, and twisted to force his shoulder back into place. His scream came out as a muffled groan around the leather. Rubbing at his shoulder gingerly, he took ragged breaths and tried to slow his heart back from pounding to a steady rhythm. Outside his narrow haven, he could hear the Frost Giants and their creatures and he knew it was only a matter of time. If he was very unlucky, they would simply shove pointed sticks into the hole to skewer him and then let him bleed to death before they dug him out of the rock.

If I get out of this, Sam is going to kill me, he thought vaguely. On second thought, there would probably be a line of Avengers wanting to smack a little sense into him. Again.

As his breath steadied, he felt a brush of wind against his forehead, going toward the cavern. It was so light he almost thought he'd imagined it in a wild hope that his only escape wasn't going to turn out to be a death trap. He tuned out the growling and shouting from the cavern, reaching cautiously into the darkness. Fingers brushed against a deposit of the stone that crumbled and gave under his fingers, falling away in thick chunks. He pawed at it, feeling wind against his face. The breeze grew
stronger as he worked, strange new odors coming with it, and he clung to hope like a lifeline.

The shield scraped against stone as he pushed further back into the darkness, digging blindly. He wedged himself in, praying the gap wouldn't become so narrow that any way out was lost to him. Dirt tumbled down over his head and shoulders. He choked on it; his eyes stung and watered. His eyelashes were caked with it and trying to brush it away only succeeded in grinding more of the dust into his eyes. Panic seized him as he struggled, caught between the rock and unable to move forward without possibly suffocating in the thick dust and unable to retreat back toward the cavern. He kicked and clawed at the vein of loose earth until he felt it give, then realized in a single, heart stopping moment that the vein was collapsing in around him.

It swept out beneath him, swallowing him up in a contained avalanche within the wall of the cavern as the entire section fell away. He tumbled with it, coughing and fighting for air, clawing for a handhold or anything to stop himself from being dragged down and buried alive, but his gloves only slipped over the firmer stone. The clang of his shield against rock was muffled. His chest ached, lungs burning. He tried to orient himself with the flow, as though trying to ride out the rapids of a river. His boots met open air suddenly. He felt thick heat wrap around his legs and up his body as the stream of rock and debris spewed him out from the wall into another cavern. Blinded by the dust in his eyes, he plummeted down into the unknown and hit the bottom with an impact that jarred his teeth and sent stars shooting through his skull. He had sense enough to roll away from the continuing downpour of dirt, hauling himself in whatever direction he could as he sucked in the stale, humid air.

He'd made it. He was lost, possibly trapped, on an alien planet worlds away from Earth, but he was still alive. It wasn't much of a victory, but it meant he still had a fighting chance to find a way home.

His head swam painfully. Curling up against a surface that felt solid, he tried to keep still and mentally take stock of his injuries. He could have a concussion; he needed to stay awake; he needed to keep moving. The rock against his back was warm and he found himself drifting away despite his best efforts to remain conscious and aware. Slowly, he got his hands planted against the rock and leived his weight up onto his hands and knees, dirt and gravel falling away as he moved. There was dim light around him; the ever familiar pulsing of green through the veins of dark stone. He had to find a place to be still, to recover and get his breath back. What he could make out of this new cavern in the pale glow was long and narrow, with a low ceiling, more a hollow in the stone than a true cave. There were more patches of the ubiquitous bluish grey plant life growing over the walls and floor. Both curious and needing a distraction from the throbbing in his skull, he crept closer to the nearest patch to inspect it more closely.

It looked like a fungus; a thick carpet of mushroom shaped growths anywhere from an inch to nearly a foot in length. The larger growths were as thick as his forearms, with smaller, more delicate stalks winding around them. He pulled off a glove and reached out to brush his fingers over one of them. It was spongy and gave under his touch like a blade of grass. Carefully, he broke off a smaller stalk at the base. The smell wasn't strong or unpleasant, reminding him of wet leaves in the fall. With experimentation, he determined that the caps of the stalks were filled with seed or spore pockets, but the stalks themselves had a fleshy, moisture rich inside textured much like a pineapple. The caps snapped off easily enough and the thick outer skin could then be stripped away from the top to get to the softer core, which had a nutty, slightly spicy flavor and a tartly sour aftertaste. He nibbled at first, waiting for any sign that his body couldn't handle the strange food, but felt no nausea or other symptoms that would indicate an allergy or toxin.

As he chewed on the stalk, he tried to get a better feel for his new surroundings. The collapsed vein of material where he'd come from had cut across the top corner of the cavern. He could reach it easily enough, though a climb up would be perilous, and he didn't think the gap in the stone was large enough for even one of the smaller Frost Giants, although they could always widen it if they
were determined enough. It was equally likely that they wouldn't view him as more problematic than
a large rat and be content to assume he'd die crawling through a maze of caverns and tunnels deep
within Jotunheim. Going back the way he came was still his only sure way of getting back to
Asgard, but he would have to wait until they forgot about him or believed him dead.

He wished glumly that he'd left more detail in his note back in Loki's room. *Gone to Jotunheim*
hadn't seemed like a good idea back on Asgard. There would be no Avengers, no team, no friends to
bail him out of the mess he'd gotten himself into this time. He'd come here alone for a reason and he
was on his own.

Light pulsed up through the rock, casting the narrow space in deepening shades of green and black.
The stillness of the air was complete that he could hear each creak of leather in his clothing and each
clink of stone against stone where the landslide he'd ridden down continued to settle. His own breath
was a rush of wind echoing back at him. It was the perfect, steady stillness of timeless earth and rock.
There was heat beneath him and at his back, radiating comfort into his bruised shoulder.
Paradoxically, he felt safe and cocooned in his accidentally discovered hollow.

He'd come to Asgard to give Loki space and find a little of his own; a little room to breathe, a little
room to think. It wasn't often that his life slowed down long enough to just be still and he wasn't
likely to find a better, more peaceful spot to contemplate his life.

Briefly, he wondered if the fungus contained any sedative compounds, since he felt distinctly calmer
than he ought to feel after being chased by giants and saber-toothed monsters. His thoughts stuttered,
replaying the memory of the creature's eyes and foul breath. He'd assumed the animal meant to attack
him, possibly even eat him; he'd assumed the Frost Giants chasing him had meant to do him harm.
But nothing he'd seen out in the cavern supported either of those assumptions. What he'd seen of
their activities would've been classified as agricultural; they'd been harvesting swaths of the fungus
and hauling it out of the cavern. Had he assumed their intentions to be violent because of the stories
he'd heard on Asgard? He knew well enough that wartime propaganda often had little enough
resemblance to truth. And if he'd been mistaken for an Asgardian, he couldn't blame them for
reacting with hostility. Maybe he could chalk up a dislocated shoulder and being lost on a planet that
wasn't his own up to the same ignorance that had caused him to screw up his relationship with Loki.
Still, he'd gotten himself out of worse scrapes than this. Hadn't he?

At the thought of Loki, the ache in his chest returned, half physical and half psychological, and all of
it unpleasant. Natasha had been right; he was hurt by Loki's rejection. He had no right to be hurt, not
really, not when he wasn't even supposed to still be in love with Loki at all. He paused, fingers
drumming against his shield as he pieced together his thoughts. He
hadn't been in love with Loki
after that night in the castle. He'd been confused and overwhelmed, but not in love.

That had happened slowly, bit by bit, after Loki had escaped the Fridge. He'd fallen in love over
plates of spaghetti and bowls of shrimp gumbo, during miles of running, and with a hundred glasses
of wine. When he looked - really looked - he could feel the difference, as though Loki had left more
than magic in his bones and in his blood; a small, warm glow and nervous butterflies in his stomach.
Being rejected hurt, but not being able to see Loki and spend time with him hurt even more. He
could wait for Loki to figure things out, but he wasn't going to sit home doing nothing in the
meantime; he was going to make sure Loki knew how he felt.

Of course, now he had to get home.

Eying the gap where he’d come down speculatively, he rolled his shoulder to determine how quickly
it was healing. There was no point in climbing back up or going exploring until he was fully mobile.
Counting the strange fungus, he had plenty of food and water; he could wait and prepare before he
tested any theories about the hospitality of Frost Giants.

**

The metal arm was the easy part.

With the device neatly repaired and its secrets stored away, to be accessible only by Steve Rogers, Loki returned to his apartment with Bucky in tow. The latter was still testing and rotating his repaired arm, checking and rechecking every aspect of its motion; the gears whirred and hummed smoothly now. Once satisfied, Barnes gravitated toward the corner window, standing just to the side and gazing out into the night. Loki didn't know if he was truly looking for something outside the apartment or if he was lost in his memories. Una kept her distance, remaining hidden in the banana tree.

He dismissed the half formed temptation to start a conversation. Silence was easier. His evenings with Steve were always filled with idle chatter, either Steve's or Una's. He kept an eye on Barnes while he pulled together a plate of sliced fruit and nuts. As an afterthought, he opened a bottle of wine and poured out two glasses, then filled a shot glass as a peace offering to Una.

"Are you hungry?" He carried the plate and wine to the living room, setting them on the coffee table. There was no response.

He lowered into a cross legged position and set to work on the puzzle, occasionally reaching for a piece of fruit or sipping from his wine glass. Barnes stood motionless, hands to the side with his fingers curled slightly. Occasionally, the flesh hand would twitch while the metal hand remained perfectly still. It was possible he was standing watch, perhaps waiting for instruction from his former Masters. Despite himself, Loki was curious about the damage to the Barnes' mind. A new challenge to occupy his mind would be a welcome relief from either thinking about Steve or trying not to think about Steve. He drank more wine. Fleeting movement at the corner of his eye was Una claiming her shot glass.

He'd made good progress on one corner of the puzzle when Barnes retreated silently from the window and approached the coffee table. Sitting seemed awkward for him, more of a folding up of his limbs. His eyes moved restlessly over the puzzle pieces but he made no move to reach for any of them or for the wine. He seemed content, for the moment, to watch Loki's hands move the pieces around. Several glasses of wine later, Loki slid the last piece into place. His back was beginning to ache from sitting on the floor. Briefly, he wondered if Steve would be proud that he'd finished the puzzle. He kept those thoughts to himself as he carried the glasses and empty plate back to the kitchen.

"Do you need rest," he asked lightly, wiping down already clean counters. "Or would you like to begin the work on your mind?" His own fatigue and the wine limited how much he dared attempt, but he was anxious to get started.

"Now," Barnes replied.

He'd expected as much. Even tired, he could get a look at the aftermath of what had been done to the man and that would be a starting point. He considered the options. Having Barnes lie down would be easier if he needed to be restrained, but might also make him feel vulnerable enough to need restraining when he would've otherwise been fine. His own desire for comfortable working conditions wasn't insignificant; he could hardly expect to be thorough if he were bent into an awkward position. Reluctantly, he motioned for Barnes to follow him into the bedroom and gestured to the bed.
"Sit or lie down on the bed. However you are comfortable." He caught the wary, sideways glance and merely shrugged. "This will take time. The floor is hardly suitable."

Barnes finally moved, stripping off his shoes before climbing onto the bed. The act seemed to mystify him, as though he couldn't understand why he'd felt compelled to remove his shoes. He settled into a cross legged position, hands loose over his knees. Loki moved deliberately to kneel behind him. The proximity to another body, close enough to hear Barnes' breathing and feel the heat from his skin, was unnerving. He'd grown used to a near paranoid lack of physical contact, with Steve being the only being to touch him since his time with SHIELD. He let his fingers uncurl, just short of touching long dark hair, and saw a shiver pass through Barnes' shoulders. He wondered how long it had been since anyone had touched Barnes and if they shared that as well.

"I am going to select a memory. A place. When you can see it clearly, tell me if it is a place where you feel safe. We'll start there." He closed his eyes and reached out with his magic.

If he had attempted to describe it, perhaps he would've called it another *sense*, not unlike sight or sound. There was no biological explanation he could give Barnes, no description of blood or electrical impulse that could tell him how Loki could close his eyes and simply step *inside* another mind as easily as stepping through a doorway. He reached for what he felt intuitively to be the last happy memory Barnes' had, buried deep beneath the wasteland HYDRA had left behind.

A place came suddenly into being around him. He was surrounded by mortals. They were dressed differently than he was accustomed to and frozen in the midst of excitement or anticipation. A moment later, he felt as much as saw Barnes standing beside him.

"What is this place?"

"World Fair. 1942." Barnes turned, his attention caught by something, and started to move cautiously through the crowd.

They came to a stop near a brightly lit stage with a man and a gleaming red vehicle. There, Loki saw another version of Barnes. This was a younger man with a smartly tailored uniform and neatly trimmed hair. Behind him and to the left was a man who was both unfamiliar and unmistakably Steve Rogers. Loki walked around the smaller version of Steve, the memories of people blurring and shifting as he walked through them. Although he saw gaps and missing details in the others - some of the faces were missing entirely - the memory of Steve was perfect and complete. The last time Barnes' had been truly happy, he'd come to this World Fair with Steve. Carefully, Loki narrowed the boundaries of the memory until it was only a circle around them and the memory version of Steve, still lit by the stage lights in front of them.

He spoke gently, almost reverently. "I will anchor this memory here. You will always be able to find this moment and return when you need to."

Barnes raised his gaze to look around them. "What's out there?"

"I am not certain," Loki began, hesitating. "I am trying to find the words to describe what I see and it is difficult." He worried at his lower lip for a moment, thinking. "Here, you are isolated from all other memories. I have set them apart from you."

Lacking a better analogy, he created the illusion of towering stone walls around the frozen memory and in those walls, he set dozens of tall, plain wooden doors. He'd crafted a similar artifice within his own mind after his fall from the Bifrost, sealing off those memories he wished to forget. Using the broad timeline provided by JARVIS, he segmented the fractured memories as best he could, placing groups of them behind particular doors. It wasn't perfect and he was regretting the last glass of wine,
as he could not be as precise as he should be.

Barnes turned in a slow circle, eying the doors suspiciously. "How do I know which door to take?"

"In the end, you must walk through them all. But only as you are ready for them." Loki motioned to a door on their left and an ornate brass handle appeared. "Those are old memories. Of your youth and childhood. They may be the least painful for you. While you are there, no other memories will intrude and there will be no interference. Handles will appear in order, as best as I could determine, so you need not fear stumbling into new memories before you're ready to understand them."

"What do I do once I go through?"

"That is simple, though not...easy. You will relive all of the memories behind each door. It will feel as though a lifetime is passing, but it will be only moments, and although you will be in the memory itself, you will remain aware that it is a memory. This may be confusing at first. Do not attempt to try all these doors now. Do only as much as you can. When you are ready, or when you need to rest, return here. It is extremely important that you return here, where I can find you if you need help. This is your anchor to me." He glanced meaningfully toward the memory figure of Steve. "And to him."

"How will you know if I need help?"

"I will know." He nodded toward the door in what he hoped was a reassuring and encouraging manner.

Barnes approached cautiously, squaring his shoulders to the door and flexing his hands several times before finally gripping the handle. With a click, the door shifted, appearing to swing inward, and beyond it lay a long, empty corridor with wide windows along each side. Loki saw small details change, indicating that Barnes' own mind was adapting to the artificial construct and laying claim to it. The floor was checkered tile rather than stone and several of the windows flickered like an old movie screen. He waited for Barnes to step through the doorway before he slipped away, his gaze lingering on the small, fragile image of Steve.

Back in the bedroom of his apartment, he lowered his hands away from Barnes' temples and carefully eased him into a supine position. Beneath his eyelids, Barnes' eyes were darting rapidly. The sleep was artificial, imposed on Barnes as much as the imaginary walls and doors had been. It was safer that way and didn't require Loki to accompany him on the journey. All Loki could do now was wait and observe.

He took the opportunity to bring two glasses of water into bedroom, draining and refilling his twice, and to shower before he settled into the bed with a book and Una on a pillow beside him. How long it took Barnes to reclaim his memories would depend on how efficient HYDRA had been at disassociating them and how much Barnes could handle before he became overwhelmed. Several days of repeated sessions would likely be needed. If there was too much physical damage to his brain, Loki would need to try a more invasive tactic, but he didn't think HYDRA had been so careless with their Soldier.

Night deepened. He watched Barnes shiver periodically, fingers twitching at his sides. A deep blush came and went, like spilled water colors over his cheeks and throat. Periodically, Loki reached out to brush his fingertips against feverish skin, feeling for a pulse and looking for signs that Barnes had gotten lost or overwhelmed. As it grew late, he carefully stripped away the t-shirt and jeans so Barnes would be more comfortable. Although he tried to keep his gaze averted from Barnes' naked body, he found it impossible not to notice a few details. Barnes was leaner and narrower than Steve; his musculature was sharply defined, the definition of too much exertion and too little food, and his
ribs showed too prominently. There was extensive scarring around the edges of the metallic arm and more scars scattered over his skin, some clearly from knives or bullets, while others were too indistinct in shape and character to identify. He settled a light blanket over him to keep the chill at bay.

He dozed fitfully through the midnight hours and was woken by Una tugging at his hair. Sitting up, he rubbed at his eyes before turning to check on Barnes. Immediately, he saw signs of distress. Barnes’ breathing had turned shallow and rapid, his face pale beneath a sheen of sweat. Loki rolled toward him and laid one hand over his forehead and eyes; he broke the sleeping enchantment and reached into the memory he’d used as an anchor to pull Barnes’ consciousness forward again.

"Steve," Barnes gasped, chest heaving. "Don't go...please."

The choice to alter his shape once again seemed inconsequential. He was only doing as Steve would do. This time, however, he chose the smaller version of Steve. It was a strange form and didn’t fit him; he felt too tightly bound within thin limbs.

"Bucky. I’m here."

Barnes came fully awake with a jerk, hands clenching into fists. He looked around, blinking in surprise. When he saw Loki, the tension seemed to bleed out of him all at once and he relaxed, an easy smile playing over his lips. “There you are.”

“Are you alright?”

The words sounded strange, not merely because they were spoken with Steve’s voice, but also because Loki was mesmerized by the change that had come over Barnes in mere seconds. Weight and darkness, the mantle he carried as the Winter Soldier, had fallen away, leaving behind clear blue eyes and a boyish smile. Loki could understand all too well how easy it must have been for Steve to love James Barnes when he’d been like this; when they’d both been young and before their War tore them apart.

With a shrug, Barnes glanced around, taking in the bed and his lack of clothing. He raised an eyebrow and the easy smile shifted into a suggestive smirk. “Guess I had more of the good stuff last night than I thought.”

Loki tried to smile. Whatever he’d expected, it hadn’t been for Barnes to immerse himself so fully in his past memories that he awoke with a new, or rather an old, personality and no recollection of the present. It could be a temporary disassociation; he would have to be careful not to let it shatter too abruptly or he might risk further destabilizing Barnes’ mind.

“Did I…you know.” A rosy blush crept into Barnes’ face. He lowered his gaze, long lashes making shadows on his skin. “Since I’m not wearing anything and we’re in bed together. I didn’t…come on too strong?” He shifted again and the playful smile returned, belied only by the way Barnes’ gaze was searching the mask Loki wore for any sign of upset. “I know you’re not like other fellas. Doesn’t matter to me.”

“What do you mean,” Loki asked softly.

"Just hoping I wasn’t a jerk last night. I got two perfectly good hands, right?” He grinned as he held up both hands and wiggled his fingers.

Metal glinted in the dim light and Barnes’ attention was instantly riveted. His right hand fell to the bed as he stared, transfixed, by his metal hand. Slowly, he turned it back and forth and flexed the
fingers. There was a furrow across his brow; he looked confused, as though he couldn’t remember why one of his arms was different than the other. Slowly, he turned back to Loki and the furrow deepened, his right hand rising in fits and starts as he reached out. Fingertips brushed against Loki’s chin, as delicate as a whisper of wind. He held still, not daring even to breathe, as Barnes tentatively explored the curve of his lips and the line of his jaw. There was a mixture of awe and heartbreak in Barnes’ eyes; the sight of HYDRA’s gifted arm must have been enough to remind him that, as before, this was only a trick.

Trembling fingertips traced the line of his nose, drifted over cheekbones, and brushed at his hair. He drew a line down the front of Loki’s throat with the back of one knuckle. Barnes was mesmerized, lying still except for his right hand exploring Loki’s face and neck. The touches were disconcerting, both in their tenderness and in their intimacy.

Had Barnes done this before? Had he touched Steve this way, feeling out the angles of his body, or was this an unfulfilled yearning? It reminded Loki painfully of the careful way Steve had bathed him after the incident with the truck and he forced himself not to pull away when he desperately wanted to escape the intensity of Barnes’ gaze. Steve would not run away; he would let his oldest friend have this moment. That knowledge held Loki in place with an iron grip. Gradually, the focus of Barnes’ search begin to narrow. His fingers curled lightly against the left side of Loki’s face, the pad of his thumb tracing the line of his lips, again and again. The light pressure on his jaw parted his lips and he breathed out shakily. Raw, heated hunger in Barnes' eyes startled him, not for Loki, but for this frail, long gone version of Steve.

"I thought...it's been a long time," Barnes said softly, a lifetime of heartache contained in his words. "You loved him. You desired him." They were leading statements meant to gain information while appearing to be comforting affirmations. "Did he return your affections in kind?"

"He loved me," he answered without a trace of uncertainty. The inclusion of desire was glaringly absent.

"And that was enough?"

Barnes looked at him strangely. "Course it was."

It was a bitter reflection staring back at him. Barnes, who had secured Steve's love but not his body, while Loki had known Steve's touch but would never be loved. Barnes began to pull his hand away, the spell effectively broken and the moment slipping away. Loki caught Barnes' hand without thinking and settled it back against his jaw.

"I could give you this. If...if it would help." His lips and throat were dry, his offer scraping over them like abrasion against a wound, but he met Barnes' confused gaze squarely.

The real Steve Rogers would give his friend this much, if he were here; just as he’d offered – ridiculous and self-sacrificing as always - to have sex with Loki. If it would help. He wondered if doing the right thing always felt so ill-fitting and one simply grew to bear it, or if it came naturally to Steve.

When it didn't seem that Barnes understood Loki's offer, he leaned in slowly, cautiously, making every effort not to startle or frighten. Barnes' eyes darted nervously, trying to follow Loki's movements and leap ahead at the same time. Between them, the air grew heavy and warm, the heat of their bodies making a connection before they were close enough to truly touch. Blue eyes grew wide when Barnes finally realized that Loki intended to kiss him and then closed, eyelashes painted dark over his pale skin. Barnes' lips were surprisingly soft, considering, and despite the rough stubble
on his face; his short, shallow breaths tickled at Loki's cheek. He shifted his weight onto his left side and felt Barnes' hand slip from the side of his face to cup his shoulder briefly, then settle between his shoulder blades. Although he'd seen heat in Barnes' gaze, his response to the kiss was gentle and, if not exactly chaste, almost shy.

Everything about this felt wrong, but Loki only closed his eyes and imagined Steve's lips pressing against his own. There was symmetry in pretending it was Steve and pretending to be Steve at the same time. Loki had only known the pleasure of Steve's body through deceitful use of magic and he felt a spur of selfish, vengeful satisfaction that deceit and magic would be all Barnes would ever know as well. In truth, Barnes might only barely understand his own actions, driven more by need than any rational thought. Tossed between his fractured memories, he might only remember this as a dream.

Loki let his right hand drift to Barnes' chest, feeling muscles tighten and shiver at each point he touched. He hooked a finger over the hem of the blanket to tug it slowly down Barnes' torso. The hand against his back slid to his shoulder, tucking him neatly into an intimate embrace. He wondered if Barnes had ever held Steve this way but pushed that thought away before he was temped to bite Barnes a little too hard. Instead, he kept his touches light. Barnes was coiled tight with tension, trembling with the effort of holding so perfectly still. At the edge of his vision, Loki saw Barnes' metallic hand clutching the blanket tightly enough to stretch the fabric. Loki curled his fingers around the wrist, the metal cool and smooth, and pulled gently. Barnes resisted, clearly reticent to touch him with the metal fingers.

"Don't," Barnes said gruffly.

Loki persisted. "It's alright."

He worked the fingers open, feeling the subtle shifting of the jointed plates. He understood Barnes' desire not to touch Steve with this hand, as though it were monstrous and unworthy, but Loki was only masquerading as Steve and deserved no such consideration. He watched a silent conflict play out in Barnes' eyes and stopped any further protest by teasing Barnes' lips apart with his tongue.

The kiss played havoc with his already muddled thoughts. His traitorous blood had him aching to seek out stimulation and friction against Barnes' body. When he couldn't resist any longer, he broke the kiss and looked away, seeing a hand that wasn't his own - Steve's hand, he reminded himself - push the blanket down the last few inches to lay Barnes bear to mid thigh. It seemed distant; he was watching but not truly participating, much the same way Steve had watched him and he'd fallen into pieces there on the bed, shattered by the realization that watching was all Steve would ever want to do and asking for more, even wanting more, would be, somehow, wrong. The memory of it and the sudden lance of pain through his heart nearly stopped him, but in the end he swallowed and curled unfamiliar, too small fingers around Barnes' swollen cock. He conjured a light, liquid-slick oil to ease the way; a spell he'd known for so long that he'd forgotten when and why he'd learned it.

Mixed with almost soundless moans, like shivers in the air, Barnes' rough breathing heated his side of his face in small gusts and whispers, a storm not yet ready to break. His right hand stuttered against the back of Loki's neck, gripping and then loosening again, unable to settle and be still. With each stroke of Loki's hand, the rigid tension broke away in chips; sharp jerks and twitches morphed into supple, undulating motion. Barnes arched against the bed, mouth open as his head pressed back, then he settled again and thrust his hips upward, knees bent to brace his feet against the bed. His movements were hungry, trying to feel more and trying to push harder against Loki's hand.

Loki drew it out deliberately. He could see Barnes coming apart inch by inch, already near boneless and breathless beneath him; he took a perverse thrill in knowing he could bring Barnes to orgasm at
any moment and was choosing to postpone that moment.

"Please," Barnes whispered, his eyes shut tight and his whole body shivering.

He wanted to deny Barnes any release, wanted to leave him writhing and suffering with thwarted desire. No doubt that's all Barnes had ever known, and would ever know, with Steve.

"Say my name," Barnes continued, barely above a whisper.

The word stuck, sour and dry, on Loki's tongue. "Bucky."

"Again."

"Bucky."

Barnes shuddered and Loki relented, changing the motion and grip of his hand just enough to close the last, tiny distance between anticipation and ecstasy. Barnes gasped, a thin, garbled keen sounding through in his throat. He wrapped both arms around Loki, the metal arm locking into place as he thrust jerkily up against Loki's hand again, then once more, before collapsing against the bed. Shortly after, he realized Barnes had fallen asleep, though his metal arm remained unyielding.

Carefully, he extricated himself from Barnes' grip and settled him once more comfortably on the bed. As an afterthought, he shook off Steve's smaller form and went for a washcloth to clean the mess from Barnes' skin. He heard Una chiding him quietly from behind one of the finials on top of the bed.

"He'll be fine," he snapped impatiently, although he was sure of no such thing. "If he remembers it at all, it will be a memory of the man he loves and desires bringing him pleasure." She chittered irritably at him and he scowled. "I've made no pretense of being anything but what I am, Una. If my lack of honor bothers you so, I believe SHIELD has made a home for the rest of your hive and you are welcome to join them." She went silent, likely sulking in the shadows.

Determined to find sleep with what little was left of his night, he checked on Barnes once more and saw his eyes darting rapidly beneath his lids, indicating either dreaming or that Barnes had opened another door within his mind. With a weary sigh, he returned to the bed and slipped beneath the blankets. There were too many roiling emotions within him and he hadn't the stomach to deal with any of them.
Chapter 17

Natasha hesitated, fingertips resting lightly on the doorknob. It wasn't that Steve would mind; he lived the open book philosophy he believed in and her intentions were good.

"JARVIS." She waited a beat. "I'm here to water Steve's plants."

The lock thunked as it disengaged. "Welcome, Agent Romanov."

It wasn't entirely a lie. Steve did have houseplants and he'd asked her to check on them. She whistled softly, a nonsense jingle she'd heard on a commercial, as she filled the watering can Steve had left on the kitchen counter and made her way leisurely through the apartment, taking thorough care of all the plants. Once finished, she returned the watering can to the kitchen, but hadn't managed to accomplish her primary goal.

"JARVIS, I'm looking for something. A small, white card. Want to help me out?"

"I'm afraid I do not maintain continuous video surveillance of these rooms. At the Captain's request."

"Figures." She frowned. "Looks like I'll be doing this the old-fashioned way."

She searched the bookshelves, making sure to replace everything exactly how she found it, and then the desk, sifting through loose papers, art supplies, and sketchbooks. She didn't linger over anything that didn't look like the card Maria had described; she wasn't here to snoop through Steve's private life, just to find the magical, Asgardian equivalent of a passive communication tap. Casting her gaze around the bedroom, she stopped at the book on the bedside table. Sure enough, flipping through the pages revealed a white card of heavy, linen-like paper. She pulled it out, noting the pages it had been nestled between, and turned it over.

_Barnes is here. I will help him if I can._

A cold sensation curled over her skin and wrapped around her stomach. This could not be good. Loki and the Winter Soldier. How had Barnes even known about Loki?

She set the book down and left with the card, heading for Tony's lab. It wasn't possible Steve had already known Barnes was in New York City. He wasn't a good liar, or he hadn't been in the past, but he had a steep learning curve and could've picked up a few tricks of the trade. But how would Barnes have ended up with Loki if Steve hadn't sent him? She didn't believe in coincidences.

"What may I assist you with, Agent Romanov?" JARVIS asked when she entered the lab.

"Patch me through to Maria Hill." She dropped down onto one of the chairs and rolled into place at the nearest workstation. The card slid easily into one of Tony's examination boxes. Slender robotic arms came to life, sliding up and along their tracks as they scanned the card from every possible angle. "And JARVIS?"

"Yes, Agent Romanov?"

"Tunguska." On the workstation screen, she watched the connection to the Fridge get established.

"Hill," Maria said briskly.

"We've got a problem. The Winter Soldier is with Loki."
The muscles in Maria's jaw tightened. "How?"

"I'll figure that out later. I've got JARVIS working on the card Loki gave Steve."

"We scanned it before we handed it over."

"You don't have Stark's toys." She glanced at the clear box. "It has to be a kind of macro scale quantum entanglement."

"Can you use it to find Loki?"

Natasha gave Maria an indignant look. "I've known where Loki is for months. He hasn't exactly been hiding. Didn't have a reason to put him under active surveillance until now."

"Does Steve know about Barnes?"

"Have to assume he does."

She wondered if that was the real reason he'd agreed to go on vacation, either because he knew where Bucky was or because he'd assumed it meant she wouldn't be able to find him. Both of those possibilities rankled unpleasantly; he'd had her convinced he didn't know Barnes was here.

Maria lowered her voice. "You know SHIELD has standing orders to bring Barnes in."

"Let me work this before you press that button."

Briefly, she considered Steve's reaction to finding Barnes in SHIELD custody when he returned. It wasn't much of a thought exercise to know how badly that would go, but if he'd known Barnes was in the city and kept it from them, she had to question his judgment. For Steve, everything to do with Loki and Barnes was too fraught with emotion for him to be rational, and after what had happened to Loki at the Fridge, she knew Steve wouldn't allow SHIELD to take Barnes in without a fight.

She pulled her knees up to sit cross-legged in the chair. "I could use you here."

"I could use a change of scenery." Maria gave a little nod. "I'll be there by noon."

Ending the call left her alone in the laboratory, waiting for JARVIS to finish analyzing what there was to find about the card and wondering if Captain America had pulled off the most Academy Award worthy performance in history.

No; Steve wasn't that good.

Had Barnes sought Loki out or was it the other way around? Perhaps Loki was attempting to manipulate Steve with Barnes as his leverage. They'd found Barnes at the destroyed sprite hive and she'd never believed there wasn't a link between Loki and the sprites, but if Barnes was connected to the sprites then so was HYDRA. By extension, Loki could also be linked to HYDRA. That was one connection she didn't want to make.

She rubbed circles into her temple. Without more information, it was only idle speculation and she was wasting her time. She could set up surveillance, with Maria backing her up and, by the time Steve got home, she'd have answers. Whether or not Steve liked the answers was a different question; she'd cross that bridge when she came to it. In the meantime, the sprite angle gave her a new data point. If there was anything about the sprites in SHIELD's intel, it would give her a place to start unraveling the connection.
"Tunguska," she said again.

JARVIS responded immediately, returning to his post as omnipresent sentry. "What can I assist you with, Agent Romanov?"

"I need a search on the SHIELD files. Global field, sprites. Cross reference and refine with New York City Avengers incidents and Loki." Windows opened and began to cycle on the display in front of her. "Find anything with that card yet?"

"Trace amounts of gamma radiation. There is a sixty percent correlation with the signature of the Tesseract."

"So it's similar, but not the same."

She chewed thoughtfully on her lower lip, watching the small robot arms rotate the card so another sensor could scan over the side with Loki's handwriting. It was possible everything Loki touched, everything magic touched, would read as radioactive to human science. As she watched the card, the words began to fade away, but she had no way of knowing if that was normal or if JARVIS' inspection had triggered a response. It hardly mattered one way or another; she was determined to have Barnes secured well before Steve returned from Asgard.

**

The day passed uneventfully for Loki. He read, cooked, coaxed Barnes into eating and drinking a bare minimum, and mostly stared aimlessly at the apartment while Barnes slept. Much of it was true sleep born of genuine need to rest; reliving an entire lifetime was draining in every way imaginable.

A few times, Barnes had woken with his older personality and disarming smile. He'd laughed when he saw Loki in Steve's smaller form, dressed in jeans and a too large t-shirt, and he'd called Loki a name - punk - that made little sense. Before drifting back into sleep, he asked about people Loki didn't know and mentioned places he only vaguely recognized as parts of the city. The War hadn't yet started and Steve...

Steve must have been ill with alarming frequency, Loki determined. He envied the way Barnes looked at him when he wore Steve's shape, with such glowing adoration that Steve would've been blind not to see it.

As the afternoon waned, he settled himself on the bed to wait out the night. He ignored Una's amused chattering as he arranged and then rearranged pillows until he could sit and recline, close enough that he could reach out and stroke his fingers through Barnes' hair, if he'd wished to do so. Not that he did, but he thought Barnes might find it soothing once he stumbled into his darker memories. He wondered what memory had troubled him the night before, though he was fairly certain he could assume it had revolved around Steve charging headlong into some sort of trouble.

He smiled despite himself. "That much, we have in common."

He squashed the budding feeling of kinship and turned back to his book. There was no point in allowing himself to see Barnes as anything other than a means to an end. Helping Barnes was his due; his fumbling attempt at friendship. There had been no response from Steve through the card and Loki could only assume Steve had thrown it away or shoved it in a drawer to forget about it. Voicing his sadness over the thought that Steve had determined to be well rid of Loki would only earn him a scolding from Una, since it was entirely his fault. He was the one who'd sent Steve away and, although he'd had reasons to do so, a small, critical voice in his mind questioned whether or not he'd done it with the hope that Steve would defy him and return anyway. As if it were Loki's place to
demand that Steve prove his commitment. His mouth twisted in distaste and he set the book aside, no longer able to focus on the words.

The presence of another in his space, and his bed, was a strange comfort and he hated himself for allowing that feeling to persist. It was because he'd grown used to Steve, nothing more.

With a series of chirps that sounded amused, probably by Loki's brooding, Una settled down on the pillow beside Barnes' head and began to work her clawed fingers through his hair, separating out handfuls and weaving them into braids. He gave her a quizzical look, since she'd shown no previous affinity to Barnes, and thought once again about the possible meaning of her claim that Barnes smelled like blood; perhaps the answer to that puzzle was locked within Barnes' mind as well. Once again, he was back to waiting as his only course of action and it chaffed at his patience.

How the court of Asgard would mock him if they could see him playing nursemaid in a Midgard apartment. It was laughable.

Restless, he conjured a dozen glimmering balls of light roughly the size of a marble and set them swirling in hypnotic patterns above him. They collided and bounced, or merged and stretched out into larger globules before splitting apart again. Una twittered with delight, darting up to chase after a ball of blue light. He leaned back on one elbow as he watched her play, his fingers falling to one of the neat braids Una had made in Barnes' hair. There was purity in her enjoyment, that of a child discovering a thing of wonder. He hadn't known that kind of purity in a very long time. It had been some time since he'd thought of his childhood other than to comb through his memories for evidence of Odin's damming lies. The corner of his lips twitched in a smile not quite ready to show itself and he added more lights to their game, sending a few of them to buzz around Una's legs, which seemed to amuse her.

The distraction of Una and the lights prevented him from noticing Barnes was awake until he glanced down, his fingers buried in dark brown hair, and saw that Barnes was watching the show of lights with an expression not unlike Una's. Blue eyes met his gaze, then slid back to Una chasing one of the orbs, her claws passing through it once she caught it.

"Who are you," Barnes asked softly.

"Loki," he answered plainly.

Barnes turned to face him, brow furrowing. The motion settled his head against Loki's palm, making it impossible for him to remove his hand now. "The Loki? When you say that...is that what you mean? That you're a God?"

"Nothing so dramatic."

"What're you doing here? I mean, shouldn't you be...wherever Gods are supposed to live."

Briefly, Loki wondered which version of Barnes he was dealing with; the older versions were far more talkative than the Winter Soldier. He shrugged, toying absently with the braid between his fingers. "I have no home."

"What happened?"

"That is a very long story. And a terribly dull one, I'm afraid." He managed a tight smile. "How do you feel?"

Barnes watched him for a long time before answering. "It's...it's strange. I remember and I know there's a lot I don't remember yet and I know it's because of the...doors? That you put there. Some of
them, some of the doors, they feel...cold. It's hard to explain."

"Are you afraid?" Loki didn't know why he asked the question. Shivering, Barnes nodded slightly. "If you would rather not remember, I can take your memories away."

"No. I need to know." The gears of his metal hand whirred as fingers closed to a fist. "But maybe. Maybe after I've...gone through all of the doors. There are still a lot of them."

"Nothing will harm you while I'm here." He heard Una chirp at him and amended his statement. "While we are here."

"This is all a little crazy." He looked around the room, then down at himself. "Gods and monsters and the future and you walking around inside my head like that makes any sense at all. And...this." He raised his left arm, turning his hand over a few times. "Do I ever get used to this?"

Loki weighed his response carefully. "As much as one can grow used to a part of them being gone."

"And Steve? Is he...are he and I? Where is he?"

"Where do you think," Loki said lightly, giving away nothing.

"Probably off getting into trouble," Barnes mused, shaking his head a little. "I'll see him when I'm done. When I've finished remembering. Right?"

Loki nodded. "That's right. I'm sure he's anxious to see you."

"I'm going as fast as I can. It's...it's..."

"Going too quickly will only damage your mind," Loki cautioned.

Sighing heavily, Barnes rubbed at his eyes with his right hand. "There are so many doors."

Loki extinguished the lights with a wave of his hand. He slipped from the bed and returned with an opened bottle of wine. Barnes was sitting on the bed, elbows propped on his knees and Una perched on the back of his metal hand as he listened to her chatter. Loki took a long swallow of the wine and held out the bottle in a silent offer. It made little difference to him if they shared; he'd had his tongue in Barnes' mouth the night before.

After a moment's hesitation, Barnes accepted the bottle. His throat worked as he swallowed down several mouthfuls. With lips stained red from the wine, he handed back the bottle. "Is this a good idea?" Barnes nodded to the wine.

"I never said I was the God of good ideas."

Barnes grinned at him and his blue eyes lit up as bright as stars. "Mischief, wasn't it? Loki was supposed to be a trickster God. Always causing trouble." He chuckled a little. "No wonder Steve likes you. He's a mangy little tomcat and trouble is catnip. Been that way as long as I've known him."

Biting back a smile, Loki readjusted his pillows once again before settling down. He drank more wine, then handed the bottle back to Barnes. "Tell me about him. What he was like when you were young."

"Two things you gotta know about Steve. One, he'll stand up for everyone around him before he stands up for himself. Two, he's got a real soft spot for broken things, you know? Like, birds with a
broken wing or a chair with one leg off, that kind of thing. He sorta gravitates to anything or anyone he thinks needs fixing." Barnes swallowed down more wine. "Always wants to do the right thing. No matter if the right thing is stupid or might get him killed. Never backed down from a fight in his life, even when he should've. Hell, he'll probably try to join the Army if we-

Loki watched Barnes stare down at the wine bottle. "If you..."

"The War's over, isn't it?" Barnes' voice was small. "And we made it out. Steve and me?"

"Your War is long over, yes."

"But I don't remember it."

"Not yet." He saw another shiver pass through Barnes and felt a pang of sympathy.

"At least most of me made it home," Barnes said. He was joking but his voice was strained with anxiety. He handed the wine bottle back to Loki as he laid down again. "Might take you up on that offer of forgetting."

There would be nothing to stop Loki from ripping out memories of Steve along with the memories of the War, but he didn't mention that possibility.

Barnes took a deep breath, closing his eyes. "You'll be here?"

"Yes."

"You won't fall asleep or anything?"

"No."

"Good. Because I think." He swallowed audibly. "I think that might be the next door."

On an impulse, Loki settled his hand against Barnes' head, winding one of Una's braids around his index finger. "Una and I will watch over you."

He sent a thread of magic into Barnes' mind to tug him down into a deep sleep before his anxiety could rob him of his nerve. If Barnes was correct and his next memories would be of his War, it would be a long night for both of them. In anticipation, he shifted back into Steve's smaller form, which seemed to give Barnes comfort, and continued to drink wine straight from the bottle. When Una appeared in the doorway, he saw that she'd gone to collect her shot glass and rolled his eyes as he splashed wine into the glass. She wanted to know if Steve would really come back once Barnes was fixed.

The lie he'd given Barnes was a kindness. He considered telling her the truth, that Steve likely didn't even know Barnes was there and was never coming back.

"If there is anything he would be willing to come back for, it is Barnes," he answered finally.

He and Una finished the bottle of wine. She curled up on the pillow beside him to sleep, her lips darkened with wine and wings fluttering lightly as she snored. In this smaller form, the bed seemed larger and emptier, despite Barnes lying beside him. He kept his hand in Barnes' hair and settled in to wait out the night.

The tremors began shortly before dawn. Loki's eyes were tired and his neck and shoulder ached from the contortion of cradling Barnes' head with his hand. He felt the bed shaking first, then realized it
was Barnes who was shaking. Sweat had dampened his hair and soaked through his clothes. Loki checked inside his mind first and didn't find Barnes waiting for him at the memory of Steve; he was still within the corridor of his memories. He chose to wait, knowing these were difficult memories to relive.

He stripped Barnes of the sweat soaked clothes and wiped at his face and hair. His pulse was elevated, but steady, and while his breathing was labored, it wasn't alarmingly so. Loki filled two glasses of water and brought them in so they would be ready when Barnes woke up.

Daylight lit the curtains in the window and Loki began to grow concerned as time marched on. Barnes continued to shake and Loki replaced a washcloth soaked through with sweat for a fresh one. Still, each time he looked into Barnes' mind, he found only the solitary image of Steve from the World Fair and the open door Barnes had gone through. Wherever Barnes was, it was far from that anchored moment. He hunted for the pulse in Barnes' neck, feeling the rapid tap of his heart against his fingertips. From the pillow, Una trilled nervously. He felt Barnes seize, every muscle in his body going rigid, and his pulse skipped once, then twice.

"Impatient fool," Loki hissed.

He closed his eyes and stepped into Barnes' mind, heading straight for the open door. Barnes was lost within his mind and unable to return on his own; he'd tried to remember too much, too quickly. When Loki stepped through the doorway, the world around him changed to a nightmare of sound and fire. It was night; he saw and heard screaming fireballs in the sky and billows of flame rising up from the ground in heavy sprays of earth and stone. Flashes of piercing blue light preceded screams of horror and pain. He pushed forward, disoriented by the sounds and the overpowering smells. The air was thick and acrid, filled with fuel and fire and the stench of death. His stomach churned when his foot struck something and he looked down to see a limp arm torn from some unfortunate soul's body. He reached out with his magic, trying to push the assaulting memories back enough to find his way to Barnes.

There. He hurried in that direction, cringing and ducking with every explosion of fire and whistle of singing steel although he knew none of it could harm him. This was Steve's great War; Loki found himself horrified and sickened by what he saw. Midgard did not raise its children to be warriors but sent mere children into battle against machines that knew neither mercy nor honor. He found Barnes crouched in a trench, surrounded by dead men missing limbs, with chunks of their skulls blown away, and their skin blistered by fire. The dirt was muddy from soaking up their blood. Barnes was babbling softly and incoherently. Grabbing hold of Barnes' arm, he hauled him forcibly out of the memory into the present.

Immediately, he pressed his hand to Barnes' throat, feeling his breath rattle and his heart beating out a frantic tempo. "Bucky. Bucky, come back. Bucky, you're safe. You're safe."

"Wanna go home, wanna go home," Barnes choked out, his eyes shut tight.

"You're home. You're safe."

He didn't resist when Barnes wrapped his arms around his back and clung to him, shaking and taking great, shuddering breaths that quickly dissolved into broken sobs. Hushing him softly, Loki wiped away sweat and tears. There was little else he could do and he felt impotent in the face of the horrors within Barnes' mind. He was tempted to erase the memories whether Barnes wanted him to or not, simply to know they were gone.

"You're home," Loki repeated. He stroked Barnes' back, feeling his skin turn to gooseflesh with the touch.

"How'd I..." Barnes pulled Loki closer, his breathing settling gradually and his heart rate evening out. He burrowed his face against Loki's neck. "A dream. Just a bad dream. Sorry, didn't mean to wake you up."

Loki grimaced. Either Barnes hadn't progressed far enough into his memories of the War for them to take root or Loki had ripped him out too soon. Unexpectedly, he was loathe to send Barnes back into that hellish landscape of blood and death. But he would have to send him back again and he was no longer certain Barnes' body could handle the strain.

"Shouldn't read the papers before bed," Barnes murmured. The forced cheerfulness in his voice gave him away; Loki could hear the lie beneath the words. Barnes knew it had been more than a dream.

He wondered how often Barnes had lied to protect Steve from truth. "Go back to sleep."

Barnes nodded against Loki's shoulder, not relaxing his embrace in the slightest. Each time Barnes begin to slip toward sleep, Loki felt him tense and jerk fully awake again, the terror of his memories driving him away. He nearly asked Una to sing and lull him into sleep, but settled for combing his fingers through Barnes' hair in an attempt to soothe him. Barnes began to shiver, still clinging to Loki but trying to shift his legs. Thinking he might be chilled, Loki reached over to pull the blanket up and Barnes tensed.

Barnes mumbled, his words barely distinguishable. "Sorry. Just...just ignore that, okay?"

"What?" Loki draped the blanket over Barnes' legs and torso. When he tucked it around his back, he felt something hard press against his thigh. A quick glance down confirmed his suspicions and Barnes' cheeks were tinted a rosy hue.

"'S just morning is all," Barnes said, muffled.

"It's...it's alright." He shifted so he could lay on the pillow beside Barnes, one hand still cupping the back of his head and the other light against Barnes' side.

With another shiver, Barnes uncurled a fraction. His eyes stayed closed. "Felt so real. Like I was...like I was there." There was a hitch in his voice; another lie, though Loki wasn't sure what it meant.

"I'm here."

Barnes relaxed another inch. "It's not 1942 anymore, is it?"

"No, it's not." Loki brushed Barnes' hair back from his face. "Perhaps bathing would help you sleep. If you would like to shave."

He finally raised his head, a lopsided grin on his lips. "Tryin' to tell me something?"

"You look like a peasant," Loki said dryly.

Barnes laughed and Loki's chest went tight, all the air freezing in his lungs at the reminder that this was what Steve loved. This Barnes was warm and kind and had a laugh like summer sunshine; he was everything Loki wasn't and could never be. He was looking at Loki with the easy, soft smile meant only for Steve. Loki wanted to rip that smile from his face. Bitter jealousy swirled in his throat because he couldn't give Steve that same warmth when there was nothing in him but ice and because
Barnes would not look at him that way at all if he weren't wearing Steve's form.

"You okay?"

Driven by an impulse born of anger and jealousy, Loki shoved at Barnes' chest to force him onto his back. He slid smoothly down the bed to Barnes' hips.

Barnes started. "Whoa. What are..." His protest choked off as Loki circled his lips around the head of his cock, rasping his tongue against the underside. "Oh," he breathed, collapsing back onto the bed in surrender. "Oh, oh...Oh. You...you're gonna..."

The words devolved into senseless babble when Loki took him all the way into his throat, his nose pressed into the thick hairs at the base, and swallowed. He eased back to catch his breath but gave Barnes only the barest amount of time to recover his composure. Each time he pulled his mouth away, he stroked Barnes with his hand, never giving him a moment without stimulation of one kind or the other. Barnes gasped, his mouth open wide and eyes squeezed shut as Loki drove him relentlessly to climax, finally spilling out over Loki's tongue with a long shuddery breath. Still panting, he grabbed hold of Loki's arms and hauled him up to kiss him, hard.

"Don't have to do anything like that, you know, for me," Barnes whispered, his voice rough.

Loki tried to shift so that his face wasn't pressed against Barnes'. His own heart was beating too rapidly, though he couldn't be certain why. The bitter, salty taste in his mouth was nothing compared to the sour guilt churning his stomach. Why did he feel so guilty? He shied away from those uncomfortable thoughts. "You want it," he answered steadily enough.

"Doesn't matter what I want. You don't have to." Barnes combed his fingers through light blond hair.

"I thought," Loki stumbled, uncertain. "I thought it would help you forget. About your dream."

Humming softly, Barnes smiled again. His eyelashes fluttered a little but his eyes stayed closed. "Sure did, sweetheart. Thank you." Still holding Loki, he rolled to the side and nestled into the bed covers. "Thought for sure I'd dreamed it up that time. The first time we...that you..."

"Maybe this is a dream too."

"Didn't feel like a dream. But if it is, it's a good dream, a really good dream." His fingers stilled in Loki's hair. "Maybe I can have this dream again sometime."

Loki listened to his heartbeat slow. Barnes was being drawn back into the quagmire of memories still waiting to be claimed. He knew he should've insisted Barnes eat and drink water before returning; the suggestion of bathing had been more than an idle one and he needed to launder the linens as well. The next time Barnes awoke, he would insist that they venture out for fresh air and fresh food. But once the process started, he knew all too well that it was difficult to resist the pull of memories demanding to be put right. Trapped in Barnes' embrace, he realized they had reached the point in time where Steve would obtain the serum and become Captain America. He made the change gradually, trying not to jar Barnes so much as to wake him, and although Steve's larger form was less constrained in size, it felt no less discomfiting.

It took several hours for Barnes to relive the War. During all of which, Barnes trembled and tears ran down his face and Loki was powerless to do anything but tend to him. When he finally looked into Barnes' mind and saw him at the anchored memory of Steve, he felt a flood of relief.

"HYDRA," Barnes coughed, jerking suddenly when Loki pulled him out. "HYDRA found me. Steve. Gotta tell...they found me. I couldn't move, couldn't stop them."
"You're safe now." Loki took Barnes in his arms, grateful at least those memories were done. "You need to eat. Regain your strength. Do not attempt more today."

Barnes nodded but didn't make any move to disengage from Loki's embrace for a long time. Eventually, he cleared his throat. "I'll take you up on that shave, if you'll help me. I think...my hands will shake too much."

Loki blinked, surprised that Barnes was coherent enough to remember their earlier conversation and that he was asking Loki to go near his throat with a blade. But, of course, he thought he was asking Steve rather than Loki and had no reason to mistrust Steve. He let go a little reluctantly and helped Barnes from the bed into the shower, working the knobs himself so Barnes didn't have to think about it. While Barnes bathed, Loki changed his clothes and stripped the bed, setting the laundry going. He was tempted to shed Steve's form - that deception was growing increasingly heavy on his shoulders - but feared Barnes wouldn't trust Loki with a knife in his hand. The water was off and Barnes was standing naked in front of the mirror staring at his own reflection when Loki returned to the bathroom.

"Would you like me to cut your hair as well?"

In the mirror, blue eyes met his and Barnes' brow furrowed as though he were struggling to understand the question. Finally, he shook his head, rubbing one hand over the stubble on his chin. "Just the shave."

"Sit." Loki directed him to the toilet. He had a blade that would do and his simple spell to conjure ointment worked for this as well. If the shimmer of green-gold energy unnerved Barnes, he didn't react other than tipping his chin upward so Loki had clear access to his face and throat. Carefully, Loki worked the ointment down to the skin and set the edge of the knife, beginning near Barnes' left ear.

"Does it bother you," Barnes asked suddenly, at least waiting for Loki to finish his first stroke of the knife. "Me sittin' here naked."

"Should it?" Loki turned the knob to run cool water into the sink and rinsed the blade clean before his second stroke. Perhaps Barnes was concerned for his modesty, as if Loki couldn't still taste the residue of Barnes' semen at the back of his throat.

"Hell if I'd know," Barnes said dryly. "Got used to seeing more'n enough of the men in camp, but the War's over and it probably ain't polite."

Loki paused briefly, wondering if this was yet another personality shift driven by newly reclaimed memories. The change was dramatic for Loki, who had only known Barnes on the scale of days, but it had likely happened gradually in Barnes himself. Then again, this could also be a response to the change in Steve's stature as well. He wondered if Barnes had felt threatened by the serum's effects and finding himself facing a very different Steve Rogers, one who likely no longer needed him. Perhaps Barnes had wondered if Steve would no longer love him. There was an edge to this Barnes, the beginnings of darkness. As Loki started on Barnes' throat, the next question nearly caused his hand to slip.

"What do you really look like?" Barnes' gaze was steady and held an unspoken challenge, as though Loki's knife wasn't against his neck.

"Would you like to see it?"

"Yes."
The change swept over him, along with a yearning to lash out and destroy anything within reach. He slipped through forms until there was only one left, but his hand kept steady as he continued to work. His vision sharpened, but blurred out over the edges; colors faded in intensity even as the contrast increased. He knew Barnes was seeing blue skin and blood red eyes.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Barnes said softly.

His lips curled and he knew the smile must look anything but friendly. "Not what you were expecting?" Unable to stand another instant in that hideous form, he shook it away and resumed his Aesir form.

"Are there others who look like that? Like you?"

"Far away from here." He rinsed the knife clean again, trying to focus despite Barnes' distractions. "On a dead world called Jotunheim. Nothing but ice and monsters."

"And you can turn into anyone? What about animals? How's that work?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

His cheeks colored. "Sorry. Steve probably already gave you the third degree. Never knows when to stop pushing, does he?"

Loki frowned. "The Captain has not asked about such things."

"What do you talk about?"

"Mostly, we don't." Loki saw the confusion in Barnes' face and hurried to correct any potential misconceptions of his time spent with Steve. "We run. Together. Or we used to. He has difficulty finding others willing to do so. Partly because he insists on running far too early in the day."

His answer seemed to satisfy Barnes. "Might not be unlucky. Sometimes, most of the time, Steve's like a dog with a bone he just can't stop worrying at."

"That trait, I am familiar with." He smiled a little. "At least his cooking has improved."

"His cooking?" Barnes frowned again. "Steve? He was always a whiz in the kitchen. Sarah, his mom, always said he could cook as well as her gran and that was high praise."

"Is that so?" Loki struggled to keep from smiling over the fact that Steve had deceived him. Then again, as he thought back, he couldn't say Steve had explicitly lied about his ability to cook, only implying that he needed the practice and to prove himself against Loki's doubts. Still, if he'd needed a ridiculous excuse to spend time with Loki - or, more likely, keeping an eye on Loki to ensure he wasn't a threat - then he could've done better.

He made the last stroke and rinsed the knife one last time before setting it aside. Handing Barnes a towel to wipe his face clean, he left the bathroom to check on the laundry and find fresh clothes for Barnes. Una was lounging in the banana tree with the remains of a large, brown beetle in one hand. He quickly took stock of what supplies he had on hand and what he needed to replenish. With Barnes, they could carry home twice as much between them as Loki usually managed and he meant to take advantage of the extra pair of hands.

"We going out?" Barnes pulled a t-shirt over his head as he entered the kitchen.

"I thought we would go to the market, yes. If you're willing."
"It'll be good to stretch my legs." He nodded toward the empty bottle of wine from the night before. "You got anything stronger?"

"We'll pick something up."

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The apartment building was typical East Village. Older, a little rundown, if Natasha was being generous, and certainly nothing to write home about. Then again, her own apartment wasn't much of a step up and she mentally chided herself for becoming accustomed to living in luxury of Stark proportions. It never paid to get use to the nice things in life; they were usually the first to go.

Maria Hill sipped loudly through the straw of her iced coffee. "Do Norse Gods make grocery lists? That seems far too normal. Loki tries to take over the planet and now he's going shopping like it's any other Tuesday. Creepy."

"Thor brings home whole salmon sometimes. He'd probably bring home whole cows if he could."

Shifting in her canvas camp chair, Maria raised her binoculars to look across the street. "You're calling Stark Tower home now? Thought you didn't want to join the Avengers Clubhouse."

"Can't beat the showers. Or the gym. Or the tech." She didn't admit she'd moved in because they'd all thought Steve needed a little closer supervision and she hadn't disagreed. "I'm still trying to convince Sam to make the Avengers a full time job. Steve would take him in a heartbeat. We all would. And he's good for Steve." Despite the fact that Steve was actually beginning to open up to her, and occasionally Bruce, it was still Sam who seemed able to consistently talk him down whatever cliff he'd managed to climb.

"What's keeping him in DC?"

"School. But we'll get him once he's finished. Tony's got his floor plan ready to go. All the bells and whistles. And you've seen his record. You know he's wasted on a desk job."

"He likes helping people."

"He counted himself out before his time. He's settling."

Sparing her a curious glance, Maria waited a beat. "Is that a crush I hear, Romanov?"

"I know an asset when I see one."

"Mm-hmm. That asset doesn't happen to be Sam Wilson's ass, does it?"

Natasha made a show of sighing wistfully. "It's a really nice ass."

"You can say that again."

They settled into a comfortable silence, watching the apartment across the street and occasionally taking a drink or digging into the bag of snacks Natasha brought for their stake out. The empty space around them smelled of the restaurant below; a little too strong to be pleasant, but the angle was right. After setting up surveillance of Loki's apartment, they hadn't learned much, other than confirming what they already knew, which was that Loki lived there and Barnes was with him. He rarely ventured out of the building; his trips thus far had been to nearby markets and bodegas for food and necessities. Barnes had gone with him once. She'd tried tailing him and he'd proven eerily adept at shaking her, which left her pride feeling a little bruised.
Maria adjusted her binoculars. "Steve said something about Loki having a sprite."

"I've seen it. Her?"

"Her. According to Steve."

"She comes to the windows often enough." She'd seen Loki interacting with the sprite, in bits and pieces and the odd occasion when he stood staring out the windows at the city.

"Loki and the Winter Soldier being farmers market bros doesn't exactly fill me with optimism." Maria sipped at her coffee again. "What about electronic surveillance? Surely Stark has some toys even Loki wouldn't notice."

"Too risky getting anything inside. Loki may have developed an attachment to Steve, but I doubt it extends to the rest of us. And your guess is as good as mine about Barnes." She was appreciative, truly, of the ceasefire between Loki and the Avengers, but she didn't believe it would last. All Loki needed was a nudge and he'd go back to causing trouble. "We'll have to wait for them both to go out again."

Maria changed the subject. "Anything on Barnes? How did he even know about Loki?"

"There are no police reports, no one matching his description has been treated at any nearby hospitals or clinics. I even checked vet clinics. But you saw him walking. Did that look like a man who took a bullet to the leg a week ago?"

"Maybe you missed."

She glowered at Maria. "I didn't miss." She chewed absently on a licorice stick, puzzling over the tenuous connection between Barnes and the sprites. As Avengers, their world was far too small, and getting smaller, with too many coincidences for her liking.

"Do you think we were wrong about Loki," Maria asked quietly.

"No."

"Neither do I."

Natasha shifted in her camp chair. "People can change."

"You did."

She didn't respond. Had she changed? Or had she simply continued doing the same things, going on the same missions, for someone else. She was still the Black Widow; she still traded on that name and its legend, the only difference now was that she used it to benefit the Avengers. If the ends justified the means, then that was good enough to count as change. She had to believe it was good enough for her, but found herself reluctant to extend that same good enough to Loki.

The bedroom light in Loki's apartment came on and then went out again. There was no clear angle into the bedroom from their vantage point and that bothered her; having any blind spot at all bothered her when it came to Loki.

"You know, when you called, I was hoping for a little less work and a little more spa day." Maria set the binoculars aside. "Why didn't you go to Asgard? Hell of an opportunity to pass up."

"Only way to get Steve to agree to it. If someone wasn't here looking for Barnes, he wouldn't have
gone. Stubborn as a mule."

Smiling, Maria shook her head. "You're always on the clock, Romanov."

"You're one to talk."

She shrugged. "I don't think Loki's going to be doing anything interesting for awhile. Unless you think he's cheating on Steve with Barnes." She laughed when Natasha pulled a face. "Technically, it's my night off, I'm finally away from the Fridge, and I'd kill for a decent martini. What do you say we take a break? We can discuss Eastern European political regimes while we drink."

"Now you're just flirting with me."

"Is it working? Because I gotta say." Maria leaned a little closer. "I really want to see these showers everyone keeps talking about."

"Forget the showers. Wait 'til you see the pool." She activated the webcam mode of the camera pointed at Loki's apartment. "JARVIS can babysit."

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"...then Dernier dives under a HYDRA tank. Right under this huge fucking tank! He'd rigged the explosives with a magnet so it stuck to the bottom. And he just stands up, sticks his fingers in his ears, and watches the tank get blown to Kingdom come." Lying on his back on the rug in the living room floor, Barnes' eyes were bright with laughter and whisky. "Gutsy bastards, all of 'em. And Steve was the worst. There was no plan so stupid he wouldn't think we should do it, you know? But somehow he always pulled it off."

"That has not changed at all." Loki didn't elaborate on exactly how he knew Steve's plans were still ludicrous. He rolled onto his side to pour more of the tawny liquid into Barnes' glass, then refilled his own.

"Did he really end up frozen?"

"For seventy years, apparently."

Barnes groaned. "I fall off one train and he goes and gets himself turned into a popsicle. Can't turn your back for a second with that guy, I tell ya."

Nearly choking on his whisky, Loki stifled his laughter. He resisted the urge to add his own stories to the mix, choosing instead to listen while Barnes regaled him with stories of Captain America and the Howling Commandos that hadn't made the history sites. They were bright spots in what Loki knew were otherwise dark and terrible memories.

"Bet you've got some amazing stories." Barnes' head lolled to the side before he pushed up onto his elbow, tucking his glass against his chest. "Being a God and all. How old are you?"

Loki smirked. "Old."

"Come on." Barnes bit at his lower lip, managing to smile at the same time. "You're in my head walkin' around. Don't I get to know anything about you?"

"What makes you think there's anything to know?"

"See, that." Pointing an accusing finger, Barnes shook his head. "That's what a trickster God would
say. Answerin' a question with another question to confuse me and make me forget what I was wantin' to know."

Loki wondered if Barnes realized how much his speech changed when he drank and found himself quietly amused with missing words, oddly emphasized vowels, and dropped consonants. He raised his eyebrows theatrically, swirling the whisky around his glass. "Are you so certain the secrets of Gods are something you wish to know?"

With a wide, mischievous grin, Barnes fell back to stare up at the ceiling. "Do the lights again. If you're not gonna tell me any stories."

Loki tossed a handful of glowing orbs into the air above them. In seconds, Una was chasing after them like a cat pouncing on mice. Barnes laughed at her antics and Loki made a mental note to buy more whisky if this was the result. The laughter was endearing, although he blamed the feeling of warmth that had infected his chest entirely on the liquor.

"I bet Steve loves this," Barnes said softly, the lights reflecting in his eyes.

The warm feeling turned painful, growing cold in an instant; a reminder that Loki was not meant for warmth or sunshine. These were borrowed moments meant for another; meant for Steve. Swallowing down those bitter thoughts, he grudgingly shifted into Steve's form as he rolled onto his back.

He managed to smile when he looked over at Barnes. "You're right."

Barnes blinked at him, his eyes going in and out of focus several times. He raised the whisky glass. "This must be goin' straight to my head."

"There's more."

"Are we gettin' drunk for a reason?"

"Maybe." He realized that he didn't remember Steve ever getting drunk, regardless of how much wine they'd consumed. What had been done to Barnes by HYDRA must have been different than the serum. He looked up to watch Una whirl amongst the dancing lights, considering.

Barnes moved suddenly, shoving the glasses of whisky out of the way with little care for sloshing their contents over the sides. He caught Loki’s shoulder and pawed at his t-shirt to strip it away. Frowning intently, he seemed determined to put his hand on every inch of Loki’s false skin. The intensity behind Barnes’ eyes was born of confusion and frustration; he was looking for reality in a shifting sea of memories, no doubt trying to find a small piece of Steve that he remembered. Or perhaps trying to find a piece of Loki that didn’t belong there so he could shatter the illusion completely. He planted his metal hand on the floor beside Loki’s shoulder, kneeling and bending over him as he trailed fingers along every line of his shoulders, arms, and chest. His thumb, rough and calloused, slid down Loki’s sternum and traced a line along his lower ribs. He shivered when Barnes caressed a particularly sensitive spot along the inside of his arm and was surprised when Barnes paused, then repeated the motion, as though trying to understand what had evoked the response.

"Please let this be real, please let this be real," Barnes chanted. "I keep having these dreams and I can’t tell, but I really want this to be real. Please, please, let this be real."

Loki clutched at the rug beneath him as Barnes' lips burned a hot track over his throat, kissing and sucked at his skin. A protest died on his tongue, overridden by the fire suddenly pouring through his veins, the roar so loud in his ears that he half expected to see flames rising up around them.
Barnes was no less thorough with his lips and tongue than he'd been with his fingers. He kept his left arm to the side, using it for support and leverage while his right hand worked the fastenings of Loki's jeans. He mouthed at Loki's hip while he tugged the jeans away a few inches at a time, continuing his meticulous exploration by moving down Loki's left leg first and closing the circle up along his right. Fingers caressed the backs of his knees; teeth skimmed over the bones of his ankles as his thumb dug into the thick muscle of Loki's calf. With a firm hand, he pushed Loki's legs wide enough to kneel comfortably between them, his knees pressing against Loki's inner thighs. He settled back on his heels, seemingly content to admire the sight before him, periodically reaching out to caress whatever caught his eye, whether it was the arch of Loki's side or the curves of muscle in his thigh.

Overwhelmed, Loki struggled not to remember how it had looked to have Steve laid out before him, but the images forced themselves in and his body, naked and turned traitor under the onslaught of physical stimulation, now betrayed him utterly. His cock pulsed softly against his belly. When he dared a glance, he saw Barnes had taken notice.

"Do you...what do you...can we..." Barnes' half formed thoughts collided in bits of words and partial sentences. He fumbled with the zipper of his jeans. The button tore loose between metal fingers, skidding across the hardwood floor when he threw it impatiently. More fabric ripped, seams popping as he yanked his shirt over his head and shoved his jeans down his thighs just enough to free his cock. That seemed to be all he had patience for before he was kissing Loki and grinding down against him, their cocks rubbing side by side. Metal fingers scraped over the floor. He hoisted Loki up with surprising ease, cool metal circling his lower back and anchoring Loki on his lap. Their weight was unbalanced and Barnes had to shuffle forward until Loki could brace his shoulders against the wall. "I wanna do everything. Don't know where to start. Can we do everything?"

Loki swallowed. "Wait."

With a groan, Barnes adjusted his legs to stabilize Loki between his thighs and the wall. He inhaled deeply, blowing out his breath and shaking his hair back from his face. "We can take it slow, sweetheart, or we can stop, too. Just tell me what you want."

What Loki wanted was torn into a thousand pieces and tossed in a thousand different directions; he wanted everything and nothing and none of it made sense any longer. In Steve's form, Barnes all but worshipped him. As Steve, he was desired; he was loved and wanted. But once his memories returned fully, Barnes would no longer have any use for Loki and, if he was very unlucky, Barnes would merely walk away instead of putting an end to his suffering. It was all temporary, all fleeting, and whatever choice he made now would matter so very little in the end.

"I want." The sound of Steve's voice was damning in his ears. He caught Barnes' right hand, drawing along his index and middle fingers to slick them with oil before he guided Barnes' hand down between his legs. Barnes looked at him with a mixture of hope and uncertainty. "Start here."

Warm, soft lips brushing kisses down Loki's chest like a trail of paint. He arched his back, shoulders pressing against the wall, offering up what wasn't truly his to give and Barnes took it. He bit at pale skin, kissing and lapping with his tongue. When he reached Loki's left nipple, sucking gently, he finally let his fingers tap lightly against Loki's asshole, making small, teasing circles. Their position gave Barnes more control and Loki couldn't even find purchase to push down against his hand in an attempt to force quicker penetration. Barnes seemed to be in no hurry at all; Loki reached down twice more to add oil to Barnes' fingers since Barnes chose to spread it over Loki's cock as well as his ass. Loki thought he might lose his mind when Barnes began to massage his balls with slick fingers. He bucked against the grip of the metal arm around his waist with both pleasure and frustration; his skin was so slick with oil and sweat that Barnes' arm and the wall were the only reasons he was still upright.
"I can feel how bad you want this," Barnes murmured and - finally - his fingers sought out Loki's asshole again, the light presses and taps making Loki want to scream at him to either stop or get on with it. "That's right, sweetheart. Gonna open you up, alright? I can tell you want this so bad, baby doll."

Loki whimpered through clenched teeth. It had been too long since anyone had touched him with anything close to desire; he wanted this to be real even more desperately than Barnes. Shaking with every breath, his body quivered around Barnes' fingers as they breached the first ring of inner muscles, easing him open as carefully and tenderly as Barnes had done everything else. Loki wanted to tell him to stop, wanted to bite him and draw blood and force him to bite back. Instead, he focused on the ceiling above him or the lights of the city beyond the window.

"Look at me, sweetheart. Nothing to be scared of."

Biting down on his lower lip, Loki turned his head back to face Barnes and shook his head. His protest was forgotten when Barnes leveraged him up an inch, just enough to position himself and ease Loki back down onto his cock. Beads of sweat slid down Barnes' temples from maintaining his hold, not allowing Loki to move too quickly, and Loki, gasping, felt as though he were floating except for the increasing pressure and stretch in his ass.

"See? Ain't gonna hurt you," Barnes rasped, gripping at Loki's back. "Gonna make it good, so good, I promise."

Loki nearly screamed and choked back a sob. This was supposed to be Steve's; this intimacy was meant for them, not him. Loki had no place in this and he'd stolen it away from both of them because he was weak, so desperately weak and foolish that he'd thought he was doing the right thing. He made a silent plea for forgiveness even as Barnes hooked his arms beneath his knees and his cock worked him open with a steady, deliberate rhythm. Loki's back hit against the wall with every stroke, not enough to abrade the skin, not enough to hurt or cause damage, no matter how much he wished Barnes would hurt him.

"You look like you're gonna break, sweetheart. Want me to stop?"

He shook his head and hated himself for it.

"Wanna show me how gorgeous you are when you come?"

He shook his head again, wincing when Barnes began to slow. "Don't stop. I don't...need to. You can, if you want."

To his surprise, Barnes chuckled, shaking his head. "Not without you."

He said it as though the words held meaning that was beyond Loki's understanding, but he recognized the intent all the same. Unhappily, he reached for his own cock, determined to end this disaster as soon as possible.

Barnes smiled crookedly. "Where's the fire, baby doll? We've got all night."

"Are you going to...or not," Loki said through gritted teeth.

He could feel the tension beginning low in his belly, trickling down into his balls, and he clenched down around Barnes' penis almost out of spite, only to shudder at a sudden wave of pleasure. Barnes began to move again, still slow and deliberate; he leaned in to suckle one of Loki's nipples in time with his thrusts. Loki writhed, struggling toward his orgasm and unable to stop it from coming at the same time. Barnes drove into him, knocking him back against the wall and forcing out a low moan.
"Oh, Jesus," Barnes said breathlessly. "Shoulda known you like it rough." He grabbed hold of Loki and twisted them to the side, onto the floor. Barely missing a beat, he caught Loki's legs to raise his hips.

Pleasure was now laced with pain, lancing through him with each of Barnes' thrusts and shooting down his leg from where Barnes had a death grip on his ankle with his metal hand. Loki sped up his own pace, as desperate for it to be over as he was for release, and, finally, the tension inside him burst apart into bits of consuming fire. He sucked down gulps of air trying to catch his breath and barely registered Barnes' collapse when he let go of Loki's legs and dropped to his metal hand, then lowered his forehead to Loki's chest before laying out entirely on top of Loki. He realized that, in their myopic rush to have sex, Barnes' jeans were still half on and half off. His stomach churned; he prayed Barnes wouldn't remember any of it as anything other than a dream.

As if reading his mind, Barnes nuzzled sleepily against Loki's chest. "If I'm dreaming...it's the best dream I've ever had."

"We should get up."

"Gimme a minute."

As if reading his mind, Barnes nuzzled sleepily against Loki's chest. "If I'm dreaming...it's the best dream I've ever had."

"We should get up."

"Gimme a minute."

Loki let his hands settle lightly on the back of Barnes' head and, his heart twisting painfully, forced his consciousness down into a deep, dreamless sleep. It was a cruel trick after what he'd suffered at HYDRA's hands but Loki couldn't bear another moment of wearing Steve's appearance. He couldn't bring himself to break Barnes' heart either. Not yet.

In his own form again, he got them both cleaned up and carried Barnes into the bedroom to settle him on the bed. He gathered water and clean cloths, aware that the rest of Barnes' memories would all be difficult and wanting to be prepared. In the living room, he cleared away the spilled whisky and their glasses and straightened the rug where they'd rucked up the corner. Una was conspicuously absent. Standing at the sink with the nearly empty bottle of whisky in his hand, he stared at a seam in the tile on the wall and tried not to throw up.

This is what came of him trying to be better than what he was. In trying to do something good, he'd become more monstrous than ever.

The bottle in his hand made a popping sound just before it shattered and fell into the sink in a shower of broken glass and frozen whisky. Blood welled up from a dozen tiny cuts over his fingers and palm, each of them stinging with a vengeance. As though detached from his own hand, he washed away the blood and cleaned out the broken pieces of glass from the sink. He gained more cuts in the process and gave them no more attention than the others.

He deserved what was coming; when Barnes realized - when Steve found out - what Loki had taken from him. His throat felt tight. A moment of panic seized him; he could leave the card with Barnes, instruct him on how to use it to contact Steve, and he could disappear. He could search out the smallest, darkest corner of the Nine Realms and bury himself in shame and misery forever.

Like a coward.

"Una?" His voice cracked. "I don't know where SHIELD has relocated your hive but the Avengers must know. They can...they will help you."

No answer came and he felt her silent rebuke as sharply as her claws.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

While Steve explores Jotunheim and learns about Frost Giants, Loki's plan to help Bucky comes crashing down.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Please note the new tag. Content is not graphic but please be aware. :( See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Why does JARVIS call you Agent," Maria asked absently, her attention on the Starkphone in her hand, reading reports from SHIELD. She'd been glued to her phone since five o'clock that morning. The white sheet tangled around her torso only barely covered her breasts and left her long legs bare against Natasha's side.

Carefully, Natasha added the final stroke of midnight blue polish to the nail of Maria's right big toe. "Tony thinks it annoys me."

Maria let out an indelicate snort. "And you let him because otherwise he'd do something worse."

"He gives new meaning to the word escalate." She caught Maria's left foot, holding it in place so she could begin painting. "I thought you wanted a vacation."

One corner of Maria's lips turned up. "Feeling neglected?"

"I expect a little quid quo pro."

"And mess up all your hard work?" She wiggled her right toes a bit, but not enough to smear the polish.

"You have until it dries and then I'm taking away your phone." The spaghetti strap of the ratty old top Natasha used as pajamas tickled at her arm, annoying her until she pulled it back up her onto shoulder.

"I'll trade you for a martini."

"You know what they say about drinking before noon."

"I'm on vacation. It's never too early to start drinking when you're on vacation." She tossed the phone onto the bed beside her. Settling back into the pillows, she stretched out her neck and shoulders. She let her hand fall to the back of Natasha's left ankle, sliding up to caress her calf. "You and Sam would be good together," she said suddenly.

"Workplace relationships. Bad idea." She dabbed at a spot of polish that had ended up on Maria's skin. "Depending on the day, the tabloids already have me sleeping with the entire team."
"But you like him."

"Everyone likes Sam. He's impossible not to like." Glancing back over her shoulder, she gave Maria a look. "Are you trying to set me up with him for any particular reason?"

Maria shook her head, smiling, and rubbed her thumb in small circles over a stubborn spot in Natasha's calf muscle. "You'd have my blessing. That's all."

"I'm glad you approve," Natasha said wryly. "Any other sage advice, babushka?"

"I'd kick you." Maria squeezed Natasha's calf, playfully, following it up with another soft caress. "But it would mess up my pedicure."

"If you're trying to tell me something," Natasha continued, ignoring the attempt to change the subject. Being around Maria was as close to being alone without actually being alone as she got. Maria never pushed for information, never made demands, and seemed equally content to leave whatever this was undefined and vague. At least, she had. "You can just say it."

Maria stroked a slow line down the back of Natasha's leg. "People like us...we don't get happy endings. You know that."

"You seemed happy enough last night." She spread polish on the last nail and capped the bottle. Rolling over, she pushed up on her elbows and watched Maria for a while. She looked older, somehow, and Natasha thought she saw a touch of gray at her temples. "You don't usually do maudlin."

"Feeling my age."

"And getting old means you feel the need to play matchmaker?" She moved closer, throwing a leg over Maria's and settling onto her lap. Eyebrows raised, Maria looked down Natasha's body with a deliberate sweep of her gaze. There was a piece of Maria that never really relaxed; Natasha could see it in her eyes and the little tic in her jaw that she didn't know about. She brushed her fingers over the edge of the sheet, letting her fingertips just touch Maria's skin. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not exactly having a hard time getting laid."

Maria toyed with the bottom hem of Natasha's boy short style panties. "You gave me a pedicure so I wouldn't be able to fight back, didn't you?"

"Are you going to make me work for a straight answer?"

She nodded toward the discarded phone. "You did promise me a martini."

"New deal. You tell me what's really going on and I'll make you a martini. Extra dirty, just how you like it."

Maria ran her fingers lightly along Natasha's arms and over her shoulders to tug at the spaghetti straps. "I thought talking about our feelings wasn't what this was about."

"This?"

"You know what I mean."

She couldn't tell if Maria was trying to throw her off track or if she'd genuinely taken a few offhand comments as more than they were. Puzzled, she chewed at her bottom lip. Appearing to be far more straightforward than she really was one of Maria's greatest tricks; no one expected her to be running
layers of shell games when she came across as such a no-nonsense leader.

Maria was watching her with an amused expression. "It's not that complicated, Romanov. I'm just trying to manage expectations."

"Did you really just apply a corporate bullshit catch phrase to sex?"

"I've got a few more if it turns you on." Maria's hands were deceptively strong. She slid the flat of her palms down Natasha's back and massaged the tight muscles of her lower back.

Changing tactics, Natasha leaned in to bump her nose against Maria's. "I'll go make that martini. You. Stay."

Maria hummed, eyes falling halfway closed. "Was that so hard?"

"Don't you dare touch that phone." She climbed off Maria and left the bed, padding barefoot into the kitchen.

The vodka from the night before was still out on the counter, along with their martini glasses. She pulled a bottle of olives and dirty martini mix out of the fridge before starting the water in the sink to rinse out the glasses. Absently, she considered breakfast, and possibly having it delivered if JARVIS knew any place that delivered strawberry crepes.

"We should check the footage from Loki's apartment," Maria called from the bed.

"Vacation," Natasha reminded her. She heard the soft rustle of the sheets on the bed. "You'd better not be messing up your nail polish."

"I'm being careful."

She didn't see Maria on the bed when she turned around. Frowning, she hurriedly rinsed out the glasses and grabbed a cloth to dry them. Stepping out of the kitchen, she saw Maria doing slow pull-ups on the chin up bar she'd installed in the closet doorway. She hadn't bothered to get dressed, wearing only a pair of sensible beige panties. The easy confidence Maria had with her own body was one of Natasha's favorite things about her. Leisurely, she watched the play of muscles in Maria's back for a count of five pull-ups before returning to the counter to make the martinis.

"One olive or two?"

Maria's voice was muffled. "Two."

"What do you want for breakfast? I don't have much on hand. Protein shakes, energy bars. That's about it. If you want real food, we could go out." She combined vodka, vermouth, and the martini mix in a shaker, pouring it out over the olives. They weren't up to Maria's standards, really, but she didn't worry too much about it as she carried Maria's glass carefully back to the bed.

Since Maria had mentioned it, she really should check on the webcam footage and see if Loki, or his houseguests, had gotten up to anything interesting. She sat down at her kitchen table command center, martini in hand, and booted the system. There were the usual alerts; SHIELD activity she wasn't supposed to know about it, news reports that were mostly useless, except when they weren't, and tabloid gossip she mostly didn't care about. They'd joked about making a drinking game out of who the press was speculating slept in Natasha's bed on any given week. So far, none of them had ever guessed Maria Hill. Then again, it had been awhile since she'd seen Maria without her uniform on.
There was a subtle glow of sweat on Maria's face and above her breasts when she came into the kitchen, martini in hand. She glanced at the table before heading to the fridge, coming back with two pre-mixed nutrition drinks and handing one to Natasha. "I'm surprised this place doesn't have a twenty four hour, four star restaurant. And tell me JARVIS has an easy way to skip through hours of filming the side of a building or this will officially be the most boring surveillance video ever."

"You doubt Tony's intolerance for boredom?" She brought up the footage and traced a blinking rectangle around the outline of the window. Along the side of the video processing window were options that allowed her to filter by time of day, duration, and contrast deviation from the original rectangle. "The sprite probably isn't large enough to trigger the threshold, but it might catch her too."

Maria dragged the second chair over to sit beside Natasha and gave her toenails a quick inspection. "You should let me do yours."

"I'm ticklish."

"Bullshit."

"I don't like having my feet touched."

"Give," Maria said sternly, holding out a hand. "Don't argue with me, Romanov."

Gingerly, she extended one leg and let Maria take her foot. Her grip was firm; she kneaded and pressed at several spots along Natasha's foot and the reverberations traveled all the way up her leg. All of her awareness zeroed in on the points of contact between her leg and Maria's thighs and the way Maria's breasts shifted as she moved. Snagging the nutrition drink, she popped it open and drank it down. Liquid breakfasts, even lunches and dinners, were hardly new.

Maria's hands stopped. Catching Natasha's eye, she nodded toward the screen. "That's not boring."

The time stamp in the corner showed that several hours had passed since she'd left the camera. It was night and the front of the building lacked any distinctly angled shadows. When she looked at the window, she had to blink several times to be certain her eyes weren't playing tricks on her. Even then, she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"I thought Steve was in Asgard." Maria was looking sideways at the screen.

"He is. Or he's supposed to be." Natasha tried several of the filters, trying to clean up the image and get more detail. "This doesn't make any sense."

"That sure wasn't in any of the history books."

Her eyes were telling her that Steve Rogers and James Barnes had both been in Loki's apartment the night before. They'd apparently gotten naked and had sex on the living room floor as well, which she knew was unlikely, verging on impossible. Even if Steve had decided to come back to Earth, it wouldn't be for a booty call.

"This is so awkward," Maria whispered. "It's like walking in on your parents, only a million times worse."

"This can't...that can't be Steve. It's got to be a trick." As she denied it, she wondered if she was rejecting the idea of Steve returning to Earth for sex because she hadn't seen it coming or because he hadn't told her. She understood the need for privacy, but she'd thought Steve had begun to trust her with his secrets.
Maria pulled a face, her nose wrinkling. "You don't think that's...who I think you're thinking of."

"I don't know. I don't know if he can do that. I mean, we've seen him change into a woman but he still looked like Loki, just a different version of Loki."

"If it is Loki pretending to be Steve, that's pretty messed up."

"Unless that kind of thing is considered normal on Asgard." She stopped the video. If it was Steve, he wouldn't want anyone watching the footage, and if it wasn't, he'd want it destroyed. Whether or not that was after he beat the hell out of Loki, or Barnes, or both of them, she had no idea.

She could get an answer easily enough, if standing out on the roof of Stark Tower shouting for Heimdall counted as easy. But if Steve had come back, he wouldn't appreciate his private business advertised to the entire team. If they even knew he was missing. And if it wasn't Steve at all, he would doubly resent her if she was the one who let it slip to the entire team of Avengers. She couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. But maybe Steve had seen the card before he left; maybe Loki had found another way to contact him. Maybe Loki had brought Steve back from Asgard to see Barnes.

She was still thinking hard when Maria placed a martini glass in her hand and she realized she'd gotten lost in her own thoughts. "JARVIS, seal this footage, accessible by Steve Rogers only, and remotely disable the camera," she said tersely. "I'll pick it up later."

"As you wish, Agent Romanov."

Maria reached out and shut down the system. "You don't think that was Steve, do you?"

"At this point, I'm hoping it was. If it wasn't, he won't take it well. I don't see how that's the better option." She set the martini aside and got up, scowling at nothing in particular.

"Natasha."

"I should've gone with them, damn it."

Maria moved behind her, wrapping her arms around her waist and hugging her close. "You're not his mother or his sister or his caseworker or even his handler."

"You don't know what it was like. After the spell."

"The spell's over."

"Is it?" She let out the breath she'd been holding. "It wasn't that he wanted to be with Loki, that wasn't the worst part. He got harder, Maria. Darker, angrier, almost cruel sometimes. Predatory. It was subtle at first, but-"

"None of that is your fault."

"We have no defense against magic and we don't understand it."

"And you don't have to solve the world's problems all by yourself. Even if you feel like you do."

"I thought we weren't going to talk about our feelings." She shivered at the light kisses Maria was leaving on the side of her neck. "You know, Stark's looking for an official SHIELD liaison for the Avengers."

"Uh-huh.‖ Maria kissed a spot about a half inch lower. "We were hoping you'd volunteer."
"We," she echoed. Turning in Maria's arms, she cocked her head. "Would that be you and Tony or you and the new Director of SHIELD?"

Maria smiled. "I told you, the offer stands if you want to come back."

"Did you ever really leave?" Then she shook her head. "Don't answer that."

"Couldn't even if I wanted to."

There was plenty she wasn't telling Maria so she let that go. Shivering again, this time from bare skin and the relatively cool air, she slipped away to collect her forgotten drink. "Up for a movie?"

"Please. Anything to get the mental image of Rogers and Barnes out of my head. I'm going to be scarred for life."

They curled up on the sofa with a pile of fuzzy throws and blankets, cradling their martinis, and Natasha navigated through Netflix menus via voice commands to JARVIS. She frowned but didn't say anything when Maria got up to retrieve her phone from the bed and spent several minutes focused on the small screen. Eventually, she settled on Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries.

Maria thumbed over her phone before leaning in close and holding it out. "I want to show you something."

The image on the screen was a complicated chemical compound she didn't recognize. "What is it?"

"There were references to a lot of unusual chemicals used in the program to create the Winter Soldier. Very experimental, most of them toxic in a dozen ways. They used Barnes as a lab rat." She brushed across the screen and another image appeared, this one a set of two analysis graphs set side by side. "Most of the chemicals weren't too hard to identify, but this one, they've been working on for months. They only figured it out after they set up the sprites down in the Core and got some samples."

"I'm not following."

"It's sprite blood. They pumped Barnes full of it. We think it was part of the hibernation process, sort of like antifreeze, to keep him alive while he was stasis. Apparently sprites have natural hibernation cycles."

Natasha winced. "What are the side effects?"

"They're still working on synthesizing the compounds in the lab, but," Maria hesitated. "The team also thinks there's a chance this could lead to a possible inoculation against magic. I put in a request with Banner to see if we could get a sample of Steve's blood as a baseline." She held up a hand when she saw Natasha about to protest. "We'd never take any without Rogers' buy in. You know I would never do that."

She did believe Maria wouldn't do that deliberately. She had less faith in SHIELD. "Maybe that's why Barnes was looking for the sprites."

"Or it wasn't the sprites he was looking for. We think he was following this guy." Maria pulled up a hazy photograph. "Raul Sampson. Neuroscientist. He was part of the HYDRA cell in DC; one of the scientists who maintained Barnes. There would've been contact, Barnes would've known him. We've got travel records showing Sampson came into the city around the time you encountered the sprites, nothing to indicate he left."
"If they were capturing sprites for their blood," Natasha said thoughtfully. "Do you think there are more assets like Barnes out there?"

"It's possible. And if there aren't, it's possible HYDRA's trying to create more like him. They haven't given up on the idea of super soldiers, not by a long shot. They're just getting more creative." With a sigh, she set the phone aside and gave Natasha a weary smile. "When we decide to sober up, what would you say to hunting down our mysterious Mister Sampson?"

Natasha raised her martini. "I get to be Bad Cop."

"You're always Bad Cop." Maria clinked her glass against Natasha's, then leaned in close, her breath warm against Natasha's ear. "And I love to watch you work."

**

The interior of Jotunheim was riddled with caverns and marbled with veins of the dark, crumbling dirt that created winding passageways through the rock. Steve found several more of the collapsed veins leading away from his narrow hollow and, with trial and error, discovered that he could use strips of the tough outer skin from the larger fungus stalks to string together a makeshift rope. Between the rope and markings he left with the chunk of green stone wrapped around his wrist, he began to explore.

To say he found wonders didn't do justice to any of it. He found additional caverns filled with activity, as well as smaller caverns. There were caverns riddled with crystals the size of skyscrapers, flashing with brilliant pulses of light that made the whole space blaze like a sun. There were caverns filled with mineral deposits, including a powdery substance that tasted very much like salt, with an extra kick at the end. He learned the indicators of steam vents and how avoid them; he found open spaces filled with hot springs and air thick with sulfur. One enormous cave appeared to be a nesting or brooding territory for the enormous beasts. The smell of ammonia in the cave was strong enough to sting his eyes and he stayed clear.

Small breaks and gaps in the rock were more common than he'd expected, giving him glimpses into the lives of the Frost Giants as he moved like a rat within the walls of their home. He ate when he was hungry and slept when he was tired and lost track of time, as though it had no meaning in this strange new world.

When he discovered the first of what he could only describe as an engineering workshop, he hunkered in the wall for hours and watched them build parts of complicated machinery. Steam and heat were their primary energy sources, with light from both the green stone, which they carved to guide the light along a desired path, and traditional fire torches. He saw them create ice, forming it around their hands and using it to shape molten metal and rock into the tools or pieces they needed. Their armor was carefully crafted and he soon realized that each piece was intended to serve as an anchor for a blade or cast of ice, like the hilt of a sword where the blade came and went. They sheared rock and gem alike with the combination of their cold touch and blasts of steam.

Steve was fascinated by the civilization he was discovering piece by piece. The Frost Giants walked and work side by side their giant beasts, raising them from cubs and sometimes carrying the smallest of them on their shoulders. He saw children playing games with bits of ice pulled straight from the air, their laughter harsh and grating to his ears but still unmistakably laughter. They were fierce warriors and spent a great deal of their time training, both males and females. In fact, Steve didn't see any obvious social divisions by gender, although it was possibly he simply couldn't tell them apart.

When he'd come back to watch the engineers work after three periods of sleep, he was surprised to find the workshop nearly empty. As he tried to see more through his narrow fissure in the stone, the
remaining Frost Giant came near the wall and set a thin plate on the ground, then retreated from the space. There were pieces of what looked like bread and possibly a type of cheese on the plate.

He puzzled over the strange behavior for some time, waiting for something to come the food; perhaps a pet. Eventually it dawned on him that they'd left it near the hole in the wall because they knew he was there. In fact, it was near enough for him to reach without leaving the relative safety of the wall. If they knew he was there and hadn't carved out the stone to get to him, then it was possible the food wasn’t so much a lure as an offering. Cautiously, he wriggled down the fissure to a spot where he could reach through. Tensed for what could be a trap, he extended his hand out and caught the edge of the plate with his fingertips. It scraped loudly over the stone as he pulled it back, just far enough that he could snatch up the food. He retreated away from the gap, but stayed near enough that there was light from the workshop filtered into his crawl space. A few minutes later, he heard footsteps and voices as the Frost Giants returned to work, which meant they had been watching and waiting to see what he would do.

First, he sniffed at the food in his hand, then tentatively nibbled at the edges, remembering that poisoned food was a primary method of getting rid of rats in the walls. The square that looked like bread was much closer to a dense cake in texture, with a sweetness that offset the familiar nutty flavor of the fungus. The other was as he had guessed; a rich, creamy cheese that tasted nothing like any cheese he'd had on Earth or Asgard.

He stayed to watch after that, thinking and observing them while they worked. Perhaps they had determined him to be a harmless annoyance, or an amusement. He noticed they took breaks in regular intervals. The Frost Giant that had left him the food was distinguishable by the swirled markings on their calves, which is what Steve saw the most of, and they returned to collect the plate before they left. Whether it was curiosity or simply good manners that urged him to creep out of his spot onto the workshop floor, he wasn’t certain. He wanted to do something, leave something behind, to return the olive branch that had been extended with the offering of food.

With his smaller hands, there was little he could do that would be of use to the Frost Giants but he looked anyway. He climbed and hoisted himself up one leg of a bench to leap up and catch the edge of the worktable, swinging up and over. Even the smallest of the chisels was the size of a full pickax to him, but he'd seem them use smaller, more delicate tools in their work as well.

He settled on what appeared to be a piece of jewelry one of the Frost Giants had been working on, likely meant to be inset into armor. It was a smooth, creamy white flat of stone, the edges carefully and neatly faceted to slot into a metal insert. He hunted out the pots of ink he’d seen them use, some of them the size of barrels, and used a sharp bit of the green gemstone to cut away thick bristles from an oversized paint brush. Once he had the colors he needed, he set himself to painting over the stone's surface. He painted the landscape he’d seen from the foothills of the mountains; the snowflake city and glittering stars overhead. After he left that one to dry, he found another stone and this time, painted swirls of bright red California poppies.

Tremors in the table and the low rumble of voices alerted him to the Frost Giants' return to work. He hurriedly returned everything to its place, tucking the bundle of bristles into the belt at his waist before he scrambled down the table leg and raced back to the safety of the hollow in the wall. He waited, watching through the gap, as the Frost Giants gathered around the work table and inspected the painted stones. They didn't appear angry and made no attempt to seek him out.

Feeling invigorated by the strange interaction, he crawled back through the tangled honeycomb of passages to one of the caverns he'd discovered. This one had a thin stream of cool, fresh water that washed down one side in a tumbling waterfall. Beneath the fall, a small pool joined with a thermal vent and the water warmed to a perfect temperature. He carefully stripped off his clothes, folding
them into the hollow of his shield, and eased himself into the warm water. The mineral content gave the water a slick, almost greasy feel; it was strange but not unpleasant. Deposits over the stone ensured there were no sharp edges to catch his toes or knees on, only gentle, smooth curves. He hadn't found any caverns where he could observe the Frost Giants bathing, but he doubted that he'd seen even a fraction of Jotunheim's interior.

He knew he should be trying to get back to Asgard, but he was fascinated by his discoveries and learning so much about the Frost Giants that he found himself reluctant to stop. There was so much he could tell Loki that was counter to the bar songs of Asgard and what Loki must believe about his own heritage and he was convinced he'd only just scratched the surface.

Once he was clean and dry, he ate a meal of the fungus meat and fresh water from the falls. There was a warm bed of rock in a low hollow against the wall that provided him a relatively comfortable and safe place to doze. He'd grown used to the deep groans deep within the rock. The subtle sounds of water and vibrations through the stone were as soothing as waves on a beach. It was no tropical island, but he couldn't remember that last time his life had been this simple and he could truly relax.

After he'd slept enough to feel rested and eaten more of the fungus, he set off down a new line of passages, looking for gaps and holes in the rock where he could observe more of the Frost Giant's culture. Several hours later, he followed the murmur of voices until he found a crack that opened onto a ledge high up in a wide, brightly lit cavern. Below, he saw child-sized Frost Giants dashing and racing back and forth in a game, while adults navigated what appeared to be a market for food and goods. He crouched on the ledge, wishing for a pen and notebook so he could make sketches and jot down notes of his observations. There were new smells; the aroma of roasting meat made his mouth water and he thought wistfully of the banquets on Asgard.

It wasn't much all that much different from Asgard. He was even willing to bet the Frost Giants sang songs of Asgard's villainy in their taverns and ale houses. The sheltered quarters of living underground created a clear sense of community amongst them, possibly making them close knit and quick to distrust outsiders.

One of the children saw him and began pointing and shouting, directing others to where he was perched on the ledge. He made a rapid retreat, still uneasy about drawing attention to himself, and picked his way down another collapsed vein of earth to see if he could get a lower viewpoint into the market. He found one when he circled around the other side and was surprised to see the children methodically examining each and every crack they could find in the walls. He made sure he had an easy escape route before he peered out of his hole long enough for one of them to catch sight of him and begin shouting excitedly to the others.

He was even more surprised when one of them approached the hole with hesitant, cautious steps and stopped some distance away. The child laid down a small plate with a random assortment of food, then hurried away to hide behind a large stalagmite with their playmates. They were trying to feed him as though he were a stray cat, he realized, and almost laughed out loud.

Before he could wriggle out of his hole, one of the children darted forward and knelt beside the plate. They pulled one of their arm bands away, then dug into a pouch slung over their shoulder to retrieve several small jars and set everything beside the plate before retreating.

Curious, he waited until the nearby Frost Giants had retreated, obviously giving him a wide berth. He crept out slowly, keeping low to the ground, ready to run back to his hole in an instant. When he reached the plate, he found more of the dense cake and small strips of cooked meat. While he ate, he watched the children occasionally peer out to monitor his progress with similar curiosity. The bracelet left behind contained a wide, flat gray stone in the center. He recognized the small covered...
pots from the workshop. They wanted him to paint the stone and had given him food in exchange.

Eying the child who'd left the bracelet, he tried to think of what might please them. There was so little he knew for certain; he hated to think he might offend them without understanding what he'd done wrong. Once he'd eaten, he settled the bracelet in his lap and pulled the bundle of bristles from his belt. The colors the child had provided were reds and oranges, so he painted an intricate lacework of red roses and orange honeysuckle blossoms, shading in their darker centers and around the edges.

By the time he finished, he looked up to see the children had come closer and were seated in a half circle watching him work. There were watchful eyes in the crowd of adults as well, but they seemed content to let events play out. Since even the child Frost Giants were the same size or taller than Steve already, he didn't think they were particularly worried that he might harm them.

Once he finished, he set the cuff on the ground and replaced the lids of the pots. He took a chance at remaining where he was as the child moved slowly closer, until they could reach out and touch both him and the bracelet.

The child took the bracelet, holding it as if it were made of delicate glass, and inspected the painting thoroughly. After a long moment, they looked at him and dark blue lips spread into a wide smile. With slow movements, they reached out again and this time, he felt the rough fingers gently brush against his hair and the shield on his back, petting him as he'd seen them pet the newly born saber toothed creatures they bred in the caves.

A moment later and the children were dashing off to resume their game, the bracelet held high in the child's hand like a prize. He returned to his crack in the wall and slipped inside, unable to keep from smiling.

It quickly became a game. He would find offerings of food along with bits of stone and inks to paint with laid out for him in various caverns and caves. His flowers seemed to be particular favorites. The children were bolder and always patted or stroked him once he'd finished, as if he were a particularly clever pet. Gradually, he spent more time outside of the walls, watching them play or work. He was surprised and excited when one of the children brought him a blank roll of parchment paper, since he'd seen no evidence of a written language or literary culture in his explorations. He thought he might be getting better at seeing the subtleties in their geometric markings and painted the boy - he hoped he got that right - a tapestry of flowers and butterflies that filled the entire parchment. At the bottom corner, he neatly printed his own name. *Steve*.

As soon as the ink dried, the boy raced off with the parchment to show his friends and, satisfied, Steve finished the remainder of his cake. He was surprised when one of the adults approached and saw them holding the parchment. Hoping fervently that he hadn't offended by giving a boy a picture of flowers, he crept closer to the nearest hole in the wall, ready to flee if necessary. The adult stopped beyond arm's reach and settled into a crouch. They held out the parchment and indicated the name in the corner.

"Steve," he answered, pointing at his own chest. "My name is Steve." He heard murmurs and whispers in the background. Perhaps they'd assumed he was incapable of speech.

The Frost Giant studied him intently before they stood and turned away. He had no idea if it had been a test of some sort and whether he'd passed or failed. Where his name had simply been part of the art to the children, the adult had recognized it as a symbol with a larger meaning. At least the flowers hadn't appeared to raise concern; he breathed a sigh of relief for that. He waited for a while longer before venturing out again, looking for new places to explore and more to learn.

He'd made a full circuit of the more heavily utilized caves, darting and dodging between the larger
Frost Giants, when he found himself back at the central market where the children played. He settled onto a relatively comfortable stone to watch them and pass the time. Excited shouting preceded a tumble of gawky limbs and bare feet and the boy from before emerged from the throng of the market with his arms around a large, thick book. He slowed when he neared Steve and knelt down to open the book against the ground. It was a picture book, with large symbols that reminded Steve of runes printed neatly beside each picture.

The boy pointed to a painted picture of one of the fungus stalks and said a single word that sounded like *fray*. His voice was low and gravel rough. He repeated the word several times.

Steve crouched beside the book. "Fray."

With a nod, the boy pointed to the next image, which was one of their beasts. "Hundur."

"Hoon dure," Steve repeated carefully, trying to mimic unfamiliar sounds.

Soon enough, they had a circle of the children around them. They took turns repeating words until he manage to fumble the strange sounds over his tongue. He did his best to remember each image, filing away the name of the item or object for reference. When they reached the end of the book, the boy pointed to himself and said what Steve assumed was his name.

"High din," Steve sounded out. He pointed to himself. "Steve."

"Ste-veh," the boy repeated. The other children tried it out as well, smiling.

Steve put his hand on the cover and said, "book?"

"Bok," Hedinn said, stressing the vowel differently.

"Bok."

Hedinn nodded, clearly pleased with Steve's attempts at learning their language, and petted him gently several times in reward. The children probably viewed him as he would've view a parrot on Earth who had learned to talk. It gave him a whole new perspective on parrots.

"Are there more? Boks." He gestured to indicate a pile of books. "Library?"

Cocking his head to the side, Hedinn considered him for a few moments before he gathered up the book and motioned for Steve to follow him. He led Steve and a handful of the other children through the busy market, along the side of a great cavern, and over a hanging walkway into a section that Steve hadn't yet explored. They received the occasional curious look, but the Frost Giants must've decided he was a harmless diversion for their children and none of the adults made any effort to stop or delay them.

At a large archway leading into a tunnel, Hedinn paused and pointed. "Bokasafn," he said.

"Bocca saven," Steve attempted. He had to repeat it several times before Hedinn deemed his pronunciation acceptable.

The bokasafn turned out to be the largest, most fantastical library Steve had ever seen. It dwarfed the market cavern and all of the sides, even beneath his feet, were riddled with crystal veins and marbling. There were no torches; the light from the stones themselves filled the space with a bright, warm glow. Enormous bookshelves circled stalagmites and hung from anchors above them, with walkways between them. The Frost Giants here appeared to be mostly older, with frosted hair and pale silver showing over blue skin, particularly along the geometric markings. He wondered if
Jotunheim's division of labor was divided primarily by age, with scholarship fallen to the elder Frost Giants.

Hedinn led him to an alcove with child sized chairs and benches and more of the large, sturdy books. There were other children working quietly, scratching out symbols over rolls of blank parchment. He wondered if their library also served as a school or similar place of learning.

A sharp, commanding voice snapped the children to attention and then sent them scurrying away, leaving Steve searching for a hole in the wall to disappear into. When he turned around, he came face to face with the most ancient Frost Giant he'd ever seen. Blue skin was nearly silver and they were so hunched over that the red eyes were nearly at his level. He guessed they were female from the markings, the long braid of snow white hair, and the stern expression that reminded him unequivocally of a school teacher.

The Frost Giant sniffed at him, or sniffed him, he wasn't sure, and her red eyes narrowed. When she spoke, her voice rumbled as low as the males. "You are far from home, child of Midgard."

He was so shocked to hear what sounded like English that he nearly forgot to respond. "I'm...a tourist?"

"I smell Asgard on you."

"I, um, visited Asgard too." He hoped that was vague enough to diffuse any potential hostility. "I'm Steve."

She moved with slow steps, her age appearing to weigh heavily on her broad shoulders. Circling around him, her eyes never looked away. "We have not seen the light of the Bifrost and Midgard is not known to produce Walkers."

"Walkers?"

"Those who travel the ways between worlds." Leaning closer, she sniffed at him again. "You are no sorcerer, yet you reek of magic."

"It's a long story." And not one he was about to tell her. Something about the ancient Frost Giant was raising the hair on the back of his neck and had his hands itching for his shield.

"Was it borrowed or stolen," she asked sharply. "This magic within you."

"It was a gift. From a friend." Although, he realized belatedly, Loki had probably stolen it.

She completed her circle and stopped directly in front of him. She moved faster than he'd thought possible, one great blue hand snaking out to grab his right arm. Deep green lines began to surface on his skin, He saw patterns form, nested chevrons appearing down his forearm. She hissed when she saw the pattern and tore at his sleeve to bare more of his arm, her eyes wide and wild.

"This cannot be," she growled. "How?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "I don't know what those mean."

A burning sensation raced up his arm, the cold burn of ice; he couldn't pull free of her grip. He felt his heart pounding as though it would burst through his ribs. Panicked, he wondered if she was trying to gather the magic from his bones and blood and rip it out of him. His vision began to distort, as though he'd been thrust suddenly under water. Pain seared up his arm and exploded like fire in his skull, blotting out his vision completely. He saw the Earth; a silent blue marble amidst the vast
cosmos. He saw the surface of the planet begin to ripple and a new shape emerge. A gigantic snake was unfurling, tearing the crust of the planet to ribbons as it rose. Glittering, liquid eyes looked straight at him and its mouth opened to reveal fangs dripping black poison. When the monster came for him, he didn't even have time to scream.

**

Loki woke from a fitful sleep. He rubbed at his eyes and felt short hair at his temple, which meant he'd fallen asleep in Steve's form. Barnes had trembled in his sleep and he'd thought to be prepared. The charade of pretending to be Steve was torture now, but stopping altogether was a greater risk to Barnes' sanity and Loki was convinced that something good, however small, had to come of what he'd done. In his tangled quagmire of mistakes, he had to do something right.

He felt for Barnes in the darkness and his hand met only empty space. Wondering what had woken him and thinking Barnes might be standing watch at the window, a behavior that often preoccupied his waking moments, he slipped quietly out of the bed and moved toward the doorway.

As he reached the bedroom door, he felt an object crunch beneath his foot. Frowning, he crouched down and searched it out with his fingers. It was thin and lightweight, small enough to fit against his palm. He conjured a ball of light and the object glimmered, iridescent in the flickering light. It looked like part of a dragonfly's wing.

Una.

Fear clutched at his heart and turned his blood to ice. He moved slowly, watching the shadows. The living room was dark, the only light was from the city filtering through the window. He should be able to see the outline of the banana tree, but it was missing, and he thought he saw a misshapen mess on the floor that could be the tree, overturned and uprooted. That must've been what had roused him. Thinking to set the piece of Una's wing on the kitchen counter, he took careful, silent steps from the doorway.

A portion of shadow peeled away from the wall in the living room and, too late, he caught a brief gleam of metal passing through a ray of weak gray light.

He meant to speak, though had no idea what he would say, when Barnes lashed out and Loki felt the sting of a blade cut across his chest. Stumbling back, he caught Barnes' arm as he flipped the knife, intending to slicing backward and through Loki's throat. The metal arm hummed and shifted beneath his grip before Barnes kicked his feet out from under him.

"You're my mission," he snarled, following Loki to the floor.

Loki twisted out of the way as the knife came down and the blade thudded into the wood where his head had been. He wedged a knee between them and shoved against Barnes' chest to throw him off. This wasn't Barnes at all, he realized with a sick feeling; this was the Winter Soldier. He rolled, scrambling to his feet. He had to put some space between them and talk Barnes down, trigger his other memories, and he had to do it without damaging or harming Barnes, who was still inside his head, possibly lost or trapped. Metal fingers closed around his ankle, hobbling and preventing him from getting up quickly enough.

Whatever he might have said turned into a yelp of pain as Barnes got a grip his right arm, twisting it behind his back until his shoulder screamed. A sharp kick to the back of his knee brought him down and Barnes slammed him into the coffee table. The puzzle tore and broke apart beneath him, pieces unhooking and scattering. Barnes pinned both of his arms behind his back, metal fingers digging bruises into his skin.
"This is what you want," Barnes said flatly, without a trace of warmth.

Loki felt rough fingers hook over the waist band of the soft pants he'd worn to sleep in and his stomach twisted painfully as he realized what Barnes meant. "Bucky, please don't -"

He caught a fistful of Loki's hair, yanking at the shorter strands as he pulled Loki's head back, then slammed it down against the coffee table. Loki saw stars and his left temple throbbed. Bile rose in his throat as he felt Barnes yank the fabric away from his skin.

"This is what you want," Barnes repeated. There was the barest hitch at the end, as if it might have been intended as a question but he'd forgotten how to ask.

Loki swallowed. He felt sick and guilty; Barnes wasn't trying to hurt Loki. His meddling with Barnes' mind had woven sex into the Winter Soldier like rot into the roots of a tree and now, this was the price that Steve would pay. Loki almost laughed, hysterically and desperately, at how horribly wrong his good intentions had gone. Better him than Steve, he thought. He'd survived far worse than this and deserved no better.

But Barnes deserved better. This was Loki's fault, not his.

Nauseous with guilt, he reached into Barnes' mind and tore loose the entire construct he'd built. He ripped it out, every metaphysical stone and door. Barnes screamed, clutching his skull, and crumpled onto the floor.

Slumping against the coffee table, he pulled the thin pants back on with trembling hands, then hugged his legs to his chest and buried his face against his knees. For his sins, he deserved no better than this, but Una had been innocent. Her watchful eyes in the dark would've been seen as a threat; the Winter Soldier would've removed her first so she couldn't warn Loki of danger. He wanted to hate Barnes, to blame him for everything. He wanted to hate Steve too; for convincing Loki that he could be better if only he would try - look where that had gotten him - and for not killing him when he'd had the chance.

He wanted to hate them both, but he only hated himself. He was a monster who created monsters.

"Una," he croaked, letting Steve's form fall away and vowing never to take it up again. "Una? Where are you? Please, Una. Please."

There was no sound in answer to his call.

Dawn came and the light through the windows revealed that the banana tree had been torn apart, its pot shattered and dirt strewn over the floor. There were more fragments of Una's wings. This had been where the Winter Soldier had found her before he'd waited in the shadows for Steve. Carefully, Loki cleaned up the mess of leaves, earth, and ceramic shards, filling several plastic trash bags with the remains. He didn't find Una amidst the wreckage, which left a small glimmer of hope that perhaps she'd escaped. He threw away the puzzle as well, no longer able to look at it, and removed the knife from where Barnes had embedded it in the floor. It was the same knife he'd used to shave Barnes' beard and that memory now lodged painfully against his ribcage. He washed the blade clean and set it to dry as though it were merely another utensil.

Occasionally, he saw Barnes shudder or twitch on the floor, his eyes moving rapidly beneath his eyelids. Destroying the construct had been rash and foolish; he could have rendered Barnes damaged beyond hope of recovery. He would have to keep him unconscious until he could determine how to repair the harm he'd done. The memories of him as Steve would have to be destroyed utterly if he would have any hope of returning him without fear of Barnes hurting Steve in the same manner.
He showered, allowing himself to shake and cry under the spray of the water, and dressed. He needed to get out of the apartment, away from Barnes, until he could get his wits about him.

Before he could do any more damage.

In a daze, he hauled the trash bags out of the apartment and deposited them in the apartment's trash collection area, then detoured to the roof of the building. It was cold, the warmth of summer fading into autumn and the first whisper of winter. The wind was brisk and chilling; he found it strangely calming. Dark bruises were already showing on his wrists and forearms. He traced their outline gingerly and rubbed at his sore joints.

*This is what you want.*

The words rang in his ears. How could he argue? How could he say he *hadn't* wanted it when he'd sent Steve away because Steve didn't; when he'd manipulated Barnes' love for Steve and taken his own pleasure from it. There was a sick ache in his stomach and his throat felt tight. Here he was, sick and trembling like a fool - like a child - over such a little thing. A little thing that was all his fault; he'd brought this on himself, thinking only to use Barnes for his own purposes. He'd set the pieces in motion without realizing the arrow of Fate pointed directly back at him.

Barnes did not deserve to be brought down to Loki's level, to be branded *monster* and villain for what he'd done; he was as much a victim of Loki's pride and selfishness as Steve had been under the spell's control. Loki thought of Barnes' easy laughter and gentle smile and his eyes stung with fresh tears.

Steve could never know about any of this; Loki would see to that. He would undo what he'd done. He would remove all memories of Loki from Barnes' mind, all memories of this place, and then he would vanish. It didn't matter where he went. He could return to Jotunheim and perhaps they would not be so foolish as to allow him to live. The Allfather's dungeons would always be an option, though he had no wish to give Odin the satisfaction of surrendering to his will. If he went straight to Hel and stayed there, amongst the host of demons and monsters and the dishonorable, then so much the better for all.

When his legs were stiff and aching, he left the roof, but didn't return to the apartment. Instead, he ventured out into the city in search of another banana plant. There was an ache in his heart, however much smaller and nearly eclipsed by the rest of his hurts, for the loss of something Steve had given him. He wondered if banana trees could survive in Hel and the ridiculousness of his desire to hold onto a *plant* nearly brought him to his knees in the middle of a store.

He missed Steve terribly, like a constant, gnawing hunger. Dazed, he looked for nearest place to step away from the milling crowd of customers. What a fool he'd been to send Steve away, he knew that now. He left quickly, no longer able to stand the crush of people around him and wishing only to be home again. The sooner he repaired the damage he'd done to Barnes, the sooner he could be rid of Earth completely.

When he opened the door to his apartment, Barnes was no longer lying on the living room floor. He tensed, scanning the space and seeing nothing else altered from when he'd left. The sound of running water caught his ears and he realized Barnes must be in the shower.

How long had he been gone? He frowned. He hadn't thought it was long enough for Barnes to pick his way through what was left of his shattered memories and regain consciousness on his own. He wondered if the decision to shower could be construed as indicative that he would be dealing with Barnes and not the Winter Soldier. Cautiously, he moved until he could see through the bedroom doorway. The bathroom door was closed, a bar of light shining at the bottom. Shivering, he rubbed
at his arms. Barnes might remember it only as a dream and Loki would reassure him that's all it had been; a bad dream. Thinking to steady his nerves, he moved to the cabinet to retrieve a bottle of wine.

The knife was gone.

A sliver of dread stabbed into the base of Loki's spine. It could mean nothing. It probably meant nothing. He thought of Steve running to Connecticut after a bad dream, how it had haunted him even months later.

Mouth suddenly dry, he left the kitchen. When he tried the handle of the bathroom door, it was locked. He hadn't even known the door had a lock. Terror mounting, he shoved against the door with his shoulder and the frame splintered around the metal lock as he tore free. Inside the bathroom, the thick odor of blood nearly overwhelmed him. He stared in horror as the spray washed long, thick streaks of red from tiled walls and the glass door of the shower. Barnes was lying slumped in the corner and water ran crimson beneath him. Held loosely in metal fingers was the missing knife.

"No!" Loki nearly shattered the glass door in his desperate hurry to get through. "No, no, no. Please, please, Bucky."

An ugly slash ran the width of Bucky's throat, blood gushing out through broken skin. Loki pressed his hands to the cut, pouring magic into the wound and working frantically to repair the damage. He could feel life slipping through his fingers like fine grains of sand, death already reaching down to claim its prize. Bucky jerked weakly, his eyes fluttering open only barely. He tried to reach up and pull Loki's hands away; his attempts to speak resulted in a wet gargling sound, blood oozing from the corner of his lips. His teeth and lips were stained red, his skin a sickly grey from blood loss, and Loki could feel it in his lungs. He poured more magic into his effort, stitching together severed veins and arteries and vocal cords. He pulled blood from Bucky's lungs and throat, causing him to gag.

"Let...go," Bucky said finally, his voice hoarse and thick blood dripped down his chin.

"No," Loki's voice broke. He couldn't let Bucky die for his mistakes and foolhardy arrogance. Loki had tricked and manipulated him unforgivably, when Bucky had hardly known who he was, let alone how to defend himself. "It wasn't your fault."

"Never wanted." Bucky's throat worked grotesquely, torn skin slipping beneath Loki's fingers as he fought to hold it together. "To hurt...never..."

Loki sunk down onto his knees, tears blurring his vision. One last time, he thought miserably. The change felt physically painful and seeing Steve's hands covered with Bucky's blood was more than Loki could bear. "It's alright. It's going to be alright. I promise."

"Steve," Bucky gasped, still choking on his own blood.

"I'm here. You're going to be alright."

"Don't." He tugged at Loki's hand again, this time with more insistence. "Don't...deserve."

Loki tried to smile. Maybe he could get something right after all. "I forgive you," he said, voice shaking violently. He swallowed against the tightness in his throat. "I forgive you."

He watched Bucky's eyes roll back in his head as he went limp against the shower wall. Loki threw off Steve's form immediately, not wanting to waste magic on illusions with more pressing matters at hand. The flow of blood gradually stopped and the layers of skin began to knit together. Beneath his
fingers, he could feel Bucky's heartbeat, as shallow and slow as it was, and he sagged with relief. He hadn't been too late; he'd managed to do one right thing. Eventually the water beneath him ran clear and he turned it off.

When he was convinced Bucky would live with nothing more than a faded scar across his throat, he tenderly cleaned away the last of the blood from his skin before carrying him back into the bedroom. This time, he ensured Bucky would not wake again until he was fully healed and Loki was ready to face him.

He scoured the bathroom well beyond what it took to remove all traces of blood and he threw the knife away with the remains of the banana tree, loathe to see or use it again.

It felt wrong to lay beside Bucky on the bed, so he did as Bucky had done the first night and pulled out some of the extra bedding to create a nest on the floor between the bed and the wall. He felt more tired than he had in a very long time; from days of barely sleeping while he kept vigil over Bucky to the drain of using so much energy to bring Bucky back from the brink of death. He curled into the pile of furs and blankets and closed his eyes.

A quiet chirp broke the near perfect silence.

His eyes flew open. There, in the shadows beneath the bed, he saw two glittering eyes peering back at him. "Una?"

She scurried from her hiding place in a gap between the mattress and the bed frame, barreling into his chest with the tattered shards of her wings trailing behind her. Her brown skin was mottled in a pattern he feared would match the grip of Bucky's metal fingers, but she seemed otherwise unharmed.

"I am so sorry, Una." He cupped his hands over her protectively, holding her to him. "I will never let anyone hurt you again, I swear on my life."

She chittered softly at him and called him a fool.

Chapter End Notes

Finishing this story is my NaNoWriMo project for this year, which also means I had to post as much as I've figured out thus far. And you can all see now why I've been stuck on this for over a year. I have no idea how I'm going to get these idiots out of this gargantuan mess I've put them in.
Chapter 19

A steady dripping of water greeted Steve as he woke. There was dim green light around him and he felt heat in the surface beneath him. He turned his wrist and let his fingers curl, touching warm stone. A residual ache on his left side spanned wrist to shoulder and he winced at the memory of the Frost Giant’s icy touch, but other than that, he felt unharmed. When he roused enough to sit up, he discovered a thin strip of cloth bound around his forearm, either to hide the markings that had appeared or to cover a wound.

He went slowly, paying attention to each twinge and pull in his muscles and deciding if they were worrisome or not. The questions left from his encounter with the elder Frost Giant gnawed at him far more than any of the inconsequential bruises. He had to know what the marking meant to her, and if she had any idea about what he’d seen before he’d blacked out. Satisfied that he was uninjured, he looked around, realizing he was still in the library. In fact, there appeared to be a sturdy shelf of books directly above him, as if the elder Frost Giant had merely cleared off a section and laid him down in place of the books.

Ducking his head to keep from bumping against the upper shelf, he swung his legs over the edge and eased himself forward. For a Frost Giant, it was barely a step, but for him, it was more like waking up on a dining room table. He couldn’t see the main entrance of the library from the alcove and there was no one else in sight, although he could hear the soft thrum of heavy footsteps in the distance. Before, he wouldn’t have hesitated in seeking one of the giants out, but now he stood, waiting and listening. He didn’t know what the marks meant, other than they’d looked the same as the marks from Loki’s drawing. It made a certain sense that a permanent imprint of magic left by Loki would also have carried a piece of Loki himself.

Against the base of the shelf, he found his few belongings set neatly into the curve of his shield. Crouching down, he felt a strange, sudden wave of homesickness and longing for Earth. He tried not to think about the War, when they’d carried heavy packs on their backs for miles, cut off from the Allied forces and relying on what they could find or had brought with them. All of those memories were shaded and colored by the fact that Bucky was in them, which only made him long for home even more. He’d come all this way, as good as lost on an alien planet, and he was still making the same mistakes over and over again.

“What am I doing,” he murmured.

He should be home searching for Bucky and bringing him in, not running off on a wild goose chase to help someone who didn’t want Steve around in the first place. Trying to find his way back to Loki had only resulted in getting even more lost than before. He could’ve left at any time after he’d known they wouldn’t harm him. He’d stayed out of hope that he could learn enough to convince Loki to let go of his self-hatred. Because, if he could do that, then maybe Loki wouldn’t pull away, wouldn’t send Steve away again, and maybe they could’ve found a way to be together. It was ridiculous and selfish, but he’d done it anyway, forgetting all of the people who depended on him and needed him. Bucky was still in New York, with a bullet in his leg and nowhere to go, while Steve painted flowers on another planet. He’d done all this, for what? Stories Loki didn’t want and wouldn’t listen to, if he even agreed to see Steve again. All the fight went out of him and he sunk down onto the cavern floor beside his belongings.

It had all gone so very wrong and the harder he tried, the more of a mess he made of things.

He didn’t stay on the ground long, unwilling to let himself wallow in self-pity for more than a few minutes. A setback or two didn’t mean the fight was lost, but he’d done as much as he could on
Jotunheim. His first priority was determining what he needed to take with him back to Asgard and what should stay behind. He wouldn’t need much to get back across the valley and the ice flow. Hopefully his markings in the snow remained and he’d be able to find the fissure in the glacier that led to Loki’s secret window.

“Did you intend to leave,” said a low voice behind him.

The shield clanged like a bell against the stone as he jumped, heart hammering against his ribs. At the end of the shelf stood the elder Frost Giant who’d knocked him unconscious earlier. She’d been impossibly quiet for him not to have heard her approaching and his skin crawled with what he thought might be magic.

He swallowed. “I’m sure my friends are wondering where I am. I’ve been gone longer than I’d intended.”

She moved with surprising grace for her apparent age and came to sit on a bench near him, indicating for him to continue what he was doing. As she settled on the bench, he thought he heard subtle chimes or bells and wondered if they were hidden in the braid of white hair or within the loose fabric she wore draped over her bent frame. Long, bony fingers curled over her knees and he noticed they were scarred, with pale lines criss-crossing the darker markings of her clan or family.

“What do they mean? The markings on your skin,” he asked, then realized it was an impertinent question. “I mean no offense.”

Her red eyes were sharp and she blinked slowly, the heavy braid swaying as she tilted her head. “We wear our history on our skin. Our heritage, our past. Held to us all our lives. Never forgotten. We are an old race, Midgardian. Older than you have words to measure.”

“And the markings on my arm? I saw them, when you touched me. What history is that?” He waited with bated breath.

After a long silence, the Frost Giant let out a heavy sigh. “Your friend was reckless with this gift of magic you now bear. What path it will lead you down, I cannot see, but it may not be one you wish to travel.” The bench creaked beneath her as she began to rise again. “You came here seeking answers, mortal. Have you found them?”

“She answered earnestly. Although Natasha would’ve been the first to say his diplomacy skills were lacking, it was never for lack of trying. “I came here to learn about your people and I have. I’ve found them to be generous and clever, and I found your world to be full of wonders.”

She eyed him with what might have been surprise. After another long moment, she gave him a slow nod. “Come with me.”

Hurrying to gather his things, he slung the shield onto his back as he walked, barely able to keep up with her much longer stride. He caught sight of some of the children hanging back and peeking around the edges of shelves, whispering to themselves as he trailed after the elder Frost Giant. She seemed at home in the library and he wondered if she served as librarian, and teacher, to the younger Frost Giants. There were still so many questions left unanswered. So many that he would probably never have answered. It would have to be enough that he could counter Loki’s Asgardian upbringing, and all its stories of monsters, with basic observations of how the Frost Giants actually lived.

"Where are you taking me?"
"It is time for you to return to Asgard." There was a sly look on her ancient face when she looked down at him. "We are not used to...tourists. But you have provided much amusement for our little ones."

"They're great kids."

"Midgard has ever been strange in her ways. Most Realms do not venture far unless it is to conquer. We are content in our age. But perhaps, inflexible."

She led him through the great entrance to the library, through familiar caverns, until they started up a steeply inclined corridor he hadn't seen before. The air grew cooler each time the path made a sharp turn, angling back and forth in switchbacks as it climbed toward the surface. He'd forgotten the icy skin of the planet while he'd been cocooned in her inner warmth; it was as much a metaphor of Jotunheim and her people as a reality of his experience.

Bone chilling air wrapped a great fist around him when they reached the entrance, the air freezing in his throat as he tried to inhale. He tugged his borrowed clothing tighter to close up all the gaps where the cold snuck in. After a few minutes of walking, he saw they'd emerged near the center of the great city. Although he saw evidence of movement in the disturbed ice and snow, he saw no other Frost Giants. He'd expected the center of the city to be more maintained, but there were broken pillars and heavy drifts of ice, as he'd seen on the far edge of the city.

"What happened here?" His voice seemed unnaturally loud in the stillness.

"Asgard," she answered simply. After a moment, she spared him the need to think of a way to change the subject by continuing. "In war, there are no winners. Those who are victorious merely pay a lesser price than the conquered. There is always a price, mortal, and it is always greater than those in power will admit. There is no glory in war."

He looked at her askance, wondering if he was imagining the undercurrent of sadness in her voice. With their rich, deep timbre, he floundered for interpretation of Frost Giant tonal inflection. He wondered how many wars she'd seen, in her long years, and how many more she believed would come. She led him into a great open space that he could easily imagine had once been a place to gather or perhaps a market. To his surprise, the space was not empty, but the solitary figure waiting for them was clearly not a Frost Giant. As they neared the figure, they turned and pulled back the fur lined hood of their heavy cloak.

"Your majesty," he said and bowed quickly. He felt a little sick to his stomach that it was Frigga, Asgard's Queen, who had come for him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be gone this long." He stopped, wondering if she'd known all along where he was.

Frigga gave him a polite nod. "I had thought you might discover my son's secrets." Her eyes darted to the Frost Giant. "And it appears you have." She gave the ancient Frost Giant a nod in greeting as well. "Farbauti. It has been a long time."

"Too long." There was something that sounded like humor in her deep voice. She shifted and a pack slid from her shoulder, landing with a soft thud against the stone. It was small, likely fitted for a child, and had been all but invisible amidst the layers of her garments. "The mortal is free to take this with him. I believe this is customary of those who visit other Realms. These tourists. To return with objects by which to remember their time."

He saw Frigga's small answering smile and had the sudden impression that he was witnessing an exchange that had nothing at all to do with him. He waited until Frigga gave him another nod before he took up the pack, holding it in his arms rather than trying to pull it onto his back over the shield.
Frigga spoke carefully. "Your generosity will not be forgotten. He is beloved of my son."

Beside him, the ancient Frost Giant was still as a glacier, but her eyes turned to him. "Yes," was all she said in response. The answer gave him no insight into why Frigga would mention Loki at all, given what he knew of Loki's attempt to destroy Jotunheim.

Frigga motioned for him to come closer. "Come, Captain Rogers. You have wandered enough, I believe."

"Thank you, ma'am." He ducked his head as he stepped forward. "I'm sorry."

"You will repay me." Her words were spoken brightly, but with a core of certainty like iron beneath them. "Heimdall, we are ready."

He felt the air around him ionize as the beam of light shot down from the sky. Turning his head for one last look at the Frost Giant, he blinked against the light. It might have been a trick played on his eyes by the rainbow of the Bifrost, but as he watched, the guise of an old Frost Giant fell away. Her silver braid turned black and glistening under the light; her stooped posture straightened and her size diminished. Blue skin lightened to pale ivory, but her eyes stayed red and her garments were those of a warrior. Before he could understand what he was seeing, the Bifrost pulled him away from Jotunheim.

The heavy pack in his arms nearly caused him to stumble when he and Frigga stepped out of the Bifrost tunnel. He'd barely taken two steps when he pulled up short. Sam was standing at the base of Heimdall's dais, arms folded and glowering. The others were beside him and only Thor seemed pleased to see him at all.

"Hey guys," he said weakly, freeing a hand to give them a wave.

"Oh no. No, you don't," Sam snapped. "You don't get to disappear to another planet with nothing more than a note. What were you thinking?"

He tried not to smile as Tony joined in, which quickly resulted in Tony arguing as much with Sam as berating Steve. It was a comfortingly familiar sound and it made him glad to be back. The noise dulled the questions still ringing in his head. The others, his friends and colleagues, surrounded him, ushering him back toward the palace. He saw Thor break away from the group and go to his mother, his face serious, but he was swept along before he could hear any of their hushed conversation. Steve wondered how many intergalactic treaties he'd managed to violate and if he'd even be able to pack before they sent him back to Earth.

Tony's voice rose as they neared the open courtyard at the end of the Bifrost bridge, breaking through Steve's thoughts. "Alright, alright. But he's fine, look at him. I mean, he's...filthy. But he came back in one piece. No harm, no foul, right?"

Before Sam could make good on the daggers he was glaring into the side of Tony's head, Steve interrupted. "It was boneheaded and stupid and I got lucky. You guys wanna yell at me, that's fine, but I'd like to at least change before they send me packing back to Earth."

"You'll be lucky if that's all Odin does to you," Sam said, frowning. "Travel to Jotunheim is forbidden and they execute people here, you know."

"It's forbidden for Asgardians," Steve said calmly.

Sam's eyebrows rose. "That's how you're gonna play this?"
"I'm a guest here and a lousy one, but not a subject." He held the pack in his arms a little tighter. Hopefully Asgard shared the concept of extradition and would overlook a potential issue of contraband materials.

It was a guess, maybe only a vague hope, that Odin simply wouldn't care much about one Midgardian who'd gone wandering and managed to survive. That it was Frigga who had come for him, alone, was significant as well, even though he didn't fully understand how. She'd known the strange Frost Giant called Farbauti and Steve wished he had the nerve to ask her what hidden machinations were undoubtedly happening behind the scenes. He also doubted Frigga would've taken such a risk if her plan included his execution upon return to Asgard, when she could've easily left him to die on Jotunheim.

"We'll figure it out." Tony waved Steve off, wrinkling his nose. "Apparently there are no laundromats on Jotunheim. Please, go spend a couple hours in the sauna." He was eying Sam as he spoke, no doubt already formulating a dozen damage control scenarios and trying to decide which one Sam might agree to support.

"I promise I won't go anywhere except my room," Steve said preemptively, knowing that would be Sam's next request.

"Damn right you won't." Sam glared meaningfully in that direction before ceding his attention to Tony and looking unhappy about it. He shook his head, but his expression softened toward weary concern as he turned away. "Gonna have to GPS chip your ass one of these days," he muttered.

Steve hurried to his quarters, head down and focused entirely on getting there uninterrupted. It was a relief when he could close the heavy door behind him, shutting out the sounds of the palace. He settled the pack on the floor at the foot of the bed and began stripping out of his worn clothes. Although he'd managed to soak and wash them in the cavern pools, he had to admit that Tony had a point. Gathering up and folding the soiled clothes as best he could, he set them in the basket beside the wardrobe as he'd been instructed to do. There was fresh water in the large basin of the washroom adjoining his bedroom and it was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen. By the time he'd finished scrubbing himself clean, the water was a dull brown.

Clean and dressed in fresh clothing, he sat down on the end of the bed with the pack between his feet. His stomach twisted with a mixture of nervousness and anticipation, unable to even guess what Farbauti had seen fit to give him. Fingers trembling, he fumbled with the carved bone and metal clasps until he could open the leather and peer inside.

The contents were no less mystifying than their source. He pulled out a small collection of books carefully bound in leather, filled with brightly colored pictures, and an assortment of what must have been a child's toys: carved animals and several stuffed creatures that weren't anything like teddy bears, but had the same sense of wear and comfort. He placed them all neatly back into the bag, wishing he knew how to read the Frost Giants' language. Perhaps he could ask Loki to teach him and they could discover their meaning together.

With that hope to buoy him, he gathered up the few items he'd brought with him, anticipating being sent back to Earth on short notice, and washed his shield clean of the gray dirt of Jotunheim. In the brighter sunlight of Asgard, he saw flecks of color and iridescence, like powdered opal, in the dust. With more light, he thought, all of Jotunheim might glitter like diamonds, its beauty easily on par with the gleaming gold of Asgard.

Packed and ready to go, he sunk down onto the bed. As he stretched out, a soft sigh escaped his lips. Sleeping on stone and dirt floors of caverns hadn't seemed to be a hardship at the time, but the bed beneath him now felt like a bank of soft clouds and aches he'd forgotten about began to ease from his
He'd send Loki a message through the card when he returned, asking to meet him in person one last time. And he knew Natasha was the best at what she did; if Bucky was still in the city, she would find him. The idea that she might already have found him, might already have brought him in, only made Steve impatient to leave. He'd come to Asgard to get his head on straight and he had. He would tell Loki how he felt, knowing that Loki wasn't ready or able to hear it, and then he would move on with his life, with or without Loki. Still, there was a silver lining; he doubted Loki would truly return to being their enemy again and that was a victory of sorts. It would be enough. His time on Jotunheim had given him the clarity he needed, after being tossed to and fro by forces beyond his control for too long. He was ready to move on, ready to get back into the fight. There was still the unknown assailant of Una's hive and their connection to HYDRA. He'd done everything possible to help Loki and now he could focus on the work again.

Several hours later, it wasn't a surprise when Thor arrived at the door to Steve's room, with a handful of guards in tow. Thor started to speak, but stopped when he saw Steve gathering up the leather pack, shield, and the small bag he'd brought with him. He gave Steve a solemn nod, with the barest hint of a smile.

"I will see you to the Bifrost."

"Thank you for your hospitality," Steve said loudly enough for the guards to hear him clearly. "Your Realm is beautiful. I'm grateful for the chance to see it."

Thor raised an eyebrow but said nothing further as they traveled through the palace. Steve half expected one of the guards to demand that he turn over the pack he'd brought back from Jotunheim, but none of them seemed to be paying any attention to him. It seemed he would be sent home without fanfare or fuss. It seemed he would be sent home without fanfare or fuss. He was secretly grateful Odin seemed to have such little regard for humans that his transgression warranted a nearly casual dismissal from the Realm Eternal. Still, he caught the odd looks Thor gave him as they traveled and wondered what intrigue might be lurking beneath Asgard's surface.

"Heimdall will return you home," Thor announced as they entered the Bifrost housing. "I hope you enjoyed your time here, my friend."

Steve glanced around. "The others?"

"Will return as planned, in a few days' time." Thor gave him another strange look, as though he wished to say more or ask questions, but was held back by an invisible binding.

With a nod, Steve started toward the section of the housing where the Bifrost energies were gathering. "Give the Queen my thanks, please? I owe her a debt."

One corner of Thor's lips twitched. "She will not forget." He glanced sideways at Heimdall, which made Steve wonder if it was Heimdall that Thor was wary of. There was an unspoken implication that the Queen fully intended to request repayment of Steve's debt, someday and somehow, that she may have even anticipated Steve's need to be collected from Jotunheim.

He remembered Thor describing Loki as their mother's son. An apple not fallen far from the tree.

Heimdall interrupted to inform Steve that it was time for him to go. His stomach lurched as the energies caught around him and tugged him into the rainbow vortex of space and light. He had time to wonder if he would ever get used to traveling that way and then he was standing on the penthouse patio of Stark Tower.
"Thank you," he called up at the bright blue sky. Manners were manners, after all.

The door clicked open when he took hold of the handle and JARVIS greeted him politely as he stepped inside, heading for the elevator. "Is Natasha around?"

"Agent Romanov is currently away from the Tower."

He smiled, knowing she was probably out hunting for Bucky. As the elevator started down, he realized that he hadn't truly been alone in the Tower for a considerable time. Since before the spell, certainly. The Avengers had metaphorically circled the wagons around him since then. Even Natasha had stuck around more than usual. He needed to remember to thank her for that when he saw her again.

His mail bin was empty when he reached his suite, which meant Pepper had arranged to have it handled while they were away. He'd need to thank her too. It left him with little else to do beyond unpacking the bag he'd taken with him and putter around his apartment. He retrieved the card from the book on his bedside table and set it on the shelf where he could see it as he emptied out the bag to pull together a load of laundry. The heavy pack from Jotunheim stayed at the foot of his bed. Excitement simmered just under his field of attention, thinking about what message he should send once he was ready to sit down with the card.

"JARVIS, can you give me a rundown of what's happened while I've been gone?"

He hauled his laundry basket to the washing machine, only half listening as JARVIS rattled off news headlines and article titles, all flagged by Steve's interest in the topic. Once the news listing was exhausted, JARVIS continued on to lay out the more tightly controlled information; official government requests, unofficial and unofficial SHIELD reports, and whatever else fell into the Avengers' bucket. He thought, vaguely, that there were more than usual, but he didn't exactly keep track so it was hard to know one way or another.

With the first load of laundry started, he continued puttering around the apartment, starting the kettle to make tea and tapping a list of groceries into the Stark Tower interface tablet. If there had been any perks of being confined to the Tower for so long, learning how to navigate the world from behind a tablet was one of them.

"You said there were video files?" He propped the tablet up on the kitchen counter beside the stove.

"Three, sir. Would you like to view them now?"

"Yes, thank you."

The first video was a news broadcast from the Potomac River Recovery team. Frowning, he turned the audio up, listening to the commentator talk about the long term effort and progress while he hunted through the fridge to clean out what had gone bad. His feelings about crashing the helicarriers into the river were about as mixed as the press coverage. It had been two years and they were still fishing debris out of the water, much of it carried miles down river and some even finding its way to the Chesapeake Bay. The alternative had been crashing the helicarriers into the city itself and the casualties would've been far greater, but the criticism of the damage he'd caused was fair enough. That it might have been worse was of little comfort in the end.

Agent Simmons' voice filled the kitchen for the second video. It was a brief, cheerful update on the sprite hive at the Fridge and he couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. Maybe Una would want to join the hive at some point. He filed that question away to ask Loki when they met.
The kettle began to whistle and he didn't notice the silence of the third video for several minutes. On the tablet screen, he could make out the side of a building and he recognized it as Loki's apartment.

"Did Natasha do this?" Uneasiness coiled tightly in the pit of his stomach at the idea of Natasha instituting a surveillance program on Loki. They would have to talk about that when she returned. He'd promised Loki they weren't watching him. "How much footage is there?"

"Approximately twenty two hours were recorded before Agent Romanov disabled the camera and requested that file access permissions be restricted to you only."

That was odd. He couldn't imagine why Natasha would feel the need to restrict footage of the side of a building. Tapping at the screen to bring up the controls, he zoomed forward in time, watching shadows creep down along the building edge. Lights turned on and off in the apartment and he thought he saw Una dart past the window a handful of times. Through the window, he could just barely see one side of the coffee table and the puzzle they'd been working on together. He thought it looked as though Loki had filled in a few more pieces.

A figure came into view, achingly familiar, and Steve startled, splashing hot tea over the counter. It was Bucky. Suddenly, his heart was racing. He slowed the video rate, backing up to the moment Bucky came into view. He'd shaved and he looked clean; he looked fine. Brow furrowed, Steve watched intently as Bucky settled on the rug beside the coffee table and Loki joined him. They were drinking, he realized, and Bucky was actually smiling. Like they knew each other; like old friends. A sensation like a vise around his chest was making it hard to breathe. How had Bucky even found Loki? Or had it been the other way around? The possibilities, some of them unpleasant, made Steve nauseous. They'd never completely ruled out the possibility of a connection between Loki and HYDRA.

The video quality was high enough - trust Natasha - to watch the level of liquor in the bottle steadily decrease, and it caught the subtle shimmer of magic when Loki shape-shifted. Not into another version of himself, but into a perfect copy of Steve.

He barely noticed the ceramic handle of the mug breaking into pieces in his hand. All his attention was on the screen, his stomach twisting with shock and horror as the video continued. The footage was silent, but his imagination was all too ready to supply the sounds that must've accompanied the scene unfolding on the floor of Loki's living room. He was frozen, too stunned to move, even as part of him wanted desperately to hurl the tablet against the wall. Loki had offered, that night in the castle, to be someone else, Steve thought, his mind sluggish and whirling at the same time. Had he made the same offer to Bucky? Or was this a trick; did Bucky understand that it wasn't Steve? All of the options were sickening in their own way. He'd wondered, before the War, if Bucky might have looked at him that way a couple of times, but nothing had ever come of it.

He forced himself to watch to the end and had to grip the counter to keep upright. The worst part wasn't the sex. He might've been able to understand that. Not approve, but understand. At first he thought Bucky had fallen asleep, but when Loki, back in his own form again, lifted him to carry him into the bedroom, he realized that Bucky was clearly unconscious. His stomach lurched violently, as if he'd jumped from a plane. Teeth grinding together, he reversed the footage several times, watching Loki reach up to lay his hand against the back of Bucky's head, and how Bucky immediately went slack under the touch. He couldn't think of a single reason Loki would need to knock Bucky out after having sex with him, unless he was trying to control Bucky. Unless Bucky didn't clearly understand what was happening, or that it wasn't Steve.

For a long moment, he hung on the knife edge of throwing up. Finally, he pulled himself away from the tablet and stared down blankly at the crumbled bits of his mug. "JARVIS, delete this. Destroy it.
I want it gone. Forever. No one can ever see this." His voice came out thick and garbled, but JARVIS understood and agreed immediately to wipe the footage from the system.

Natasha had seen it, he realized, a fresh wave of horror washing through him. That was why she'd sealed the file, why she'd disabled the camera and stopped the surveillance. With a jolt, he remembered JARVIS saying she wasn't in the Tower and wondered, wildly, if she might have taken action against Loki or Bucky, or both. He made it to the edge of the kitchen before he realized he was shaking. Shaking and furious. So furious that it whitened his thoughts into a blur of bitter, seething rage. Thor had warned him that Loki would betray him, but he hadn't considered it would be anything like this. After all he'd done for Loki, after everything. The leather pack from Jotunheim looked ugly and dark now, a representation and reminder of Loki's treachery. He didn't bother with the card. Snatching up the pack, he threw it over one shoulder as he headed for the door. He'd come back intending to have a conversation with Loki and he was going to, but it wasn't going to be anything like the one he'd wanted.

Between the Tower and Loki's apartment, his anger cooled to an icy fury. He didn't bother to buzz Loki's apartment and ask to be let in. The door lock broke easily enough and he couldn't bring himself to care about the damage. He charged up the steps two and three at a time, no less furious at the top of the fifth flight of stairs than he'd been at the bottom. Half thinking to throw the pack in Loki's face, half to simply leave at the door and walk away, he reached the door and raised his hand to knock, then decided to kick it down.

Wood splintered apart as the door broke inward, one section swinging loose to crash into the wall while the rest scattered over the entry and living room floor. Loki was standing near the kitchen bar, his eyes wide and his face paled when he saw Steve coming through the doorway. He looked exhausted and guilty, but stood still, head and shoulders back.

"How could you," was all Steve managed to grit out.

He cast the pack carelessly aside, closing the space between them and hauling back to punch Loki squarely in the face. Words welled up in an aborted scream, choking him. He wanted to know why and he didn't want to hear anything Loki had to say at all. He was too angry to make sense of anything; furious and blind with it. He hit Loki again, and again, registering belatedly that Loki wasn't trying to defend himself or fight back. On the fourth punch, strong fingers caught his arm on the way back and cold metal wrapped around his neck, choking off his air.

"Bucky, wait," he wheezed, desperately scrabbling at the implacable metal. "You don't understand, he wanted to scream. Didn't understand that Loki had betrayed them both.

His vision began to tunnel, his legs going weak under him. Was this part of Loki's plan too? Would he force Bucky to kill Steve? The questions swam and fell apart as he struggled to breathe, to stay conscious. Agonizing seconds dragged by at a crawl before he couldn't fight any longer and the blackness swept in around him.

When light began trickling back into his consciousness, Steve could feel something solid against his back. A car horn sounded in the distance. There was an ache in his throat from Bucky's stranglehold and that brought the whole situation rushing back. Coughing, he opened his eyes, squinting at the light, and felt around. His hands met grass. A quick sweep of his gaze and he recognized Battery Park. Settled in a crouch beside him was Bucky, staring intently down at him.

"Bucky." He stopped, realizing that he shouldn't make any sudden moves. It was hard not to stare openly, trying to memorize every detail, and a whisper in the back of his mind questioned whether or not it truly was Bucky, or if it was another of Loki's tricks. "Buck, are you...are you okay?"
"Why did you attack him," Bucky asked abruptly.

"Bucky, I..." Steve floundered, lost for words. His anger flared briefly, then collapsed into hollow sadness. "I should've stayed, I should've looked for you. Bucky, I'm so sorry." There'd been no way for him to know what Loki would do, or that Bucky would encounter Loki at all.

Bucky cocked his head, brow furrowed. "He fixed my arm."

"What?" He watched Bucky rotated his arm through a series of motions, demonstrating something. "That's...alright. That's good. Are you..." He swallowed against the stubborn lump in his throat. "It wasn't me. Whoever you think you've...been with. It was all Loki. I haven't...I've been gone. Since I saw you in the steam tunnels. It wasn't me. And he shouldn't have..." He felt sick thinking about it and Bucky didn't look any closer to understanding what he was saying. He dropped his voice to a near whisper. "You and me, we've never...we've never been together, like that."

Bucky's eyes narrowed and his lips twisted into a frown. "Like what."

He couldn't bring himself to say it. Maybe Loki had erased Bucky's memories. If Frigga could do it then Loki probably could as well. "I know...it's okay if you thought it was me. It's not your fault." He couldn't look at the confusion on Bucky's face any longer. Either Loki had tricked Bucky into sex or he'd tampered with those memories after the fact. After knowing what HYDRA had done to Bucky, it made Steve nauseous to think about. "I'm sorry."

"Because you'd never give it up, is that what this is?" The question was sharp and edged, like Bucky was wielding a knife.

"No, that's not what I meant." With a sigh, Steve scrubbed his hands over his face. "Loki and I...it's complicated. But I never thought he'd do anything like this. I thought-" That they'd had something special and important, something he'd been willing to travel across worlds for, to risk his life for. Apparently it hadn't meant that much to Loki after all.

"You and Loki," Bucky repeatedly dully. "You were together. Like that."

Steve nodded, unable to unstick his tongue from the back of his teeth. He'd thought nothing could be worse than the spell, but he'd never imagined anything like this in his worst nightmares. "I thought...I was in love with him." It felt like admitting he'd thrown Bucky from the train.

Bucky stood up, his face a blank mask that reminded Steve of Washington DC. "Anyone comes after me, won't end well. For them."

It was unmistakably a threat and the weight of it kept Steve frozen on the ground as he watched Bucky stalk away. Eventually he got to his feet to stumble to the curb and hail a cab back to the Tower. Loki had betrayed him and he'd lost Bucky, again. He felt utterly lost. Moving on auto pilot, he paid the taxi driver and managed to get through the front doors of the Tower. His sight was beginning to blur with tears, of frustration and shock, before the elevator doors closed. Self-doubt swirled around him as the floors ticked by. He knew what Loki had done to Bucky wasn't excusable, but still, he wondered if it would've happened at all if he'd never told Loki the truth and had just gone along with it, pretended that he wanted sex the way Loki did. Could he have prevented it? Back in his apartment, he threw himself onto the bed and curled into a ball, feeling broken in more ways than one.

He was grateful that, for once, no one was there to see him fall apart.

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In the silence of the apartment, Loki felt like he was walking through a fog. His cheek and jaw ached where Steve had struck him, but he couldn't bring himself to be angry. He deserved no better. Sending them away had been a fit of cowardice, one last gasp of self-preservation. Now Steve was gone and Bucky with him and Loki could feel the sands of the hourglass slipping away from him. Once reunited, he had no doubt that Steve and Bucky would quickly come to obvious conclusion.

The door was easy enough to repair, knitting the splintered pieces back together while an illusion of the door masked his efforts from outside eyes. It passed the time. He felt strangely calm now. He'd reached the end of the path he'd set for himself when he'd crafted that first, ill-fated spell for Amora and soon enough, it would be over. He settled in the chair to wait, facing the door, but when he finally heard a key in the lock and the door swung open, it was only Bucky. Loki swallowed as he stood up. Of course, Steve had sent HYDRA's greatest assassin to do what needed to be done.

Bucky moved without hesitation. He stopped close enough that Loki could see the darker ring of grey in his blue eyes. "You were with Steve," he bit out, voice cold.

"Did he tell you that?" Loki almost laughed. Of all the things for Bucky to fixate on, he hadn't expected that.

"Tell me the truth," Bucky demanded. Then he seemed to think better of it and reached out to grip the front of Loki's shirt, hauling him in close. "Show me the truth. I know you can. I want to see it."

He managed to keep his voice from wavering. "Very well."

It felt dangerous and wrong to reach out and pull Bucky's consciousness into his own mind, but he had taken so much from Bucky, stripped away so much of his privacy, that he couldn't deny him. Suddenly, he was standing beneath a great Ash tree with Bucky beside him and carved wooden doors extended out around them, seeming to go on for eternity. He was vulnerable here, exposed in a way he'd never been with anyone, but he supposed it was only fair, after all he'd seen of Bucky's mind. He cast a sideways glance at Bucky. He hadn't had time to erase Bucky's memories before Steve had broken down the door. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure how Bucky had even been aware enough to pull Steve off of his attack, or how lucid he truly was now. He thought to ask but it was far too late for conversation. He had the distinct feeling that he may have severely underestimated Steve's long lost friend from the very beginning.

"Which one?" Bucky scanned over the rows of doors, frowning.

Indicating a nearby doorway, Loki nodded. "There."

He knew what lay behind it. The spell and the torment it had caused Steve, and the night they'd shared in an empty castle. He knew once Bucky stepped through that door, he would see it all play out again and know everything that had transpired between him and Steve. He would realize that Loki had been using him for his own ends all along.

Settling down against the trunk of the great tree, Loki looked wearily up at Bucky. "I will be here when you return."

Having another inside his mind was a cold shadow against his back; a crawling itch under his skin. It was strange and unpleasant. He wondered if it had felt the same to Bucky when their roles had been reversed, if Bucky had been willing to tolerate the sensation for the sake of regaining his past. One more way in which Loki had failed and proven himself unworthy. Always unworthy. But it would be over soon enough. Bucky would know the truth and it would be over.

He sensed Bucky's return, but couldn't bring himself to look up. Unnerving silence continued to
stretch out around him, though he could feel Bucky's presence. Demands crowded up inside his
mouth, wanting to ask if Bucky intended to kill him, or simply leave him, but he kept his peace.

Bucky's voice finally broke the silence. "What's behind this one? It feels cold."

Jerking his head up, Loki saw Bucky standing near one of the other doors. This door was sullenly
black, like a hole in space rather than a color. He scrambled to his feet as Bucky reached out to open
it. "No!" he cried out, but it was too late.

He thought to reach Bucky and pull him back, but just as Bucky had been drawn back into his dark
memories of war, Loki felt the tug of his own memories reaching out to suck him down into Hel.
He'd walled these memories away to forget them forever and now the door was open. Sick and
stumbling, he fought to turn away. He was falling again, down through the endless void of space
between worlds, waiting for death that never came. He heard screaming - his own - and felt his skin
blisters and burn, peeling back to expose raw flesh. He couldn't stop any of the memories from
coming, couldn't hold any of them back, and he collapsed under the weight of them, reliving all of
the torment Thanos had seen fit to inflict. The memories trapped him, inexorable in their march.

Shock numbed him soon enough, leaving him shivering but also providing a thin separation between
him and the horrors he'd survived. He clung to the stubborn reminder that they were only memories.
He'd survived. The end had been written and he merely needed to get there. He felt a vague sense of
sympathy for Bucky, whose curiosity had damned him to witnessing Loki's memories.

A lifetime seemed to pass before he felt the rough bark of the Ash tree against his hands and face,
vaguely aware that Bucky must have carried him out of his nightmare. The mental connection he'd
made snuffed out and he was once again alone in his own mind.

Gradually, he became aware of a steady heat against his side. He was on the floor and Bucky, he
realized, was holding him, cradling him like a child. With his ear against Bucky's chest, Loki could
feel and hear the steady beat of his heart. Too weary to speak, he raised his head just enough to meet
Bucky's gaze. Bucky looked equally weary and haunted by what he'd seen. He tightened his hold,
his metal arm whirring softly. Loki allowed himself to take that small amount of comfort and
surrendered into it. He felt Una's light touch on his arm. She nestled into the space between Loki's
arm and Bucky's chest. He was surprised at her willingness to be so near to Bucky, with her wings
now gone because of him, and he was humbled by her choice.

"Rest," Bucky said softly.

Loki squeezed his eyes shut tightly, fighting to keep his emotions in check. His most shameful
secrets had been exposed and, after all he'd done, he knew he didn't deserve Bucky's compassion.
He tried to take a deep breath but only managed a shaky, shuddering gasp. He felt fingers comb
gently through his hair and the similarity of the soothing gesture, that Bucky was willing to give Loki
the same careful touch as he'd given Steve, was his undoing. Pressing his face into Bucky's chest, he
curled tighter, eyes filling with tears. Una chittered, her tiny hands warm against his skin, and began
to sing a quiet, mournful song.

"Just rest," Bucky repeated, echoing what Loki had told him many times over the past week, "I'll be
here."
A gnawing hunger in Loki’s gut broke through the gray haze that had enveloped him. Stirring reluctantly, limbs simultaneously heavy and weak, he swung his legs off the side of the bed and pushed himself up. His head swam dizzily with the motion, forcing him to grip the bed covers and hold still until it faded. When he could focus again, he saw a bowl of soup on the floor beside the bed. It had long grown cold with bits of fat congealing on the surface. Mouth twisting with distaste, despite his hunger, he slid from the bed and carefully bent down to pick up the bowl.

Bucky had brought him the soup some time ago. He’d lost track of how much time had passed. The ache in his jaw where Steve had struck him had faded. Days, perhaps? He vaguely remembered Una scolding him for refusing to eat, but he’d been stretched so thin, and he’d lost so much, that it had seemed pointless to try.

The dizziness returned as he walked; it helped to focus on the bowl of soup in his hands and trying not to slosh the liquid over the sides. Keeping soup off of the floor was an immediate, tangible goal, one that was inarguably good and noble, beyond the murky quagmire where his decisions always seemed to fall. He carried the soup into the kitchen and poured it out into the sink, but didn't have the energy to do more than that.

"There's broth in the fridge," came Bucky's voice, somewhere in the living room behind him. "It'll be easier on your stomach but you should take it slow."

A bitter remark about being familiar with starvation withered on Loki's tongue; there was no arguing when he knew Bucky was familiar with all manner of deprivation. What was the point in any of it? He wanted so badly to simply close his eyes and cease to exist, to blink out of reality and out of a universe that seemed to be filled with nothing but misery. His stomach rumbled a protest and he relented. He could disappear tomorrow.

The carton of chicken broth was easy to find. He filled a glass instead of a bowl, intending to drink it, and used the microwave to warm it enough to make it tolerable. With glass in hand, he finally gathered up his courage and left the kitchen. There was a blanket over the living room window. He puzzled over that for a moment before he followed the same train of thought that Bucky must have and his mouth twisted. Of course, he'd been arrogant to assume that he hadn't been under surveillance. How else would Steve had known? He swayed on his feet as he realized, if the angle had been just right, that Steve would have seen them having sex on the living room floor. Nauseous with guilt and shame, he managed to reach the chair in the living room and sink down into it without dropping or spilling his glass.

Still, Bucky hadn't left and he hadn't killed Loki either, which had seemed the only two likely outcomes. He waited until his stomach began to settle before he took a tentative sip of the broth.

"You've been asleep for four days," Bucky told him, his tone perfectly casual, like he was giving a report. He was seated on the floor, bent over an odd assortment of unfamiliar objects spread across the coffee table. Perched on one corner, Una was watching Loki with her dark, luminous eyes and he noticed the bright curves of new wings beginning to sprout from her back. After a moment, Bucky continued, "I didn't know if anything was wrong with you, but Una said you were only sleeping."

Loki took another slow sip. Una chittered a quiet agreement, adding that Loki seemed ill. With his mind dulled, his thoughts felt thick as tar; a far cry from the usual cacophony within his own mind. He frowned, blinking at Una. "I didn't realize you could understand her."
"Yeah." Parchment rustled as Bucky carefully set aside what he'd been studying. He didn't elaborate, but perhaps, didn't realize it shouldn't be possible and found it unremarkable.

Another string of thoughts finally made a connection. "You woke him. Before," he said to Una. "That was dangerous. You shouldn't have risked it." Not for him; he wasn't worth it. She'd been lucky that the damage he'd done to Bucky's mind hadn't rendered him violent and lost to reality forever. She gave him an irritated chirp in response.

"Steve's in love with you," Bucky said flatly. He finally looked up from his work, turning to look back over his shoulder. "He told me."

"It certainly feels like love." Loki turned his face away and tried to wash the bitterness from his mouth with more broth. Had it ever been true, he doubted it was true any longer. He'd driven Steve away and to violence through his own stupidity; he'd betrayed Steve in the worst of possible ways and deserved no better than to lose whatever love Steve might have harbored for him.

If Bucky had an answer, he kept it to himself and went silently back to what he was doing. Loki let the silence stretch out without keeping track of anything but the slow sips of broth. It was cold by the time he finished the glass and set it aside.

Eventually, he roused himself from lethargy enough to look more closely at the items spread out over the coffee table. The leather pack Steve had left behind him sat slumped and empty on the floor beside Bucky. As he moved closer, he realized the writing he could see on the pages wasn't even remotely English. He sunk to his knees at Bucky's side and reached for the nearest bundle of papers with trembling fingers.

"This isn't possible," he murmured, fanning his fingertips over the printed runes.

Bucky shifted a stack of parchment aside, picking up a piece with a drawing of a four legged beast with monstrous jaws. He indicated a pair of runes that he'd neatly copied onto into a notebook. "I think these are the symbols for this creature."

"Hundur," Loki said quietly. "They are found...where I am from." He couldn't imagine how Steve might have traveled to Jotunheim and back, nor how he would've survived even if he'd found a way.

"There's a primer. For a kid, I think." Bucky shuffled through the pages again. "I don't know how to pronounce any of the symbols but I've been learning them." He cast a quick sideways glance toward Loki. "It's something to do. I was pretty good with languages. Before." He picked up his pen and printed the phonetic pronunciation Loki had given for the strange beasts next to the runes.

Loki swallowed, his throat suddenly dry and tight. Lying on its side on the coffee table in front of Bucky was a strange stuffed animal made of similar animal skin as the heavy pack. He reached out to pick it up, turning it over and over in his hands. There was a flat white stone tied to the collar of the beast with a name painted onto its surface; Loptr. Bewildered, he set the toy aside to shift through the other strange objects. Bucky was correct in his assumption; the materials were intended for children. There were stories of Frost Giant mythology: how Jotunheim was born under a cold blue star and the gift of the Casket of Ancient Winters. The stories were too simplistic for him to glean any real information, but startling nonetheless.

Why would Steve bring back the contents of a child's nursery from Jotunheim? Surely there had been objects of value. Weapons, even, would've made more sense. On the other hand, if Steve had left Jotunheim under peril, he might not have had time to assess the importance of the contents. But that only left Loki with more questions.
On his second time through the piles of parchment, he realized the contents were, in fact, meant for a specific child. Steve had not raided a children's library at random. He found the symbols - Loptr - tucked into corners of the pages and hidden in inconspicuous spots on the toys. The idea of Steve deliberately stealing objects from a child, even a Frost Giant child, was laughable. That they existed at all, that a Frost Giant mother or father had taken care in collecting the items, was only one of the mysteries spread out over his coffee table.

"Here." Bucky set a second glass of heated broth down on the coffee table. "Drink at least one more before you try to eat anything."

Loki had been so lost in his questions that he hadn't noticed when Bucky had left to get the glass. He accepted the drink. It was warm to the touch and, this time, the lump in his throat had little to do with the broth. He watched Bucky move back to his spot at the coffee table, continuing his careful study of the runes.

"Why," Loki whispered, searching Bucky's profile as though he could find the answers there.

"Why what?"

Why had he stayed? Why hadn't he killed Loki when given ample opportunity? After everything Loki had done, why stay and study runes? Why bring him broth and insist that he eat? Finally, he settled on a question. "Why are you still here?"

Bucky's brow furrowed for a moment, then he shrugged. "I got nowhere else to go."

"You have Steve." After all, they had been childhood friends and warriors in the same great War. If Steve had been so angry as to attack Loki for usurping his place with Bucky, he had no doubt Steve would welcome Bucky back with open arms. He knew Bucky had loved and desired Steve. It seemed an obvious choice now.

Almost turning, Bucky's gaze was distant. "Not sure I do. Not sure I ever did."

The uncertainty in his answer sucked all of the energy out of Loki, twisting his stomach into knots again. He couldn't think of any apology, any words at all, that could make amends for pretending to be Steve and taking Bucky as a lover. His foolishness had cost Bucky his dearest friend and his only sanctuary in a world that was no longer his own.

"Why didn't you get rid of those memories?" Bucky didn't have to specify which memories he referred to. "You said you could get rid of mine. Why not your own?"

How much do you remember? Loki wanted to ask. He thought of Una's delicate braids and the warm smile Bucky had given him when his dark memories were further away. Those moments seemed startlingly precious now, amidst all of Loki's lies. He leaned away from the coffee table, holding the glass of broth to his chest as though its meager warmth could thaw the ice of his heart. "Because I am a coward. You cannot banish memories you are unwilling to face."

"You've faced them now," Bucky told him without any trace of judgment.

Loki countered, more out of habit than true desire to be contrary. "What memories would you give up?"

"You know the answer to that."

Immediately chastened, Loki blinked away the sudden stinging in his eyes. "It was not your fault."
With a weary expression on his face, Bucky turned to look at Loki. "But I did it."

"I deserve far worse. For my sins."

Bucky watched him thoughtfully for some time, so still that Loki had no trouble seeing him as the silent predator hidden in the shadows. He set his pen aside, pivoting to the side so he was facing Loki directly. "What do I deserve? For what I've done."

"It wasn't your fault," Loki repeated, the shaking of his voice giving him away.

Frowning, Bucky shook his head. He opened his mouth, then seemed to think better of it. "Whatever you deserve, I don't deserve any better," he said finally, with a grim stubbornness Loki hadn't heard before. "We've suffered enough."

From the corner of the coffee table, Una gave them an exasperated trill of sound before she hopped down and stalked toward the kitchen. Despite himself, Loki smiled. "Perhaps it does us little good to compare our evils. It's hardly a competition either of us wishes to win."

Until he'd spoken it aloud, he hadn't realized it was true. He no longer wished to be the monster in stories told to frighten children. He no longer wished to be Loki.

He'd lost Steve, that was true, but this tiny piece of change he felt in himself was like a gift. Not merely the desire to change the outcome of his Fate, but to change himself. Just as Steve had believed he could. It felt of standing at the edge of a vast, fathomless ocean, knowing he wouldn't fall into blackness that lead only to pain and torment, but into new possibilities. For so long, he'd clung to the stories he'd told himself, that others had told of him, and wrapped them around him like armor, despite their barbed edges. But they were only stories and stories could be changed; they could be rewritten. He could be more than Asgard's stories.

With shaking hands, he set the glass on the coffee table. "Stay as long as you wish. I will be... glad for your company. However long you are here." He swallowed down an offer to help, knowing there was little he could give and his poor attempts at help would render the offer itself an insult.

Bucky returned the smile timidly. "I'm not much for cooking or... anything like that. But if there's anything I can do. In exchange, I mean. For putting me up."

It wasn't far from Steve's bargaining of cooking and running, and Loki was struck with the sudden insight that Steve had been trying to make it easier for Loki by giving him terms, giving him a way to feel as though the debt he owed Steve could be lessened by even the smallest of degrees. Yet Steve had never counted his debt against him at all, he realized, just as he had no desire to hold any accounting against Bucky now.

"Una is undoubtedly sick of me." He nodded toward the kitchen. "She'll be grateful to have someone else to order around." A series of scolding chirps exploded from the kitchen, insisting that she did nothing of the sort. He caught the urge to retreat into insincerity and stamped it down. "Please. I, too, have nowhere else to go and I do not wish to be alone."

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The last of the materials from the wall went into a dark brown banker's box. Steve snapped the end of the packing tape against the cardboard, sealing the box with more stripes of tape than necessary. All of his research on Bucky and Loki seemed pointless now; he couldn't solve anything and trying had only made everything worse.

"Sir," JARVIS interrupted politely, "Agent Romanov appears to be heading to your floor."
He paused, considering telling JARVIS to run cover and redirect her, but the conversation was an unavoidable one. With a sigh, he set the packing tape aside and carried the box over the growing stack of boxes along the wall. "Thanks, JARVIS. Go ahead and let her in when she gets here."

All told, there hadn't been much to pack. The furniture had come with the suite and rightfully belonged to Tony, or whoever decided to move into the space after Steve left. Books, knick-knacks, and clothes were boxed up and ready for the movers to arrive. The apartment already seemed as empty as the day Tony had shown it to him and asked him to move in. All the Avengers together. Like a home; like a family.

He dug through one of the open boxes in the kitchen to find the box of chamomile tea. The sound of the front door opening and closing was quiet, which was very Natasha.

"I hope you're planning on staying for tea," he called. There was already a lump in his throat, like he'd swallowed a bite of food that refused to go down. He'd shared too much with Natasha to be worried that she might judge him, but there was nothing easy about any of the subjects she might want to discuss.

"Of course." She rounded the corner. He heard the beat in her response as she took in the moving boxes. "You make the best tea," she continued casually.

"I'm back early. The others will be a few more days." He dropped two tea packets into mugs and carried them to the kitchen table. There wasn't exactly proper etiquette for opening a conversation about his former lover shape-shifting into him and seducing his best friend. If seduction was even the right word.

She raised an eyebrow, but took the seat across from him and reached for one of the mugs. "You're moving?"

"Found a place in Brooklyn. Nice place. Older. Signed the lease yesterday."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Only a phone call away if you need me." Mentioning the apartment she kept separate from the Avengers seemed petty. He leaned back against the counter, half watching the kettle as he waited for the water to boil. "Having all the Avengers under one roof only paints a bigger target on the building anyway. Always thought it was too much of a risk. Right in the middle of the city like this. Tony's high enough profile for all of us."

She shrugged, her fingers picking at the tea tag hanging over the side of the mug. "Fair enough."

A silence of water heating settled between them. Not awkward; not uncomfortable; it felt more like the silences between them as they headed out on a mission. He half expected her to make a joke. A split second before the kettle began to whistle, he cut off the burner and plucked it up to pour out the water into their mugs. Once he sat down there would be no more delaying. She'd want to help and he was so far beyond anyone's help that he would only disappoint her. Eventually the numb cocoon he'd been in since deciding to leave the Tower would melt away, but he was unashamed to cling to it now.

"When did you get back," she asked as he finally took a seat. She watched him over her tea, blowing away the rising steam.

"It wasn't me."

Her expression gave nothing away. "Loki."
"Yes."

It was so much more than a single word. Yes. As if his whole world hadn't been upended and shaken apart; as if a single word could contain the disaster after disaster that had been his relationship with Loki. Could he even call it a relationship? He didn't think there was a word for it. There weren't words for such a tangled mess.

"The video?"

"Deleted."

She gave him a small nod. "Maria is the only other person who knows. She also knows how and when to keep a secret. We've been running down a lead on the attack on the sprite's hive."

It took him a few seconds to process the idea that Maria knew and run the gamut of emotions: shock, fear, anger, and humiliation. But he trusted Natasha and if Natasha trusted Maria to keep it a secret, then he was willing to extend his trust as well. The segue of topics away from Loki and Bucky might have been Natasha's attempt to be kind and not put him through a painful conversation. He nearly seized the opportunity with both hands, wanting more than anything to shy away from the worst of it.

He chewed at his bottom lip. "I don't know if it was wholly consensual. With Bucky. On the video, it looks like Loki knocked him out. After." His stomach twisted unpleasantly at the memory. He knew it would raise questions. Questions he couldn't answer and solutions Natasha didn't have.

She carefully sipped at her tea. "Are you worried?"

"That Loki might be manipulating or controlling him? Yes."

Might be manipulating or controlling the Winter Soldier, which made it so much worse. And where was Una in all this mess? Was she a helpless witness trapped in Loki's web of deception? On top of that, he was terrified Bucky had believed it was Steve, that Bucky had loved him or wanted him so many decades ago and he'd been too stupid to notice; that he would've given Bucky anything and Bucky had never asked. Even all that was only a part of the messy tangle of emotions knotted up around his heart.

She raised an eyebrow. "And your solution was to move to Brooklyn? You might have to connect a few dots for me here, Steve."

They'd sat together, him and Loki, at the same table, drinking tea and talking their way through what they wanted and could give each other. It had seemed so clear, so simple, but he should've known it wouldn't last.

"I messed up," he admitted. He fiddled with the tea tag, winding the slender string around his finger a few times as he worked up the courage to tell her the truth. "I don't think I'm the man I thought I was, Nat. Maybe I never was. Maybe I just don't know what I'm doing enough to be any good at this. I don't know. But I don't know how else to fix it, other than to just leave."

Lines knitted together between her brows as she studied him. "Maybe a few more dots..."

"After I watched the video, I went over." He kept his gaze down, watching ripples in the surface of the tea. "Loki was there. I couldn't think straight, couldn't see straight. I was so...angry. I hit him. Attacked him. It was Bucky who pulled me off and I don't know...if he hadn't." With a heavy sigh, he rubbed his hand down his face. If he were honest with himself, he'd been struggling with being angry and hurting ever since Loki sent him away. "What kind of person does that make me, Nat? I
never thought I was capable of something like that. Hurting someone I care about like that." He felt the light brush of her fingertips against the back of his hand and looked up, bracing for pity or disgust. She only looked sad. "I didn't think I was that kind of person but I guess I was wrong."

"You made a mistake," she began.

"I attacked someone I love. There's no excuse in the world that makes it okay. No matter what he's done to Bucky, it's not okay for me to turn into an abusive asshole." With a grimace, he shook his head. "Loki's a risk. Whatever's going on with him and Bucky, it's not good. But I'm too close to this and I can't help anyone, not anymore."

"So you're what? Running away?"

"The only thing I know for sure will stop me from hurting anyone else is to isolate myself." He watched the subtle play of emotions on her face, nearly too subtle for him to notice.

"Being alone doesn't solve anything." Her voice wavered.

"Maybe not." Turning his hand, he caught her fingers in his and squeezed. "But I don't deserve anything else."

"Steve."

"I don't think I know how to be the man I thought I was, the man I want to be. And until I figure that out, I'll keep hurting people I care about." From her muted reactions, he couldn't tell if she understood or if she thought he'd lost his mind and was trying to figure out the easiest way to get him into a straitjacket until Bruce returned from Asgard.

Visibly steeling herself, she pulled her hand away. "I can't tell you that I agree, but it's your choice."

"If Maria already knows where Loki is, it's easy enough to turn him over to SHIELD. They won't be able to hold him and trying to capture him will only waste their time. If they're smart, they'll know that already. If they can get Bucky away from him, safely, that'll be a step in the right direction. Might not be easy." He was taking a huge risk in letting SHIELD take a role in Bucky's fate, but given the choice of SHIELD and letting Loki continue to play with Bucky's sanity, he'd choose SHIELD a hundred times over.

"I'll let Maria know." A thin smile did nothing to mask her dislike of his decision. "They offered me the official Avengers SHIELD liaison job. Maybe I can keep this from blowing up in all our faces."

"You're the best hope we have."

"Oh, don't say that," she said, breath whooshing out as she spoke. "If that's true, we're screwed."

"I don't think Loki will cause trouble."

She gave him a sharp look. "I think he's incapable of doing anything else. Best case scenario, we convince him to leave Earth and get Barnes into a rehabilitation facility equipped to handle someone with his kind of background. If such a place even exists, outside of the Fridge." With a wave, she cut him off before he could protest. "I know how you feel about the Fridge. It wasn't a suggestion, just making a point."

"Point taken. And maybe the right person to ask for suggestions is Thor. He tried to warn me that Loki couldn't be trusted. I just didn't want to listen."
When he looked around the suite, he was surprised at how little he thought he'd miss it. There had never been a sense of home in the walls around him, only of a place he was staying until life took him in another direction. Now it had and he only wanted to keep moving, to see what was around the next corner. Maybe the grass would be greener.

"Do you still want to be on the team?"

"Of course," he said quickly. "I'm still an Avenger. You need me, I'll be there."

"Even if it's Loki?"

"Especially if it's Loki." He hesitated, then smiled a little. "But I'll let you call the shots on that one. We both know my judgment's shot to hell when it comes to him. Has been for a while."

Her fingernails made soft clicks against the side of her mug as she drew lines over the smooth porcelain surface. "And if I don't call you in? When it's Loki."

"I'll understand. I'm no help to you if you can't trust me and if I can't trust myself."

Attacking someone he loved had always seemed so far from the realm of possibility that he didn't know how to grapple with it. He oscillated between feeling like a monster, like a demon had crept in at night and turned him cruel deep down in his soul, and a stunned, morose disappointment in himself. Worse, he thought there was a chance Loki might forgive him and he didn't deserve it. He would never deserve it.

Irony tasted a lot bitterer than he'd expected.

"Loki was only the second person I've ever had a relationship with. First was Peggy and I crashed a plane that time. I think I prefer the plane crash." He'd broken Peggy's heart, certainly, but never deliberately hurt her the way he'd hurt Loki. "Guess I should've known I'd be terrible at it. Maybe I'm just not cut out for any of that. Love, companionship, family; all the things he didn't deserve to have if he couldn't manage to be a decent human being. Sighing, he raised his mug and swallowed down a mouthful of tea.

"Life's messy." She reached out, wrapping her hand over his wrist. "You can't count yourself out forever because you made one mistake."

"It's the only answer I've got right now."

"Alright, so it's the answer for right now. But not forever." Leaning forward, she looked earnest, almost pleading. "Maybe you don't know how to be with someone. Most people don't. No one ever teaches them how and they've got piss poor examples everywhere they look. Most people never figure it out and they go through life like wrecking balls. You don't get better at it by hiding from it."

"Natasha--"

"If you don't deserve to be happy, what chance do the rest of us have?" She was searching his face for something. "You're allowed to fuck up, Steve, you're allowed to be human. You learn from it, you apologize, you make amends if you can, and you move on. It doesn't mean you deserve to be alone and lonely for the rest of your life. If this is what you need right now, I get that, but don't get stuck there. It's harder to get out of the hole you're digging for yourself than you realize." Easing back, she gave him a self-deprecating smile. "Take it from someone who's been there."

His heart ached at the sadness he could hear in her voice, the loneliness she was letting him see now, that she never let anyone see. He felt a surge of fierce protectiveness, daring anyone to tell him that
Natasha didn't deserve to be happy and loved, however she needed to be. More irony.

"It's not forever," he lied, wanting to give her the hope she was reaching for. There probably wasn't a deep enough hole he could crawl into and pull down on top of himself for it to be forever. That didn't mean he couldn't try.

Her eyes narrowed. "I'll hold you to that."

Setting the mug down, he placed his hand over hers and rubbed his thumb affectionately across her wrist. "You always do."

She turned her hand to take his. "I'll put together a few options for taking Barnes in and getting him help. Let you know what we've got. If nothing pans out, I'll cast a wider net. Might be able to call in a few favors, see where they lead us. If all else fails, there's Asgard, right?"

"If Thor does the asking, yeah." Sheepishly, he ran his fingers through his hair and scratched at the back of his head. "I may have been sent home early because I, um, took a side trip to Jotunheim. I owe Frigga for getting me out. I got lucky." Because of his own blind anger and his pride, he'd repaid that debt by assaulting her son. A wrong he would never be able to make right.

She blinked, eyebrows raising. "I really shouldn't be surprised that you managed to start an intergalactic incident when you were supposed to be taking a vacation."

"There was no incident," he protested.

"Are you allowed to set foot in Asgard again?"

"Maybe?"

Blowing out a breath, she pulled her hand away to pick up her tea, cupping it close to her chest. "Tell me everything."

To her credit, she didn't hurl the mug at his head while he recounted what he'd discovered in Loki's room and taking the leap of faith to slip through Loki's portal into another world. He couldn't do justice to the grand caverns and wonders within Jotunheim, but he tried. In longer than he could remember, his time on Jotunheim had been the most peace he'd known. Part of him wished he'd never left. The only piece of the story he kept to himself was the pack of strange objects that he'd left at Loki's. For whatever reason the Frost Giant, Farbauti, had given them to him, it was possible they only held meaning to Loki.

The movers arrived before he finished and discreetly took the boxes already sealed and labeled. He kept one box for the tea kettle and mugs. Without the boxes, the apartment was even barer than before. It felt hollow and empty; he knew the feeling.

"There is one more thing you should know. About Barnes and the sprites," she told him after he'd finished telling his story. "According to the files, he was exposed to sprite blood, possibly during the cryofreeze process. They're looking into it at the Fridge and they think, maybe, they might be able to use some of HYDRA's research on the Winter Soldier to create a vaccine or something against magic. They'd like your help, if you're willing."

He nodded. "Of course."

"We'll make sure you're working with someone you know you can trust."

Absently, he rubbed his forearm where the dark green chevrons had appeared under his skin when
Farbauti had gripped him. "I think there might be other consequences of what Loki did to me to make me immune to his magic. I don't know what they might be. The Frost Giant I met said he was reckless and that it might lead me somewhere I don't want to go."

"Maybe it already has," she said pointedly.

He wished it were true. It would be easier if he could write it all off as the influence of magic and not his own lapse in judgment, his own weakness of character. He had nothing to blame but his own foolish temper. But he didn't argue with her or tell her he wasn't that lucky. Natasha wanted to see the best in him, for her own reasons, and he wasn't so heartless that he wanted to take that away from her.

Finally, he stood up and cleared the mugs from the table. "Do what you can to get Bucky out of there. Call if you need me. Anytime. And if anything comes up, I'll let you know."

"I'll be in touch."

He hugged her tight before she left the apartment. Left him standing with nothing but the single cardboard box in the kitchen. He took his time washing out the mugs and packing them away with the kettle. The movers might already be in Brooklyn, unloading his few belongings into another empty apartment. He remembered how barren Loki's apartment had been at first, how he'd wondered if Loki was afraid to put down roots, or maybe punishing himself. The latter, he thought, or maybe it was Loki's depression manifesting in an inability to find any enjoyment in his environment. Sam would probably have a good theory or two.

That wasn't a conversation he was looking forward to having. Sam wouldn't let him go as easily as Natasha, he never did. Sam had an uncanny knack for knowing when Steve was only fooling himself. Sighing, he picked up the box and started out of the apartment. Hopefully Sam would be too busy after he returned from Asgard to worry about Steve disappearing (again) into an apartment in Brooklyn. Maybe he could adopt a pet. It wouldn't be a sprite, but it might be enough. On the elevator ride down to the lobby, he resolved to look into the local animal shelters and see what he could find. Even if he couldn't ask anyone to love him - didn't deserve it - he could still get a dog.

Despite the phantom pain settling like a vise grip around his chest, he smiled and nodded hello to the guards and others in the lobby. Walking out the door meant walking away from the only friends and family he had. He'd cost them enough and couldn't begin to repay them. If he stayed, they'd keep trying to help him, keep taking the bullets meant for him, and he simply couldn't let them continue fighting a lost cause.

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Natasha quietly let herself into Maria's loft, following the low murmur of Maria’s voice out into the living area. Maria waved from the stairs, her omnipresent phone against her ear. She was listening intently, lines drawn down her face in concentration, and she raised an eyebrow when she saw Natasha going for the liquor cabinet.

“I’ll have to get back to you. Something just came up.” She listened, watching Natasha get mixers and ice from the refrigerator. “Yeah, sure. Flying back first thing in the morning.”

After Maria ended the call, Natasha glanced up from the vodka she was pouring. “Work?”

“Always.” She motioned to the liquor. “Are we celebrating something?”

“Steve’s back from Asgard.” She shrugged, not sure if anything about that counted as celebratory.
“Turns out that wasn’t him with Barnes. And he’s already been over there to let Loki know how he feels about it.” Cranberry juice splashed against the side of the glass. She taste tested it first, vodka burning against her tongue, and added a half cup more. “Steve’s willing to turn Barnes over to SHIELD, if we can get him away from Loki. He’ll help if he can but... he moved out of the Tower. Found a place in Brooklyn.”

Maria pulled down a second glass from the cupboard and took the bottle of vodka from Natasha. “Just when I think this can’t get messier.” She poured out two fingers of vodka, speculatively eying the options Natasha had taken out before choosing orange juice. “Think Loki will hand Barnes over if we ask nicely?”

“I think as long as they’re not causing problems, we call this one a loss and walk away.” Shaking her head, she leaned forward onto the island. “But I promised Steve I’d look into getting Barnes out of there. He watched more of the footage than we did and he doesn’t think it was consensual. It’s deleted now so there’s no way to go back and see what he meant, but I’ve got no reason to doubt his read on it.”

“Shit.” Maria took a long swallow from her glass. “How do we end up dealing with this kind of shit?”

Smirking into her glass, Natasha shook her head. “Magic.”

“Wish I’d never heard of Asgard.” Reaching down to take Natasha’s free hand, Maria guided her gently out of the kitchen, toward the couch. “So how do we do this? What if Barnes doesn’t want to leave?”

There was no need to elaborate on how Loki might have found a way to control him, like he’d done before. This time, Natasha doubted it would be as simple as hitting Barnes over the head. A team would lead to a fire fight and she doubted even SHIELD’s best would win. If Loki didn’t up and disappear, spiriting Barnes away with him, then they’d probably just end up with a destroyed building and a body count.

“We’ll have to separate them outside the apartment. Find a way to get Barnes alone. Grab him that way.” On the couch, she curled against Maria’s side, taking deep breaths to relax.

The answer to the obvious follow up - then what? - was another tangled mess she didn’t want to think about. There was no good answer when it came to Barnes. No one knew how much he remembered, who he was now, how deep HYDRA’s conditioning went and if it could be reactivated at any moment.

Maria stroked her fingers through Natasha’s hair, light like the tug of a breeze. “Here’s a radical idea, what if we try talking to them?”

“And say what?” Natasha snorted. “Hey, noticed you were pretending to be Steve and getting it on with a brainwashed assassin who used to be Steve’s best friend, kinda thinking that’s a bad thing so could we have him back, please? I’m sure Loki will hand Barnes over out of the goodness of his heart.” She bit her lower lip, stamping down the frustration she was feeling. What they needed now were solutions, not helpless, hopeless worry about what she couldn’t change or fix. She wasn’t so clueless that she hadn’t realized Steve was diving headlong into a major depressive episode and unlikely to seek the help he needed until it got much worse. If he sought help at all.

“Maybe a trade?” Maria offered.

“Do we have anything he wants? Even if he still wants Steve, it’s not like we can hand him over.
Not now.” She didn’t want to think of any number of strange and powerful weapons in the Fridge that Loki might want, and if any of them could be stacked against Barnes’ life as payment.

“There’s always a solution.”

“I need a vacation.” She took a drink and closed her eyes to pretend she was on a tropical island working on her tan. It was a close as she was going to get to a real vacation. “Is that offer still on the table? Avengers liaison to SHIELD.”

“Thinking of saying yes?”

“Might as well. Looks like the Avengers and SHIELD are going to be working together sooner than we thought.”

“Perfect.” Maria brushed a kiss against Natasha hair. “Looking forward to working with you, Romanov.”

“Workplace relationships never work out,” she deadpanned, wrinkling her nose when Maria laughed. “Speaking of, I might need a favor of the surveillance kind.”

“Because that’s worked out so well for us?”

“Not like that. Windowless vans and men in dark suits. That kind of surveillance. The kind that broadcasts that we’re paying attention. That shows up on the doorstep with the morning newspaper all ready for you.” She sipped at her drink, already planning her next glass and hoping the entire morning would disappear into a vodka soaked haze at some point. “I want Loki to know we’re watching and I want him to know why. As long as he has Barnes, for whatever reason, then he’s on our radar. Maybe he’ll decide it’s easier to be left alone if he doesn’t have a hostage.” She hadn’t spoken the word aloud – hostage – but it had been lurking at the back of her tongue since she’d talked to Steve.

“You know, Romanov, I think I know just the guy you need.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rose gold washed up the sky in slow, broad strokes and painted over New York City street by street, window by window. Below, the city stirred, shaking off sleep in fits and starts as Bucky watched. Someone had left a couple of battered lawn chairs on the roof. It creaked every time he turned his head. One window in the building across the street stayed dark; empty now, with no show to watch. It was the vantage point he would’ve chosen. There weren’t many good options. On the other hand, the people watching now didn’t seem to care if the options were good or not.

The shift changed a half hour before dawn. They weren’t subtle. He watched the dark SUV roll away from the curb, replaced by another, identical SUV with bland, identical agents inside. If they were armed, it was lightly. Not meant to engage, only to watch. Briefly, he considered the possibility that armed didn’t matter, if any of the watchers were like him or like Loki. Like the others HYDRA had created; more than human.

He didn’t know if they were watching him or watching Loki. Maybe both. The two of them added up to a greater sum than they were apart, somehow. There was far more going on than his narrow world of Loki’s apartment.

Loki. Who had taken a bullet out of his leg. Who had fed him and shaved him. He rubbed absently at his neck. Who had taken him to fix his arm. Who had built him an imaginary castle to wall off all of his memories until he was ready to face them. Loki, who had been Steve’s lover. Who was being watched and only seemed to be annoyed by it. Who walked like a contradiction, like he was crumbling under the weight of the world in one step but untouchable in the next. Maybe all gods walked that way. He wondered if the men in the SUV would be afraid if Loki acknowledged they were there. If they knew Loki viewed them as both a buzzing insect and a punishment to bear.

The key to Loki’s apartment clicked over metal fingers, gleaming dull against his palm. In the context of Steve, Bucky was simple, but in the context of Loki, he’d become much more complicated. Loki’s contradictions, his twists and turns, had created versions of Bucky who lived and breathed beyond HYDRA’s intent and beyond the memories of Steve. He felt them echoing out and back, resonating within his mind. All of them truth and none of them real.

Loki didn’t ask which one was Bucky, didn’t expect there to only be one, because he also walked with multiple footfalls in every step and all his echoes trailing behind him. For now, Bucky was the echo that watched and waited. He listened to the city’s unfamiliar sounds, counted the miles between New York and his memories, and turned the key over and over between his fingers. There was no silence here. He couldn’t remember silence, only the constant static hum of electricity in the walls, forever locked together with the smell of hydraulic fluid and rust.

He’d died. Or he thought he’d died. More than once, maybe. Over and over. Kept trying and never getting it right, stumbling at the last step and never making it through the door. The scar across his throat was smooth like a lazy river. Another echo; another Bucky who might have been.

But there was only one Steve. Bucky didn’t know if seeking him out would collapse the echoes into a single voice or leave him shattered into a chaos from which he’d never return. A decision for another day. For when he was ready, if that day ever came. He didn’t know what ready meant or
how he would know it if he found it. If it would be heavy in his hands, like a winter coat, or so light he wouldn't realize it was there, like fog come light on cat's feet. The imagery and words bubbled up from the deepest shadows of his past; a poem, washed onto the shore like wrapped parchment inside a bottle.

Behind him, he heard the sound of shifting weight on the fire escape. Loki. Who walked with a forward bounce, weight on the balls of his feet, ready to spring or pounce like the fog-cat of his memory.

"Here."

A ceramic mug with a swirling, blue patterned glaze appeared at the edge of his vision. He accepted it, not letting his attention slip from the SUV of watching men. The mug was warm; coffee scented steam rolled up into the cool morning air. Loki settled into the other lawn chair and it squeaked in protest.

"I don't suppose our friends have done anything interesting?" Loki's voice was the sound of turning pages, if a book could whisper and breathe and grant wishes.

"The fog comes on little cat feet," Bucky recited, his focus lost in the space between the roof and the street below. "It sits looking over harbor and city on silent haunches and then moves on." He would move on too, when ready came for him.

Loki was silent for a long time and only the sounds of the city filled the spaces. Perhaps he was wondering if Bucky had lapsed back into the place between the echoes. He sipped the coffee. He blinked when one of the men in the black SUV climbed out and started down the sidewalk toward the cafe on the corner. Surveillance was dull work, full of stiff joints and a full bladder. He wondered if Steve had sent the men to watch them.

When Loki broke the silence again, it was to tell him that he needed to visit the market. "If you would like to join me..." The offer trailed off, his words sinking into the city noise.

They'd done that before. Before.

He nodded. "There might be crickets. In the park." He thought of Una and the fading marks from his metal fingers. He hadn't the slightest idea of how he might catch a cricket, but the need to make reparations hung broken and bent in the back of his mind, jabbing at his conscience.

"I'm sure she would be happy with blackberries as well as crickets. As a treat."

Loki. Who knew catching crickets in daylight would be impossible so he offered another way for Bucky to make amends. He risked a sideways glance. It was easy to see why Steve loved him. Loki, who drank coffee on the roof with his long legs stretched out in front of him. Who woke from nightmares at least four times a night but never made a sound. Unconscious reaction, maybe. A rabbit freezing still and silent as a predator passed by. Steve hadn't known about the nightmares, couldn't have known. Loki was made of pieces and puzzles and he guarded them like treasure. Bucky had more those pieces than Steve, he thought, but not because Loki had given them willingly; he'd taken them against Loki's will.

He wanted to feel guilty. Should; didn't. In the place where guilt should have been, there was a strange, settled calm, like the eye of a storm. In the context of Steve, he was lost; damaged; fallen. In the context of Loki, he was remade and set free. Two monsters or two soldiers or something that
wasn't either of those, something that could be of their own making. Maybe.

Steve had saved him; Steve had saved Loki. It felt like a weight around his neck; a weight that bound them together in a debt that could never be settled.

"Whenever you're ready."

There was that word again, like the steady thrum of rain filling the background. Not quite silence, not quite noise; always in between one thing and another. Ready. Maybe he was ready to finish his coffee. He took another sip. Maybe he was ready to venture out into the city and disappear into the sounds and colors and all the people who weren't lost; damaged; fallen. Taken apart and put back together. Except they were, he thought. They all had cracks; they were all in pieces. They covered it up with tape and ribbons and noise.

"Now people who are hurrying alone, and those who come in crowds from far away." He squinted up at the buildings around them. "Pass through this great concourse of steel and stone." Another message wrapped up tight in a bottle and thrown into a great ocean long ago.

If Loki grew impatient while Bucky finished his coffee, he didn’t show it. Perhaps he would live forever. Ten minutes on a roof wasn’t even the blink of an eye in the face of eternity. He let Bucky sit, silent and watching, until the mug was suddenly empty. He blinked when Loki tugged the mug gently from his hand, looking up to see the fleeting sorrow in Loki’s eyes.

“It will get easier, I promise you,” Loki told him. “Your mind is healing. You’ve already exceeded my expectations. You’re coherent most of the time now.” His brows knit together.

Bucky thought of the strange lines he’d seen when Loki’s skin had turned blue and curled his fingers against the impulse to reach out, to smooth away the worry or to draw out the lines beneath the pale mask that Loki wore. He didn’t reach out, because what was inside his mind didn’t always match his voice or his hands. The echos were inconsistent, bubbling and jostling inside him, and they left him lurching, like a step that vanished beneath his feet or a door that was only sometimes there.

“Blackberries.” He smiled as he said it, although smiling only seemed to make Loki sad.

A treat for Una. A simple concept so small and slight that he could hold it in the palm of his hand. The clink of metal against metal reminded him of the key. He stuffed it into the pocket of his jeans as he stood up, pushing the rickety chair back. Having the key in his pocket made him feel tethered; it would keep him from drifting away into the city noise and forgetting. There was so much he wanted to forget.

Loki. Whose touch was so light on the back of Bucky’s elbow as they walked down the stairs that he hardly noticed. Enough to be certain he was going the right direction, enough for Loki to guide him if he needed it. An unspoken just in case. He remembered doing the same for Steve, when he’d been smaller. Steve had shrugged it off often enough, but that hadn’t mattered, he’d looked out for Steve and now Loki was looking out for him until Steve came back. If Steve came back; he always came back, didn’t he?

They passed the black SUV and the men inside were talking into their phones, watching. He stuck close to Loki. Crowds seemed to part around Loki without realizing what they were doing or why. No one bumped him or jostled him, bouncing off a kind of invisible force field well before they got near enough to be a threat.
The market was a blur of color and sound and the busy energy of the people coming and going. There were mounds of vegetables and stall upon stall of homemade goods. He followed a step behind, carrying one of the canvas shopping bags and holding it out each time Loki made a purchase. He kept his gaze down, letting his hair fall and obscure his face. Old habits. Loki handed him a piece of candy at one of the stalls and he grinned as he took it, before he remembered that smiling seemed to make Loki worry more. He wanted to say something, wanted to explain that he hadn’t smiled before he’d stumbled his way to Loki’s door, that he hadn’t remembered how. He wanted to gather up all their pieces and hold them in Loki’s hands and convince him that they could put them all back where they needed to go. He wanted to try, even if he wasn’t sure what that meant. But he knew that didn’t make sense and what would come out of his mouth would inevitably make even less sense, so he reminded himself not to smile and held out the bag for Loki to add a couple of fat, yellow onions.

Under the pretense of checking a basket of apples, Loki leaned in close. “Our friends have followed us.”

Bucky held still. The kind of still that came just before he pulled a trigger. The still of nothing but his blood like a river behind his ears, not even breath, just quiet.

“Do not be alarmed if I appear to be in two places at once,” Loki murmured. He plucked up one of the apples and studied it. He frowned. “They seem to be most interested in you.” His eyes flicked to the side and back again, watching over Bucky’s shoulder. “In particular, they are speculating as to the difficulty of separating us.”

“To take me in,” Bucky said hoarsely. His throat was sandpaper rough. Part of him screamed that he needed to run, needed to disappear and get as far away as possible. “What are they going to do with me.” It came out flat, stretched thin between his teeth.

Another frown. “I don’t know. Perhaps they are trying to save you.”

Bucky reached out when Loki began to pull away and caught his wrist, breaking another of their unspoken agreements. Loki seemed afraid to touch him, afraid to be touched. “You saved me,” he insisted plaintively.

Loki’s calm expression wavered, guttering like a candle. “You might be better off,” he began. His gaze darted to the side again and his face went blank as his shoulders set.

Behind Bucky, footsteps approached and then stopped. Cautiously, Bucky turned, grateful for the baskets of apples behind him that made it impossible for anyone to steal up on them undetected. The man facing them was unremarkable, a neatly pressed grey suit and neatly cropped brown hair.

“Loki,” the man said with a small, polite nod.

“Agent Coulson,” Loki answered stiffly. The name meant nothing to Bucky. “You look well.”

The answering smile had an edge of teeth in it, for all the man’s cool exterior. He turned his attention to Bucky. “Sergeant Barnes. It’s an honor to meet you.” Bucky blinked and said nothing. The voice in his head was still screaming for him to run. “We know a little of what you’ve been through.” Coulson’s eyes slid to Loki for an instant. "And we want to help you in whatever way we can. Doctors, scientists, you name it. All standing ready to help you recover what was taken from you. I will personally see that you get whatever help you need.”
He swallowed, trying to line up all his thoughts and turn them into words. Beside him, Loki was
tense, staring just past the man’s ear. He wanted to ask Loki for a reason or an explanation, to tell
him what was going on, but Loki wasn’t looking at him. The man seemed sincere in his offer. Bucky
knew looks and words could be deceiving.

“If you’ll come with me, Sergeant Barnes.” Coulson held out a hand.

Apples made soft sounds as they shifted, jarred loose when he stepped back and closer to Loki.
Coulson's expression turned wary but he kept his hand extended, waiting.

“Would you take him against his will,” Loki asked.

“There’s some debate about whether or not he knows what that is,” Coulson answered, still polite
but sharper this time. “Given your history on this planet, you’ll have to forgive us if we’re
concerned.”

Loki’s jaw visibly tightened. “I am not holding him prisoner.”

Eyebrows rising, Coulson gave them a forced smile. “As I said, we have concerns. Primarily, that
he’s getting the care he needs and deserves.”

Bucky finally managed to get the right words stitched together, stiff and ungainly as they were. “Did
Steve send you?”

After a long pause, Coulson nodded once. “We’re here at Captain Roger’s request, yes.”

He saw Loki flinch. No, not a flinch. He crumpled, an internal support failing; a bridge losing a
suspension cable and swaying against the loss of balance. Steve worried, he wanted to reassure Loki,
that’s all. It was his fault in the end. Because he’d wanted.

“You should go,” Loki whispered. He held out his hands to take the canvas bag. Loki was telling
him to go. Loki, who had sent Steve away for the wrong reasons. Maybe the wrong reasons. It was
hard to tell.

Clutching at the straps of the bag, he nodded at the apple in Loki’s hand. “We’re not done. We still
need blackberries.”

“Sergeant Barnes,” Coulson began cautiously.

“I don’t need their help.” Or their doctors and their scientists, poking and prodding and looking for
his blueprints.

He watched a dozen emotions go through Loki’s eyes and thought he must’ve said the wrong words
again. Making the connections; he didn’t always get it right. Loki was patient, he always waited until
the words finally clicked, or he didn’t mind if Bucky’s answer was about metaphorical cat paws.

Coulson withdrew his hand and gave them another polite smile. “I’m sure we’ll meet again. It’s a
small town.” He seemed to fade into the crowd as easily as he’d appeared.

Silently, Loki added a half dozen apples to the bag and turned to continue along the line of stalls.
“They will tell him I have ensnared your mind.”
Bucky barely heard the words through the constant hum of conversation around them. There was too much to filter out as hostile or not hostile, and he had no answer to what Loki was telling him. He kept his head down, accepting the added weight in the bag with each purchase and the light touch of Loki’s hand on his arm, prompting him through the maze of stalls. The walk back to the apartment was uneventful; he knew Loki was clearing the way, making it easier. Somehow. Magic.

He left the bags on the kitchen counter and went to the windows to check the coverings, ensuring there would be no prying eyes. This time. He tried not to think about who had been watching them before. Might have been watching. What they might have seen.

“They will not be so polite next time,” Loki said from the kitchen. He spoke calmly, putting away the groceries as though nothing was out of the ordinary. “I have taken minds before. He...they will assume this is no different.”

“You’re helping me.”

Loki chuckled bitterly. “I would hardly call it helping. I left your mind in pieces. I used you-” He stopped when Bucky caught his arm, but didn’t look up.

“You,” Bucky said, his voice rough with the effort of concentration. “You gave me something I was never gonna have any other way.” He frowned, rubbing at his forehead. Too many things were too difficult to explain. Steve didn’t love him; Steve loved Loki.

“What?” Loki stared at him with disbelief. “Do you mean...did you? You knew?”

“Most of the time or...sometimes. I don’t know. Maybe.” He rubbed harder at his temple, unsuccessfully trying to force his thoughts into clear patterns. “No one’s touched me...like that. In so long that I didn’t...it didn’t hurt. I just wanted something that didn’t hurt.” Hadn’t cared that it was only as real as a dream. He realized he was gripping Loki’s arm and had backed him up against the counter trying to get closer, trying to feel something he couldn’t explain. It was wrong; a mistake. He tried to shake off the hungry shivers, wanting the contact but afraid of what it meant.

Loki moved slowly, pulling his arm free. But he didn’t push Bucky away. Instead, he carefully put his arms around Bucky’s shoulders, one hand settling against the back of Bucky’s head. With a shudder, Bucky sunk into the embrace, forehead pressed into Loki’s shoulder and hands clutching at Loki’s t-shirt.

“I understand,” Loki whispered.

Bucky nodded. “I know.”

“You should rest.” Long fingers combed soothingly through Bucky’s hair. “I’ll make tea. A shower? It might help.”

Bucky cringed, swallowing against the memory of thick blood filling his throat. When he closed his eyes, Loki’s bathroom always seemed to be covered in red.

“I can, if you want...I can come with you.” Like Steve had done for Loki. Another stolen memory.

He let Loki lead him out of the kitchen to the bathroom, drifting like a fallen branch caught up in a winding stream. He was the echo who watched. He watched the shift of the lines at the corners of Loki’s eyes and the soft fall of black hair, loose around his face. The sound of water in the shower
was a dull hum. Loki’s hands were gentle. He watched fingers slender as willow branches tug and pull at his clothes, prompting him without words to raise his arms or lift his feet. Another tug from the past; his childhood; home. Warm water cascaded down against his back and he watched Loki’s face, drawn in concentration as he worked the soap between his hands, then over Bucky’s skin.

“Is this alright?” Loki murmured.

He nodded, watching pale fingers slide down his arm. He looked at the scars on Loki’s stomach and reached out, brushing his knuckles over them. This skin was unfamiliar, like the geometric blue of his true form. Steve had known Loki this way, known these scars. It felt like another echo in his mind. An echo who had known and loved this Loki.

Loki, whose touch stayed gentle. Who washed his hair and kept the suds away from his eyes. Steve had only known this echo of Loki once, in a castle far away from the noise of the city.

The water stopped too soon for all his winding thoughts to find their places. He smelled like soap. Loki helped him dry off and dress in a soft pair of pants before leading him back out to one of the chairs in the living room. He watched the twitch of Loki’s lips as he worked a towel over Bucky’s hair, squeezing out the water.

“You’re drifting again,” Loki sighed. “It was too soon to venture out. You weren’t ready. Too much stimulation. It will get better, I swear it. However long it takes, I’ll see you through this.”

Bucky reached for Loki with his left hand, catching his elbow. “Can you change?”

Loki’s expression twisted into pain. “Don’t ask me for that.”

“No...that.” Bucky drew his right hand up along the inside of Loki’s forearm. “How you really look.” There was indecision, and worry, but gradually the pale skin began to darken into a vivid blue. He held his arm against Loki’s, tracing across the patterns of Loki’s skin to the grooves of his metal arm. The symmetry was comforting.

Slowly, Loki knelt down, still holding his arm out for inspection. “Can you tell me what you’re thinking?”

“We match,” he answered with a smile. “See?”

“Yes, of course.”

Loki’s hair was wet too, he realized. Somehow he’d missed that. He blinked or he’d forgotten. He pulled the towel from around his shoulders and began to mimic what Loki had done for him, using it to gently work the water out of Loki’s hair.

Blue faded back to ivory as Loki stood. “Come lie down. Rest. I’ll bring you tea and something to eat. I’ll teach you more runes, that seems to help you focus.”

Unhurried, Loki guided him back into the bedroom. Una chirped from her nest on one of the pillows, stretching out of her nap. When Bucky climbed onto the bed and settled back against the pillows, she went immediately to his hair, weaving loose braids with quick fingers. She buzzed a sing-song series of notes with only the brush of a lure. He smiled at her silly little song about collecting acorn caps from seas of golden leaves. Blinking, he looked up to see Loki standing at the side of the bed, an odd expression on his face.
What is it?"

Loki shook his head slightly, the corner of his lips turning up. “Thank you for staying. I’m not used to being...the better option.”

“Steve chose you too.”

His smile turned wry. “He will never forgive me, but I hope he will forgive you. Should he believe any of this is your fault. Which it isn’t. It wasn’t. You are-” he stopped, cutting himself short, seeming to think better of what he’d meant to say. “I’ll make the tea.”

In his ear, Una chittered about humans making messes out of everything. He couldn’t disagree. Tipping his head to the side, he eyed Una. “Why don’t you hate me?” The answer - that she wasn’t stupid; she could tell the difference between a dog and a wolf - made him smile again. Una liked it when he smiled. “I just want.” He hunted for the words, like picking up rocks and stones to peer underneath. “To make it right.”

Reaching out, he tucked his fingers under Una’s legs and waited for her to get her balance before he lifted her up, carrying her gently to settle on his chest. Her wings had begun to grow back. He drew a fingertip over one silvered point.

All he remembered was a broken world. Outside of this place; outside of Loki. It had been broken before he’d fallen from the train and it was broken now. Between the two points of time were the ruins he’d left behind, lives he’d broken because of HYDRA, because of greed and fear and lies. Bits and pieces. Everything he touched crumbled. He wanted to stop, to do more than break and destroy. If Una’s wings could grow back, if he could stop his mind from drifting, as Loki called it, then maybe it would be possible for him to be something more than what HYDRA made him.

“I made sandwiches as well,” Loki announced, coming through the doorway with two steaming mugs of tea in one hand and a large plate in the other. “It’s your favorite. At least, I think it’s your favorite. You aren’t exactly picky so it’s rather difficult to tell.” He juggled the tea and the plate, relinquishing one of the mugs only once he was certain Bucky had a solid hold on it.

He had to sit up and Una squawked in protest as he resettled her on his knee. He blew over the top of the mug; the steam smelled like raspberries and summer grass. “Doesn’t that mean I’m easy to cook for?” He saw a brief half smile appear on Loki’s lips.

“Nothing about you has been easy, my friend,” Loki answered. He took one of the sandwiches, but waited for Bucky to begin eating before taking a bite.

“Bet you wish I never showed up at your door.” The taste of bread mixed with turkey and tomato on his tongue. He caught other tastes as well; pickles and mustard and an unfamiliar spice.

Loki studied him for a long time before speaking again. “There are many things I would change. Many choices I would make or unmake, other paths I would take. But that is not how Fate works, I suppose. We do not choose the direction of the river, only whether or not we fight against it, or for it, or if we drown from inaction.” He paused to pull his hair back and tie it into a loose knot. “You worry that you’ve made my life more difficult, but I assure you that isn’t the case. Certainly no more difficult than is of my own conjuring.”

Now that he was eating, he found himself hungry and he finished well before Loki. Using the plate
grooves of his left arm like a ladder, Una climbed up to his shoulder to resume her casual braiding of his hair while he sipped tea. He watched Loki over his mug; Loki’s long, slender fingers and how he held himself so carefully, as though he was so used to being observed, and judged, that the habit was deeply ingrained in even the smallest motion.

He made no protest when Loki took the empty mug, returning to the kitchen with the dishes. There was more tea when he came back, and one the strange books full of runes and stories. Bucky took the notebook and pencil Loki had gotten for him to copy and practice the runes. It helped. Sometimes. He had to disturb Una once again. Loki soothed her ire with an offering of a small bowl full of blackberries while Bucky stacked the pillows against the headboard so he could sit shoulder to shoulder with Loki and prop open the notebook over his knees.

Slender fingers fanned over the top corners of the pages. “We left off here, I believe.” Loki tapped a fingertip on a drawn image of a cavern filled with crystals.

Each type of crystal, distinguished by their facet shapes and subtle coloring, had runes printed beside a selected example. Names, Loki explained, as well as useful properties and folk stories or remedies associated with each type. Minerals; gems. He filed the comparison away in the din of his memories while he studiously learned and copied down the runes. Their pronunciations were rough in his throat. As Loki had said, it helped; focusing on the runes quieted the part of his mind where all the overlapping echoes created chaos.

Loki peered over to examine the copied runes. “You’re a quick study.”

“HYDRA didn’t keep me around for my good looks.” He bumped his shoulder into Loki’s. A gesture from another lifetime. Something he might have done with Steve or Dugan.

“No,” Loki said softly, “I suppose not.” His gaze was thoughtful, watching Bucky trace out the last set of runes. “Why did they take you, do you know?”

He had no answer that wasn’t shapeless and soundless, slipping away from him on little fog-cat feet. He leaned a little more into Loki. “Didn’t spend much of my time thinkin’ why me. Maybe. Maybe I did and it’s just buried under everything else. Maybe sometimes I believed them, that I was makin’ the world a better place. Maybe sometimes I didn’t, like I was just...watching. Helpless.”

“And yet,” Loki trailed off. He smiled suddenly, shaking himself. “All you’ve been through...you aren’t angry. Or vengeful. Bent on destruction as though it would make up for,” he paused to close the book and set it aside, “any of it, I suppose. All the lies, all the slights. But you are content to learn runes. Whatever else HYDRA has done to you, they didn’t touch who you are. Your heart.”

Taking the cue, Bucky closed his notebook. He turned to study Loki in profile. “Tell me a story. About you.”

Loki bit at his lower lip, then took a deep breath. “It was the day of my brother’s coronation. He was to become king of Asgard. Months of preparations, planning. None of which he knew anything about or appreciated. I told myself over and over that he wasn’t ready. Perhaps I was even right.”

“So you ruined it.” Bucky smiled at the sheepish look Loki gave him. “What did you do?”

“I allowed the sworn enemies of Asgard to gain entrance to the vault where the most powerful weapons in the Nine Realms are kept. They were stopped, of course. I knew they would be, but...”
“But then it went pear-shaped?”

Loki nodded, momentarily leaning closer. “That is one way to put it. I was arrogant enough to believe I could predict the outcome. That I could know what would happen, control it even. That my actions would have so little consequence. Pure arrogance. I started a war. I nearly destroyed an entire Realm. All for what? My own vanity, I suppose. You know the rest, or enough of the rest. How I came here, how I became involved with Steve.” His tone turned somber at the mention of Steve. “I’m sorry I have no light-hearted tales to give you, my friend. They’re all tainted by who I...was. Before him.”

Shaking his head, Bucky reached out to skim his knuckles along Loki’s forearm. Awkward comfort at best. “Steve didn’t change you. He reminded you of who you really are. He’s good at that.” He met the nakedly hopeful look in Loki’s eyes with a smile. “This is the real you, right here. Just got lost for awhile, that’s all.”

Like he’d been lost; damaged; fallen.

The touch, shy as it was, or maybe the words, seemed to wash away Loki’s reluctance for contact. He uncurled, long legs stretching out, and reached around to pull Bucky in, folding around him. With his back solidly against Loki’s chest, he exhaled into the embrace and let his right hand fall to Loki’s leg, just above his knee. Loki caught the book again, this time reaching around to open it where they could both see the pages. His breath was cool against the side of Bucky’s face; the reverberation of his words a subtle rumble through his skin.

They stayed that way until Loki finished reading the book and Bucky, nearly lulled to sleep, protested when Loki moved.

“Stay,” Loki soothed, “I won’t be longer than a moment.”

He curled into the blankets and pillow, teasing Una half-heartedly with metal fingers. The bed shifted when Loki returned. He’d barely raised his head before he felt Loki’s touch, light as Una’s wings, on his back and side, and immediately relaxed again.

Loki tucked Bucky’s hair behind his ear. “I’ll wake you in a few hours.”

He caught Loki’s hand and wove their fingers together against his chest. “Don’t have to keep sleeping on the floor, you know. Bed’s plenty big enough for both of us.” In the silent pause, he could feel Loki weighing his answer, fingers twitching between Bucky’s. “Always slept better with you here,” he added.

Loki’s hand went still, a bit of tension slipping away. “I thought it would make you uncomfortable.”

“You and Steve are the only good things I got goin’ for me.” He grinned at the immediate burst of scolding from Una. “You too, Una. ‘Course I meant you too.” Seemingly mollified, she settled herself into a curl of limbs and burgeoning wings on the pillow beside them. Turning his head up, he leaned closer into Loki. “It does help, you reading to me.”

He might have imagined the brush of Loki’s hair against his ear. “You are healing remarkably well and that is none of my doing. If there is still a chance for you to return to Steve.” He paused, his fingers curling momentarily in Bucky’s. “I will help you any way I can.”

He would face Steve when he was ready. When there weren’t as many echoes bouncing back and
forth inside his head. Until then, he would wait and Loki would read to him and Una would braid his hair.

They would face Steve together and he would make it right.

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Loki ignored the pointed chirp from Una, realizing he was staring at the door with a mix of dread and anticipation. The market wasn’t far. He’d sent Bucky with a short list and Bucky had promised to return immediately if anything seemed suspicious. He refused to uncover the living room window to see if the surveillance team had followed Bucky rather than remain parked in front of his building. He had no doubt they’d consider trying to recover Bucky if they saw an opportunity.

“Perhaps now they will believe I’m not holding him hostage.” It was a dubious hope even to his ears, since the men watching had likely made up their minds about him long ago. He couldn’t fault them in their judgment. He’d done all they loathed him for and more besides.

Maybe he’d agreed to let Bucky go alone to see if he would, in fact, return, or if seeking out Steve would be a more attractive option. His desires were a tangled war of contradictions; he wanted Bucky to stay and wanted, equally, not to stand between him and Steve. There was precious little ground in between and it grew more complicated each time Bucky smiled.

He was a fool to believe it might last.

Forcing his attention away from the door, he returned to surveying the living area. Bucky had suggested adding a couch. With two of them in the space, it made sense to have more seating than a single chair. It would be easy enough to rearrange the space to allow them to sit together and enjoy the fireplace, once the weather turned colder. He caught himself thinking in terms of the future and sighed.

“Foolish,” he muttered under his breath.

He moved the chair further to the side and rearranged the coffee table and rug that Steve had gifted him, allowing space for a couch facing the fireplace. The blank white card remained on the mantle, though Loki couldn’t imagine why Steve hadn’t destroyed its twin. A lingering hope for a message from Bucky, perhaps. Loki doubted it was because Steve had any desire to hear from him.

As he pondered the rearrangement of the space and what kind of couch to fill it with, he heard the key in the door. He forced himself not to look as Bucky let himself into the apartment, not to show the swell of relief he felt, selfish as it was.

“What do you think?” He motioned to a spot of the floor in front of him. “A couch, perhaps another chair.” A part of him mused with twisted humor that if he’d had a couch to begin with, there wouldn’t have been room for them to have sex on the floor and Steve would be none the wiser. He glanced up and saw that Bucky was unloading the contents of the canvas bag and neatly sorting out a small pile of fresh vegetables and fruit onto the counter. He seemed serious and thoughtful, making Loki wonder if he was drifting again; he’d been lucid when he left. “Your trip was uneventful, I hope.”

When Bucky spoke up, his voice was distant. “Has to be comfortable.”

“I can find something.” Hesitant, Loki started for the kitchen, watching Bucky carefully. “Or we can
look together. Either is fine with me.”

The half smile Bucky gave him was sad and the way he looked up through his dark hair made Loki want to reach out and brush it away from his eyes. “It’s not so bad. All the people. All the noise. Easy enough to blend in, but...it’s the cameras, you know? They’re everywhere.” His gaze darted to the covered window. Loki knew he was including the dogged surveillance team outside and whoever had been watching them before. “Never know who’s looking through those.”

“I’ll go.” Comfort was hardly Loki’s strong suit. He felt awkward and ill at ease with his own lack of skill.

With a deep breath, Bucky seemed to shake himself out of whatever thoughts had trapped him. “Whatever you find, if it’s half as comfortable as that bed, it’ll be a dream come true.”

“Perhaps I should merely pile cushions on the floor? You and Una both could curl up like lazy cats.”

Bucky grinned, bright and soft as sunlight. “I’ve done my time sleeping on floors and rocks and dirt, in goddamn caves, strapped to a chair, strung up in a damn freeze chamber with needles in my veins. I want blankets and pillows and sheets that feel like melted butter.”

“Your wish is my command.” Loki waved a hand in a ridiculously grand flourish, as if a moment’s levity could cast off the weight of Bucky’s words.

He thought Bucky might have wanted to say something, but he only bit at his lower lip and chuckled, shaking his head as he gathered up the vegetables to transfer them to the fridge. “Probably need to sleep it off. Clear my head again.” Hand on the door of the fridge, Bucky stared into it for a few moments after he’d finished, the beginning of a frown showing in the lines between his eyebrows. “There’s something. It can wait though. I need...need to be clear before I try to talk about it.”

“Take your time. And when you wake up, there will be a couch waiting.”

Bucky gave him a dubious look. “In a fifth floor walk up? You planning on-” he stopped and shook his head again. “Right. Magic. Norse God. You can probably pull a couch out of thin air.”

“Not quite,” Loki said with a shrug, the corner of his lips turning up in a sly smile.

“You got yourself a deal then.” Planting both hands on the counter, Bucky took a deep breath, steeling himself either for or against something. A brave face, perhaps, and one that Steve must have seen many times. There was strain in his smile when he met Loki’s eyes again. “Anything you pick will be fine.”

For a brief moment, Loki wondered if the subject of a couch was serving as a mask for another conversation entirely. How many of his and Steve’s conversations had been the same? Layers and masks and everything left unspoken between them. Maybe Steve would have listened.

“If you wish to talk about,” he began, “when you’re ready.” Uncertain, he reached over the counter, settling his fingers over the back of Bucky’s right hand.

“Whatever you wish to talk about,” he began, “when you’re ready.” Uncertain, he reached over the counter, settling his fingers over the back of Bucky’s right hand.

“When you get back. I’ll just work on my notebooks for awhile.” His thumb rubbed light patterns over the side of Loki’s hand. Loki wondered, not for the first time, if Steve would’ve been as responsive to such casual touch as
Bucky. If Loki had been able to get past his self-recrimination and fear long enough to initiate contact. The couch seemed unimportant now, but Bucky probably needed privacy with his own thoughts as much as he needed to rest.

Reluctantly, he left Bucky under Una’s watchful eyes and ventured out under an illusion that disguised his appearance. If he’d thought the surveillance team would be able to provide adequate advice on purchasing furniture, he might have stopped at the dark vehicle to ask them to accompany him. After visiting his third furniture store and finding nothing among their selections that suited him, he nearly reconsidered asking SHIELD for their help. He was torn between wanting to find something perfect and not wanting to leave Bucky alone for as long as perfection seemed to require.

Outside the fifth store on his list, the first display he saw seemed to be overflowing with stuffed pillows and soft blankets, like a mound of fluffy clouds. Seizing on this as a promising sign, he ventured in and less than an hour later, he found a modular sofa set in a subtle blue and gray woven fabric with an optional chaise section. The extra space would allow them both to stretch out if they wanted. He could easily picture himself reading with Bucky lying against his side or beside him. There would even be space for another, if Steve-

He brushed those thoughts aside with a pang of guilt. He shouldn’t even want Bucky to stay.

Transporting a couch wasn’t quite as simple as pulling it out of thin air, though it was simpler than stealing his childhood bed from Asgard. He smiled at the memory, wondering how long it had taken anyone to notice it was missing, if anyone had noticed. The sofa came apart into sections, no doubt to make it easier to transport in a crowded, busy city full of narrow stairwells and buildings that lacked elevators. As he stepped sideways through one space into another, passing through collapsed dimensions as a shortcut, he pulled the pieces with him and was back in his living room with no one the wiser. He called out to alert Bucky of his return, not wanting to alarm him, and set himself to the task of assembling the sofa. The chaise section, he put on the window side, leaving the path from the front door relatively clear. It filled the space, but not to the point of inconvenience, he thought. Once the frame was connected, he added the cushions and then started pulling overstuffed pillows in dark blue and cream patterns out of a large bag. Some of the blankets and furs from under his bed could come out to add more softness. While he fussed with the placement of the rug, he heard Bucky in the kitchen. He rotated the rug one more time, decided it was as good as he could make it, and replaced the coffee table before pushing the chair into a spot beside the fireplace.

“What do you think?” He asked, looking up to see Bucky standing behind the couch, holding two glasses of white wine. Loki went still, shocked by the echo of his evenings with Steve. Was it deliberate? Or were his own memories subconsciously influencing Bucky’s behavior. He swallowed against the lump in his throat. He doubted even Bucky would know the answer.

“Looks good enough to sleep on.” Bucky moved around the end and set one of the glasses on the coffee table before he sunk down onto the couch. He let out a deep sigh as he sunk back into the cushions and pillows. “This is heaven. I could definitely fall asleep here.”

Cautiously, Loki picked up the glass meant for him. He settled on the couch beside Bucky, his legs curled beneath him. Within moments, Bucky had reached out to put his hand on Loki’s knee, as though to reassure himself Loki was there. Maybe Steve had wanted to do the same all those nights they’d sat together working on the puzzle. Loki was deeply conflicted about that possibility. He kept his internal struggle to himself and sipped at his wine. Should he prompt Bucky about what he’d meant to talk about or wait until he was ready?

Once Bucky’s glass was half empty, he finally spoke. “The place where they kept me, stored me
when I wasn’t active.” He raised his head to stare down into his wine glass. “I wasn’t the only one. There are more Winter Soldiers. All of ’em worse than me, really. They wanted to be there. And there was...his name was Karpov. There were others, but he...before they sent me here. To America. He was the one who controlled me.” Dark hair fell back as he turned to face Loki. “I need to find him. I need to go back there. Find a way to be sure they can’t control me ever again. And I need your help to do it.”

Loki had held his breath since Bucky had begun. He breathed out now, pensive. “Wouldn’t you rather go to the Avengers?”

“I know you can stop me, if it comes to that. There are words. Karpov kept them locked up. They’re still in my head where HYDRA left ‘em and that’s all it takes. But you can stop me.” Bucky’s eyes were bright but his voice was surprisingly steady. “And I know I can trust you. You don’t have any other agenda running in the background. Nothing else you might want, like figuring out how they made me, how they made the others. And if you might want to make more someday.”

“You don’t trust SHIELD,” Loki summarized, more surprised that Bucky would anticipate such an outcome. He nodded once. “Alright. I’ll help you. Where do we start?”

“Russia. There’s a bunker. Hard to get to.”

“It won’t be a problem. If you have a location, coordinates, I can take us directly there.” His heart skipped a beat at the wide smile that spread over Bucky’s lips.

“Magic, huh.”

“Magic.” He hid the flush in his cheeks behind the glass of wine. “When do you want to leave?”

“Soon. Tomorrow, if we can. Before I forget,” he finished ruefully.

Loki was far less certain Bucky was ready to undertake such a task, but knowing how hard Bucky was trying to recover his life from HYDRA’s control kept him from voicing those doubts. He could make up the difference and ensure Bucky found the answers he needed.

“What else do you need?” Bucky craned his neck to look around the room. “Art for the walls, maybe. Couple bookshelves.”

With a laugh, Loki let himself relax and sipped at his wine. “You and Steve both. I don’t understand your determination to decorate my home. But if you would like art on the walls, I will put art on the walls. And find bookshelves.”

“It’ll give me something to look forward to,” Bucky said, his focus somewhere over Loki’s shoulder. “When we’re done. When it’s over.”

Following his gaze, Loki realized Bucky was staring at the white card on the fireplace mantle. Should he inform Steve of Bucky’s self-imposed mission? After Coulson’s reappearance at the market, Loki thought informing Steve might not be any different from informing SHIELD. He’d expected them to make another, more determined, play to get Bucky away from his influence, but perhaps they were merely biding their time. If he had understood Bucky correctly, the method HYDRA had used to control him was still in enemy hands and was little better in SHIELD’s hands, but once it was destroyed, he could breathe easier. They would both breathe easier.
He dropped his hand to Bucky’s and gave his fingers a quick squeeze. “We’ll have to pick books for the shelves as well. More than Jotunheim’s runes for you to study. When it’s over.”

Bucky turned his hand beneath Loki’s and wove their fingers together. He turned his face toward Loki, smiling. “It’s a deal.”

Chapter End Notes

Because even I needed a whole chapter of domestic fluffiness at this point.

Bucky references two poems:

Fog by Carl Sandburg
Pennsylvania Station by Langston Hughes
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Mood Music: All This And Heaven Too - Florence + the Machine

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Loki registered cold first. Ice beneath his boots and chilled air catching in his throat as he took a breath. Beside him, Bucky swayed on his feet, bumping against Loki’s shoulder and then pulling back, frost unfurling from his nose like smoke. The stillness was so complete that Loki could hear each breath, hear the sound of his own blood in his veins. Squinting under the glare of the sun, both beating down and glancing back from the slopes of the black mountains behind them, he cautiously moved toward an unnaturally shaped mound.

Siberia, Bucky had called this place of endless bright winter; the place where he’d been kept by HYDRA. There was no sign of life, no other footprints in the wind blown snow.

“Should we be expecting a welcome?” Loki murmured. There was a heavy, metal door seemingly cast out of the rock itself. Bucky crept forward to inspect the door, feeling along the seams and edges until he found a panel embedded in the rock on the right hand side of the door. Hand on the panel, he looked down toward his feet, studying the snow slowly swirling over the dark stone.

“Maybe,” Bucky said finally. “It’s iced up though. Hasn’t been opened in awhile.” Lines deepened around his eyes as he looked back out toward the icy wilderness.

“May I?” Carefully, Loki moved around Bucky to inspect the thick layer of ice covering the panel. “How long do you think it’s been?” He was reluctant to use the word abandoned, half thinking it was a mere stroke of fate that Bucky wasn’t inside, left alone in the cold and the darkness. Shifting the ice away wasn’t difficult. He reformed it into thick ridges around the panel, leaving the metal cold but clear.


The latching mechanism was sluggish but gave under pressure, creaking open to reveal a numeric keypad. Ice had worked its way into the interior of panel and left a dusting of crystals that crumbled as Loki brushed his fingertips over the blocky keys. A whisper of power was all it took, sent through the circuits beneath to release the lock. Heavy bolts sounded within the wall. More ice fell away as the doors creaked outward. The air inside was no warmer and brought a stale, heavy odor that made him think of human machines and the alleyways of New York City. Sickly yellow lights flickered on, revealing a shallow room leading to another set of metal doors.

There was a freight elevator behind the interior doors, caged with wire mesh and sturdy, but clearly out of use for some time. Gears creaked when Bucky found the controls and it began to move downward. Loki kept alert, straining to hear even the smallest sounds that might indicate they weren’t alone. Only the hum of the lights greeted them when they crept cautiously from the elevator. With one hand, Bucky gestured down a corridor toward a set of stairs. Loki nodded, following a step behind.
Everywhere he looked, he saw nothing but stone and steel. He could taste the dust of it on the air, feel the solidity with each step. It was no wonder Bucky wanted softness, pillows and blankets, after surviving years of a hard, unyielding world.

They crept deeper into the shadows, passing walls of shattered glass held in place by the metallic webbing inside. Loki was about to ask how much deeper the icy prison burrowed into the earth when Bucky stopped at set of a heavy, reinforced doors already partially open to reveal a narrow, circular passage. Beyond the passage, the chamber extended dramatically upward in a cylindrical shape and around the circumference, Loki saw a series of chambers lit dimly from within. Human figures were discernible through the fogged glass. The air in the room seemed heavy with anticipation and a sense of eeriness that made Loki’s skin crawl; it was not a good place. He glanced sideways to see Bucky’s attention was fixed on the apparatus in the center of the room.

“What is this place?” Loki whispered. He thought he knew; he could imagine the use the apparatus in the center must have been put to by the way Bucky’s eyes stayed on the chair. As if it could spring to life on its own; as if the terror it instilled was still very real for Bucky.

Wrenching his gaze from the chair, Loki turned to the chambers along the wall. One of them was conspicuously empty. He drifted toward it, noting that it too was little more than panels and strips of steel. Comfort, it seemed, hadn’t been a priority; a mockery of true sleep. The others remained occupied; the Soldiers Bucky had spoken of back in New York, that he’d known were here, perhaps forgotten, perhaps only waiting to be called back into wakefulness.

Bucky’s voice broke the silence. “It’s not here.”

Turning, Loki saw him standing in front of another circular passage. This one was shallow, leading only to a set of doors and an empty hollow in the wall. Its contents must have been important to be so protected. The key to the Winter Soldiers; the object that had brought Bucky back to a place that held only horror for him.

He didn’t question Bucky’s statement that it was gone, wanting only to continue the search and get Bucky away from this place. “Where else might it be?”

“There’s a room. Back down the corridor. All the way at the end, on the right. They kept records.” Bucky remained still, staring at the empty shelf. “Mission reports. Files. Even HYDRA had paperwork.” The idea seemed to amuse him, though his smile was strained.

Loki nodded and moved to leave, stopping when Bucky made no move to follow. “Should we check?”

A muscle in Bucky’s jaw worked. “Right behind you. I just…” He slowly turned his head to look back over his shoulder, his eyes tracking immediately to the chair. “Need a minute. Please.”

Whatever closure Bucky needed in that place, Loki couldn’t deny him, but he left reluctantly. The records room was where Bucky had directed. Its shelves were draped with dust and heavy cobwebs, though Loki found no indication of any live spiders as he moved down the nearest aisle trying to read the labels in the dim light. Belatedly, he realized he had no hope of making progress when Bucky alone knew what they were searching for and Bucky would have known as much. Uneasy tension settled into his shoulders, making him glance back toward the corridor often, straining to hear any sounds emanating from the chamber of Soldiers.

A gunshot cracked, bouncing against concrete and steel like the world itself was splitting apart. Loki’s heart leapt and he raced back toward the door, thinking of the last time he’d left Bucky alone. Another gunshot sounded, bringing Loki up short at the threshold of the records room. Another, then
another. His stomach twisted, sinking with a cold certainty. He knew what Bucky must have done. There were five shots in total, the echoes of the last fading as he reached the chamber.

Bucky was sitting with his back against the wall near the entrance, head bowed, elbows braced on his knees, and a gun held loose in his right hand. Another wall panel had been opened, revealing racks of similar weaponry. As Loki moved toward Bucky, he cast around the room and saw a single bullet hole in each of the remaining chambers walls. The Soldiers inside, now frozen in death as they were in life, weren’t bleeding. When Bucky finally looked up, his eyes were bright and wet with tears.

Fierce anger and protectiveness swelled up inside Loki. Had he known, he would’ve taken up the weapon himself and spared Bucky this burden, would’ve reduced this entire room to rubble. He swallowed down questions and protests, clenching his fists at his sides and hating every man and woman who’d ever set foot in this place, who had forced Bucky to walk this path. It was not a prison; it was a graveyard. Unable to speak or move, he watched Bucky stand up, getting to his feet as though he carried the weight of Realms on his back. He set the gun gently on one of the sturdy metal tables. It rattled before it settled, giving away the shaking of Bucky’s hand.

“They must’ve taken it when they transferred me. When they...they must not have sent anyone back. Just left them here. After the helicarriers,” Bucky said, his voice was thick and rough. “Karpov. If we can find him. Maybe he kept it with him.”

Loki nodded mutely. His expression must’ve betrayed his inner turmoil because Bucky paused as he reached Loki’s side, a sad half smile flitting across his lips. He knew, Loki realized with a start, that Loki would’ve spared him this last horrific act, however necessary. He’d known and had sent Loki away, unwilling to let Loki have their blood on his hands.

Unable to offer comfort in any meaningful way, he kept as close to Bucky as practical while they made their way back up through the corridors and took the rattling elevator back to the surface. When they returned, when they were back in New York, he would figure something out, as ill-equipped for comfort as he was. He could cast balls of light and Una could chase them; he could hope that it would make Bucky smile again.

“I don’t know where to start looking. Other than Washington DC.” Bucky squinted out over the bleak landscape, his back toward the door as it creaked and shuddered to a close.

“Then we’ll start there.” It felt like walking away from a tomb. “Perhaps we should go home for a day or two. Make a plan.” He floundered, wanting terribly to know if Bucky was alright and if he was reliving old horrors after visiting this place of cold and death.

No doubt Bucky could see through his feeble guise, but if he did, he made no protest, only nodded. Loki stepped in close, his arm going around Bucky’s waist a little tighter than strictly necessary as he stepped them both sideways out of the cold and into the familiar warmth of his apartment. Bucky stayed close, his breathing shallow and a look of such careful concentration on his face that Loki thought he must be near to collapse.

“Rest,” Loki murmured. When Bucky still made no move, Loki guided him gently to the couch and helped him to lie down, stripping off Bucky’s heavy jacket. Bucky reached out when he started away and caught his arm. “I’m only going to make tea.”

“Please,” Bucky said in small, cracked voice.

Abandoning all thought of tea or food, Loki stretched out on the couch, letting Bucky curl into his chest, arms wrapping tight around him. Bucky shuddered and his breathing came in fits and gasps.
His clothes and hair still felt cold from the frozen wasteland. Loki stroked his hair, massaging the back of his neck as he tried to dispel the cold, since he could do nothing for whatever Bucky was facing internally.

Helplessness wrapped around his throat like a vine attempting to strangle him. Loki squeezed his eyes shut; there had to be a something he could do other than hold Bucky while he crumbled. He had a moment to marvel at the irony of being put in Steve’s shoes once again and wondered if the Fates were, perhaps, none too subtly ensuring that he understood Steve’s perspective. But what Steve could never have done for him, he could do for Bucky. Before, he wouldn’t have dared; he would’ve felt too vulnerable and exposed to even think of it.

The connection was slight, barely a whisper of magic between them, but it was enough. He reached into Bucky’s mind and pulled him out, back into his own mind and the soft glow of the stars above a great Ash tree in the palace gardens. In this construct, they were nestled on a bed of clover between two large roots. Only the sounds of the breeze through the leaves and surrounding gardens, bringing the heavy perfume of flowers, met his ears. Bucky’s shivering began to subside immediately, away from the terror of his memories. Still, Loki kept him close and stroked his hair, listening to his breathing grow steady.

“Where are we,” Bucky whispered, the words muffled against Loki’s shoulder.

“A memory. From long ago.” He shifted enough to see Bucky’s face, reaching up to brush away tear tracks from his cheek. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t think of any other way to help you.”

Bucky pressed his forehead to Loki’s collarbone, his grip on Loki’s shirt relaxing. “I don’t know how I found you but…thank you.”

Loki smiled faintly. “It was Steve who led you to me. Unknowingly, but all the same.” Because Steve had smiled when he left and that had been enough, in Bucky’s fractured state, to bring him in. A hundred gossamer threads bound them both to Steve.

“Gotta remember to thank him sometime.” Shifting his weight, Bucky turned his face up toward the stars. “This was where you used to come when you were a kid, wasn’t it?”

Swallowing against the knot in his throat, Loki nodded. The mental connection between him and Bucky was dangerous. He needed to be careful, as he’d been with Steve, to prevent it from taking hold or growing stronger. No one deserved to be shackled to him that way, unable to escape the ice and darkness inside him.

“How long can we stay here?” Bucky rested his head against Loki’s shoulder. “It’s peaceful.”

“As long as you wish,” Loki promised, against his better judgment.

Bucky was silent long enough to make Loki wonder if he’d fallen asleep, but his voice was steady when he spoke. “We should bring Steve here sometime. When it’s over.”

We. Loki stumbled over the word, puzzling over it for a long moment before deciding to set it aside. “I may not be able to. I protected him from magic like mine.” From me, he thought sadly. He hadn’t considered the ways, like this, that the protection might cost him. It had seemed worth anything to keep Steve alive and safe.

“There’s always a way,” Bucky murmured.

“A challenge for another day.” He crooked his arm to reach Bucky’s hair, combing through it. “For now, rest. Allow your mind to settle again. When you’re ready, we’ll continue your search.” In the
stillness, he wasn’t quite comfortable thinking about Steve, as those thoughts would no longer be entirely private. He had no way of knowing how much Bucky might glean from them until it was too late. Despite those misgivings, he spoke without thinking, surprising himself with his honesty. It was hard not to be honest in this place. “I tried so hard to push him away. I thought it would be better. Easier for us both. But I think, now, this was all he wanted. To be close. In his way, if not in mine.”

“Steve never does anything by halves.”

“I suppose not.” He thought back to Steve insisting that he would never give up trying to save Loki, that he would be more unbearable than Thor, and all of the nights he’d come for dinner, to cook and work on their puzzle together. Had Steve been tormented by those nights of near intimacy as much as Loki? It hadn’t occurred to him that Steve might have struggled just as much, with wanting something and not knowing how or if he would ever be able to have it.

It must have been strange for Bucky to listen to Loki talk about Steve; a love and experience they simultaneously had in common and didn’t share at all. The niggling guilt in the pit of his stomach stopped him from saying more, worrying that it would be adding pain or difficulty for Bucky on top of everything else he’d been through.

Silence settled around them. Loki watched the stars glittering through the branches of the great tree while his thoughts meandered from memory to memory, from his childhood to Steve and then Bucky. Under the expanse of Asgard’s remembered sky, he felt small and humanity even smaller. He held Bucky a little tighter, acutely aware of how fragile mortals were and how quickly they faded. Their loss would leave a hollow inside him, Steve and Bucky both, which was a revelation as surprising as it was disturbing. His careful plans of not becoming anchored to anything on Midgard were utter ruins now.

“Thank you for this,” Bucky said softly. “We should go back. But we should do this again. It’s beautiful here.” He made no move to sit up or pull away. “Probably gonna be out of it for awhile. Takes time to process.”

“Una and I will watch over you.” He felt Bucky smile against his shoulder.

He made the transition back as smoothly as he could, breaking the connection at the last moment. Once it was gone, it felt like a loss, but he brushed those feelings away. That kind of sentimentality was dangerous. Carefully, he let go of Bucky and tugged the soft blanket from the back of the couch to lay over him, promising to return with tea. The soft clicking of Una’s claws on the wood floor alerted him to her approach before she climbed up the side of the sofa. With a worried trill, she found a spot on the pillow beside Bucky’s head and began to braid his hair, chattering one of her nonsense stories as she worked.

As he started water heating in the kitchen, his eyes fell on the white card standing sentry on the mantle. Would it be safe to tell Steve? Of what Bucky was searching for or what progress he was making in his own recovery. Would Steve believe anything Loki said? He doubted it and he doubted there was anything in the Nine Realms that could restore Steve’s trust. He wasn’t above swallowing his pride and begging Steve to talk to him for Bucky’s sake.

“I’ll start dinner soon,” he said aloud, fiddling with the paper tags on the tea. “Call it an early night. Fresh eyes tomorrow.” Nightmares would likely interrupt Bucky’s sleep before morning and their best lead was, quite literally, cold. But they had to try.

He toyed with the possibility of calling Heimdall and asking for Asgard’s aid. Ill-advised, certainly, and unlikely to result in anything useful. The alternative of finding a single man somewhere on the planet, one whom only Bucky remembered, was daunting. It would take time and he didn’t know
how much longer Steve and SHIELD would restrain themselves from trying to remove Bucky by force. He would need to take precautions to ensure them enough time to locate the man Bucky sought. There was a working he knew of from his reading, more tangible than the illusions he’d used to hide himself at the ancient castle ruins, but he’d never attempted it and without Frigga to guide him, he was uncertain. On the other hand, he’d never woven magic into a mortal the way he’d done for Steve before either and knew of no one in the Nine Realms who had even thought to try. It was a season of firsts, perhaps, and fitting that he use his magic in new, different ways.

Bucky’s eyes were closed and his breathing steady when Loki carried the tea into the living room, although the tension visible in his shoulders indicated he wasn’t asleep. Quietly, he shooed Una away from her work braiding Bucky’s hair and shifted the pillow to take its place. He laid the pillow over his lap and eased Bucky’s head back down. Fingertips trailing over a half-finished braid, he made slow, gentle strokes to brush Bucky’s hair back from his face and some of his tension seemed to ease.

“I understand,” he began, faltering. “I understand why it was necessary. If I could have…” he trailed off. Could have done it for him, could have kept him from returning to that place; could return to the moment Bucky arrived at his front door and do better.

With a deep breath, Bucky rolled onto his side, his forehead toward Loki’s stomach. “Wish you hadn’t seen any of that,” he whispered.

Loki drew the pad of his thumb down Bucky’s temple and over his cheekbone. He wanted to offer, again, to take those memories away but he understood Bucky more now; he’d watched Bucky suffer to regain those memories and taking them away would make a mockery of that effort. He could take Bucky out of his memories when it grew too difficult, he could offer some peace, and that would have to be enough.

“There’s a great deal I wish you hadn’t seen, my friend, so perhaps we’re even now.” He smiled when Bucky turned his face up to look at him, his expression serious but without any sign of regret.

“Why didn’t you tell Steve about any of that? What happened to you.”

Humming softly, Loki combed his fingers through Bucky’s hair. “I’m as anxious to tell him about my dark secrets as you are to tell him yours.” He spoke lightly, keeping his voice calm and without judgment or scorn. “Would you tell him if he asked?”

Bucky’s brow furrowed as he considered the question. “I don’t know. If I had to. If it would do any good. If he needed to know. If there was something in my head that mattered.”

An honest, noble answer and Loki felt undeserving, perhaps a little jealous, of the grace in how Bucky carried his past. “For your sake, I hope he never has to know.” He hoped there was nothing lurking in Bucky’s past that could reach forward and threaten his reunion with Steve, whenever it came. There was worry around the corners of Bucky’s eyes and Loki thought he must share that fear. Silently, he vowed to stay close, as long as possible, and protect Bucky from whatever ghosts might rise.

“Cross that bridge when I come to it,” Bucky sighed. “Gotta know I’m safe to be around first. That HYDRA can’t control me anymore. Then I can think about what to do next.”

The future, Loki thought. For the longest time, he hadn’t thought further than his next scheme or his next step; afraid of the future or afraid there wouldn’t be one. There’d been so little to hope for before the spell. He swept his gaze over the room as he sipped at his tea, plotting out where bookshelves might go and considering another banana tree. A future, however small it might be. He
would’ve considered it beneath him before the spell and considered it more than he deserved after the spell. Now, he wanted that sense of comfort and home whether he deserved it or not.

“I have preparations to make before we search for your answers. Rest, while you can.” The expression on Bucky’s face when he looked up was one of such affection and trust that Loki had to be careful swallowing his mouthful of tea. It was too close to the way he’d looked at Loki while he’d worn Steve’s appearance. Carefully, he brushed his hand through Bucky’s hair, catching up one of Una’s braids and curling it around his finger.

Bucky’s eyes began to close. “Let me know what I can do, with dinner.”

Loki thought he’d rather let the whole world collapse around them than disturb Bucky while he slept. Dinner could wait. He took his time drinking his tea and watching the rise and fall of Bucky’s chest slow as he relaxed into sleep. Setting the mug aside, he settled more comfortably into the sofa cushions and closed his eyes, reaching out with his magic to the edges and corners of the apartment.

An illusion would’ve been simple, but fragile. Had the Widow and Barton been more thorough in their search of the castle, it would’ve collapsed and revealed him. This would hold up even if the whole of SHIELD came bursting through the front door. Carefully, he found the very limits of the apartment in every direction, no matter how small each nook and cranny. Slivers of floor or wall might be left behind but they’d be too small to give them away. With full awareness of the apartment, he nudged the entire space slightly out of sync with the world around it. Not so far that it would cease to exist, but enough to render it unreachable by mortals. No matter how many times they searched the empty space left behind, they would find nothing. The tricky part came in crafting a binding that served both as anchor and a switch he could use to shift them out of reality in a heartbeat. It took him multiple attempts to determine the precise knot of energies that held sturdy when unperturbed but collapsed when he brushed at the correct spot.

Night had fallen and Bucky was fast asleep when Loki opened his eyes again. Despite the comfortable couch, he had to shift his legs and back, carefully, to ease the tension from sitting still. From her spot on the armrest, Una uncurled and stretched, chirping softly.

“You’re right,” Loki mused. “If Steve were here, he could make dinner and I wouldn’t have to get up.” He allowed himself a wistful glance at the white card on the mantle. In another life, perhaps, that might’ve been possible.

Resigning himself to the possibilities he did have, he cautiously lifted the pillow under Bucky’s head enough to slip out from underneath, then ease Bucky back down. As an afterthought, he tugged one of the blankets from the back of the couch and laid it over Bucky to ensure he’d stay warm. Una leapt into his hand as he rounded the end of the couch and accompanied him into the kitchen where she settled near the plant Steve had given him. She kept him company while he hunted through the refrigerator, eventually deciding on a variation of potato salad he could add to and use up several of the miscellaneous vegetables that needed to be eaten. He pulled everything out and settled into a rhythm of washing and chopping, feeling strangely content despite what had happened with Bucky. Had Steve felt this way all those nights? Simply content to cook and eat and work on their puzzle.

“We should get a new puzzle,” Loki said offhandedly to Una. “A landscape perhaps. Mountains. Or the sea.” She chirped in the affirmative.

The potatoes needed to be boiled and it took some time to settle on the combination of spices he wanted for the dressing to cover the vegetables. He was dicing pickled beets and green peppers when he heard movement in the living room. Hair mussed and sleepy-eyed, Bucky roused himself from the couch to join Loki in the kitchen, pulling the blanket over his shoulders. To Loki’s surprise, he stepped in close behind Loki, leaning his head against the back of Loki’s shoulder and wrapping
his arms loosely around Loki’s waist.

“Miss that tree already,” Bucky murmured, the last of his words nearly swallowed up by a yawn. He rested his chin on Loki’s shoulder and peered down at the steadily filling bowl. “Looks interesting.”

“You sound positively enthused,” Loki said dryly.

“Well, interesting is...interesting.” Reaching around, Bucky plucked a cube of dressing covered potato from the bowl and popped it into his mouth. After a moment, he made a soft, surprised sound. “Not bad. What’re the little green things?”

“Capers. Or dill. Whichever little green things you are referring to.”

“I like it.”

“I’m glad you approve, since it’s either this or you can fend for yourself.” He smirked a little when Bucky responded by hugging him tighter. “There’s chicken in the fridge. This needs to marinate for an hour. The chicken should be done by then.” He felt Bucky nod against his shoulder and made a half-hearted attempt to swat his hand away when he reached for another piece of potato. “You’ll spoil your appetite.”

“Want me to open a bottle of wine?” Bucky shifted around Loki to lean against the counter. He was watching Loki with a strangely intense curiosity.

“If you’d like. I’m not sure what would go with the vinegar in the dressing.”

As he added the last of the chopped green peppers, Bucky sneaked a piece of pickled beet. When he saw Loki was watching, he held the chunk of beet up as an offering. Amused, Loki took the piece and popped it into his mouth, but his teasing response stuck in his throat when Bucky, still watching Loki with unusual intensity, sucked the dressing and beet juice off of his fingers. The way he was looking at Loki, as if he was searching or waiting for something, brought a blush into Loki’s cheeks.

Suddenly aware of how close Bucky was standing, Loki turned toward the wine rack and selected a bottle without paying attention. He read the label as he chilled the contents. “Sauvignon blanc? I still don’t understand the intricacies of Midgard’s wines, but it might go well.” The cork slid through the foil wrap with a quiet pop.

Bucky retrieved two wine glasses, bringing them back and setting them on the counter for Loki to pour. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. I’m not picky. Anything tastes better than what I was used to.”

With a quick glance, Loki checked for any indication that Bucky might be getting caught in his memories again, but the moment seemed to pass. Glass in hand, Bucky moved closer again. Close enough that Loki could feel his body heat and the pressure of metal fingers against the curve of his lower back. Conscious of the touch, Loki finished tossing the vegetables in the dressing and set the bowl aside for the flavors to soak into the potatoes. Perhaps Bucky merely needed the comfort of closeness.

“Loki.”

It was so soft he thought he’d imagined Bucky speaking, but he turned and Bucky stepped with him. His breath caught as his gaze went involuntarily to Bucky’s lips. He tried to look at the flecks of color amidst the blue in Bucky’s eyes instead. As Bucky said his name again, the barest shiver of uncertainty in his voice, Loki realized that Bucky meant to kiss him.

The words tumbled out before Loki could think. “I’m not him.”
Surprisingly, a smile flashed across Bucky’s lips. “Neither am I.” He leaned in slowly and there was a taste of wine when their lips met. It was gentle, even timid, despite their twisted, torrid history, and ended gradually. Bucky didn’t pull away entirely, his breath warm against Loki’s skin. “Was that okay?”

He wasn’t entirely sure what Bucky was asking and his head was fuzzy for half a dozen reasons. “I don’t know,” he said, swallowing against a tightness in his throat.

“Maybe?” The strained note in Bucky’s voice sounded closer to anxiety than hope, afraid he’d done something wrong.

With a soft laugh, Loki wrapped his arms around Bucky and let himself relax into the embrace, reassuring him without words that no harm had been done. He was confused, maybe, and Loki couldn’t blame him when he fault was his own. “I’m not sure I understand what it is you wished to accomplish.”

“Thought I’d been pretty obvious.” There was color in Bucky’s cheeks now.

“You may have to give me a hint.”

“We’ve been sleeping in the same bed for awhile now.” The wine glass clinked against the counter as Bucky put it down. Cool fingers stroked down the back of Loki’s neck. “Getting harder to lie next to you, the way your skin feels against mine. Thinkin’ bout what it would be like. With you...as you. Not pretending, just you. Touching you, being with you. If you don’t want to...that’s alright. More than understand if you don’t. After what happened before. But I thought, I thought maybe you might want to. With me.”

Loki was too stunned to speak for several minutes, turning Bucky’s words over and over in his head. If he were honest with himself, he did want what Bucky was offering, wanted it more badly than he was willing to admit. Along with that want were a dozen questions, fears, and reasons why he should stay as far away from Bucky as possible.

“I’m not trying to replace him. Maybe I can’t be part of what you have with him.”

The words tugged at Loki’s heart, making him feel worse. “Bucky,” he started.

“But maybe I can.”

That got Loki’s attention. He eased back enough to look Bucky in the face. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not asking you to choose between me and him and I don’t want to choose between you and him either.” There was a steady blush in Bucky’s cheeks but he seemed perfectly lucid. “He’ll come around eventually and we’ll figure something out.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I know Steve,” he answered simply. “I want to be part of what you have with him. If I can. If you want me to. And I want him to be part of what we have. If you’re alright with it, I mean.”

Loki was doubtful and felt that he needed to be honest about his pessimism. “I don’t know if he’ll ever come back. I don’t know what I have with him, if there’s anything left at all. What if he wants to choose? What if he chooses you?”

This possibility didn’t seem to bother Bucky at all. “He won’t. He didn’t before. He loved Peggy and loved me just the same as he did before her.”
There was rock steady certainty in Bucky’s voice. Loki couldn’t bring himself to believe his reading of Steve, although that was entirely due to believing this woman, Peggy, could never have betrayed Steve the way he had. But he didn’t want to counter or argue with Bucky when he seemed so convinced of Steve’s commitment.

“You don’t have to have an answer right now.” Bucky turned shy, his gaze dropping. “And I can sleep on the couch from now on if it’ll bother you. Having me that close.”

“Bucky.”

Lines crinkled around Bucky’s eyes as he smiled. “He used to say my name like that. Like he was tryin’ to figure out if I was just plain crazy or not.”

That smile had been his undoing from the start. It was too easy to imagine taking Bucky to bed. He could remember the sounds he’d make, the way he’d taste, and the feel of his hands and lips. Somehow, he knew it would feel utterly different as himself, not pretending to be Steve. It frightened him more than a little, the idea of putting himself in a position where the tentative mental connection between them would only strengthen. He should warn Bucky of that possibility, but couldn’t seem to get those words out either.

“You don’t have to sleep on the couch.” His voice came out ragged. He cleared his throat. “But I...we should wait. I don’t know if Steve will come back but, whatever he’s decided, I need to know, before...it wouldn’t be fair. I just need to know.”

It sounded like a poor excuse even to his ears, but Bucky was nodding and changing the subject. “You made the salad. Why don’t I handle the chicken? You can finish your wine and keep me from burning anything.”

He let Bucky go reluctantly and took refuge behind his wine glass. Una was perched in the plant, watching them with an expression Loki thought might be amusement. The silence was surprisingly comfortable and he had no need to make corrections to anything Bucky did to coat and prepare the chicken breasts before putting them in the oven. It was a heady thing to think that he’d be able to hold and touch Bucky, knowing it was something Bucky wanted. And he knew Steve would question it, would wonder if Loki had somehow manipulated Bucky into wanting him. Steve might be right to question, with how much he’d meddled with Bucky’s mind. Even Loki couldn’t be sure this wasn’t an unintended consequence of his mistakes. He couldn’t change any of that, couldn’t undo anything he’d done, no matter how desperately he wished he could. His only option was to do right by Bucky and Steve now, to make amends as much as he could. If that took swallowing his pride and asking Steve to come back, then so be it.

“The item we’re searching for. Can you tell me what it is?” He asked, but watched for any indication that Bucky didn’t wish to speak of their challenge.

“It’s a book. Where they wrote down the procedures. The process.” Bucky gave him a wry smile. “Guess you could call it a user manual. Never saw inside it myself, just saw them using it. Reading out the words they used. Seemed to keep it safe so I think it’s the only one out there. Or at least it was.”

A book was more of a needle in a haystack than a man, but Loki only nodded, accepting Bucky’s explanation. If the man he remembered no longer had the book, their search would be near hopeless.

Bucky seemed to have followed the same train of thought. “If we can’t find it, might need a plan B. Is there any way you can...I don’t know.” He gestured toward the side of his head. “Something like what you did before. If there’s a way.”
“I will take you to Asgard if it comes to that,” Loki said fervently. He would ask Thor, plead with him if necessary; Thor could name his price. “There are healers there far more skilled than I and I have been careless enough with your mind.” He was surprised to see that Bucky looked relieved by his words and hoped it was due to the possibility of someone who could help them if they failed in their search, rather than fear, however well-founded, of what further damage Loki might do.

Bucky visibly hesitated, then set his wineglass down to hug Loki tightly, pressing his face against the side of Loki’s neck. “Thank you.”

“Anything,” Loki whispered. A reckless promise, to be certain. One he would most certainly answer for, but that had never stopped him from tempting Fate. Someday he would learn.

The remainder of the evening passed in companionable peace. They ate quietly and finished the bottle of wine before getting ready for bed. Loki found himself getting nervous as he washed up and ran a comb through his hair, pulling it back to weave into a loose braid. In the bathroom doorway, he saw Bucky already in bed, bare chested, with one of the rune books open in his lap. The crease between his brows eased when he looked up and saw Loki, his expression softening into a smile. Unsure, Loki went to the other side where he normally slept.

“Guess I made things a little weird.” An embarrassed flush was spreading up Bucky’s face.

“No, no,” Loki reassured him quickly. He stripped out of his t-shirt and pants, pretending it was no different than any other night they’d spent in the same bed. Settled under the covers, he motioned to the book. “You’ve made progress.”

Bucky nodded, still blushing. “I like this one. It’s all fairy tales. Or folklore, whichever the right word is.”

“It’s hard to believe Jotunheim has any fairy tales.”

Absently smoothing the corner of the page he was on, Bucky stared down at the runes. “How do you think Steve got these? If they’re from another planet.”

“I admit that I’m afraid to find out. I can’t imagine how he found a way to get to Jotunheim, but—” He didn’t like any of the possibilities that came to mind, least of all the possibility that Steve had somehow wandered into Jotunheim alone.

“But he’s the type who’d jump in without knowing what he was getting into.”

Loki sighed. “Yes.”

Adjusting the pillows, he settled onto his side, watching Bucky carefully read each symbol and occasionally providing a definition when an unfamiliar rune appeared. He was pleased with how lucid Bucky was. It seemed he’d finally stumbled on a way to help that was truly effective and he was grateful for it. Keeping Bucky with him, whole and sound of mind, would be worth the risk of making the connection between them permanent. He’d need to be careful, that was all.

Bucky closed the book but kept his gaze down. “You said these were from...where you’re from. So you’re from Jotunheim too?” He sounded tentative, afraid of offending or saying the wrong thing.

“I was taken from Jotunheim as an infant. I don’t remember anything about it. Or about my parents. I was raised in Asgard and that’s all I know.”

“Why would Steve go there and bring back a bag of nursery toys and kid books?” Thoughtfully, Bucky opened the cover of the book and traced a finger over the carefully painted name on the
inside. Loptr. “Have you thought? What if these were meant for you? What if they’re yours?”

Loki swallowed. “My father is dead and would have sooner killed Steve than hand over anything so
harmless. But I suppose it is possible, if very unlikely.”

Possible but unlikely that Steve had gone to Jotunheim looking for the secrets of Loki’s past. That
he’d found Loki’s mother in the vast expanse of a dead realm and that a Frost Giant had kept a
collection of baby’s things all this time, as though mourning the child who’d been lost. It seemed
impossible; each piece seemed impossible on its own and as a whole even moreso. Why allow Steve
to take the items if they’d been important enough to keep as a memento for so many years?

“We’ll ask him when he comes back.” Finally settling the book aside, Bucky slipped down under the
blanket and rolled to his side to face Loki. After a moment, he reached out to take Loki’s hand, silver
fingers bending around pale skin. “Bet it’s a helluva story anyway, however he got ‘em. He can tell
us about that and we can tell him. About us.” He faltered at the end, unsure.

“An interesting if not pleasant conversation, I have no doubt.” Steve’s initial reaction had been to
attack him. Time to think would have probably dulled Steve’s anger, but Loki doubted he would
view the situation favorably.

“He’ll get over it,” Bucky insisted with a touch of stubbornness.

“I hope you’re right.”

A distraction came in the form of Una’s claws clicking against the floor. Bucky rolled away and
dropped his arm over the edge of the bed so she could catch the grooves in the metal and climb up.
She clambered over his shoulder to stake her claim on one of the pillows. Loki was surprised when
Bucky turned back and slid close enough to drape his arm over Loki’s waist. They’d slept tangled
together more often than not, but it felt different now. He marveled as he trailed his fingertips up
along Bucky’s spine, feeling ridges of scarred skin around his metal arm, that the touch was
welcomed instead of unwanted.

That was unfair to Steve, perhaps. Steve had never said he didn’t want to be touched, but Loki
hadn’t understood what Steve was trying to tell him and he’d been so determined to believe that
Steve could never and would never want him in any physical way.

“Did you do this with Steve?” He asked quietly. “Before your War.”

“Usually when it was cold. Punk had feet like ice growing up.” Bucky shivered a little at the
memory. “Keepin’ him warm helped keep him from getting sick.”

“I never thought he would want...this.”

“He’s never been good about telling anyone what he wants,” Bucky mused. He nestled closer, his
breath warm against Loki’s throat and chest. “Sometimes you gotta wear him down until he has to
really think about it or he’ll never figure anything out. Too busy worrying about everyone and
everything else.”

“I didn’t...don’t...know how to do that.” He fumbled, realizing that he hadn’t known how to interact
with Steve. “He isn’t what I’ve been used to. I haven’t responded well. Haven’t known how to
respond. I don’t know if I can give him what he needs.”

Bucky let out a slow breath. “I know you can.”

“How can you be sure?”
Bucky’s response was to lift his head and press his lips to Loki’s. Like before, it was gentle and chaste. When he pulled away, he met Loki’s gaze. “Because you’ve given me what I needed.”

Shaking his head, Loki pushed himself up onto his elbow. “You should hate me for what I did. What I took from you and from him.”

“Loki.”

“It was wrong. Unforgivable. I don’t understand how you can—” The rest of his protest died against Bucky’s lips, more insistent this time, and he shivered when Bucky’s tongue brushed over his lower lip. His head was fuzzy again when Bucky leaned away. He cleared his throat. “Do you intend to kiss me every time I argue with you?”

There was a sparkle in Bucky’s eyes. “Only when you’re wrong.”

Raising his eyebrows, Loki tried to keep from smiling, equal parts amused and irrationally fond of Bucky’s show of attitude. “And how often do you expect that to be?” His smiled faded when Bucky caught Loki’s hand and tugged it up the thin scar on his throat.

Loki felt Bucky swallow and the vibrations of each word when he continued, completely serious again. “Loki, you forgave me. And whatever you think you’ve done to wrong me, I forgive you. I owe you more than I’ll ever be able to repay. The rest, we can figure out. Together. Steve will understand. He might not be okay with it or with being part of this, but he’ll understand.”

“You may have to do the talking,” Loki whispered.

The irony wasn’t lost on him; his silver tongue failed him whenever it came to Steve. How it was that Bucky was managing to be so understanding, and how long Bucky would remain this lucid, he didn’t know. The cold ache of guilt in his chest eased, replaced by something bright and hot that felt almost like hope.

Bucky smiled, moving his hand to Loki’s face. “I’ll convince him.”

There were too many questions. Convince Steve of what? He still didn’t understand what Bucky was hoping for when it came to Steve, but he couldn’t deny that whatever Bucky had in mind would be better than no Steve at all. If there was a chance it would work, that Steve would agree to what Bucky wanted, he’d take it.

“I hope you can.” He closed his eyes against the odd mixture of guilt and hope and not knowing what he wanted, except that both Steve and Bucky were pieces of the puzzle.

Bucky brushed his lips over Loki’s brow. “Can’t wait to make love to you again, sweetheart.”

Breath sticking in his throat, Loki hooked his arm around Bucky and gripped his shoulder tightly. Again. It felt too kind to say that, given the dishonesty of their sexual history. He shivered at the light kisses Bucky was leaving on his face, pulling closer as the desire for contact overrode his guilt. He wanted this badly, the heat and desire and the pleasure of exploring another’s body.

“Maybe Steve will want to watch,” Bucky murmured. Loki could hear the smile in his words even as they burned like electricity under his skin. “Maybe he’ll want to kiss you, slow and easy, while I take you in my mouth...”

Loki groaned at the mental image, finding himself both frustrated and amused. “If you can convince him to do that, I will never doubt you again.”
With a low laugh, Bucky eased back a few inches. “Better find that damn book soon so we can get Steve over here.”

He chased after more kisses, catching Bucky’s lips one last time before rolling onto his back. “If I have to search the Nine Realms from end to end, I won’t rest until I find it.” Another reckless promise; he was making far too many of those.

Bucky settled against his side, head on Loki’s shoulder and one arm draped around his waist. Gradually, his breathing slowed into the steady rhythm of sleep. Loki drew his fingertips along the grooves and plates of Bucky’s arm, tracing them without truly seeing. This turn of events, he certainly didn’t deserve. No more than he’d deserved everything Steve had tried to do for him.

Maybe it wasn’t about what he deserved.

The night moved on and Loki drifted in and out of sleep, his dreams tangling up with thoughts and possibilities. His mind conjured possibilities that ranged from pleasant to awful, where Steve returned and rejected him, or took Bucky away forever, leaving him alone in an empty apartment disconnected from reality. Strange visions of a Frost Giant mourning a lost son morphed into Odin’s stern, unforgiving face and an Asgardian prison cell. He dreamed of the frozen soldiers, of seeing Bucky trapped inside one of those chambers and being unable to free him, while Steve stood aside, blaming him for Bucky’s imprisonment. His frequent nightmare of falling from the Bifrost woke him in the early hours and he slipped back to sleep with Bucky’s fingers combing lightly through his hair.

When he finally woke in the morning, it was to the smell of coffee and the sound of Bucky in the shower. He smiled fondly, felt immediately guilty for it, and rolled his eyes at his own ridiculousness. He refused to feel guilty for enjoying this one small thing. He was still in bed when the water shut off and Bucky emerged a few minutes later dressed in flannel pants and towel drying his hair. When he saw Loki watching, he flashed him a lopsided grin.

“Feel like a trip to Washington DC?” He draped the towel around his neck as he moved back to the bed, leaning down to give Loki a quick, soft kiss. “You can see the mess me and Steve made out of it the last time we were both there.”

“It’s quite impressive, so I’ve heard,” Loki mused. He was pleased to see that Bucky had remained lucid through the night.

“Coffee’s ready. Thought we could use up some of the veggies in a couple omelets, see if we can find anything about Karpov in all that HYDRA info they dumped on the internet. Might give us a plan B in case DC doesn’t pan out.”

With reluctance, Loki stirred to get out of bed. “Omelets sound excellent.” He noted the way breakfast and gathering intelligence on their quarry blurred together in Bucky’s thinking, as though it was no different than casually reading the morning paper.

Feeling more rested and lighter than he had in a very long time, he stumbled through a shower and getting dressed, humming under his breath all the time. Perhaps their goal was impossible, but he’d thought other things impossible too and still, Bucky was smiling at him from the kitchen bar, a mug of coffee in his hand. There was a neatly chopped pile of onions, peppers, cheese, and salted meat beside the range, ready to go into the skillet.

“Here. You can use this if you like.” He hunted for the Stark phone, finding it half buried under the pile of junk mail he couldn’t seem to stop from coming. It was a mystery why anyone on Midgard would send mail that was clearly unwanted, but at least Una seemed to enjoy sharpening her claws on the strange items.
There was a mug waiting for him beside the coffee maker. He kept his back to Bucky as he filled it, feeling unusually shy about how much the small act pleased him. He pulled down plates and retrieved eggs from the refrigerator, setting about making omelets for them both. A quick glance around for Una and finding her nowhere to be seen made him think that Bucky must’ve let her out to gather her own breakfast from the stairwell. Another way their lives had become tangled together, just as his life had had Steve woven into it.

“Loki,” Bucky said, his voice strained. “Something happened. A bomb. I don’t…it says I did it.”

“What?” Forgetting the omelet, Loki took the phone back from Bucky and stared at the tiny screen. There was a breaking news article open with the report of a bomb and a picture of the suspect. A picture of Bucky. His eyes flew to the date, checking what he knew to be true. “This is impossible. You’ve been with me for the past twenty four hours. There is no way you were Vienna.”

As the implications sunk in, he bolted for the front door and called for Una. Moments later, he saw her flying haphazardly, her wings barely grown enough to carry her. Hurrying down the hallway, he caught her up and held her against his chest back into the safety of the apartment. The moment the door closed, he reached for the knot of magic he’d woven the night before and tugged it loose, setting the apartment adrift from any reality that SHIELD could reach. Bucky was holding the phone, his face pale as he read about the incident.

“They were there. The Avengers. To sign something.” Bucky rubbed a hand down his face. “They’re searching for me. Loki, I can’t…”

“No one will find you here, I promise. They can kick down the door and still not find you.” He smiled briefly at Bucky’s incredulous look. Setting Una down on the bar top, he moved back to the stove to finish the omelets, only barely managing to keep his composure. “This does rather put a snarl in our plans.”

“Why would someone pretend to be me?”

“You’re an easy scapegoat, I suppose.” Loki’s mind churned over the idea, unsettled with how easy it would be to place blame on HYDRA’s assassin. He doubted anyone but Steve would even question that it had been Bucky who placed the bomb. Glancing over his shoulder, he eyed the white card on the mantle, considering his options.

“They’ve…there’s a task force being assembled to find me and bring me in,” Bucky choked out. “Something about the Avengers being dismantled. None of this makes sense. What are the Accords?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“What’s going to happen to Steve?”

The hollow tone in Bucky’s voice made Loki turn around. When their eyes met, he knew they were thinking the same thing. Steve would insist on bringing Bucky in alive, maybe even by himself; he would insist on due process and justice. And that would make Steve’s position all the more precarious if the Avengers were being targeted or controlled. He took a deep breath and forced himself to focus on breakfast. They were safe and had time to develop a strategy.

“We know that someone wanted to blame you for the bomb,” Loki began, as much to keep himself from panicking as anything. “No doubt thinking no one would question it and that the authorities could hunt you for years without finding you.”
“The whole world’s gonna be looking for me now. Doubt I would’ve lasted three days out there.”

“Then they didn’t care that you were found. Or that you were thousands of miles away when it happened, even if you could prove you were on the other side of the world.” He dumped in vegetables and cheese, absently poking at a bit of onion. “They’re relying on no one finding anything that contradicts the idea that it was you and that is hardly likely.”

Bucky himself had commented on how many cameras were out in the world, invisible eyes watching them. Surely one of those cameras would’ve caught him and been found, showing him far away. Or it would have, if they hadn’t been in Siberia the day before, and for all anyone would care, unaccounted for. He cursed under his breath. Even if they accepted him as Bucky’s alibi, and the dead soldiers as evidence, that would only cause more chaos and damn Bucky in a dozen other ways. He cursed a few more names and beings for good measure. How was it that every time he tried to do something right, it ended up going wrong?

Except, he thought, surely their unknown enemy would’ve known that Bucky wouldn’t be able to hide from the whole of Midgard. Not for long. He glanced again at the white card, which remained stubbornly blank.

As he flipped the first omelet, he voiced the dark suspicion that had occurred to him. “What if it’s a trap?”

Bucky was quiet for a long time, still reading whatever news he’d been able to find. Finally, he set the phone down on the bar top. “For me or for Steve? He didn’t sign the Accords, whatever they are. Supposedly that means he’s retired or something. That’s what it says in the news.”

“He knows you’re here with me.” Frowning at the skillet, he tried to decide if Steve would assume he’d aided Bucky in his act of terrorism, or if he’d believe it was an attempt to blame Bucky for another’s actions. He doubted it would be the latter. Perhaps he’d paid too little attention to the dealings of Midgard’s governments, assuming it would never affect him.

“He’ll know I didn’t do this.” Bucky stood up, frustrated. “And he’ll do something stupid.”

Loki slid the first omelet onto a plate and passed it over to Bucky. “Eat first, then we’ll decide on a course of action. A way to tease out whoever lies behind this. If they’ve done it to draw you out, they’ll find themselves regretting it.” He waited patiently until Bucky sat down again and began to eat, then turned back to begin making his own omelet. “You said there were men gathering to hunt you, this...task force?”

“Based out of Berlin.”

“Is there any mention of Steve?”

“He was in Vienna with the other Avengers.” Bucky paused, his fork making light clicking noises. “People died.”

“Then we will see their murderer brought to justice.” Out of habit, he filled a shot glass with water and set it next to the plant for Una. She had curled up beneath the leaves, recognizing that something was wrong. With a pang, he realized what he had to do. “Una. You need to return to your hive. It won’t be safe for you to be with us.” Her usually steady chirp quavered but she didn’t protest. “I know they were relocated to one of SHIELD’s locations. I can take you to the one that I know of and I’m sure they’ll be able to take you the rest of the way.” She wanted to know if he would ever come back for her.
“Course we will,” Bucky answered for him. She chittered at them to hurry, but she didn’t sound as though she truly believed Bucky.

He finished cooking his own omelet, still thinking through the various possibilities, and settled beside Bucky to eat. With the phone between them, he scanned the text as Bucky moved from article to article, searching for even the minutest bit of information.

First, he would take Una to the Fridge. He was relatively certain they wouldn’t harm her. Then they would need to gain more insight into the task force set to hunt for Bucky, details that wouldn’t be provided in any news article available to the public. Even that was easy enough, if not simple. They needed to know what actions Steve was taking, or not taking. Loki vaguely thought to learn more about the mysterious Accords, but decided the pressing danger of men hunting for Bucky was more important.

Bucky finished his omelet and coffee first, frowning down at the phone as he read. When he’d at last exhausted the available news articles, he rubbed at his temple. “We need to get to Steve. Somehow. Try to talk to him, see if he knows more. But if they see you with me, that’ll be worse.”

He had no doubt of that and Bucky only knew a fraction of the reasons the people of Midgard had to hate him. “I won’t leave you. I can remain unseen. I’ve done it before and was never detected.”

“All right. Vienna will be too hot. Berlin too. Probably shoot me on sight. But further out, they might hesitate long enough to make a difference.”

“You’re assuming Steve will come after you.”

“I know he will. But I don’t think he’ll be alone.” Bucky frowned and reached for the phone again, this time searching for something. “Stay hidden unless it’s absolutely necessary, alright? If we’re going to figure out what’s going on, I think we’re going to have to let this play out. Maybe someone needed a scapegoat, maybe they just want me dead.” He slid the phone toward Loki with a map of a city called Bucharest on the screen. “Here. I remember it from before. There’s a safehouse, or at least, there was. It should still be there. If I’m seen, Steve will come.”

“This is dangerous,” Loki cautioned.

Bucky looked tired but he smiled. “You’ll be with me. I’ll be fine.”

“Your faith in me is undeserved,” Loki said faintly. As an afterthought, he reached out to take Bucky’s hand. “Thank you. I will try to be worthy of it.”

“We’ll need a way to communicate. Without anyone being able to listen in. Can you do that?”

Loki’s stomach dropped. He’d dreaded this moment. “There is one way I know of.” There was nothing but trust and hope in Bucky’s eyes. He hoped it would stay that way. “There is already a connection between us. It is slight, now, but it could be altered. Enough to allow us to share...thoughts. It would require reasonable proximity.” He didn’t mention that it would become closer to permanent each time he strengthened it; every time they used it.

“Perfect.” Bucky’s face split into a wide grin. “Once you’ve got Una to safety, we can head out.”

The rest of their morning was filled with a quietly intense energy. They dressed in more suitable clothing, aiming to blend in, and determined what little they needed to take with them. Bucky stayed glued to the phone while Loki coaxed Una into coming with him to the Fridge where she would be safe from whatever Hel they might bring down upon themselves. He saw evidence that SHIELD had come to the apartment building but found nothing. The watching guards outside were as mystified as
the others, all of them none the wiser as Loki slipped back into the apartment through the narrow gap in energies that SHIELD couldn’t see. Very little new information had been published by the time he’d returned, leaving them no further changes to their plan. If it could be called a plan. They were relying, in no small part, on Steve’s utter bullheadedness.

Bucky walked him through locations on the map of Bucharest, naming streets and buildings, stepping him through an escape plan. Loki would remain at a distance, watching and waiting to intervene if necessary. If the task force reached Bucky before Steve, then Loki would return them both to the apartment and they would try again in another location. They would keep trying until Steve arrived first. If necessarily, Loki would take both Bucky and Steve out of the situation. They could explain later, when they were all safe.

“It’ll work,” Bucky said finally.

Loki hoped he was right. It seemed to hinge on chance and luck, though he’d done far stupider things with much less. When there was nothing left to plan or speculate about, he tucked the white card inside a jacket pocket. Just in case.

“Ready?” He turned to face Bucky, whose face was pale but determined. “This will just take a moment.”

He reached for the connection between them and dripped magic into it, building it up from a tenuous thread into a stream of energy that stretched out between them.

Bucky shivered, eyes closing. “Did it work?”

Yes. Loki thought, directing it toward Bucky. Open your eyes.

Bucky’s eyes flew open. “I heard you. It was different. Inside my head. Can I talk to you too? That way.”

“It takes concentration. Try it. If you need time to learn, we’ll take the time.”

After a moment, Bucky frowned and then his voice came through, clear and quiet, as though speaking from across the room. This is amazing. He grinned and Loki also felt his certainty that it had worked, that Loki had heard him.

“We’re ready,” Loki breathed.

He stepped in to wrap his arms around Bucky one last time and pulled them both through a weave in space from New York City to Bucharest. They arrived on the outskirts of a busy market, hidden in the shadow of an alleyway. He pulled Bucky close for a moment, resting his forehead against Bucky’s; another reckless promise. As he stepped away, he pulled an illusion in around himself and faded from view.

Still there? Came Bucky’s voice in his mind.

Always, Loki answered silently.

Bucky nodded, steeling himself for what they were about to do. He swallowed before he stepped out of the alley and started into the crowded market, trusting Loki to follow. After nearly an hour of meandering through the market and making multiple stops at various sellers’ booths, he heard Bucky like a whisper in the back of his mind.

I’ve been made. Headed to the safehouse.
I’m behind you.

Immediately, he turned toward the location Bucky had shown him on the map. Twice more on their route, Bucky alerted him to being seen and likely recognized. He noticed cameras and police along the way, his nerves steadily winding into a buzzing tension. Bucky had asked him to stay back and watch the building from a short distance. Although he understood why Bucky wanted a lookout, he immensely disliked being separated. He fell back, stationing himself on an adjacent rooftop where he could see a wide swath of the building.

They were found sooner than Loki had expected. He didn’t see Steve enter the building but movement on the roof caught his eye and he recognized a familiar figure, Sam Wilson. No sooner had he decided to alert Bucky to the presence of the Avenger when he felt a shiver along the connection between them and knew immediately that Steve was there; he could feel the echo of an aching, deep-seated longing.

There were more figures on the roof now. Loki tensed as he watched men connected to ropes climb over the sides to come down the building. It unfolded quickly with the sounds of shattering glass and gunfire. He focused all his attention on the sliver of connection, feeling for any indication that Bucky was in distress or pain; there was only resignation and regret. When Bucky came out of the building, leaping over a low balcony wall to clear the distance to a neighboring building, Loki’s heart was hammering painfully. A second later, he was propelled into motion by a black figure seeming to come from nowhere and determined to attack Bucky. He’d barely reached the edge of his rooftop when Steve vaulted out of the safehouse building in pursuit. Bucky had no more idea who the figure in black was than he did, Loki could feel that much. This was an unknown element, something they hadn’t planned for. Something that could ruin everything. He followed them down from the roof to the street then into a tunnel humming with traffic, keeping back but within sight. Bucky kept to their planned route as much as possible, moving to block aerial attacks and minimize how much of the task force could close in around him, trying to ensure that it was Steve who caught him.

An explosion obscured the opening of the tunnel. He felt as much as heard Bucky cry out in surprise and pain. Racing out of the debris and dust, he realized he was mere feet behind Steve, who was racing to Bucky’s defense against the man in black. It was over. He could hear vehicles closing in around them and one of Iron Man’s suits thudded down onto the asphalt.

Stay with Steve, came Bucky’s voice, urgent and low. Find out what they know. Like who the hell that guy is.

I won’t leave you. Loki clenched his fists, frustrated and helpless as the men forced Bucky down onto the ground.

Bucky kept his face down, his posture unthreatening. I’ll play nice. Won’t give ‘em any reasons to shoot me. Just stick to Steve. We need more information if we’re going to figure this out.

Following Steve was bittersweet. He hated leaving Bucky with the men and was horrified to see the containment cell they’d clearly designed with him in mind, but it had been so long since he’d seen Steve that he nursed his own quiet ache of longing as they traveled.

The man in black was a king of sorts. Loki barely followed the exchange; he believed Bucky had killed his father in Vienna. But Steve was right, Bucky was alive and that was no small thing to be grateful for, given the number of people who seemed determined to kill him. He followed along in their shadows, watching over his shoulder as Bucky was taken away to a more secure location while Steve was lead into series of glass walled offices. They were met by a sharp, professional blonde that Loki didn’t know and Tony Stark, who seemed about as thrilled to see Steve as Loki was to see Stark.
Loki drifted toward the monitor showing Bucky trapped in the containment cell while Steve and Tony talked, only pulling his attention away from the screen when the conversation escalated into an argument.

“This isn’t a jaunt to Jotunheim. You can’t pull that kind of stunt anymore,” Tony snapped, dropping into a chair at the end of the table. “Forget the tons of helicarrier you dumped into the Potomac and the thousand lawsuits coming out of that. Your bullshit with Loki is enough to justify the Accords.”

Steve visibly bristled. “Don’t bring Loki into this, Tony. The Accords aren’t about Loki anymore than they’re about oversight or management, whatever you want to call it so it looks better on paper.”

“You.” Tony pointed an accusatory finger. “Are off the reservation. Not just today. It’s a permanent state of being for you. You’re lucky you weren’t imprisoned or executed on Asgard, for Christ’s sake. And now you go and pull this kind of stunt? One of these days, you’re going to get yourself into a mess that I won’t be able to get you out of.”

“I’m not asking you to get me out of anything! I’m asking you not to lock a man away for mass murder and an act of terrorism without due process.”

Loki stared, perplexed, as the argument continued. What on earth had Steve done that could’ve warranted execution? When had he gone to Asgard? How? He couldn’t imagine a single scenario in which Odin would’ve welcomed mortals into Asgard, let alone extended an invitation. The argument ceased abruptly, with Steve storming from the room and Tony staying behind, looking equally angry. Loki followed Steve again. Another room, more monitors. This time, there was a man trying to talk to Bucky. The blonde woman from before turned on the audio so they could all hear. Beyond the rear glass barrier, Natasha sat listening to the multiple conversations going on in the command center.

“Why would the task force release this photo to begin with?” Steve asked the room.

Loki felt a stirring of pride and relief, realizing that Steve was following the same line of thought that he and Bucky had also gone down, that Steve didn’t believe Bucky had set the bomb in Vienna.

“You’re saying someone framed him to find him,” the blonde said.

Sam spoke up. “Steve, we looked for the guy for two years and found nothing.”

“We didn’t bomb the UN. That turns a lot of heads.”

“That doesn’t guarantee whoever framed him would get him. It guarantees that we would.”

Steve turned back to the screen, new tension in his shoulders. “Yeah.”

When the lights went out and the screens turned black, the rooms were silent for a long moment, then burst into a frenzy of action. Loki stared dumbly at the empty screen, hearing Steve and the others leaving. He felt frantically for the connection to Bucky, felt a sudden spike of fear, and then he heard as much as felt Bucky scream.

Without knowing the layout of the building, he had to find his way in skips and jumps, trusting in the connection to Bucky to guide him. He knew he was close when he felt the connection suddenly go blank. Not dead, but empty of emotion or thought, as though buzzing with static like the empty television screens. He moved on instinct, holding onto the thread of magic between them until he came to a room littered with bodies of men lying still on the ground. Beyond the room, he saw the man who had been talking to Bucky and Bucky himself, his face and eyes blank.

Loki threw himself forward, grabbing the man by the throat and lifting him off the ground. “What
“Soldat,” the man gasped, pulling at Loki’s wrists.

Bucky stepped forward, his left arm rising to attack. Loki reached out with his other hand, not reaching for Bucky but reaching through the connection between them. In the space between heartbeats, he stepped into Bucky’s mind.

His ears rang with buzzing static, loud enough that it was a shrill shrieking inside his own skull. There was sound and noise; thousands of voices or perhaps only one, fragmented and multiplied. Fighting his way toward what felt like the center of a hurricane, Loki searched for the anchor spot they’d created before, where he would always be able to find Bucky when he needed to. There, surrounded by the screaming and the senseless howling wind, he saw Bucky strapped into the chair from the compound in Siberia, his mouth open in an endless, soundless scream. Realized what had happened, what the man had done, Loki reached for the straps and bars holding and surrounding Bucky. They crumbled to dust as he wrenched them away, breaking off pieces, desperate to get Bucky free from the torture device. When the last piece of the crown fell away, the screaming stopped.

In its place came a terrible, still silence. The Bucky in his arms flickered, fading in and out, color draining from him like ink from a picture. Something had gone wrong; there was a consequence he hadn’t foreseen. He hadn’t freed Bucky, he’d lost him. Reeling himself back out into his own mind, he turned to the man with cold fury. At his side, Bucky stood motionless and blank, no longer able to accept orders from the stranger. Small mercies.

“Who are you?” The man whispered harshly.

Footsteps came around the corner. Loki turned to see Steve and Sam Wilson enter the corridor at the far end of the room. He saw shock and then fear flash across Steve’s face. Above them, the whole command was mobilizing. There was no time to explain. As he moved to let the man drop, he saw a book clutched in his hands. A red book with a black star; an impossible coincidence. He yanked the book free of the man’s grip before tossing him aside.

“Loki, wait!” Steve shouted.

Loki caught one last glimpse of Steve as he sidestepped around Bucky, pulling him tight and twisting them both through space back to the safety of the New York apartment. Bucky was little more than dead weight. His eyes were open but there was nothing in them, no spark of intelligence, no hint of life or emotion.

He tossed the book onto the couch before pulling Bucky’s arm over his shoulder and half carrying, half dragging him into the bedroom. Ideas and possibilities darted through his mind, evaluated and discarded as easily as they came. He’d torn something loose inside Bucky’s mind. Something he hadn’t known was there, hadn’t seen before, but had lain dormant beneath his memories. It was part of what HYDRA had done to him, but what was it? He waivered on the edge of calling for Heimdall and Thor. If Steve had raised Odin’s ire against Midgard then Asgard’s doors were doubly closed to him.

Settling Bucky on the bed was no different than moving a life-sized, breathing doll. He could wait, perhaps, and see if Bucky pulled out of his fugue on his own. There was risk in that approach; too much. It made Loki uneasy.

Carefully, he smoothed Bucky’s hair away from his face. He was well beyond what he knew and what he’d been taught. All that was left to him was intuition and guesswork. Those had served him
well enough with Steve though. He would have to try. The connection he’d been so loathe to let exist between them seemed fragile and precious now that he would likely lose it forever. If he failed, or caused even more damage, he would have no choice but to take Bucky back to Asgard and beg Odin, promise anything, submit to any punishment, if the healers could bring him back.

He shoved down his fear, pushing it to the furthest reaches of his mind. The working he’d laid into Steve’s blood and bones had been far simpler. He’d intended to undo the hidden damage done by Asgardian magic by filling it with the steady, ancient magic buried in Midgard itself. It served as a shield and a grounding, keeping Steve from harm. With Steve, he’d gone slowly enough to ensure none of his own magic mixed with the magic of Midgard and he hadn’t needed to know the intricacies of that borrowed magic. He’d never needed to enter Steve’s mind. Knitting Bucky back together would be far more difficult. This damage had been done by men, though it was tainted with traces of magic. Accidents, perhaps, from the many experiments Bucky must have been subjected to during his captivity. He knew magic could be used to heal mortals and he knew he could use magic to stabilize Bucky’s mind long enough for him to heal. He simply had to find a way.

“If only you’d found yourself to the doorstep of a more capable healer than myself,” he lamented. “I should’ve stayed with you. I meant to protect you and I failed.” He smiled tentatively, feeling a hot prickling at the corner of his eyes. “I will never listen to you again.”

Since he didn’t know how long it would take, he gathered supplies first: water and any food that would keep and could be eaten easily. He wished briefly for Una to fill the unnatural silence, wished he hadn’t returned her to SHIELD in the first place. As gently as possible, he stripped Bucky down to his underwear, then stripped down himself to maximize skin to skin contact. He pulled one of the blankets up over them both to keep them warm.

“I promised I would try.” He said it as an apology for what might happen and what else he might do wrong in his attempt to fix what had happened. “I hope you can forgive me.”

He laid his head on the pillow beside Bucky’s, letting his hand fall over Bucky’s heart so he could feel each beat beneath his palm. The connection made it easy to close his eyes and slip back into the stillness of Bucky’s mind. He took in impressions and feelings, trying to pull meanings from formless impulses of energy. There was the feel of a vast emptiness, of darkness that extended forever. No memories, no coherent thought, only the silence. He refused to believe that Bucky’s mind had simply been wiped clean of identity. He felt for the steady anchor again, drawing from his own memory the image that Bucky had conjured of him and Steve at their World Fair.

A pinprick of light was all that came out of the darkness, but it was something. Loki cradled it tenderly in both hands. If he could feed energy into the spark, he thought the memory would emerge. Taking care to only use his own magic as a conduit, he reached down into the earth, beneath the city, deeper and deeper until he felt the steady hum of Midgard’s magic. It was more difficult to reach here than the abandoned castle. He pulled it up by sheer determination, channeling it through his own body, through his fingertips into the tiny drop of light.

Gradually the light expanded until it filled his hands. He urged more energy into his hands, reaching deeper into the earth. As the light continued, it took on shape and contour. Details of a uniform began to emerge, then a torso, arms and legs. It was perilously fragile and translucent, like the ghost of Bucky standing before him, but it was there, and beside it, the form of Steve took shape as barely more than a vapor.

Once he had the full form of Bucky, he worked to anchor that memory, pouring more magic into it in an effort to solidify the forms. From here, he could reach out to other pieces of Bucky’s identity and begin to rejoin them, like piecing together one of Steve’s puzzles.
He’d nearly finished filling the ghost of Bucky with swirling, dark green energy when he was surprised to see that other shapes had emerged from the darkness. There were hundreds of them, shadowed and flickering; there one moment and gone the next. He brushed tendrils of magic toward one of the shapes, catching it long enough to illuminate it, and saw another version of Bucky, this one mute and stony-faced with longer hair and hollow eyes. They were all fragments of Bucky, he realized. As though Bucky’s mind had shattered into pieces when Loki had torn the machine apart.

The sheer number of them was overwhelming and in the time his attention had wandered, energy had drained from the central image of Bucky, leaving him vague as a phantom again. He needed more energy and he needed to move faster to bind all of the pieces back to the anchor point. Indecision seized him, doubts and doubts upon doubts creeping into his thoughts. Was he doing the right thing? If he went faster, there was no way he could be certain none of his own magic - of himself - bled into Bucky as well. They would be bound together for the rest of their lives. Bucky would be forced to accept the connection as permanent without knowing or being able to agree. He’d taken so much from Bucky already, taking away his choice in this felt like yet another betrayal.

And once Bucky was gone, as mortal lives tended to be terribly brief, he would be left with that empty connection like an invisible wound for as long as he lived.

The realization hit him like a blow. He sunk to his knees, exhausted and overwhelmed. He’d thought, all this time, that he’d been protecting Steve by denying that connection, denying even wanting a connection at all, but in truth, he’d only been protecting himself against the inevitable loss of it.

“I can’t,” he whispered, hating himself for his own weakness. “I can’t. Bucky. I’m sorry.”

Energy was steadily draining from the shape of Bucky in front of him and the whisper of Steve was already gone. He was losing ground and faced with horrible choices. He could give up and place his hope in Asgard’s mercy or he could damn them both to being bound together, without Bucky’s consent.

Miserably, he stared up at the mute face, already disappearing into the dark silence. “Please tell me what to do. I haven’t made a single good decision in my life. I’ve tried so hard and still done everything wrong. Please.”

He knew there would be no answer. Bucky was in pieces all around him, unable to hold onto his identity and unaware of Loki’s plight. If he gave up now, he would have to tell Steve what had happened. He would have to tell Steve that he’d given up on saving Bucky. The same fierce protectiveness he’d felt at the bunker in Siberia welled up in his chest, spurring him back onto his feet.

He placed both hands against the fading green outline of Bucky’s face and braced himself. “Forgive me.”

This time he reached down into the earth and gathered more energy than he could handle. It roared up into him like a raging river and spilled out into Bucky, bringing him back into focus in moments. The magic burned through his veins, lapping green flames around his fingers, over his arms and shoulders. He felt it sliding over his scalp, dripping from his hair to spatter around him. Each drop illuminated another ghost of Bucky and he saw them begin to take form as well, drifting closer as the energy pulled them in. He was losing his sense of self, blurring at the edges until he couldn’t tell where he ended and Bucky began. Veins of gold writhed within the green earth magic, his own magic inexorably mixing with Midgard’s.

Deep within Midgard’s heart, he touched a current of magic that blazed white hot and tore him
utterly out of himself, setting him adrift and senseless. Time and space no longer had meaning. He might have seen galaxies spiraling around him. He felt rather than saw Asgard as a brilliant golden knot of energies. It was suddenly the simplest thing to do to reach out and touch that knot, feeling the whole of Asgard beating and breathing against his fingers. Further away was Jotunheim; a tangle of deep, cold blue that burned with a strangely familiar energy. He touched that too, curious and unafraid. He was beyond fear, beyond anything but the white energy that wove around him, stretching and curving around the Realms like the branches of a great tree. Other branches stretched off into vast regions of unknown and he yearned to explore them, to ride the current of energy to the ends of existence and tumble over into the beyond. He felt everything; he understood everything. The worries he’d had before was laughable now, so small they were insignificant.

A voice said his name. Soft, gentle. A woman’s voice. He paused, compelled to listen in spite of his desire to continue on. It was familiar, but no name or face came to him. None of that was important here. Still, the voice tugged insistently at him.

“Loki,” the voice said, as clear as if the unknown speaker was standing beside him. “It’s done. Come home.”

The meaning of home came to him slowly. A place. Four walls. A spot of floor where a banana plant had been. And a face, the idea of someone waiting for him. Gradually, the universe around him began to fold, though he knew he was the one shrinking and collapsing down into the insignificant form he’d had before he’d touched that deep vein of energy, losing all of the knowledge and understanding as he diminished. He opened his eyes to a sepia toned crowd of people frozen in a moment of excitement, with booths and colorful banners hung all around them. The man standing in front of him had skin that glowed with a hint green and gold.

He smiled like the curve of a galaxy. “Loki?”

Loki pulled out of Bucky’s mind with a deep, gulping gasp for air. They’d kicked off the blanket at some point but he still felt as though burning embers were smoldering in his veins. Memories jarred into place. He turned to Bucky, putting his hands on his face and chest and arms, feeling for anything wrong or out of place.

“Hey! Buy a guy a drink first,” Bucky laughed.

“You’re...you’re here. I thought,” Loki swallowed at the memory. “I thought I’d lost you.”

Bucky tipped his head and shrugged a shoulder. “I’m surprisingly hard to get rid of.” Lines crinkled around his eyes, his expression turning thoughtful. “I thought I saw…”

“Yes?”

“The whole universe.” He looked at Loki with unabashed wonder. “Just for a second.”

Loki pulled back, suddenly remembering and conscious of the connection he could feel between them. He would be an open book now, all of his thoughts and fears there for Bucky to know and feel. He was terrified of what he would see in Bucky’s eyes when he realized it was there and what it meant. Cringing, he searched Bucky’s face, holding his breath.

“It started as a frown, a furrow between his brows. Then his eyes began to widen and his lips parted. Loki could feel him touching the connection, feeling it out and reaching through it.

“I had no choice,” he said plaintively. “I thought I would lose you if I didn’t. I’m sorry. There’s no way to undo it. I’m sorry.”
Bucky made a strangled sound in his throat before he threw his arms around Loki and held on so tightly that Loki struggled to breathe. He felt the moment Bucky sensed his difficulty and loosened his hold, responding to him without effort or thought. He put it off as long as possible, trying to stop the swell of emotions that weren’t his; they were Bucky’s and he had no right to take them. What he expected was fear or anger, even sadness, but there was none. He felt overwhelming relief and gratitude.

Stunned, he forgot to try to stop the flow of emotions and then he was drowning in them. Bucky, who had been nameless and faceless for decades, nothing but an object and a weapon for HYDRA; less than human. Bucky, who’d struggled so desperately to communicate even simple thoughts through the maze of damage left by HYDRA, who’d spent years screaming to be heard inside his own mind. Loki felt all of that hunger for contact, for a connection with another human being. To Bucky, the ribbon of magic binding them together was nothing short of a miracle. A miracle to be understood, to be known and seen, to feel human again.

Loki closed his eyes and held Bucky tight, burying his hands in Bucky’s hair. He knew Bucky would be feeling all of his own worries and insecurities, everything he’d kept hidden. His guilt and self-loathing, how terrified he was of the day when there would be nothing but emptiness where Bucky had been. Shuddering with a mixture of shame and catharsis, he could feel Bucky inside his mind, feel how gentle he was with the shambled ruins of Loki’s emotional landscape. His greatest fear was to be seen and known and found lacking, to be fully and completely rejected. But reflected back at him was only the same rock-steady dedication that Steve must’ve known in Bucky, the same quality that had driven Bucky to follow Steve into their terrible War.

Bucky simply loved him.

They stayed locked together for hours. A gradual equilibrium emerged as they learned the edges and boundaries of the connection, how to pull closer, how to give each other space when it became too intense. Loki felt raw with the vulnerability of being utterly open and exposed, but the sting of embarrassment faded over time. He felt Bucky’s emotional shift before he stirred to move, reluctantly letting go of Loki enough to look at him.

“We need to talk to Steve.”

Somehow, Loki wasn’t surprised that Bucky could still surprise him. “Of course. I’m sure he’ll want to know you’re alright.” His voice trailed off as he realized that wasn’t what Bucky meant.

Bucky’s smile turned wicked. “I need him to be okay with this as soon as possible because the sex is gonna be incredible.”

Loki caught a flash of what Bucky was thinking and swallowed, hard. His voice came out with an undignified squeak. “Oh.”

“Jacket pocket, right?” Bucky rolled away, hunting for the jacket Loki had been wearing. He found it quickly, going through the pockets to find the white card. “How long has it been? I’m starving.”

“I don’t know.” Loki’s mouth was still dry from what he’d glimpsed of Bucky’s intentions. He felt the connection fade without direct contact and was both relieved and disappointed. “A day? Perhaps longer. I haven’t paid attention. It’s possible he’s still in Germany.” Now that he was fully awake, he realized he was also quite hungry.

Bucky hurried into the kitchen and returned with a pen cap stuck between his teeth, climbing back onto the bed with the card and pen in his hands. “What do we say?”
“You’re more likely to get a response than I am. He may have thought I was kidnapping you rather than rescuing you.” After hesitating for a moment, Loki reached out to touch Bucky’s knee, relieved to feel the connection strengthen again. Bucky shivered a little and set the card on his other knee, transferring the pen to his left hand so he could take Loki’s hand with his right; he was just as thrilled to feel the connection expand as Loki.

“I know,” Bucky said, grinning. He wrote in slanted, blocky letters, then held it up for Loki to read.

*Come home.*

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't completely ignore Civil War but this was never intended to be a Civil War fic, so this is my compromise.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Mood music: Let's Hurt Tonight - OneRepublic

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Brooklyn apartment was quiet and empty when Steve let himself in. Aches and pains he’d ignored since leaving Siberia seemed to redouble their efforts, making him head for the nearest seat and sink into an armchair with a strained sigh. He felt strangely heavy, given how much they’d stripped away from him; shield, uniform, everything that symbolized Captain America. Lucky to escape prison, he’d been told. Only let go to avoid public outcry and scandal, he’d been told. This was a quiet retirement where he would be closely monitored at all times, for the rest of his life.

Lucky seemed an odd choice of words.

As silver linings went, clearing Bucky’s name of the bombing in Vienna and finding an ally in the new king of Wakanda were pretty good. T’Challa had promised to champion amendments to the Accords that would address cases like Bruce and Bucky, where there were too many complications for simplistic agreements to cover and where, frankly, men like Thaddeus Ross could not be trusted. He wasn’t allowed contact with the rest of the Avengers for now, except Natasha, their SHIELD liaison. Another condition of his quiet retirement that was probably for the best.

He’d only come back to Brooklyn because there was nowhere else to go and then he might disappear too. If he couldn’t be Captain America, he’d try being someone else for awhile. It couldn’t be worse. Maybe he’d find a way back to Jotunheim to live in the caves and paint for the kids. The thought of leaving, or of packing and moving again made his bruises twinge. Maybe he could wait until he was healed. A cup of tea, a solid night’s sleep, a book to read. All good ideas. The book with the card seemed conspicuous on the shelf. If he were being honest with himself, he’d admit that he didn’t want to pick up the book and look inside, didn’t want to see a plain white card with nothing written on it. Because that would mean Loki had moved on and had taken Bucky with him, both of them lost to Steve forever.

Loki had come to rescue Bucky, he had no doubt of that, despite others’ skepticism. He’d seen the proof in the terror and fury on Loki’s face before he’d taken Bucky and vanished. Steve hadn’t been able to keep Bucky safe but Loki could. No one could find even a trace of Loki anywhere on earth now, no matter how many teams they sent to search every place Loki had ever been. For all Steve knew, he and Bucky were worlds away by now. So much the better if they were; it would be safer that way.

A ping alerted him to an incoming message on his phone. Natasha’s name flashed up on the screen. Incoming.

It was enough to get him out of the armchair and start the kettle for tea. He might have lost the shield and his purpose in life, but he still had his manners. There were two mugs waiting when Natasha knocked on the apartment door. She stepped past him with her hands tucked in her jacket pockets, the usual inscrutable smile on her face.

“How was your flight back?” He waved her toward the kitchen table. “How’s Tony?”
“Oh, you know Tony. He gets a little crazy when he’s away from Pepper too long. They’re holed up in a beach house in Hawaii for awhile, getting some R and R.” She settled into one of the chairs and reached for her mug to twirl the string from the tea bag around her index finger. “You look a little rough.”

“Yeah, well…” He didn’t know how to answer that.

“Tony looks like he went a few rounds too. Wouldn’t tell me what happened other than to throw your shield at the wall.”

“Not mine. Not anymore.” Easing himself down into the chair, he shrugged wearily. “We followed Zemo to a decommissioned missile silo in Siberia. He had a surprise waiting for us.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’re telling me Zemo managed to beat up Captain America and Iron Man?”

“No, um, we,” he gestured to the bruises on his face. “We did this to each other.”

If she was surprised, it didn’t show. “Care to tell me why you decided to use each other as punching bags?”

“Zemo had evidence. Footage. Proof that Bucky killed Howard and Maria Stark. He showed us. Then left us to take each other out, I guess.” It still turned his stomach. He’d suspected, but knowing and seeing was different. Knowing that HYDRA must have chosen the location of the hit in order to have video footage, as though requiring Bucky to provide proof of kill on top of what they’d made him do; it was voyeuristic and disgusting. He didn’t blame Tony for being furious, even if he was more furious at Steve for not telling him than anything else.

“That’s what you fought about, his parents?”

“And what happens to Bucky now that Tony knows he killed them. About how I hadn’t told him that I knew about it, how I don’t listen to him. About not signing the Accords. About Loki. And everything else he’s been wanting to get off his chest until now.” There were parts of it Steve hadn’t even understood. Names he didn’t know, references he hadn’t gotten. It didn’t seem important to memorize every grievance Tony had leveled against him when half of them weren’t really about him at all.

Slowly, Natasha nodded. She picked up her mug and blew over the surface of the liquid before taking a sip. “Zemo’s in custody. Tony’s on probation, you’re retired. Barnes and Loki have vanished off the face of the earth. Wanda and the others are still being processed, trying to figure out where they want to go from here. T’Challa made them an offer.” She pulled a face. “Almost breaking even isn’t a total loss, but this isn’t how I wanted it to go.”

“What about the Accords?”

“On hold. Pending someone figuring out what the hell we’re supposed to do next. There are protests in a dozen countries about Sokovia and Lagos, lawsuits over the helicarriers in DC, damage from the Chitauri is still being litigated. SHIELD’s hiring more lawyers than anything else right now. All that anger and grief has to go somewhere. People are afraid. They want to believe someone or something can stop bad things from happening.” She took another sip before setting the mug down. “We both know better than that, but what can you do?”

He gave her a half smile. “Hey, I’m retired. I can’t do anything now.”

“I’d better not hear about any new masked vigilantes,” she warned. “Got enough of those already.”
“Thought I might take up fishing.”

“Well, if you decide you want a companion...something.” She pulled her phone out of her pocket and thumbed over the screen a few times before sliding it across the table. “Someone dropped her off at the Fridge with a note asking SHIELD to reunite her with the hive. And that she likes blackberries.”

There was a picture of a small animal carrier on the screen. Through the mesh on the side, Steve could make out what looked like Una huddled inside. His heart sank. This was the proof he’d been waiting for that Loki was gone for good. He couldn’t think of any other reason he would’ve left Una behind. Trying to keep his disappointment from showing on his face, he shook his head. “She’s better off with her hive.”

“You should at least come visit. Say hi.”

“Yeah, of course. Of course I’ll come visit her.” It felt like one more in a line of promises he was doomed to break, like keeping Bucky safe. “Am I still allowed in at the Fridge or is that off limits too?”

She rolled her eyes, but it was fond rather than irritated. “I’ll get you a visitor pass.”

“It’ll be good, you know. Peace and quiet.” He looked around the apartment while he drank tea. “Haven’t had a lot of time off since the forties. Probably due.” He saw the chastisement coming and chuckled. “No running off to another planet this time, I swear. Wouldn’t know how to get there anyway.”

“If you get bored, I could probably throw a few low-key jobs your way. Strictly off the books, of course.”

Shaking his head quickly, he set the mug down. “Wouldn’t want to get you in trouble with Ross. Want a cookie or something? I think I have something around here.” He hunted through the cabinets and a couple of the boxes he still hadn’t unpacked before he found a tin of shortbread cookies.

Natasha accepted one with a smile and dunked it into her tea before biting it in half. “SHIELD’s planning on calling off the hunt for Loki soon. Wherever he’s gone, they’ve got no trail to follow.”

“No point in wasting their time.” He wondered at the sudden change in subject and eyed her suspiciously. “You’re probably not supposed to tell me that sort of thing.”

She gave him an indelicate snort and reached for another cookie. “How are you doing with him being gone?” The unspoken with Bucky hung in the air between them, making the silence heavier. She seemed to give up on getting an answer far sooner than usual. “I just want to know you’re okay. I know you two were pretty complicated. The whole thing was pretty complicated, actually.”

Smiling stiffly, he tried to think of a good answer. Or any answer at all. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to scream or if he felt absolutely nothing. “I hope they’re...I hope he’s safe. That’s all. Really.”

She watched him while she ate her cookie, looking for all the world as if she were trying to see into his brain. “You know, or maybe you don’t. I’ve been seeing Maria for awhile now. Off and on, I guess. Since SHIELD went down. It was simple, even easy. Right up until it wasn’t.”

He blinked. He hadn’t known. Now that he could look back and think about, he still wouldn’t have believed it if it wasn’t Natasha telling him. “Oh?”
“She decided that I deserved better. Or some bullshit like that. Something about people like us not getting happy endings and now she’s trying to hook me up with Sam.” She sighed, blowing a lock of hair out of her face, “Made me think though. Thought maybe she was trying to let me down gently, but that’s not really Maria.”

“Not really,” he said slowly. His brain was stuck on Natasha hooking up with Sam and he thought he should be saying something about that part, in Sam’s defense.

“I think she’s trying to push me away because she doesn’t want to have anyone that close. Because it’s a liability or a risk or half a dozen other reasons it makes her life harder to give a damn about something other than the mission. She’s always been married to the job and I respect that about her. I wouldn’t have her any other way.”

“Nat, are you okay?”

Her smile was warm this time, if a bit brittle. “With Loki, do you think you’ll wish you’d fought harder? Tried one more time. I don’t know. Do you think you’ll regret the way it ended?”

For as casual as she asked the questions, each one felt like a punch to the gut. What would he regret? Never getting a chance to say goodbye; a dozen conversations they’d never had; never being able to apologize. Never being able to make it right between them, or between him and Bucky. There was so much to regret that the list felt endless. There were moments when he regretted all of it, all the way back to knocking Thor out of the way and getting hit by Amora’s sex spell. But he knew she wasn’t really asking for him, she was asking because she didn’t know what regrets might lie in store for her if she didn’t fight for Maria now.

“Yes,” he said finally. “I have regrets. But I can’t make anyone want to be with me. I made my choices and Loki made his and in the end, we didn’t choose each other. Maybe it’ll be different for you and Maria. I hope it will be.”

“What’s the one thing you wish you’d told him?”

“Just one?” He shook his head, laughing a little under his breath. “I never told him how I felt. Maybe if I had...maybe we both would’ve made different choices.” Reaching out, he took her hand and gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. “That’s my advice. Tell Maria how you feel. That’s the only way you’ll know you did everything you could.”

“Wish I had one of those fancy cards. She’s dodging my calls.” She squeezed his hand back for a second, then pushed away from the table and stood up, holding on as long as possible. “Come see me. And Una, that’s her name, right?”

“Trying to get me to leave my apartment?” He teased.

“There’s a whole world out there, Steve.”

As long as he didn’t mind constant surveillance.

He saw her out of the apartment, standing with his forehead against the closed door long after she was gone. Maybe Una wouldn’t want to stay with her hive after all. It felt like a weakness to wish for that, to want to hold on to a small piece of what he’d had with Loki. He had a new appreciation for why Frigga had kept Loki’s rooms intact; they were all she had left. If he thought about it, he’d let her down as well, after she’d risked herself to get him back from Jotunheim.

In an attempt to occupy his mind with happier thoughts, he started on the rest of the unpacked boxes and moved the book containing the messenger card at least half a dozen times, never sure about
where he wanted it to be. He wasn’t sure he’d ever finish reading the book. Once he opened it and saw the blank card, it would really be over. Until then, he could imagine opening it up and seeing Loki’s writing on it, saying goodbye or a hundred other things they’d never have a chance to say to each other. He opted for take-out for dinner and found himself in bed at a respectable hour, staring up at the ceiling.

Maybe they were happy together; Loki and Bucky. He wanted to be happy for them, if they were. He could have misinterpreted what he’d seen on the video, could have jumped to the wrong conclusions. Bucky had looked healthy when Steve had found him in Bucharest and that was something. Loki had at least taken care of him. There was a weird mix of guilt and relief in that. If he’d been wrong, if he’d attacked Loki for no reason but his own temper, his own hurt feelings, then they were both better off without him.

He thought about what Maria had said about Loki being tortured and wondered if Loki and Bucky simply had more in common. If they shared experiences he didn’t and couldn’t understand. Somehow every positive aspect he thought of seemed to have a dark, unpleasant underbelly.

With a groan, he pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. “Congratulations on finding someone with an equally tragic backstory. Pretty sure they don’t make cards for that.” Scrubbing his face with his hands, he rolled onto his side and tried to force his mind clear so that he could sleep. The apartment was so empty that the silence seemed impossibly loud, like a pressure bearing down on his ears.

It was going to be a very long quiet retirement.

Around three in the morning, he managed to fall asleep only to find himself wide awake again at six. Once he’d gone for a run, done enough push ups and sit ups that he lost count, and eaten breakfast, he realized he had nothing planned for the rest of the day. No meetings, no emergencies, no briefings, no training. His entire day, and his entire life, stretched out in front of him, barren and empty. The lack of anything to occupy himself was paralyzing. Natasha was probably expecting him to crack within twenty four hours and take her up on the offer of finding something unofficial. She was probably right. He really should check on Una, at least, and make sure she was happy back with her hive.

That was all the justification he needed to get showered and dressed. He sent Natasha a text to let her know he was coming. Her response only contained a single emoji and minimal gloating, which showed a surprising amount of restraint. He made one stop for lunch along the way, grateful that being on the bike required all of his attention. True to her word, Natasha was waiting with a bright blue visitor badge when he came through the front doors.

“How about a road trip? I saw one online the other day, supposed to take you to see every major attraction in the US. Not a bad way to kill a few weeks.”

“I’ll be sure to look it up when I get home.” It wasn’t a terrible idea, even if he doubted she was seriously suggesting he follow through. There was far too much trouble he might get into if he went driving across the country. “I could find a cabin in the woods somewhere.”

“Because that’s not the setup for a hundred different horror movies.”

“Compared to an underground bunker full of...” He grimaced at the memory of what they’d found in
Siberia. The single empty chamber had been far more haunting than the ones with dead soldiers. Had the empty one been Bucky’s? Could that have been his fate, executed in his sleep, if he hadn’t been sent to Washington? “I’ll take my chances with the cabin.”

Natasha pressed a comforting hand to his shoulder. “From the records we found, they weren’t good guys. We’re lucky HYDRA left them on ice.”

It was cold comfort, when he knew Bucky might have been one of them once. Might have known them and fought with them, like he’d fought with Steve and the Commandos. Steve shivered at the idea, wondering how much of Bucky’s time had been a dark, twisted mirror of his previous life. Those thoughts kept him occupied for the remainder of the elevator ride and Natasha seemed content to let him brood. She pulled a set of earplugs from her pocket as she swiped for access to the Maintenance area, waving him through the door.

The buzzing of the hive was as deafening as he remembered, but the hive itself had grown significantly, glittering like an enormous mass of jewels spreading over the wall and arching out into the space. There were at least two technicians in lab coats with handheld scanners moving slowly around the hive taking readings. He stood at the edge of the room, realizing how hopeless it would be for him to identify Una out of the milling mass of sprites when they were all nearly identical to him. She would have to see him and choose to come out to see him. He balled his fists in his jacket pockets, trying to stifle his disappointment. His record of anyone, or anything, choosing him when better options were available hadn’t ever been good. He wondered how long he could stand there before it became awkward and he had to apologize for wasting Natasha’s time.

Feigning interest in a particularly intricate segment of the hive, he moved closer to peer behind the outer support structure into the smaller lacework of opalescent material. There were groupings or clusters of what looked like cut and polished gemstones with irregular facets tucked up into the angles and grooves. He curled his fingers in his pockets to resist the urge to reach up and touch one of them, unsure if it might damage them.

A few sprites buzzed passed him, barely taking notice. Maybe they’d grown used to having humans around now that they were welcome within SHIELD’s facilities. He knew he should stop and visit the lab where they studied the sprites, and where they’d been working on one of the chairs used to brainwash Bucky into the Winter Soldier. His mouth twisted at the memory of a similar chair in the Siberian compound. But Bucky was safe now; safe and gone. Nothing SHIELD learned about the chair would be needed. Maybe SHIELD would let him come work at the Fridge and study the sprites instead of being Captain America.

With a tired sigh, he ducked his head to avoid knocking into the hive as he carefully made his way back out toward Natasha. When he cleared the boundary, he saw one of the sprites come down a support beam in leaps and hops. Its wings were shorter and smaller than the others, making him wonder if they were growing back after being damaged when the Avengers had encountered them. But as it came closer, then leapt from the beam to fly directly at him, he recognized the unmistakable attitude in its chatter, undoubtedly berating him for being late.

“Una?” He caught her and she kept scolding him even as she clambered up his arm to tuck herself against the collar of his jacket. Her stunted wings fluttered beneath his ear. “What happened to your wings?”

The answer was a long, dramatic series of chirps and squeaks he couldn’t understand, but he got enough from her expressive body language to guess it had been terrifying for her. Once she was done telling him the story, she sprawled over his shoulder with a melodramatic sigh.

“How do you like being back with the others?” Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her wings
flex as she answered, rising and falling like an unconscious indicator of her mood. He thought she sounded as conflicted as he was; glad to be home, but missing the home she’d had with Loki. “Yeah,” he told her softly. “I know that feeling.”

He caught himself before he asked about Bucky, since she must’ve known him too. Whatever she might want to tell him, he wouldn’t be able to understand. He’d gotten used to not knowing what had happened to Bucky before, or if not used to it, he’d at least grown accustomed to the gnawing guilt. This time, at least, he wasn’t leaving Bucky behind in a frozen chasm or an exploding helicarrier. Loki would take care of him. Loki might even be able to love Bucky and Bucky could give Loki what he wanted, be what Steve couldn’t.

Una squawked when he sat down hard on one of the large intake pipes. He felt suddenly, bitterly, inadequate in a way he hadn’t since before the serum. Captain America had world-sized problems that were always impossible; he’d gotten used to that perspective, to seeing everything in terms of a greater good, a larger scale. But when it came down to two people trying to make it work, the little things mattered, and sex hadn’t been a little thing to Loki.

“Steve?” Natasha shouted to be heard above the din of the sprites.

He looked up to see her holding the carrier Una had arrived in. Before he could shake his head, Una darted for the carrier and grabbed onto the front zipper to wrench it open. She dove inside, chattering excitedly. His heart sank. She was probably expecting him to take her back to Loki. He couldn’t bring himself to refuse when Natasha held out the carrier, holding it gently against his chest as he followed her back through the maze to the maintenance entrance. Natasha removed her earplugs once they emerged into the relative silence of the hallway.

“You alright?”

He nodded stiffly, heading for the elevators. Una would have to settle for him and he’d see how long it took for her to want to come back to the hive instead. The elevator doors closed and it took him a minute to realize that Natasha hadn’t pressed the button for the lobby floor. She was watching him with concern and suspicion.

“I’m fine.” He stared pointedly up at the floor display.

“You look like I told you Christmas was canceled and there will never be any more puppies.”

“She wants to go back to Loki,” he said irritably. “I don’t know where he is anymore than you do. If he doesn’t want to be found, he won’t be, you know that. What am I supposed to do?” He heard a soft, querulous chirp from the carrier but nothing more. He’d half expected her to start screeching in protest, wanting to be returned to the hive immediately if he couldn’t take her home.

“Couldn’t you ask him?” She still hadn’t pressed the button.

“If he kept the card. If he ever looks at it anymore. He could be anywhere and I don’t know if it even works if he’s not on Earth.” Shifting his weight from foot to foot, he nearly reached out to press the button himself, but he doubted the visitor badge would work the way her access badge did. “Look, Nat, I get what you’re trying to do, okay? And I appreciate that you’re trying to help because you don’t want me to live with not knowing or regretting what happened, but that’s how it’s going to be. I have to find a way to live with that. He’s got Bucky now and...that’s better. For both of them.” He swallowed against the lump in his throat, stubbornly refusing to look at her. “Not like I ever did either of them a lot of good. They’re better off without me.”

“Like the whole world is better off without Captain America?”
“Maybe it is,” he snapped.

She was silent long enough that he thought they might be stuck in the elevator all day. Finally, she
swiped her badge over the scanner and pressed the button. The elevator began climbing smoothly
upward, floor numbers ticking off on the overhead display. “Is this about you attacking Loki? Just
wondering which flavor of guilt I’m dealing with.”

He turned his head to glare at her. “Shouldn’t I feel guilty for attacking him?”

“That was kinda shitty.” She shrugged, unconcerned. “But what he was doing was kinda shitty too.
Not saying it makes anything okay, just that there are enough shitty choices to go around for you to
be carrying all of the guilt.”

“Maybe it wasn’t...” He couldn’t wrap his head around what it might have been enough to figure out
what it wasn’t.

They reached the lobby and the doors opened neither of them moved. Natasha’s eyes were
narrowed. “If you feel guilty about attacking Loki, you should apologize. But you don’t seem to
want to.”

“I don’t know where he is.”

“Nice try. I know you still have your magic card.” She frowned and crossed her arms, staring him
down. “You haven’t even looked at it, have you?”

“What’s the point?” Exasperated, he watched the elevator doors close again.

“It’s the right thing to do? When you hurt someone, you apologize, isn’t that how it works?”

“What good will it do?”

“It’ll do you a world of good if it means you’ll stop beating yourself up over it.” She waited for his
response, but seemed to decide she wasn’t going to get one. “And it would give him the opportunity
to forgive you. Even if you won’t forgive yourself. You should at least give him that chance. You
forgave him, didn’t you?”

“He didn’t attack me.”

“I remember bruises on your neck that looked an awful lot like his handprint.”

“Nat-”

“He’s attacked you a hundred times. Attacked most of us a hundred times.”

“That was before,” he protested weakly, feeling a flush spreading up his throat. “He didn’t trust me
then. It’s different.” He watched her expression, knowing she was calculating her next words as
carefully as she calculated where to stick a knife.

“Steve,” she began, her voice very gentle. “If you ever have a reason to think that someone has taken
control of my mind or done something to me without my full consent.” She paused, making sure she
had his full attention. “I expect you to kick down the door and beat the hell out of them. Anything
less and I’ll be extremely pissed off, do you understand? Do not stop and ask questions, do not wait
politely for an explanation. That isn’t the world we live in. I need to know that I can count on you to
do that without hesitation.”
He dropped his gaze to the floor and the toes of her boots. “Of course. Of course I would. You know I would.”

“I thought I knew that but now I’m not sure.”

That made his stomach clench painfully. He valued Natasha’s trust and her faith in him, had always been proud to be one of the few people she counted as a friend. “If it wasn’t…if it was consensual.”

“Then they both owe you a fucking explanation for why Loki was role playing as you, don’t you think? Why he did it, why Barnes went along with it. I would’ve bet that both of them cared about you, about how you would feel about it, so what the hell were they doing? It’s messed up and wrong however you frame it.”

He kept staring at the floor, uncertain if he wanted an explanation. But she was right. Not facing Loki was easier and he’d wanted it to be easier. Now that she’d confronted him and forced him to think about it, his choice felt like fear; it felt like cowardice. “I don’t want to talk to him because I don’t want to face that I’m not enough for him.” He held Una’s carrier a little tighter, his knuckles white around the straps. “For him or for Bucky. If Bucky wanted that, he never said anything. Never told me.”

“Times were different then.”

“Or he knew that I was fucking broken and not…not enough.” The words felt like razor wire in his throat and his eyes stung.

Natasha sighed. “If you were broken, the serum would’ve fixed it.” She reached out to press the open button and the elevator doors slid back again. “Maybe a cabin in the woods isn’t a bad idea after all. Sounds like you need some time to get your head on straight.”

He brushed hastily at his eyes with the back of his hand before he stepped out of the elevator. “You mean pull it out of my ass.”

She gave him a crooked smile. “That too.” She waved him to the access control desk and signed him out, sliding the visitor badge back through the gap beneath the protective window. “I’ll walk you out. Fresh air will do me good.”

The afternoon sun seemed too bright and he realized as they walked that he had to find a way to keep Una safe while he drove back to the city on his bike. If Natasha had any suggestions, she wasn’t offering them, but she walked with him to his parking spot, looking for all the world like she was merely out for a pleasant stroll.

“Thanks,” he said lamely, still holding tight to Una’s carrier.

She nodded, her gaze sweeping over the line of parked cars behind them. “Sacrifice isn’t the solution to every problem, Steve. You can shut yourself away if you want, but don’t pretend it’s the only choice you have.” She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a set of tie-downs, which meant she’d planned to send him home with Una all along.

“Are you talking about Loki or being Captain America?”

Her smile was enigmatic and completely without answers, as usual. “You get bored, come see me.”

“I’ll do that.”

He watched her walk to the lobby doors before he set about finding a way to secure Una’s carrier to
the bike. Somehow, he mused, every conversation with Natasha left him feeling as though she’d raked him over the coals and poked fingers into all his wounds. Una made a few quiet chirps while he worked, but he assured her he’d drive carefully as well and get them both home in one piece. After that? He had no idea what came after that. He could stop by a market and see if there were any blackberries, which felt like trying to bribe Una to settle for him instead of Loki.

“I’m not above bribes at this point,” he muttered as he settled onto the bike.

The engine roared to life. He was glad to leave the Fridge behind, his pride stinging and his thoughts tangled up by Natasha’s words. Her practicality was one of her greatest assets, a quality he’d valued highly in the field, even if he disliked when it was directed at him. There were problems and there were solutions and Natasha never wasted time going in circles. And she was right, he simply didn’t like it. Then again, he didn’t have to like something to know it needed to be done.

By the time he parked the bike and unhooked Una’s carrier, it was nearly sunset and the lights of the city were blazing. He took a mental inventory of the insects he’d seen in his apartment or in the building on the way up the stairs, mentioning the likely hiding spots to Una. “I’ll look for insects tomorrow. Bet I could get some at a pet store, if you like crickets.”

He set the carrier gently on the coffee table to let her out. She came out tentatively, eying the apartment with dark eyes. After a couple sniffs at the air, she set out to explore in hops and short bursts of flight. He watched her until night had truly fallen and he had to get up to turn on enough lights to reheat leftover takeout for dinner. She’d found a moth to eat; it left white dust on her hands and face. He found a place to store the carrier and brought the book containing the card back with him, setting it down on the coffee table while he ate.

What would happen if Loki agreed to talk to him?

“Same thing that happened with Tony, probably,” he told the empty room. Gingerly, he prodded at the edges of the bruising on his cheek. He hadn’t been able to keep that argument from coming to blows either. Una settled on the coffee table with a dark brown beetle, pulling legs off to chew as she watched him.

“Couldn’t keep Bucky safe. Couldn’t keep the Avengers together.” He sighed, wondering how much of his anger had always been there, if the serum had amplified that too, and how many more people would end up hurting because of him. His own words to Wanda rattled around his head. Failed missions hadn’t stopped him before; if anything, he’d always used them as motivation to try that much harder on the next mission.

He didn’t even know what to say to Tony now and that should’ve been worlds easier than figuring out what to say to Loki or Bucky. There was an invisible bruise made from layers of deep hurt and betrayal in Loki’s relationship with Bucky, even when he made all the excuses for them that he could think of. Loki certainly hadn’t waited long to find someone else, while Steve was risking his life on an alien planet, and then he’d used Steve’s form to get what he wanted, or, at his most optimistic, it had been some sort of sexual game with Bucky. Role-play, Natasha had called it. Even that train of thought made him see red. Forcing his fingers open, he sighed at the metal fork he’d bent beyond usefulness without realizing what he was doing.

“I don’t know how to have that conversation without wanting to punch him. Both of them.” He tossed the fork onto the coffee table next to the book, his wants and darkest impulses laid side by side like an art exhibit. “I don’t...know how I feel about him now. I don’t think I trust him anymore.” Una remained silent, watching him from her perch on a pile of magazines. It was easier to talk to her than an empty room, although it probably only made him marginally less crazy. “I thought he loved me and I was the one who kept screwing up, but I don’t know anymore. Maybe he didn’t love me.
Maybe he...

A new thought began to wind its way through his mind, tugging at strings of thoughts and memories of Asgard, of what Thor had told him about Loki growing up and the songs of Frost Giants. He remembered Loki’s frustration and his conviction that Steve would eventually decide to kill him.

“Maybe he didn’t know how to love me. Or anyone.” He was thinking out loud now. Leaning back against the couch, he stared up at the shadows cast over the ceiling. “I had my mom. And Bucky. Peggy, for awhile. People I knew loved me, who treated me like they loved me. I thought Loki had that too. He’s what, a thousand years old? Someone had to have loved him. Thor, his mom, at least.” But he wondered what counted for love on Asgard, if it was different than Earth. Thor had all but told Steve not to trust or hope for Loki and Frigga had manipulated him into revealing the secrets in Loki’s private space. He believed they both loved Loki, but those were strange ways to show it.

He dug his fingers into his hair, then rubbed at his face. “I don’t even know how to feel about Bucky. He acted like he didn’t really know me in Bucharest. What if he wanted Loki to pretend to be me? That’s pretty fucked up.” Either the idea or the leftover chicken salad made him slightly nauseous. Rolling his head to the side, he looked at Una. The idea that Loki or Bucky, or both of them, had carried out whatever sexual fantasies they had about Steve was repulsive; if Bucky had known, if he’d been aware, been himself.

“Did Loki talk to you like this?” Una gave him a bright chirp in the affirmative, fluttering her wings for a moment. “At least you’re used to it then.” He wished he had access to what she knew, what Loki had told her. Maybe then he could understand; he desperately wanted to understand. He wanted to believe there was a reason or an explanation that would make sense.

The Accords had briefly distracted him from all of these questions and then the disastrous manhunt for the Winter Soldier. All of that noise was gone now, leaving him alone with his questions and his doubts. No wonder Natasha was trying to distract him. Another chirp from Una reminded him she was there. Not quite alone then, he thought, and that was comforting. Maybe that’s why Loki had been happy to have her stay, despite his protests. The thought snagged and spun around a few times, his brow furrowing as he considered it.

“Why did Loki take you to the Fridge, Una?” He held out a hand. She scrambled forward and made the leap, her claws scratching against his skin before she reached the cuff of his sleeve and pulled herself up. Her answer was a series of chirps and chattering that he couldn’t understand, but he didn’t think it mattered. There were only a couple of answers that made sense. “Was he going to come back for you?”

She trilled in response, her wings brushing against his cheek as she settled onto his shoulder. It sounded like a positive.

“Did he take you to the Fridge to keep you safe?”

Another cheerful trill sounded in his ear. He puzzled over that for a few minutes. Sputters of hope weren’t helping clear his head and getting information from Una wasn’t a substitute for talking to Loki. Still, information could shape his intentions when he did muster up the courage to reach for the card.

“So Loki left a note that you really like onions, right?” The sharp string of chirps was a clear no. “Alright, so that’s a no and before was a yes. If Loki took you to SHIELD, he wasn’t protecting you from them. But who else is there.” Frowning, he drummed his fingers on his knees as he considered the possibilities. It felt like a test of how well he thought he knew Loki, if he knew him at all. “Did Loki know about Vienna? About the bomb. And who they said did it.”
Her answering trill was subdued, but still followed the same pattern as the previous yes responses.

“Was Loki with Bucky?” He thought of Loki in Stark Tower, undetected except for Bruce’s migraines. Una gave him another timid yes. That put a new spin on what happened in Berlin. He’d seen Loki take Bucky away, but if Loki had been there all along, invisible and watching, that implied planning and intent.

“What were they doing?” That wasn’t a yes or no question Una could answer so he expected the series of chirps and trills he had no way of deciphering.

Loki could’ve hidden Bucky better than anyone, made it impossible for anyone to find him. He’d proven that much by disappearing. If he’d known about the blast and had chosen to come to Berlin instead of going underground, it had to be for a reason. A wave of deja vu swept over him, taking him back to the sleepless nights he’d lain awake wondering why Loki had saved him under the ruse of taking the scepter. He’d been right then, even if he hadn’t understood why Loki felt the elaborate charade was necessary.

He reached up to offer his hand to Una and she took hold of his fingers, letting him lift her up to eye level. Holding her lightly, he met her bright eyes, watching the way her head tilted and craned to look at him. Carefully, he framed his question in a yes or no, half terrified of the answer.

“Una, were they looking for me?”

She trilled excitedly, her wings buzzing like a hummingbird and nearly lifting her off his hand.

Her answer did strange things to his inside, making his heart speed up while his stomach twisted in knots. Why had Bucky acted so strange? Why hadn’t Loki sent him a message? Or had he, and gotten no response. He looked guiltily at the book with the card. Why would they have coming looking for him? It put Bucky at risk, out in the open where he could be found and delivered to the taskforce. He’d known it couldn’t have been Bucky who set the bomb but maybe they’d assumed that he believed the headlines along with the rest of the world.

Had they assumed the worst of him, like he’d assumed the worst of them?

With a heavy sigh, he let Una down on the coffee table. He wanted to reach for the book, to finally know if the card was blank or not, but his hands stayed still, fingertips trailing over the smooth surface of the cover.

“I don’t know what to do,” he began, unsteady and faltering. “There’s no right or wrong here, Una. Every one of us has fucked this up in one way or another. Me, Loki. Tony. Maybe Bucky didn’t know what he was doing, but he could’ve said something. Could’ve told me what they were doing or that Loki was there too. We all just keep...making everything worse.” Hands shaking, he reached out to turn the book around and brushed the edge of the card. “And I’ll probably make the wrong choice now, no matter what I do. I’ll do the wrong thing, say the wrong thing, and I’ll just keep making it worse.”

Una climbed back up onto the stack of magazines and chirped at him cheerfully. After a moment, she began hunting for the remains of her beetle.

“Maybe I just have to learn to live with that.” He slid the book off the table into his hand, slumping back onto the couch. “With getting it wrong. All the time. And not knowing how to love-” The word stuck against the back of his teeth. “How to love someone who doesn’t know how to love anyone. How to love someone who never told me the truth. I don’t know how to do any of that. I don’t think anyone knows how to do any of that. I don’t even think it’s a good idea. It never was, we both knew
that. It’ll probably be a lot of pain and heartache.” He didn’t know how much more he could take. Una chattered at him, a jaunty series of rising and falling chirps, and he smiled in spite of himself. “Don’t know if Loki ever told you, but you’re easy to talk to.”

He set the book on his lap as though staring down an opponent. Without knowing what the worst outcome could be, he had no way to prepare, but he doubted it could be worse than driving his shield into the arc reactor of Tony’s suit and an involuntary, quiet retirement. What did he really have to lose? An empty apartment. Takeout dinners. Asking Natasha for small jobs to keep him from losing his mind. Trying to find someone else to be now that he couldn’t be Captain America.

“Here goes nothing.” He thought he preferred taking a nosedive into the Arctic, but he slowly opened the book to display the white card.

Written plainly across the front of the card in handwriting so familiar it didn’t matter that he hadn’t seen it in seventy years were the words Come Home. He stared without seeing, blinking as if that would bring the handwriting clear each time it blurred. In every scenario he’d run, thinking what Loki might say, it had never occurred to him that the message might be from Bucky.

“How.” His voice cracked and he gestured with the card, bewildered. “How am I supposed to come home? I don’t have...I don’t know what this means.”

The only place like home he knew was Loki’s apartment and SHIELD had found nothing there. Unless Loki had left a message SHIELD couldn’t find, like the hidden compartment in the bookshelf. He read the words over and over again. It seemed like an impossible hope that they wanted him to find them and that Loki might have made it possible. How long had this message been waiting for him? If it had been there before Vienna, he might have been able to prove Bucky wasn’t involved. Had it been long enough that they’d given up on him coming?

Did he want to find them?

That was the toughest question of them all. If he went after them, he had to be willing to listen to what they had to say, wherever it led him; he had to be willing to ask the questions he needed answered, no matter how much the answers might hurt to hear.

“I need to think about this. Sleep on it, maybe.” He set the card carefully on the coffee table, watching as the words sunk into the paper and disappeared. “Last time I went over there without thinking it through, it didn’t go very well.” If Una agreed or disagreed, she kept it to herself, continuing to chew at a bit of beetle carapace.

If he decided not to act on the message, he’d have to let them know. He doubted it would trigger another spree of violence on Loki’s part, not this time, but that choice might mean he never saw Bucky again. Weighing his options, he hunted through the books and magazines on the coffee table for a pen or pencil, finding a blue pen buried under a stack of newspapers. Bucky had kept his message brief; he’d take his cue from that. The tip of the pen touched the card three times and each time he pulled it away again, uncertain.

Finally, he put the pen down. Bracing his elbows on his knees, he let his chin rest on his knuckles while he tried to quiet all of the racing questions in his head. He knew Bucky was safe, or at least relatively safe, so there was no urgency. A day or two to think, and for the bruises to fade, wasn’t a bad idea. There was nothing but his own impatience pushing him to commit one way or another. It made him wonder if his fear of the unknown, of not having a mission or a purpose any longer, was going to send him rushing headlong into whatever came his way, whether it was a good idea or not. He couldn’t ask anyone else to fill the void the Accords had left in his life.
“It’s barely been twenty four hours since I got back,” he sighed, “and here I am ready to run off after them like some sort of adrenaline junkie.” He could hear Bucky asking what he was trying to prove. Looking around the sparsely filled apartment, he remembered how hard he’d tried to fill Loki’s apartment with life and comfort. What did it say about him that he couldn’t manage that much for himself?

“Maybe I should get my own life together first,” he said hopelessly, sagging back against the couch again.

With a sharp chirp, Una scurried off of the coffee table and leapt onto Steve’s knee. She peered around at the couch, using his arm for leverage on the way up the back cushion, and prowled over the top, stopping here and there to stick her head into the gap between couch and wall.

“I’ll pick up crickets tomorrow,” he promised.

He watched her explore the couch, tugging at the buttons on the upholstery and crawling under the pillows to see what was beneath them. She kept up a running commentary of chirps and chatter as she went, unfazed by the unfamiliar environment. It was enviable, he thought, how easily she accepted and adapted. She reminded him of a child setting out to learn and explore without the anxieties and fear of adulthood, not knowing everything that could harm or endanger it. After awhile, he remembered the souvenir shot glass Sam had given him after Washington and went to hunt through the kitchen cabinets for it, returning with it half filled with water. He could pick up wine along with the crickets and then she’d feel a bit more at home.

“How do you want your own bed? I can get a cat bed or something. Or a doll bed. I’m sure they make nice ones. I’ve seen commercials, I think.” He grinned a little at the thought of Una living in a Barbie dream house, although he had no idea where he’d find one. Then again, he could learn how to build her one; he had plenty of time. Maybe she’d want to start her own hive in a corner somewhere. “We’ll have to come up with a system for you to tell me what you need, since I can’t understand you like Loki can.” He was only mostly sure she could understand him.

Having Una there filled the silence and the space in a way he hadn’t realized he missed. When he finally roused himself to go to bed, she curled up on the pillow beside him, making small noises with her wings like a sleepy hummingbird. The next morning, he cracked open a window for her to come and go, drinking his coffee and staring at the card until she returned with an enormous cockroach.

He hung prints on the walls with her chirping in his ear, unsatisfied until they exactly level, and went shopping for curtains and rugs with her tucked into a jacket pocket. They ate in a quiet corner of Central Park where he could let her roam freely, collecting her own lunch of beetles and flies with enthusiasm. After leaving the park, they walked by Loki’s building. The lock on the front door had been replaced and there was no sign of SHIELD. He didn’t stay long, unsure what he was even looking for in the empty windows. It didn’t look as though anyone lived there now.

On the way back, he found a pet supply store that sold boxes of crickets and bought one. He set them loose while he made lasagna, laughing as Una chased them around the kitchen. She sprawled on the coffee table contentedly while he ate dinner, her shot glass filled with red wine.

He checked the bruises on his face as he brushed his teeth before bed, Una perched on his shoulder again. They were nearly gone; another day and it would be as though Siberia never happened. He wished making peace with Tony could be that easy.

With Una curled up on the pillow beside him for the night, he stared up at the ceiling and listened to the sounds of the city outside. After the first hour, he realized he was staring at the stretch of mattress beside him, his mind wandering through his memories of Loki. They’d never really had a chance to
figure out how to be together. Loki had sent him away and asked him not to come back before they’d made real progress. Did he really want Steve to come back now? Did that mean he’d decided to say goodbye or that he wanted Steve to be part of his life again? It was impossible to guess, but factoring in Bucky made the latter the less likely alternative. Loki probably felt that he owed Steve an explanation.

“I don’t know if he does,” he sighed, rolling over onto his side, careful to not disturb Una while she slept. “I guess we weren’t together when he and Bucky, not really, so that’s not...but an explanation would be nice.” He wanted the truth from Bucky as well, if he’d wanted Steve all those years ago and never said a word; if he’d come to Bucharest to find Steve and then pretended to barely know him.

How much would an explanation change? Would the truth make a difference?

“Maybe it won’t matter,” he whispered. It seemed terrifying to think it wouldn’t matter, that they would have gone through everything with the spell only to have it fall apart.

Suddenly restless, he sat up against the headboard. All the months, all the tests, all the nightmares, the hours they’d spent together. What if he had to accept it all meant nothing? He’d thought it they had something special and real; a connection. Maybe they’d simply been on the same collision course and now they were headed in different directions. It seemed cold and impersonal to think of it in terms of direction or Fate. He’d thought seeing Bucky again meant he could get Bucky back and maybe that was the same mistake he’d made with Loki. Maybe there was no going back, no reconnecting; no way to find a path that converged for longer than a moment.

Maybe nothing Loki could say, no explanation he could give, would change anything and Steve would come home with more invisible bruises to the same apartment, the same uncertain life ahead of him. Still alone.

“I keep trying to figure out who I am and the answer keeps changing. What if this is it? If the answer always changes and I keep chasing after something that never holds still. The Army, the serum, the War, SHIELD, the Avengers.” A faint trill from the pillow meant Una was awake and he apologized for keeping her up. “Just talking to myself, Una.”

At best, he would get closure. He would know that Loki and Bucky were together and safe, maybe even happy. He had to walk into the conversation knowing that was the best he could hope for and be at peace with it.

“I can do that,” he told himself quietly. He could get up the morning after and find a new purpose, find something other than Captain America, something other than love, to fill his life. “I can do that,” he repeated. Surely he wasn’t alone in facing that prospect, a life of being alone and making it work, even finding happiness where he could; there was small comfort in knowing he was likely one of millions.

He managed a few hours of sleep after that, finding himself awake as dawn began to light up the sky. Strangely, he felt lighter and more at peace than he had in a long time. He’d take it for as long as it lasted even if it was only the calm before the storm. It was possible Una would want to stay with Loki instead and he’d have to accept that too. One more thing that wasn’t meant for him. He’d let the serum and the world trick him into thinking he could accomplish the impossible, that he was meant for more, that he could hope for more, but all he could do now was accept what was and move forward.

Routine got him through a morning run, pushups, and breakfast. He showered while coffee brewed and Una chased her own breakfast outside the apartment. Fall was coming; there was a hint of it on
the air even in the city. With Una on his shoulder merrily eating whatever bug she’d caught, he picked out a dark blue button up shirt and a pair of slate gray slacks. They needed ironing and his black dress shoes needed a good polish. He whistled absently as he worked, setting everything aside for later. Lunch cleaned out the rest of the leftovers from the fridge. He left Una napping to walk to one of the few remaining old-fashioned barbers for a shave and a haircut.

Back in the apartment, he dressed carefully, fidgeting with his collar and cuffs until they were how he wanted them. Evening would be cool enough for a light jacket, if it took several hours. Once he was dressed, he sat down on the couch and stared at the card for awhile. Maybe it wouldn’t take hours, maybe it would only take minutes.

“I’m going to take you with me, Una. And if you want to stay with them, I’ll understand.” He smiled when she chirped back and thought she might sound worried about what he was planning.

The card and a pen went into an inner pocket of his jacket and he pulled down the carrier, waiting for Una to climb in. For the first time, he noticed a lump of fabric inside. When he pulled it out, he recognized one of Loki’s worn t-shirts. The sight of it put a dent in his determined calm, but he stamped down the tangle of emotions and shoved them aside. He folded the shirt neatly and put it back inside the carrier so Una would have something soft to sit on. If this didn’t work out, he wasn’t going to leave her behind unless she wanted to stay.

He took a cab to East Village, but chose a destination several blocks from Loki’s building. The walk calmed his nerves as much as possible and he spent the whole time trying to prepare himself for finding nothing at all. Stopping at the front door, he set Una down to pull out the card and the pen, holding his breath while he wrote.

I’m here. At the front door.

If they were worlds away, would the message reach them? They might not notice it for days. He checked his watch for the time, determined to give them at least a half hour before he headed back to Brooklyn. If nothing happened, he would try again tomorrow. How many days until he gave up, he hadn’t decided. But if Loki had left him a hidden message, he had to try to find it, and he didn’t exactly have anything more pressing to do with his time. Trying to look inconspicuous standing outside the building, he scanned over the windows and the building across the street, looking for anything that might indicate a hidden message. If SHIELD hadn’t already abandoned their surveillance, he doubted he’d even get a half hour before they arrived and wanted to know if he’d lost his mind. Natasha would have to bail him out of that one, again.

With each passerby he felt more foolish, ducking his head and trying to become invisible. He checked his watch and saw that it had been twenty seven minutes. Why had he bothered? Swallowing against the lump of disappointment in his throat, he picked up Una in her carrier. But as he turned to walk away, he heard the door lock disengage. There was no one in the lobby coming out and no one walking toward him who looked like they were coming home.

He’d reached for the door handle and was pulling it open before he could think, hurrying into the cover of the building. Una chirped encouragingly. It could’ve been a coincidence. He might get up to the fifth floor and find an empty apartment, just like SHIELD.

“I have to try,” he murmured, half to Una and half to himself. Like he’d had to try to get through to Bucky on the helicarrier, like he’d had to try to build something real with Loki. He had to try.

His heart was pounding like he’d run for miles by the time he reached the last stair and started down the hallway to what had been Loki’s door. Now was the moment of truth and he thought he’d rather face down a thousand German tanks. Bracing himself, he raised a fist and rapped his knuckles
against the door, counting out the seconds while he waited, half expecting and half dreading that nothing at all would happen.

*Four, five, six…*

The door swung inward without warning. Bucky must’ve either been standing at the door or he’d learned how to not make any noise on the hardwood floors. His face was flushed and his hair was pulled up into a messy bun, making him look younger and less war-weary than Steve had expected after seeing him in Romania. Unable to think of anything to say, Steve held up Una’s carrier in a wordless explanation.

“Come in,” Bucky said, stepping back and waving Steve inside. “Wasn’t sure how long it would take you to get back. We’ve, uh, been trying to keep up with the news but it’s mostly garbage, you know?”

He might as well have walked into another world; the apartment was nothing like he remembered. He recognized the rug and the coffee table, and some of the plants, but there was a couch strewn with pillows and blankets that looked like fluffy clouds. Bookshelves, some still being assembled, lined half the walls and there were boxes of books waiting to be shelved and organized. The walls without bookshelves had paintings and photographs arranged carefully and artfully into groupings. More plants topped the shelves and filled in gaps between them. There was a banana tree but it seemed smaller than he remembered. Another rug had been added to the kitchen. The whole apartment smelled like baking brownies. He heard footsteps and turned to see Loki coming out of the bedroom, his hair pulled up like Bucky’s.

Motion inside the carrier broke the spell and he hurried to unzip the opening. “I was at the Fridge yesterday and she wanted to leave with me so…”

“Una!” Bucky was grinning. He held out his left hand as a perch and her claws clicked against the metal as she landed. “I was just about to come bust you out myself. Unless you’d wanted to stay of course. With your own kind and all.” He held her up to get a look at her. “Your wings are comin’ along. Back to normal in no time.”

This brightly cheerful Bucky Barnes was a stark contrast to the nearly monosyllabic version he’d met in Bucharest, but it was good. More like the Bucky he remembered. Steve’s gaze was drawn back to Loki and he saw that Loki was watching him intently, his expression so perfectly neutral that it could only be a mask. His attention was torn between Bucky telling Una about the bugs he’d caught for her to eat once she got back and Loki, who came slowly around and closed the door behind them without taking his eyes off of Steve.

“SHIELD’s pretty much given up looking for you,” Steve started, casting about for a safe subject. “Figure they’ll never find you.”

“They won’t,” Loki said softly. He gave Steve a small, polite smile. “Would you like to sit down?”

“Yeah, uh, sure. It, um, it looks nice. What you’ve done with the place.” He circled around the end of the couch and opted for the armchair instead, assuming Loki and Bucky would prefer to sit together. “Are you both...okay? After what happened in Berlin, I was worried.” God, he hoped he didn’t sound as pathetic as he felt. He caught the quick glance exchanged between Loki and Bucky, an unspoken question seeming to pass between them.

Bucky sat down across from him, letting Una go to explore the new additions to the apartment. His expression was serious now. “That guy, the one who came to talk to me. He had the trigger words HYDRA used to turn me into the Winter Soldier. Loki broke the controls but.” He looked to Loki
again, as though waiting for assurance that he should continue. “It messed me up pretty good. Loki got me straightened out though.” There was such open affection in the look and the smile he gave Loki that Steve felt like a hand had reached into his chest to rip his heart out. He’d seen that look before; Bucky was in love.

“Good, I’m glad,” Steve forced himself to say. “I’m glad you’re both alright.” He wanted to have this conversation even less now that he’d seen them together. While he tried to figure out whether or not to simply leave, he watched Loki detour to the kitchen to take something out of the oven. The sheer domesticity of the action left a dull ache in Steve’s chest.

When Loki returned and took a seat on the couch beside Bucky, he left a respectable amount of space between them. Steve wished he could appreciate the gesture, since Loki obviously didn’t want to wave his relationship with Bucky in Steve’s face, but it only made the ache in his chest throb.

Silence stretched out for several minutes. He doubted any of them wanted to have this conversation. Finally, he cleared his throat, trying to keep his voice as steady and without accusation as he could. “I have some questions about what happened. Before. The last time I was here.” At least whatever bruises he might have left on Loki had faded so he didn’t have to face evidence of what he’d done. “Maybe I should’ve tried to find out more before I reacted.” He didn’t want to admit what he’d believed had happened.

“Was there surveillance?” Bucky asked, fingers clasped together over his knees and his gaze somewhere on the floor between them. “Is that how you...” His eyes slid to the window, then back to the floor.

“Yeah. There was video footage. It’s been destroyed now. Only two other people saw it and I trust them both.” He saw the question in Loki’s eyes and figured he owned them that much. He couldn’t ask for their honesty if he wasn’t willing to be honest in return. “Natasha Romanov and Maria Hill. Natasha promised to look for Bucky while I was gone.”

“How did she,” Loki began, but he stopped halfway through, seeming to answer himself. “Then you weren’t aware that Bucky was here until you saw the video.”

Steve shook his head. If he’d known Bucky was here, he never would’ve left. “I was out of touch for awhile.” For some reason, he didn’t want to get into the story of how he’d ended up on Jotunheim. It seemed foolish now, running off in search of a way to understand Loki.

“She’s the one who shot me,” Bucky said suddenly, rubbing at a spot on his thigh.

“Yeah,” Steve nodded again, “but she didn’t know it was you. She was just reacting to a perceived threat.”

Bucky waved a hand as though being shot was of no importance. “Sorry you had to find out that way.” The way he shifted and leaned slightly to the side made Steve think he was consciously trying to keep himself from reaching out for Loki, probably trying to be sensitive to Steve’s feelings.

“It was...a bit of a shock.” Understatement of the century. He braced himself for the unpleasant questions he had to ask next. “Was it some sort of role play or something? You pretending to be me. Or...not.” He saw Loki go very still, his expression neutral again, and he knew the unspoken half of the question had gotten across as clearly as the spoken words.

Beside Loki, Bucky frowned. He looked at Loki intently for a moment, then glanced back and forth between him and Steve several times, his expression darkening. “Wait a second, Steve. That’s not-”
He broke off abruptly at a sharp glance from Loki, his jaw setting.

“We still need a few items for dinner,” Loki told him lightly. “The list is on the counter. If you wouldn’t mind.”

It looked like the last thing Bucky wanted was to leave; he huffed out a sigh before getting up and retreating to the kitchen. His expression was frustrated and mulish as he jammed a small piece of paper into his back pocket and hunted for a ballcap to pull on. He gave Steve a hard look on the way to the front door but slipped out without saying another word.

Loki braced his elbows on his knees, meeting Steve’s gaze calmly. “You believe that I tricked him.”

“Did you?” Steve shot back.

Loki’s expression stayed calm, giving away nothing of what he was truly feeling. Steve wished fervently that he wasn’t so difficult to read. “I don’t know.”

“How do you not know?” Steve burst out, his anger bubbling up like hot ashes in his throat. “It’s a yes or no question, Loki. Did you pretend to be me and manipulate him into having sex with you or not? It shouldn’t be that hard to answer.”

“You know as well as I do that it’s not always that simple,” Loki countered. A flush had started to bloom over his pale cheeks, but his voice stayed even. “Whether or not he believed I was you is an answer only he can give you. My intention wasn’t to trick him, only to give him something that I thought he wanted. He wasn’t...he’d only recovered part of his memories by that time and I don’t know how well he truly understood what was happening.”

“You’re not making it better.” He pressed the heels of his palms against his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to stay calm. “If he didn’t understand, if he wasn’t himself, didn’t have all his memories, then he couldn’t...he couldn’t give consent, Loki. Goddamnit. You know that, I know you know that. What were you thinking?”

Loki let out a long breath. “I’ve no defense for what I’ve done. It was wrong. When you came here, before. I deserve no less than what you did.”

Scrubbing his hands down his face, Steve tried to ignore the sick feeling in his stomach. “Two wrongs don’t make any of this right. I shouldn’t have resorted to violence but I should’ve gotten Bucky out of here.” He saw Loki flinch, but there was no other reaction. “He wasn’t like that before. He never...he was never interested in me like that. Never wanted that with me. I’ve gone over and over my memories thinking maybe I missed it but I can’t think of a single moment or a word or anything, that might’ve meant he was queer.” Slumping back into the armchair, he didn’t bother trying to hide the horror and despair he felt at the obvious alternative. “Is there any chance that while you were messing with his head, you changed him or influenced him?”

All color had drained from Loki’s face and his hands were in fists against his knees, knuckles white. He swallowed before answering. “It’s possible. It was not intentional, if that’s the case. I swear on my life, I never thought.” He stopped, drawing in a ragged breath, and closed his eyes.

“Does he think he’s in love with you too? Is that another consequence of you not thinking before you use magic?” He heard the edge in his voice and tried to dial it back, but in his head, he could hear the old Frost Giant warning him that Loki had been careless, that there would be consequences. “You can’t mess around with magic with mortals, Loki. We’re not like Asgardians, we don’t react the same. Didn’t you learn anything from that damn spell? It nearly killed us both. Wasn’t that
enough? You keep doing things like this instead of just leaving it alone.”

“I never meant to harm him,” Loki whispered.

Steve’s anger fizzled, the energy draining out of him. “I believe you. I think you’re just reckless. You don’t think before you jump in. And...and it takes one to know one, I guess. Because I’m guilty of the same thing. But when I screw up, I try to do better the next time instead of making the same mistake all over again.” He’d been so convinced that Loki felt guilty for the spell and what had happened, guilty enough to let himself be imprisoned and tormented; he couldn’t wrap his head around Loki doing anything like that again. Hadn’t he seen the parallels between the spell and manipulating Bucky’s mind? Good intentions or not, he couldn’t believe Loki could be so clueless. “If it was just that you and Bucky met and fell in love, that’d be one thing. I’d be happy for both of you and move on. But this is something else.”

When Loki opened his eyes again, his expression had gone closed and distant. “Is that why you came here? To move on. Is that what you want?”

“Isn’t that what you’ve already done?” He gestured at the apartment around them.

Loki’s lips tightened. With deliberate movements, he opened his hands and laid his palms over his knees. “I told him this wouldn’t work. There’s no argument that will make you hate me any less for what I’ve done. I don’t know how to tell you, how to explain. I’ve never known how to talk to you in a way you understand.”

Had the message been from Bucky because Loki hadn’t even wanted to talk to him? He wanted to protest that he didn’t hate Loki, but his throat was too tight to get any words out at all.

“He believes that you love him, that you have always loved him,” Loki continued, suddenly brisk. He was staring straight ahead instead of looking at Steve. “Even when you were with Peggy Carter, he believes that you loved him no less. I would ask that you not tell him otherwise. It would be cruel and unnecessary to take that away from him. Say whatever you will about me, but leave him that much.”

The hollowness in Loki’s voice, that he would ask nothing for himself but didn’t want Steve to hurt Bucky, unstuck his voice again. “Wouldn’t it bother you? If what he feels, what he thinks he feels, if it wasn’t real. If that’s not who he really is. Wouldn’t you want it to be real?”

Loki’s mouth twisted. “What he feels is something you’ll have to discuss with him. I won’t speak for him or put words in his mouth. Not when you’re already convinced I’ve brainwashed him.”

“I’m just trying to figure out what’s real. Loki, please.” It didn’t seem like too much to ask for when his life was falling apart and everything he cared about was being ripped away from him. “If you want me to talk to him about it, I will. I’ll listen to whatever he has to say and whatever you have to say. I didn’t come here to fight, I came to listen.”

“And if you don’t like what you hear?”

“So far I don’t, to be honest, but I’m still listening.” He held open his hands, trying to convey his willingness to hear them out, no matter how much it hurt. If he could keep listening, he’d know he’d done everything he could. “Maybe he’s just confused. That’s all. You said HYDRA left his mind in pieces. Maybe some of the pieces didn’t get put back together right. No one’s fault but HYDRA’s.” Nothing in Loki’s expression was giving him any indication if his words were helping or hurting and he didn’t know how long Bucky would be gone. Or how much longer they should keep jabbing at each others’ wounds. “Maybe if he got some help. A doctor or something. Someone who might…”
he trailed off because he didn’t know if there was a doctor on Earth who would know where to begin. His only option would be Bruce and with the Avengers disbanded, he didn’t know how that would work.

“If he wishes to see a healer of any kind, I’ve no protest against it. I’ve done what I thought was necessary to save him, but I fully admit I’m no great healer.” Again, Loki sounded so calm and reasonable that Steve wanted to throw something at him just to get a reaction.

How could Loki be so calm? It felt more like they were negotiating shared custody of a Labrador; whatever was best for Bucky. Irrationally, selfishly, he wanted to ask if Loki had even missed him, to demand a kind of proof that the end of their relationship had been painful for Loki too. But how painful could it have been if he’d moved on to Bucky so quickly? He tried to squash the bitter voice in the back of his head; the voice reminding him that no one had wanted him before the serum so he should be used to rejection.

“Was anything we had real?” He asked without thinking. There was a flash of what might have been surprise, Loki’s eyes widening for a split second, but then it was gone.

“Do you...not? Think it was real,” Loki said cautiously.

The pause triggered a memory for their night in the castle. A memory of Loki asking, awkwardly, about what people in love did together, as if it had been a foreign concept to him. They’d never been simple, he thought tiredly, and they never would be. He was tired of fighting, tired of every direction of his life being uphill and against the wind.

“I don’t know anymore. I’m sorry I couldn’t give you what you needed,” he said finally, weary of everything. If he’d been able to, maybe Loki wouldn’t have turned to Bucky and none of this would’ve happened. “I tried. Would’ve kept trying if you’d let me.”

Loki watched him with a strange, thoughtful expression until Steve shifted in his seat, wondering how long the silence would stretch out between them. He spoke softly, not quite meeting Steve’s gaze. “Sending you away was a mistake. If I had been...better. At this.” He gestured between them; a lazy sweep of long, graceful fingers. “I’ve used words as weapons all my life but when it comes to you, I never know what to say. Maybe that’s why. I have no wish to wield a weapon of any kind against you. So my tongue betrays me, with you, and I find that I have no words.”

A declaration of peaceful intent was a bittersweet victory. Not wanting to be enemies was the success he’d always claimed to want and now that he had it, there seemed to be so much more he wished he had. For so long he’d wanted, desperately, for Loki to talk to him, to open up and let him in rather than holding him at arm’s length. Now that it seemed he was capable, it was too late.

“You’re doing fine right now,” he said encouragingly, hoping Loki would continue.

He huffed a laugh, his smile lopsided and a little sad. “I care. For him. A great deal. That doesn’t change what you...meant. To me.” Head turning slightly toward the door, Loki seemed to be listening for something, but there was no sound from the hallway. He visibly pulled himself away from whatever had caught away his attention. “I should’ve tried harder. I was too wrapped up in my own pain to see that I could’ve...what we could’ve been. I wish I’d tried harder. You deserve more than I was able to give you and I wish it could’ve been different. That I could’ve been different.”

Steve blinked in surprise. He’d never heard Loki talk like this and part of him ached while part of him wanted to congratulate Loki on making real progress. If this was the result, Loki’s relationship with Bucky couldn’t be all bad, however questionable its beginning. He fought back the bite of jealousy that Bucky had managed to do more good for Loki’s mental health in a matter of weeks
than he’d managed to do in months. The right man in the right place at the right time; it just hadn’t been him.

“He wants,” Loki hesitated, stirring restlessly. “He wants you to be part of his life again. As you were before. I hope you will. Don’t refuse or stay away because of me. Please.”

It was a scenario out of his nightmares. Instead of tagging along on Bucky’s dates, he could imagine himself as the third wheel to Bucky and Loki and he didn’t know how long he could endure that kind of pain. Maybe it would get easier with time. Maybe he really would be able to move on, eventually. Unable to think of an answer, he simply nodded.

“If we can’t be,” Loki’s throat worked as he swallowed. “Friends. Someday. I would still be glad not to count you among my enemies. If that isn’t presumption on my part.”

Steve forced his mouth to work. “It’s not. And friends. Would be good. Someday.”

“I’m sure he’ll be back shortly,” Loki said lightly. He stood up, looking around in a way that seemed lost, as though he wasn’t actually seeing anything around him. “No doubt you have a great deal to catch up on. I’ll give you both time. To talk.” He was staring at the wall behind Steve and when he looked, there was a familiar white card propped up on the fireplace mantle. “It was good to see you again. Steve. I’m glad we had a chance to...talk.”

He frowned. There was a strained note to Loki’s voice that didn’t match his words, making him think Loki was lying or hiding something. Before he could ask, Loki had stepped sideways and out of the room, vanishing in the blink of an eye. From the banana tree, he heard Una make a series of chirps.

“T have no idea,” he answered her, still trying to make sense of the polite and oddly communicative version of Loki he’d been talking to. Loki had talked but Steve wasn’t sure he knew what it all meant.

Sitting alone in their apartment was awkward. He was in their space and imposing on their life together because he’d wanted answers. It felt selfish, demanding their time simply so he could feel better about his own choices. He tried reading the titles of the books that had been shelved, wondering if there was any sort of pattern; it seemed like they’d collected books at random. Maybe neither of them had known what books they liked and decided to try a bit of every genre they could find. Staring blankly at the couch, he could imagine Loki and Bucky both curled up with books in their hands. He shook himself, face heating with embarrassment, when his imagination suggested that reading probably wasn’t the only couch based activity they enjoyed.

He was about to get up and find a book to read when he heard someone at the door. Bucky came through quickly, a canvas sack over one shoulder. He scanned the living room, brow furrowed, before heading into the kitchen.

“Loki?” He called, dropping the bag on the counter on the way to the bedroom. “Loki?”

Steve stood up, a new wave of guilt twisting his stomach. Loki had left because of him and it hadn’t even occurred to him that there might be consequences for Bucky, if he needed Loki to be there more than he needed Steve. Bucky looked on the edge of frantic when he came back from the bedroom, rubbing at his chest.

“Where’s Loki?” He asked, still scanning the apartment. “I can’t feel…” He stopped and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath in.
Steve hurried to reassure him. “He’ll be back. He just wanted to give us time to talk.”

Tension visibly bled out of Bucky’s shoulders and he opened his eyes, his palm pressed flat over his heart. He seemed to focus on Steve for the first time and his eyes narrowed. “What happened?”

“Nothing. We just talked,” Steve said, bewildered. “He said it was nice to see me and that he’d give us time to talk, that’s all. He never said where he was going.”

If anything, Bucky’s eyes grew narrower. He sidestepped into the kitchen, not speaking as he emptied the contents of the bag into the refrigerator. When he was finished, he emerged with two bottles of beer in his right hand, peeling back the caps with his left as he walked. Circling around the couch, he handed one to Steve before he sat down. “What else did you talk about?”

“Um.” Steve sat down, wondering why it was he felt that he was the one being interrogated. “A little about him, uh, pretending to be me. He said I’d have to ask you about it. Said he didn’t want to speak for you or put words in your mouth.”

Bucky’s eyebrows rose like that was amusing somehow. He leaned back, sipping at his beer and watching Steve with an expression that Steve remembered from when they were kids and he’d tried to hide a fresh black eye or bloody knuckles. He wished Bucky would say something to get the conversation going; it felt like he was doing all the heavy lifting. The last thing he wanted was having this conversation only for Bucky to be polite and considerate in telling him that he was happy with Loki and didn’t need Steve at all.

Ripping the band-aid off was usually the best method.

“Did you know it wasn’t me you were having sex with?” He gestured toward the floor, as if Bucky wouldn’t know exactly what he was talking about.

A small crease appeared in Bucky’s brow. He didn’t look angry, only thoughtful, like he was sifting through memories and looking for the answer to Steve’s question. He took another drink from his beer, holding it in his mouth for a few seconds before swallowing. Finally, he nodded. “Most of the time. I think there was once that I really thought it was you, but mostly, I knew.”

Steve had to fight to keep his expression neutral. They’d had sex more than once then; Loki had pretended to be Steve more than once and Bucky had gone along with it. More than once. He stared down at his beer, trying to ignore the ringing in his ears.

“You’ve never looked at me like you wanted me to rip your clothes off in your whole life. So yeah, I knew it wasn’t you.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?”

Bucky was quiet for a long moment. “Does it bother you?”

Bucky was quiet for a long moment. “Does it bother you?”

“Of course it bothers me.” Steve stared at him, shocked. “I feel used. And betrayed and I don’t even know what else. Did you...did you want it to be me?” He didn’t wait for Bucky to answer. “If you did, why didn’t you ever tell me? I thought we knew each other. And I never would’ve thought you wanted that. Or that you were like that. I don’t know what to believe. That you’ve wanted me and never told me, never shared that entire aspect of your life with me, of yourself, with me. Or that this is just Loki’s magic messing with your head and making you think you wanted me when you never did.”

“Is that what you told him?” Bucky demanded, interrupting Steve’s rant. “That something he did to me made me queer?”
“Buck.” Steve tried to sound calm, thinking maybe he could get through to him. “You weren’t. You never...you didn’t want me like that. You were always going out with girls and you…” he trailed off, gritting his teeth. He thought about what Loki had said and tried to choose his words carefully. “Whatever you think you feel for Loki, it might not be real. And, and you and me. We were friends. Best friends. We’ve always loved each other, like family.” He stopped short of saying not like that.

Bucky’s eyes were narrowed again and there were ugly splotches of color in his cheeks, like he used to get before he started lecturing Steve. He looked like he wanted to punch Steve in the face but only took a few more swigs from his beer and glared.

“Buck?”

“So what,” he forced out through his teeth, still glaring.

Steve stared at him, confused. “What?”

“So what if I wasn’t queer before. It’s what I am now. Feels real enough to me. That’s what matters, isn’t it?”

“But even Loki...he thought there was a chance he might’ve influenced you somehow. Not on purpose.”

To his surprise, Bucky barked out a laugh. “Of course he agreed with you.” He shook his head, running fingers through his hair. “I honestly thought he was exaggerating but you two don’t know how to talk to each other at all.”

“We talked,” Steve said, suddenly defensive. It wasn’t like he hadn’t tried.

“And he told you what he thought you wanted to hear.”

“Wait, what? Why would he think I wanted him to agree with me?”

“Because he thinks he’s a monster and that he doesn’t deserve to be loved and that he destroys everything he touches.” He gave Steve a very pointed look. “So you told him that you think he brainwashed me and turned me queer and he didn’t deny any of it.”

Steve opened and shut his mouth a couple of times, trying to work his brain around what Bucky was saying. What Bucky was implying. “You mean he doesn’t actually think he could’ve influenced you somehow?”

“I’m sure he thinks he has now you’ve put that idea in his head.” Bucky snapped. “That’s why he’s not here. Thinks you’ll convince me it’s not real and I’ll leave with you.” Huffing out a breath, he rolled his eyes and muttered something that sounded like thanks a lot, Rogers.

“I’m not...I’m just here to listen.” Steve felt like he was getting whiplash from Loki and Bucky both. “Do you want to be with him? Are you happy? And you definitely know what you’re doing and who you’re with. It’s all...consensual?”

“Did you ask him that?” Bucky groaned, head falling back against the couch cushion. “So you called him a rapist too. Of course you did.”

“Bucky, come on,” Steve protested. He hadn’t been that tactless. “He knocked you out, I saw it on the video. I didn’t know you knew it was him. I had pretty good reason to think you might not know what you doing.”
Bucky raised his head again, giving Steve a hard look. “He had to give me my memories back in pieces. Years at a time. When I got the memories back, the ones from HYDRA. When I was the soldier. You know what I did?” His jaw worked and his knuckles were white around the beer bottle. “I tore apart the banana tree trying to kill Una first. Then I went after Loki. Pinned him down and...he almost let me do it.” His mouth twisted in distaste and pain. “He thought he deserved it. Only reason he stopped me was to keep me from doin’ somethin’ I’d regret.”

The pit of Steve’s stomach was ice now. He wished he couldn’t imagine it. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the banana tree, which must have been a replacement, or think about how Una’s wings had been broken.

“When I was myself again, when I remembered what I’d done. I, uh.” Bucky reached up to rub at his neck. “I slit my own throat. Might’ve had seconds left when he found me. He saved me, brought me back from being halfway into the grave. He thought that was his fault too. And then you showed up and knocked down the door. I didn’t know about you and him until after that. Didn’t know about the spell and what you went through. He wouldn’t touch me again after...after that. He thought I’d want to kill him or wouldn’t want to be around him, once I knew. He figured that’s how it would go. That when I found out about you, I’d kill him for it."

“Buck,” Steve breathed. He never should’ve left, never should’ve gone to Asgard. He should’ve kept looking for Bucky until he found him. If he had, he would’ve spared them both more pain.

“Showed up here with a bullet in my leg, you know. I’d seen you coming and going so I knew he was safe, somehow.” Bucky smiled a little, finally pulling his hand away from the thin scar that seemed glaringly obvious now. “He took the bullet out. Fed me, cleaned me up. Got my arm fixed. I owe him my life a few times over, Steve. More than that. So if he wanted to look like you during sex, I wasn’t gonna ask a lot of questions, you know? And I wanted it. Figured he was just trying to do me a favor. Maybe you’re right and I didn’t want you like that before, but it feels real now and that’s good enough for me.”

“He didn’t.” Steve’s throat felt stuffed with straw. “He didn’t tell me any of that.”

“You two can’t communicate worth a damn.”

He managed a sad smile. “Never could.”

“Well, you’d better start workin’ on it because I don’t want to be the one doing all the explaining for the both of you.” He raised his beer bottle in a salute before finishing it off.

His cheeks burned embarrassingly. “I don’t think you need to worry about that too much. I’m happy for you both, really. I’m not going to try to get in the way.”

Bucky frowned. “What’re you talking about? I didn’t tell you to come over to say goodbye. Didn’t he tell you that?”

“Uh. Not good at communicating, remember? So no.” There was a lot Loki hadn’t told him and the list seemed to be getting longer.

“Asked you over because he wants you back and so do I.”

The gears of Steve’s brain stuttered and then ground to a halt. He stared at Bucky, wondering if Loki had a strait-jacket lying around or if he could wrap Bucky up in a blanket instead and call for help. Loki had barely wanted to talk to him, let alone want him to come back and pick up where they left off. He didn’t know if he could even do that, or if Bucky was telling truth and hadn’t gone insane.
“What do you mean?” He managed to get out in a strangled whisper.

“Loki’s in love with you. Has been for ages.” Bucky set his beer bottle on the coffee table, meeting Steve’s gaze. “He figures he fucked it up and you’ll never forgive him, that you hate him now. I’m willing to bet that’s not true. Gonna tell me I’m wrong?”

“But he...and you...you…” He made a helpless gesture at Bucky, all his words piling up on his tongue.

“Yeah. He loves me too. So what? Doesn’t mean he loves you any less.” Bucky cleared his throat and this time, his eyes darted away. “Loving him doesn’t mean I love you any less either. And it feels real to me even if you think it’s not. Figured there wasn’t any point in choosing if we didn’t have to, so...I thought we could figure out how to make it work. The three of us. If you were interested.”

He stared, half expecting Bucky to disappear or maybe turn into a talking zebra. He had the urge to shake his head and rub his eyes, even pinch himself to see if he was dreaming. Bucky seemed to be waiting for an answer and Steve was waiting for his brain to start working again. After rubbing at his temples a few times, he managed to ask, “you want the three of us to...do what exactly?”

“Well, we might need a bigger place if there’s three of us. This is okay for two but it’s cozy.” Bucky looked around the apartment. “Wouldn’t mind somewhere quieter, myself, but I can get used to wherever you guys want to be.”

“You want the three of us to live together?” Now he was certain Bucky had lost his mind.

“You could come over at first, spend some time, get used to the idea, if you need to. Have dinner a couple nights a week or something. Head out if it got too much for you. Maybe spend the night and see how it goes, if that’s something you’d like to try.” Nothing about the idea seemed remotely bizarre to Bucky. He might have been discussing a book club instead of Steve living with him and Loki; sleeping with him and Loki. Steve had no idea how that would even work.

“You want a relationship? All three of us. That’s not how it works, Bucky.”

Bucky’s eyes glinted with stubbornness. “Why not? If we want it to work, then we can make it work.”

“Buck.”

“Why won’t it work? Give me a reason. Give me five reasons if you can think of ‘em.”

“It’s just not...normal.”

Bucky snorted. “Says the science experiment to the guy with the metal arm. Which one of us is normal, Steve?”

“Loki’s okay with this?”

“He pretty much figured you’d tell him to go to hell if he asked.” Bucky shrugged his right shoulder. “But yeah, he’s okay with it. He wants this too and he’s willing to work for it, if you’ll give him a chance. If you’ll give us a chance.”

Seconds ticked by, turning into minutes while Steve stared at Bucky. Each time he thought of a reason why he couldn’t do what Bucky was suggesting, he stopped short of voicing it aloud because he knew Bucky would immediately counter it and he didn’t have any real arguments. He could
worry about Captain America’s reputation, but half the world thought he was a criminal; an unconventional relationship could hardly make it worse. When he spoke again, he knew he was stalling, still turning the idea over in his head and trying to decide how he felt about it. “You love him?”

“I do,” Bucky answered without hesitation.

“And me?”

The answer was just as quick and certain. “Always loved you.”

“And Loki…loves both of us.” He could barely get his mouth to form the words, let alone get his brain to understand it.

“Yup.”

He took a deep breath. “So you want to know if I can love both of you.” That answer terrified him. He didn’t know if he could; he didn’t know if he could help it. Bucky had meant everything to him for most of his life and it felt like there was an empty space inside him where Loki had been before it all went wrong.

“Even if you just wanted to see if you can,” Bucky continued. “That’s enough to try, isn’t it? Give it some time and see how it goes.”

For a moment, he let himself acknowledge how much he wanted it. Wanted not to have to choose between them; wanted to be able to slip so easily into their lives and find a way to be part of what they had. It was ludicrous and wonderful and he couldn’t bring himself to say yes. Bucky made it sound so simple, so easy, but it couldn’t be. Could it?

“I don’t know,” he said softly.

“Stay for dinner and then decide. No pressure.”

He didn’t exactly have other plans. Not that night or any of the nights that came after it. Another take out dinner; alone.

“If you need more time, I can give you a spare key.” Bucky got up and hurried into the kitchen, digging through one of the cabinet drawers. “You’d have to ask Loki how it works, it’s all magic to me. But without the key, you won’t be able to find us unless we let you. With the key, when you come back, you’ll be able to get in even if we’re not here.” A small piece of metal flashed against his fingers as he held it up. Coming back to the couch, he set it on the coffee table where Steve could reach it. “We want you, when you’re ready. However long that takes.”

Cautiously, he reached out to take the key, surprised that it felt completely normal in his fingers. He’d expected it to feel different since it was touched by magic. His spirits fell in the next second.

“Are you sure it’ll work for me? Magic doesn’t do much to me anymore.”

Bucky nodded. “That’s why you have to have the key. You don’t have to be magic at all to use it.” There seemed to be more he wanted to say but he only smiled.

“You’ve thought about this then. How it would work. The three of us.”

“A bit, yeah.”

“And you both want this? Loki too?” He knew he sounded skeptical and was repeating himself,
stuck on the impossibility of it all. “He would barely look at me before he left, let alone get near me or make any sort of contact. Didn’t seem like he wanted me around.” The long-suffering look Bucky was giving him was achingly familiar even if he hadn’t seen it since the Second World War. “Are you sure?”

“He’s afraid.” Bucky said simply. “Afraid you’ll reject him, afraid you won’t be able to forgive him. Afraid he’ll hurt you again. Afraid you’ll convince me to leave him. There’s a lot going on that he doesn’t let people see.”

He couldn’t help staring, again. There was absolute certainty in Bucky’s voice, not speculation or guesswork, but a perfect, clear understanding of Loki. The one thing Steve had wanted more than anything, had gone across alien planets on the barest hope of finding, and it felt utterly futile now. Everything he’d wanted from Loki, Loki had given to Bucky instead. “Except you, apparently.” It came out more bitter than he’d intended.

Bucky didn’t deny it, only shrugged. “I’m a special case. I didn’t give him much of a choice.”

“All I ever wanted was to understand him.” He felt hollowed out, as if he were admitting defeat. One more failure in a line of failures that started on a train careening through the Alps and ended in a Siberian bunker.

“Then stay for dinner. Just...stay.”

It felt like another failure to give Bucky a shaky nod. What they were asking for was absurd and impossible; he couldn’t do it. He didn’t think he had it in him to suspend his disbelief long enough to make it through dinner. He tucked the key into a pocket, wondering if he’d ever find the nerve to use it once he left.

“He’ll be back soon. You want another beer?”

“No, uh. I’m good.” The beer in his hand was nearly full. He wanted to ask how Bucky could possibly know when Loki would return. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the card on the mantle was still blank. Bucky was already up and returning to the kitchen to get another drink for himself; he definitely hadn’t checked a cellphone or any other device. Then again, with magic cards and magic keys, it was possible they had a magic way to communicate that he didn’t know about.

“How’d it play out for you? After Germany.”

Steve sighed heavily. “Went to hell.”

“Ouch. Sorry, pal.”

“I’m officially retired or something. Retired but not allowed to walk around without people following me and asking questions. Thought about looking for a cabin in the middle of nowhere. Just disappear.”

“Sounds quiet. Nice.”

It did sound nice. But how long would it take for all his doubts and self-recrimination to turn the silence into deafening noise? He didn’t know how long he’d last before he couldn’t handle not doing something about everything that was wrong in the world. It felt like a sickness or a compulsion. He kept failing and was stupid enough to keep throwing himself back in.

“I’m no good at sitting home and doing nothing, Buck. Never was, you know that. If I just go quietly into retirement like they want me to, I’m throwing away everything Erskine worked for. People died,
he died, turning me into a science experiment and I can’t just…” he trailed off. Because he didn’t know how to finish and because Bucky was smiling at him like they were kids again and he was complaining about his asthma keeping him indoors. “You know what I mean.”

Bucky nodded, smiling fondly. “Yeah. This part’s pretty familiar. Wasn’t good enough doing USO tours and raising money, wasn’t enough to save my unit after Azzano, wasn’t enough to chase HYDRA across Europe and back.” The look in his eyes was fond, but sad. “When’s it ever gonna be enough, Steve?”

“When there’s nothing left for me to do.”

“Haven’t you died already?” Bucky said pointedly. “Seems to me once is plenty.”

“I’m not dead.”

“So you keep fighting until something kills you. That’s your plan.”

Memories of Jotunheim flashed behind his eyes. Of crystals and caverns and a world of perfect stillness. “What else is there?”

A muscle in Bucky’s jaw ticked. “I never wanted this for you. Never wanted to see you like this, thinking you have nothing to offer but how much you can suffer and bleed for everyone else.”

“You would’ve had me staying home and collecting scrap metal.”

“You’re damn right.”

“And what would’ve happened to you if I’d done that?” He didn’t know which was worse. If Bucky had died in Azzano or fallen in the Alps.

Bucky looked down at his hands, drawing his fingertips over the seams of his metal palm. “Would’ve been the same for me. Except for this, maybe. They might’ve chopped one off anyway to see if they could replace it. Zola never met a bad idea he didn’t like.”

Any protest he might have made, the horrible realization that he’d never saved Bucky after all, died when he heard someone at the door. He tensed and seeing Loki come in did nothing to ease the tension. Bucky raised his right arm over the back of the couch, waving Loki in, and Loki came forward. He reached out to grip Bucky’s hand and Steve saw a shiver go through Bucky before he relaxed.

“Is everything alright?” Loki asked cautiously. He stayed standing behind Bucky, holding his hand and stroking long, slender fingers along the length of Bucky’s forearm.

There was more intimacy in that touch than Loki had ever given Steve and the ache in his chest at seeing it was like he’d been kicked.

“How are you?” Bucky answered with a smile. “Better late than never. We should start dinner.”

Loki’s gaze flickered between Bucky and Steve. “I can get started, if you’d like to keep talking.” He looked skittish and anxious, like a cat trying to navigate a room without getting its tail stepped on.

“Thought I might talk Steve into helping me with my books.” Bucky nodded toward the remaining boxes and empty shelves.
Sitting useless while Loki cooked sounded awful so Steve jumped at the option. “Sure. You got a system in mind or...” He couldn’t see any rhyme or reason in how the books had been added to the shelves but that didn’t mean there wasn’t one.

“Nothing particular.” He noticed that Bucky and Loki broke contact at the last possible moment, Bucky moving toward the bookshelves and Loki toward the kitchen. “Mostly just trying to catch up on what’s out there so there’s a bit of everything. Poetry, science fiction, non-fiction. Can’t believe what’s considered a classic nowadays.” He settled cross-legged beside a box and reached in, pulling out several books at a time to look over. “Been reading some of ‘em as I go, parts here and there.”

Steve made space between two of the boxes and reached for the nearest one. “What’s in here?”

“Biographies mostly. Whole bunch of books on World War Two and not one of ‘em mentions HYDRA, if you can believe that. Not interested in correcting them though.” Bucky held up a book with a spaceship on the front cover, reading the summary on the back. “One of them got an updated author’s note after the helicarriers that mentions me. Didn’t get much right.”

“I spent a lot of time reading at first too. Non-fiction mostly.” He didn’t look too hard at the books, scanning titles and authors before he found empty space on the shelves for them. Bucky seemed more inclined to read through the descriptions and page through, picking out an occasional passage to read. There were soft sounds coming from the kitchen as Loki worked and the scene struck him as strangely well-worn, as though they did this often and he was being given a voyeuristic glimpse into their lives. Loki had never seemed this comfortable with him when he’d come over for dinner and to work on the puzzle. Idly, he wondered what had happened to it and if Loki had finished it with Bucky instead.

The books made it easier. He half-listened to Bucky read out snippets that caught his eye and managed to lose himself in his focus on organizing that he didn’t notice Loki joining them until he looked up and saw Loki seated on the chaise section of the couch with a glass of wine in his hands. He’d been watching Steve but looked away quickly when he realized Steve had noticed him.

According to Bucky, Loki was in love with him and had been for awhile. Also according to Bucky, Loki had fallen in love with Bucky too.

It seemed to have happened quickly but the sound of Bucky’s laughter caught his attention and he had to admit, Bucky had always been easy to love. He hadn’t exactly resented it, because he’d loved Bucky too much to resent him, but this was the first time they’d ever been in direct competition for someone’s affection. Bucky didn’t seem to think of it as competition, maybe because he didn’t know what it was like to be overlooked and to always come in last. He tried to shake those thoughts away; he wasn’t the scrawny kid no one wanted anymore. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe Bucky. He at least believed that Bucky believed what he was saying, that it felt real to him, just as everything had felt real after the spell, when everyone was telling him it wasn’t. But how could Bucky be so sure it would work?

The book forgotten in his hand was a historical profile of the 1930s. He flipped open the cover, turning pages without reading any of the words. “You remember the Moultons? Knew your mom and dad.”

“Yeah, I remember. Ben and Alice. And Miss Penny, right? She was some sort of cousin used to live with them and take care of the kids.”

“Cousin,” Steve repeated. He closed the book and drew his fingers down along the spine. “You really think that’s what she was?”

“Nah.” Bucky pulled another pile of books from his box. “Reckon everyone knew she wasn’t really
Alice’s cousin. I remember mom and dad talking about it a couple times. About how all the kids had Ben’s eyes, even Penny’s. But the kids were always polite and clean so they figured it didn’t matter.”

“How do you think they made it work?” Studiously focusing on the books, he tried to ignore the blush rising in his cheeks. “They must’ve known people talked, back then. You think they just didn’t care?”

“If they were happy together, yeah. Why care what other people think?”

Loki cleared his throat. “It is less uncommon on Asgard.” He sounded as awkward as Steve felt. “If a warrior falls. It’s not uncommon for his widow to be welcomed into another warrior’s family if she has none of her own. Many of them stay together for the rest of their lives.”

“You’re the only one who’s got any family left,” Steve said quietly. He’d always thought of Bucky as family. He wasn’t sure he could think of him as anything else.

Bucky snorted. “Speak for yourself, Rogers. I have some grand nieces and grand nephews somewhere. I think.” He gathered up one pile of books he’d looked through and started placing them on the nearest empty shelf. “Not exactly worried about what’ll happen to my reputation if people find out I’m living with two fellas though, if that’s where you’re going with this. Probably be an improvement.”

“I’m technically a criminal now so mine’s shot too. And Loki.” He glanced at Loki and saw a small smile on his lips. It left Steve with a strange, tight feeling in his chest. “So damage to our reputations isn’t going to be a problem for any of us.”

“Were you planning on holding a press conference?” Bucky teased good-naturedly.

“I’d probably have to get Congressional approval at this point. They’ve got me on a pretty short leash.”

“Even more reason to come with us.”


With a hum, Loki took a sip from his wine glass before suggesting, cryptically, that Steve go look out the front door. Curious, Steve set aside his book to go to the door, expecting to see the same hallway he’d seen a hundred times.

Instead, the door opened onto a narrow, overgrown road with open fields and pastures stretching out over rolling hills in every direction. He stumbled out the door and into warm, humid air filled with the sounds of birds and insects. Behind him wasn’t a New York City apartment building but a rundown cottage with a sagging roof and boarded up windows. Hurrying back inside, he swallowed down a sigh of relief to find himself in the apartment again and reached into his pocket to curl his fingers around the key. That’s what Bucky had meant about being able to find them.

“How?”

Bucky was grinning widely. “Opens wherever we want it to. Amazing, isn’t it?” He reached out to squeeze Loki’s shoulder.

“It’s limited to Midgard,” Loki qualified. He leaned into Bucky’s touch and there was a touch of color in his cheeks now. As Steve watched, he thought maybe, impossibly, that Loki was shy.

Yet again, he wondered if he’d read Loki entirely wrong the whole time. Each time he thought he
was making progress in understanding the real Loki, all the rules seemed to change. He closed the
door behind him, thinking that an apartment existing wherever Loki wanted it to still wasn’t the
strangest thing he’d heard that day. At least he knew why no one had been able to find Loki now.

“Thank you,” he said suddenly, surprising himself as well as Loki, if the look on Loki’s face was
anything to go by. “For keeping Bucky safe. In Germany. I couldn’t. I tried and Zemo still got to
him.”

“I, uh, don’t,” Loki stammered, the color in his cheeks darkening.

Bucky interrupted, his tone mild and amused. “If you two start comparing all the times you think
you’ve let me down and talking about how guilty you both feel, I’m gonna need a stronger drink.”

“Buck,” Steve started, chagrined.

“Well, I do. Loki keeps apologizing for stuff that doesn’t matter and you’d apologize for the rest of
your life if I let you. But you don’t need to, either of you.” He waved off their protests, abandoning
the books for the kitchen to pour himself a glass of wine. “I’m sure you’ll both be assholes to me at
some point in the future. Save it for then.”

“Was he always like this?” Loki murmured behind his wine glass.

“Pretty much.”

He saw Bucky’s eyes narrow. “You’re going to gang up on me one of these days, I can tell. Smother
me with your guilt and your apologies.” He shook his head slightly. “Long as you make it up to me
in sexual favors, preferably both of you at the same time, we’re square.”

Steve’s face flushed hot and he was glad to see that Loki had gone equally red. “That’s new,” he
whispered.

Eyebrows rising, Loki gave Bucky a speculative look. “Is it?”

“Hey, I spent nearly seventy years locked in an icebox, cut me some slack for wanting to live a
little.” Bucky rolled his eyes. He checked on something cooking in the oven before bringing his wine
glass back to the living room. “I don’t see any point in not being honest about what I want anymore.
And Loki won’t sleep with me again unless you’re onboard with it.”

Steve glanced sideways at Loki, who was now intently studying his wine. The tips of his ears were
red now. “Is that...why you asked me to come over? To tell you I’m okay with it?” Bucky opened
his mouth, then closed it again, frowning. Steve kept going, his face burning with humiliation. “You
don’t need me to be okay with it. What you two do is your business. I’m not...I didn’t know, before,
that you were...that you knew what was going on. But I don’t get a say in what you two do in your
relationship.” He felt sick and wished he could open the door to find New York again.

Mouth twisting, Bucky waited for him to finish. “Onboard means you’re with us. If you want, that
means in the same room, even the same bed. Or not. If you want to be there. Not asking for your
permission or anything like that, just want you to be part of this, with us.”

“What if I say no?” He look back and forth between them. “What if I tell you to let me out in New
York and never come back?”

“If that’s what you want,” Loki said quietly.

“It’s not what he wants,” Bucky snapped.
“You don’t get to decide what I want!” The outburst echoed in the apartment and he felt even worse for it. “I don’t get it. Loki acts like he wouldn’t even notice if I stayed or not and you keep acting like you know me as well as you know him. And how do you even know him that well? You met, what, a month ago? At the most.” He crossed his arms, hands balled into fists. There was another look between Bucky and Loki where they seemed to have an entire conversation without saying a word. “See? That’s what I’m talking about. It’s like you’re reading each other’s minds.”

With a sigh, Bucky dropped down onto the couch beside Loki and reached for his hand. “That’s because we are. It was a sort of side effect, I guess. Of what Loki had to do to save me, after Germany.”

If Steve thought his legs would’ve carried him as far as the armchair, he would’ve taken a seat too. Instead, he stood still, waiting for the world to right itself again. He realized that he’d assumed Bucky believed everything he was saying but that it still couldn’t be true. But if Bucky could read Loki’s mind, then everything he’d said must be true, and Loki could’ve answered for Bucky but had chosen not to, giving Steve the excuse of not wanting to speak for him. The sight of Bucky coming in the door, worried, came back vividly. When he’d said there was something he couldn’t feel, he’d meant that he couldn’t feel Loki.

He forced himself to ask a rational, reasonable question. “How does it work?”

“Feelings mostly. Thoughts. It’s stronger when we’re closer together. Strongest when there’s contact.” Bucky nodded to their clasped hands. “Took a bit to get used to but it’s…it’s like a part of me I never knew was missing and now I’ve got it back.”

“Do you remember,” Loki began hesitantly. “You told me once that you would give me everything, all of you, and that you knew I couldn’t accept it. You were right. I couldn’t.” He looked up, meeting Steve’s eyes for the first time, and he looked terrified. “But now I’m asking. That’s what we…that’s what I’m asking for. If you can, if you think you can try. That’s what I want. Everything. All of you.”

“We think Loki can do the same thing for you. Make a connection between the three of us.”

“It may not be possible,” Loki said, his grip in Bucky’s fingers visibly tighter. “If it is, you should know that it would be permanent. There’s no way to undo it. You must be sure. If we were to part ways someday, it would be lessened, but it would always be there. Even across Realms, as a mere whisper perhaps, but still.”

He had the sense of something lurking, of something Loki wasn’t telling him. It might have been because he’d come to expect secrets and layers when it came to Loki. He’d always wondered if Loki was the still, deep lake that hid worlds beneath its surface. Whether there were monsters or wonders in the depths, or both, was the constant question. Bucky didn’t seem to have any regrets, which meant it couldn’t be too bad, although he wondered how skewed Bucky’s view of monsters might be.

Finally, he spurred himself to move and made his way back to the armchair, dropping down into it like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. They were serious; they wanted to live together and sleep together and try some sort of mind meld that would involve magic. He didn’t know if he trusted Loki’s magic, or even his judgment in how he used his magic.

“You don’t have to decide right now. We’ll wait,” Bucky was quick to reassure him.

“Why does it matter if I’m onboard or not?” He directed the question to Loki. It certainly hadn’t mattered to them before now. “It’s not like I can stop you from having sex. Why do you care what I
think?” Loki flinched and Steve saw him struggle to keep his expression neutral, trying not to let Steve see what was going on underneath the mask.

“IT matters because.” Every word seemed to cost Loki an enormous effort. “I don’t trust myself to make the right decision. What I’ve done...if you can’t find a way to forgive me, then I don’t...I don’t deserve this. To have this.”

He watched Bucky put his arm around Loki’s shoulders, his face drawn into a frown as Loki struggled, and he could tell Bucky disagreed, but was keeping silent to allow Loki his chance to speak. There was a terrible sadness in Loki’s explanation, the implication that he would sever ties with Bucky if Steve wanted him to and the way Bucky was holding onto him made Steve wonder how awful, maybe even painful, it would be for them to be separated now. If he told them no, if it meant Loki would cut himself off from Bucky, he thought he’d be ripping both of their hearts out.

“You’re both consenting adults,” he said hoarsely. “I can’t tell you I’m onboard but I don’t want to come between you. I’m not against you being together, I’m just not convinced there’s a place for me, here. I’m not sure I want to be part of this.”

It was only partly a lie. He wanted the intimacy he could see between them, that must have come with their connection. It made his stomach ache with jealousy, he wanted it that badly. But Loki said it might not work and he couldn’t get his hopes up again. What could he offer them anyway? They were more compatible with each other than either were with him. Would he end up relegated to the couch every night, listening to them have sex? But he couldn’t allow Loki to punish himself, and Bucky, because of his own failings.

Bucky gave him a skeptical look but nodded. “Take your time.”

“It’s a lot to consider,” he said weakly.

“Why don’t we,” Loki started.

Bucky didn’t need him to finish, he was already getting up. “I’ve got it.” He disappeared into the bedroom.

If Steve hadn’t been there, he thought they probably didn’t need to speak anymore, if they could think and communicate just as well. Better, probably. He tried to swallow down the envy, tried to be glad they’d found each other. Loki wasn’t looking at him, again. Instead, he was stared down into his wine.

“You said it might not work, is it because of what you did before?” Absently, he rubbed a hand over his left forearm.

Loki nodded. “I was careful not to allow a connection to form. With you.”

That stung more than Steve would’ve thought possible. Loki could’ve given him what he’d given Bucky but he’d chosen not to. “Why?” He thought he saw the wine splash against the glass as Loki raised it to his lips, as if his hand was shaking.

“I didn’t want to force that on you. After everything else.”

“I wanted it,” he said sharply. “I would’ve given anything to have that with you. You knew that.”

“You weren’t in your right mind-”

“And Bucky was?”
“Hey!” Bucky emerged from the bedroom, a long slender box under one arm. “Knock it off, both of you. Steve, stop lashing out and dragging me into it. There’s a whole lot of difference between how I got here and how you got here. Loki, stop letting him get to you and second guess what you did, please. You know how I feel about it, that’s what matters.” He cleared off the coffee table and set down the box, which turned out to be a puzzle. The image was a beautiful castle in the midst of a wintery landscape. “You two have baggage enough to hash out between yourselves without making me part of it.”

“It’s a fair question,” Steve said defensively.

“The choice was completely different. With me, it was either allow the connection to happen or refuse because I couldn’t give him permission and let me end up a vegetable for the rest of my life. Of course I would’ve told him to do it, Steve. Don’t act like that’s at all the same as the choice he had with you.” Bucky glanced around, taking note of Loki’s wine glass and Steve’s long forgotten beer. “I’m getting the whisky out, since you two don’t seem like you’re gonna have an actual conversation any time soon.”

Steve bristled. “I’m sorry if I’m keeping you from getting laid with all my baggage.” He saw the spark in Bucky’s eyes but the rebuke never came. Loki reached out to brush his fingers over Bucky’s arm and that stopped whatever Bucky might have said. The wordless exchange irritated Steve nearly as much. “Could you both not do that? It’s like you’re having an entire conversation that I’m not allowed to be part of.”

Rolling his eyes, Bucky headed back to the kitchen. “He was just reminding me not to pressure you or make you feel guilty about sex and to be more sensitive about how hard this must be for you.”

Surprised, he glanced at Loki and saw that he was blushing and staring into his wine glass again. It was thoughtful, even kind, and not at all what he expected. “Oh. Um, thank you. I guess, um, Bucky’s right. It was different, with the spell.” He stared at the picture of the castle instead of looking at Loki. “I would’ve wanted it, if you’d asked. After, after the spell. I would’ve said yes.”

“I know that now,” Loki whispered. He set his glass down to open the puzzle box.

“What happened to the puzzle we were working on?”

Loki’s throat worked as he swallowed. “There was an accident. It was damaged.”

“It got covered in blood,” Bucky called from the kitchen. There was a soft tinkling of ice falling into glass. “After I slammed his face into the coffee table.”

Steve caught the irritated look that flashed across Loki’s face when he turned to glare at Bucky, and the open challenge in the look Bucky returned. “Are you two fighting?” He was oddly curious to see them argue rather than get along perfectly.

“Reading each other’s minds doesn’t mean we always agree,” Loki said mildly. He started picking the edge pieces out of the box. “I would prefer a bit more tact in discussing an incident that was profoundly traumatic for both of us.”

“I prefer to deal with shitty things by not being tactful about how shitty they were.” There was a smile beginning at the corner of Bucky’s lips when he returned with three glasses filled halfway with whisky. He doled out the drinks before sitting down to help sort puzzle pieces. “Seems dishonest to call it an accident. To me anyway. Nothing I did to you was by accident.”

“You were also not in your right mind,” Loki reminded him gently.
“Yeah, but still. I did it.”

Loki reached out again to brush his fingers over Bucky’s. “You know how I feel about that, too.”

Just like that, the argument was over. Steve marveled at it, jealous and amused at the same time. A new thought occurred to him, prompted by the bluntness of Bucky’s words. “You can’t lie to each other, can you?”

“Nope,” Bucky answered, the sound of the p like bubble gum popping. He shrugged a shoulder. “Good for conflict resolution, not so useful for romantic surprises.”

“It’s taken some time to adapt,” Loki admitted. “There are times when I would’ve preferred to hold my thoughts to myself.”

“I think what you meant to say was...drown yourself in self-loathing and isolate yourself because you don’t think you deserve to be loved.” The easy way Bucky said it made Steve think they’d had this argument a thousand times before and he was surprised to see Loki smiling, if it was slightly abashed.

Steve reached hesitantly for a handful of puzzle pieces. “Guess I should’ve tried the blunt route. I always tried so hard not to upset you but Bucky’s method seems to be more effective.”

With a soft hum, Loki tossed a pile of pieces back into the box. “Keep that in mind as you make your decision. He’s rather pernicious.” His smile turned mischievous when Bucky threw a puzzle piece at him. It was a smile Steve hadn’t seen in ages, perhaps not since before the spell, and there was a pang in his chest a seeing Loki so much more like his old self.

“He was always like that,” he agreed. “Even when I sickly and near dying from—”

Bucky groaned. “Oh, don’t start that again. You were fine. It was one ride on the Cyclone. Ain’t nobody died from that.”

When Steve grinned, it felt easier. “What’s for dinner anyway? I never asked.” He could smell whatever was in the oven now and it smelled delicious.

“Lasagna,” Bucky said brightly, smiling back at Steve. “Been craving it for awhile and Loki’s never tried it. Told him it was a lot like the spaghetti and meatballs you made for him, only with more cheese.” Loki looked skeptical of the value of lasagna.

“How did I not make you lasagna?” Shaking his head, Steve finished sorting his pieces and start trying to build one of the corners. “Shame on me.”

“Consider it rectified,” Loki said smoothly. He raised the glass of whisky in a mock salute. “It should be done soon enough and I hope I managed to make it correctly. The recipe wasn’t difficult to follow but...” His lips quirked and he made a soft sound, like a laugh. “Alright, alright. Bucky has asked me, multiple times now, to stop assuming that I will ruin everything I touch.”

Again, Steve felt touched by the obvious show of concern, and a bit jealous, at how they seemed to play off of each other, each trying to ease and guide the other. Any doubt he’d had that they truly cared for each other evaporated. Not only did they care, but they were obviously committed to helping each other.

“So, Steve.” Bucky swirled the ice in his glass. “We’re both dying to know. How the hell did you get to Jotunheim?”
Steve laughed in spite of himself. “Long story actually.”

“We’ve got all night.”

Hesitantly, piece by piece, he told them about Asgard, about Frigga showing him Loki’s rooms and finding the portal to Jotunheim. Loki had gone pale and drank his entire glass of whisky before he’d finished describing the trek across the glacial landscape.

“Frost Giants are nothing like they say they are on Asgard,” Steve told him fervently. “Nothing like you think they are.”

He described the caverns of crystals, the veins of soft earth, and the vast markets where the Frost Giants gathered, where the children had left food for him in exchange for his painting small trinkets. There was a wistful longing in his voice that he heard and didn’t try to hide when he talked about the silence and the simplicity he’d lived for that brief time. Finally, he told them about being taken to the great library and the old Frost Giant who had given him the cryptic warning about Loki’s meddling with magic and the mysterious pack, how she had changed forms as he’d left with Frigga.

“The markings that appeared when she touched me.” He held out his forearm, tracing his fingers over where the lines had appeared. “They were like the markings on your arm in your drawing. She said they were history. Heritage. That Frost Giants wear their history on their skin. And when I looked for the markings in the library on Asgard, it showed me Laufey.”

Loki’s brow was drawn, his expression serious and thoughtful. After a moment, he got up without saying a word and headed for the kitchen. Steve assumed he was taking the lasagna out of the oven and turned back to Bucky, looking for insight into what was going on inside Loki’s head.

“Sounds like an amazing place,” Bucky said quietly. He continued working at a small grouping of puzzle pieces. “Not surprised you managed to get yourself banned from an entire planet though.”

“Not banned. Exactly. I think Odin was more annoyed than angry.”

“No wonder you were worried about Loki’s magic. That makes more sense now.” He glanced at Steve’s arm, then down at his own, lowering his voice. “Wonder if I have those markings too.”

“Maybe. Maybe they’re like a signature. Like Loki’s signature.”

Bucky shifted, turning his head slightly. “He didn’t know that would happen. Doesn’t know what it means and...and it scares him.”

“You don’t have to tell me that stuff. If you don’t want to. What I said before…”

“He doesn’t mind if I tell you.” Bucky took a deep breath. “You have to change the way you think of privacy with this kind of thing. It’s not bad though. I’ll take it over HYDRA’s concept of privacy any day.” It was the first mention of his treatment at HYDRA’s hands and Steve stayed quiet, not wanting to press. After a few seconds, Bucky shook his head. “That’s another thing. If you do want to do this, you’ll have to be prepared to get all that stuff too, even the parts that you really don’t want. What HYDRA did to me, Loki knows all that now. What they did, how it felt, what they made me do. And I know what he’s done and what was done to him.”

Steve swallowed. He supposed Bucky must think it would discourage him and it was half true; part of him didn’t ever want to know what Bucky or Loki had gone through.

“I’m gonna grab the lasagna,” Bucky said suddenly, standing up. “Be right back.”
When he looked up, Loki wasn’t in the kitchen. He hadn’t heard the front door open, though that hardly mattered with Loki. He stayed where he was, half-heartedly working on the puzzle. Bucky would know if Loki wasn’t okay. He found the knowledge comforting.

Bucky returned with three plates piled high with steaming lasagna, making Steve realize how hungry he was. A curious chirp from the banana tree behind him reminded him that Una was there, tucked into one of the leaves where she’d been sleeping. At the prompting, Bucky produced a small tin containing crickets and grubs he’d been storing for her return. Una was munching happily and Bucky was refilling their glasses with whisky when Loki returned. He was carrying a small stack of hidebound books and what looked like a stuffed animal.

“There’s a symbol on everything you brought back. A name,” Loki said without preamble. He sat down, holding the items on his lap and looking dazed. “They were things from a child’s nursery. Learning books, children’s tales. Primers, that sort of thing. And I think, if I marked you and those markings are the same as mine and this Frost Giant you met recognized them.” He faltered, picking up the lumpy animal to stared at it. “These must’ve been mine. This...this was my name. And perhaps, if she could alter her appearance, cast illusions. If she could summon those markings out of your blood. It’s impossible. But if Frigga knew her by name.” Eyes closing, Loki took a deep breath. “You may have met my biological mother.”

It was the last thing Steve had expected. He’d never even looked in the pack and now, it was shocking to think he may have been carrying the only piece of his real family that Loki might ever have. He ached to close the distance between them, to hold Loki and reassure him again that Frost Giants weren’t horrible monsters.

“I will have words with Frigga,” Loki continued, opening his eyes again. “But not tonight. Tonight is about the future, not my past.” He gave the stuffed animal one last, small stroke over its ugly nose before he set it aside. “Dinner is getting cold.”

“It smells amazing.” He picked up his plate and fork, watching Bucky out of the corner of his eye to see if he looked worried about Loki. After the first bite, he made a soft sound, nodding and swallowing. “It tastes amazing too, Loki. Thank you for cooking. It’s really good. You did good.” He saw Loki open his mouth to refuse the compliment or downplay his cooking, and saw the quick glance toward Bucky and the way Loki blushed before he picked up his own plate to start eating. He wanted to give Bucky a pat on the back and thank him for that too.

Maybe Loki needed to literally read someone’s mind before he could let himself believe them. It made Steve’s heart ache, knowing the betrayals and self-doubt it must’ve taken for Loki to reach the point where he didn’t trust anyone, not even himself. A bite of lasagna stuck in his throat as he realized that he was part of the problem; he’d walked through the door and the first thing he’d done was make Loki doubt himself. What had happened between Loki and Bucky had changed Loki dramatically, he could see that too. He didn’t want his own trust issues to damage that growth or push Loki back into a place where he would isolate himself again.

“Gettin’ lost over there, Steve?” Bucky asked.

He smiled around the bite of lasagna, hurriedly swallowing. “Just thinking I owe Natasha a fruit basket. She’s the one who convinced me to go get Una and try to find you guys.” He watched Bucky’s face light up in a wide grin and some of the tension seemed to bleed out of Loki’s shoulders. “I’m glad I came. Glad you wanted me to.”

“Think you might want to spend the night?” Bucky smirked at the sharp look he got from Loki.

Pretending to focus on his lasagna, Steve shrugged. “Thinking about it.” He hadn’t, but things were
settling and smoothing out and he didn’t want to spend another sleepless night staring at the ceiling of an empty apartment, even he was on the couch. Just the thought of being able to sleep more than three or four hours, of waking up to coffee and breakfast with more than silence for company, tugged longingly at him.

“Please don’t think there’s any pressure to do anything you don’t want to do,” Loki added, still eyeing Bucky sternly.

Bucky was clearly trying not to smile and failing. “Of course not. No pressure.”

The minutes slipped by more quickly after that. He ate his way through two plates of lasagna, barely noticed each time Bucky refilled his glass of whisky, and was surprised, and a little disappointed, when Bucky slotted the last puzzle piece into place several hours later.

“I can’t believe we finished it.” Steve checked the box, rereading the number of pieces.

“It’s nearly two in the morning,” Bucky pointed out. He stifled a yawn as he collected the glasses and the nearly empty bottle of whisky. “I’m gonna hop in the shower if you don’t need me to help with clean up.”

Loki waved him off. “Go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.” He cast a quick glance toward Steve, but waited until Bucky had disappeared through the bedroom door before speaking again, his voice low. “The shower was where I found him, when he….” He paused, lips pressing together. “It bothers him sometimes. The memory. So it’s easier if I’m with him. I’ve been trying to convince him to look for another place to stay with me. He insisted we keep the apartment until you came back.”

Like everything else they’d said that night, Loki seemed to be handing him live bombs with every other word. He frowned. “Did you not think I’d come back?”

Fidgeting with the puzzle box, Loki shifted on the cushion. “I didn’t see any reason why you would. After what happened. I didn’t create the working to cut us off from the world to keep him away from you, only to keep SHIELD from coming after him when we saw what happened in Vienna. I only wanted to keep him safe.”

“It was a good call,” Steve said softly, cutting in before Loki got caught up in trying to justify himself. “I would’ve done the same if I could do what you can. To keep him safe.” He heard the water start in the bathroom and nodded. “You should go.”

“There are extra towels. And something for you to sleep in if you’d like. And an extra toothbrush.” Loki smiled shyly as he stood up. “He was more optimistic than I was.”

Returning the smile, Steve nodded again. “Always thought he knew me better than I knew myself sometimes.”

Once he was alone, he gathered up the dishes and carried them into the kitchen. They’d polished off the entire batch of lasagna, so he scraped out the dish and set it soaking in the sink while he loaded the rest into the dishwasher. Wondering how Loki managed to have water and electricity if the apartment was disconnected from reality made his head spin and he doubted he’d understand if Loki explained it. With the kitchen squared away, he had nothing else to occupy himself and the open bedroom door was an irresistible temptation.

The bedroom was almost as he remembered it. There was an overstuffed chair that was new and more books piled haphazardly on the floor, the chair, and a couple of small tables added between the bed and the chair. A plush rug covered the floor between the bed and the bathroom door. He pulled
off his shoes before stepping onto it, his toes sinking into the thick weave. Like the rest of the
apartment, the bedroom looked lived in rather than barely touched. He was reading the titles of the
books when Bucky came out of the bathroom wearing a pair of boxer briefs and towel drying his
hair. Something at the pit of Steve’s stomach did a flip at the scarring around Bucky’s metal arm.

“You wanna hop in? Loki’s just getting out.” Bucky hunted through the mess on the table near the
chair and pulled out a comb and a hair band. “Make yourself at home. Anything you need, just let us
know.”

“Buck.” His voice gave out, losing momentum amidst everything he wanted to say. He wanted to
believe it could be this easy.

Bucky combed quickly through his hair and pulled it up into a loose knot at the back of his head.
“We got all the time in the world to talk about it. About everything. You can take five minutes for a
hot shower. It’ll do you good.” He came close enough to reach out and grip Steve’s shoulder. “Have
a little faith.”

Mutely, Steve nodded. When he started toward the bathroom, Loki emerged. He was dressed like
Bucky, a towel around his neck to catch the water dripping from his hair. His pale skin was flushed
pink from the heat. Ducking his head, Steve hurried into the bathroom and shut the door. The air was
still heavy and warm with humidity. Folded neatly on the sink counter was an extra towel and a pair
of soft cotton pajama pants; a toothbrush still in the packaging was set on top.

He undressed hurriedly and folded his clothes. In the shower, he tried not to think about Loki and
Bucky in there before him, together, and about everything he still didn’t know or understand. Bucky
was putting up a good front, but if being in the shower bothered him enough that he didn’t want to
be alone, it might be no more than a front. And Loki still thought he didn’t deserve to be loved.

“How did I get myself into this,” he muttered as he scrubbed at his hair. What was he supposed to
do?

He wondered what advice Natasha would have if she could see him now.

With a sigh, he finished rinsing off soap and shut off the water. “Just go with it and see what
happens, Rogers. The couch can’t be worse than being alone.” He dried off and slipped on the soft
pajama pants before brushing his teeth, trying to come up with a good way to say good-night without
sounding ridiculously awkward.

Bracing himself, he opened the door and stepped back into the bedroom. Loki was already in bed,
lying on his side and watching Bucky read in the armchair. There was a look of such tender fondness
on Loki’s face that Steve felt guilty for being there to witness it, as though he’d stepped into a private
moment between the two of them. He was spared the decision of speaking up when Bucky set his
book aside.

“Feel better?” Bucky asked, giving Steve a lazy smile.

“Yeah. Thanks. For the,” he waved awkwardly at the pants. “I’ll just. See you in the morning, I
guess.” He took a sideways step toward the living room.

Bucky rolled his eyes, a smile curling one corner of his mouth. “Get in bed, punk.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to, um, get in the way.”

“Bed,” Bucky said more pointedly.
Blushing furiously, he made for the bed and climbed in. There were more memories with this; memories of the castle and Loki. His face felt bright red by the time he’d eased onto his back, lying stiff and trying to take up as little space as possible.

Bucky got in after him, stretching out so their shoulders bumped together. “Do the lights,” he said.

Before Steve could ask what he meant, Loki reached out and with a flick of his wrist, cast what looked like a handful of glowing marbles into the air above them. They hovered and bobbed, occasionally spiraling and zooming from spot to spot. Before long, Una darted through the bedroom doorway, chattering excitedly and diving for the nearest glowing ball. Steve couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face at watching her chase after them.

“They’re like floating Christmas lights,” he said in awe. Curious, he raised a hand and tried to catch one, feeling it slip through his fingers like a shiver of warm electricity.

“Wait ‘til you see what else he can do,” Bucky murmured.

If this was what Bucky knew of Loki’s magic, it was no wonder he’d fallen in love. Magical lights and mental connections weren’t on the same level as potentially lethal sex spells. Steve pulled his hand back slowly. He’d seen one side of Loki and Bucky had seen another; he had to wonder what he’d find if they tried to meet in the middle. With Bucky on his left side and Loki on his right, it was a literal question as well as a figurative one. He couldn’t imagine that watching Una chase balls of lights was what they were hoping for.

“How does this...work?” Better to bite the bullet, he thought, and figure out what they wanted him to do. For a brief moment, he hated how willing he was to do anything they wanted if it meant not going back to an empty apartment.

Loki shrugged and tossed another handful of lights into the air. “It’s merely bound energy.”

“I mean, you know.” His heart was racing now. He gestured nonsensically between them. “With three of us. How is supposed to work?” Seeing their confused expressions, he felt even more clueless. “Sex. How is this supposed to work? I mean, that’s what...you want to have sex, right? I just don’t know how you want this to go.” They were both staring at him and the silence got heavier with each passing second, making him feel worse.

Finally, Bucky reached down to take Steve’s hand, his head resting against Steve’s shoulder. “Sex would be awesome, yeah. But this is awesome too. Just being together.”

Steve craned his head, trying to get a look at Bucky’s face. “Are you sure? It’s, um, are you sure this is enough?”

“It was always enough for me.” Bucky pulled Steve’s hand up to press a kiss to his knuckles. “Don’t worry about it. If sex happens at some point, that’ll be icing on the cake. I just want you here.”

Something twisted in his chest but it didn’t feel like pain. It felt like a knot of tension and fear he’d been holding beginning to unravel. He held Bucky’s hand, stroking his thumb over Bucky’s skin until he saw as much as felt Bucky begin to drift off into sleep. When he turned his head, he saw Loki watching him, the same tender look on his face as before.

“Does he mean that?” Steve whispered.

Loki nodded. He eased closer, letting his hand fall to Steve’s chest, as light as a hummingbird. “Make no mistake, we want you. You’re beautiful.” He drew circles over Steve’s skin with one fingertip. “We’ll always want you. But we want you to feel good, whatever that means for you.”
His eyes stung and he blinked furiously, trying to push away the sudden swell of emotion. “I don’t. This is. I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to. Just stay. Please.”

The knot in his chest unraveled another notch. He caught Loki’s hand in his, pressing it against his ribs. “Will it be enough for you?”

“This,” Loki said, smiling at him and Bucky both, “is perfect.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 22 attracted a rather peculiar variety of troll. I gave them the benefit of doubt for a while but eventually decided they were just a troll. If they come back under a different username and I can tell it’s them, I’ll delete those comments too. I don’t usually see any reason to delete comments, even critical or rude comments, but I do delete trolls.
Chapter 24

As much as Natasha hated being on the front lines in the chase after HYDRA’s remnants, she hated being on the sidelines even more. But SHIELD had harbored HYDRA for too long and for many of the agents, it was personal; she understood that kind of determination.

“Get me eyes on the situation, Hill,” she snapped into the comm link. Understanding didn’t mean she had to like it.

Maria’s answer was full of static and distant gunfire. “Little busy.”

She pursed her lips and put down the pen she was holding before she snapped it in two. It was a HYDRA den disguised as a grain processing plant. All of the SHIELD agents had been hand-picked; they were experienced; they knew the risks. The Avengers couldn’t sweep in to save the day anymore, not with half of them forced into retirement or vanished into thin air. Her hands were mostly tied unless she wanted to join them in retirement. Unable to do much else, she ran through all of the channels, checking and rechecking to be sure she was still getting clear signals from each team member. They were all still there, still alive. This was their job and she had to trust them to get it done.

A burst of chatter filled the channels, shouting and exclamations that didn’t make any sense from her vantage point of the mobile command station. She hit the button for Maria immediately. “Hill? What’s going on?”

“Backup just arrived.” Maria sounded like she was trying not to laugh. “Whatever strings you had to pull, Romanov, it was totally worth it.”

“What backup?” Natasha spun around to bring up the satellite link and hopefully catch a glimpse of what was going on, but she froze when she saw the man sitting in the chair behind her. Heart pounding from the shock, she kept her expression blank. “You’d better have a good reason to be here, Rogers.”

Steve grinned. “I’m not here. Retired, remember?” He looked different. His hair was longer and he was sporting the beginnings of a beard. More than that, he looked relaxed.

“Are you…” She didn’t finish the question because the screens lit up as one of SHIELD’s surveillance satellites came into range. Frowning, she moved closer, scanning the image to pick out the shape of the plant as the satellite zeroed in on the site. There were flashes of light that must’ve been gunfire and she could make out the dark shapes of SHIELD agents. Her eyes darted to the time at the bottom corner of the screen; the time until she’d lose the overhead view again and have to wait for the next satellite to fly over; minutes, at the most. A larger, brighter flash of light drew her attention back to the firefight on the ground. She blinked, leaning closer and wondering if her eyes were playing tricks on her. “Is that Loki?”

“And Bucky,” Steve said cheerfully.

She blinked again, recognized the man she knew as the Winter Soldier. “He looks like some sort of...knight.”

“Yeah. Loki made the armor for him. Half Asgard, half something Bucky found in a comic book, I think.”

“Is that a sword?” At least the gun in Barnes’ other hand made sense.
“Loki’s been teaching him.” Steve sounded unbearably proud.

It was over before she lost the satellite signal. Holding her relief tight inside her chest, she turned slowly back to face Steve. “You’ve been marked as missing, you know. A fugitive.”

Steve shrugged, clearly not upset by the news. “I figured that would happen. Hope you didn’t waste time looking for me though.”

“You could’ve left a note.”

“Well,” Steve said sheepishly. He shifted in the chair. “I didn’t expect to stay, but once I’d found them, I just...never left. I’m good though, really. We’re good.”

She wasn’t going to admit that she’d worried about him. “Are you blushing?”

His smile widened. “It’s a little unconventional, I’ll admit, but we’re making it work. And I’ve tried to keep tabs on what SHIELD is doing, to see if there’s anything we can do to help.” He made a little wave toward the screens. “They’re something when they’re together, aren’t they?”

“Very effective,” she admitted. “Looked like they work well together.”

“They’ve got a connection, literally. Something Loki did to help Bucky recover from what HYDRA. It’s like mind reading.”

Eyebrows rising, she filed that piece of information away. “And you? Are you in on the mind reading?” She saw his smile falter for the first time and guessed the answer. “Or are you immune to that too.”

“Loki tried but it didn’t work.” The casualness of his shrug was forced, hinting at how much it must’ve hurt Steve not to be able to share in that connection. “Bucky wants to keep trying but the old-fashioned way works for me too.”

“Old-fashioned way?”

His smile softened into something sweeter, if wistful. “We talk. A lot.”

“That’s a damn miracle.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “We probably won’t stick around for clean up but I wanted to see you. Check in while I could.”

“Thanks for the backup.” She knew he was going to disappear as suddenly as he’d appeared and, apart from knowing he was alive and safe somewhere, she’d go back to not having him around. It was something she’d gotten used to, but seeing him brought back the pang of nostalgia she secretly harbored for the time they’d spent as Avengers. As a team.

“Anytime.”

“Are you happy?”

He nodded. “I am. We are. We complement each other, I guess. Fill in the blank spaces.” He reached into his jacket as he stood up and pulled out two thick envelopes, holding them out. “One of these will let you get in touch with me if you need to. The other is for you to use however you want.”

“You know Sam wants to see you one of these days.” She accepted the envelopes, guessing what was inside at least one of them and touched that he’d thought of her. “I’ll let him know there was a
Steve Rogers sighting, at least. But he’ll want a visit.”

“I figured it would be better if I kept a low profile, didn’t draw attention to any of you, but I’ll stop by when it’s safe.” He hesitated, hands in his jacket pockets and shifting his weight nervously.

“How’s Tony doing?”

“Tony’s Tony. He’s back in the private sector mostly. He and Pepper went through a pretty rough patch but I think they sorted it out. She’s moved back into the Tower at least. He does some consulting for the Pentagon, along with Rhodey, but otherwise, he spends his time tinkering in his lab. He’s made some pretty great stuff so maybe the Accords weren’t all bad.” She had a million questions but didn’t think she had long enough to get answers. And if this was the only chance she had, she figured she’d better give him all the news she could. “Thor’s off on some quest in outer space. Bruce went with him, thought it was better to go where Ross couldn’t find him for awhile. Not sure that was a good idea but how much trouble can they get into?” At the look on Steve’s face, she laughed. “They’re both pretty much indestructible at least. They’ll be back in one piece, eventually. Probably.”

“Clint?”

“He checks in more than you do.” She gave him a pointed look, but held up the envelopes. “But that’s going to change, right?”

“Absolutely. I can probably talk Loki into making one for Sam too.”

“You know you’d better. Might save you being read the riot act for disappearing on him.” She’d hold him to it, somehow. Especially if he was going to show up unexpectedly with a very unusual version of the cavalry. When Ross found out about Loki and Bucky as rogue agents, she thought his head might explode. As appealing as that was, she preferred to keep it quiet as long as possible. “I’ll make sure the team keeps this to themselves, buy you as much time as I can before word gets out.”

The eventually didn’t seem to bother him. He gave a half shrug and turned toward the door. Something glinted in his hand as he reached for the doorknob. “I’ll be in touch, Nat. Look after yourself.”

Confused, she watched him slide a key into the lock before he pulled the door open. It should’ve been impossible for him to have a key to that door to begin with. She was out of her seat before the door fully closed but when she opened it, he was already gone. Standing outside the command center, she scanned the entire area, knowing he couldn’t have disappeared that quickly unless he’d flown or magic had been involved. She frowned down at the envelopes, turning them over to open them. Steve’s handwriting was recognizable on one of them; if you need me

She opened that one first and pulled out a single blank card. A smile spread across her lips as she opened the second envelope; two blank cards slid smoothly out of the thick paper.

“Thank you,” she told the empty night around her. She’d needed a good Valentine’s Day gift for Maria after all.

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Steve didn’t think they’d beaten him home by that much, but he stifled a laugh at the hastily discarded clothing in the living room. He rolled his eyes as he piled Bucky’s armor into the chest under to the window and gathered up the clothes to dump in the laundry room. Their new place gave them all more space to spread out, with its own washer and dryer units, plus a spacious kitchen and a second floor with another bathroom and three bedrooms. He wasn’t certain the house actually existed anywhere or if Loki had simply conjured it into being. The stars in the night sky made him wonder if
they even on Earth. But Bucky loved it, loved that it was surrounded by empty fields and forests for
miles; that was good enough for him and Loki.

Bucky’s boots were in the hallway at the top of the stairs. He picked them up on the way and set
them down just inside the bedroom door. Loki and Bucky were collapsed on the bed, pillows tossed
carelessly over the side and the neatly made bed completely undone. There was still a sheen of sweat
on Bucky’s bare back, half of him sprawled over Loki and one foot hanging off the edge of the
mattress. Both of them were flushed from what Steve could only imagine was some pretty intense
sex.

“You could’ve waited for me.” He shrugged off his jacket and sat down in one of the armchairs to
untie his shoes.

“Sorry,” Bucky mumbled. He shifted enough to turn and look over his shoulder at Steve. “Got a little
carried away.”

“Mnhmm,” Loki agreed, eyes closed and sounding dazed.

“Guess you’ll have to make it up to me.” He finished undressing and gently slapped the back of
Bucky’s calf to get him to move so he could climb into bed, forcing a gap between them wide
enough for him to fit. Bucky made a half-hearted protest, but immediately pressed up against Steve’s
back with a contented sigh. “You’re both a little gross.”

“Shower later,” Bucky said against his shoulder. “Cuddle now.”

“As long as you plan on showering.” He relaxed into the tangle of limbs, pulling Loki a bit closer
even though Loki’s hair tickled his nose. “You guys did really good tonight. I’m proud of you.”

He could tell Bucky was smiling as he kissed the back of Steve’s neck. “We’re pretty amazing.”

“Nat liked the cards, I think,” he told Loki, leaning in to kiss his temple. “That was a good idea. And
I need to check on Sam soon. Maybe we could stop by DC one of these days. See how the river
clean up is going and grab a beer with Sam, do some catching up. I haven’t seen him since
Germany.”

“He’s the one with the wings, right?” Bucky propped himself up to rest his chin on Steve’s shoulder.
The one I kicked off the helicarrier in DC.”

“That’s the one.”

“I might skip that reunion.”

Steve turned his head to look at Bucky. “I think you’d like each other once you got to know each
other. You’re both bossy.”

“Hey!” Bucky gave him a mock wounded look.

“I meant you’re both awesome.”

In Steve’s other ear, Loki made a soft sound of disapproval. “Some of us are trying to sleep. It was
an exhausting evening. How am I expected to get any rest with you two bickering like children?”

Bucky snorted but Steve shushed him, pretending to whisper. “We’ll be quiet.” But he slid his hand
down to Loki’s hip and let his fingers fan out over his thigh.
Eyes still closed, Loki raised an eyebrow, but the corner of his lips quirked as he tried not to smile. “That’s better.”

“Give him an hour,” Bucky whispered loudly. “Then he’ll be ready for round two.”


“An hour sounds perfect,” Steve interrupted before they could get started one-upping each other, which inevitably escalated into sex and as hilarious as it always was to watch them trying to get the better of each other, he was enjoying the relaxation. He nestled closer to Loki and reached back to pull Bucky tighter against his back.

They settled into the quiet and eventually Steve let his eyes close, listening to the sound of them breathing. This was his favorite part of the day, when they were quiet and just enjoying being with each other. This was home.

He dozed lightly, waking a moment here and there when either Bucky or Loki shifted on the bed and eventually ending up on his stomach. The feel of hands on his back finally woke him; two pairs of hands working at the tension in his muscles and sliding smoothly over his skin. He opened one eye and saw Loki kneeling on his left. Another moment and he registered the smell of the lavender massage oil Bucky had found in a market somewhere. He let out a long breath, abandoning himself to the sensations. Bucky’s metal hand was always cooler but made incredibly quick work of the knots that seemed to persist behind his shoulder blades. He moaned, breathy and low, when he felt a thumb press into the tightness in his lower back.

As usual, they didn’t stop at his back, their hands moving up and down his legs and arms, then back up all the way to his neck. He was beginning to feel like jello, his muscles more relaxed than he could ever manage on his own. At Loki’s prompting, he rolled over onto his back. More lavender; he felt the oil drip onto his chest before Bucky’s right hand began to smooth it over his skin. They worked down to his toes, then out to his fingers. He felt boneless and his skin tingled from the attention.

“This feels incredible,” he slurred, nearly too relaxed to get his mouth to work. He felt Loki’s lips against the palm of his right hand and smiled, opening his eyes just enough to see. They’d showered at some point; both had their hair pulled up, damp at the ends. A glance down told him that Loki was aroused and looking sideways showed him that Bucky was too. His smile turned into a goofy grin.

“Were you hoping for a happy ending?”

Bucky continued working his thumbs over Steve’s palm. “Kinda hoping you’d want one, actually.”

“You were, huh.” He thought his cheeks might split from smiling. “What’d you have in mind?”

“Well.” Bucky drew out the syllable, tipping his head to the side as he pretended to think about it. “Got you good and relaxed.”

“And?” Steve said innocently.

Bucky turned Steve’s hand so he could kiss the center of his palm. “But I think we might’ve missed a spot.”

Steve sighed contentedly as Loki’s fingers started back up his arm, pressing and sliding with the massage oil. “Maybe you should do something about that.”

Bucky moved in first, easing onto his side and rolling close enough to kiss. It had taken some getting used to, the idea of kissing Bucky like this; a lot of stops and starts and laughing at his own
embarrassment. He dug his left hand into the loose bun at the back of Bucky’s head and tugged, which Loki had confided was something Bucky enjoyed; in response, he felt the stutter of breath against his lips. There was a thrill in getting that reaction. Shifting weight on the bed let him know that Loki was moving, probably getting close enough to kiss Bucky’s neck or shoulder.

He broke the kiss to give Loki a chance to cut in, smiling as he watched them kiss. There was nothing like it, seeing them get caught up in each other. He envied them, the connection they shared and the intimacy it gave them. Whether fighting or cooking or fucking, he’d watched them move in perfect synchronization over and over, and it was incredible every time.

“I love watching you together,” he said when they stopped to breathe. “The way you touch each other. How you know exactly what the other wants.” The lock of dark hair bounced back against Loki’s skin when he let it go. He dropped his fingers to Loki’s shoulder, tracing the lines of bone and sinew.

Bucky settled back down, pressed tight to Steve’s side and occasionally planting kisses on Steve’s shoulder. Silver fingers flashed in Loki’s hair and Loki leaned into the touch before he lowered his head to Steve’s chest. His lips were warm on Steve’s skin. He let out a soft sigh as Loki left a trail of kisses down his stomach, still looking up in case Steve gave him a sign that he needed to stop.

Bucky’s breath hitched when Loki caught Steve’s cock, still soft, between his lips. He shivered at the feel of Loki’s tongue on his skin, surrendering to the sensations.

He relaxed into the pleasure of it, his right hand loose in Loki’s hair and his left flat against the back of Bucky’s neck. Watching Bucky was half the fun, since he couldn’t seem to pull his attention away from what Loki was doing. There was a sharp, hungry look on Bucky’s face; one of the many moments that Steve wished he had a window into Bucky’s mind, to know what made him wear that expression. Loki took his time, as thorough and patient as he’d been with the massage, working Steve toward orgasm, and when it came, Steve let out a soft moan. It was calm and easy, far from the intensity of what he remembered of the night in the castle with Loki. Eyes half closed, he watched Loki kiss Bucky again, Bucky’s tongue slipping into his mouth to chase after the taste. If he hadn’t been dazed with relaxation and pleasure, he might have been embarrassed.

If only he could feel what they did, know them as intimately as they knew each other. Loki’s skin was smooth against the backs of his fingers as he stroked the line of his neck. Tugging at a stray lock of hair that kept trying to curl, he wound it around his finger.

“I want to try again,” he told them when they pulled apart.

He’d watched them enough to catch the lightning fast glances between them and guessed at the silent conversation. Bucky wanted to try again to extend their connection to Steve and Loki feared another failed attempt.

“I won’t be disappointed if it doesn’t work. Even if it doesn’t work the next fifty times we try. I still want to keep trying,” he reassured Loki, continuing to caress his shoulder. “What we have now is amazing and I love it. But I,” he hesitated, picking his words. “I want you to know that I love you the same way you know Bucky loves you. Without any doubts.”

There was a brief sorrowful expression, but it smoothed away into Loki’s mask of careful concern almost immediately. “I know you love me.”

“I want you to be sure.”

With a crooked smile, Loki bent his head to press a gentle kiss to Steve’s lips. “I am sure. You tell me nearly every day.”
“That’ll be good enough until we figure it out.” He wasn’t giving up even if he’d resigned himself to not being part of what they had with each other. There was still a chance he could be, someday, and that was worth trying for. Smiling, he reached up give Loki a kiss. “And then I’ll tell you every day.”

Loki huffed out a breath. “Alright. If you insist.”

“Swap,” Bucky said, not needing to explain. He and Loki traded places so Bucky could lie on Steve’s right. He was grinning broadly as he got comfortable, laying his flesh and blood hand on Steve’s chest over his heart.

On Steve’s left, Loki adjusted one of the pillows to get more comfortable before placing his hand on Bucky’s, his fingers slotting between Bucky’s to rest lightly against Steve’s skin. It was subtle. Steve craned his neck to see the glimmer of golden light beginning at Loki’s fingertips. Wisps of gold unfurled at the surface of Loki’s skin, like miniature waves curling and lapping up against the edges of Loki, spilling out and into Bucky’s skin. He felt Bucky shiver. Under Bucky’s palm, his skin felt warm and buzzed, a little like electricity. The golden glimmer writhed around their fingers and brushed against his skin, but couldn’t sink beneath the surface. He tried to be patient, tried not to let his disappointment show on his face. It wasn’t going to work.

“Just try it,” Bucky said, eying Loki with a hard look. Steve knew that look meant he and Loki were arguing silently about something.

“No,” Loki said flatly.

“Try what?” Steve asked, glancing back and forth between them. “If Bucky’s got an idea.”

“No,” Loki repeated, sounding a little frantic now. “We don’t know what will happen.”

“We’ve got a pretty good idea.” Bucky seemed immune to the glare Loki was giving him. “What’s there to lose?”

Loki started to pull his hand away but Steve caught him, holding both his and Bucky’s hands firm against his chest. “And if I harm him? I don’t know what it will do. If it will alter him or you in some permanent way. Again. I won’t take that risk.”

“Loki,” Bucky’s tone softened immediately. “Sweetheart, don’t.”

Finally, Steve understood. He squeezed Loki’s hand. “I want to take the risk. And maybe you will change me, again, but you’ve already changed me without any magic at all. You’re changing me all the time. Both of you. So what’s a little more?” Bucky was smiling as if he’d known exactly what Steve would say without being able to read his mind. Even the look that Loki was giving him held no surprise, only worry. He held tighter to their hands. “So let’s try it. Whatever it is. I want you to try.”

He saw the moment Loki relented and thought it probably had more to do with whatever Bucky was saying or doing than his own request.

“If you feel any pain, tell me immediately,” Loki told him sternly.

“I promise.”

The change began like a shadow sweeping over Loki, spreading out from his chest up his throat and down his arms; dark blue with darker lines like painted geometric patterns. Loki’s eyes were closed tight, but Steve knew they were red now, like the other Frost Giants he’d seen. A sharp intake of breath drew his attention to Bucky. The energies that had been swirling in Loki’s fingers were now
traveling up Bucky’s arm, under his skin, and tracing out a matching pattern of nested chevrons over his forearm. This had never happened before but Bucky didn’t look frightened, only amazed.

Loki made a soft, pained sound. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, babydoll,” Bucky soothed, speaking aloud for Steve’s benefit. “You didn’t brand me, you gave me something amazing. It’s beautiful.” He pressed closer to Steve. “You know he’s marked too. You left a trace even if you didn’t mean to. Just go a little deeper, okay? We’ll bring you back. This is home, alright? We’ll bring you back.”

Back? Steve frowned. It hadn’t ever occurred to him that Loki might be going somewhere. He shifted, suddenly uneasy and wondering if he should’ve had them explain more before he insisted they try again. The patterns were over Bucky’s shoulder and throat now, beginning to appear on his face, giving him the appearance of Loki’s golden twin. What had been heat under Bucky’s palm was growing colder. Steve gasped when he looked down; dark green lines were beginning to appear on his skin, just as they had when Farbautí had touched him on Jotunheim. They grew out from Bucky’s palm, inch by inch, branching and splitting into variations of a repeating pattern. Bucky’s fingers still glimmered gold but Loki’s now looked wreathed in cold, blue white fire.

The first flash was nearly indistinguishable from his own emotions. Worry, nervousness, fear; then he felt something steadier, something that reminded him of winter in the mountains and the silence of pine trees under snow. Turning to look at Bucky, he watched him take several long, deep breaths. He heard the distant sound of a train howling through a mountain pass and Bucky leaned in to press his forehead against Steve’s cheek.

“Buck,” he whispered and he felt the answer. For a moment, he had a glimpse of what Bucky could endure and it felt endless, as if HYDRA had unwittingly burned into him a powerful, indomitable will to live.

A pulse of energy hit him without warning. He felt it go through Bucky like an echo, felt them both caught up in a torrent like falling into a raging river. His vision snapped out - or the house vanished? - and there was roaring wind in his ears that didn’t make any sense. Irrationally, he had the impression that Bucky was laughing with the exhilaration of hurtling through space and he wondered if he was losing his mind.

Open your eyes, Steve.

He obeyed because he could feel the rock solid presence of Bucky at his side and his conviction that this, whatever it was, was the most wonderful thing in the world. Bright light swirled around him, racing toward and away, and he was struck dumb with the realization that he was seeing stars, as though Bucky had simply redecorated their bedroom with a cosmic theme. Bucky was grinning, laughing and trying to see everything at once, and the lines over his skin blazed golden light bright as the sun. Half afraid of what he’d see, he turned to look at Loki.

Loki was nearly unrecognizable. His hair was loose and the stars were mirrored in his dark blue skin. When he turned his head to look back at them, his eyes were a solid, brilliant, burning white. There was distance in his expression and Steve suddenly understood what Bucky had meant. Whatever energy Loki tapped into to create the bond was bigger than Earth and Asgard and any of them. It was cosmic and eternal, and whatever Loki became while he was here was utterly alien to them. He’d thought the risk would be to him or to Bucky, but he’d never considered the risk that Loki could be the one who was lost in the attempt.

Loki. He felt himself reaching out even though he knew Loki was still lying beside him. Come back. He held onto Bucky, who was steady as an anchor the size of a mountain. Loki turned, as though
listening to a call only he could hear, and Steve could feel the intense desire in him to continue moving; to expand; to create and annihilate; to ride the energy to the ends of the universe and beyond.

Come back to us. Come home.

Then he was falling, racing like a meteorite, and when he blinked he was back in their bedroom. His heart pounded and his breathing came harsh and labored. It took him a moment to feel Loki’s and Bucky’s hands beneath his, and then a wave of emotions that weren’t his own crashed over him. Bucky was elated; Bucky wanted to give Steve everything, right now, all at once; he was nearly bursting with how much he wanted to give and show Steve. All that held him back was Loki, whose caution was driven by the fear that Steve would reject him now; that what he needed most to hide was himself. Rolling toward Loki, Steve wrapped his arms around him and held him tight. Bucky pressed against his back, reaching around to grip Loki’s shoulder.

I love you, Steve whispered without having to speak. Loki crumbled, shaking, and Steve let it all wash through him.

It was morning of the next day when he came back to himself fully. Opening his eyes, he stared at the ceiling above the bed for long time, listening to the silence. He was alone, but he could feel Loki and Bucky downstairs, like a tug at the back of his mind. He’d slept, but his mind was still whirling with information. What Thanos had done to Loki; he could smell burning skin like it had been his own. What HYDRA had done to Bucky; he reached up to brush his fingers along a phantom ache in the left side of his skull. They’d warned him, of course, that he’d see all of that too, see everything they’d wanted to spare him from. That’s why they were downstairs; they knew he was awake and giving him space, letting him set the terms of their interaction as he got accustomed to having their whispers inside his head. It had taken them time to get used to each other, he knew that too.

A whisper of silk caught his ear. Turning to look, he was stunned to see Frigga standing in their bedroom. Clutching at the blanket they’d laid over him, he shoved himself up into a sitting position. “Your highness. Um...this is...”

“My apologies.” Frigga gave him a small nod, the smile on her lips mischievous and familiar. “Our debt is settled, Captain Rogers.”

“Oh? Um, are you sure? I’m not.” He glanced at the door. There were footsteps on the stairs and he knew Loki was seconds away.

“It’s all I could’ve asked.” She was gone when Loki pushed the door open, his cheeks flushed as he searched the room. He opened his mouth but no words came out, and Steve felt his pang of heartbreak that Frigga had come but not to see him.

“Come here.” Steve waved Loki in, waiting until he sat down on the bed to wrap his arms around Loki’s shoulders.

“No doubt she had her reasons,” Loki said calmly.

Steve pulled back, staring at Loki wide-eyed. “You don’t even believe that. You’re hurt and betrayed that she didn’t stay.” He dug his fingers into Loki’s hair. “My God, is that how it always is with you? No wonder I kept screwing everything up. Loki, oh my God, Loki. You could’ve told me how you really felt. About anything.” He couldn’t imagine believing that everything about him was so wrong that even his emotions had to be treated like shameful secrets, but that’s how Loki had lived before Bucky had shown up and started kicking down metaphorical doors.
“I tried,” Loki said, his shoulders sagging.

There were more footsteps in the hall. Bucky came through the doorway with three glasses and a bottle of wine. He set the glasses on the bedside table and poured out the wine. “Should we be expecting more drop ins from Asgard?”

Loki sighed. “I must’ve caught her attention when I…” he trailed off, meeting Steve’s eyes. “I think she was the one who called me back the first time. It must have been her.”

He kept rubbing circles over Loki’s back. “We’ll add a visit to your mom after Sam, how about that? I’m sure we can find a way to see her without pissing off all of Asgard. Since both of us seem to be pretty good at that.” He shot Bucky a look. “No.”

“You didn’t even let me say it,” Bucky protested, but he grinned as he held out their wine glasses.

“You have terrible ideas.”

Bucky raised his glass in a toast and winked. “I have the best ideas.”

“You know, I don’t think you were this terrible back in the forties.” He had to shift to let Loki slide back on the bed.

“You just couldn’t read my mind back then.”

“Yeah, well.” Steve nearly choked on his wine. “If I’d had any idea how much time you spent thinking about, um, having sex with me. Probably would’ve been terrified. This is a whole side of you I never saw before.” His face flushed at a particularly detailed line of thought he was picking up from Bucky. At his side, Loki’s expression had turned a little glazed. He was suddenly, acutely aware of an unmistakable lust that wasn’t his and his stomach turned unpleasantly, forcing him to reach out and set the glass of wine down. He hadn’t felt anything like that since the spell and it was tangled up in a knot of emotions that had nothing to do with sex. Immediately, the lust slipped away, vanishing as both Loki and Bucky felt his response. His cheeks burned hotter and he tried to brush it off. “Sorry. Not used to that yet. I’m fine.”

Neither of them looked like they believed him and he grimaced, realizing that they would knew he wasn’t being entirely honest. He gave them a meek smile and shrugged.

“Has it always bothered you?” Bucky was watching him intently.

“No, not at all. It’s not like that normally,” Steve hurried to explain. “It just reminded me of the spell, that’s all. I’ll get used to it, I promise. I don’t mind it. Sex. It’s fine. I want to have sex with you, really.” Even as he said it, he could feel them responding with varying degrees of horror and frustration. “Really. I’ve always wanted to when we’ve had sex. It feels good, I promise. You guys always take such good care of me.”

Bucky folded his arms, eyes narrowing. “Yeah, but you’re doing it because you’re afraid we’ll abandon you if you don’t.”

“Not...not really. I mean, yeah, but I know that’s a stupid thing to be afraid of. I know it’s not real. I know you won’t, in here.” He tapped his temple a few times. “But it’s a hard fear to get rid of. That’s all it is, I swear.”

Loki shook his head as he laid down, placing his head in Steve’s lap. “You wonderful, beautiful fool.”
“Goddamn it, Steve,” Bucky said at the same time.

“We’ll just have to start small,” he offered, trying to make up for the mess he’d made. “Maybe I can get used to just watching the two of you first. Get used to how that feels.” Bucky was giving him a skeptical look, but he didn’t think it was a bad idea so Steve pressed his advantage while he could. “Avoiding it won’t help me deal with it. Sam’s told me that enough times I ought to get it framed and put it on the wall somewhere. And I love watching you, I’ve told you that before. This will be even better.”

“Your ideas are terrible.” Bucky picked up Steve’s glass and held it out for Steve to take, then grabbed his own and climbed onto the bed to sit cross-legged at Steve’s feet. He reached out to lay a hand over Loki’s ankle. “I thought we were past this, that’s all. We want you here, yeah, but if you wanted to go read a book instead, we’re good with that.”

“I know. I’m sorry. There’s not exactly a filter with this.” He gestured between the three of them.

“We just want you to be happy,” Bucky finished. He was frustrated, but it was with himself for not realizing sooner that Steve still had doubts.

“Hey, I haven’t done anything I didn’t want to do.” He scratched Loki’s back a few times, willing them to feel that he meant what he said. “I want you to be happy too. Sex is part of that, for both of you. And if it makes you happy then yes, I want to be a part of it.”

“It made you nauseous,” Bucky said pointedly.

“It surprised me.”

Loki stirred. “Enough. We aren’t a straight line. Sometimes backwards is the right way to go.” He rolled onto his back, lifting his leg to drape it over Bucky’s lap. “We went slowly at first so we’ll do that again. If you aren’t going to be comfortable with it, we’ll know soon enough and we’ll adjust.”

There was a dizzying blur of emotions from both of them, changing too fast for Steve to catch them all. Bucky nodded, resignation and determination both radiating from him, drinking wine like it was a challenge. That was new too, Steve thought, or maybe he’d only seen flashes of it before. A glimpse here and there; Bucky going off to war, Bucky up on a cliff watching over them and the quiet determination that must have taken. He was lost in his thoughts before he realized that both Bucky and Loki would know what he was thinking about. When he blinked, he saw Bucky watching him with a soft, fond expression and Loki had a small smile playing over his lips.

Bucky gestured at them, splashing wine around inside his glass. “You two both think more than is healthy.”

Steve felt Loki’s silent laughter, felt how fond he was of Bucky’s brashness, his fearless claim on his own emotions and desires. In the ebb of that, he felt the deep roots of Bucky’s fierce determination to own his life, how they grew out of decades of dehumanization and losing his identity to HYDRA’s will. He saw Bucky take a deep breath and pull away, sliding off the bed.

“Buck?” he called as Bucky bolted from the room.

Loki placed a hand lightly on Steve’s arm. “He’s not ready for you to feel how angry he is about what was done to him.”

“What? Of course he’s angry. He’s got every right to be angry.”

Loki’s fingers pressed a little harder. “He’s not ready for you to feel that.”
“Oh.” He wanted to say he understood, but he didn’t.

“He hides it very well. The anger. Under his jokes and his energy. Swallows it down with a hundred glasses of wine.” Loki rolled onto his side again, looking up at Steve. He wasn’t upset or frustrated, only accepting of what Bucky needed to do. “The nights when he goes walking in the forest. It’s because he’s dealing with his anger. It’s why he doesn’t want to be surrounded by people.”

As if on cue, Steve heard the distant sound of the front door slamming closed. He could still feel Bucky, still feel that tug at the back of his mind, but it was softer, quieter somehow. He took a drink from his wine glass, thinking back to how often he saw Bucky with a glass of wine in his hand. “Guess we’ve all got our issues.”

“We do,” Loki sighed. “But we’ll work through them. When he gets back, I’ll have a bath waiting for him, soak with him for awhile. Or you can, if you’d like.”

“No, that’s alright.” He hadn’t thought about how often Loki and Bucky took a bath together either. “It’s something you two have, together. I’ll have to find my own way to help him.” He reached down to stroke Loki’s hair. “You too. What can I give you that’s just ours?”

Loki smiled and for the first time, it reached his eyes. “Why don’t we make cookies? He’ll like that when he gets back.”

“So your idea of doing something together is doing something to help Bucky feel better?”

Loki’s smile widened. “No need to pretend to be surprised.”

“There’s no pretending. You are...so much more than I thought you were. Even after everything, I was still only seeing a sliver of who you really are. Of everything you really are.” He thought of the vision of Loki with burning white eyes and constellations cast on his skin. “You’re incredible.”

Slowly, he leaned in and Loki rose to meet him, closing the space between their lips tentatively. It felt the same and different. He felt the same warm rush of emotion at kissing Loki, but also felt the way Loki’s heartbeat skipped and a flutter of desire before Loki pulled away. They kissed a few more times, taking their time, before Loki roused himself enough to get out of bed. Steve caught his hand, let himself be pulled out of bed and caught the clothes Loki tossed him. He kept reaching for Loki as they went downstairs and remembered noticing how Bucky always reached for him. Each time felt like coming home.

He was surprised again when the first thing Loki did was make him breakfast; he hadn’t even remembered that he needed to eat. They were silent as they worked on the cookies, not needing to speak to know what the other needed or would ask for. Steve found himself smiling, settling into the rhythm as though waking up for the first time. A deep, heady joy kept bubbling up inside him and threatening to spill out.

There was a hot bath and a plate of freshly baked cookies waiting when Bucky returned. He looked windswept and cold, but calm. Standing at the edge of the kitchen, he stared at them. Steve felt his gratitude for both of them, his shame at storming out of the house because he couldn’t keep his shit together, and --

Steve left the cookies and pulled Bucky into a tight hug. “Stop it.” Bucky’s arms went around him, metal fingers digging into his shoulder.

When he let go, Loki was there with a cookie and all but forced Bucky to eat it. Laughing and coughing at the same time, Bucky waved them off with a gruff thank you before he settled on one of
the dining chairs.

“Loki’s got a bath ready.” Steve took the glass of wine Loki handed him and brought it to Bucky, who was now staring at them as if he was about to break. “Take your time.”

He joined Loki in washing up and cleaning the kitchen, occasionally glancing over at Bucky while he ate cookies and drank wine. Bucky loved them both so fiercely that it left Steve a little breathless. With the kitchen tidied up, he shepherded them upstairs into the master bathroom and helped them get undressed, then collected the bottle of wine Bucky had brought up earlier and emptied it into his glass.

“Stay,” Bucky said softly when Steve turned to go.

“Let me grab a chair.” He carried one in from the bedroom and set it by the tub so he could rest his hands on the side. After several minutes of silence, he stirred himself to speak. “It’s alright if you have to leave like that. We all need space sometimes.”

Bucky smiled, leaning into Loki’s side. “I’ll remember that when it’s your turn.”

“Good.” He drew a finger across Bucky’s forehead, catching a lock of hair and tucking it behind his ear. The heat of the water and their relaxation was contagious, making him wish they had a bathtub big enough for three. Making do, he crossed his arms on the edge and laid his head down. He could stay there beside them, close, and that would be enough. He felt Loki’s fingers comb through his hair.

“Steve,” Loki said suddenly. “Have you seen Una?”

Steve pushed himself up, frowning as he tried to remember the last time he’d seen or heard her. “Not since... it must’ve been two days ago. Did we leave her behind on accident? Maybe she went out looking for bugs.”

“No, I don’t think so. She must be here somewhere.” Loki was beginning to worry now. Worry that she was gone and worry that he’d been so distracted that he hadn’t noticed.

“I’ll go look. You guys keep soaking.” He leaned in to give them both a quick kiss, then hauled the chair back into the bedroom on his way out.

He combed the bedroom first, looking under all of the furniture and into the back of the closet, then expanded his search to the other bedrooms and closets on the second floor. It was possible that she’d decided to hibernate on her own, away from her hive, and he’d find her curled into a soft, warm spot somewhere. Once he was certain she wasn’t on the second floor, he started his search of the ground floor, combing through the shelves of Bucky’s library and checking behind the washer and dryer to see if she’d decided to nest there.

“Una?” he called, listening hard for any sound of her.

Halfway through searching each leaf of the banana tree, he heard a faint sound of claws on a hard surface that sounded like it had come from kitchen. As quietly as possible, he crept into the kitchen, listening. Another faint scratching. He stood still, not even breathing. Deciding the sound was coming from the refrigerator, he peered into the crack between the fridge and the wall. He wasn’t able to see much and backtracked to grab a flashlight, shining the beam into the narrow space. In the top right corner, the light caught something that flashed opalescent and he heard an annoyed, muffled chirp. Lowering the light, he let out the breath he’d been holding.

“Sorry, Una. Just didn’t know where you’d gone. We’ll see you when you wake up, okay?” He
wasn’t entirely certain that sprites didn’t hibernate for centuries, but at least Loki would probably still be around. He was quiet on the way back up the stairs and found Loki and Bucky already out of the bath, toweling off in the bedroom. “Found her. She’s built a nest behind the fridge. Hibernating maybe.”

“Maybe.” Loki wasn’t convinced. He was worried that Una wasn’t feeling well and was hiding like an injured cat. None of them had any idea how to nurse a sick sprite back to health.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine. We’ll keep an eye on her.” He leaned back against the dresser. “We’ve got the whole afternoon. What do you think? Lunch? I had a late breakfast but I could throw together some sandwiches. Something more than cookies at least. We could use some more firewood split and hauled up to the house. Or we could spar for awhile.” He tried to get a feel for Bucky, who seemed to have mastered the ability to not give away anything other than mild amusement.

Still naked, Bucky climbed into bed and under the covers. “I’d like to lie under a tree and stare at the stars for a while, get out of my head. You should come with us.”

Baffled, Steve watched Loki get in bed after Bucky. He had no idea how going back to bed in the middle of the day was going to end up with lying under a tree watching the stars. Both of them were waiting for Steve now, quietly amused by his confusion. He decided it must be some sort of magic trick and shrugged before he slipped under the blankets to join them. His head barely hit the pillow when the bedroom vanished. He found himself lying beneath an enormous tree, a warm summer breeze rustling the leaves and millions of sparkling stars overhead.

“Where are we?”

“A memory from my childhood,” Loki answered. He was stroking Bucky’s hair tenderly. “It’s easier. His memories are further away. He can take refuge from them here.”

“He is right here and not deaf,” Bucky murmured, amused.

Steve looked over Bucky’s head to watch Loki, wondering how he’d ever doubted that Loki loved Bucky. After seeing everything Loki had been willing to do, was still willing to do, it seemed foolish now. Without speaking, Loki assured him that he would do as much for him. A lump swelled in his throat. He put an arm around Bucky’s waist and laid his head on Bucky’s shoulder. They could stay here as long as Bucky needed.

“Loki,” Steve whispered, “where do you go to get away from your memories?”

Bucky was the one who answered. “I usually kiss him until he stops thinking about ‘em. It’s an effective distraction.” He turned his head to nuzzle against Loki’s neck. “He’s got this spot, right...here.”

He watched Loki melt a little against Bucky, his eyes closing. Surprisingly, he didn’t feel the overwhelming lust he’d felt before, only an easy relaxation and affection between them. For them, this wasn’t about sex. He was learning and relearning them all over again, like he’d done when he’d found them. There were layers he’d never seen before, entire worlds apparently, that were new to him. He worried, momentarily, that he didn’t truly belong here, but hurriedly brushed that feeling away, knowing Loki and Bucky both would disagree with him. There hadn’t been anywhere he felt he belonged in a long time. The closest he’d come to belonging was being part of the Avengers and he’d lost that. Maybe he’d lose this too.

“So this is what it’s like in your head all the time,” Bucky said wryly. He rolled onto his side toward Steve, wrapping an arm around Steve’s waist.
Embarrassed, Steve tried to quiet the whirling thoughts in his head. He’d always taken for granted
having his thoughts and feelings to himself; the loss of that privacy left him feeling exposed and
vulnerable. Loki and Bucky seemed to think it was worth it so he’d have to take it on faith that he’d
get used to baring his soul whether he wanted to or not.

“Just remember that we want you here,” Bucky said, his voice soft and sleepy. “You belong with us.
And we belong with you.”

Steve smiled against Bucky’s hair. “What’s it like to have sex with this? Can you feel everything,
like it’s doubled? Or...I don’t know.”

“Mind. Blowing.”

Laughing, Steve hugged Bucky tight for a second. “That is a terrible pun.”

“Well, it is. You tell ‘im, Loki. Tell him what he’s been missing.”

Loki rolled his eyes fondly. “It is doubled, I suppose. In a way. There’s pleasure, your own, feeling
the physical sensations of it. And I can feel Bucky’s pleasure, what he enjoys.” He drew his fingers
down Bucky’s arm. “Sex is often very jumbled. A lot of emotions, a lot of sensations, very quickly.
It’s impossible to name them all but I can feel what he wants, what will bring him the most pleasure.
And, sometimes, things he wants but also...doesn’t want me to do.” Bucky made a soft hmm and
Loki went silent.

Steve thought it sounded complicated. “Can I...can I ask what that means?”

Stirring, Bucky pulled away from Steve enough to look up over his shoulder at Loki. “I don’t want
him to do anything he’s not comfortable with, no matter if I want it or not. Like having sex when he
looks like a Frost Giant.”

“Oh.” Steve didn’t press, wondering how often they’d argued about this.

“I fantasize about it sometimes, while we’re having sex. Tracing the lines on his skin with my
tongue,” Bucky continued. Loki was blushing now and staring fixedly at the great tree trunk behind
them. “You get that too, the bits and pieces of random fantasies. All those crazy thoughts that go
through your head when you’re having sex. Sometimes…” He licked his lips and Steve could tell he
was checking with Loki to determine if it was alright to continue. The red in Loki’s cheeks darkened.
“Sometimes he thinks about having both of us inside him at the same time. How it would feel. How
he’s never gonna ask for that because he’s worried what we’ll think if he does.”

“Why would,” Steve’s voice cracked, “why would we think that was bad?”

“He thinks everything he wants must be wrong.” Bucky grinned when Loki gave his shoulder a light
slap. “I’m the one thinkin’ about bondage gear and knocking him up and he worries about what
we’ll think of him for a few harmless threesome fantasies.”

He could tell Loki was embarrassed but amused and Bucky was teasing. Between the bondage gear
and the idea of Bucky wanting to impregnate Loki, Steve didn’t know which part of that he dared
comment on. Neither of those were anything he’d considered before. It hadn’t even occurred to him
that Loki could get pregnant, despite seeing Loki in a female form. He stopped himself there,
wondering if that actually mattered or how Loki viewed his own transformations, and he was so far
out of his depth on that subject, he kept his mouth determinedly shut.

“It can be distracting. We’ve had to stop a few times and ask what the hell. My head comes up with
some pretty twisted stuff sometimes. Stuff I don’t actually want when I think about it, but it pops in
there all the same.” Bucky shifted onto his back so he could put his arm around Loki.

“Stuff like...like what?” It felt like too personal a question even though Steve knew their personal boundaries were practically non-existent now.

Bucky shrugged a shoulder. “You’ll see soon enough. It’s random mostly. Stuff from my memories that comes through. Doesn’t make a lot of sense most of the time so I don’t try to figure out why.”

“Alright.” Steve hesitated, then plowed on. “I don’t want to think you want something and do it when you don’t.”

Shaking his head, Bucky reassured him, “you can always stop and check in, we do that all the time. For the longest time, Loki kept wanting me to punish him or hurt him during sex. Thought he deserved it.” Loki buried his face against Bucky’s shoulder, his clenched fist resting on Bucky’s chest.

Loki still thought he deserved it, Steve realized. He thought back to how certain Loki had been that Steve would decide to execute him after the accident with the truck in Chelsea. That was a part of Loki too, constantly bracing for punishment was a habit so well-worn it was woven deep into who Loki was and how he viewed the world. Just like he’d worried that Loki and Bucky would leave him if he didn’t want sex the way they did. Those were old reflexes; old wounds. When he looked, when he reached for the connection between them and felt around the edges, he could tell that Bucky’s relationship with pain and punishment was intricately complicated by his time with HYDRA. It was a give and take that he and Loki were still negotiating; adding Steve to the equation required even more negotiation. There were sexual acts they hadn’t involved Steve in because they weren’t entirely comfortable letting him into that space between them, letting him see all their twists and turns.

Steve turned to look up at the stars, letting out his breath slowly. “This is more complicated than I thought.”

“Always is,” Bucky sighed contentedly. “But we’ve made it work so far. We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, of course. I just didn’t realize. Guess I should’ve known, but, honestly, the spell was pretty straightforward and before us, that was about all of my sexual experience. So my expectations might’ve been a bit skewed.”

Bucky yawned and settled more comfortably into the bed of soft clover and moss spread like a blanket over the roots of the tree. “It sounds more complicated than it is. Helps that we can’t lie about it to save someone’s feelings or pretend we like something when we don’t. Makes it easier right upfront. Sex is full of contradictions, just takes time to work through them all. But it can be incredible too, when it’s right and we’re both in the same headspace. Everything gets magnified.”

They kept giving him more to think about, adding nuances to how they each fit into their three by three equation. Bucky came across as simpler than he really was and Loki often contradicted himself; between the two of them, he was surprised had hadn’t manage to screw up worse. Additionally, Bucky thought Steve spent too much time in his own head, thinking, and Loki-

“Hey,” Steve said, but he grinned. “I’m not disagreeing with either of you. I do think too much and have a hard time figuring out what I want.” He watched the stars for several minutes before asking another question. “So, the next time you’re, um, both in the same headspace, can I just watch?”

“You can watch anytime you want, babe.”
“Only if it doesn’t make you uncomfortable,” was Loki’s answer.

“I’ll go read a book if it bothers me,” he promised, “but I want to try.”

He set himself to watching the stars and the subtle motions of the leaves in the breeze, trying to keep his mind quiet so that Bucky and Loki could relax in the peaceful calm of Loki’s memory. It got easier not to think the longer he focused on the stars. He drew imaginary patterns from star to star, sketching out his shield and Loki’s helmet and a few segments of Bucky’s arm in patches of the sky. When they got back, he could sketch out the night sky and add the connecting lines to see his constellations come to life. It still seemed strange that he could fill his days with whatever he wanted to do, but it was less terrifying when his days held Loki and Bucky.

With a smile, he rolled onto his side to lay his head on Bucky’s shoulder, stretching his arm across Bucky so he could hold both of them at the same time. They were both right; they could take it slow, they could take everything slow. He could stop and ask when he needed to and he knew they’d answer without judgment or irritation. These felt like such small things, but each small thing made him want to hold onto them forever.

Bucky stirred and made a soft sound. “We love you too, punk,” he murmured. Loki caught Steve’s hand and placed it over Bucky’s heart, his own long fingers slotting between Steve’s.

_I know_, he thought, closing his eyes, still smiling. After everything they’d been through and whatever happened next, this - here, together - made it all worth it.

**

Three was not a hive. _Three_ was barely a family.

Humans were too large. They took up too much space. So much space that it seemed they could barely keep their families together, let alone settle to a hive. It was their size; it must be.

So it wasn’t much of a hive, but if three humans was all Una was going to get, she could work with that.

The space between the human food box and the wall was dark and warm. It would do. She built a neat, careful webbing first, pressed up into the corner, and when she was ready, she placed two eggs into the safety of the webbing and settled around them to wait.

If they couldn’t figure out how to build a proper hive on their own, she’d do it for them.

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