After coming online as a Guide in Siberia, after Thanos, after everything that happened, Tony is finally doing better. His therapist and his new family have finally declared him ready to start looking for a Sentinel to bond with. Tony just has to find one interested in him.

(His family meanwhile is greatly entertained by Tony missing his suitors' attempts)

I did write this sequel for the April Rough Trade, as I planned last year. I'm going to post the parts over the next few days as I work my way through editing them.
Chapter 1

Tony slowly left the office of Jess Yates, the therapist here at Xavier Institute after his session, feeling tired but accomplished. There were other therapists aside from Yates also working with the students and other residents, of course, since there were far too many mutants who needed help in dealing with past experiences, past traumas. Yates, however, was the only one to also live at the school, which made it easier for Tony to schedule sessions around his work for SI. Not that he was back to full-time work. He’d still not been cleared completely from his injuries, both the remaining ones from the fight against his ex-team mates and new ones from the fight against Thanos and his forces, so Erik and Charles insisted that he should take it easy for now and Pepper had agreed. Tony knew better than to try and argue when the three of them were in agreement.

Tony sometimes still found himself surprised to be here, not just seeing a therapist but living at Xavier Institute for Higher Learning. After being betrayed by his supposed friends and team mates and being abandoned wounded and in a dead suit in Siberia, he’d been rescued by the X-Men and invited to stay at the Institute while he recovered. They’d also offered him information and training in his gifts after he’d come online as a Guide and support in dealing with everything, with what had happened and what was coming. Or rather what had been coming. When he had told them about his fears of another, bigger invasion, they had not only believed him, they had started planning with him and so, when Thanos and his army arrived, they were able to defeat him with no loss of life on their side.

Seeing Yates to heal from everything he had gone through had been Erik and Charles’ suggestion. He’d been hesitant at first, afraid to trust a therapist after some he had seen in the past had ignored doctor-patient confidentiality and had sold details of their session with him to the press or hadn’t been prepared to deal with what he’d gone through. Pepper and Rhodey had encouraged him, pointing out that a therapist proven to be trustworthy enough to work at the Institute and used to the unusual issues resulting from the different mutations would be more likely to work out for him. And it was working out well. Yates was not only successfully helping him to recover from Scarlet Witch messing with his mind and the constant state of hyper vigilance he’d been in as a result but also the PTSD resulting from Afghanistan and flying the nuke through the portal back in 2012 and what he recognized now as gas lighting by Obie and later by Romanov.

That didn’t mean the sessions weren’t hard on him, quite the opposite. Right now, he just wanted to rest.

He stopped in the middle of the hallway, considering where to go. He could go to the room he was staying in, the room he was slowly coming to believe was his room, of course, but right now he did not want to be alone. Decision made, he turned around. Considering the time of the day, he expected to find most of the adults currently not on duty to supervise the children in one of the sitting rooms.

He was right. Erik and Charles were sitting at the small table between three comfortable armchairs, playing chess. Jean was sitting near the windows, reading a book and enjoying the last rays of sunshine. Alex, Kurt and Peter were sitting on the couch in front of the TV but the sound was turned down and they seemed more interested in talking. Tony walked over to the corner with the armchairs and let himself drop into the chair beside Erik, tiredly leaning his head against the headrest.

“Are you okay, Tony?” Charles asked.

Tony just hummed, idly watching Erik make his next move. “Tired.”

“I’m afraid we have no coffee ready but you can have some tea if you want,” Charles said.
“Still not a tea drinker,” Tony replied, still looking at the chess board with his eyes half closed. “Bruce tried to convert me. Didn’t work.”

Charles laughed and reached over to pad his arm. “Fair enough.”

Tony smiled slightly. This was nice, being able to just sit and enjoy the company without any demands being placed on him and yet knowing that he’d be able to talk to them if he wanted to.

“So, did Wendy and Vision say when they’ll be back from their date?” Alex asked after a moment.

Jean raised the book to hide her smile at the twin grimace on Peter’s and Erik’s face. Charles didn’t even bother hiding his own smile. Erik and Peter’s denial of the tentative romance between Wendy and Vision was a source of amusement to the others.

“They’ve just gone to see a movie together. They’ll be back right after, I’m sure,” Erik said.

“I guess it’s date night then. Logan and Scott are down in the garage together, aren’t they?” Kurt said casually.

“And I’d like to not consider what my little brother and his boyfriend are doing there, apart from working on the cars or motorcycles,” Alex said.

“Children,” Charles chided patiently.

Tony smiled, letting his eyes drift close. He loved his new family. Now if only his Rhodey would be back from Washington where he’d gone to discuss his future with the Air Force.

Erik and Charles briefly looked up from their game, taking in their newest son dozing in the armchair. ‘Should we let him sleep?’ Charles asked.

‘For now. We can wake him later to get him to bed.’

~*~

The next morning Tony slowly made his way into the kitchen for his morning coffee (he may have celebrated when he’d been finally declared healthy enough to have coffee again). He just hoped that no one brought up yesterday evening. He was an adult and over 40, he was too old to be walked to bed half-asleep. At least he hadn’t been carried. Peter and Alex might tease him by calling him their new baby brother but he was not a baby.

He smiled brightly at Jean when she offered his a cup of coffee and a friendly “Good morning.”

“’ morning,” he mumbled back, taking his first sip of the nectar of gods.

The X-Men were by now used to him not being very much of a morning person, especially not the morning after a therapy session, so they simply went back to their conversations. Though Tony noticed that plates with food were being pushed in his direction in a silent invitation to have some breakfast aside from coffee, a now regular occurrence he’d had to become used to.

Scott and Logan were at breakfast as well already. Scott was typically up early but Logan sometimes preferred a morning in bed or wherever he went. Tony had to agree with Alex, he didn’t want to know any details. As far as they were concerned, he spent those mornings sleeping, no matter if either or both his partners were also in their room with him.

“Is Hank in Washington again?” Tony asked after a while when he was awake enough to properly
take notice of who was there or at last passing through the kitchen.

“Yes, he has a few meetings yesterday and most of today but he said he’d be back this evening, tomorrow at the latest,” Alex said. His bond with his Sentinel was strong enough after all these decades that the distance was no problem for them, something he was rather relieved by because, while Hank enjoyed his work in politics, he had neither the patience nor the inclination for it. He did well enough accompanying Hank to events as his plus one or in meetings with representatives of the military branches who tended to listen more to him, a Vietnam veteran, than his civilian husband, as he’d done while preparing for the fight against Thanos, but he was not interested in doing it regularly. No, he very much preferred his life here at the Institute. Of course he still missed his husband and was happy whenever he could find a few days between meetings to come home. “He mentioned that he ran into Ellison and Sandburg recently. They are consulting in the training of all the Sentinels and Guide who have come online right before or during the fight against Thanos and on if and how the Accords apply to all Sentinels and Guides, no matter when their gifts emerged.” He looked to Erik and Charles. “They’d like to visit us here, to keep us up to date on the results of their meetings in Washington and to see how where doing with the Sentinels and Guides were training.”

Tony frowned. “They’re not suggesting that you’re not doing enough or doing something wrong, are they?”

“No, my dear, don’t worry,” Charles assured him. “We regularly exchange ideas and act as guest teachers for each other’s students. Generally speaking, we’re better equipped and more experienced for cases with additional abilities or unusual experiences but some while they have more experience training Sentinels and Guides how to use their abilities in law enforcement without drawing attention or endangering cases. But, like with any teacher, there are sometimes students who respond better to the other teaching approach, so we sometimes exchange students.”

“They often send students our way since it was a bit easier for us before.” Seeing Tony’s confusion, Alex clarified: “Before Sentinels and Guides became known. As a school, it didn’t seem all that surprising that we offered special training sessions for adults sometimes but Sandburg and Ellison are police officers, so Sentinels and Guides working neither in the military, federal agencies or the police could easier explain why they stayed with us.”

“We’ll give them a call later,” Erik told Alex, “and see when they plan to visit.”

“How are they handling the revelation that Blair’s dissertation wasn’t fraudulent after all, now that the fight is over and it has had time to sink in for everyone?” Jean asked.

Alex shrugged. “I don’t know, Hank didn’t say. But I expect Ellison will be happy that his Guide is finally getting recognition.” He paused. “Not that I think Blair ever really regretted his decision to declare his dissertation a fraud, not when it meant protecting his Sentinel and their bond.” He smiled gently, thinking of his own Sentinel.

Tony sighed softly, a bit envious. The other Guides here seemed so happy and settled in their bond. He wondered what that was like.

“Speaking of bonds,” Charles said. “Jess talked to me earlier today. They think, and I agree, that you are ready to start looking for a Sentinel to bond with.”

Scott stood up. “Sorry, I have to get ready for my first lesson.”

Tony was momentarily a bit he surprised by his abrupt exit, never mind his excuse since Scott tended to make sure to have everything ready well before his lessons, but he was quickly distracted. He’d
perked up at Charles’ words, all attention on him. “Really?”

Charles smiled at him. “Really. You have come a long way in your recovery, physically and psychologically. You’re in a better place now to build a bond of your own.” Too many people in Tony’s life had targeted his self-worthy in an effort to make him easier controllable, so they had been worried he might form a similarly unhealthy relationship with a Sentinel, because it was the kind of relationship he had become used to and because he had a self-sacrificing streak that made him value others more than himself. It was still a work in progress but they were reasonably certain Tony would be better able to recognize signs of an unhealthy relationship now. Never mind that any Sentinel wanting to bond with their boy would have to prove themselves to them first.

Tony nodded. He looked down at his plate thoughtfully. “Then I guess I just need to find a Sentinel who would be interested in a bond with me.” Considering how many Sentinels had come online, surely there had to be some willing to give him a chance.

The other adults exchanged meaningful looks over his head. Logan opened his mouth to comment but Jean reached over to take his hand and shook her head. Logan might be a bit too blunt for Tony to handle in this case.

“Has Doctor Strange decided if he’s going to train here, in Cascade with Blair and Jim or somewhere else entirely?” Erik asked.

“Here, I believe,” Jean said. “He’s going to come here three days from now.”

“Isn’t that also when Rhodey’s coming back?” Alex asked.

“Yes, he said he hopes to be back by then,” Tony said. He frowned lightly, considering, then asked: “The last time I talked to King T’Challa, he mentioned asking if he can train here as well. Do you think some of the other online Sentinel heroes would be interesting in joining us for training? I think a Sentinel familiar with working as a hero or for an agency will be better able to accept my being Iron Man.” He’d learned from his failed relationship with Pepper, after all. They were great as friends but she just couldn’t understand what made him Iron Man, that it was not just a suit he put on but an important part of himself. If he wanted a bond like the one between Erik and Charles or Hank and Alex, then he needed someone who could accept all of him.

“We’re still in contact with a number of them from the fight against Thanos. I’m sure we’ll be able to come up with something,” Charles said.
Chapter 2

Vili sighed, rubbing his head. Cleaning up after his brother was giving him a headache. Thor wasn’t doing too badly as the public head of the remaining Asgardians. Assisted by his friend and shield brother, Doctor Bruce Banner, he had received permission from Norway to settle their people there for the time being. They had landed the spaceship on a field a few miles from the next human settlement and had lived in it until they had managed to build some simply longhouses around it, assisted a lot by the mages. Vili had been involved in politics long enough to be aware that their assistance in the fight to protect Midgard, the cooperation of their mages in defence and healing, even after the fight, and their insistence on being self-sufficient had played a major role in the government’s decision. Doctor Banner was an invaluable asset there. Thor listened to his advice and took his insights into account. Vili was a bit worried that Loki might get jealous at that, since his own advice on any less aggressive approach had been rejected in the past, but for now he seemed more relieved to have the fight with Thanos over with and to return of some form of stability.

Not that he could blame his younger nephew. Loki had not spoken in too much detail about his time as Thanos’ prisoner but what little he’d mentioned, combined with what he knew about the Mad Titan, was more than enough for him.

But Vili knew that more needed to be done for Asgard. Midgard was a good place for them to get their bearings, to heal and grief for what they had lost but it was not the best place for them to settle permanently. Part of it was the different life expectancy of humans and Asgardians. The humans who had accepted them here would be dead long before the Asgardian children they had managed to get to safety were grown. Asgard, like many other Realms aside from Midgard, was used to dealing with unchanging leadership, the same person being head of state for centuries, sometimes millennia at a time. Here on Midgard, it changed every few years, sometimes along with the policies and attitudes. He was unsure how well Asgardians would take to this, which would feel like instability to many of them, especially in the wake of what they had suffered.

Right now, the Asgardians were thankful but how long would it be until their sense of superiority, born out of their past victories over all the other realms and unfortunately fostered by Odin, reasserted itself? How would Midgard react, especially since the ones who had made the decision to accept them and who had seen how they had helped Midgard would no longer be in power, would likely not even be alive any longer? No, they needed to find their own place before that.

He started pacing up and down in the room on the ship which he had claimed as his office.

There was also the matter of their relationship with the other Realms to consider. Thor might not be aware of it, since it had been the status quo as far back as he could remember, but the peace between them and Asgard had been because Asgard had subjugated them all. He doubted very much that they would be willing to leave the treaties Asgard had enforced as victor in place, so they would need to negotiate new alliances with most if not all of them. He was strongly considering taking Loki along to visit the other Realms. He was used to travelling, even without the Bifrost and had a quick mind. It would also give him an opportunity to start rebuilding the familial ties between Loki and the rest of the family and to start more or less openly teaching him about his heritage. It would also serve to keep him from getting bored. He shuddered. Asgard had learned that Loki being bored was a recipe for trouble and should be avoided at all cost. Thor would have to visit the other Realms for the final signing of the different treaties but it was hardly unusual for the negotiation to be made by others beforehand. Right now, Thor was also needed here more, as a figure of hope for their people, a promise of a stable, prosperous future.
He dropped back into his seat. Travelling to the different Realms would also give him an opportunity to covertly start looking for Thor’s biological mother, to see if his suspicion about his paternity was correct. “What was her name again?” he muttered under his breath.

“Who are you looking for?” Heimdall asked from the doorway.

Vili looked at him over his shoulder, considering what to answer, then finally admitted: “Thor’s mother.”

“Frigga,” Heimdall replied.

Vili snorted. “I’m talking about the woman – or person of a different gender, the Norns know Odin never cared about that when it came to sex – who gave birth to him. We both know that wasn’t Frigga.”

Heimdall looked up and down the corridor, checking that there was no one else there, then stepped into the room and closed the door. “Why would you need to know her name?” he asked.

“I want to investigate a suspicion,” Vili replied.

“You want to look into Thor’s true parentage.” It was a statement, not a question. “Is that truly necessary? It is unlikely to ever come up.”

Vili gave him a look. “Right, because relying on it never coming up worked out so well with Loki and his parentage. We do not know who all knows and what might come up in the coming years. For the sake of Asgard, we need to be prepared for all eventualities.” He paused, considering his words in the light of the tense relationship between Heimdall and Loki but then he added: “Actually, I intend to look into both Thor’s and Loki’s parentage.”

Heimdall stared at him for a long moment, not speaking and not moving. “Jörd,” he said at last.

“Sorry?”

“The one who bore Thor. Her name is Jörd,” Heimdall said.

Vili smiled slowly. “Good. Now it’s just a matter of deciding where to start.”

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Loki slowly made his way into what was basically the royal council chamber, no matter how much simpler it was than the one on Asgard had been. It still seemed unreal to him. Asgard was destroyed, Odin dead and he was as official a member as Thor’s council had currently, along with a Valkyrie and the human form of the Hulk. Never mind that he’d yet to hear any serious protest about his position from the other Asgardians. Granted, that might be partially because many of the warriors, who often looked down on him for his use of magic on the battlefield, had been wiped out by Hela and the remaining Asgardians were aware that they owed much of their current comfort to magic.

He wondered why Vili had asked them here. The council chamber saw little regular use. Most of the time, they simply discussed everyday business over a meal. The council chamber had mostly been used to strategize before Thanos came, when their allies new and old had visited, and to plan their approach for trying to get refuge for their people of Midgard.

The others were already there, sitting around the table. Well, Valkyrie had her chair pushed away from the table so she could sprawl more casually, a bottle dangling from her hand, though she seemed less inebriated than she’d been on Sakaar. Banner looked like he didn’t really know what he
was doing here, though he had volunteered to stay with them and help them figure out their stay on Midgard. Thor was sitting at the head of the table, looking at Vili expectantly. Heimdall..., well, he looked as unfathomable as usual. Loki nodded in greeted and sat down on his chair on Thor’s left, beside Vili and opposite Banner.

“What did you wish to discuss, Uncle?” Thor asked.

“Things have settled down nicely here, so I figured we can start working on long-term plans,” Vili said. “To that end, I believe we should check with the other realms, see where we stand with them.”

Thor frowned. “You think they would break their alliances with us?”

“Well, we can’t exactly uphold our end of the treaties at the moment,” Vili pointed out. “Some of them were also connected to Odin himself. I would like to visit them to talk with their leaders, to let them know that Asgard is still there, even without the planet. We might need to renegotiate here and there, get some more assistance for the rebuilding of Asgard or offer incentives for upholding the treaties.”

Thor was still frowning. Loki figured it was still hard for him to understand that some of the realms might figure that they would be better served without Asgard. He had got a look at some of the treaties while he had been posing as Odin and some of them had not exactly seemed like alliances between equal partners.

“It makes sense, Thor,” Banner said. “You said yourself that you needed to figure out that Asgard is not a place but a people. They need to know that the planet might be gone, but Asgard isn’t.”

Thor smiled at him. “I guess you are right.” Turning back to his uncle, he asked: “But how will we get there without the Bifrost?”

“There are other ways between the realms,” Vili said. He nodded to Loki. “Something I believe your brother is familiar with.”

Loki felt himself flinch, expecting a reprimand but Vili just seemed amused.

“You are needed here, for our people and as counterpart for the governments of Midgard,” Vili said. “I have often served as ambassador for your father, so if you agree, I could visit the other realms in your stead.”

“I would be grateful,” Thor said. Loki was a bit surprised. It seemed Thor had grown up considerably since the first attempt to crown him. Back then, he would have never agreed to stay behind to deal with the ‘boring’, everyday tasks of governing Asgard.

“I would also like to take Loki along,” Vili continued. “I think he might enjoy it and it’s not an unusual role for a prince not expected to take the throne.” He laughed. “And perhaps I can even show him a thing or two.”

Loki turned to stare at him. He wanted to take him along? He trusted him enough to allow him to be involved in the negotiations?

Thor hesitated. “I’m sure he’d enjoy it but I don’t like losing both of your council at the same time.”

“It would just be a few days at a time,” Vili said. “I intend to return here between every visit, to tell you about what we have learned and to give you time to consider your next steps with each of them.”
Thor looked at his brother. “I’m not going to order you to go with him.” His lips twitched. “I doubt it would go well for me if I tried. Is that something you would like to do?”

Loki looked around, taking in everyone’s expression. None of them seemed about to protest. Vili was even the one to have suggested his involvement. “Yes, I’d like to go with him.”

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Clint sat down on the roof of his barn. It wasn’t as high up as some of the other places he’d like to go to for a chance to think but he needed the peace and distance to try and wrap his head around everything that had happened. Even now, weeks later, he was still trying to understand it, now that he was thinking clearly again.

After what had happened with Loki, his family and this farm had been his refuge. Here, he could pretend that all of it had not happened or that it had happened to someone else, not to him. He had been filled by this nervous energy but had channelled it into work on the farm and there was always more than enough of that. Now, after what he had learned from Doctor Strange when he had come to Wakanda to see him, he figured that the nervous energy had been the remaining influence of the sceptre. As he and the other still official Avengers had explained it during his hearing, Nat knocking him out had only freed him from Loki’s control but had not ended what the sceptre had done to his mind. He had, in fact, been left open to pretty much any outside mental influence. It was pretty much sheer luck that the place he had sought refuge in was so remote that no one with even latent mind abilities had been near him.

And then he’d been exposed to Maximoff. Clint shuddered, remembering the way he had doted on her, like she were his child, the way he had abandoned his actual children and his wife for her sake, just because she’d been on house arrest for getting people killed on a failed mission. Her influence had also completely derailed his budding friendship with Tony. He’d known that Phil and Fury had had a soft spot for him, so he had been willing to give him a chance. They’d never talked about it but, even considering their very different background, there’d been an understanding between them. Neither of them was exactly good at making friends, too used to questioning people’s motives, though for different reasons. But then Maximoff had started influencing him. They still didn’t know if it had been on purpose. She claimed it had been but he didn’t trust her. He couldn’t believe he had ever trusted a HYDRA agent. In a way, he felt worse about being under her influence than under Loki’s. With Loki, he knew exactly when the other had taken control of his mind. With Maximoff, it was less clear cut. Had it started when they had first encountered them? Before or after her brother’s death?

He had been surprised that Tony, Rhodey and Vision had testified in his favour at the hearing, especially after his comment on the Raft. He’d felt the need to apologize to them after the hearing, for both his actions and his words. They had accepted his apology but things remained tense between them.

And his relationship with them wasn’t the only one that had suffered. Cooper and Lila didn’t understand what had happened, why their daddy had just up and vanished during what was supposed to be their family vacation, to attack friends, end up in prison and then spend months on the run. Laura had tried to explain that it had not been his fault, that something had made him abandon them, but that didn’t change that their trust in him had been shaken. That was probably the worst part for him. He’d promised himself to be a good father to them, to not break their trust, to do better than his own father. And now this.

It probably didn’t help that Laura, for all that she tried to explain what had happened to their children, was also still hurting. She tried to hide it from their children but he knew all too well how
perceptive children were.

He remembered their first encounter after Doctor Strange had freed him from the sceptre’s influence and had brought him back to the US, to the UN in New York where he had been held until his hearing.

He had been fidgeting nervously since he had been informed that his wife was there to see him, sitting down and standing back up, unable to stay still, something that rarely happened to him. As a sniper, he was used to waiting without moving, often for hours at a time. But the stakes here were too high.

Then the door had finally opened and an agent had led her inside. “Hey, Laura.” He’d wanted to slap himself at once. Really, this was the first thing he said after seeing her again after all that had happened?

“Clint,” Laura had replied, staring at him, holding herself stiffly.

Clint had just stared at her, at a loss what to do. He had wanted to pull her close and hold her but she hadn’t look like she’d have appreciated that. But what could he say? Apologize? Point out that he had not been completely responsible for his actions? “I...”

She’d finally sighed. “They told me... They told me. Explained what they figured out.”

She’d allowed him to come back home after he had been acquitted at his hearing but it didn’t quite feel like he was home – and not just because they were not back to sharing a bed. They didn’t know how to act around one another or what to talk about. Speaking of plans set off Cooper who was still angry at him for leaving instead of sticking to their plans, speaking of the past didn’t offer too much fodder for conversation and could set him off because he was questioning his own mind and actions during the past six years and his relationship with his teammates and the present left even less fodder for conversation. They were all hurting and things didn’t seem about to improve.

He closed his eyes and sighed deeply. It was time he faced reality and stopped lying to himself.

He wasn’t surprised to find Laura was waiting for him on the porch. “Hey.”

“Hey. Are the kids in bed?” When she nodded, he sighed again. “Good. I think we should talk. This isn’t... this isn’t working, not like this. Is it?”

“No,” Laura agreed softly.

“I think we both, or rather all four of us, need some time and space to heal. After the hearing, I got an offer to return to SHIELD, though I’m not yet cleared to go on missions outside the US or on the mission in general, right now. I would still be close enough to visit regularly but we’ll have space.”

“Space and resources to get professional help,” Laura said.

Clint grimaced. He hated shrinks. But he could see where she was coming from. “We’ll get help.”
Chapter 3

Tony hesitated in front of the door to Alex and Hank’s room, warring with himself whether to knock or not. He could just ignore it. Really, they were a family, had been for a while, so surely it must have been his imagination. Right? But his mind just wouldn’t shut up about it, so he finally knocked.

It took a moment, then Alex opened the door. “Hey, Tony. Come on in. I was just talking to Hank.”

“I can come back later,” Tony offered at once. He knew Alex missed his husband and Sentinel when he was in Washington, especially since they were both often busy and didn’t have a lot of time when both of them were free for a video call.

“Nah, it’s fine, Hank wants an early night. He has another meeting early in the morning, then he’s coming back home.” Alex dropped back down on the bed and motioned Tony over to the desk. At first glance, it seemed to be Hank’s desk. Alex, Tony had found, preferred to do the administrative part of his job at the Institute in the teachers’ lounge, not in his private rooms.

Tony waited for Alex and Hank to say their goodbye and goodnight. They kept it brief, much to his relief. He liked them, he might even be coming to love them like family, but he was not interested in seeing details of their private relationships. When Alex ended the video call and turned to him, Tony straightened. “I wanted to ask about bonding. I mean, I know all of you are bonded but how does that work? Bonding I mean.”

Alex grinned and nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re not interested in asking Erik and Charles for The Talk.” He leaned back on his hands. “Not that a bonding is necessarily sexual but it is always intimate. It’s pretty similar to a romantic relationship, you find someone you just... click with, someone you feel a connection to. It’s pretty common that a Sentinel and Guide will form a preliminary bond at that point. It means that they will respond better to the other and feel a desire to be close.” He gave Tony a self-depreciating grin. “This part seems to happen unconsciously. I have yet to meet a Sentinel-Guide pair who didn’t realize only in hindsight that they had started forming a bond. The actual bond however requires Sentinel and Guide to consciously choose the bond and their counterpart. It’s... it’s like you’re recognizing them as your other half and the bond is a way to always stay connected.” He frowned, trying to find better words to put it. “Does that make any sense? It happened pretty much on instinct for us, so we never had to really try to explain it.”

“I think I get it.” Tony nervously rubbed his hands on his legs, unsure how to bring up what it was actually made him seek out Alex above the others he could have asked. Perhaps he should have gone to one of them after all?

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Alex leaned forward, growing serious at the way Tony was acting. “What’s wrong, Tony?” he asked.

“At breakfast this morning, when Charles told me that they think I’m ready to bond, Scott seemed... different. He left so suddenly. Or perhaps I’m just imagining things. It’s just...” Tony trailed off, not sure how to put it into words.

Alex sighed, running a tired hand down his face. “Shit. Of course you picked up on it,” he muttered. He looked back up at Tony. “That’s not meant as a reproach,” he clarified quickly. “It’s a private matter, so I’d ask you not to bring it up around the children, but you should know so there are no misunderstandings. It’s not that Scott has problems with Sentinels and Guides. He accepted my new abilities and my bond very quickly. Sometimes I think he accepted them even more quickly than I did.
“You remember we told you that sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference between abilities caused by a mutation and abilities people have by coming online as a Guide or Sentinel, especially with some mutants? Logan is such a case. He has more acute senses than a baseline human, more feral instincts and has been able to help Guides in distress but we don’t know if that’s due to his mutation or if he’s a partially dormant Sentinel.”

“Dormant?” Tony repeated. “What does that mean?”

“It means that the abilities as a Guide or Sentinel are there but are basically inaccessible. Sentinels and Guides come online when there is a need and a triggering event, most of the time a period of high stress. That can be isolation or being in danger. If the event is traumatizing, it can lead to the memories and the abilities being temporarily or permanently suppressed. We can also go dormant if we reject our abilities. Again, it can be temporary or permanent and we have no way of knowing if the abilities won’t resurface unexpectedly at some point. It’s why, when those of us aware of Sentinels and Guide encountered a newly online one, we encouraged them to train and get control over their abilities, even if they prefer not to actively use them.” Alex paused briefly, waiting if Tony had a question about his explanation. “Logan has few memories of his past before he met us. What we know is traumatizing enough to qualify as reason to go dormant.”

“I guess it’s hard for him to know his boyfriend went through that but why does that make him react to bonding like he did?” Tony asked.

“When Logan first came here, there was an instant attraction between him and Jean. Scott fears that Jean might not be a telepath with telekinesis but an online Guide with telekinesis and that her and Logan are compatible and might bond if and when Logan recovers enough to come online again,” Alex sighed again. His little brother’s relationship was seriously complicated. “Things were getting better between them a few years ago but then Logan was replaced with the Logan from an alternate timeline.”

Tony stared at him, certain he must have misheard. “An... an alternate what?”

“You’ll need to ask Charles or Hank or someone for the scientific details, I didn’t really understand that part, but things had happened that had led to a catastrophic, apocalyptic future. Mutants were being hunted down, killed and experimented on, all on order from the government. Then they found a way to send Logan’s consciousness back into his body in the 70s to change what had happened. It worked but after he did what needed to be done, his consciousness was transported back into the present, just that things were obviously changed now. In that other timeline, the three of them had never dated, only Scott and Jean had been together. What’s worse, Scott and Jean had been killed. Logan never told the rest of us how but he might have told them what happened. Either way, they’re still finding their feet in their relationship now. But it does mean that Scott’s insecurities are back and the talk about your bonding was an unexpected reminder to him.”

“What should I do? Should I keep quiet about bonding?” Tony asked.

“No, you just feel free to ask us about bonding and talk about finding a Sentinel. I mean, perhaps don’t ask Scott for assistance where bonding is concerned but otherwise there is no reason to keep your looking for a Sentinel quiet.”

Tony smiled, relieved. He relaxed back on the chair. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“It’s not your job to help him there, it’s between the three of them for now, until they ask for help.” Though he wasn’t above kicking their asses if they broke his little brother’s heart just because they couldn’t figure out how to communicate.
The next day found Tony joining Erik and Charles in their office, which had originally been only Charles’. Since Tony’s revelation about Thanos, it had become the head office for coordinating the alliances they were all building and strengthening. Tony liked curling up in one of the chairs intended for visitors and working on some messages on his tablet, especially if the other two were also there. This kind of working in companionable silence was something he had a hard time admitting to himself to have been seeking from Howard when he’d been younger.

“T’Challa is coming later today,” Tony said after reading the message from the young king.

“Is he?” Erik said drily. He still hadn’t forgiven the other Sentinel for abandoning Tony in Siberia, though he knew that T’Challa had not known how wounded Tony had been.

“He decided to get training here after all,” Tony continued. He looked up. “Do you think it’s to reconnect with Ororo?”

Charles’ lips twitched. “I don’t know. Perhaps he’s also hoping to get to know other Sentinels and Guides, like you are.”

“The politicians in Washington certainly like the idea of him bonding with an American Guide,” Hank said, entering the office. He was still wearing a suit, obviously having come directly from a meeting in Washington, since he preferred more casual clothes when in private. “I think they’re hoping to get their hands on vibranium that way.”

“Welcome back, Hank,” Charles said. “How was your flight?”

Hank shrugged. “As usual.” The additional space and quiet for first class passengers and adaptation through repetition made it bearable but he preferred their jet and having Alex by his side. “I’m about to go see Alex. I just wanted to drop something off for Tony.”

Tony looked up, startled. “For me?”

“Or more accurately someone, I guess,” Hank added.

“Rhodey!” Tony exclaimed happily when he saw who had followed Hank inside. He quickly dropped his tablet on the table and jumped up, giving his friend a tight hug. “I thought you were still in Washington.” He pulled back a bit, looking him over worriedly. “You’re not having trouble with your senses, are you?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry. Yes, I was in Washington but Hank offered to bring me along, so I hurried up my meetings,” Rhodey said.

“The Air Force...”

“...are eager for me to get trained here in my new abilities,” Rhodey interrupted. “They’ve assigned me here for the time being.”

“Really?”

Rhodey smiled at him. “I promise.” He looked to Erik and Charles. “At last if you don’t mind putting me up for a while. If not, I can figure out alternative accommodation.”

“We’re happy to have you here, Colonel,” Charles assured him. “We always keep a few rooms ready, you can stay in one of them.”
“Thank you, Professor,” Rhodey said.

“Yes, thank you,” Tony said. “Come on, Rhodey, let’s go pick a room for you.”

~*~

They were just crossing the entrance hall on the way back from dropping off Rhodey’s luggage when someone called “Doctor Stark!”

Tony stopped short, surprised by the unusual appellation, no matter how correct it was. “King T’Challa!” He was surprised to see him standing there, accompanied by two of the Dora Milaje. “We expected you later today! I only saw your message an hour ago.”

“Yes, I’m sorry for not informing you sooner,” T’Challa said. “I was in New York for negotiations with the UN about Wakanda’s re-introduction to the political stage. The agenda for today freed up unexpectedly, so we decided to come here.”

“So you’re only here for today?” Tony asked.

“I’m afraid so, yes. I will have to return to Wakanda tomorrow but I will be back in a few days. Professor Xavier has agreed that I may train with the Sentinels here at his Institute.” He paused. “Perhaps you would like to accompany me back to Wakanda? I’m sure you would enjoy a stay there. I could show you what our scientists are working one?”

Tony smiled. “Thank you for the offer, your majesty.”

“T’Challa,” he corrected.

“T’Challa, then. I wouldn’t want to cause any trouble. I know that your father’s decision was not well liked by everyone. Perhaps in the future I’ll get to visit but I wouldn’t want to cause tension now.” Tony smiled. “Your sister has been sending me some videos and research papers, even after we won over Thanos. Some of their projects really sound quite interesting.”

T’Challa frowned. “She does?”

Tony was worried now. He hoped he had not caused problems by revealing their having been in contact. “Yes. I hope that’s okay? She won’t get in trouble, will she?”

“No, no, don’t worry,” he quickly assured him. “I just wasn’t aware that you were in contact or that you were already getting an introduction to Wakandan science.” He ignored the badly stifled laugh behind him. “Then perhaps when I return we could talk? I would like to learn more about the US. Or perhaps we could see a movie?”

Tony shrugged. “Sure, why not.”

“Good. That’s good. I...ah...”

“Well, we don’t want to keep you,” Rhodey cut in. “Professor Xavier and Mr. Lehnsherr are probably waiting for you already to plan your training.” He turned to Tony. “You mentioned something about some equipment you received from Miss Sato in Cardiff during our last call. Anything interested in there?”

Tony’s eyes lit up. “So many interesting things. I’d love to get a look at their base sometime. Charles and Erik suggested that I should wait before going there. It seems her boss and his lover came online as well and bonded recently but her boss is still too territorial to bear a strange, unbonded Guide in
his territory, around his Sentinel. Come on, I’ll show you what they’ve sent.”
Tony spend the rest of the day in one of the labs he had been allowed to use, looking through the crates he had received from Cardiff and taking some of devices apart. Tony hardly minded that there had obviously been a preselection about which devices to give them access to. He was definitely going to insist on being allowed to visit and see their base but for now he was kept busy enough with what they’d been sent. That he got to study them together with Rhodey was the cherry on top, reminding him pleasantly of their time at MIT together, back before his parents had died, before they had been murdered.

Rhodey did insist that they take a break and go have dinner with the others. Tony figured it was probably for the best, otherwise someone would have probably come looking for them. He really didn’t want to go back to threats of having his tablet turned off if he didn’t take care of himself properly, like they had when he had been recovering after Siberia.

Not that he minded dinner with the others. It was nice, having these kind of family dinners, getting to catch up with what they were doing and having them show an interest in what he was doing, not because they distrusted him but to share it with him.

“What are your plans for tomorrow?” Erik asked at dinner. It was obviously addressed mostly to those not teaching or not teaching any of the core subjects that required them to teach at least two lessons per day.

“Nothing definite,” Tony said. “I was thinking Rhodey and I could continue working on the devices.”

“I have a day off, so Alex and I plan to catch up, perhaps go out on a date,” Hank said.

“Do you have a moment after breakfast?” Wendy asked. “There’s something I wanted Jean’s and your advice on.” She looked back to her father. “Vision and I are going out later tomorrow. There’s an exhibition that seems interesting.”

“Some of the kids who have the afternoon off want to go into town. Marie asked me to drive them,” Logan said.

“Jim Ellison and Bair Sandburg will come to visit tomorrow, presumably early in the afternoon. Hank, Alex, it would be good if you could be there as well to greet them when they arrive but afterwards you are free to continue with your plans,” Charles said. “Tony, they would like to talk to you, see how you’re dealing with your abilities.” He waited for Tony to nod, then turned to Rhodey. “Colonel, I believe you already met them in Washington?”

“I did, yes. Seems they’re checking on all the Sentinels and Guides who came online because of Thanos. Many are in the military or law enforcement, so there was talk of offering training for them all at once or at least in groups. The brass is interested, of course, since it means losing them for less time than if they had to figure it out on their own or if each of them got individual training and went looking for a Guide or Sentinel to bond with.”

Tony frowned, worried for his best friend. “But you came here training here. Did you not get along with them?” he asked.

“No, that’s not it. I told you yesterday, I requested to get my training here.” He nodded to Scott, Charles and Erik. “They were happy to agree, hoping to get a closer relationship with the X-Men, I
Charles shrugged. “It’s not unexpected. Now that mutants and other enhanced are known, it’s also in our own best interest to be on good terms with the military.”

~*~

Of course their plans got derailed. Tony really should have started to expect it by now. It was not fair.

They hadn’t been back in the lab after breakfast when he felt the gentle brush against his mind that signalled that Charles would like to talk to him mentally. It was only recently that they had agreed that Charles could do this, like he did with the others, instead of calling him on his phone or sending Peter Maximoff to tell him but they had been worried that Tony would be triggered, considering the way Wanda had used her abilities to abuse Tony. Tony sighed and put down the device he’d been fiddling. He sent back a brief acknowledgment like Charles had taught him.

‘Doctor Banner and Prince Loki are here. They requested your presence, since you are one of the more well-known signatories of the Accords.’

Tony sighed again. ‘I’ll be right there.’ He gave the work bench where Rhodey had just taken apart another device a last longing look, then stood up. “Charles asked me to come up for a moment. I’ll be right back.”

“Want me to come along?” Rhodey offered.

“No, it’s fine. Hopefully it won’t take long.” He was happy to see his science bro again but it could have come at a better time.

“Hey, Brucie. Reindeer games,” he greeted when he entered Charles’ office. The two were sitting in the visitor chairs opposite Charles’ desk. Erik was standing behind Charles’ chair, watching them carefully.

“Tony, hey. How are you doing?” Bruce asked. “You’re looking well.” He was looking very well, in fact, better than Bruce was used to seeing him. It was only now, seeing Tony so happy and relaxed, that he realised how stressed out he had been before. It made him feel even worse for having fallen asleep when Tony tried to talk to him.

“I am. It’s great here. You look like you’re enjoying your stay with the Asgardians as well.”

“It’s good to see you catching up,” Erik interrupted, “But I believe you have a reason for showing up unannounced.”

“We are here on my behalf,” Loki replied. “My... Thor’s uncle will be leaving the planet on a few diplomatic missions soon and has asked me to come along. Considering my actions here on Midgard while under Thanos’ control, we figured it would be best to let you know, so there will be no misunderstandings.”

“Leaving the planet?” Tony repeated, curious.

“Yes, we will be travelling to the other Realms, in preparation for when we are ready to re-establish Asgard,” Loki replied.

“I’m staying with Thor in Norway for the time being,” Bruce said. “That way I can explain to him things he might encounter as King of Asgard here on Earth. Turns out Loki is more familiar with
Earth than Thor.”

“You are?” Tony asked.

Loki shrugged. “I have always enjoyed travelling. The Mad Titan sending me after the Space Stone wasn’t the first time I was on Midgard.”

“You have already informed the UN and Norway of your intent to travel, I take it?” Charles asked.

“We have, yes. They have agreed that we may travel for diplomatic reasons without it impacting our status as refugees,” Loki said.

“We figured it would be better to let the X-Men as the major organised team of enhanced heroes know in person why Loki is leaving, instead of risking rumour and suspicion when it gets out that is no longer in Norway,” Bruce added. The Avengers were effectively disbanded. Tony, Rhody and Vision had stepped back and were staying with the X-Men, he was in Norway, Clint was back with SHIELD, Ant Man retired and returned to San Francisco and Wilson and Barnes had retired to Wakanda. Only Rogers and the Witch remained as Avengers, though not allowed to go on missions without more team members.

“I also wanted to drop off a copy of the information Asgard’s mages supplied the UN with about the theories behind magic, to make you Midgardians more comfortable with its use,” Loki said. He pulled out a stack of papers and put it on the desk. He nodded to Tony. “You showed interest in a proper explanation during the meeting with Strange about Thanos’ interest in the Infinity Stones.”

“Thank you,” Tony said, pleasantly surprised. “I’ll have to take a look when I have a moment.”

“We appreciate your forethought and will pass it on as needed,” Erik said.

Bruce recognized it for the sign that the meeting was over it was and bit back a wince. It seemed Rhodes wasn’t the only one who wasn’t quite ready yet to forgive him for abandoning Tony to take the brunt of the blame from the other Avengers and the public after Ultron. “Of course, we don’t want to keep you. We did show up unannounced.” He tentatively smiled at Tony. “Perhaps we could catch up via video call sometime when you’re free?”

Tony beamed. “Sure, we’ll figure out a good time, what with the different time zones.” He turned to Erik and Charles. “Rhody’s waiting downstairs in the lab, so if there’s nothing else...?”

“Go on, Tony,” Erik said, smiling indulgently.

“Have fun,” Charles added.

~*~

Wendy had followed Hank and Jean down to the lab after breakfast. She waited until the door was closed, then said: “It’s about the Witch, Wanda Maximoff. Or rather about her abilities.”

“What do you mean?” Jean asked.

“We know HYDRA somehow managed to give them their abilities using the Sceptre and Peter’s and my DNA. Is there a way to take her powers again?”

“Take them?” Hank echoed.

Wendy ran a hand through her hair, considering how to explain it. “I can’t stand the thought of her
having my powers. Of a Nazi having... having taken my powers.” A Nazi – or HYDRA agent, same thing – with powerful abilities was bad enough but for her, the daughter of a Jewish Auschwitz survivor and a Romani having fled Europe and the War, it was pretty much unbearable.

“We can’t make any promises but we can look into it,” Jean offered.

“Can you not mention it to Dad and the Professor?” Wendy asked.

“Why not? I’m sure they’d understand and approve.”

“Dad has been distracted, what with the invasion, Tony and all the new Sentinels and Guides. I’d prefer to already have a solution before he’s reminded of a Nazi having absorbed mutant powers and used it against others.”

It took Hank a moment but then he realized what she meant. “Shaw.” It wasn’t quite the same, of course, since Shaw had not been able to use the ability itself, only able to absorb the power behind, not the ability itself, but he knew that wouldn’t make much of a difference in how it felt to them.

“We’ll try to keep it quiet.”

~*~

Ellison and Sandburg arrived about an hour after lunch, as agreed. The Sentinels and Guides at the Institute were waiting for them outside. Tony had had JARVIS and Friday look them up back when he had first come here and learned about Sentinels and Guides but he hadn’t seen any pictures. Jim Ellison was still looking quite fit, considering that he had recently turned 60 and had been an Army Ranger and later police Detective. His hair was receding rapidly but there was a sense of power still emanating from him. His Guide, Blair Sandburg, was at least a head smaller than him, with shoulder length brown curls, only just beginning to grey. His bright smile just put Tony at ease, stronger even than when he had woken up after Siberia to Alex.

“Welcome, my friends,” Charles greeted them. He and Erik came forward to shake their hands. “I hope the drive here was okay?”

“Yes, better than flying, that’s for sure,” Ellison replied.

“You remember Alex and Hank, of course, and Colonel Rhodes you’ve met in Washington,” Erik said.

“We did, yes,” Blair confirmed. “You seem to be settling in here quite nicely. I was a bit worried, considering how territorial Sentinels can get.”

Jim smiled at his Guide. “Let’s at least go in before you start lecturing, Chief.”

“Sure, sure,” Blair agreed.

“King T’Challa and Doctor Strange are not here yet, they’ll arrive within the next couple of days to start their training,” Charles said.

Alex and Hank took their leave for now, promising to join them all for dinner, while Erik and Charles led the way to one of the sitting rooms. Jim stopped outside. “Actually, Chief, how about I go outside with Rhodes for some tests of his control over his senses and you can concentrate on Doctor Stark.”

“You are suggesting tests?” Blair laughed. “That’s a new one.”
“Well, I’m not the one having to do the tests. That makes all the difference.” Jim looked at Rhodey. “If that’s okay with you, Colonel?”

“Sure. And call me Rhodey, please.”

The others watched them leave, then sat down around one of the lower tables. “I’m impressed, Doctor Stark, you seem to be doing well with your new abilities,” Blair said.

“How can you tell?” Tony asked. “And you can call me Tony.”

“Most Guides have emphatic abilities,” Blair explained. “The degree to which they are able to recognize others’ emotions varies, some can only pick strong, general emotions, not much different to someone reading the atmosphere in a room, and others can pick up details to the point that they can almost read minds. You are hardly reaching out, that means you are already quickly gaining control over your new abilities.”

“He is learning very quickly,” Charles agreed. “We’re working on his ability to project emotions.”

“Projecting?” Blair asked. “That’s impressive but a hard ability to master. Any other abilities you’ve noticed? Visions perhaps?”


Blair shrugged. “I’ve learned to rule nothing out. But I was talking about visions of spirits. Both ghosts and whatever spirit animals are. We’re not really certain yet what they are and how they are connected to Sentinels and Guides, we just know they exist.”

“No, not outside of seeing my own spirit animal,” Tony replied. “Well, and Erik showed me his spirit guide.” The idea of seeing ghosts rather freaked him out.

“It might just be because I’m a Guide and a Shaman, we don’t know for sure, even after 20 years.” Blair paused, then, after a brief glance at Charles, he continued: “Did you want to stay here and train with Charles? You can also join some of the other Guide I will be training in Washington.”

Charles held his breath. He remembered only too well how scared of him Tony had been at first, scared of his ability after what Wanda Maximoff had done to him. It wouldn’t surprise him if Tony preferred Blair as his teacher. He was grateful for his husband when he covertly reached over and took his hand.

“I’d be grateful for some pointers and I have some questions to your dissertation but otherwise, I’m happy with Charles as my teacher,” Tony replied.

Charles relaxed. He gratefully squeezed Erik’s hand.

“I told you he would come to trust you,” Erik told him.

Blair nodded, unaware of or at least willing to ignore Erik and Charles. “Sure, ask away,” he told Tony.

“It’s... it’s about bonding.” Tony briefly looked to Erik and Charles. “I talked to Alex. He said that the actual bonding requires both to accept the other as their other half. Does that mean both have to be... I mean, do the feelings for one another have to be mutual?”

Blair frowned, considering how to answer. Then he sighed, figuring that Tony needed him to be blunt, and said: “No, I’m afraid not. It’s a mutual decision but does not necessarily require mutual
feelings. It’s possible for one to trick or pressure the other to agree to a bond, just like it’s possible to trick or pressure someone into a romantic or sexual relationship. It shouldn’t be done and is not a healthy relationship but it happens. Those kind of bonds are also not as strong as in an equal, healthy relationship and might break.”

“In your dissertation, you wrote that Sentinels have an instinctual drive to protect,” Tony protested.

“They do but it’s also a matter of how they define their territory and how to best protect it.”

Tony grimaced. “The safest hands are our own.”

“In the worst case, yes. Sentinels and Guides, we’re still human. We’re just as susceptible to corruption as any other person.” Blair briefly closed his eyes. Now he regretted agreeing to let Jim distract Rhodey. He’d rather had him close for this. “Back when I first met Jim and we started exploring his senses, when we were still inexperienced in both our abilities and our bond, I met another Sentinel. She... well, it turned out that she was a criminal. When I refused to help her, to bond with her, she killed me.” He ignored the way Tony drew back in shock. “Jim was able to bring me back through our preliminary bond. It’s what started me on the path of a shaman.”

Tony sank back in his chair. He had expected that it was possible but he had not expected to have someone confirm it because of personal experience. Knowing that Rogers had come online as a Sentinel, he had wondered if things might have been different in Siberia if they had both been online already. He still wasn’t sure if he’d have wanted the answer to be yes or no. Hearing Bair’s story, he didn’t think it would have changed anything.

Blair hesitated a moment, wondering if he should tell him. But, considering what he had heard about how he had come online, perhaps it would be helpful. “She was only able to hurt me because I was not just inexperienced with Sentinels but because I was pretty much unaware of my own abilities.” He looked to Charles, waiting to see if he was okay with telling Tony. Erik, he suspected, knew as well, just like Jim did. They did not keep many secrets in their bond. “We know now that a strong Guide is able to render a Sentinel dormant. Obviously it should only be done if there is no other way, either because they are a danger to others or because they cannot control and cope with their senses. I could do it, in an emergency, as could Charles. As could you, I think.”

“Why do you ask about the feelings being mutual?” Charles asked after a moment. Tony expected too much of himself as it was, he didn’t want him to start setting himself higher expectations about his abilities, just because everyone was certain he had the potential to be very powerful. He had hoped that Tony had moved on from feeling that he needed to bond at any cost, regardless of his personal happiness.

Tony looked down and picked at non-existent lint on his pants, avoiding all their gazes. “I haven’t exactly been lucky when it comes to love. Either they’ve dated me to get information, money or fame or they only wanted part of me.” He shrugged. “I just want to have an idea if a bond requires a Sentinel to want all of me.” Pepper had been the first person he had dated who had not wanted to gain something from dating him and even then it had not worked out between them because Pepper could not deal with dating a superhero, someone she knew might not come home one day.

Blair reached out, stilling Tony’s hand by covering it with his own. “I can’t see the future but I’ve met many Sentinels and Guides these past months. I’ve seen a number of them find someone to bond with, even when they had bad past experiences with relationship, even when they had already resolved themselves to being alone. I’m certain you’ll find a Sentinel.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The door had barely closed behind them when Jim tugged Blair into his arms, burrowing his nose in his Guide’s hair. “You okay, Chief?”

Blair had returned the hug with no hesitation. “I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I felt you earlier.”

“Oh.” Blair ran a gentle hand up and down Jim’s back, to soothe both his Sentinel and himself. “I told them about Barnes.” He hated the way Jim had tensed up at his words.

“I’m sorry, Chief.”

Blair leaned back a bit to be able to look Jim in the eye. “We talked about that, Jim. We both made mistakes back then but we moved on. There’s nothing for you to apologize for now.”

Jim smiled, though it ended up a bit crooked. “Not even for not being there when you talked about it?”

Blair leaned up to kiss him. “Not even that. I admit, it would have been nice to have had my Blessed Protector with me but it was better that you distracted Colonel Rhodes. I doubt he would have dealt all that well with the conversation.”

~*~

Loki went to see Vili after he had transported himself and Banner back to Norway. He finally found him in his room. “They have been informed and have not protested our plans,” he reported. He looked at the bag Vili was packing. “Have you decided where we will go first?”

Vili placed the shirt he was holding in his bag, but didn’t bother looking up. “We will start with Alfheim.”

Loki was surprised. He had not expected that Vili intended to start with the home realm of the light elves. “Alfheim? Why? I would have thought Vanaheim. We had the closest relationship with them.”

Vili sighed. “We had a close relationship because Frigga was a war bride from Vanaheim and the war did not end in as clear a victory as Odin’s wars with others realms. I’m not sure how they will react to Asgard’s destruction, not after Frigga’s death. Alfheim on the other hand has the advantage that Freyr, Frigga’s brother, is the Prince consort. I’m hoping that it will make them more sympathetic to our cause.”

Loki froze. He had not considered that going to the other realms would mean seeing Frigga’s brother. He had sent messages with the news about Frigga’s death and his condolences, of course, while posing as Odin after the victory over Malekith, but he had not seen him in person.

Vili looked up when Loki remained silent. He took in his expression, trying to guess what he was thinking. “I think it’s important that he get to see you, so no, you can’t stay here,” he said gently. “Now, go on, pack your bag. We will leave in an hour.”
Stephen stepped through the portal to the Institute. Wong had luckily agreed to keep an eye on the Sanctuary for him while he got trained in using and controlling his newly enhanced senses. He had come online as a Sentinel shortly before Thanos reached Earth. Learning about Sentinels and Guides from the X-Men and Doctor Sandburg had been fascinating. He’d remembered a few cases of out of control senses he’d heard of as a neurosurgeon and had found himself wondering if some of them might have been other Sentinels, coming online but not having the knowledge and help to understand what was happening and how to deal with it.

The promised training really couldn’t come soon enough for him. He had lost count of the number of times he had almost zoned on a portal or some other spell. His stay at the Institute would also give him an opportunity to spend time alone with Tony Stark, to get to know him better and prove himself to the X-Men, so that they would hopefully stop running interference, as they had during his previous visits before and right after the invasion. He had already been intrigued when Tony, as he’d asked to be called, had actually greeted the Cloak of Levitation as an individual when they had first met. As a result, the cloak had taken a liking to him as well and would sometimes seek him out to spend time with him.

Stephen couldn’t quite decide how he felt about it he the cloak returned smelling faintly of Tony.

“Good afternoon, Doctor Strange,” Hank McCoy greeted him. It seemed he had been waiting for him.

“Doctor McCoy.”

“I’ll show you the guest room we’ve prepared for you and let you get settled in. The actual training will start tomorrow. King T’Challa will have arrived by then. Colonel Rhodes is already here, of course.”

Stephen stopped short. “They’re training here as well?”

~*~

Loki had let Vili lead the way to Alfheim, curious if he would take the same way he was familiar with or if he might learn something new. The path had turned out to be familiar to him, though it was rare that he saw someone navigate it as confidently as he did.

Alfheim was beautiful. He had never told anyone on Asgard so but he preferred the palace with its slender, almost delicate seeming architecture to the pretentious, golden floors and walls of Asgard. The towers reminded him a bit of the trees that surrounded the capital, tall and seemingly wispy but actually older and stronger than they appeared.

They were being expected already. Ciliren, one of the members of Queen Elanil’s council, was waiting for them. He bowed to them. “Prince Vili, it is good to see you again. Prince Loki, your arrival will be a pleasant surprise to Prince Freyr.”

Loki very much doubted that. He figured it was just Ciliren being polite to their guests but, for the sake of diplomacy, decided not to call him on it.

They followed him inside, through long corridors, open on one side to give an unobstructed view of the forest, until they reached the throne room. The columns of the hall looked like threes. Actually, Loki wasn’t completely convinced that they weren’t trees.

Two thrones, carved out of some kind of dark wood, were in the centre of the throne room, directly
opposite the entrance they came through. Sitting on one of them was Queen Elanil, her long red hair contrasting sharply with the dark green tunic she was wearing over simple brown trousers. Freyr was sitting on the throne beside her, clad in a similar tunic in red. Loki had forgot just how much he looked like his sister, hair the same shade of blonde, the same eyes. He stopped short, struck again by the loss of the only mother he had ever known.

“Loki!” Freyr exclaimed when he caught sight of him. “You’re alive!” He jumped up, ignoring protocol and instead crossing the space between them with long strides, then pulled him into a hug.

Loki froze, unsure how to react. It had been a long time since he had been touched like this, gently and completely non-sexual. Touches between him and Thor were rarely gentle, not in a long time. There was some affection there once again but that did not translate in the way they touched: they pushed and shoved each other or threw things at one another, they did not exchange gentle touches. The Grandmaster had quickly taken notice that he preferred gentle touches and had enjoyed using them to make him fall apart but they had rarely been non-sexual. He was pretty certain that the last one to touch him like this had been Frigga.

Freyr pulled back a bit but left his hands resting on Loki’s shoulders. “It’s so good to see that you survived. When I heard...” He broke off, then shook his head. “Losing you and Frigga at the same time...it was such a heavy blow.”

Loki stared at him, unsure how to react. As her brother, surely he must know...? “I’m not... I’m not Frigga’s son.”

“Yes, you are. She may not have the one to give birth to you but that doesn’t mean that she loved you any less. She considered you her son, from the first time she held you.” His smile was bittersweet. “She was so proud of you. Sometimes it felt like most of her letters were about what new spell you’d mastered or which lessons you’d succeeded in.”

Loki had to close his eyes, afraid that he would start crying. He had wondered if she’d been disappointed that he had not been what Asgard had expected from one of their princes but had never dared to ask. And then it had been too late.

“Come, my love,” Elanil, having joined them without Loki noticing, “give him a moment.” She smiled at Loki. “Welcome to Alfheim, Prince Loki.”

Vili stepped up to them, steadying Loki with a supportive hand to his back. “Thank you, Queen Elanil. I’m sure we will enjoy our stay.”

~*~

Stephen first got to see Tony Stark at dinner together with some of the teachers of the Institute. He’d been relieved to hear that they would not be eating in the mess hall with all the students. That would have been stressful enough for him on its own, now as an untrained Sentinel, he doubted that he would have been able to eat very much, no matter how well prepared the food was with people with stronger senses in mind.

T’Challa and Rhodes, the other two Sentinels he would train with, where also there. Rhodes was even sitting beside Tony, the two of them discussing something they had been working on together.

Stephen cleared his throat to get Tony’s attention. “Tony, you seemed interested in learning more about magic from a scientific point of view. As a surgeon, I was a man of science myself before I became Sorcerer Supreme, so if you’d like, I could tell you a bit about it after dinner.”
“Oh, I don’t want to be a bother, you are probably kept very busy as Sorcerer Supreme,” Tony said. “Loki brought the document the Asgardians mages prepared for the UN. I’m working my way through it.”

“Did he?” Stephen asked, forcing himself to sound pleasant.

“And Alexander has been in contact for me to ask questions,” Tony added. Alexander, a red-headed young man around 20 years old, had shown up for the fight against Thanos, wearing a flying suit Tony was very curious about and yet also using magic. Tony had asked to get a good look at it after the fight but Alexander had denied the request. “Sorry but the suit is actually my Pop’s. I’ll have to clear it with him first,” he’d told him.

“Also, T’Challa has suggested that we go see a movie in an actual cinema today.”

Stephen glowered at the smug smile T’Challa shot him.

~*~

Elanil had invited them to an informal sitting room. “You’re family,” she had explained. “Even if the reason for your visit is not purely a family matter, I see no reason why we have to stand on protocol.”

Loki and Vili weren’t about to protest, not if it meant that they could sit together on comfortable couches instead of having to stand for the whole of the conversation. It also made it feel less like them begging another sovereign for assistance and more like a conversation among family, no matter if it was actually more the former. It was also very different from Asgard where everything had been about shows of strength. As much as he had hated that, Loki found the difference now jarring.

“What happened? We only know that Asgard was destroyed and then that Asgardians were fighting against Thanos,” Freyr said.

“Odin is dead which freed Hela, his daughter, from her prison. We lost many of Asgard’s warriors to her forces and were only able to defeat her by destroying Asgard,” Vili explained. “The remaining Asgardians, the ones we were able to bring to safety, are staying on Midgard for the time being.”

“Asgard the planet is destroyed but Asgard the people still remains,” Loki said. “Thor is king now. He intends to restore Asgard, to build a new home for us somewhere.”

“Thor is king?” Elanil repeated. She exchanged a long look with her husband. “How is he doing? I imagine it’s hard to assume the throne under such circumstances.”

“Quite well, given the circumstances,” Vili assured them. “He has taken the loss hard, of course, as we all have, but he has accepted help. He has the support of the council he formed, made up of Heimdall, Loki, one of Thor’s Midgardian shield brothers, a Valkyrie and myself. Thanks to his time on Midgard, he also has good relations with them.” Not too long ago the mention of having Midgard’s support would have generated amusement or scorn, many other realms having considered them as too backwards to pay much attention to. That had changed now that Midgard, with just a little help from Asgardians, had managed to defeat the Mad Titan.

“And you, Loki? How are you doing?” Freyr asked.

“Me?” Loki was startled by the question. “I’m fine. I’m... relieved that Thanos is not a danger any longer.” That was an understatement, of course. He’d spent a lot of time fearing the moment Thanos would come for him, to make him pay for failing to bring him to Tesseract and losing the Mind Stone.
“Understandable,” Freyr said. He squeezed Loki’s forearm. “It’s impressive how well you dealt with what happened, especially considering how young you are. Both you and Thor.”

“Thank you?” Loki replied.

“We are thankful that you have come here to personally tell us what happened and to give my husband peace of mind where the fate of his family is concerned but I’d like to know what else has brought you here,” Elanil said after a moment.

“Of course,” Vili replied. “As we mentioned, Thor intends to build a new home for our people. We wanted to be sure that Alfheim will remain our ally, whether Asgard is still on Midgard or has established a new kingdom.”

“With Thor as the new Allfather?” Elanil asked.

“With Thor as the King of Asgard, just as you are Queen of Alfheim,” Vili replied.

Elanil looked him in the eye, trying to judge his sincerity. Then she nodded once. “Let’s see what you need.”

~*~

T’Challa straightened his clothes once again. When he’d had everything ready to return to the US for training, he had not just informed Lehnsherr and Xavier but had also sent a private message to Tony, asking him to go see a movie with him, supposedly to help introduce him the US culture. He’d been relieved that he’d been alone when he received Tony’s reply agreeing to go. He was sure Shuri would have teased him mercilessly otherwise. Never mind what she or Okoye would have said about the way he had hesitated over what to wear before deciding on the suit he was now wearing. Then, taking after a deep breath, he left his guest room. He and Tony had agreed to meet at the front door, then go pick out which car to drive. He wondered if he could talk him into taking one of the motorcycles he’d seen there.

He stopped inside the front door for a moment, then, making sure to smile charmingly, stepped out to meet him.

Tony was standing there with Alex Summers, Peter Maximoff and Kurt Wagner.

T’Challa frowned slightly. Were they here to see Tony off? Or perhaps to warn him to be respectful? As an older brother, he could certainly see himself doing so if some boy (or girl, for that matter) was about to take Shuri on a date. “Good evening.”

“Ah, hello, T’Challa,” Summers greeted him. “We’re ready.”

“‘We’?” T’Challa had a bad feeling about this.

Tony smiled happily. “Yes. The guys want to see the movie as well. It will be nice, a family night out.”

Well, what could he say to that? “Which car did you want to take?”

~*~

Loki slowly walked through the market, listening to Freyr tell him about the home he had found here on Alfheim. Vili was back at the palace with Elanil, ironing out the details to their new alliance but they had agreed to let him and Freyr leave, to catch up. It was nice, not just because Freyr had some
similar interests but also because he could reminisce with him about Frigga. As much as he denied Odin as his father, to others and to himself, he had a harder time denying Frigga. Freyr was right, she had loved him. He might not be Odin’s son and might be unwilling to claim Laufey as his father but he could accept being Frigga’s son.

He stopped when one of the market stalls caught his eye.

“Loki?” Freyr asked.

“There is something I have to try and make up for.”

Chapter End Notes

Why do they all use the same few names? There are thousands of names, but every second character is called James, Peter or Alex. At least the three Alex are from three different fandoms but the James and Peter are Marvel canon.
Chapter 6

Peter was on his way to school when he heard it. He had stuck to the promise he had made, Mr. Nelsen, DareDevil’s friend, and Mr Stark and had stopped actively patrolling, at least on his own. They had agreed (together with Aunt May who had figured out that he was Spider Man somehow) that he could and should train with other heroes and that he was allowed to accompany them sometimes on patrol when it wasn’t a school night but he wasn’t supposed to go look for crimes being committed on his own. He did always carry with him the suit Mr Stark had made him, since they had agreed that he was allowed to step in if he accidentally came across a crime being committed and didn’t put himself into unnecessary danger. He’d been a bit put out that Mr Nelson and Aunt May had been the ones to define ‘unnecessary danger’, something about them not trust some of the heroes’ judgment on that matter.

He quickly tucked into an alley to put on the suit, then followed the sound to a shop where an armed robbery was taking place. Three armed, masked men had cornered the staff and customers and were demanding money and any other valuables. Peter was able to get close without being noticed by sticking to the ceiling. Then, when he figured his chances were good, he used his web to pull two of the guns away.

The third man however turned quickly enough to see what had happened that that he could not get it as well. He was considering how to defend himself from the gun when that man caught sight of him, then dropped his gun and raised his hands in surrender. “We give up.” The other two also surrendered at once.

Peter stared at them, taken aback by the reaction. “What the...? Why?”

“You were seen patrolling with DareDevil,” one of the robbers said.

“And you worked closely with Iron Man,” another added.

“And you were seen with Magneto.” The third man’s voice shook at the last word. “We’re not gonna risk it.”

Peter pressed his lips tightly together. Great.

~*~

T’Challa and Stephen did their best to ignore one another when they ended up going down for breakfast at the same time. Yesterday they had both failed at getting to spend time alone with Tony, to get him to see that they were interested, but that didn’t mean anything. Today was a new day, full of new opportunities.

Tony was already sitting at the table though he did not look awake. His eyes were half closed and he was resting his head on one hand. Wearing an oversized sweater, he looked so deliciously rumbled it made them both want to tug him away somewhere safe. Preferably their room.

Before they could greet him, Rhodes stepped up behind Tony and placed a cup of coffee in front of him. “Here you go, Tones.”

Tony smiled at him over his shoulder, not even bothering to really open his eyes. “Thanks, Platypus.”

Rhodes shook his head. “Go on and drink. You want to be awake for your lesson later.” He looked
at the sweater he was wearing. “I see you found my old MIT sweater.”

Tony just hummed, not replying otherwise. Instead he pulled the cup closer, enjoying the smell of fresh coffee, then took a deep gulp.

T'Challa and Stephen had to bite their lips not to say something. From the way the sweater smelled, it really was Rhodes’. Perhaps they could spill something on it to make him take it off?

They all jumped when Tony’s phone rang suddenly. Tony quickly pulled it out and, after a glance at who was calling, put the call on speaker. “Peter, is everything-”

“This is so unfair. You planned it, didn’t you?” Peter demanded.

“What do you mean, Peter?” Tony asked, surprised by his tone.

“I stopped some robbers today and they just gave up because they’re scared of you and DareDevil and Magneto and everyone.”

Charles just looked at his husband. He was certain that that had been exactly Erik’s intention when he had visited Peter. “Erik...”

Erik didn’t even both pretending not to know what he meant. In fact, he looked rather self-satisfied. Tony’s thankful smile was not helping.

“How am I supposed to work as Spiderman if criminals are too scared of you all to engage me?” Peter asked.

“We agreed with your aunt May that you can train and prepare already as long as you should stay as safe as possible,” Tony pointed out. “And shouldn’t you be at school?” He frowned. “You’re not skipping, are you? Is that guy bullying you again? I can come-”

“Dad!” Peter exclaimed, embarrassed to be called out like that in front of what sounded like a number of X-Men. Then what he had said struck him. “M... Mr Stark, I mean. I... I’ve gotta go.” He hung up.

Tony was still staring at his phone, certain he must have misheard.

Alex snorted suddenly. “Another reason. Hey Hank, Jean, what are the chances of Wendy really having wished for a younger sibling from Erik and Charles? I mean, he’s even adopting teens right and left like them now.”

“She can do a lot but I don’t think her powers can do that,” Jean said.

~*~

Turning back time doesn’t work, no matter how much one might want it to. Clint was finding that this was true once again. His time at SHIELD, just SHIELD, before the Avengers, had been one of the best in his life. He had felt like he belonged, like he was making a difference. Laura, the farm and their family had been another source of comfort, another home he had beside the one at SHIELD. That’s why he had accepted the offer to go back to working for SHIELD. If he was truthful to himself, he had been wishing to go back to that easier point in time.

But it didn’t work like that. He’d seen how Rogers had failed when he’d tried, so he really should have known better.
Things were different now at SHIELD. Not just because they were only just rebuilding after the revelation that some they had considered friends and colleagues had been HYDRA and they were still working to regain the public’s and government’s trust. He noticed the looks he was getting from the other agents. Some were similar to the ones after the fight against Loki, the ones saying that those agents didn’t want the guy who had killed their colleagues around, no matter that he had not attacked them of his own free will. Now there were some blaming him for bringing in Natasha. She had also shown up for the last alien invasion (and what kind of universe were they living in that there were multiple alien invasions?) but had not returned to SHIELD or the Avengers. Well, the Avengers didn’t exist anymore, not with only Rogers and Maximoff on the team and no one else eager to join them. SHIELD had not even offered to let Natasha return. Some of the agents had been very blunt in their threats of putting a bullet in her head if she dared to show up, not after getting all those innocents killed by leaking all SHIELD files, not just the ones having to do with HYDRA moles.

Which led him to the next reason why the other agents were far from friendly. From what he understood, Tony had been the one to go and get as many of them and their families to safety as he could. He was certain that a number of them were more loyal to him now than to SHIELD, so they had not taken his betrayal of Tony lightly. As far as they were concerned, he had a lot of making up to do still, no matter that Tony had forgiven him.

Then again, Tony had forgiven them a lot that, looking back with a clear mind, he shouldn’t have, so perhaps that was not a proper criterion.

Of course his feelings about SHIELD were more ambiguous now as well, especially about its director. Director Phillip J. Coulson. His previous handler. One of his closest friends. The man all the Avengers had thought to have died back in 2012.

Hill and Fury had been the ones to approach him with the offer to return to SHIELD. It was only when he had accepted that they had taken him to meet the new director. For the longest time, he’d just stared at Coulson, certain that he must be hallucinating. He’d been under the influence of the sceptre for 6 years without anyone noticing. Hallucinations didn’t seem that unlikely.

Coulson had frowned worriedly at the lack of reaction. “Clint...”

He hadn’t been interested in explanations. He’d simply turned around without a word and left.

Of course Coulson had found him soon. “I’m truly sorry, Clint,” he’d said. He come closer and, when he still hadn’t replied, sat down beside him. “If it helps, I wasn’t aware I was keeping my survival a secret.”

Clint had looked at him from the corner of his eye, though he still refused to face him.

“I did die, that wasn’t a lie. The procedure Fury used to bring me back to life was...” He’d shaken his head. “Experimental. It should have been scrapped long ago. There were side effects that ultimately required the patients to have their memories wiped in a horrifically painful procedure. The other patients had all memories of SHIELD wiped, my case was the only one where they tried to remove only some memories. They didn’t notice it at the time but something went wrong. From what we’ve been able to reconstruct, I locked away private memories in reaction to the pain of the procedure to change my memories. I only recently regained all my memories. I was finally around Nick long enough for him to figure out that something was wrong with my memories, that I was not just colder to him because I had never wanted that project used on anyone again, never mind myself. He ended up having to contact my father. He’s part of another agency and they have experience changing memories. They were able to fix my memories.” He’d laughed. “Dad was furious with Nick.”
“When did they fix your memories?”

“When you were in Wakanda. Then Strange brought you back but you were still recovering from him freeing you from the influence of the sceptre and reconnecting with your family. I didn’t want to get in the way.”

Clint was still hurt but he got it. It actually made him understand Laura’s and the other SHIELD agents’ reaction better. Understanding that the betrayal hadn’t been intentional didn’t just undo the hurt and restore the broken trust. The past couldn’t be undone.

He was about to face another part of the past he wished could be undone. Loki had asked to see him. Clint didn’t particularly want to see him but, after having been on both side of the situation, he was willing to listen.

They’d finally agreed to meet at the Sanctum. Clint hadn’t wanted to meet him in public, too worried about it devolving into a fight or civilians getting involved. Meeting at SHIELD was definitely out, at least if he wanted to avoid setting off a number of agents. Somehow they’d managed to convince Wong to be allowed at the Sanctum.

Clint was early. He’d been unable to settle down, so he’d just made his way to the meeting. He hadn’t been there long when Loki arrived, stopping some way away. Clint wondered in he’d been also nervous. “What do you want?” he asked, wanting to get this over with.

“I realized I have yet to apologize to you for what I did to you,” Loki said.

“From what I was told, it wasn’t like you were in much more control than I was,” Clint replied.

Loki inclined his head. “Perhaps but I still caused you harm. Worse, I didn’t make sure you were properly freed from the effects of the sceptre, even with I was free and posing as Odin. I want to offer you a weregild as reparation.” He placed a bow, quiver and amulet on the table.

“The bow was exquisitely crafted and, when Clint carefully touched it, turned out to be made of wood.

“It’s from Alfheim, the realm of the Light Elves,” Loki explained. “It’s made from a wood native to their realm. It’s hard as what you call steel and yet flexible like regular wood. Some of the arrow tips are made of Uru, the same metal Mjölnir was made off. They will penetrate all other metals and, like Mjölnir, will return to you when you call them. But the most important part, I believe, is the amulet.”

Loki nudge it a bit closer to him. “I found one for myself after we defeated Malekith. It protects the wearer from having their mind messed with.” Loki looked up at him. “You are of course free to have Thor or the sorcerers here verify my words and to check these.” He paused. “Do you accept the weregild?”

Clint considered it, then said: “If they are what you say, I accept.”

“Very well.” Loki stood and gave a slight bow. “Then I will take my leave.”
but Rhodey had suggested getting a coffee and some snacks together while planning out what they wanted to tinker with in the lab together before they both had lessons again later.

He nodded and smiled at Wendy and Kurt when he saw that they were also in the kitchen preparing snacks. “Hey, Wendy. I thought you might be away when you were not at breakfast this morning,” he said.

“I felt a bit sick this morning but I’m feeling much better now,” she replied. She held up one of the apples she was cutting up. “Want one?”

“Sure, thanks. I hope you haven’t caught something,” he said earnestly. Then he grinned slightly. “It would be a pity if you’d have to cancel your next date with Vision.” Neither of them had admitted to dating yet but they were all sure that was where their relationship was going.

Rhodey laughed when Tony’s phone rang, preventing Wendy from having to find a reply. “Don’t tell me your boy is calling about another instance of your protectiveness.”

Tony considered it. “I don’t know what else I did.” He wasn’t even going to pretend that criminals being too scared of him to attack Peter had not been his intention when he’d blatantly worked and interacted with Spider Man in front of cameras before and during the invasion. When he saw who was calling, however, he stared in shock at his phone “It’s Daniel.”

That sobered Rhodey up quickly. Daniel Sousa, Peggy’s husband, had been an important figure in Tony’s life, just like Peggy. He had also founded SHIELD with her, so it was likely that he had also been aware of what had really happened to Howard and Maria Stark.

Tony swallowed heavily, then accepted the call. “Hey Daniel.”

Rhodey, Kurt and Wendy watched worriedly.

“He wants to see me,” Tony mouthed after listening for a moment.

“Tell him to come here,” Wendy said.

Tony nodded. “Can you come to the Xavier Institute or should I come to you?” He relaxed when Daniel agreed to come in a few days, then hung up.

“I’ll be there, Tones,” Rhodey promised, “in the meeting with him, if you want, or afterwards.”

“I know.”

~*~

“How did it go?” Vili asked when Loki returned. Not too badly, he assumed, since Loki had sought him out instead of hiding in his room, as he often had as a child when hurt.

Loki shrugged. “As good as could be expected, I guess. I should have apologized sooner.”

“Perhaps. But it’s important that you’ve done so at all, for both your sakes,” Vili offered.

“If you say so.” Loki certainly hoped it would help both of them make peace with that part of their past. He changed the subject, not wanting to dwell on it. “Have you decided which realm we will visit next?”

“I was thinking of going to Nidavellir. Asgard has had a good relationship with the dwarfs, mostly because their skills in the forge were too important to risk angering them by trying to subjugate
them,” Vili said. “It will probably still be more tricky than Alfheim. We do not have any of Asgard’s previous wealth or much of anything else to offer.”

Loki cocked him head. “I might have an idea of how to make them a bit more receptive.”

~*~

“So, did you enjoy your time at the movies?” Shuri asked innocently after she and her mother had caught T’Challa up on what had happened in Wakanda in his absence and he had told them about his first lesson with the other two Sentinels.

T’Challa was still trying to figure out how to downplay how his plan for a date had failed when he caught the amused look in her eyes. “You talked to him.”

“Perhaps.” Now she couldn’t stop the grin.

It was unfair that she was so easily talking about his private life with Tony, even from another continent, while he barely managed to engage him in conversation without someone else being also involved, never mind spend time alone with him. For just a moment, he considered asking her what Tony had said about their evening at the movies or asking her for help in getting an actual date with Tony, without someone else coming along. But he was sure he could manage on his own. He did not need his little sister’s help to get a date.

He just needed to come up with a plan.

~*~

Coulson was waiting for Clint when he returned to SHIELD. “Are you okay?”

Clint considered the question. No matter what had happened between them, Coulson was still too important to him to just throw him off with a lie. Wong and some of the other sorcerers had confirmed that the bow, arrows and amulet were what Loki had claimed. Clint didn’t like to admit it but Loki was right, the amulet was the most important gift. After having been more or less strongly controlled by others for most of the past six years, Clint was relieved to have something to prevent it from happening again. It left him more relaxed than he’d been in a long time. “Yes, I’m okay.”

They were quiet as they walked inside. Clint allowed Coulson to lead the way, not surprised when they went Coulson’s office.

“You aren’t happy here,” Coulson said when the door had closed behind them.

“Things have changed. At SHIELD. Between me and Laura.” A pause. “Between us.” Clint sighed. “Perhaps coming back was a mistake.”

“If you want, I can talk to my father. We could arrange for you to be seconded to his agency for a while. At least if you don’t mind working with aliens? More alien than Thor.”

“I don’t mind, no.”
Chapter 7

Charles stopped mid-sentence in his explanation on how he extended his powers to shield Erik from other Guides or telepaths reading him. “Tony, we’ll need to continue this later,” he said after a moment. “Loki is here again. He’s asking to talk to you.”

“He’s here?” Tony asked, surprised.

Charles nodded. “He’s waiting in my office with Erik. Do you want to see what he has to say or do you want to wait here?”

Tony still wasn’t completely used to being given a choice. “I’ll come along.”

“I have to say, Reindeer Games, even when they told us that you were staying on Earth, I didn’t expect to see you so often,” Tony said when he saw Loki.

“‘Reindeer Games’?” the older man with Loki asked with a grin. “I assume it’s a reference to-“ He pointed to his head.

Tony was almost certain Loki was pouting. “Yes, it’s a reference to my helmet.” He cleared his throat. “I would like to introduce you to Prince Vili, Odin’s brother. Vili, these are Guide Tony Stark, Iron Man, one of Thor’s shield brothers, and Lehnsherr’s Guide, Charles Xavier, the second head of this school.”

Vili smiled at them. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. We were happy to learn that there are still Sentinels and Guides on Midgard.”

“Likewise. The knowledge about Sentinels and Guides was lost for a long time, we have only started rediscovering our abilities in the last 20 years. It would be interesting to learn what you know about the earlier Sentinels and Guides on Earth, considering your longer lifespan,” Charles said.

“I’m afraid my own knowledge is limited but I can ask among our people if some of them remember more,” Vili offered.

“But I assume the history of Sentinels and Guides is not what brings you here,” Erik said.

“It isn’t, you’re right. We would like to once again ask for your assistance,” Vili replied. “As my nephew, Loki, and Doctor Banner have informed you, we are working to re-establish Asgard’s alliances with the other realms. Our next destination is Nidavellir, home of the dwarfs. They are gifted craftsmen and women, creating marvels. Not just weapons, though that’s what most Asgardians know and admire them for, but also other things, ships, even a boar moving like a life one. Loki has told me that you are a craftsmen yourself and how impressed by the armour you created he was, so we were hoping to convince you to come along with us to Nidavellir, to assist in the negotiations.”

Tony stared at them, surprised by the request. Were they serious? He was supposed to negotiate on Asgard’s behalf?

“How long do you expect the negotiations to take?” Charles asked.

Vili gave the question honest consideration. “Dwarfs place importance on respect and the proper protocol but they also have no patience for empty words. The meeting will also be mostly to re-establish the relationship, not to decide each and every individual point of our alliance in the future. I
believe it should take no longer than a day or two.”

“And you would guarantee our boy’s safety while he is with you?” Erik asked.

It took Tony a moment to realize that Erik was talking about him. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it. On the one hand it always warmed him when Erik or Charles showed that they considered him a son, on the other hand he way embarrassed to be referred to as ‘boy’, considering his was a grown man.

“Of course. I do not expect any danger. Otherwise I would not bring my nephew along. He is still young yet and has faced enough,” Vili replied.

Tony thought Loki looked about as embarrassed as he felt to be talked about like they were hardly more than a child.

“Will you give us a moment to discuss it?” Charles asked.

“Yes, of course. There is no pressure. Should we come back tomorrow?” Vili asked.

“It won’t take that long, I think. Would you mind waiting outside? A teacher will be here in a moment to show you the way,” Charles said.

“That’s fine with us.”

Ororo knocked at the door just then, called by Charles, Tony assumed.

“What do your abilities tell you, Tony?” Charles asked. “Are they genuine in their request?”

Tony hesitated. “I felt no falsehood from them. I don’t think they were lying.”

Charles nodded. “Neither did I, neither in their emotions nor their thoughts.”

“You read their minds?” Tony asked, surprised. He knew how important consent and not violating boundaries was to Charles.

“They’re asking to take you away from the planet, without one of us. I didn’t read their mind in depth but I did make sure that they were being honest.”

Damn. Alex and Peter were right, he was the baby of the family.

“Then the question is if you want to go with them, Tony,” Erik said.

Tony thought about it.

~*~

Everyone was sitting down for dinner. Alex liked these dinners, having the whole family together. One or both of his dads and siblings was often away, for politics or for lectures, so having everyone sitting at the table was nice. He was just a bit worried at the looks Erik and Charles were exchanging. He was used to them spending a lot of time looking at one another and communicating, either through their bond or Charles’ telepathy. One of the first things he’d learned after coming online as a Guide was how to block out the arousal that often accompanied those looks. There were things you were not supposed to know about your parents and that was definitely one of them. He was very happy pretending their relationship was entirely platonic.

These looks today were different, however. They were more the looks when they did not want to
come out and say something, a very rare occurrence. It led to a more strained atmosphere than usual, since even those without telepathic or emphatic abilities were able to pick up on the tension in the air. It meant that the conversation was a bit stilted.

Hank tried, managing to sound as usual as he told Wendy: “By the way, we’ve made progress with what you asked for. You could take a look later.”

“Sure, I’ll come see you,” Wendy replied, though she kept glancing at Erik and Charles, as confused by what was going on as as the rest of them.

Finally Alex couldn’t stand it any longer. “Okay, what’s going on?”

Erik and Charles exchanged another look, then Charles slowly put down his cutlery. “You are aware that Loki was here today?”

“Yes, together with some other Asgardians. We saw Storm show them around,” Peter said.

“They were here to ask for Tony’s help. On the diplomatic meeting with the dwarves. On Nidavellir.”

They all stared at Charles, certain they must have misheard.

Then Rhodey turned to Tony. “What did you say?”

Tony wouldn’t meet any of their eyes. “I agreed.”

“You agreed?” Stephen echoed loudly.

Alex could just see how the three unbonded Sentinels were close to blowing up but he also knew that would be just about the worst thing they could do right now. He quickly nudged Hank.

Luckily he understood at once. “Right. We’re having another Sentinel training session. Right now.” He stood up and left the room, the three following after him.

Seeing Tony’s confused look, Alex explained: “He’s helping them deal with their instinctive reaction. You’re a Guide, an unbonded Guide at that. For newly online, unbonded Sentinels, letting you go alone to somewhere you might be in danger goes against their instincts.” He figured that mentioning that part of it was because all three of them were interested in bonding with him would not be in Tony’s best interest.

~*~

It was the right decision, Clint figured. It actually was, not like a number of his other decision in the past year. He needed to accept that he had to move forward. Working for another agency, the same one Coulson’s father worked for, could help him with that. The agreement reached for his being seconded there included the same provisions that he would have the opportunity to regularly see his family but professionally, it would allow him to start anew, without constant reminders of the past, without colleagues unsure if he could be trusted not to betray them again. Coulson’s father was to pick him up today, then take him to the HQ.

Clint found that he was actually a bit nervous to meet Coulson’s father. He hadn’t even known that he was still alive, never mind working for another agency who had been aware of aliens before the Invasion in 2012. “Didn’t you say once that your father died when you were 10?”

“I thought he did. The agency he works for had different regulations for their agents. When they
joined, they had to completely give up their old identities, including what family they had at the time. He did contact me when my clearance got high enough but we had to keep it quiet, since it was still against regulations,” Coulson explained.

“And the regulations have changed now? They would have had to, for Fury to have contacted him about your memories and you to have called him now? Or did his boss make an exception?”

Coulson looked at him, surprised, then his expression turned a bit embarrassed. “I didn’t say?”

“Say what?”

Coulson shifted his weight in a way Clint remembered being a sign of him being nervous. “He’s the director of his agency now. He changed the regulations. His ex-partner supported it and since they were the most influential agents...”

“Okay, so I’m meeting your father and my new boss,” Clint concluded. He wasn’t sure if he should be pissed or not that Coulson hadn’t warned him earlier. Trying to distract himself, he asked: “So what, Fury isn’t even going to see me off?”

“I told you, Dad’s still pissed at him. Fury’s avoiding him.”

Okay, now Clint was nervous. Anyone having Fury hide from them was intimidating. Before he could decide if that made him change his mind about working for that other agency, there was a knock at the door.

Clint didn’t doubt that the man who’d come in was Coulson’s father. The dark suit, the form of his face, the way he looked to be as unflappable...

“Hey Dad.”

Coulson Senior (seriously, how was Clint supposed to tell them apart?) took off his dark sunglasses. “Phil. You’re looking much better.”

“Yes, my memories are all back now and there’s no sign of any side effects.” Coulson, Clint’s Coulson, nodded in his direction. “Dad, you know Clint Barton, of course.”

Clint offered his hand. “Director Coulson.” And really, didn’t that get confusing, that they now even had the same title?

“Call me Kay.”

~*~

Tony stood in front of Rhodey’s room, wondering if he should knock. Before he could decide, the door opened. “Come in, Tones.”

Tony followed him quietly. “Are we okay?”

“Of course, Tony,” Rhodey assured him at once. “I’m not angry or anything. I’m worried, yes, but it’s your decision. I don’t think you or Erik and Charles would agree if you thought it was needlessly dangerous. It’s just... hard for me.” He considered how to explain it. “Did they explain about a Sentinel’s instincts and how we remember all sense memory, even before we come online?”

Tony frowned, surprised by the second part of the question. “Yes, why?”

“This will be the first time you will travel somewhere without me since I came online. I travelled to
Washington and New York a few times but you were here. With my instincts telling me to keep you
safe, the sense memories of Afghanistan are making a reappearance.” Seeing Tony flinch, he
hurriedly assured him: “I talked to Sandburg and the others. They don’t think it’s some kind of vision
or premonition or something like that. It’s... well, it’s kind of a Sentinel-specific form of PTSD.”

“Do you want me to stay here?” Tony asked.

“It’s intriguing for you, isn’t it, the thought of going there?” Rhodey replied. “I’ve never particularly
cared about Norse mythology but if those Tolkien movies and books are in any way true, the
dwarves are gifted craftsmen. I can imagine how appealing that is for you.”

“And it’s only for a day or two. I’ll be back in time for Uncle Daniel’s visit.” Tony looked up at his
friend. “So we’re okay?”

“Yeah, Tones, we are.” He smiled. “Though I hope they know what they’ll face if anything happens
to you.”
Okay, Tony had obviously not given enough consideration to how they were going to get to Nidavellir. The Bifrost, basically an Einstein-Rosen-Bridge, had at least in theory made sense to him. Loki and Vili had promised to explain the theory behind how they were able to travel between the realms at a later point but for now, it was giving him a headache. And he wasn’t just talking figuratively. He now had a lot more compassion for Strange and his trouble with magic after coming online.

“Are you alright?” Vili asked, having noticed him rubbing his head.

“I’m okay, just a bit of a headache from the magic,” Tony replied. “It’s receding already. Strange has the same problem.”

Vili frowned. “I’ll talk to our mages when we get back. They might have an idea how to deal with it or at least reduce the impact.”

Nidavellir itself was interesting. He had no idea how the surface of the planet looked like, as they had come out in a hall of stone under the surface. The hall was very high with huge columns throughout. Tony could not tell if it was a naturally occurring hall or if it had been hewn into the stone. Either way it was impressive. He could certainly understand why they wanted visitors to arrive here. As far as first impression went, this certainly served to inspire respect.

Two dwarves were waiting for them. Tony wondered if either Tolkien or Peter Jackson had somehow managed to come here or if Dwarves had visited Earth at some point within the last century. The similarities were remarkable. They were shorter than human though not as small as some depictions in children’s books made them out to be. If Tony had to guess, he’d say that if he were to stand right in front of one, they would just about reach his shoulder. They had a more stocky build and beards that reached their chest.

“Prince Vili, Prince Loki,” one of the dwarves greeted them. “And this is the Midgardian, Tony Stark, I take it?”

“I am,” Tony confirmed.

The dwarf looked him up and down. “Well, it seems Midgardians have a more reasonable height than Asgardians. I am Hanarr. I will take you to my king and his council.”

Tony figured he should probably not comment about the height issue. It didn’t seem to be malicious, in fact it seemed to be more aimed at the overly tall Asgardians.

They passed a few other dwarfs on the way through the halls but they ignored them, apart from some curious looks. Tony noticed that many of these looks were aimed at him. None of them were malicious, just curious. He couldn’t blame them, he was just as curious about them.

They reached another big hall, with many corridors leading off. A few dwarfs were standing around in a semi-circle to the side. As they came closer, Tony could see a dog made out of metal in the middle. It moved but the movements weren’t fluid at all. To Tony, they looked more like the way robots often moved in older movies, all choppy. Just as they passed the group, the dog reached the wall but instead of turning, it kept trying to walk forward, only to knock against the wall again and again.

Tony winced. If this was an example of their craft, then Loki and Vili had seriously overstated their
“Very nice,” one of the dwarfs standing around the dog commented. “Very lifelike.”

“A wonderful piece of work,” another added. “I wouldn’t know what to improve.”

Tony couldn’t stay quiet. “The movement can use a lot of work and if it’s supposed to be lifelike, the processors need a complete overhaul.”

The dwarves whirled around to stare at him, not having noticed their approach, then glared at Tony. “Have care what you say, Midgardian,” one said. “This work was crafted by Prince Vitr.”

Tony winced. Great, he knew he shouldn’t have come, no matter how appealing it was. Not even arrived and he’d already insulted a member of the royal family.

“It’s an honest assessment,” Hanarr said. “That would be acceptable for an apprentice just starting out, for a master it’s an embarrassment. His lineage doesn’t change that.”

Their eyes widened. “M-Master Hanarr,” they stammered.

“I believe you are needed elsewhere,” Hanarr said. He waited until they had left, then turned to Prince Vitr. “And you, what are you showing off this kind of substandard work for? This is far below your usual level of skill.”

Vitr shrugged. “I know. That’s the point. I’m trying to learn how to make an automaton like Gullinbursti but neither Ivaldi nor his sons are willing to share how they did it. I need someone to bounce ideas off, someone who won’t hesitate to tell me if I’m wrong just because of who my grandfather is.” He grinned up at Tony. “And I think I might have found someone.”

Tony couldn’t help but return the smile. He still remembered when he had been younger and many people had been trying to gain his favour by kissing his ass. “Well, I do have a day or two here. I could take a look.”

“Oh, very well,” Hanarr sighed. “Bruni, please take Prince Vili and Prince Loki the rest of the way. I will accompany these two to the forges and keep an eye on them.”

“I believe Mister Stark is not yet cleared again for working the forge. He was wounded in battle against Thanos,” Vili said. “I would rather not have to explain to his guardians why he returned more injured than he left.”

“I assure you, I am very familiar with young warriors trying to return to work quicker than they should. I will make sure he does not overdo it,” Hanarr replied.

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Charles reached over and covered Erik’s left hand with his own, stilling his nervously drumming fingers. He squeezed them gently, then intertwined their fingers. “I know, dear.”

Erik sighed. At least he didn’t have to try and put the reason for his agitation into words, both because of the bond and because Charles felt the same. They knew that Tony was an adult, just a bit younger than Peter and Wendy, that he was strong and had thrived in situations that would have destroyed most others. It didn’t change that he was, as Peter had so fittingly put it, the baby of the family. And so they worried.

He closed his eyes for a moment, extending his senses to check on the rest of their children and
enjoying the peace their bond offered him. Then he tenderly caressed Charles’ wrist with his free hand before raising it up to press a gentle kiss to his knuckles as a silent thank you.

~*~

The negotiations were going reasonably well, Vili figured. They had even been brought to meet High King Modsagnir himself, the first of the dwarves. Odin had been forced to leave Nidavellir a lot more independence if he wanted to keep them making armour and weapons for Asgard. It now proved both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand it meant that there were less hard feelings between their people they would have to overcome. On the other hand it also meant that they had not been close enough to the rest of the realms under Odin’s rule to want to be interested in supporting the rebuilding effort in order to keep the close relationship.

They all looked to the door when it opened without a knock or a servant announcing who it was. The automaton in the form of a dog they had seen earlier entered but it was moving a lot more smoothly than before. Next followed Tony Stark and Prince Vitr, both of them beaming with accomplishment. Hanarr was just behind them, his smile almost hidden by his beard.

“Grandfather, look! It’s moving properly,” Vitr called.

“I see, Vitr,” Modsagnir replied, smiling indulgently.

Vili’s eyes widened a bit. They had heard earlier that Vitri was a prince but they had not known that he was High King Modsagnir’s grandson, one of his younger grandchildren probably, since he had not played a role on the political stage yet.

“His code, was makes him act independently, will need some more tweaking.” Stark said. “But the groundwork is solid.”

“Master Stark was able to help Vitr figure out how to make it work,” Hanarr said. “I understand he has created artificial lifeforms before.”

“Not all of them have a physical form,” Tony said, “but yes, I’ve created five AIs.” He did not count ULTRON. Since Charles had undone Maximoff’s attacks on his mind and the investigation carried out by both the UN and the X-Men, he knew that ULTRON had not been his doing but an outside force who had simply taken the Iron Legion and assumed the name of the program he and Bruce had been working on. Vision on the other hand had been less his creation and more the result of magical and scientific elements coming together in a way no one had yet been able to properly explain.

“Impressive,” Modsagnir said. “We have been very impressed by your armour as well, all versions of it, not just the one you created to fight the Mad Titan.”

“You know about me?” Stark asked before Vili could. They had of course informed the dwarves that they intended to bring a Midgardian along but they had neither told him his name nor any other information, aside from him being one of Thor’s shield brothers.

Radswid, Modsagnir’s advisor, grinned wickedly. “We make sure to stay aware of what is happening in other realms.”

“I have seen your people on numerous markets in the different realms but I would have thought that you would draw too much attention on Midgard,” Vili said.

“You did not actually think that Asgardians and Vanir are the only ones with the ability to shapeshift, did you?” Modsagnir said.
“Or perhaps you thought we subscribed to that foolish notion that as a warrior race we should reject magic as dishonourable?” Radswid added.

Vili hid a wince. It seemed that the prejudice many Asgardians had regarding magic was known in the other realms. Personally, he’d always taken too much after his mother’s side of the family to believe that foolishness but he knew many, especially among the warriors, who thought that magic had no place on the battlefield. Asgard would have to change where the role of magic was concerned, partly because they did not have the power and influence anymore to take such a view without facing opposition, partly because most of their warriors had been wiped out by Hela and the survivors were either mages themselves or owed their survival to magic.

“So you have visited Earth?” Tony asked. He wondered if he had been right earlier and Tolkien or Jackson had actually encountered real dwarves but decided not to ask.

“We have, yes,” Radswid confirmed. “We’ve been interested in the advancement you have made, both your people in general and you in particular.”

“It is rare for us to find a kindred spirit in other realms, someone who is also both creator and warrior,” Modsagnir said.

“I’m not a soldier,” Tony pointed out. Again. He hated the assumption. He did agree that heroes should have to follow rules and have some oversight, like soldiers did, but most heroes weren’t soldiers and shouldn’t be treated and expected to act like they were.

Modsagnir just looked at him calmly. “I said warrior, not soldier. We are very aware that not all battles are fought on the literal battlefield. And those battles off the battlefield are at least as important.”

Tony found himself flustered by the respect the dwarves were showing him. They were not kissing ass to get something. Sure, they were interested in seeing what he and others on Earth came up with but from the sound of it, they could do so already. They didn’t need to butter him up. So did that mean they were giving their honest opinion? “Would you be okay with return visits?” he asked to change the subject somewhat. “I know a few young scientists who would enjoy and benefit from the chance to exchange ideas.” He figured Peter, Harley and Princess Shuri would love the chance to learn from the dwarves.

Vitr stared at his grandfather beseechingly, making Modsagnir laugh. “I believe my grandson is very much in favour of that suggestion, as well as the chance to get your input on some of his other projects.”

“Then let us return to formulating future relations,” Radswid suggested. “We are not interested in another alliance with Asgard. Frankly, it will be centuries until you have something to offer Nidavellir.”

Vili could not refute his words. He had figured the same already.

“We are willing to sign a non-aggression pact,” Modsagnir said. “We can also offer you some assistance in building your new home when you have found a planet and a deferment of payment until Asgard is back on its feet.”

“With the understanding that all our work will remain our property until paid for,” Radswid added.

“You have our word,” Vili said.

“You misunderstand,” Modsagnir said. “Our works will be spelled so that they can be recalled by
their creator if payment is refused.”

Vili and Loki exchanged a look. They would forget to mention this to Thor. He probably would not take it well that the dwarves did not consider his word or Asgard’s as sufficiently trustworthy. “We accept,” Vili said. Really, it was the best they could hope for, getting the offer to assist them even if they could not pay anytime soon. His grandson’s happiness seemed to have put Modsagnir in a good mood.

“Now as for Midgard,” Modsagnir said, turning to Tony. “A more formalized relationship between our realms would give both sides certainty, especially if we intend to exchange ideas and students. Would you take our proposal for an alliance to Midgard?”

Tony was taken aback. Hadn’t he just rejected an alliance with Asgard? And now they wanted one with Earth?

“As we said, we are interested in the advancement made on Midgard. Your work with Vitr today has shown us that we can benefit from an exchange of skills and knowledge, so an alliance makes sense,” Radswid said.

“I would be happy to take your proposal to the UN and to advocate for it,” Tony said. The details might take a lot of discussion but he didn’t doubt that they would ultimately agree. An alliance with an established planet or realm, as they called it, would give Earth a better position in any future contacts with other planets.

“And will you also come back to Nidavellir to visit?” Vitri asked.

“I would love to.”

~*~

Out of courtesy, Vili and Loki made sure to arrive outside the Institute and then enter through the front door, then accompanied Tony up to Charles and Erik’s office. Charles and Erik weren’t surprised that Rhody, Steven and T’Challa had all found their way there by the time the three travellers had made their way up.

“Welcome back, Tony,” Erik greeted him, ignoring his three fellow Sentinels and the way they were feasting their senses on him. He was doing much the same, if for slightly different reasons. He always catalogued his children with sight, hearing and smell when they returned from travelling, satisfy his instinctive need to make sure his family was alright. “Did you enjoy yourself?” The question was only partially serious. They could all see Tony beaming happily. “It was amazing. There was so much to see and I got to tinker in the forge with two of them.”

“In a way that wasn’t physically straining,” Vili hurried to assure them. “They knew not to let him aggravate his injuries.”

“Some of those metals are like nothing I’ve seen before. They said that I can study it when I visit again.” He looked at Erik. “You could come along next time, see how they feel to you.”

“You’re planning to go back?” Rhody asked.

“Oh yes, Prince Vitr invited him personally,” Loki said.

“Did he?” T’Challa asked, voice strangled.

“Yeah, he’s one of the two I worked with in the forge,” Tony said.
“It does sound like you had fun,” Rhodey said.

“I totally did.”

“Would it really be okay for Erik to come along? Did he extend an open invitation or did he invite just you back?” Charles asked.

“No, it’s fine. We agreed to visits in general, especially for engineers or smiths, since that’s close to what they are doing,” Tony said.

“We will take our leave,” Vili said, “Thor is likely waiting already to hear how it went.”

“I can stay a bit longer however if you have questions about the document on magic I gave you, Stark,” Loki offered.

“We wouldn’t want to keep you,” Strange said, glaring at Loki. “I’m sure I’ll be able to answer any questions he might have.”

“Fair enough,” Loki said. He managed to keep it together until they had travelled back to Norway through a portal, then he started laughing.

Vili shook his head, though his lips were twitching as well. “You enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

Loki glanced up, a bit worried about Vili’s reaction. To his surprise, Vili looked amused and something almost like... affectionate. “A bit, yes.”

Vili laughed. “I could tell.” He shook his head. “But tell me, where you serious about answering his questions or was it just a way to tease the sorcerer?”

Loki paused, weighting how truthfully to answer. “I mainly offered as a tease but I would have answered had he asked.”

“You’re not about to join those three Sentinels, are you?” Vili asked.

“Norns, no. I’m not interested in Stark,” Loki said. “He’s one of the more bearable Midgardians and any honest interest in magic is a nice change but I’m not interested in a romantic relationship with him. Or any other Midgardian.” Certainly not when he was still considering returning to Sakaar, to...

“If you’re looking for someone falling for Midgardians, you should look to Thor.”

“Oh really?” Vili said, smiling. He sobered soon however. “Loki, in the meeting now, we’ll also discuss our next destination.”

Loki frowned, confused by his reaction. “I figured, yes. It’s the same thing we did last time.”

“I plan to go to Jotunheim next.”

He paled. “Jotunheim?” He gave him a pleading look. “Can’t you go alone this once?”

“I think it’s important for you to come along, to learn more about over heritage and to overcome to prejudices Odin failed to protect you from.”
Rhodey smiled indulgently, enjoying the happiness Tony was radiating talking about his visit to Nidavellir. Some of what he had seen, both in the forge and being used outside of them, sounded a lot like engineering to Rhodey as well. He was certain already that he wanted to come along on one of the next visits Tony was already planning, to get some first-hand experience with the work there. People often forgot that he had befriended Tony when they had been attending MIT together, that, while not a genius of Tony’s level (but then, who was?), he was an accomplished engineer himself.

His smile slowly faded as he remembered what he had volunteered to bring up with Tony.

“Rhodey?” Tony asked, even better attuned to his friend’s emotional state since coming online.

He slowly reached out to lay a gentle hand on Tony’s lower arm, giving him an opportunity to avoid the touch if he did not feel like being touched today. He was pleased when he didn’t pull away.

“Tones, Daniel’s coming today.”

Tony stared at him. “That’s today?” He had not remembered. The excitement of visiting another planet, a planet that seemed a lot like his ideal vacation spot, had made him completely forget about the planned visit.

“He called while you were away,” Rhodey said quietly, “to confirm that he’s coming today and that he’ll be here before noon.”

“Oh.” Tony ran a nervous hand through his hair.

“I told you, I can stay with you when the two of you meet if you want. Or we can Charles or Erik or one of your new siblings.”

“No. no, we don’t need to bother them. It’s Uncle Danny. I can meet with him on my own.” Tony paused, then continued more softly: “But you’ll be there afterwards in case... just in case.”

“Always,” Rhodey vowed. “And just for the record? I doubt any of them here would consider being there for you a bother. They’re your family.”

Tony smiled slightly. “They are, aren’t they?”

~*~

“Are you ready, brother?” Thor asked.

Loki sighed. “Yes, Thor. Really, you’ve heard how well the last two visits went. There’s no reason to check if we’ll keep doing our best for Asgard.”

“I mean if you’re ready to go to Jotunheim,” Thor corrected. He kept his gaze out towards where the other Asgardians were going about their new daily lives. He knew better by now than to face Loki when bringing something like this up. Loki was more likely to give him an answer that was at least close to the truth if he did not have to worry about hiding the emotion in his face.

“I will do what needs to be done,” Loki said.

“I don’t doubt that. Perhaps Vili and you can tell me more about the heritage of our grandmother when you return, instead of the lies we’ve been told about Jotunheim?”

Chapter 9
“Perhaps,” Loki conceded. “I have to go, Vili is likely waiting for me already. And aren’t you having a lunch date with Banner?”

“We’re just eating together, to have a chance to catch up and let him tell me more about the UN and politics here on Midgard.”

Loki smirked. “As I said.”

Tony stood when Daniel came in. He had considered having the conversation in his room but he was afraid how it was going to go, that it might go badly and he wouldn’t have a place to withdraw to. After talking to Charles, they had instead prepared another smaller room, on the ground floor of course, in deference to Daniel’s leg.

“Tony.” Daniel just stepped up to him and hugged him. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Hey, Uncle Danny.” Tony returned the hug briefly but couldn’t melt into it like he used to, not with the doubts in his mind. “I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to the funeral.”

Daniel took a step back so he was able to look him in the face. “Nah, we all understood,” he assured him. “We know from personal experience that duty often has to take precedence. It’s why we were surprised to see Rogers there.” He shook his head, not wanting to talk about him, especially not with Tony. He waited for Tony to sit down, then sat in the chair opposite him. “And I meant that it’s good to see for myself that you’re okay. After seeing the fights on the news, both in Leipzig and then against Thanos, I was worried that you might be hurt more than they were telling the public.”

“I’m fine,” Tony said reflexively, then admitted: “At least I will be soon, the doctors say.”

“That’s good to hear.” He paused, considering how to continue, then decided to be blunt. “You’re tense. Are you still hurting? Is it a bad day today?”

“No, that’s not it. It’s...” Finally Tony couldn’t keep it in anymore. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what, Tony? What do you mean?” Daniel asked.

“You were leading SHIELD back then, you and Aunt Peggy. You must have known. I would have been obvious, so you must have known it wasn’t an accident. Why didn’t you tell me?” Tony asked.

“‘Accident’?” Daniel repeated, trying to understand what Tony was talking about. “Are you talking about what happened to Howard and Maria?”

“Of course I am,” Tony exclaimed. So he wasn’t denying it at least, contrary to Rogers. It still hurt, however.

Daniel could only stare at him in confusion. “I don’t understand. We told you. Not personally, I mean. We couldn’t get away, we were stuck either in the field or in headquarter dealing with it, so we sent an agent to you. We ordered him to get you to safety and to tell you what happened, both the official version and what actually happened.”

“They told me it was an accident. That dad had lost control of the car.”

The two of them stared at one another, trying to understand how this could have happened. When he realized it, Daniel closed his eyes and sighed. “Fucking HYDRA.”
“Fucking HYDRA,” Tony agreed.

“Shit.” Daniel ran a hand through his hair. “Peggy and I should have been more insistent when you didn’t want to talk about it the next time we tried to bring it up. We should have made sure you were dealing as properly as possible with what happened.”

“I was really stubborn about ignoring it,” Tony pointed out. He did not mention that he had been blaming both Howard and himself for having fought with him before they left.

“You’re still stubborn,” Daniel said. “But you were a teenager. We were adults. It was our job to make sure you were okay.”

Tony was about to disagree when he remembered Harley and Spiderling. “I guess.”

~*~

Loki stayed close to Vili from the moment they arrived. Part of it was that he had a hard time navigating in the snow, in telling which way they had to go. The other part was that he was worried about how the frost giants would react to him, to an Asgardian, a son of Odin, the one who had killed Laufey, their king.

He gasped when the structures he had assumed to be mountains of ice and snow revealed themselves to be buildings as they got closer. Everything was made of ice, shimmering white and blue in the light. He was fascinated as more and more details became apparent, reliefs of battles and other events he could not recognize, depictions of plants, animals and geometrical forms. “Did they chisel it out of the ice, the way the dwarves carved their halls?” he asked, voiced hushed.

“No, they have ice mages who create them,” Vili explained. “Well, obviously the law of the conservation of mass means that it is easier to take a mountain and form it into a building than to conjure all to necessary ice but powerful mages have been known to manage.”

“No since we lost the Casket, Asgardian,” someone said. Loki jumped, not having noticed frost giants’ approach. “What do you want?”

Vili bowed low. “We would like to request an audience with the king.”

“I don’t see what he would have to say to Asgard. Or rather what remains of Asgard. I hope for you that you are not here to beg assistance. But very well, I will let him know,” the frost giant said. “Come along.”

He made some gestures Loki couldn’t follow, probably to inform any other frost giants around who could see them while remaining unseen themselves.

Loki tried to hide his reaction to what he was seeing but he did not think he was very successful. All he saw was so different from what he had learned as a child. People at the palace would talk about Jotuns like monsters, without reason, living without shelter or, at best, in holes dug into the ground, like animals. This was so much more. Not only did it look beautiful and serve as proof that they had a culture, his surroundings were resonating with his magic. He’d never experienced anything like this.

He couldn’t help but gasped when they entered the room their guide had stopped in front of. He wasn’t sure if it was a throne room or an audience hall, he just knew that it certainly achieved his aim of leaving him speechless with awe.

He quickly turned his attention back to the frost giants around them when he felt Vili tense beside
Vili bowed low. “Well me, Blýeistr Laufeyson.”

Loki’s eyes widened slightly. Laufeyson. Didn’t that mean that he was his brother? He should have expected it of course but he had not considered if Laufey had any other children.

Blýeistr stood up. “I was certain that my brother Helblindi’s message must have got mixed up.”

Loki looked back to the doorway over his shoulder. Another brother?

“What would bring Vili Borson and Loki Odinson to Jotunheim? The brother of the man who almost destroyed our home and the one who tried to finish the job?”

Loki raised his chin. “And the one who killed Laufey.” He would not show weakness, not even in front of his brother. Especially not his brother.

Blýeistr actually snorted at that. “Laufey wasn’t the same after the war, the loss of the Casket, of...” He shook his head. “By killing my bearer you might have actually done a favour to Jotunheim and Laufey himself. Though I’m sure that was not your intention.”

“After Asgard’s destruction and Odin’s death, we want to change relations going forward,” Vili said, trying to change the subject. “We are hoping to rebuild the relationship between Asgard and Jotunheim, especially considering that many Asgardians are part Jotun.”

“Why would we agree to that?” Helblindi asked, having followed them inside. “You said it yourself, Asgard is destroyed. What do you have to offer us?”

Loki took a deep breath. He had not talked to Vili about it before but had decided privately that his spontaneous action just before he had triggered the destruction of Asgard might prove beneficial here. “We would return the Casket of Ancient Winters to you.”

Not only the two Jotun, Vili turned to stare at him in surprise as well.

“The Casket? We assumed it was destroyed with Asgard,” Blyéistr said.

“I took it and hit it just before,” Loki admitted. Like the Tesseract, it had drawn his attention as he was walking through the vault. Something had made him take it along as well, though he hadn’t been able to explain it.

“Why would you take it to safety? Why save the Casket while destroying Asgard?” Helblindi asked.

Loki hesitated. “Perhaps because I am more Jotun than Asgardian.” He conjured the Casket from the pocket dimension he had kept it in. His fingers flinched back from touching it, knowing what would happen when he did. Then, gathering all his bravery, he grabbed hold of it and pulled it out, offering it to Blyéistr. He kept his eyes on him, though he could see out of the corner of his eye how his skin turned Jotun blue.

Blyéistr ignored the Casket, however, instead staring at Loki, eyes roving over his face. “Impossible,” he breathed. He turned to glare at Vili. “Did you know?”

“I suspected his heritage,” Vili admitted. “I had no idea that Odin had kept it from everyone, including Loki himself.”

“I only found out I’m a Jotun when Thor came here,” Loki said.
Blýeistr opened his mouth, then closed it again and shook his head. “Helblindi, go get Fárbauti. Our sire should be here for this conversation.”

Helblindi was still staring at Loki. He seemed reluctant to comply.

“Helblindi!” Blýeistr repeated.

He finally turned to leave, not without looking back at Loki again.

“Your sire?” Loki asked.

“Fárbauti, Laufey’s husband. He agreed to stay in the capital as my advisor. Laufey was my bearer. He was the bearer of all three of us.”

That confirmed that Loki had not misheard but he was still confused. “I thought Laufey... He was king. How could he be king if he birthed you?”

“He was king because he birthed us,” Blýeistr replied. “Life here on Jotunheim is hard, even before the Casket was taken. Bringing forth new life in these conditions is seen as a great and revered achievement, especially giving birth to three healthy sons.”

“Then it is certain he is my... my bearer?”

“Yes, you are our half-brother,” he confirmed. “Your kin markings prove it.” Seeing his confusion, he explained: “The markings on your skin, especially your face. They show your lineage, who your parents were. You are clearly Laufey’s third-born.”

“But not Fárbauti’s,” Loki stated. “Then who is my sire?”

“Aside from the line of Laufey, you also bear the markings of Bestla’s line.”

“Who is Bestla?” Loki asked.

“Bestla is my mother,” Vili said.

Bruce frowned at the way Thor was, untypically for him, only picking at his lunch. “Is something wrong, Thor?”

“No, it’s nothing. I’m fine,” Thor assured him.

“Thor,” Bruce chided gently. “It’s me you’re talking to.” He paused. “You’re worried about Loki, aren’t you?”

Thor shrugged, trying to appear unconcerned. “Why would I be?”

“Because he’s your brother.” He wanted to reach out to Thor but he didn’t really know how. Right now, he wished he were more like Tony, the way he managed to still reach out. “You can talk to me, you know.”

Thor smiled at him. “Thank you, my friend.”

Andrew Thomas resisted the urge to slam the door behind him. It wasn’t the fault of the café or the
other customers after all. He was just frustrated and needed out.

When he had been asked to meet Steve Rogers, to see if they would be compatible as Sentinel and Guide, he had been flattered. Like many others in the US, he had grown up with stories of Captain America and the Howling Commandos, though he, like many agents, had been rather disillusioned after how he mishandled the revelation that HYDRA had infiltrated SHIELD and his overreaction to the Sokovia Accords. Still, he figured that it was likely due to a misunderstanding, to SHIELD not properly introducing him to the present. A friend of his in the Army had suggested that he should stay away but he had wanted to make up his mind on his own.

He was almost afraid to know what else his friend could tell him after the disaster of this meeting.

It had started out well enough. Rogers certainly was attractive, even out of his armour. But when they had started discussing the changes brought on by coming online, as so many others had recently, he had started complaining.

“The Army has changed since my time,” he’d said. “Now it’s obviously being led by politicians with agendas, not soldiers. They’re bullies, trying to make me pay for standing up to them. They’ve even taken my rank, saying I’m just Private Rogers.”

Thomas had caught that statement of the news. A week or two after the fight at the airport in Germany, the Army had issued a statement disavowing Captain America and stating that it had been just a stage name, that Rogers had never had a higher rank than private.

“And those Guides in the armed forces aren’t even standing up to those bullies. They have all refused to meet with me, to see if they can bond with me and join the Avengers.”

He had been a bit surprised at that. As far as he knew, the Avengers had been scraped for the time being, seeing as they were made up of only two members and no agency or other institution backing them.

“If we bond then you can take over the support for the Avengers, at least until we make Stark see sense.”

That had stopped him short. “What do you mean, take over support? I’m an FBI agent.”

“You will of course have to resign. They say that a Guide’s role is to support the Sentinel, so obviously you will work with me. I understand you’re not a hero, so you can’t become an Avenger yourself, but you can still do your part. It won’t be hard, don’t worry. I’m sure Stark will come to his senses soon and come back. He will finance us and make our weapons and armour. His computer will help you with your job but you’ll have to keep an eye on it, make sure it doesn’t go crazy like ULTRON did.”

“I’m not interested in resigning and joining the Avengers. I’m happy in my job.”

He had looked all disappointed at that. “Being a hero is much more important. We are saving lives.”

He’d finally lost his temper. “I am saving lives. All you seem to do is bring chaos and destruction.” Then he’d stood up and left.

Steve stared after him, shocked and insulted. Did all those Guides have no sense of duty?

And he needed one. His senses were spiking regularly and he had zoned a few times now. The UN were refusing to sign off on him returning to the field until he got his senses under control and the Avengers had more members. Perhaps he should write Bucky another letter, ask him to come back,
assure him that he would not have to work with the X-Men, considering they had bullied him to the point that he had left the US with Sam. He regularly wrote but hadn’t received many replies. He probably hadn’t received all of them. The post service in Wakanda didn’t seem to work very well. If only Tony would finally see sense, then everything would go back to normal.

He perked up when he remembered the rumour that he had come online as a Guide. If he bonded with him, he could make him come to his senses and he would be able to keep him in his place, offering support but not on the field himself.
“Are you saying I actually am Odin’s son?” Loki demanded.

Vili shrugged. “It seems like it, yes. I know I didn’t have sex with Laufey and neither did our brother Vé. As for Odin... well, his relationship with Laufey was always both passionate and complex. I don’t know for sure but I wouldn’t be surprised. And you have to admit that there is a resemblance between you and Hela.”

Loki opened his mouth to disagree, then closed it again. Thinking back, he had to admit that there really was a resemblance, certainly more than between here and Thor. Thor probably took more after his mother.

At that moment Helblindi returned with another Jotun, probably his sire Fárbauti. Loki could see some similarities in their markings, now that he knew to look for it.

Fárbauti looked Loki up and down, then nodded at himself. “Well, that explains a lot. You come at it from both sides.”

“Pardon?” Loki had no idea what he was talking about.

“Laufey and Odin were both drama queens,” Fárbauti said, “so I guess your overblown reaction was to be expected.”

Vili coughed to hide his laughter at the assessment of his brother and nephew. He wasn’t very successful.

“Father, Loki is offering to return the Casket,” Blýeistr said. He hoped that would change the subject. He was not interested in speculating about how his youngest brother had been conceived.

Fárbauti considered the Casket Loki was still holding. “It would be a great help in rebuilding, more so if Loki agrees to offer his assistance. It has been while since Jotunheim has had the services of an ice mage. The last one, I believe, was Laufey’s sire.”

Loki looked down at the Casket, then back up at Fárbauti. “Are you certain?”

“Your appearance certainly suggests it. Ice mages are often less physically imposing, though most Jotun can change their size and shape to at least some extent. Tell me, Loki, when you are near the Casket, does it seem to speak or sing to you? What about the ice here around you that has been magically altered? In a fight, do you have a preference for daggers and short swords?”

Loki remained silent. He felt exposed at having a stranger correctly predict so much about him, things he had never talked about with anyone, not even his mother – or the woman he had thought of as his mother.

Fárbauti smiled, trying to put him at ease. Seeing him was strange. He was still quite young, obviously, hardly of age if he had to guess. He could see much of a younger Laufey in his features, back before he became king, before the war with Asgard. It made him feel nostalgic. “From what I remember Consort Helreginn telling me, it’s typical for an ice mage. They are vicious fighters, often using daggers made of ice they conjure. Seeing them fight is like watching a dance, graceful but deadly. And yet for all that they are fighters, they are also often gifted artists.” He motioned at the walls around them. “You’ve seen some of what they have created. Unfortunately we lost most of them in the war.”
“Could I see more of what they created?” Loki asked.

“Of course,” Fárbauti replied. “I’m sure you also have many questions. Odin obviously failed to teach you anything about your heritage. Helblindi and I can show you around and answer some of them while Blýeistr and Vili discuss the new alliance between our people.”

“Father!” Blýeistr protested. He was supposed to just stay behind for politics while Fárbauti and Helblindi got to know his baby brother?

Helblindi grinned at him. “Sorry, brother, you’re the king. I’m sure you’ll have some other opportunity to get to know Loki.” He didn’t wait for a reply from Blýeistr, instead gently urging Loki out of the room.

Loki looked to Vili, unsure if it was really okay for him to go with them but Vili just waved him on, smiling indulgently.

As they walked and Fárbauti and Helblindi told him about the symbolism behind the reliefs on the walls, Loki kept glancing at Fárbauti, trying to understand his reaction. Finally he had to ask. “Do you not mind? That I am the result of your husband having an affair, I mean.”

“It’s not unusual for us here to have relations outside a marriage, at least if all parties are in agreement. Life is hard here and we take comfort where we can. Laufey told me that he had slept with Odin before the last round of peace talks fell through, so we suspected that you might be his but it didn’t matter to me. If Odin hadn’t taken you from the temple, you would have been raised by Laufey and me as a prince of Jotunheim, just like your two brothers.” He paused. “Well, you would have had some individual training as ice mage, of course, but otherwise it would have been no different to Blýeistr and Helblindi’s upbringing. You would have had the same right to the throne as them.”

Loki was confused for a moment until he remembered Blýeistr saying that Laufey had been king because he had born children. If Blýeistr was now king, did that mean he had nephews or nieces? He did not feel comfortable asking however.

Luckily for him Helblindi was happy to talk about his family. “Blýeistr’s husband and children are visiting some of their sire’s relatives, so you can’t meet them today. Perhaps when you visit the next time.”

Loki expected it to feel presumptive that Helblindi was already planning his next visit when he had not even agreed yet to return but in the face of his happiness at having him there, he could not work up any ire. Returning and using the Casket to help rebuild Jotunheim would surely go a long way in helping establish an alliance between Jotunheim and Asgard. And perhaps he would even get to learn more about his heritage and learn new kinds of magic.

Tony was waiting at the door. He kept looking down the driveway, waiting for his guests. Alexander had called, asking if he was still interested in having a look at his armour, a suit of flying armour, though with adjustments to allow the pilot to use magic. Of course Tony had agreed. Alexander had even agreed to bring the Spiderling along when he made the journey from New York City. Now if they would just arrive. He briefly glanced to the lawn where Erik and Hank were training with Rhodey, T’Chall and Stephen. He watched them for a moment, happy to see that their training was going well.

He looked up at the sound of a helicopter coming closer. He tensed as it came closer, then started to
land. He’d heard some of the stories of people attacking the Institute and hoped the current students would be spared the experience and the three newly online Sentinels the stress of another fight.

He relaxed when he saw the Spiderling, out of costume, waving from the cockpit. Judging from the red hair he could now see peeking out from under the helmet, he figured Alexander was piloting.

Alexander shook his head, running a hand through his shoulder-length red hair after taking off the helmet. “Seriously, I don’t understand why they insist on it. Mom and Dad aren’t wearing one when they fly it.”

Tony just gave him a look. “A helicopter? Really?”

“You really have no room to talk, Tones,” Rhodey said, having come closer with the other Sentinels.

Tony pointed at him. “Hush you.”

Alexander shrugged. “It’s quicker than a car. And I’ve been flying one longer than I’ve been driving a car.” He pointed at Peter over his shoulder. “And I would have been harder to bring him along if I had taken just the suit.”

“But you brought it?” Tony asked.

Alexander rolled his eyes. “I promised, didn’t I? Pop agreed to let you take a look at one of his own suits, one without the changes to for me to use it and still use my magic. He also gave me some of the specs of older versions and the armour I’m using. He did ask that you sign a standard NDA but he and Dad are willing to discuss the ideas behind some of the schematics, especially the ones protecting the pilot from magic.”


Alexander shrugged. “Frankly, he doesn’t have the means to build one. Plus Dad figured the internship contract you arranged for him with SI will cover it.”

“It should, yes.” Tony glanced at the Sentinels. “Rhodey and some of the others might pass by. At least if he can refrain from such slander.” Rhodey held his hands up in surrender, grinning. “So I hope you have a few copies of the agreement.” When he nodded, Tony turned back to the door. “Then let’s go down to the lab and take a look, Alexander.”

“You can call me Alex, you know?” Alexander pointed out. “Everyone does. I’m used to only being called Alexander if I’ve done some mischief.”

“Then you should be used to being called Alexander,” Tony said drily. “But it’s more that here you’ll get confused with Havok, Alex Summers.”

“At least you get called by your name,” Peter said. “I’m getting called Spiderling.”

“Yeah well, I’m of age, Spiderling,” Alexander replied.

Peter pouted. He looked to Tony, the one who had come up with the nickname. “You could at least call me Spiderman.”

“No happening, Spiderling.”

Peter followed Tony inside but Alexander, feeling the stare of the three Sentinels on him, stayed behind. He turned to look at them. “Yes?”
“Why are you here?” T’Challa asked.

Alexander frowned, not sure what he was getting at. “So Tony can take a look at my Pop’s armour?”

“Not because you are interested in him?” Strange asked.

“Interested in...?” Alexander made a face. “Eww, no. Just no. No offence to him but he’s my Mom’s age and looks a lot like my Pop.” He shook his head. “Seriously.” He grabbed the armour and went after Tony and Peter.

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Loki resisted the urge to push Banner along. He had been so lost in learning about ice magic and Vili in catching up with some relatives on his mother’s side that they had stayed a day longer than intended. It normally wouldn’t have been a problem but before they had left Vili had sent a message to Vanahem, informing them of their desire to visit and meet the Queen. Writing them now to say they would be coming a day later would probably set them off to a bad start for the negotiations.

He had also promised Thor that he would take Banner to the US to visit Stark, thinking he might have the opportunity to annoy Strange some more. Banner had offered to postpone his visit but Loki had decided to stick to his word. Banner would just have to wait until their return to be picked up or find alternate means of transport.

He stopped short in the doorway to the lab where Stark was with two others, the teenager calling himself Spiderman (Loki agreed that Stark’s nickname Spiderling seemed more fitting) and a young red head. It was the latter who drew his attention. Seeing the armour in the corner, he figured it was Alexander, the fighter who had used both technology and magic to fight. He had had a suspicion then but had not seen him out of the armour to tell for sure. “You’re not human,” he stated.

“Yes, I am.” Alexander said, then conceded: “Well, for the most part. My grandma on Mom’s side of the family isn’t. It’s where I got my magic.” He regarded him. “You’re Loki, right?”

“Loki considered replying but then just shook his head. “I have to get going. We are leaving for Vanahem later. Remember, Banner, we will return tomorrow at the earliest, so I can’t take you back to Norway before that.”

“You’re going to Vanahem?” Alexander asked. “Can I come along?”

“I will have to ask my uncle,” Loki said. “But why would you want to?”

“It’s where Dad and Grandma are from. Originally, at last. They’ve been on Earth for a while already.”

“In that case it should be possible. Just a moment, then.” Loki stepped outside to have some privacy
Clint was surprised how much he was enjoying his new work. Things were absolutely crazy here, more than SHIELD and the Avengers combined, but it was also great fun. He was even willingly attending his sessions with one of the MiB psychologists. It helped that when he had told her about being mind-controlled and everything that had followed, it hadn’t appeared to phase her in the least. She’d just nodded and given him the dates of the group sessions for agents having been mind-controlled. Group sessions. Clint wasn’t sure if he should be relieved that there were so many who understood what he had been through or worried how common it seemed to be here.

Kay had arranged for him to work with Jay, his ex-partner, for the time being. It was great for him, not only because they shared the same sense of humour but also because the time spend in the car together gave them opportunity to talk. Jay could relate to some of what Clint was struggling with now. Jay knew from personal experience what it was like for a partner to return but not directly with all his memories, to have to deal with the emotional rollercoaster of grieving for your partner only for him to be alive after all.

Clint wondered if that had been Kay’s intention. Considering he was Phil’s father, he wouldn’t be surprised.

Jay slid back into the driver seat, carrying a pizza carton. He offered Clint a piece. They ate in companionable silence. Then Clint said: “I’m ready. But I’m also staying.”
Chapter 11

Tony walked towards the kitchen to get himself a cup of coffee, still staring at the schematics Alexander had brought him. He’d been very impressed, especially when Alexander had mentioned that his father had built it 1994, years before he had built his own suit.

He normally wouldn’t be able to walk around like this since someone would usually insist that he put it down, at least while walking, but no one was around today. The students were away on an excursion, accompanied by most of the teachers and Bruce, Erik and Charles had taken the Sentinels out for some tests and Wendy had asked Jean to come along for an afternoon among girls. Beside him, only Logan and Scott stayed behind and he hoped Logan would keep Scott too busy to call him out.

Keep him busy by talking or working on a car or something. Tony refused to consider what else they might be doing.

When his phone rang, he briefly put down his coffee to pull it out without looking away from the schematics. He accepted the call then placed it on the counter.

“Tony.”

Tony froze, the cup of coffee slipping unnoticed from his fingers. No, that was impossible. He had made sure to avoid all contact.

“Tony, finally. They kept getting in the way, trying to keep us apart. But we won’t let them destroy us, destroy the Avengers.”

“No.”

“No,” Rogers said. “It’s time for you to get over yourself and give up the Accords so we can re-establish the Avengers, to bring Bucky and everyone back together. Once you and I bond—”

“No.” Tony stumbled back from the phone. No, he couldn’t... he wouldn’t...

“Natasha warned me about your ego but this is too much. I’ll talk to them. They’ll see the best solution is to make sure we bond.”

Tony couldn’t hear what else Steve said over the rushing in his ears. Suddenly he was back in Siberia, lying there on the cold ground with Steve kneeling over him, shield raised.

Scott stumbled when Tony’s fear rushed over him, holding himself upright against the doorjamb. He’d heard the cup shatter and had come to investigate. He wanted to curse for once when he saw Rogers on the screen of Tony’s phone and the empty look in Tony’s eyes. He’d only once seen a Guide in a fugue, the Guide equivalent to a Sentinel zoning. It could happen if a Guide got lost in a painful memory. Their emphatic abilities would make them experience their emotions at the time they were remembering which in turn was keeping them caught up in the memory. The last one he’d seen had been Alex when he had been triggered by a memory of Vietnam. It had been horrible, seeing his brother suffer that way until Hank had been able to pull him out. Only now none of the Sentinels were here now. He made a decision. “Logan!” He was certain that Logan was already on his way, having felt Tony losing control, but he needed him to hurry. When he heard him in the hallway, he ordered: “Take care of Tony.” Then he grabbed the phone.
“What’s going on there? What happened to Tony?” Rogers demanded.

“None of your business,” Scott replied sharply. He left the kitchen quickly, hoping that not being able to hear Rogers anymore would help Tony come out of the memory. “You have no right to bother him, not after what you did to him.”

“This is Avengers business, just between me and Tony,” Rogers protested.

“The Avengers don’t exist anymore,” Scott said bluntly. “Tony is part of us now, part of the X-Men.”

“He’s not a mutant.”

“He’s family. And we protect our own. Let me be clear, Rogers, I’m not going to stand by and let you harass or bother any member of my team. So if you contact Tony again without his explicit invitation, we will be finding out if your super soldier serum is strong enough for you to heal from a laser to the face.” With that, Scott cut the call.

~*~

As strange as it sounded, Logan was relieved when Tony started shaking, the unnatural stillness of the fugue giving way and the projected fear receding. “It’s okay, you’re safe,” he repeated, gently rubbing his back.

Tony tried to push away. “No, no. Scott...”

“Scott’s dealing with Rogers,” Logan assured him, listening in on Scott’s conversation with Rogers. Tony shook his head, trying to explain. Logan acting as a Sentinel to help him could hurt Scott, make him remember his fear of losing him and Jean.

“Come on,” Logan said, gently helping him up. “I think you need to hear this.” He led him to where Scott was, in time for them to catch his last reply to Rogers before he ended the call.

Scott took a deep breath to calm down after he had ended the call, then stepped up to Logan and Tony and offered Tony his phone back, only for Logan to sink a hand into his hair and pull him into a deep, filthy kiss.

It took Scott a moment to remember that they were not alone or with just Jean but then he pushed Logan away. “Logan!”

“Hearing you threaten Rogers was hot,” Logan said, absolutely shameless.

“You... you said I’m part of your team,” Tony said, staring up at Scott.

“Of course you are. You are family and very much part of the team.”

“But I’m not a mutant,” Tony pointed out.

Scott sighed. “This was not how we wanted to tell you. I’ve been discussing it with Rhodes and representatives from the Accords Council. We are planning to establish a new X-Men team, one not entirely made up of mutants. There are some mutants who don’t feel comfortable joining the X-Men, either because their mutation is not suitable for fighting or because they do not want to use it and they feel they cannot fight using other means while part of the X-Men. A mixed team would hopefully make them feel more welcome. If we got the okay, we planned to ask you to be the leader.”
“Really?” Tony asked, hardly able to believe it.

“Really,” Scott confirmed. “We’re far along in the planning and should hear back from the Council soon with their decision.”

Logan pulled him into another kiss in reply.

“You’re an amazing big brother,” Tony said when they broke apart.

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It occurred to Loki only now that, even though his foster-mother had been Vanir, he had rarely visited. The architecture reminded him a lot of Asgard, though with considerably less gold. He doubted any of the other realms included as much gold in their buildings as Asgard had.

He and Vili made sure to keep Alexander behind them as they made their way to see Queen Nerthus. He had not told them yet who his non-human father was but they figured, whoever he was, it was better not to risk his anger by letting his son get hurt.

They finally arrived in what seemed to be a room intended for semi-public meetings. Queen Nerthus sat on an elaborately crafted chair with some members of her council around her.

“Queen Nerthus,” Vili said, bowing to her.

“I go now by the name I gained on Midgard, Thetys,” she replied. “So you have come to Vanaheim at last in your work to re-establish Asgard.” Seeing their surprise, she added: “I hope you did not expect Asgard to be the only realm in contact with other realms.”

“No, of course not,” Vili hurriedly assured her. “We are simply surprised how quickly news spread.”

“The destruction of Asgard was hardly hidden. Nor is your desire to rebuild Asgard unexpected.” She paused. “Though what you expect to gain from your visit I do not know. We are not interested in returning to being Asgard’s vasall and, as it stands, Asgard has nothing to offer us.”

“We don’t expect things to return to the way they were,” Vili quickly said. “We are hoping for an alliance or, at the very least, a non-aggression pact, as we have offered Nidavellir. That way we can have the assurance that you will not prevent us from building a new home and you have the assurance that we will not attack you, not now and not when we are stronger again.”

She raised an eyebrow, not impressed by him. “How do you intend to make certain both sides keep the pact? Will you demand hostages again, like Frigga was? Or will we exchange them this time?”

Vili winced at the reminder that Frigga, even though she’d carried the title Queen, had actually been a political hostage and that Asgard had failed in protecting her. Asgard had no leverage to demand a hostage and too little survivors to offer someone suitably high up as return hostage. “I’m certain we can come up with a solution we can both agree to.”

Judging by her expression, Thetys was less certain by far.

Alexander stepped forward. “Please, your majesty, will you allow us to stay until tomorrow? Will you give it a chance?”

She was about to disagree but then she paused, looking straight at him. “You are of my people.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Alexander said, though it hadn’t been a question. “My grandmother is one of
the Vanir who remained on Earth – on Midgard."

“Very well. The three of you may stay until tomorrow. Later, I wish to hear more about you and your family on Midgard.” She looked to Vili. “You have until noon tomorrow to give me a reason why I should trust a non-aggression pact with Asgard. After that, you will leave, with or without a pact.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Vili said and bowed deep, the other two following his example. The queen nodded, then rose and left with her council, leaving the three of them behind.

“Well, I guess we are lucky your parents agreed to let you come with us,” Loki said to Alexander. Alexander froze. “They, ah, they don’t know I’m here.” Vili and Loki stared at him. “They’re gonna kill us.”

~*~

“What did you want to talk about that you didn’t want anyone to overhear?” Jean asked. It wasn’t the first time she’d come along to a girls’ night or afternoon out but usually there were more than just the two of them and they usually did not drive as far. But Wendy had asked just her and had driven all the way here. “Is it about the witch?”

“No, it’s... I need you to give me a check-up,” Wendy said. Jean waited, certain that there had to be more to it than a simple check-up.

“I think I might be pregnant,” Wendy finally rushed out. She rubbed her forehead. “I don’t know. Perhaps I’m just imagining things. I didn’t think it would be possible.”

“There is no reason why your mutation would keep you from getting pregnant,” Jean pointed out. For some mutants, especially with more obvious physiological mutations, there actually was a worry but Wendy’s body did not differ from other humans’.

“It’s my mutation that might have made it possible. I shouldn’t be able to get pregnant from an android. And there hasn’t been anyone else for months.”

“Vision?” Jean asked, just to be sure.

“Yes.”

“We can check when we get back,” Jean said. “Though if you are, telling the others will be awkward.”

Wendy winced. “Perhaps I can tell father when he is in New York the next time?”

~*~

Scott and Logan hadn’t needed to talk to one another to agree that they would not leave Tony alone for the rest of the afternoon. Tony was doing a lot better already after their conversation but they knew that, if left alone, Tony might get lost in his dark thoughts again and, worst case, convince himself that it was the best for everyone if he agreed with Rogers and bonded with him. Not that they would allow it. Their family would have Rogers had if he even thought about touching Tony again. Still, better not to even risk having to argue the matter with Tony. Instead they had brought him down to the garage and kept his mind busy by having him come up with ideas to improve the
different vehicles, including the jet. (Hopefully Hank would forgive them for suggesting Tony might work on his baby.)

They were still there when Erik and Charles returned with the three Sentinels trying to court Tony. Not that he seemed to notice it. The three younger Sentinels were quick to let Tony tell them all about what they had been doing and his plans for improvements. Charles and Erik on the other hand turned to Logan and Scott, surprised to see them here with Tony.

Scott covertly tapped his temple, then when Charles started reading his thoughts, showed him what had happened, what Rogers had said. They could tell the moment Charles had passed it on to Erik by the way he stiffened.

‘We need to discuss how to deal with him,’ Charles said.

‘But without Tony overhearing.’

‘I might have an idea how to keep him sufficiently distracted,’ Charles said.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vili knew that he should be in the rooms they had been given, working on his arguments to convince Thetys of their trustworthiness, but this was a family matter. And right now, family was the most important thing they had. So instead, he was out, trying to figure out where he might find Jörd. It wasn’t easy. Thetys wasn’t the only one here who did not trust Asgardians, many other Vanir didn’t seem interested in talking to him, never mind telling him where one of their own was. He was about to turn around and go back to his room, try to figure out a strategy with Loki, when there was suddenly a rustle behind him, then a female voice said: “I hear you’re looking for me.”

When he turned around, he recognized her at once. The Vanir, like the Asgardians, aged only slowly. He had always wondered why Odin had looked so old, if it had been the strain of controlling Asgard’s magic or the way he had fought his own heritage. Jörd had aged some, of course, but not so much that he couldn’t recognize her, as little as he had seen her back then. “I am, yes,” he said. “I wanted to talk to you about Thor.”

Something shifted in her eyes. “How is he? I... I heard that he was involved in the fight against Thanos.”

“He was. Against Thanos and Hela before that. But he’s okay. He’s on Midgard, with the other surviving Asgardians.” He watched her carefully, taking in her every reaction. “With Odin’s death, he has succeeded his father as King of Asgard.” He waited, then asked quietly: “Or rather his foster father, right?”

She turned away. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Thor is not Odin’s son,” Vili said bluntly. Then he softened. “I’m not looking to displace him as king. He’s become a good ruler and Asgard needs stability. I just want to know. If someone else knows, we can’t be caught unaware.” He didn’t add ‘again’. They had gone through it with Loki. He really didn’t want to see what might happen if Thor were suddenly faced with his whole life having been a lie.

Jörd stayed staring off into the distance, then her shoulders slumped and she closed her eyes. “You’re right. He’s not... he’s...” She sighed. “I always knew that what I had with Odin was nothing serious. I didn’t expect or want it to. He was already married and I’m just a third daughter, not important enough to risk the peace treaty.” She laughed darkly. “Not that he had any intention for anything more than some fun. Neither had I, like I said. So I started seeing one of the guards here as well. My pregnancy was completely unplanned. It seems I wasn’t paying enough attention once when I was manipulating my body not to be fertile. When I admitted it to myself, I was far enough along already to feel him. I couldn’t abort the pregnancy then.”

“So you told Odin the child was his and convinced him to take him. But why give him to Odin?”

She whirled around to glare at him. “Because I wanted more for him than being the son of a simple guard and a third daughter.” She raised her chin. “There, now you have confirmation. What are you going to do with it?”

“I told you, I’m not going to dethrone Thor. I do intend to tell Thor and those closest to him. With your permission, I would like to tell him your name, so he can seek you out if and when he wants to.
What about his father? Is he still alive?”

She shook her head. “No, he was killed defending Vanaheim a few centuries ago.” She hesitated. “I can see what I can find about him for you to take along for Thor, so he can at least get to know his father that way.”

~*~

Coulson sat behind Lola’s wheel, staring in trepidation at the farmhouse. Finally he took a deep, bracing breath, then got out. He was not surprised when Laura opened the door before he could knock. He’d certainly sat in the driveway long enough. “Hello, Laura.”

“Phil.” She stood there, staring at him, unsure what to do. He had been a close friend to both Clint and herself. At least until his supposed death. “You look well for someone who’s been dead for years.”

Phil winced. “I’m sorry, Laura. I didn’t… I didn’t know I’d survive. And then I didn’t remember you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Part of the procedure to revive me involved manipulating my memories. I locked away private memories, like memories of you and the children, to… to protect them. To protect you. I only recently got them all back.” And then he had been too much of a coward to seek her and Clint out until his hand had been forced.

“So Clint said.” She finally made a decision and stepped aside to let him in. “Come on in. It’s about time you were here again.”

“Yes.”

“And after you’ve got reacquainted again with the kids we’ll talk about bringing Clint back home.” She looked at him over her shoulder. “And Phil? Pack a bag on your way to get him. You’re staying a while.”

~*~

Alexander followed the servant into the sitting room Thetys had invited him to. He bowed in greeting. “Your majesty.”

“Come, sit. You’ll find I don’t stand too much on formal titles with my own people.” She paused, considering him. “You seem surprised. You’re not very familiar with the Vanir on Midgard, are you?”

“Not with many, no. Most of them are staying on Avalon.” His smile was crooked. “I’m unfortunately familiar with Oberon.”

She nodded sagely. “Ah, yes, Danu’s boy. But how come you know him if they are staying on Avalon?”

“I’ve unfortunately seen him a few times because my grandmother is Titania, his wife.” Seeing her questioning look, he explained: “I was told that they separated somewhat over a millennia ago and so Oberon banished them all from Avalon. They’re remarried again but before, she was briefly married to a human, my grandfather, and had my Mum.”
“Did you have to grow up with him?” she asked.

“No, I...” Alexander looked down on his hands, nervously rubbing them together. “She kept who she really was a secret from Mum. Until I was born, at least. Then she tried to take me with her, with Oberon’s help. Dad stood up to them, together with Mum and Pop.” He looked up briefly, lips twitching up into a smile. “He’s not my dad in the biological sense. But he’s with Mum and Pop and has raised me with them. He’s also the one who’s taught me how to use my magic.” He took a deep breath. “He’s also why I asked Loki and Vili if I can come along. Oberon banished him and bound his magic as punishment for standing up to him. He never even suggested in my hearing that he regretted it,” he hurried to say the last part, not wanting her to think badly about his Dad. “But I’ve still always felt a bit guilty since I understood what happened, no matter how often he has assured me that he do it again. So I was hoping... I was hoping you would be able to help.”

~*~

“Tony, wait a moment before you go back to the lab,” Charles said when Tony got up after dinner.

Tony frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“No, not at all. In fact we have good news for you,” Charles said.

“I talked to Helen this morning and she agrees that you and Rhodey have recovered enough that you can safely use your suits again,” Jean said.

Tony instantly turned to look at his friend who was also getting up now. “Let’s go?”

“Let’s go,” Rhodey agreed.

Moments later, they were flying in the sky above the house, for the first time in far too long flying just for the fun of it and playing around. Tony used the greater agility of his suit to dash around his friend.

Jean stood on the lawn with some of the other X-Men, watching as they seemed to be playing catch. “You said Tony’s spirit guide is a raven. Are they aware...?”

“No,” Ororo said. “Let them figure it out themselves.”

“And if we’re lucky they’ll be the first men in this family who don’t take years to get a clue,” Raven added.

“Haven’t they known each other for years?” Rogue asked. “Does that still count?”

Raven considered it, then qualified: “The first ones we won’t have to watch for years until they get a clue.”

Meanwhile the three bonded Sentinel-Guide pairs stood together with Scott and Logan. “Tell us again what happened, Scott,” Charles requested. “Then we’ll see what we can come up with to deal with him.”

~*~

“Well, Prince Vili, have you found arguments for a non-aggression pact?” Thetys asked when they met up again in the morning.

“I have, yes, but I would ask that they do not leave this room,” Vili replied.
“Oh?”

He had fought with himself whether to reveal it to the ruler of another realm but it might be the only way to convince her. It would also then be in her own best interest not to let it get out. “Thor, the new King of Asgard, is the son of Jörd, a Vanir.” He ignored the way Loki’s eyes widened slightly.

“A half-Vanir as king of Asgard,” Thetys mused. “That’s certainly an interesting idea.”

“A Vanir as king,” Vili corrected. “I talked to Jörd yesterday. Thor was actually sired by a Vanir, a guard of your realm. Odin adopted and raised him, believing him to be his son.” He waited a moment for the revelation to sink in and for her to consider the consequences. “I see no reason why we should destabilize Asgard further by revealing his true parentage. He is Odin’s son as well, his foster son. The people love him and he is growing to be a good ruler. My suggestion is therefore this: we will let Thor know about his Vanir ancestry but otherwise keep it a secret. Thor and his line will remain rulers of Asgard.”

Thetys smiled slowly, deeply satisfied by the unexpected change after the way Odin had treated Vanaheim, after the concessions they had had to make after the war. “Asgard being ruled by a Vanir.” She nodded. “Yes, you will get your non-aggression pact and, in time, an alliance. For now, our agreeing to an alliance would be cause for suspicion and draw too much attention. But in the future, after we’ve seen what king of ruler Thor will be…”

Vili nodded. “I agree with your reasoning. For now we will just prepare the non-aggression pact. In the future, when Asgard is re-established and suitably stabilized, King Thor might want to visit the other realms in person. Perhaps that will be a good time to discuss an alliance.”

“Perhaps.”

~*~

Steve sighed. His senses were once again not doing what he wanted them to. His sense of touch, smell and taste were working as normal for once but his sight and hearing were below the level he was used to. That had happened before a few times, though his more common problem was his senses spiking. If only one of those Guides would finally do their duty and bond with him. The X-Men were obviously still trying to sabotage the Avengers by keeping him and Tony apart.

“Rogers, you have a call,” one of the agents working at the base he was currently housed at told him.

He didn’t see why he and Wanda couldn’t return to the Avengers Compound while they waited for the others to see sense and come back, why they instead had to stay here at the base, together with other agents who didn’t show the Avengers any deference. And why did he have to use the landline? The UN had refused to pay for a cell phone for him, instead telling him that he would have to pay for personal expenses out of his own pocket. How was he supposed to earn money? He was a hero, he was too busy to work like a regular person. He hoped that Natasha, wherever she had gone after the invasion, would soon return with a solution that would finally make everything get back to normal.

He followed the agent to the common area where there was a phone for the private use of the people staying at the base. He picked up the phone, looking around to see if any of the agents were eavesdropping. “Hello?”

“Stevie.”

“Bucky!” he happily exclaimed. “How are you? Did you get my letters? Have you arranged a flight back to the US yet?”
“I’m fine. So is Sam, by the way. I did get your letters but I don’t see why I would be flying back.”

Steve frowned. “What do you mean? You have to come back so we can fight together on the Avengers.”

“You were there in the meeting where I told the UN that I’m not interested in joining the Avengers. I’ve spend over 70 years fighting. I want to finally get to enjoy peaceful life, together with my Guide.”

“But this is your home!”

“It was my home,” Bucky corrected. “Now I’ve built a home here in Wakanda.”

“But Bucky, if you’ve read my letters then you know that I need you. They’re not letting us back into the field as long as only Wanda and I are officially part of the Avengers.”

“I’m not interested in returning to a life of violence, not without a major threat to the world. And I’m definitely not joining a team with a HYDRA agent.”

“She’s just a kid, Bucky, she didn’t know what she was doing. If you’d just come back and get to know her…”

“And let her use her powers so I’m once again getting mind controlled? No thanks.” He took a deep breath, easily audible through the phone. “Listen, I need you to respect my decision. I’m not coming back. So please stop those constant letters asking me to.”

Steve was still searching for an argument to convince him when he heard the dial tone. Had someone interrupted the call? He tried to make his sense of hearing stretch, to hear if some of the agents were talking about messing with the phone. It didn’t work. Frustrated he hit the table with his fist.

Then he stared. The table was still standing, not damaged in any way.

~*~

It was early afternoon when Loki and Vili returned to the Institute with Alexander. They had enjoyed lunch with Thetys and she had then seen them off. Alexander checked his watch, wondering if he had time to talk to Stark some more about the armour before his parents started wondering where he was.

“Alexander Fox Xanatos!”

He winced. Obviously they had wondered already. He turned to the house. “Dad, hey. Are Mom and Pop here as well?”

Charles and Erik who had followed him outside were amused to see Vili and Loki take a step back. It was rather satisfying, considering they had been left with the unenviable task of explaining where Alexander was when their unexpected visitor had shown up an hour ago. Though they had not been aware he was Alexander’s father.

“No, they are waiting for us at the Eyrie,” Owen replied.

Alexander smiled, trying to get him to soften. “Then we probably shouldn’t keep them waiting much longer. I have so much to tell you.” Though perhaps he should wait with the details until they were home. Hopefully Thetys’ gift for his Dad would make at least Mom and Pop more forgivable.
“You left very quickly yesterday,” Tony said during their video call the next day.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Bruce replied. “Vili and Loki were in a hurry.” He’d been confused at first but he had also come to know and trust them enough to go along with it.

Thor had seemed very happy when they had joined him in his office “You’re back. Did you enjoy your time with the Man of Iron, Bruce? How is he?”

Bruce had been unable not to return the smile. “I did, thank you. He’s going a lot better. He was even allowed back into his suit yesterday.” Seeing him and Rhodey play around in the air had been a sweet view.

Thor had then looked to his brother and uncle. “What about you? Was your visit to Vanaheim successful?” His smile had dropped when he saw their serious expressions. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Should I leave you alone?” he had asked.

“No, I believe Thor will appreciate your being here,” Loki had said. Then he had gone and closed the door, a sign that Thor was not to be disturbed.

“There is something I need to tell you about Odin. And Frigga,” Vili had begun.

Bruce and Thor had listened in growing disbelief to their tale. The truth about Odin’s mother, about his marriage to Frigga and about the true parentage of his sons. Thor had sunk down, hiding his face in his hands. “It was a lie. Everything was a lie.”

Bruce had not been able to stand seeing him like that. He’d gone to him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Not everything. This does not change who you are. You are still Thor. You are still the son of Odin and Frigga. You are still King of Asgard.” In an effort to get him to smile, he’d added: “The second strongest Avenger.”

“Banner’s right, Thor,” Loki had agreed, voice softer than Bruce had ever heard it. He’d rested a hand on Thor’s free shoulder. “It’s not all a lie. Freyr told me that mother loved us, no matter that she has not born us.” He’d paused, then had added: “And we are still brothers.”

Bruce could only imagine how much it meant to Thor that Loki finally acknowledged him as brother again.

Tony’s next question pulled him out of his memories. “And your missing Thor had nothing to do with it? ‘Cause I have to say, the pining is getting rather noticeable.”

Bruce started. “W-What are you...?”

“I don’t get it, really,” Tony continued. “It’s obviously mutual. I haven’t seen Pointbreak as often since you arrived back on Earth but from what I have seen I’m sure he’s interested in you as well.”

That was... interesting to know but really, for Tony to bring up pining? “You have no room to talk about pining. The attempts of your three suitors are getting ridiculous. And I’ve been there not even two days.”

Tony stared at him. “My suitors?”
“Rhodey, T’Challa and Stephen. Seriously, I think the only reason you haven’t found them naked in your bed is because your new parents and siblings would have their heads for pressuring you.”

~*~

Thor and Loki stood beside one another on the cliff where their father had vanished what felt like centuries ago.

“What now?” Thor asked.

Loki shrugged. “Nothing changes. As far as anyone’s concerned, you are Odin’s son and heir, the legitimate King of Asgard.” He paused. “Vili explained it to me after he told Queen Thetys. It was never about declaring you illegitimate but about being prepared, in case it ever gets out or someone tries to use the knowledge against you.”

Thor nodded. “So I could learn about it under better circumstances than you did.” He sighed. “I hadn’t realized just how badly we failed you back then.”

Loki didn’t disagree. The revelation of being Jotun and Laufey’s son (though it had turned out that he was also Odin’s after all) had been handled badly, though most of the blame rested on Odin and Frigga, not Thor. Still, Thor’s acknowledgement of Loki’s feelings and the mistakes made by their family went a long way in healing some of the lingering resentment. But that was not something he wanted to talk about with Thor or anyone for that matter. So he decided to change the subject. “You know, there are advantages to your not being Odin’s son.”

“Like what?”

“Well, it turns out that male Jotun can also get pregnant. Since you don’t have Jotun blood, when you and Banner finally manage to get it on, you will not have to worry about accidentally getting pregnant.”

“Loki!”

~*~

Charles and Erik were curled up together on the couch in their room. Charles lifted his head when he noticed the familiar mind and nervous energy in front of the door. “You can come in, Tony,” he called.

Tony slowly entered. “I... Bruce said... Are they really courting me? Rhodey and T’Challa and Stephen, I mean.”

Charles patted the couch beside him. He waited until Tony had sat down, then answered: “Yes, they are. Or at least they’re trying to.” Seeing his embarrassment, he laughed gently and tucked him closer, letting him hide his face against his shoulder. “It’s not some idle interest, they’re serious about you, about bonding with you. But that doesn’t have to mean anything, who you bond with is your choice. You can choose one, neither or all of them. It’s entirely up to you.”

“You also don’t have to decide at once, just because you know now,” Erik added. “You can take some time to think about it.”

Tony was quiet for a long moment, then softly admitted: “I know what my choice is.”

“Good,” Charles said. He’d worried a bit that Tony would question his decision but he had come a long way since they had found him in Siberia. “Rhodey is reading in his room.”
Steve stared in disbelief at the letter he’d received. He kept hearing the words of all the experts called in when it had become obvious that both his enhanced senses and his superhuman strength were gone.

“It was to be expected, really,” Sandburg, the expert on Sentinels and Guides, had said. “Sentinels and Guides come online when there is a need of them. Most of the ones who came on during the last year did so in response to an extraordinary threat. Now that it is dealt with, some of them are not needed. So it was to be expected that superfluous Sentinels and Guides would return to being offline.” He was not superfluous. He was Captain America. He was a hero.

“The radiation in space is very different to the one on earth,” Bruce had said. “The time I spend on another planet stabilised the effect of my previous exposure to radiation, which had caused the unstable transformation into the Hulk. The phenomenon is obviously not very well studied but it’s possible that radiation has destabilized the previously stable reaction Rogers had.”

“We do not know when the deterioration of his strength started. Mister Rogers refused to attend training with the other agents,” Everett Ross had said. “We just know that he is now no stronger than a regular human of average fitness.” Of course he and Wanda hadn’t trained with them. Training with some agents would have not been challenging. He also had not wanted them to get information that might be used against him.

“Physically, he seems to be at standard human level. There is no sign of his superhuman strength or healing, though he is still healthy, contrary to how he was before the serum,” Helen Cho had said. “We do not know if the current state is permanent however. He could regain his strength or the effect of the serum could degrease even further. Therefore I think it would be unethical to clear him for field work.” He was certain his strength would return soon, just like Wanda’s powers which also weren’t working properly. They’d just have to wait.

But they weren’t willing to wait. The letter he received stated that he was no longer considered qualified to be an Avenger. He was to leave the base and Wanda would be deported to Sokovia. And without a shield, without his strength, without any kind of resources, he had no idea how to proof them wrong.

Tony took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves and the butterflies in his stomach. Then he knocked on the door to Rhodey’s room. He found Rhodey reading, just like Charles had said. He hadn’t mentioned, however, that he was sitting on his bed, back against the headboard. It was silly. He’d seen him do the same so often but somehow everything was different now.

“Tones?” Rhodey asked when the silence stretched.

Tony opened his mouth, then closed it again. For once in his life, he didn’t know what to say. What if Bruce and Charles and Erik were wrong?

What if they weren’t?

He slowly stepped closer to the bed and reached out a hand. “My Sentinel?”

Rhodey’s eyes widened, then he smiled brilliantly. He took Tony’s hand and pulled him into his arms. “Yes. And you’re my Guide.”

Tony pressed their foreheads together, eyes drifting close to enjoy the closeness. Then he felt the
Loki smiled to himself, feeling a sense of satisfaction he had not believed possible. He actually had a place here on Midgard, a purpose. He had a family: an uncle, a brother, a soon-to-be brother-in-law (or was that two? He wasn’t certain how things worked between Thor, Banner and the Hulk and he did not want to know). He was also enjoying getting to know his half-brothers on Jotunheim and their sire Fárbauti. To his surprise, he had also been asked to help out the Avengers from time to time. Considering they were now being led by Stark and his Sentinel Rhodes, he was actually considering it, though he was already missing the hilarity of the three Sentinels vying for Stark’s attention.

He enjoyed his new life but it had consequences for him. He had responsibilities, to his family, to Asgard and to Jotunheim. So he had to change his plans. He pulled a pendant out from underneath his shirt, a gift from the Grandmaster. He had been considering returning to Sakaar, to the Grandmaster since the victory over Hela. He sighed, his hand tightening over the pendant, then let it drop. He could not just leave. He could not go back to him, not for a while yet, if ever.

“Lo-Lo, there you are.”

Loki whirled around. “En?”

Chapter End Notes

So, that’s the end of this story but not of this ‘Verse. I have a pretty definite idea for a story about Jack and Ianto coming online and bonding and a more detailed take on the Logan/Scott/Jean triad. I’m also starting to plan sequels about Clint’s time at MiB and about the Grandmaster coming to Earth, perhaps also a bit more about what happens now to Steve, Wanda and Natasha. Or perhaps I’ll play some more with the other Realms.

I had planned Loki’s and Thor’s parentage already back when I was writing ‘Families’ back in July 2018 (Did any of you catch the hint in Vili’s internal thoughts when he told Loki about them not being Frigga’s sons?). When I researched Norse mythology, Laufey was always referred to as Loki’s mother. So I wondered: what if Odin’s his father and not Farbauti? And if Loki and Hela are Odin’s children but Thor is so different, perhaps he is not Odin’s son?

The decision to include Alexander Xanatos from Gargoyles was a pretty spontaneous one shortly before the April Rough Trade challenge began. I had included Puck/Owen’s explanation to Xanatos “Energy is energy, whether generated by science or magic” in Families for Loki’s explanation to Tony but then I decided that I’d love another chance at having them meet.

I learned that courtship rituals among ravens include acrobatic feats of flight and bringing gifts of food while at a museum in March. It seemed just as fitting for the courtship between Tony and Rhodey.
So, for those wondering:

Blair, Bruce, Everett and Helen are lying. Blair and Charles made Steve go dormant and Hank and Jean were able to tweak their “solution” for Wanda to fit him. Between Raven and Loki, getting access to him was ridiculously easy. Helen was still furious with him for what he did to Tony and for shielding Wanda from having to answer for working with ULTRON and Everett was just happy to be rid of him.

As for the non-Marvel characters:

Jess Yates is an OC. I figured Tony needs a therapist, as do most of the X-Men and their students

Vili is Odin’s brother in Norse mythology.

Jörd is Thor’s mother, according to what I found online.

Miss Sato, her boss and his boyfriend are Toshiko Sato, Jack Harkness and Ianto Jones from Torchwood. I might be writing a story about them and Jack and Ianto coming online and bonding.

Jim and Blair are obviously the two main characters of The Sentinel.

Ciliren and Elanil are OCs. I found some references to Freyr being ruler of Alfheim even though he’s Vanir. I didn’t want another foreign ruler, so I instead decided to make him the Prince Consort to the Elf Queen.

Uncle Daniel is actually a Marvel character, Daniel Sousa from the Agent Carter TV series.

Kay, Coulson’s father is Agent Kay from Men in Black. His ex-partner and Clint’s current partner is Jay.

The names for the dwarfs are all taken from Dvergatal, part of the Edda listing names of many dwarfs. Modsognir is the ruler of the dwarfs according to this list.

Blýeistr and Helblindi are Laufey’s sons according to Norse mythology and Fárbauti is her (his in Marvel canon) husband.

Andrew Thomas is an OC.

Alexander Fox Xanatos and Owen Burnett aka Puck are from Gargoyles. Alexander’s mother is Fox Xanatos, his Pop is David Xanatos and his Dad is Owen/Puck.

Nerthus/Thetys is pretty much an OC, though the name Nerthus is from Norse mythology. Her using the name Thetys is a reference to The Gargoyles Saga, a fan-made continuation of Gargoyles.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!