As atonement for his crimes against Midgard, Loki is sentenced to fight alongside the Avengers. In time he finds love with Steve Rogers, but then Steve’s first love, Bucky Barnes, returns from the dead. The solution is something he hadn’t dared to hope for.

Notes

“Deep Freeze” is my name for this ship.

This won’t be so much a novel as a series of connected shorts. ETA: Yeah, about that... this will be a novel. Whose first few chapters bounce around a little randomly before the actual
story arc really sets in.

A Russian translation is in progress at https://ficbook.net/readfic/7892271
Not even a week had passed since the defeat of Loki and his Chitauri army. Tony Stark had somehow overwhelmed everyone’s objections to moving into his Tower, which wasn’t so ugly now that Steve was used to it, so now Steve was living in a suite larger than every apartment he’d ever had put together.

His head was still spinning from all of this when Fury summoned the team, and they all reported to SHIELD headquarters.

Steve had no idea what he was expecting, but it wasn’t an audience with a queen. They were swiftly instructed by some agent they’d never seen before about how to bow and ushered into a conference room. Queen Frigga, beautiful and regal, was sitting at the head of the table, flanked by four large armored warriors holding swords approximately the size of Tony.

Natasha was the only one who didn’t seem to feel awkward about bowing, but then, Steve didn’t think she was capable of feeling awkward. Or at least, not of showing it.

“Queen Frigga rules Asgard now,” Fury told them after they’d all straightened up. “She’s here to open diplomatic relations.”

“What about Odin?” That was Tony. Probably showing off that he wasn’t intimidated by alien royalty just on principle.

“I killed him,” the queen replied serenely.

The Avengers just stared.

“If that’s how succession works on Asgard, it kind of explains a lot.” Unlike Tony, Clint was intimidated by royalty, at least royalty surrounded by huge guards, but he was also pretty ticked off, and why wouldn’t he be.

“It isn’t.” Frigga’s voice was still serene. “But neither of my sons is currently fit for a throne, and no one else has any claim, nor sufficient sorcery to unseat me.”

Steve had to speak up. “Thor seemed pretty fit to me.”

She turned to him, her expression cold. “One year ago, he did to Jotunheim precisely what Loki did to your world. Only with far less excuse. Thor invaded Jotunheim and murdered hundreds of its citizens because one of them called him a ‘princess.’” She looked around at them all sharply. They took this in silently. They knew almost nothing of Thor. They should have known better than to trust him so easily, just because he had fought at their side once. “Loki invaded your world because he was being tortured by a being more evil than you can even conceive,” Frigga continued, her face grim. “He deliberately sabotaged his invasion so that you mortals could put a stop to it. If he had not, his captor would have come to Midgard and murdered half of the humans on this planet - before using the Tesseract to do the same to the other realms. Loki saved your world.”

“By murdering a few dozen of us.”
“In order to save a few billion of you,” Frigga countered.

“I told you guys Loki was throwing the fight.” Tony smirked at them. It had been his pet theory ever since it was over. He’d shown them all the footage of Loki’s physical condition when he’d first arrived on Earth, the moment during the invasion when he’d suddenly jerked his head like someone invisible had punched him; he’d pointed out the stupidity of the way Loki had let the entire world know what he was up to right off the bat, the fact that he hadn’t killed all the Avengers instantly even though he could have easily, even his letting Erik Selvig put a back door into the Tesseract apparatus. Tony’s case was compelling, but mere days after they’d all been killing aliens in the streets of New York, it was too much to take in.

Bruce spoke up. “Excuse me, um, ma’am. Would you mind telling us why you killed your husband?”

Again her face was cold and resolute. “He was going to murder my younger son. I begged him to spare Loki for my sake and he refused. In the last two years he has nearly cost me both of my sons several times. The Norns know what he might have done had I allowed him to live. He might have caused the deaths of everyone in Asgard.”

“Her Majesty has a request to make of us,” Fury announced. He glanced at her, but she merely waited, so he went on, “After Loki’s had time to heal, she wants to send him here to make reparations.”

The Avengers considered this for a moment. It was Steve who decided to answer. “Ma’am, we do appreciate the offer of reparations, but if it’s all the same to you, we’d rather you sent Thor instead. We’ve worked with him well before and-”

“Thor is making reparations on Jotunheim. Both of my sons harmed that realm, as did their father, but Thor was the one who started the war with them. And you humans persist in coddling him, which is the last thing he needs after the way his father spoiled him. If you accept Loki’s service, I will send Earth a supply of healing stones sufficient to treat those wounded by the invasion he was forced to lead, and Loki’s magic and his sword will be at your service.”

Tony perked up. “Magic? Is it against the Prime Directive for him to tell us how Asgardian magic works?” Bruce’s eyes darted between Tony and Frigga, attentive.

Her gaze turned to him. “You are Tony Stark, are you not? The smith who created enchanted armor for himself?”

Tony gave her a cocky little grin. “That’s me.”

“My sons told me of you. They both said you were strikingly clever for a human.”

“Please, ma’am, I’m going to start blushing.”

“Whatever the Prime Directive is, the sovereign of Asgard is not bound by it. I will instruct Loki that his knowledge is also to be at your disposal.”

“Sold!” Tony pumped his fist, gleeful.

Clint scowled. “You’re going to let that-” He glanced at Frigga and amended what he’d been going to say. “-that menace come here just for your scientific curiosity?”

“Yes!” Tony was unrepentant.
“What we can learn from Loki might be worth it,” Bruce said, mild as usual, but he had the same gleam in his eyes as Tony did. His scientific curiosity was activated too. Steve sighed.

Natasha had been silent, as she sometimes was in large groups, watching others and getting the lay of the land. Now she spoke for the first time. “Still. Maybe we shouldn’t take this offer, given the risks.”

Fury looked dour. “The UN and the World Council want to establish good relations with Asgard. I want those healing stones. This is Queen Frigga’s condition for these things. But you don’t have to be around Loki yourselves if you don’t want to. I suggested it-”

“So that if Loki goes evil overlord again, we can suit up and take him down,” Tony finished. “Or try to, given that we only defeated him last time because he was helping us do it. I’d say that makes him an honorary Avenger already.”

“If Loki’s going to be here, we’ll want him where we can keep an eye on him,” Clint conceded.

Tony grinned. “We can move him into Thor’s suite. I’ll get rid of the red drapes - I hope Thor returned your drapes to you, by the way, your Majesty - and put up green ones.”

“Thor’s suite?” Frigga inquired, ignoring the rest of Tony’s babble. Smart lady.

“Yeah, Stark Tower is now Avengers Tower. An apartment for each of us.”

Frigga stood up and looked down upon Tony. Steve was quietly sympathetic. Being shorter than everyone around you could be rough. Tony was shorter than everyone on the team except for Natasha.

“If any harm befalls my son on Midgard, Tony Stark, my vengeance will make you all wish the Chitauri had returned instead.”

Tony was sensible enough to be quiet, for a change. Steve asked, “And if he goes rogue again?”

“I will see it from Hlíðskjálf. If I am not on the throne at the moment, the magical link I have formed with him for this very purpose will alert me. I will immediately come to fetch him, with an army if necessary. But he will not.”

Steve looked around at the others. He didn’t see much choice, but he had to ask them. “Are we accepting these terms?” They all nodded, some after a moment of thought, and he turned to Frigga. “When do you plan to send him here?”

“In one month. He needs to heal, and… I am not quite ready to part with my son just yet. I spent the past year believing he was dead.” Abruptly her beautiful face showed the grief she had been trying to conceal.

“I’m sorry about that, your Majesty,” Natasha said, strategic as always.

Frigga’s regal mask was back in place already. She nodded graciously. “You will receive the healing stones immediately. Now if you will excuse me, there are many people I must meet with before I return to Asgard.”

Having been dismissed, the Avengers filed out. Tony was still gleeful at the prospect of alien magic/science, even after Loki’s mother had put the fear of God(dess) into him. The rest of them were more or less in shock.
Sorry to recap the obvious, but it’s necessary to set up the fic.

ETA: I changed one word. I recently learned that we have a canon death toll for the Chitauri invasion, given in Captain America 2: 74. I’ve been assuming the toll was in the thousands, and then we find out it was fewer people than Thor murdered on Jotunheim because he got called a princess. Screencap is here:
http://mosellegreen.tumblr.com/post/142555841104/rennemichaels-mizstorge-the-stats-from-the

Since Marvel Studios keeps giving us evidence to support Loki’s lack of villainy, I’ll just keep accepting canon!
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Loki’s first day with the Avengers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

One month later, a fleet of SHIELD vans arrived at the Tower and delivered one god of mischief, none the worse for wear.

Loki had clearly been in terrible shape during the Chitauri invasion. His skin had been pasty and damp with sweat, his hair bedraggled, his eyes wild. Really, his haggard appearance then had added to his air of menace. Every moment Steve had been around him, he’d felt that Loki might snap and kill everyone in the room at any instant. Which at least once, he had.

Loki was completely different now. He was clean and perfectly groomed, for one thing, his long black hair neatly combed and tied back from his face. His face was still pale, but it looked like a natural pallor now, not a sickly one. His demeanour was calm. A bit apprehensive, very resigned, but calm. No hair-trigger warnings now. He looked like a prince.

He was not wearing his armor, just slacks and a tunic of black leather and green silk with a few bits of gold here and there. Presumably this was Asgard’s idea of casual wear for royalty.

All the Avengers gathered in the common room to receive him. Loki faced them like he was on trial. Well, he sort of was.

Loki had clearly prepared his speech in advance. He formally apologized for invading their world under duress and equally formally thanked them for stopping the invasion. “My mother - my queen - has commanded me to serve you in expiation. I am at your disposal.”

The Avengers had discussed in advance how they would proceed. As team captain Steve had been given the duty of speaking first.

“We’d like you to start by coming to the Tower’s gym with me and Tony and showing us what you can do, combat-wise. Both magically and physically. I need to know your abilities if you’re going to be fighting with us.”

“As you wish.” He followed the two of them into the elevator, glancing at everything with curiosity.

It was weird seeing Loki just complying with them like this. Steve would have felt less suspicious if Loki had been sullen or defiant. Instead he was behaving as if he had never been a half-deranged supervillain with an alien army.

Well, one way or another, they would all get used to each other. For now, Steve had a job to do.

“Are you still healing?” Steve asked as they stepped onto the mat. Loki quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Would you not welcome the chance to reopen the wounds of your foe?”
Steve hadn’t even thought of it that way. “You don’t injure your sparring partners if you can help it. Anyhow, I know Asgardians heal fast, just had to make sure.” He stood with his feet slightly apart, ready for combat.

Loki hesitated. “I am not an Asgardian except by citizenship. I found out just one year ago that I am a Jotun.”

Steve shifted to a more easy stance as Tony asked, “So what’s a Jotun? A different kind of alien?”

“Ehm, yes. I was the son of Jotunheim’s king. Odin kidnapped me as an infant and lied to us all about it. He intended to eventually put me on the Jotun throne as his puppet king.”

Loki’s voice was so utterly flat as he said all this that Steve realized it had to be important. There was an awful lot of significance to these facts that the humans just didn’t know.

Steve could see that Tony caught it too, in the brief curious glance Tony gave him before saying, “Cool. I’d be curious to hear about Jotuns sometime, and every other alien species you can tell us about. I intend to pick your brain for everything you can tell us rubes here on Earth. For now, though….” One of Tony’s suits, which he’d fitted up specifically for combat with Asgardians (he called this one the “God-Buster”), wrapped itself around him. “Come at me. Don’t hold back.”

Loki did not move except to clasp his hands in front of him. “My mother and queen has tasked me with being your ally, so I shall begin by urging you never to say those words to any Asgardian or Jotun opponent. Your species is too physically frail—”

Tony shut Loki up by shooting him with a blast of energy. Loki was knocked over. He propped himself up on an elbow with a scowl, irritated as if he’d been lightly shoved instead of blasted. His hair was now disheveled and slightly frizzy.

“Do that again, please. You may increase the power if you wish.”

Tony did so. This time the blast was blocked with a force field like the one Loki had conjured to block bullets when he had first arrived in SHIELD’s Tesseract lab.

“Can you shield more than one person in one of these?” Steve asked once the blast had dissipated. Tony muttered an order to his suit and blasted Loki again, this time with more concentrated beams.

“Yes. I can extend my force field to about ten feet,” Loki explained as Tony’s new blasts bounced off said force field, still lying back on his elbow. “I could easily shield all of the Avengers if they were near to me.”

Tony made another adjustment and this time the blast which uselessly battered against Loki’s invisible shield was green. Steve asked, “Can you shield something outside yourself, or do you have to be inside it?”

“The force fields I can form separate from myself are different. It’s….” Loki considered. “You won’t know the magical terminology, so let me try to explain.” Tony kept right on blasting Loki’s force field in different ways and Loki continued to talk to Steve as if Tony were a dog barking to alert them to a distant cat seen through a window. “Asgardians are difficult to kill because we - they, but we Jotuns have them as well - each have a force field around our bodies that repels many types of injury and… keeps our bodies together, where those of other species would be torn apart. As a sorcerer, I can make my force field much stronger than is natural and extend it farther from my body.”
“Does that mean that if we got into your force field with you, we could stab you and get something out of it?” Tony asked, and hurled some actual fire Loki’s way when the alien turned his head to look at him. Loki flinched very slightly at the sight of the flames heading towards him, but of course the field protected him from the fire just as it had from the blasts. Steve suspected Tony was smirking at that tiny victory.

“I suppose we’ll just have to wait until such an eventuality arises to give you the chance to engage in such unsporting behavior and risk exposing your shield-brothers to whatever peril I was shielding them from.”

Steve couldn’t help a little smirk of his own at that. Listening to those two snipe at each other was probably going to be a show.

“Tony, stop shooting him so I can try something else. Loki, you were just playing with me in Stuttgart, I could tell even then. Don’t-” At Loki’s ironic glance, Steve amended, “Don’t hold back as much.”

Loki stood - Tony had lowered his gauntlets and stepped back to give them room - and closed the distance between himself and Steve in two long strides. Steve swiftly moved into a fighting stance and threw a punch, but Loki caught his wrist and held it. Loki’s free hand clamped Steve’s throat, not hard enough to prevent him from breathing, just hard enough to make it hurt.

Asgardians - and Jotuns - were really, really strong. Steve was unable to budge Loki’s grip.

A hundred harrowing memories flashed through Steve’s mind, of boys and later men towering over him, his fiercest efforts to defend himself useless, that helpless anger when he knew there was nothing for it but to wait for his attacker to grow bored.

Abruptly Loki released him, and now that long-fingered hand was resting on Steve’s shoulder, anchoring rather than threatening. “I am not your enemy now, Captain.”

Steve blinked. Now that he was again able to take in what was before his eyes, he saw concern in Loki’s pallid face.

The incongruity of the earnest sympathy from the half-mad invader Steve had known made his head clear the rest of the way. He shrugged off Loki’s hand. “Not now? What about tomorrow?” Not much of a comeback but it would have to do.

Loki stepped back. “My mother would be furious if I harmed any of you after you have been so generous as to forbear with me.”

“Aww. Even bad boys love their mommas,” Tony said, removing his helmet and coming to stand beside Steve.

Loki remained focused on Steve. “Why did you not simply ask for quarter? I am from a more powerful species, it would be no shame.”

Tony laughed. “You clearly don’t know Captain America very well.”

Loki gave Steve an appraising look.

“Stand back, Steve. I want to see how the suit stands up to alien superstrength.” With that Tony put his helmet back on and marched right over to Loki like the crazy person he was.

The suit’s “muscle” was enough to challenge Loki, whose green eyes lit with the delight of challenge
when he discovered this. Steve backed up to the wall and watched the two of them spend the next hour flinging each other back and forth while Steve gauged what Loki was capable of in combat.

Within ten minutes Steve had resolved to give SHIELD’s scientists more blood samples towards recreating the supersoldier serum. If the galaxy was full of aliens like Loki, Earth needed to step up its game.

Chapter End Notes

There’ll be flashbacks about Frigga claiming the throne and installments about what she’s doing on Asgard and what Thor’s doing on Jotunheim in between us watching Steve and Loki fall in love. ^-^
Flashback

Chapter Summary

Flashback: Frigga does her duty as a mother and a queen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From Hliðskjálf, Odin watched his son (his only son) on Midgard, slaying the Chitauri, defeating them all with ease. Thor’s joyful laugh made Odin smile. The boy was just like him. He would be almost as good a king, now that he was finally coming to understand the wisdom Odin had tried for centuries to teach him. Losing his “brother” had been for the best. It had hardened the lad, made him grow up. Made him understand the harsh necessities of leadership. As soon as he got over seeing his dalliance with that mortal girl as more than an amusement, he would be ready to succeed Odin.

A servant approached and knelt, waiting to be acknowledged. Odin watched Thor for a few more minutes before nodding to the man.

“The queen requests your presence, Your Majesty.”

Frigga had been most troublesome of late. She could not admit that their younger son was already dead, that the man who had materialized on Midgard was not him. Women were soft-hearted in such matters. Sentimental. That was why wise realms chose kings who were strong enough to make the hard decisions that must be made.

That had always been the trouble. Odin would have made Loki a king had he been a better son. Loki would have ruled Jotunheim with Asgard’s support, preventing Jotunheim from again attempting conquest of other realms. But Loki had proved to be too devious, too clever. Too prone to getting creative instead of simply following instructions. Odin had tried, for centuries, to teach him better. To mold Loki to his proper destiny. The boy had been stiff-necked and recalcitrant, and thanks to him the Bifrost had been destroyed.

Frigga seemed at last to be accepting the harsh reality that her younger son no longer existed. She was yet sorrowful, but resigned. She had ceased to plague him about the matter.

And so Odin joined her in her garden shortly, to share a midday meal with her as they often did. It was the first time they had shared a table only with each other since Loki had appeared on Midgard scant days ago.

She greeted him with a kiss. A brief one, and there was sadness in her eyes, but he accepted the unspoken apology and sat at the table laid in the sunshine. Frigga dismissed the servants as soon as they had set out the dishes. Then she rose and poured him mead herself, and did not move away as he took a long drought. He lowered the goblet and looked at her, ready to accept her offer of reconciliation.

She smiled, a little sadly. “I wanted you to have a drink first.”

With lightning swiftness, she snatched up the jeweled knife and thrust it into his heart.
It took Odin a few seconds - precious seconds - to realize she had betrayed him and begin to muster his seiðr to dematerialize the knife, to heal the wound. But she had enchanted the knife, and her own seiðr was ready to counter his.

Her face was cold now, uncompromising. She was like a Valkyrie.

“You nearly killed both my sons.” Her voice was grim. “You took them both away from me. You have turned them both into monsters.”

She raised her hand, and the knife twisted in his chest. He felt the seiðr spiral out through his body, tearing him to bits.

The last thing Odin ever heard was his queen’s voice saying, “You will not harm my sons again.”

The last thing he saw was a single tear rolling down her steely face.

Chapter End Notes

People who enjoy Frigga offing her no-good husband might enjoy the other fic I wrote about that at http://archiveofourown.org/chapters/1696562
Frigga commanded that her sons were to be told nothing upon their return, only escorted to her presence in her garden. After this day she would use the council chambers, but for now the sight of her husband’s stiffened corpse with her dagger still protruding from his heart was an effective demonstration of who now held the power in Asgard, even more striking than Gungnir clasped daintily in her hand. Despite the fear that gripped her for both sons’ safety, she summoned the royal council and began discussing her plans with them.

It was a badly needed distraction.

Ambassadors were departing, some to initiate negotiations with Jotunheim, others to inform Vanahem (Frigga’s native realm) of its new independence from Asgardian rule, when her sons were announced and admitted. Both of them saw their father’s lifeless body at once.

Loki was bruised, manacled and muzzled. With a sound of disgust, Frigga stood and waved a hand. The shackles and muzzle clanked to the paving stones. Loki’s eyes flitted between her and Odin’s body, startled and wary.

“Mother,” Thor gasped, staring at his father, “what have you done?”

“My duty as a queen and a mother. Odin robbed you of your powers and exiled you alone to Earth. He drove my younger son to suicide and meant to execute him on this day.”

Loki dropped to one knee, grasped her hand, and kissed it. His hands and lips were cold, clammy. She put a gentle hand on his head. He needed her care now more than ever before.

Thor turned to face her, his mouth set and grim. “Mother, I promise I shall be merciful to you.” At these words Loki rose and stood between them, facing Thor. He was shaking from fatigue and injury and he was trying to protect her.

This was the son Odin would have taken from her.

Thor continued, “Do not make me take Gungnir from you by force, Mother. You know you cannot prevail.”

Frigga spoke softly. “Mjölnir. Drop.”

Mjölnir did.

In the centuries that followed Frigga always preferred not to dwell upon her elder son’s reaction to this. Odin’s genes would tell.
That evening, with Odin’s body at last taken away for burial and Loki looking much more himself after some time in the healing room and two hours in a bath, Frigga held an audience in the throne room, sitting upon Hliðskjálf for the first time. Thor was sullen but marched to his place on the right of the throne. Loki took his place on the left, pride and warmth in his eyes as he regarded her.

The vast room was crowded with Aesir eager to gawk at their new sovereign and their resurrected prince. They had already dubbed Loki with the new kenning *Baldr*, an archaic word that meant both “shining white” for his eternal pallor and “prince” for his restored position. Already poets were writing of the queen grieving for her slain son and rejoicing at his return from the dead.

After the necessary proclamations of Frigga’s new rule had been made, Frigga spoke. “Sif. Volstagg. Fandral. Hogun. Come forth and kneel.”

None of them looked at all apprehensive as they obeyed, because they were fools. Well, they were Thor’s friends.

Frigga looked down at them coldly. “You four accompanied my elder son’s illegal invasion of Jotunheim instead of preventing him from it. You committed treason against my younger son when the line of succession rightfully fell to him. You disobeyed both King Odin and King Loki to bring Thor back from exile. These actions of yours started a war with Jotunheim and nearly caused the deaths of both of my sons. You will all be executed at dawn.”

Guards moved to surround them, ready to escort them to the dungeons.

The four were too stunned to protest at first, but Thor immediately shattered protocol to argue with her. He pointed out that they had acted out of friendship for him. He reminded her of their centuries of loyalty to him and service to Asgard.

The four eventually began to offer Frigga panicked apologies and pleas and reminders of Odin’s mercy for these same crimes.

That last argument was not well received by their queen.

At length Thor descended the steps to Hliðskjálf, knelt in front of his friends and pleaded, a son to his mother rather than a prince to a sovereign.

She answered coolly. “Your father dismissed my pleas for my own son. Why should I heed yours for your friends who are no kin to you?”

Thor was staring up at her, grasping for more words, when at last Loki moved. All eyes turned to him as he too descended the steps, movements measured, and then knelt beside Thor.

“My Queen. Mother. I too beg you to spare the lives of Thor’s shield-brothers.”

Frigga locked eyes with her younger son, knowing he alone would see the approval in them. She had known he would see the opportunity to indebt them all to him even as she brought them into line as Odin should have done centuries ago, and to demonstrate to Asgard in what esteem the Jotun-born prince was held by their sovereign.

“They have helped me keep your elder son alive through centuries of his own folly. Because they committed their crimes and errors after centuries of being indulged by an imprudent monarch,
and may be more obedient citizens with wiser guidance.” He paused and the entire throne room held its breath. When Frigga only waited, he said, “Because you have shown me mercy on this day and I would like the Realms to see that mercy is a wise policy.”

Frigga let a long moment pass as she pretended to weigh Loki’s words. When she judged the suspense was taut enough, she spoke.

“In celebration that my younger son is restored to me, I will grant his request. The sentence is suspended. You four shall be given missions with which you may show your loyalty and obedience to your sovereign. Be ready when the order comes. When - if I am convinced of your trustworthiness, you will be pardoned. You are now dismissed.”

They all bowed with apprehensive thanks and departed. Loki remained kneeling. “Thank you, Mother,” he said, his even voice carrying through the large room.

“Yes, Mother, thank-”

“Thank your brother. It was for his sake that I spared your treasonous friends.”

Thor hesitated, then turned to Loki. He hardly seemed to know how to form the words. “Thank you… Loki. For speaking for my friends.”

Loki acknowledged this with a nod, not looking at Thor. Watching, Frigga suppressed a sigh. Her sons were princes, both powerful in their own selves and both potential heirs to the most powerful throne in the Nine Realms. She had no choice but to find some way of reconciling them with each other, else they would tear the realms apart between them.

If only her husband had not worked so hard to make that reconciliation so close to impossible.

Chapter End Notes

Couldn’t resist the Baldr thing. It just struck me that the MCU has made Loki Frigga’s son, which he wasn’t in the myths, and had him resurrected not once but twice. So I looked up the name’s meaning and it fit.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Midgard has use of the stolen relic. Also, Jane Foster meets Loki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After that first sparring session, Tony leered at Steve over his Scotch. “He’s hot.”

They had shown Loki to his green-bedecked suite after Tony’d spent two hours sparring with him with Steve watching, trying to get a sense of the god’s moves. Loki had glanced around his new home and then started pulling possessions out of thin air. Tony had almost passed out with joy. He had an alien wizard assigned to teach him advanced magitech; a kid in a candy store had nothing on him.

Now they were at the bar in the common room while Loki got himself settled, or whatever Norse god alien princes did when you left them alone.

Steve sipped water. No point in wasting alcohol on himself. “I’m telling Pepper you said that.”

“Go ahead. She’ll think he’s hot too. Hmmm. I wonder if the two of us might interest him.” An unholy light appeared in Tony’s eyes as he waited for Steve’s reaction.

Steve replied in a monotone. “Oh, gracious. I am so shocked. I think I might faint.”

“You’re no fun.”

“You don’t fool me. You’d rather find out how his pocket universe thing works than have a ménage à trois with him.”

“Shh! I have a reputation as a man-slut to uphold.”

“I think your reputation is safe, Tony.”

***

The humans put Loki to various uses immediately. Sometimes government limousines filled with black-suited agents wearing sunglasses would come and take him away for a while, debriefing him about the various other inhabited planets. Queen Frigga had given them various documents about the basics - The Backwater Planet’s Guide To The Nine Realms - but of course they had questions.

Tony and Steve sparred with him a few times a week, and often the others watched. The second day, Steve had marched into the gym and told Loki, “I want to try a couple of things. Grab me the way you did yesterday.”

Steve had spent the first chunk of his life being afraid. He wasn’t going back to that. He was going to get over his phobia of super-strong Norse gods.
“As you wish.” Loki seized Steve by the throat and held him without apparent effort while Steve tried to find a weak spot he could hit that would allow him to wrench free. There wasn’t one, not even when Steve finally resorted to hitting below the belt, literally.

Loki smirked. “I hope you didn’t hurt your knee, Captain.”

Tony laughed from the sidelines. “So they make those jokes on Asgard too?”

“All things are universal.”

“Okay, so what should I do?” Steve was glad the raggedness of his voice would be attributed to Loki’s grip rather than to the panic he was trying to control.

“Have a friend shoot me. It won’t kill me, but it will knock me over.”

“Okay. Let me go.” Loki complied immediately. “Now I’d like to try something else, if you don’t mind too much. I want to see if my shield is useful in combat against Asgardians - or Jotuns. Uh, how different are the species? I mean, in terms of combat?”

Loki considered for a moment. “I believe we are roughly equal in terms of strength and endurance. Otherwise my oddness in that regard would have been noticed, but I am as strong as an Asgardian of my size ought to be. What works on me ought to work on an actual Asgardian.”

“My shield’s made of vibranium,” Steve said as he fetched it. “Your brother’s hammer couldn’t dent it.”

“Impressive. If you want to know if your shield can injure me, Captain, the answer is yes. Try it and see.”

“That’s why you made sure to knock my shield out of my hand when we fought.”

“Yes.” Loki moved to the center of the mat and smiled, impish. “All right, Captain. Don’t hold back.”

Steve didn’t. That was when their sparring sessions became interesting. It was difficult to get a hit, even with Loki unarmed; he was still incredibly strong and he had a thousand years of practice behind him. But when Steve managed it, it actually had an effect.

Gods weren’t invulnerable. It was good to know.

Loki spent hours every day in the lab with Tony and Bruce, explaining how magic worked. Sometimes these conversations spilled out to the common room at mealtimes, and Steve understood maybe one word out of every ten, but Tony and Bruce were having a ball.

It turned out that as soon as it was known that Loki, former aspiring world conqueror, was back on Earth, Jane Foster had started calling SHIELD demanding to be allowed to talk to him. They put her off and didn’t tell Loki or the Avengers about her requests. Dr. Foster was a persistent young woman, however, and after a few days of being stonewalled tried other means of reaching him. There were several layers of gatekeepers between Tony Stark and the legions of random people who wanted to talk to him, but Iron Man wasn’t the only Avenger. Jane’s mentor Erik Selvig had worked with Bruce Banner several years ago. Bruce no longer had the same phone numbers or email addresses, but after several days of phone tag and emails, Selvig found someone with Bruce’s contact information and called him. After speaking to Jane, Bruce approached Loki, who without hesitation agreed to answer her questions.
Selvig had one condition for his help: he asked Jane to promise not to talk to Loki without Bruce Banner present.

Tony and Bruce both reacted like schoolboys to the prospect of meeting Jane Foster, brilliant scientist and beautiful woman. When she arrived at the Tower, Steve was just entering the common room after a run, wearing a sweaty tank top. She’d been chattering excitedly with the scientists but stopped talking for a full thirty seconds at the sight of Steve, much to Steve’s embarrassment. Then, abruptly as if a switch had been thrown, she was back to asking them questions about the arc reactor.

Then Loki joined them, summoned by Jarvis, and she was instantly back to her chief purpose in being here. She didn’t even say hello, just dove right in to the good stuff. “Loki! Your brother gave me a really vague explanation about Yggdrasil and the Rainbow Bridge, and as a scientist I was able to extrapolate some, but from what I hear, you actually understand how it works. Will you tell me?”

Loki’s eyebrow quirked. “Of course, Dr. Foster. But it will take some time. There are core concepts I will have to relay first.”

“I figured.” Jane sat on the nearest sofa, hardly seeming aware that she had done so. The men followed suit, all amused at her enthusiasm but infected by it nonetheless. “I have a theory about why the subtle aurora was showing up at the same time every night…..”

Steve left to take a shower and a couple of hours later wandered back in to see if the others were ready for dinner. The four scientists were still at it, talking about something called fermions, when Jane suddenly cut off what she was saying to ask, “Oh, how is Thor? Is he all right?”

“He is well. You know he is serving on Jotunheim right now.”

“I saw it on the news. Isn’t Jotunheim Asgard’s enemy? Is he safe there?”

“While he lives, Queen Frigga grants badly needed magical aid to their damaged world. If he dies, she has promised they will wish my own attempt at destroying their world had succeeded.”

“They’re bad kids,” Tony said solemnly, “but she likes them.”

Loki actually laughed at that. Nice to know he could be a good sport.

“Okay, cool. Um, does Thor have a girlfriend? On Asgard?”

Loki thought for a second before replying. “He has no formal commitment to the Lady Sif, but they have been dallying for some centuries.”

Jane actually shuddered. “Centuries. I guess I can’t compete with that. Okay, so, how can a living being travel through the Einstein-Rosen Bridge without being torn apart?”

Tony laughed. “You got over that fast. Love ‘em and leave ‘em, huh, Foster?”

She scowled at him. “What am I supposed to do, spend months sitting in my mother’s basement eating ice cream straight out of the carton and scouring the internet for pictures of a guy I knew for two days?”

Bruce gave his gentle smile. “No one would ever believe you would do that, Dr. Foster.”

“Well,” Tony said with a smirk at Steve, “if you like I could put in a good word with Cap for you. Since you seem to go for those brainless muscle guys.”
“Captain Rogers is hardly brainless,” Loki objected coolly.

“Gee, thanks.”

“I know I do.” Jane shook her head at herself. “I pick men based on their looks and then I wonder why it never works out. Anyway. How do you not die inside the Bridge? Could a human survive it?”

***

Loki did everything that was asked of him without demur.

“Never thought you’d be this obliging,” Clint observed after about a week. They were all eating pizza in the Tower’s common room. The Avengers had agreed before Loki’s arrival to treat him as a guest rather than an enemy, until he gave them some reason not to.

Loki looked at him. “My mother slew her own husband. Now she must defend her rule against the many who would rather see Thor on the throne. She did this in order to save my life. And you, my former enemies, are willing to have me under your roof and treat me with civility. My extenuating circumstances do not exonerate me. I am now deeply in debt to her and to Midgard.”

Natasha snatched the last slice of green pepper pizza an instant before Tony would have secured it. “Is Asgard really going to let Queen Frigga get away with her palace coup? I mean, it is illegal to kill the king and seize his throne, right?”

“I’m curious how you imagine they can stop her. She now has Asgard’s magic as well as her own at her command. It would take both powerful sorcery and a great deal of guile to even attempt to harm her.”

“So might makes right on Asgard?”

Loki regarded Tony with an arched eyebrow for a long pointed moment before replying. “Are you trying to be naive, Mr. Stark? Don’t, you can’t pull it off. All governments are based on might. Odin ruled all the Nine Realms for the past two millennia by murdering everyone who defied him, not by waiting to be acclaimed by a majority of citizens on each world. Mr. Stark, I know for a fact that you object to many of the things your own government does, and yet, you continue to follow its laws. Is there some reason for this other than the fact that it could send men to your home to seize your possessions, seize you?”

“It’s not just that, though.” Steve had to stick up for the home team. “The government we have now has the consent of the governed. It’s legitimate.”

“Really. So tell me how this legitimate government of yours came into being.”

Steve was maybe one full minute into what should have been a beautiful account of the heroic struggle for American independence before he saw in those sardonic green eyes where Loki’s argument was going. His voice trailed off. Loki smiled.

“So hundreds of years ago, your ancestors killed every man who came here to uphold the legal right of your legitimate monarch to rule this land, until that monarch gave in to their might and stopped sending them new victims?”

Steve was still trying to frame a reply adequate to this depth of cynicism when Natasha cut in. “Aren’t you worried about your mother? You say she has the magic to defend her position, but….”
“I am. I asked her to allow me to stay and defend her and her authority, but she wants me here.”

“Why?”

“To make expiation. To begin cordial relations between our realms.” Loki hesitated. “To learn.”

Tony and Steve both saw the tiny anomaly. Tony pounced first. “Learn what? You guys discovered all our technology thousands of years ago. Or are you here to learn Earth culture so you guys will know how to manipulate us?”

“No doubt she expects that of me, but that was not her stated mandate.” When the humans just looked at him, Loki conceded. “She told both Thor and me that we must… adjust our attitudes towards other sentient species. Asgard is exceedingly… you would call it ‘racist’. Asgardians firmly believe their own species far superior to all others. Even the Vanir, who are our - their - close relatives, are looked down upon.”

Pizza slices grew cold as the humans all gave Loki their undivided attention. “So just how does Asgard deal with other sentient species?” Steve asked. He was already sure he wasn’t going to like the answer.

Loki didn’t look particularly happy about sharing it, either. He took a moment to choose his words.

“What would you have to learn about yourselves that would drive you to attempt to destroy an entire planet?”

Everyone was quiet.

“In front of Asgard’s royal palace is a sixty-foot-tall statue of Bor, Odin’s father. The statue commemorates his great feat in wiping out the Dark Elves. There is not even one of them still in existence.”

“Fuck.” That was Clint. “I was about to ask if you had seriously thought your father would be happy that you destroyed a whole planet just for him, but now I’m starting to see how you came to that conclusion.” Clint’s attempt at dryness didn’t quite come off, but no one was criticizing.

“Mere days before, Thor thought Odin would be pleased with us for illegally invading Jotunheim without his permission and starting a war. We both grew up listening to Odin boast about how many ‘monsters’ - frost giants, my people - he slaughtered a thousand years ago.”

“And your mom waited until you went off the deep end before doing something about it. Did she ever tell you that maybe frost giants weren’t.”

“She didn’t know.” Loki’s voice cut in sharp as a blade. In the shocked silence that followed, he went on, “Odin transformed me before dumping me into her lap and ordering her to raise me as if I were her own. He told her some tale about me being the babe of some Asgardian warrior who died heroically. She had no idea she was raising a frost giant on tales of the monstrousness of his own species. She only found out what I was after I did.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask what you guys think of humans.” Of course it was Bruce, the ’monster’, who said that.

“Odin considered simply sending Thor to Midgard, with no imprisonment or physical pain, sufficient punishment for breaking his law and starting a war.” Loki’s gaze turned inward. “Though I suspect Thor would have endured nothing worse than a scolding had he not called his father ‘an old man and a fool’.”
“Banished for talking back. Yay monarchy.”

“We don’t think of you as monstrous,” Loki assured them. “Had I learned I was born a human rather than a Jotun, I would have been merely disappointed, not horrified.”

Bruce huffed a laugh. “Now we know why they call you Silvertongue.”

“We thought of you as simply… backward. It has been a long time since we paid any attention to your world. A thousand years ago we visited your world - that is why you have myths about us - and you were quite primitive then. But when Thor was banished here, I watched him from Hliðskjálf and was amazed. I saw your machines, your towers, and for a few minutes thought some other realm had defied Odin to teach you higher technology. But a bit of investigation showed me that you had worked it out for yourselves.” He looked around the table, speaking seriously. “If two hundred years ago someone had told me that humans would achieve what you have without help from some more magical species, I would have laughed at them.”

“Guess the joke’s on you, then.” Tony preened.

“It is.”

Steve studied Loki carefully. Everything he had said fit together, but he couldn’t help but feel that they were being flattered.

Chapter End Notes

There was a lot of discussion in the comments about the legitimacy of Frigga’s rule, so I had to include some discussion of it in the story.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Loki’s first battle with the Avengers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You could get used to damn near anything. Including having a former enemy who’d nearly killed you living under the same roof and fighting at your side.

Clint didn’t doubt what Queen Frigga had told them. He knew torture victims when he saw them, unfortunately. When Loki had first arrived on Earth, he’d been grinning in a way obviously intended to scare the humans, but after he’d busted up the room and killed eight people, he’d dropped the supervillain leer and Clint had looked at his sweaty face, the circles under his eyes, the way he was shaking, the wild look in his eyes, and he’d known immediately: this guy had been put through the wringer. Probably his last torture session had been one or two minutes before he’d emerged from the cube’s portal. Hell, he’d almost fallen over while they were walking to the truck.

So yeah, Clint knew it was true. Loki had been tortured, and pretty horribly. Though really, even if Clint had had any doubt, he’d never have said so without evidence. He knew people who’d been through torture. Discounting that if there was any possibility it might be true was obscene.

He hadn’t said anything about it in the first week after the invasion while Tony was telling them his theory because he’d been dealing with his own trauma. It was only after Loki’s mother had verified it that he’d told the others that he’d seen the signs, because she had removed the one tiny doubt he’d harbored. Everything Clint had seen could have been one of Loki’s illusions, but Frigga was a sorceress - hell, she was the one who’d trained him. Loki could fool the humans, sure, but she’d have seen through it.

Admitting that Loki hadn’t really had any choice didn’t equate to excusing or forgiving him, though. Being robbed of your free will wasn’t something you could really forgive, even if the guy who did it was saving your planet.

So Clint did what he had to do. He agreed to having Loki living in the Tower and working with the Avengers because he wanted to keep an eye on his former enemy. He forced himself to be civil to the alien because he knew Loki had been trapped. Clint wanted Loki neutralized as a threat, and now that Earth was joining the larger universe he wanted his planet to have allies, like Asgard. He could keep his own grievance on a leash for the greater good. And he did.

Tony was best buddies with the alien in no time. That wasn’t surprising, in retrospect; Tony had been through a very similar ordeal, plus there was that whole scientific curiosity thing. The magical technology Loki was giving them did a pretty good job of winning Bruce over, too. When they all looked up Jotuns on wikipedia one day while Loki was off briefing Earth intelligence services about other realms or whatever he did when he wasn’t in the Tower every morning, Bruce started to see Loki as a fellow Jekyll/Hyde sufferer, another man with a monstrous aspect he couldn’t get rid of. One more Avenger for Team Loki.
Steve was simply a good person. There was reason to believe Loki wasn’t inherently evil and that he was trying to make amends. Naturally Captain America would give him the chance to do so.

That left Clint, who had a grudge there was no way to really let go of, and Natasha, who loved Clint. They both went along with the whole thing out of duty - to SHIELD, to their fellow Avengers, to all humanity. But they had reservations the others didn’t.

The first time the Avengers went into battle against Doom with Loki on their side, all of them were shocked. They knew him as an enemy who was throwing the fight, as someone who had been tortured two or three days before. Now he had spent plenty of time healing and was in a fight he actually wanted to win.

Loki was ferocious. With the superstrength and the bolts of magic he could put out and the staff he’d brought from Asgard, he decimated Doom’s army of robots.

Also, he seemed to believe that it was his job to watch everyone’s back. Several times he flung a conjured knife or a blast of magic at a robot who was about to score a hit on one of the Avengers. He had mentioned that he had done this for Thor and Thor’s friends in battle, but he’d said it in passing as if it were of no importance. Steve had focused on what Loki could do to the enemy; even he had not realized just how useful Loki was in, well, in keeping his teammates alive.

Even after an hour of watching Loki tear a hole straight down the middle of Doom’s robot army, Steve was taken aback at Loki’s reaction when the robot army took the fight a few blocks over. He went from a deliberate calculating fighter to a cyclone of robot-killing frenzy. He made Steve think of Bruce in an especially nasty fight.

This must be what the Norse meant by “berserker”.

The Avengers were left to just follow in Loki’s wake picking off the stragglers. At least, until a handful of doom-bots broke away from the rest and proceeded down the street. Loki started to lunge after them, but stopped himself mid-lunge and called to Steve.

“Captain. Can you handle these if I go after those? If not, someone must stop the ones who have departed.”

Steve didn’t get it, but there wasn’t time for discussion. He quickly evaluated the remaining doom-bots. “Yeah, go ahead. We got this.”

Loki charged off and Bruce took over center stage. Steve spoke into his comm. “Tony, can Jarvis keep an eye on Loki, let us know if he needs backup?” Or if he went crazy and started murdering civilians, Steve didn’t add. Out loud.

“Already done, Cap. Hey, gimme that robot, willya?”

Cap slammed the nearest robot with his shield, flinging it into the air, where Tony blasted it to scrap metal.

When the Hulk was stomping on the mangled remains of the final robots, Steve looked down the street. Where Loki had been battling the dozen robots, there was now a pile of charred ex-robots. Loki was nowhere in sight.

“Loki,” Steve spoke into his comm, “where are you? Do you need assistance?”
“I am well, Captain, thank you. I will rejoin you shortly.”

“Where are you?”

There was a brief hesitation. “I am reassuring the civilians inside the building the robots were approaching.”

Loki reassuring civilians. If there was anything he needed help with, that had to be it. Steve told the others where he was going and moved down the street at a brisk jog.

Until he was able to see what the building was, and then he ran like hell.

It was a kindergarten. Like it wasn’t enough that the fight had gotten that close to a bunch of kids, now they were seeing the guy who’d brought an army of monsters to their city. What the hell had Loki been thinking, going in there? Steve sprinted and covered the distance in a matter of seconds. Maybe children wouldn’t be too scared of Loki if Captain America was there.

Right inside the door, Steve stopped on a dime and took in the sight.

Three dozen five-year-olds were gathered around Loki, saying his name, some of them shouting to get his attention, the nearest ones clinging to his leather coat. And he was speaking to them, answering their questions with grave patience. He glanced Steve’s way with resignation before giving the children his full attention again.

“We knew you wouldn’t let the robots get us!” a little boy declared with great conviction.

“He really is great with kids,” a voice at Steve’s elbow said. An adult, presumably the teacher. She was middle-aged, African-American, smiling at her students as they crowded around Loki. “The day he comes to tell them stories is the highlight of their week.”

“What?” was all Steve could say.

The teacher frowned. “Didn’t he tell you?”

“Please tell me SHIELD knows he’s been doing this.”

“SHIELD set it up.” Her voice was firm; she struck him as a no-nonsense sort of lady. “He’s been going to schools all over the city for weeks now. It’s helped the kids a lot. He’s not so scary now that they’ve seen him up close, talking to them and answering their questions.”

One red-haired little girl held up her arms, clamoring to be picked up. Loki did so, and when she surveyed the room from this higher vantage point, her eye fell on Steve.

“Look, it’s Captain America!”

All the children turned to look at Steve, and several of them came over to talk to him instead of to Loki. Steve knelt down and tried to answer them the way they would like Captain America to.

The kids wanted to know what it had been like fighting with Loki in Stuttgart. “He packs a wallop,” Steve said, honestly. “Aren’t you scared, having him here?”

“We were at first but he’s not bad anymore. The Avengers wouldn’t have let him come to our school if he was.”

Children were capable of being so sure about things. Steve put on an expression he hoped was reassuring. “That’s right, we wouldn’t.”
“Is Loki an Avenger now?”

“No, but he is working with us to make up for bringing the Chitauri here.”

Still holding the little girl, Loki approached him. “Valkyrie would like to meet you, Captain.”

Steve stood up. “Valkyrie?”

“My name used to be Valerie,” she said, very seriously, “but when I started studying Norse myths I changed it.”

“We all have to call her Valkyrie now,” the teacher confirmed, both amused and exasperated. “And she makes her parents check out all the children’s books about Norse mythology from the library. They say she insists on being read them every night.”

“When did you start studying Norse myths?” Steve asked the girl, careful to use her word.

“When Loki started coming to our school to tell them to us. I like the one about getting Thor’s hammer back from the giants but Loki says it’s just a story.”

“More’s the pity,” Loki said, shifting her in his arms. “Thor would have been charming in a dress.”

The children evidently considered this the funniest thing anyone had ever said. Steve had a sudden vision of piles of crayon drawings of Thor in drag.

“You wouldn’t have looked bad in one yourself,” Steve said. Now Loki would be in the drawings too.

Rather than deign to respond to this, Loki coolly asked, “Do you think Agent Romanoff would be willing to join us? There is a young man here who I promised to introduce to her when the opportunity arose.” Loki nodded in the direction of a boy who was hanging back from the others.

“ Heck, I’ll call the whole team.” Steve spoke into his communicator, explaining the situation as quickly as he could, and in a couple of minutes the rest of the Avengers had joined them.

Most of the kids gathered around Tony, demanding that he show them how his suit could fly. Natasha’s admirer had eyes only for her, but was more or less hiding behind a cabinet.

“Agent Romanoff, this is Luis. He is a great admirer of yours.” Loki set Valkyrie down and held out a hand to the boy. “Luis, please, come here so that I may introduce you.”

Luis walked over to his idol and just gazed at her in silent awe. Natasha clearly didn’t know what to do - Steve suspected she’d never spent much time around children - but she held out a hand to him.

“Shake her hand, Luis,” Loki prompted gently, when the boy did not do so after a few seconds. Luis did, and then hesitantly spoke in a soft voice.

“Black Widow, may I ask you a question?”

Natasha looked a little alarmed at that, but gamely replied, “Sure.”

“Can you jump up and kick people in the head like Xena?”

A grin spread over her face. “I sure can.”

“Is it hard to do?”
“Very. It takes years of training.”

Luis nodded, turning this over in his mind. Natasha tried to draw the boy out with a few standard grown-up questions - did he have any siblings or pets (no siblings, one iguana named Creech) and what did he want to be when he grew up (a SHIELD agent like her). Tony was basking in being the center of attention, as usual. Clint and a de-hulked, ragged Bruce weren’t getting mobbed as hard, but the children did want to know if turning into the Hulk hurt. (Yes.)

When the kids’ initial rush of curiosity was satisfied, the teacher announced, “I’m sure the Avengers have a lot of important work to do. We have to say goodbye to them.”

“Can Loki stay?” several children immediately asked. A chorus promptly arose of piping voices wheedling the teacher to let Loki stay with them.

“I could tell them a few stories to help calm them a bit,” Loki suggested to the teacher.

“I guess they’re not going to settle down again today no matter what,” she conceded.

The Avengers left as Loki settled himself on a cushion on the floor. A couple of the kids had already joined him, but most of them were waving and shouting goodbyes to the Avengers.

Loki rejoined them in the Tower just as they were starting dinner. It was a nice sunny day, so they’d set up a grill on the balcony and were making burgers and hot dogs, the smell of the food mingling with the scent of charcoal.

Steve spoke as soon as Loki stepped through the door. “So, storytime at local schools. Whose idea was this?”

Loki molded some hamburger meat into two large patties, expressionless. “It was mentioned to me in passing that many children in this city are having nightmares about me. I asked SHIELD if they could find some way for me to make those children less afraid of me - I deemed it best to go through them rather than set out to arrange it myself. Agent Hill suggested this. It seems to have helped them.”

Clint was incredulous. “You’re spending hours every week telling stories to children?”

“What else should I do? Continue being the monster parents tell their children about at night?” Loki dropped his burgers on the grill and sprinkled generous portions of salt and pepper onto them.

“So you’re telling them Norse myths?”

“I mainly tell them stories I heard as a child, ones that were never told on Midgard. And some tales I learned recently from the books about Jotunheim my mother bade me take here to study. Some of the children have become interested and read children’s books of Norse myth on their own, and they often ask me if any of them are true.”

“Are they?”

“Snorri Sturluson got almost everything wrong, but some of what he wrote down was a garbled version of the truth. And before you ask, no, I never gave birth to a horse.” Loki delivered this information with great weariness. Tony snickered. “The children were terribly disappointed that that one wasn’t true.”
“Maybe you could tell us a few of these stories,” Natasha said. “You’re making me curious.”

Steve thought it was more her usual habit of gathering intelligence than personal curiosity, but his own curiosity was also piqued.

“If you wish.” Loki started assembling his hamburgers, each with a dozen different ingredients. Steve had to look away; meat that rare grossed him out. “One tale each time we share a meal?”

“It’s a deal.”

Clint got up to prepare another hot dog for himself. “Nat, you want another?” She shook her head. “So what’s the deal with Natasha’s groupie? I was getting jealous.”

“Thank you for speaking to him, Agent Romanoff. I’ve been trying to help him overcome some of his shyness and your kindness encouraged him.”

“The kid’s got a crush, I see.”

“I don’t think so. I think he simply admires Agent Romanoff’s ability to defeat several opponents single-handedly without weapons or superpowers.”

“Doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a crush.” Clint tilted his head, looking at her. “I, for one, find that incredibly hot.” The two of them shared a little smile.

“So.” Bruce gave his usual gentle little smile. “How about that story?”

Loki swallowed a bite of hamburger - for such a lean guy, he put an awful lot of food away - and considered. “Let me see. Once there was a great warrior called Hjalmar who loved the beauteous Princess Ingeborg, but her father wished her to marry a man with nobler blood…”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to brinylon for the idea about Loki’s community service!

Yes, Clintasha is a background pairing in this fic. I don’t see any reason why not, since there is NO SIGN WHATSOEVER OF ANY OTHER PAIRINGS FOR EITHER OF THEM IN MOVIE CANON LALALALA I CAN’T HEAR YOU.

You can read about Hjalmar and Ingeborg at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hjalmar_and_Ingeborg
Flashback

Chapter Summary

A brief flashback chapter. Immediately after claiming the throne, Queen Frigga deals with Heimdall.

Chapter Notes

Warning: canon-typical fantastic racism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Once Thor had - grudgingly - bent the knee and pledged loyalty to his queen, Frigga lost no time in assigning her sons their first mission on her behalf. Loki had to use his seiðr to shield Frigga’s instructions from prying ears. Luckily, their years of intense closeness led him to grasp that she required that he do so after the mildest hint.

Then she summoned Heimdall to discuss rebuilding the Bifrost using the newly recovered Tesseract.

Heimdall had scarcely risen from bowing to his queen when both princes of the realm struck him down, Loki with Lævateinn, the staff he had forged from Yggdrasil years ago, and Thor with the utterly unmagical axe Frigga had issued him after denying him Mjölnir.

They allowed him to live long enough to hear his queen pass sentence.

“Heimdall. You broke Asgard’s law forbidding its citizens from going to Jotunheim. This started a war between the realms, led to the deaths of thousands of Jotuns and nearly cost me both of my sons. You committed treason against King Loki. You brought Prince Thor back from exile in defiance of both Odin and Loki, defying two kings at once. How could any monarch ever trust you now? Is there any reason I should allow you to live?”

“It was my duty to protect Asgard from the rule of a filthy Jotun,” he snarled. He turned a fiery glare on Loki. “You should have turned blue the moment you reached your native realm, so that the prince and his friends could see you for what you truly are.”

“Kill him,” Frigga commanded.

Her sons obeyed.

Chapter End Notes

I’m about to adjust the first chapter to fit with this one; fortunately, only a couple of sentences will need to be changed. I try not to change things after I’ve already posted
them, but this is shaping up to be a proper novel with a real story arc after all and this was necessary for the continuity that’s developing. Since this started as connected snippets and evolved into a novel, I’ll just have to ask you all to please make allowances for a few early missteps and random flashbacks.

Iron_Dragon_Maiden told me about Lævateinn, which will be featured more in future chapters.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Clint and Natasha have a request for Loki.

A couple of weeks after the Avengers found out about Loki’s little storytime program, Natasha asked him, “Do you think the teacher would mind if I came to that class to see Luis again?”

“I am certain she would not. She too has been trying to encourage the lad’s tentative expeditions outside his shell. I go to that school the day after tomorrow, if you wish to accompany me.”

“Great, I will.”

“Perhaps you could tell them a story of your own.”

Natasha considered. “I think I can do that.”

Storytime was a great success. Luis sat right next to Natasha for the entire session, instead of sitting on the edge of the group as usual. He raptly absorbed every word she said as she told a bowdlerized story of infiltrating a drug dealer’s operation and beating up five men single-handed once she had the intel she needed about them. Then Loki told another Asgardian story about a bilgesnipe hunt, swiftly sketching a bilgesnipe on the whiteboard (Thor was right, they were repulsive), and they left the children making crayon drawings.

As they walked out, Natasha suggested, “Why don’t we stop for a coffee? There’s a place just up the block.”

Loki shot her a glance and an arched eyebrow, but only nodded agreement.

Clint was waiting in the coffeeshop, taking his time with a cappuccino. Loki gave the eyebrow again when he saw him there but didn’t seem surprised. He and Natasha acquired coffees for themselves (a huge sweet frozen latte for Loki, an espresso for Natasha) and joined him.

Once they were all sitting down, Loki just waited.

“You seem to like kids,” was Clint’s opening.

“Don’t think me more sentimental than I am. I had frequent nightmares as a child. I have often had insomnia all of my life, and I suspect that it is partly a sort of phobia of sleep, caused by those early nightmares. I disliked the idea of inspiring nightmares.”

“What did you have nightmares about?”

An acid smile spread across his face. “Frost giants, mostly.”

“Shit.”

“Indeed. I also often dreamed of being smothered with heat, which makes sense in retrospect.”

“Do you think you’re more sensitive to high temperatures than… than born Asgardians?”
His mouth twitched. “I do not like hot weather, but it doesn’t seem to do more than annoy me.”

“What about cold? Do you have a higher tolerance for it than other Asgardians?” When Loki did not reply immediately, Clint backpedalled a little. “Sorry, I know this is a sore subject. I do have a reason for asking.”

“Somewhat, yes. And Asgardians in general can withstand more extreme temperatures than humans. I assume that in my Jotun form, I would find freezing temperatures comfortable. On my brief visits to Jotunheim, I found it much too cold despite being bundled in a warm coat, but the Jotnar wear only brief kilts.”

Clint and Natasha exchanged a glance. “Can you transform, or are you… stuck?”

Loki did not answer immediately. His eyes moved between them. “I think you had better tell me what this is about.”

Natasha set down her espresso. “I haven’t taken you up on your offers to use your powers for us because I don’t think we should become dependent on you. Eventually you’ll go back to Asgard.”

“Very sensible.”

“But this case, I think, merits an exception.”

He shrugged. “You have a powerful sorcerer with a large debt at your disposal, Agent Romanoff. Make use of me.”

“There’s more,” Clint said. “This mission we have in mind isn’t authorized by SHIELD. We’re going to warn you right now that it could get you - and us - into trouble with them.”

“You think I am concerned about Midgardian authorities?” Loki was genuinely amused. “I am concerned about my mother. Do you think she would disapprove of whatever you are about to propose?”

“I seriously doubt it.”

“Then tell me, and if I am able, I will assist you.”

Natasha found her hands curling into fists. She unfolded them. “Clint told you my history. That I was taken from my parents as a small child and trained to be an assassin.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve done what I can to keep tabs on the people who trained and used me. Sometimes, though not often, they can be brought to justice for what they did to all of us. Recently, I found out that two of them have left Russia and are now working for the Borovnian government. I’m not sure how much you know about Earth governments-”

“I know that the Borovnian one is exceptionally corrupt.”

“Yeah. Well, they’re starting their own Red Room program. They’ve got about twenty children so far, to my knowledge, and have just begun their training.”

“Hence your question about whether I like children or not.” Loki paused. “I strongly disapprove of using children for political ends.”

“I kind of figured.” Clint finished his coffee.
“Can Midgardian governments do nothing about this? The World Council, the United Nations-“

“I’ve alerted the appropriate authorities. They’re already talking about trade sanctions and that kind of thing. But it’ll be slow if it works at all, and in the meantime, these children are being put through-” She stopped.

“And since no one is currently actually at war with Borovnia, and no one really wants to be…..”

Loki took a meditative sip of his latte. “I understand. So you two intend to put a stop to the Borovnian Red Room operation before it becomes entrenched, and you want me to help you.” He paused for a second. “Which I will. Now, what has this to do with… ah, I see. These Red Rooms are concealed in the subarctic region of the country.”

Clint nodded. “Yeah. If it weren’t for that, we’d have done it by ourselves. But the snow and the freezing temperatures will make it almost impossible to infiltrate. For humans to get there, they have to use specialized vehicles and stuff. We could, ah, borrow one, but there’d be no way to sneak inside. They’d see us coming a mile away. We hoped you could help us with that.”

For a minute they were all silent as Loki drank and thought. Finally he said, “I am not certain I am able to change to my native form without the Casket of Ancient Winters, which is lost to the Void. Nor am I certain that Jotun abilities, such as conjuring ice, are available to me in this form.” At the disappointed looks the humans could not entirely conceal, he said, “I can still help you even in this form, but tonight, when Stark and Banner are through with me for the day, I will experiment. If I find that I can indeed transform, don’t worry, I will cast a glamour over myself to make myself look normal.”

“Why is that necessary?” Natasha was frowning.

Loki was surprised. “If the children see me in Jotun form, they’ll be frightened. You two won’t enjoy it much either.” At their continued puzzlement, Loki raised a hand and conjured an image of a craggy blue head. “Frost giants are ugly.”

The humans studied the image, but did not seem as repulsed as Loki would have expected. Well, after the Chitauri, perhaps Jotnar were not quite so bad. “So that’s a frost giant.”

“That is Laufey. My real father.”

Both humans looked from Laufey’s image to Loki, and back. “You must take after your mother,” Clint said.

Loki shrugged. “I know nothing of my birth mother, save that she died in the war during which Odin kidnapped me.” Ominous suspicions about that flitted through Loki’s mind, not for the first time, but he banished them to deal with the business at hand even as he let Laufey’s image dissipate.

Natasha paused to choose her words. “I do know this is… a lot to ask.”

Loki shrugged. “I always intended to investigate this at some point. I was putting it off for reasons you can likely guess at.”

“Thank you.”

“There is no need to thank me. As I mentioned, I have a debt. Red in my ledger, as you put it.”

Clint frowned a little. “It’s still necessary to thank you. Expressing recognition for things… it matters.”
Loki looked surprised, but nodded after a moment. “Then you are most welcome. Now, why did you tell me about this away from the Tower and your shield-brothers?”

“We’re not planning on bringing the rest of the Avengers on board for this.”

“Why not? You expressed concern about getting into trouble with Earth authorities if your deed comes to light. If the Avengers presented a united front, most of Midgard would condone your acts, and with the power the five of you wield together, the authorities could not punish you unless you allowed them to.”

Natasha held his gaze. “That’s kind of the problem.”

“This isn’t a Justice League cartoon where we all put on costumes and do whatever we want.” Clint chose that example because the series had been viewed by the Tower’s inhabitants recently. That reference, he knew Loki would get. “It could set a dangerous precedent.”

“So you will risk your own liberty and position to limit your own power?”

“We thought it might be a little weird to your worldview,” Natasha conceded. “But yes, that’s the decision we’ve made. If you’re not still up for it, we ask that you at least not tell our ‘shield-brothers’-”

“I am still ‘up for it’, and I will not reveal your plans to your shield-brothers without your agreement.” He drained the rest of his drink in one long swallow. “Since you require secrecy, I invite the two of you to join me for lunch tomorrow after my session debriefing SHIELD is over, somewhere away from the Tower. I will tell you what my experiments have yielded.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Loki assists Black Widow and Hawkeye on an unauthorized mission.

Chapter Notes

I'm SORRY this took so long. It wasn't going right, so I tried adding this whole new level of complication and then realized how much it would mess up the general story arc and so had to START ALL THE HELL OVER.

So I hope this is okay.


Sanja strapped on her sparring helmet. It was a little difficult as her wrist was still in a brace from the other day, but she managed it. Their instructors said that when they were old enough to go on missions they would sometimes have to fight injured, so they had to practice by not having time off when they were injured, not if they could operate at all. Andrei was lucky, he had broken his leg last month and gotten a whole week off of sparring.

She hoped she wouldn’t be paired with Mirek today. The other girl was no taller than Sanja but considerably bigger boned, with a mean streak to boot. The instructors said this would make Sanja strong.

Sanja didn’t feel strong yet.

Yuri, one of their trainers, came into the gym and tersely started pairing them off. Sanja was with Mirek.

She had complained about Mirek to the trainers once. She would never do so again.

The other trainer, Masha, had been waiting leaning against the wall. Now she joined Yuri and they demonstrated kicking each other in the head.

When they were told to start, Sanja kicked Mirek as hard as she could. Mirek never held back; Sanja never dared to.

Out of the corner of her eye Sanja saw their teacher, a sour old woman, come in and go to Yuri.

At least the school part of their training, where they sat down at desks, was kind of fun. Besides languages, they learned all about how the body worked. It was to make them better fighters, but Sanja would pretend she was studying to be a veterinarian, like she had wanted to be before she was brought here.

The impact of Mirek’s foot against the side of her head almost made Sanja miss the teacher slamming
a fist into Yuri’s stomach with far more force than such an old woman ought to be capable of. Yuri just doubled over.

All the children in the gym stopped sparring and stared. Scarcely a second passed before Masha was running at the teacher, but she only got a couple of steps before a staff appeared in the teacher’s hand and a flash of light knocked Masha over.

Every child was silent as the teacher just dissolved, leaving a black-haired man in her place.

A man carrying a bow and arrow and a black-suited woman with flaming red hair appeared in the doorway. The woman began to speak, in Borovnian with an accent Sanja didn’t recognize.

“We have come to take you away-”

Sanja knew nothing about these newcomers, but she and her fellows had been well trained. They all hurled themselves at the intruders, kicking shins, punching stomachs and groins. Mirek actually bit the black-haired man’s hand before jerking back.

When Sanja got near enough to land a blow - which he didn’t seem to even feel - she learned why. The man was icy cold, so cold it hurt to touch him.

As Sanja tried to kick him in the groin with the roundhouse kick she’d been taught, she thought how odd it was that none of the strangers were hitting them back.

Sanja’s foot made contact with no visible effect. Vaguely remembered movies from before her parents had died and she was taken to the orphanage and then here had her wondering if he was actually a robot.

Just as she thought that, he turned blue. She froze, uncertain. Her training hadn’t covered opponents who suddenly changed color in the middle of a fight.

The next moment, there were a dozen of him around the room, and of the archer and the red-haired woman too.

Baffled, the children all halted, waiting, wary. Yuri was starting to get up and Masha was crawling towards the weapons rack. Without warning, stalagmites of ice rose off of the floor, creating impromptu cages around both of them.

The red-haired woman approached Yuri. He snarled. “Natasha. You were always my best student.”

“I remember what you did to me when I wasn’t.”

Sanja felt a clench in her stomach. This woman was a grownup and Yuri had done the same kinds of things to her as he was doing to Sanja and the others now. He had been doing this for a long time. He was never going to stop.

The blue man made the icicles shatter and hauled Yuri to his feet. He moved towards Natasha with grim purpose.

For the next five minutes, which felt like much longer, the children watched enthralled as Natasha beat the tar out of their instructor. Natasha’s companions just stood and watched, grim and alert.

Sanja thought Natasha was getting bored, because after a while she just gripped him in a headlock and yanked, and there was a crunch, and then Yuri fell over dead.
Before coming to this place, Sanja had never thought she would be glad to watch someone die.

The blue man shattered Masha’s ice cage next, and she launched herself at Natasha. This fight was much swifter. Masha was younger, faster than Yuri. Natasha did not delay before breaking her neck too.

Natasha spoke again.

“The people here can’t hurt you again. I was trained in a place like this. Consider me your older sister. We will take you to a safe place. If you have families, you will be reunited with them. If you do not, you will be cared for. We will be watching and if anyone tries to use you again, we will stop them.”

Sanja wouldn’t have believed it without the dead bodies of her trainers right there.

“We’re leaving now,” Natasha said. “Get your things.”

They all ran to the bedroom - just a large room full of rows and rows of cots - and grabbed what few belongings they had. Sanja had only a toothbrush, a change of clothes, and a small stuffed elephant.

None of the other adults - the guards, the doctor - seemed to be around. Sanja wondered if Natasha and her friends had killed them too.

Instead of leading them to the main door, Natasha and her companions led them all to one of the side doors. Sanja had never seen any of the doors to the outside other than the main one open. Banks of snow outside almost as tall as the building sealed them shut.

The side door opened easily. Instead of banks of snow there were now rows of ice spikes rising from the ground. Even as the children stared, the blue man made some of the freshly fallen snow reform itself into ice spikes, getting it out of their path.

“This way.” Natasha stepped into the freezing wind, careless, and headed for a Terra Bus like the one that had first brought them there, a bus with large wheels made specially for going over snow.

Bracing herself, Sanja stepped out into the cold, but to her surprise it did not reach her. She could see snow whirling above and around them all, but there seemed to be an invisible tunnel around them, sheltering them from the snow and wind.

Glancing around, all Sanja could see was snow, just empty snow stretching in every direction. This was why none of them had ever tried to escape. Even if they had managed to get out of the building, they would have frozen to death.

On the bus, Natasha got behind the wheel and started the engine. The men opened up coolers full of sandwiches and fruit, and after a few moments of hesitation, the children all swarmed over them. Sanja got a ham sandwich and an apple, which she ate slowly, rediscovering the flavor. They were fed adequately, but the food usually didn’t taste very good. None of them had eaten fresh fruit since being brought to this place.

As the children ate, the archer moved through the bus, checking the injuries of those who had them. He very gently tested Sanja’s wrist. “Does it hurt?” His accent was awkward, as if he knew only a few words of Borovnian.

“Yes.”

He held up a pill. “Aspirin,” he said, and handed it to her. She took it - painkiller was used sparingly
in this place, only for the worst cases - and in a little while her wrist hurt less. The archer looked at everyone’s injuries, but they had all been properly bandaged or splinted. All they lacked was pain relief, and the archer would select a bottle from his pocket and give the child a pill from one of them.

The blue man came around giving everyone chocolate bars. Sanja scarfed down one with nuts, and when later he moved through the bus again offering more, took a second one without.

She wanted to ask him why he was blue, but she had learned not to ask grownups questions.

They reached less snowy terrain and in time parked in front of an old grey stone building. There was a field in which children were playing soccer.

Another orphanage. But Natasha had said she would be watching this one. Sanja knew it was true.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Steve has to give a speech on Veterans' Day.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer and thorkys for beta reading and hand holding!

After their mission in Borovnia, Loki and his accomplices followed the news carefully. Dumping three dozen children on a Red Cross orphanage was difficult to cover up, so the Borovnian government had to find a spin for the story. The precise face-saving statements they had expected were issued: the official story was that the child assassin training program was the work of a few isolated rogues in Borovnia’s intelligence services, now conveniently dealt with. Borovnia’s government was also quite happy to claim credit for having “discovered” and put a stop to the program.

At least the worldwide scrutiny meant that miscreants would hesitate before attempting to abduct those children again.

“Is the gold you had converted into Midgardian currency for me sufficient for their needs for a time?” Loki asked Natasha after a week. She and Clint had met him for coffee away from the Tower again so they could discuss the aftermath of their operation.

She huffed. “Sufficient until they’re middle-aged, I should say. But we’ll have to watch to make sure no one misappropriates it.”

Clint blew on his coffee. “Borovnian intelligence has to realize who put a stop to their game. Nat’s hair color by itself will be a red flag.”

She nudged him. “Ha, ha.”

“And if they are not already aware that Jotuns are blue, they will be one day.” Loki looked from one of them to the other. “If you ever believe you are in danger because of this mission, please tell me. I understand that you do not wish to become dependent upon me, but we are shield-brothers in this matter.”

“We will.”

Clint surveyed the shop as if expecting eavesdroppers, but the other customers were all chatting loudly with each other, oblivious to everyone else. “I still wish we could have used healing stones on those kids.”

The other two nodded. “But that would have eradicated the proof of what those kids were put through,” Natasha reminded him. That was the decision they had reluctantly reached in their
planning.

Loki finished his iced coffee and rose. “Excuse me. Stark and Banner are expecting me in the laboratory.”

“Loki, one more thing,” Natasha said as he turned to go. He turned back, waiting. “Apparently not all frost giants are ugly.”

He raised a derisive eyebrow and his lip curled.

“You looked like yourself, only blue,” Clint confirmed.

“Sometime, transform and look into a mirror. You might feel slightly better.” Natasha put down her cup. “I won’t bring it up again.”

Loki acknowledged this with a terse nod, but of course it was all he thought about on the walk back to the Tower.

He would look someday. Not yet.

In the Tower’s common room he came upon Steve Rogers hunched over a Starkpad, looking so unhappy that Loki stopped instead of proceeding to the laboratory. “Captain, may I ask what is troubling you? Are you still fretting over your speech?” An Earth holiday called Veteran’s Day was approaching and Captain America would be obliged to give a speech. Steve never even considered shirking the duty, but had told his shield-brothers of his discomfort with the amount of media attention he would receive. So unlike Thor, who reveled in attention and never allowed anyone else to steal the spotlight from him.

Steve didn’t look up from the screen. “No. A boy in Queens just killed himself.”

The blunt words hit Loki like a blow. For a few eternal seconds he was hanging over that abyss again, begging his supposed father for some scrap of something, affection or forgiveness or anything, and finding that there was no longer any reason to exist.

“Why?” Loki asked. Immediately he regretted the harshness of his voice.

Steve glanced up, surprised at his tone. “He was being bullied because he was gay.” He shook his head. “I just can’t imagine what it must be like not to want to be alive anymore.” As he said these words, it seemed to occur to him that Loki could imagine that quite easily. He looked at Loki again, seeming to see something new in him now.

“If it hurts too much and there seems little hope of getting anything you want, or need…..” Loki spread his hands.

Steve mulled this over for a moment. “I wish I could do something for him. But it’s too late. Now nobody can do anything for him.”

Loki sat beside him, not too close. “Except try to benefit those who are yet here. Cold comfort, I know.” But what other kind could one have from a frost giant?

“That’s what you’re trying to do.”

“That’s what everyone in this tower is trying to do.”

Steve gazed at nothing for a long minute. Loki was trying to think of something encouraging to say
when the soldier’s back abruptly straightened. “I’m going to call the boy’s parents. I’m going to ask if they would mind if I came to his funeral.”

“Your presence will likely draw a crowd.”

He gave a nod, resigned. “I won’t let it be known in advance that I’ll be there, except to his parents.” He put down the Starkpad and left, determination on his boyish face.

Loki just sat for a moment, thinking about it. Steve was so troubled by the tragedy of a total stranger who was nothing to him that he had to act, even if all he could do was the symbolic gesture of attending a funeral.

Steve was one of his realm’s greatest warriors, yet he showed great kindness as well as great valor. It was not a combination often seen in Asgard.

Loki’s mother had chosen his shield-brothers well.

When Loki entered the lab, Tony Stark was sitting on the floor surrounded by floating holograms of lines of code, looking furious. “Jarvis again?” Loki asked.

“I can’t figure out where SHIELD’s back door is!” Tony slammed a screwdriver onto the floor, where it left a jagged mark. “That smug bastard Coulson just waltzed into my home, cut me and Jarvis off from the world so I couldn’t even call the police or my lawyers, and I still haven’t found out how they did it! I didn’t crawl out of my tomb in Afghanistan so that my own government could illegally lock me up.”

“We won’t let SHIELD put you under house arrest again, Tony,” Bruce promised, adjusting the settings on the spectrometer he was looking at. “I’ll turn green and tear down half the city. That’s not a promise, by the way. It’s a statement of fact.”

“And I will stand by your shield-brothers in rescuing you, Mr. Stark.”

“You’ve been here for months, you can stop with the mister thing. Call me Tony. Jarvis, let’s go over the authentication again.” The hologram changed.

“My offer stands, Mr. - Tony. I can protect Jarvis from being tampered with by anyone in this realm.”

“You know why I have to do this myself.” He scowled at a line of code and plucked it from its array with one hand, stretched it out and started altering it. “I can’t depend on anyone else to keep Jarvis free.”

“I do understand.” And he did.

“You understand a lot. You understand what it’s like to find out you’ve spent your life enabling evil when you were trying to do good. You understand what it’s like to be tortured into putting your mind and your knowledge at someone else’s service.” As Tony said this, Bruce shot a hooded glance at both of them before turning back to his work, but his eyes were unfocused and his hands idle on his lap. “You understand what it’s like to have to play along with evil assholes until you can stab them in their richly deserving backs. And you understand what the months after that are like.”

Loki felt his jaw clamping and tried to loosen it. “I do.”

“Which reminds me, any time you can’t sleep, or wake up from those fun dreams this kind of thing causes, ask Jarvis and if I’m awake we can talk. Or not talk. We can drink or watch movies or come
down here and play.”

“That is… very kind of you.” Loki hoped he had put enough solemnity in his voice to make it clear that the offer was greatly appreciated. Never before had anyone other than his mother offered him comfort when he was troubled. He realized he had sighed gustily and quickly spoke to forestall the courteous concern the scientists would otherwise offer. He had been their enemy, but they were treating him… not as a friend, precisely, but with the civility one gave an ally. It was a debt he would spend the rest of their lifetimes repaying. "You have been most generous."

“Yeah, I’m a pretty swell guy. I’m going to be doing this all day. Probably all night. You guys go play without me. Bring me a present.”

Loki had become accustomed to Tony’s style of expression. He walked over to Bruce’s workstation and sat beside him. “So, Dr. Banner, what do you wish to discuss today?”

Bruce swiveled his chair to face a different monitor from the one he’d been looking at and took off his glasses to point them at it. “I thought of something about the Bifrost last night. The last time Jane was here, she said….”

Loki was apprehensive about attending the Veteran’s Day ceremony at which Steve was to speak, but he was Asgard’s ambassador now and duty was duty. Early in the proceedings he issued yet another apology for what he had done to Earth, which was received with the expected cold silence. All Midgard now knew of his reasons, but humans were still angry and he blamed them not a jot. In his speech, he praised the valor of those who had combated the invasion he had been forced to lead with carefully chosen words. He had practiced the speech before the Avengers, taking their advice about the wording so as to avoid giving offense with his alien attitudes. Tony’s lady Pepper Potts had given the most thorough advice. She had excellent instincts. She would have been a valuable addition to Asgard’s court.

Having said what he must, Loki sat down with the Avengers and listened to various speeches before Captain America was introduced to resounding applause. The lad looked apprehensive as he approached the podium, but his jaw was set.

He spoke for a time of the Howling Commandos who he had served with, of their courage and the camaraderie they had shared. Then he cleared his throat. Looked around at the assembled crowd. Visibly braced himself.

“All of them were important… but the one I need most to talk about is Bucky Barnes. Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes and I were friends from childhood. We went to school together, watched baseball games together, played together. He was always there for me, to the end of the line.

“Before Dr. Erskine’s serum, I was a ninety-pound weakling. If you’re small or weak and you stand up for yourself, you get beaten up. I wasn’t willing to run or to back down. I won’t judge anyone who does. I just couldn’t. I was sure things would be even worse if I did. I never asked Bucky to defend me but he did, over and over, from when we were kids. When bigger kids, and then when I grew up bigger men, decided I was an easy target, he would show up and put a stop to it. He never asked me to stop standing up. He understood why I had to.”

Loki had read a bit about Bucky Barnes as he was reading everything he could find about the Avengers during his first weeks on Midgard, but these details were new to him. Now he wished he could have known Bucky. He sounded like a good man.
He sounded like the kind of brother Loki had always wished he had.

Steve was still speaking. “Nowadays people are more aware of bullying as a problem, and the world has become a lot more accepting, but there are still kids in danger and scared and feeling like no one is going to help them. Just a couple of weeks ago a sixteen-year-old boy named Peter Berg killed himself because he endured physical assaults, taunts, and vandalism on his locker, all because he was gay.

“I said I wasn’t willing to run or back down. That’s not completely true, because there’s one part of my life where I did.”

Tony sat back in his seat. Loki glanced at him and saw alertness in his eyes. The rest of the Avengers only looked attentive.

“Bucky and I never had the courage to tell anyone what we really were to each other. That… that we were lovers. Until this moment, I’ve never told anyone.”

The audience had fallen deathly silent. Scanning the room, Loki saw shock, disgust, compassion. Admiration.

“We were afraid to tell the world how we loved each other. At that time people were so horrified by homosexuality,” his voice stumbled a little over the word, “we would have been outcast, maybe even arrested or institutionalized, we couldn’t have enlisted….” He swallowed.

“I have never been ashamed of loving him. And from now on I won’t hide it, not ever again. I could not have had a better friend, or a better boyfriend, than Bucky Barnes. He was brave and generous and honest and - and I would give anything to have him back.”

Steve’s voice broke on the last word. Loki felt certain this was not what he had planned to say, that these words had forced themselves from them.

Steve’s head was bowed, his hands clenched, his eyes screwed tight. After a few seconds it was clear he was not going to regain his composure and Tony swiftly whispered to the others as he rose.

“Operation Group Hug, everybody. Short people first.” He glanced back at Loki, who was still sitting as the Avengers got up. “You too, Loki.”

Loki was not certain Steve would want him to share in this moment with his shield-brothers, but this was no time to argue. He followed the others. Tony and Natasha reached Steve first and wrapped their arms around him. Steve broke down completely then as cameras flashed. Clint picked up the podium and moved it out of the way and he and Bruce joined the group hug, including their shorter teammates in the embrace.

Loki did not dare to delay. He stood a little behind Steve and put one arm around the man’s shoulders, the other around Bruce because there was nowhere else to put it. Neither of them seemed to mind. All attention was on Steve, who was still sobbing as his shield-brothers held him tight.

Later over Indian delivery food, none of them brought up what Steve had told them. The conversation was about trivial matters such as a television show about detectives that most of the Avengers watched but none were greatly attached to. Steve spoke little, pale and quiet and relieved. Loki appreciated the tact the others were showing; they all understood Steve needed some time before discussing it.

Nonetheless, Loki resolved that as soon as it seemed proper to speak of it, he would tell Steve that he was a brave man.
Chapter Summary

Steve gives an interview about his recent coming out. At the Tower, the Avengers plan a movie marathon.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to tigriswolf, notwithweaponsbutideas, Kytt, and questionablemotivations for beta reading!

Excerpt from a *Vanity Fair* interview with Steve Rogers:

Q. So, the whole world is now talking about Captain America coming out as gay.

A. Actually I’m bisexual. There wasn’t a word for it in my time, or at least I never heard it. It confused me a lot as a teenager because I had these feelings for Bucky but I was also definitely interested in girls. I didn’t understand that it didn’t have to be one or the other.

Q. You’ve always tried to evade questions journalists asked you about your private life. Is your homosexuality - excuse me, bisexuality - the reason for that?

A. Not really. I’m a private person. I don’t really want the whole world knowing and caring who I date, or what my private feelings are. I didn’t like being asked about my relationships with women, either.

Q. So you have had relationships with women?

A. Yes. Everyone knows that.

Q. Were they less satisfying than your relationship with Sergeant Barnes?

A. Next question, please.

Q. Did your mother know about your attraction to other men?

A. She… next question.

Q. How does a private person like you feel about having the entire world discussing your sexuality?

A. I would rather keep my private life private. This is nobody’s business. But if me telling the world who and what I am makes it easier for even one bullied kid who feels so miserable he or she wants to
end it all, makes even one person re-evaluate what they think of this issue, it’ll be worth it.

Q. What do you say to those who feel betrayed or let down by you now, that you’re tarnishing the idol that is Captain America?

A. Tarnishing the idol would be if I turned out to have been a Hydra double agent all along. I’m the same person I was before I told everyone about this. I fought for my country just the same, and I wouldn’t have been allowed to do it if people had known about me and Bucky. I believe in the same things I always believed in. That I like men too at worst makes me a pervert, if that’s what you think. The world made me into an icon, I have to use that icon to help people.

Q. What kind of reaction are you seeing in your fan mail?

A. I’ve gotten plenty of hate mail. And other people reminding me of all the good things I’ve done and urging me to repent. But I’ve gotten way more people telling me their stories and thanking me, saying that I helped to give them hope or courage and that was what I was hoping for. That was why I did what I did. But what’s really amazing is, a lot of them aren’t thanking me or saying I’ve made it easier for them, they’re offering me support. Encouraging me to keep being honest and true to myself. Telling me that it’s okay. That is just so - I appreciate it so much.

Q. The rest of the Avengers have made their support of you pretty clear.

A. They have. They are stand-up people. Natasha - Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow - she’s been trying to fix me up with women for a while. The day after I came out, she said, “Why didn’t you tell me? I could have doubled my pool of potential dates for you!”

Q. And the other Avengers?

A. None of them give two pins that I’m bisexual. Two of them are also not exclusively heterosexual, and they’ve said so publicly to journalists since I came out and given me permission to mention it. Tony Stark is bisexual, but I think everybody already knew that, and Loki Friggjarson is gay.

Q. Wait, is Loki an Avenger now?

A. Ah, no, you’re right, he’s not an actual "Avenger". But he’s working with us, and he’s shown himself to be a good “shield-brother”, to use his term.

Q. What’s it like to be fighting alongside your former enemy?

A. I think it would have been really great if the Germans and Italians I had to fight in World War II had one day decided to fight beside me instead of against me, so I think it’s a good thing. It gives me hope.

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A few days after Captain America came out of the closet, Loki returned from a day of debriefing SHIELD and the UN’s newly formed Interplanetary Relations Committee about the politics of the Nine Realms and telling stories to local schoolchildren. The Avengers were assembled in the Tower’s large kitchen, chatting idly as they waited for Japanese delivery. Rogers was doodling in his sketchbook, Barton and Romanoff were inspecting their weapons, Tony was trying to find trouble to get into while Miss Potts hovered nearby to keep the amount of said trouble under control and
Banner simply sat quietly, observing them all.

Loki exchanged casual greetings with them all and strolled to the refrigerator, where he produced a sheaf of crayon drawings, selected two of them at random, and stuck them onto the refrigerator door with magnets.

Loki turned to find the Avengers all watching him. “I was told this is an Earth custom.”

“It is.” Tony got up to take a closer look. “Usually it’s drawings made by your own kids, but this is fine. So wait, is that you killing doom-bots?”

“Yes.”

Tony peered at the other one. “Hey, it’s that cross-dressing story. The lay of whosit.”

“The lay of Thrym,” Banner supplied.

“The children don’t give all of their drawings to me, but nearly all of them have drawn this tale, even though I told them it never happened.”

“I’ve drawn it too,” Rogers said. Loki turned to him and found that the soldier was wearing an impish smile that reminded Loki of himself.

“Share with the class, Rogers,” Tony demanded, his eyes alight with glee.

Rogers thumbed through his sketchbook for a moment before finding the correct page. Everyone crowded around to see it. Loki let the others get a good look and a laugh before moving to Steve’s side to see.

Unsurprisingly, the drawing was quite good. But it wasn’t quite what Loki had been expecting.

Thor was drawn in the usual comic fashion of men in female attire played for a joke, a more sophisticated version of the crayon drawings the children had done. Thor looked as if he had stuffed himself into a dress far too small for him, definitely not cut to accommodate his bulging muscles, and with an absurd excess of frills and flowers, more than Loki had ever seen any woman wear at once. Thor’s shoulder-length hair was curled and bedecked with flowers. His expression was dour, deliberately at odds with his festive garb.

But Steve had drawn Loki in a dress that… that suited him. There were no frills, just elegantly draped fabric that followed the lines of Loki’s lean body. Loose draping around the chest gave an illusion of small breasts, ornamentation de-emphasized Loki’s muscular shoulders. A subtle change of emphasis made Loki’s pretty features a bit more feminine without being at all untrue to the original. It was not a humorous drawing.

Loki actually looked quite beautiful in it.

“Loki cleans up nice!” Tony grinned at the drawing. “You should wear a dress more often, Reindeer Games. Can we put this one up on the fridge too?”

Rogers huffed a laugh and got up. “Sure, why not.” He found a sharp knife in the kitchen and cut the page out of his sketchbook. Tony made him sign it before giving it a place of honor on the refrigerator door.
“There’s an artist movie we should all watch. *Incognito*. I just wish we’d gotten to spend more time watching the hero paint and less chase scenes and intrigue, but that’s what sells tickets. Jarvis?”

Jarvis cued up the movie and had it waiting when the Japanese food arrived. Loki dove into a generous helping of teriyaki and California rolls and the Avengers similarly approached the food in locust fashion.

After the first assault on the feast, Barton spoke. “So Steve. You’re pretty good. Do you still want to be an artist?”

The soldier finished a tempura shrimp before answering. “I’m not sure. I’m not Leonardo da Vinci, okay? I happened to have a knack for drawing, and I like doing it, so I studied it hoping it would get me a job. But now, even if I pursued it, it wouldn’t matter if I could draw at all. People would come to see what Captain America drew.”

“That’s what pseudonyms are for, Rogers.” Romanoff took a sip of hot green tea. “Make some drawings, have them exhibited as the work of Roger Stevens or something. If you want to pursue it, that is.” Her face stilled for a moment. None of her shield-brothers remarked on it, they knew better, but all noticed. “I wanted to be a ballerina once.”

The group nodded in acknowledgment but still without comment, and Barton watched her with sorrow in his eyes. All that any of them could do just now was pour her more sake, though, so he did.

“If you decide to do that, Steve, I can set up an exhibit for you,” Miss Potts told him. “But if you want to do it on your own anonymously, that’s fine too.”

Rogers looked dubious, but all he said was, “I’ll think about it.”

“I suppose you’ve drawn all of us looking goofy.” Tony’s crooked grin challenged him to deny it.

“Well….”

“Come on, show them to us!”

It only took the team a minute to cajole Rogers into opening his sketchbook again. He held it up like a grade school teacher rather than risk them getting soy sauce on the pages.

Some of the pictures were goofy. Tony on stage at the Expo, his smug expression exaggerated and a gleaming peacock tail added to his Iron Man armor. Barton squatting in a nest with his arrows clutched at his side like a teddy bear. Banner and the Hulk as a steampunk Jekyll and Hyde. The entire team, Loki included, cowering in full battle gear while Pepper Potts lectured them with a wagging finger - that one got a round of enthusiastic approval from all.

Other drawings were more serious. Romanoff looking sad for a fleeting moment as she prepped her gear - Rogers flipped over that one swiftly. Tony smiling in wonder at an array of holograms with the innocent joy that only scientific discovery ever gave him. Loki holding a little girl who resembled the child who always made Loki pick her up when he came to her kindergarten except that half of her face was a skull, while an anthropomorphized wolf, serpent and eight-legged horse clustered around him tugging at his coat while he looked down with exasperated patience.
“Loki and his myth children! That’s perfect!” Romanoff was gleeful. Loki rolled his eyes, but could not restrain his smile. The way the monster-children looked up at him with such trust in the drawing was… cute. Nice.

There were other drawings. Random things Rogers saw around the city. People he had known before - his mother, Peggy Carter, Dr. Erskine, the Howling Commandos.

A dark-haired soldier in a crisp new uniform.

“Is that-” Banner stopped.

“That’s Bucky.”

“He’s very handsome,” Loki said after a moment of awkward silence. “I see why you liked him so much.”

Rogers looked at the drawing - Barnes in full uniform, right before shipping out, still untouched by what the war was going to do to him - for a moment before shutting the book. “A drawing can’t show why I liked him so much. He was so generous. So confident. So loyal.”

“I am sorry for your loss, Captain.”

Rogers managed a smothered chuckle. “If you can join my teammates in a group hug I think you can call me by my name.”

“As you wish. Steve.”

It sounded as if Steve had said it more to change the subject away from painful memories than because he cared about proper forms of address. All of the others could see this, and took the opening.

Barton picked it up first. “Yeah, I think this formality has gone on a little too long.” He looked at Loki. “It was - the right way to start. But we’ve all been living and working together for a while now. I think it’s time for first names.”

“I do appreciate that. Clint.”

The others began to chime in their agreement. Loki raised a hand. “Do not feel any of you are obliged to-”

“Modern Americans aren’t very formal,” Miss Potts - Pepper - cut in. “And the un-modern American among us has already offered on his own. That leaves the non-American….”

“…Who is modern enough not to be very formal either.” Romanoff shifted her gaze from Pepper to Loki. “Call me Natasha.”

“Natasha. It’s a beautiful name.”

“It’s one of the most popular in Russia.”

Tony had returned to his egg rolls and sake. “Speaking of the phrase ‘as you wish’, after we watch the artist movie we should continue with Loki and Steve’s pop culture education.”
“I’m always up for some R.O.U.S.’s.” Natasha poured herself more sake before passing the bottle to Clint.

“What are those?” Loki asked.

Tony looked so serious that he had to be joking. “One of the most dangerous animals on Earthgard.”

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“Those aren’t real,” Steve said later, after the scene in question.

“I am very glad - for Earth’s sake.”

“They are so! What do you think the Giant Rat of Sumatra was?”

Then Jarvis had to pause the movie while Pepper tried to explain Sherlock Holmes to Loki, and the humans spent nearly an hour figuring out which Sherlock movies and tv shows Steve and Loki needed to watch. The programming for the Tower’s next fortnight was worked out with the same amount of heated argument and careful planning as one of the Avengers’ missions.

For a moment, Loki found himself mentally stepping back and looking at the discussion from a distance.

His former enemies had, for all practical purposes, accepted him as one of them. They worked with him, listened to his ideas in discussions of strategy, fought alongside him. More importantly, they were willing to play with him. They teased him rather than taunted him. They shared meals and watched movies and told jokes with him there as if he had not imperiled their planet scant months before.

They had not forgotten, he knew. But they were willing to allow him to redeem himself, and more, treat him with kindness. Almost as if he were a friend.

Tony caught his eye and winked at him. Perhaps he was reading too much into it, but Loki believed that Tony had seen something of his feelings on his face.

And had responded with approval, not by reinforcing the boundaries.

Loki had to make a gesture of friendship in return. While the humans debated whether Sherlock Holmes and the Leading Lady was bad enough to be funny to watch or just plain bad - someone named Morgan Fairchild was playing someone named Irene Adler and all the humans (except for Steve and Natasha, who had never heard of Morgan Fairchild) agreed that this was a terrible thing - Loki decided what that would be, and formed his plans.

This was how he had always imagined shield-brothers could be.

Chapter End Notes
"Incognito" is a very good movie starring Jason Patric. If you have somehow managed not to know the significance of the phrase "as you wish" or what an R.O.U.S. is, go find "The Princess Bride" and watch it NOW. It is a basic text of our people. In one of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, Watson alludes to the cases he hasn't written up yet and one was "the Giant Rat of Sumatra". "Sherlock Holmes and the Leading Lady" is so bad it's funny. Morgan Fairchild was beautiful and a reasonably good actress, but Irene Adler she was *not*.
Some jerk who’d worked for Justin Hammer and still had some of the schematics for Hammer’s attempts to replicate Stark weapons decided this was his moment in the sun. He built a superweapon with the tech and materials he’d stolen from Hammer and started smashing up buildings and people in Manhattan.

The occupants of Avengers Tower showed up promptly to put a stop to it.

“It’s kinda nice to have a challenge for a change,” Natasha said into the comm, mid-battle.

“No, it isn’t,” Clint retorted.

“Guys, I’ve figured it out! We can’t get close enough to the device because its defenses are visually based. Loki’s the only Avenger who can go invisible,” Tony called out over the comm.

Loki promptly created doppelgangers and cloaked himself in order to approach the doomsday device. As he blasted it with his staff Lævateinn, he reminded them, “I am technically an ally, not an actual Avenger.” Presuming too much might give offense to his hosts.

“The heat of battle is always a great time to debate semantics instead of kicking ass with Damage Twig.” The Avengers had all been very amused at the literal translation of Lævateinn’s name.

“The device is destroyed. Now we should have little trouble taking our foes into custody.”

***

“So what do you guys want to eat?” Tony asked through the comm as he flew back to the Tower and Clint piloted the rest of them. “We just had pizza last night.”

Loki smiled, carefully arranging the mantle of gracious host onto himself. “Actually, I took the liberty of ordering a feast for us.”

Steve turned in his seat to look at him. “You did?”

“I thought it was time I returned your hospitality in some small measure. And I wanted my shield-brothers to experience an Asgardian style feast. I did my best to replicate our recipes; some of the
ingredients cannot be found on Earth, but I found approximations. I have had a caterer standing by with the order, waiting for our next battle. As soon as we were summoned, I notified them. There is enough variety that there should be something for everyone’s taste.”

“Sounds good to me,” Tony said. “I’d say I could eat a horse, but in present company that might be insensitive.”

Loki suppressed a sigh. Why did humans find that silly horse story so endlessly amusing?

Pepper was awaiting them in the Tower’s common area, where a small army of caterers was laying out an impressive array of platters. For a moment the Avengers just stared, because the table looked like a royal feast from a medieval movie. The aromas were downright intoxicating. At least six different varieties of roasted meat, all accompanied by stewed fruits of various sorts, and long thin loaves of a light brown bread sprinkled with different kinds of seeds.

The caterers finished arranging everything, Loki handed them an envelope, and they filed out, leaving the Avengers and their companions to it.

There was a whole pyramid of bottles of mead.

“Other beverages are of course available,” Loki informed them, “but I do think mead accompanies these dishes best.”

“Not a problem.” Tony snagged one of the bottles and opened it with one of the corkscrews provided.

“I’ve always meant to try mead sometime,” Clint admitted, opening another bottle and starting to fill goblets with it. They all took plates from a stack and started serving themselves.

As he sat down with roast chicken and stewed apricots, Steve looked at Loki. “Loki, thank you.”

“My pleasure. Let me know how you like that combination. Midgard does not have zallin fruits, but apricots seem fairly similar.”

Most of the humans chose to have several small portions of different meats so they could try a variety. “This is delicious,” Pepper declared after a mouthful of pork and apples. “How were you able to tell them how to prepare it? Can you cook?”

“I translated a few pages of an Asgardian cookbook. I can do simple cooking over a campfire, enough to make things edible, but this,” Loki gestured around the table, “is far beyond me.”

“You can cook over a campfire?”

“Of course. I am a prince of a warrior realm. War is not my chief calling but I have been on campaign many times.” Loki could not keep the defensive tone from his voice, not entirely.

“Prince. Weren’t there servants around, even on campaign?”

“I am a prince of Asgard, not Alfheim,” Loki snapped before he could remind himself that humans were a provincial species who could not realize what kind of insult they had just rendered him.

Before he could apologize, Tony leaned over his plate of beef, peaches and pears and spoke with exaggerated sincerity. “I would never think that you were from Alfheim.”

Loki laughed unwillingly. “I beg your pardon. The Elves are accomplished warriors, but Asgard
ridicules the way their nobility insist upon taking their comforts to war with them. Asgardian nobles make it a point of pride to live the same as common soldiers do during campaigns. We pitch our own tents, dig ditches, cook our food over campfires. It is good for morale that we share the hardships of all.”

“I don’t doubt you’re capable of that.” Natasha took a very small slice of bread and spread some of the stewed fruit on it. “But I can’t see you liking it.”

“I didn’t. It was my duty.” With a wrench in his stomach, Loki remembered Thor’s taunts and Odin’s disapproving scowl when Loki had complained about it after his first campaign, a thousand years ago. He hadn’t had any thought of escaping the discomfort, he had only been saying that he didn’t enjoy it, but they had been so contemptuous and it had taken years for him to feel they had forgotten. “Thor loved it.”

Bruce gave a little grin. “Yeah?”

Loki tried to set aside his anger at his not-brother and think of his kinder interpretations. “I think he enjoyed having life stripped down to its simplest elements. No elaborate rules of etiquette to recall, no long-term political concerns to worry about.”

Tony met and held Loki’s gaze. “Which reminds me. Who’s going to succeed to the throne?”

The room fell silent.

Loki spoke with careful evenness. “Mother hasn’t said. And I don’t envy her the choice.”

Clint lifted skeptical eyebrows. “Don’t you want to be king?”

“No one in their right mind would want to be a king. And neither would I. But the duty may fall to me however little I wish it.”

Bruce was watching the discussion carefully. “I get the impression that you’re her favorite.”

“There is more to consider. Thor - well, you’ve met him. He is violent and impulsive and not overbright. What kind of diplomat would he be? Remember that he tried to kill both Tony and Steve the moment he met them.”

Steve huffed. “Yeah, I remember. So you figure you’re the right choice?”


“Who do you think would be the better heir?” Pepper asked.

Loki sighed deeply. “Look at Asgard’s two princes. One is headstrong and knows of no solution to anything other than fighting and is never happier than when he is in battle. He is nonetheless beloved by many of the people, who share his lust for battle or are swept away by his boisterous charm.

“Then there is the one with the unmanly habit of scheming and manipulating people instead of killing them as a forthright man ought, who does magic and lies only with men, who was born a member of the most despised race in the Nine. But on the other hand he is clever and has served Asgard well as both a warrior and a diplomat, and certain of Asgard’s classes are fond of him, and given the opportunity he might win over the rest - but there is what he did to Jotunheim and to Midgard.”

“Maybe if your diplomacy succeeds in building good relations between Earth and Asgard and they see that you’ve won us over, they’ll - what’s so funny?”
“You do not understand. Asgard’s warrior class isn’t upset with me because I tried to destroy Jotunheim and tried to conquer Midgard. Asgard’s warriors are upset with me because I failed.”

There was a brief silence. Loki glanced around at them ironically.

“Try to look at it from their perspective. Jotunheim was a threat to Asgard. I failed to completely eliminate that threat. For now Jotunheim is no danger to Asgard, but who knows if in a thousand years or more the remaining Jotnar may find some way of rising up and attacking us again, with fresh grievances. It would be as if my grandfather… that is, Odin’s father, Bor, had allowed a few of the Dark Elves to escape and survive somehow instead of slaughtering every one of them.

“Similarly, Asgard’s age of conquest has dwindled away as Odin aged, but suppose it genuinely felt the need to conquer some other land - as this nation did with Germany and its allies a few decades ago,” Loki said, forestalling the humans’ protests. “I have not demonstrated that I am capable of doing so. Quite the contrary.

“But my worst liability as an heir is Thor - because for all of his life, he has expected the throne. If my mother names me the heir, he shall try to seize it, even if he does not truly want it, because he sees it as his. And I could not allow him to, and we might tear the Nine Realms apart between us.”

They all considered this in rather grim silence for a minute or two. Tony broke the silence.

“I don’t believe that you don’t have a plan.”

“At this point it is tenuous.” Loki turned his slice of roast goose into goose molecules with the side of his fork. “And just now, there is no action I can take.”

Tony gave him a look. “You can find a way. I have no doubt.”

“I don’t think Thor would ever yield the throne to me, but if I could be his right hand as we planned… if we could reconcile enough that he will listen to my counsel so I might temper his rashness…. But it will be difficult for us to reconcile at all.” Loki drank down half a goblet of mead. “Perhaps his time on Jotunheim will temper him, and with the passage of time the strife between us might ease enough that reconciliation might be possible. I don’t know if it ever will be possible. I am willing to try because of my duty to the realms, but - I am furious at him. This time I truly don’t know if I can reconcile with him.”

Loki stopped. He had not intended to share so many of his feelings, his doubts. The Avengers had made him feel entirely too at ease with them.

“You have to.”

Loki’s head jerked up at Steve’s voice. He and all of the other humans were regarding Loki with great seriousness.

“Second the motion,” Tony said. “I’m sorry but you have to. You’re stuck being royalty and you’re stuck having a messed up family, and you didn’t choose either one but because of it you don’t get to just let your life stay screwed up like the rest of us can.”

“You have to find some way of working things out with Thor.” Pepper was speaking with an attempt at gentleness, but the accustomed authority in her voice came through regardless. “We’ll get stomped if you don’t.”

Loki knew that, of course. This was one reason, aside from the love he had borne them both, that he had reined in his anger and hurt at his father and brother for so many centuries. Thor and Odin had
seemed to care little that those beneath them would suffer for their feuds and quarrels, but Loki knew it was his duty to care about such things. He had known from the day he returned to Asgard that this problem would have to be worked out, somehow.

But at times it was a heavy burden, and his shield-brothers’ kindness to him had made him speak unguarded.

“We’ll help if we can,” Bruce said.

That startled Loki. His eyes flitted about the table, and every one of them was nodding agreement. Their gazes on him were steady; their offer was in earnest.

How many times over the centuries had Loki been offered help?

Paradoxically, the very act of offering had Loki determined not to accept. Whatever solution he found to the problem before him, allowing these humans to aid him would imperil them.

His gaze rested on Steve, so young, so terribly brave, so earnest as he met Loki’s eyes. He could not allow these humans who had been so good to him to be endangered. He would solve the problem without involving them in the slightest.

Loki drew a deep breath. “I give you my word.”

He had no idea how he would keep his promise, but keep it he would.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, Loki, I find the silly horse story endlessly amusing too.
Chapter Summary

Loki knows how to deal with berserkers.

Tony thought it must be hard for a fledgling terrorist organization just starting out, trying to make a name for itself. It was a tough business, and if they didn’t make a solid beginning then no latent nutbars would join up with them, there wouldn’t be government task forces gathering intel on them and CNN specials wouldn’t get made about them. They’d just be one entry on a long list of low-priority threats. They had to find something really attention-getting to do to get their foot in the door.

Something like, oh, seizing an entire riverboat full of tourists and taking them all hostage.

Bruce stayed on the shore while Loki and the Avengers boarded the craft. Boats and giant rage monsters had compatibility issues. But as they’d suspected, some of the wanna-be terrorists were on the shore a bit ahead, waiting to liaison with their accomplices, and they were actually stupid enough to use the machine guns they’d managed to illegally acquire on the Hulk.

Seriously. Did nobody ever spend five minutes researching how the Hulk worked?

It didn’t take Earth’s Mightiest Heroes And Former Pretend Enemy long to crush the hopes and dreams of these bright-eyed hopeful baby terrorists. The only cloud in the ointment was that they still had a giant rage monster on their hands.

Trial and error had proven that soothing Hulk didn’t work. That hadn’t surprised Tony; few things are more enraging than having someone tell you to calm down or singing lullabies at you or something when you’re pissed off. Sometimes waking up Bruce’s brain did the trick, so Tony would talk science at him if he wasn’t too far gone. (“Holy shit, look! It’s the Higgs-Boson particle! Smash it!” had actually made Hulk laugh for the only time in known history and then re-Bruce himself.) Sometimes a shock, like falling 5000 feet, did the trick. Other times, they just had to find him some space where his rage could run its course without killing anybody.

“Jarvis, what’s in the area? Anyplace Hulk can let off some steam?”

“The abandoned Green Valley Coal Mine is a mere two hundred yards away, sir.” The coordinates appeared on Tony’s screen.

Tony relayed the intel to the others and then set about trying to lure Hulk to the abandoned mine while the others kept the civilians out of the way. Tony usually did most of the Hulk-wrangling, seeing as how he could fly and his suit protected his squishy mortal coil.

But after a couple of minutes, Hulk was still ignoring Tony’s efforts to steer him, and was making really big holes in the ground, and didn’t look like he was chilling out.

“Avengers,” Loki’s voice announced over the comms, “I am going to cast some illusions to try to lead Hulk to the mines. Do not be alarmed.”

A few seconds later, Tony was glad Loki had warned them. He wouldn’t have wanted to think the Chitauri that suddenly appeared were real.
Hulk made no such distinctions, however, and flung himself after the familiar monsters. Who conveniently sped towards the abandoned mine. Tony followed at a distance.

The mine mostly looked like an uneven valley, aside from the numerous “keep out” signs everywhere. When the Chitauri were about fifty yards away from it they abruptly sped up, sending phantom blasts back at Hulk. Infuriated, Hulk increased his own speed, hurling himself into the air when he neared the valley.

The illusory Chitauri all converged in the valley, and Hulk came down on them with his considerable weight and an infuriated roar. Turned out there had been a small concrete building under the illusions, so Hulk got the satisfaction of smashing it.

Hulk looked restlessly around for another target, growling. Obligingly, the ground literally opened up and a huge glass cage - that cage - rose up… crammed with Chitauri.

“Please tell me this is another illusion,” Tony said.

“It is, fear not,” Loki assured them, even as Jarvis explained, “My sensors show no solid objects where the caged Chitauri appear to be, sir.”

Hulk didn’t know that, though, and the combination of the cage intended for him and the aliens he had once battled freshly enraged him. He leapt high into the air and came down howling onto the illusion with earth-shattering force.

Hulk’s body crashed through five levels of mine before coming to a halt, lying facedown as if exhausted at last. It was frequently how Hulk’s rages ended.

Sure enough, Hulk stayed where he was, unmoving, and soon began to shrink back down to his normal size, the green slowly leaching from his skin. Tony kept watch over him while the other Avengers debriefed SHIELD, gave information to local cleanup, and dealt with the press. Natasha drew the short straw on that one this time.

Jarvis shared the impromptu press conference with Tony as it was going on. Tony didn’t pay close attention until one reporter asked, “So which Avenger is the physically strongest?”

“The Hulk, definitely. Next would be Loki, or Iron Man depending on which suit he’s wearing. Naturally Captain America comes next—”

“I thought Loki was just working with the Avengers. Is he a member now?”

“Oh, I misspoke. He’s integrated so well with the team that I sometimes forget.”

“Nicely done, Natasha,” Tony murmured to himself.

“How did you know to do that?” Clint asked Loki later over steaks.

“Bruce is not the first berserker I’ve dealt with. They need to feel they have very thoroughly smashed something before they can settle down. Cast an illusion that will entice them towards something with which they can have a satisfactorily solid collision and they have their necessary release.”

Everyone considered this in silence for a long minute. At length Tony gave Loki a narrow-eyed look.
“…Did you used to make Thor fall off cliffs when he was berserking?”

Loki only smiled.

Possibly they shouldn’t have laughed so hard at that, but they did.
Chapter Summary

Bruce forgets that Loki isn't an Avenger, the two of them have a late-night conversation, and Rhodey drops by for a suit upgrade.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Renne Michaels and notwithweaponsbutideas for beta reading!

Trigger warnings: suicidal ideation, mention of Natasha's forced sterilization.

Now that a precedent had been established, each of the Avengers occasionally joined Loki in visiting schools. They always told a story or two of their own, usually a suitably edited account of an Avengers mission. Bruce considered this a problem, as his memories of what Hulk did were invariably hazy, but he put enough together about the time he rescued his ex-girlfriend from three Hulkhounds to satisfy his audience.

He didn’t expect the children to be anything other than terrified of someone who turned huge and destructive, but they weren’t. Maybe children intuitively understood what being unable to control one’s emotions was like. Or maybe storytime with Loki had raised their threshold of things to be afraid of.

After the stories the children always had questions. Some of the younger ones who hadn’t yet quite grasped the difference between real and make-believe would ask him things like whether he knew Superman. He didn’t have the heart to explain that Superman was only a story. They would figure that out soon enough. “You didn’t tell them you knew Superman, did you?” he asked Loki with sudden suspicion one day.

“No, but thank you for the suggestion.” At Bruce’s look, Loki rolled his eyes. “Where is the sport in lying to small children? All adults do that.” For a second, Loki’s face froze at a grim memory before he controlled his expression again and turned back to the children gathered around them.

“No, but thank you for the suggestion.” At Bruce’s look, Loki rolled his eyes. “Where is the sport in lying to small children? All adults do that.” For a second, Loki’s face froze at a grim memory before he controlled his expression again and turned back to the children gathered around them.

There were always children curious about why Bruce’s pants were never ripped off when he transformed. He explained that Stark Industries had developed fabric that could usually withstand a Hulk-out. He did not mention that occasionally it failed, but most news outlets had sufficient self-preservation not to run footage of it. (Some were afraid of the Hulk, others were afraid of the legal team Pepper had put together to look out for the Avengers.)

Occasionally they asked him why Hulk was green. Bruce himself wasn’t entirely sure, but he tried to give them a simple version of the simplest theory. It seemed to satisfy them.

One day a little boy of about eight informed Bruce, “You’re my sister’s favorite Avenger.”
He smiled, tried to joke with the child. “Oh, yeah? So who’s yours? Captain America? Loki? Oh, um-?”

“Yeah, Loki!” the boy agreed with enthusiasm, and several of the children agreed. The others all piped up with their own favorites. Every member of the team had a fan club in this classroom.

Loki sensibly allowed all the children to cast their votes before clarifying the point about his membership.

“New drawings on the fridge, I see.”

Bruce, who had been gazing into space with a cooling mug of tea in front of him, looked up with a start. Natasha had just sauntered into the kitchen and started rummaging through the cabinets.

“Oh. Yeah. I went to a school with Loki yesterday.” One of the new drawings was of Hulk scowling furiously as he smashed Chitauri, the other of Iron Man flying through the air with Captain America at his side, supported by Iron Man’s arm around his shoulders. The media loved that, they were always running photos and film clips of them doing that.

“Want some popcorn?”

“Sure.”

She put a bag in the microwave. “Kids do anything especially funny?”

He laughed, nudged out of his gloom for a second. “When I first got there, one little boy - I think these were six - assured me very solemnly that he was one of the good guys.”

She grinned as she poured herself some limeade, a recent discovery she had taken to with gusto. “I am very glad to hear that.”

The memories Bruce had been pushing away all day refused to be ignored anymore and pushed into his consciousness with full force. Memories of being six years old, still adjusting to living with his aunt because his parents were gone and he couldn’t remember how they had been taken away from him. The vague intuition he’d had even then that there was something wrong with him, years before that could be considered true.

Natasha’s voice broke into his thoughts again. “I think Loki is more sentimental about children than he pretends.”

“His culture doesn’t exactly encourage sentimentality.” He watched her moving around the kitchen, getting bowls for the popcorn, confidence in her slightest movement. She was so beautiful she didn’t seem entirely real to him sometimes. He would never have expected to see anyone like her except on a movie screen, and here she was, a friend. A shield-brother.

(Shield-maidens were still referred to as shield-brothers, Loki had explained months ago. In Asgard’s highly patriarchal culture, the usage signified that the warrior woman had taken on the obligations of a man. And was to be treated as such.)

She sat beside him and they ate in silence for a couple of minutes. He only ate a little. He didn’t have much appetite. “Is something on your mind?” he said at last, hesitantly. He’d spent so much time distancing himself from other people to protect them from his Other Guy, he had half forgotten how to do that whole “friendship” thing.
Honestly, he hadn’t been all that great at it even before.

She nodded at the refrigerator, at the bright crayon scrawls. “The new ones got me to thinking. I usually don’t dwell on this.”

“‘Yes?’

A pause as she fished for the most buttered pieces. When she spoke her voice was uncharacteristically halting. “I can’t have children. The people who took me and trained me, they sterilized all of us as soon as we finished puberty.”

“That’s… that’s terrible.”

“I don’t think I’d want to have children, but it bothers me a lot that it isn’t my choice.”

It wasn’t subtle, but it didn’t have to be. “I’m sorry.”

There wasn’t anything else to say, but it would do. She would understand.

“Natasha, are you afraid of me?” The question surprised him more than it did her.

She met his gaze evenly, honestly. “Not anymore. I trust you, Bruce.” When he only looked down at his mostly-full bowl of popcorn, she added, “And I trust the Other Guy too.”

A minute later Clint breezed in, freshly showered after a workout. “I’m beat. Hey, popcorn!” He helped himself to a handful from Bruce’s neglected bowl. “That makes me want to watch a movie. Have you guys ever seen *The Last Remake of Beau Geste*?”

Natasha arched an eyebrow. “That sounds… lame.”

“It isn’t. It’s a hilarious comedy. Made by the same guys who made *Young Frankenstein*. I’ve been wanting to watch it again and I can’t when Loki’s in the building because it has daddy issues and brother issues in it.”

“Mr. Friggjarson is not expected back until next week, Agent Barton,” Jarvis informed them.

“Next week?” Bruce frowned. “Where is he?”

“Geneva. He is carrying on diplomacy on Asgard’s behalf.”

That gave Bruce a moment of amusement despite his gloom. “I love irony.”

“When the frost giant is away, the Avengers will watch movies with daddy issues. C’mon, join me. This movie doesn’t get enough love.”

Bruce could see what they were doing, but he went along with it, if only out of consideration for people who were trying to be good to him.

Besides, maybe it would work.

The movie was hilarious, and it did cheer him up. For a while.

Over the next week, Tony kept more regular lab hours than usual, and most of his projects were ones that involved Bruce. Jane Foster also made a random appearance. Sometimes Bruce thought she
would bring a new Bifrost into existence from sheer passion for the idea.

Bruce knew this was Tony’s way of cheering him up. It even worked some days, for a few hours. But when the high of scientific insight wore off, he was still a man with a monster on his back, still a man whose mere emotions were a peril to everyone around him. Still a man cut off from the kinds of bonds he had most wanted, even if he was no longer alone.

It was almost three in the morning. Tony had gone to bed with Pepper at a reasonable hour and hadn’t emerged, so maybe he was getting his weekly night’s sleep.

Good. Bruce had the lab to himself.

He went to the prototype Einstein-Rosen device they’d been working on, powered by an arc reactor, and started programming.

It was a prototype, meaning it wasn’t anywhere near ready to use. The coordinates couldn’t be controlled at all yet, which was why Earth didn’t have a Bifrost yet. Anything that it transported would end up in some random point in deep space.

For Bruce’s purposes, that was just fine.

He just didn’t want another night like this. Another night when he couldn’t sleep because his head was too full of the things that had gone wrong, the things he’d never have, the lack of any escape. And yes, now he had a building full of people who accepted him and weren’t afraid of him and even valued both his selves but none of them could make it stop.

“Bruce. Do not do this.”

Bruce’s head jerked up. Loki was standing in the doorway, expression grave.

Hell of a time for him to get back from Europe.

Bruce huffed a laugh. “You’re trying to convince me to live?”

Compassion in his eyes, Loki took a step inside the room, parting his lips to speak.

“Stay there.”

Loki stopped immediately. “I will not try to stop you by force. As if force would work on you. But I will try to persuade you. Give me five minutes and perhaps I can give you your life – or at least a more peaceful death.”

Bruce looked at the apparatus, which offered him release at last, and sighed. Suicide would still exist five minutes from now. “So persuade.”

“If you truly wish for death, I will try to help you find a way to it.” That startled Bruce, but Loki’s expression was quiet, serious. “But this method did not work for me, and I doubt it will work for you either.” He drew a breath. “The result was more agonizing than words can express.”

Bruce kept his hands on the control panel, but did not continue programming. “You survived spaghettification.” His voice was full of skepticism.

“The first thing a sorcerer of quality learns is to make himself as difficult to kill as possible. This is not an unmixed blessing. Had I not spent a thousand years imbuing myself with seiðr, you could
have freed me from the fate I expected once Thanos realized I had betrayed him.”

“You were trying to commit suicide by Hulk?”

Loki held his gaze. “I wasn’t certain I should tell you, but yes.”

“That really isn’t strengthening your case. Reminding me that I really am a monster.”

“Join the club. Oh, wait… you did.”

So Loki had picked up some Earth slang from the gang. “Funny.”

“It is because of my seiðr that I survived falling through the wormhole the destruction of the Bifrost created. The Hulk might survive it as well, which will mean….”

“A whole lot of pain.”

Bruce looked at the device with regret. Sometimes he wanted out so badly. He just wanted it to stop.

“The sorceresses of Vanaheim may be able to grant you death, if you truly wish for it. They are the most advanced healers in the Nine Realms. But by the same token, they may also be able to cure you, to rid you of your berserker form forever.”

For a second Bruce felt so angry that the Other Guy stirred within him. “You knew there might be a cure and you didn’t tell me?”

Loki did not allow himself to flinch, but Bruce could discern the tension in his stance. Still Loki stood his ground, holding Bruce’s gaze and speaking evenly. “Had I offered the day I arrived, what would you have thought?”

Bruce saw it and the Other Guy receded. “That you wanted to be rid of the most credible threat against you on this planet.”

“Precisely. I was waiting to tell you until I had earned a measure of trust from you. If you wish to go to Vanaheim to see if they can cure you, I have no doubt my mother will transport us.”

Bruce had not moved, but in the last thirty seconds his universe had changed completely. He now had reasonable hope of a cure - or an escape.

“After Thanos is defeated.” Bruce stepped away from the prototype, tired but lighter than he’d felt in a long time. “I was being selfish tonight, but I’ll do my part for that.”

“That is very brave of you.”

“I’m not brave enough to contemplate what will happen if we don’t take him down.”

“May I come in now?”

Bruce nodded casually, and Loki approached him. In those pale green eyes Bruce could see: Loki understood only too well what it was like to wish for death. Loki also understood how difficult it was to reach anyone across that abyss. Someone who was ready to die might as well be on the other side of the galaxy.

“Bruce, if you wish for me to keep you company at moments like this… you might not care for my presence, but if you do-“
“Actually, you may be the one person who’ll understand. Maybe even better than Tony.” Tony was the only other member of the team who got it. The other Avengers pitied him, but they couldn’t see it at all. They all wanted to live, always had.

“Anything you wish to say about it, I swear I will never repeat without your leave. And allow me to remind you that lying is one thing. Oathbreaking is another entirely.” Loki’s tone when he said the word “oathbreaking” spoke volumes about his culture’s opinion of the practice.

Bruce smiled tiredly. “Duly noted. Right now, though, I’m going to eat something sweet and then sleep. Why don’t you join me. I think there’s still some doughnuts.”

“If not, doubtless there is something else good in the kitchen. There invariably is.”

“One thing I’ll say for my ‘shield-brothers’, they appreciate good food.”

They ate slightly stale but still good doughnuts with decaf coffee. Bruce asked a couple of small-talk questions about Loki’s diplomatic mission and received equally superficial replies. Once his coffee was finished, he said good night and departed for his suite.

Right before he dropped off, he realized he probably should have thanked Loki. But gratitude wasn’t quite what he felt.

Maybe approval, that like Bruce himself - like all of them - Loki was trying to wipe out the red in his ledger.

“Maybe I’ll give him a gold star,” Bruce muttered, shifting position a little. A minute later he fell into relieved sleep.

When Rhodey landed on the Tower’s balcony and used Tony’s nifty armor-removing bots as he strode into the Tower’s common area, sitting around it were Dr. Bruce Banner, Prince Loki of Asgard, and Captain America.

It might have been intimidating as hell, except that his best friend was Tony Stark, genius inventor, billionaire, superhero, and pain in the ass. Once you got used to Tony Stark, nobody could make you blink.

They had been sitting around dawdling over post-breakfast coffee, it seemed, but all rose to greet him. “You must be Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes.” Captain Freaking America was coming over to shake his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Steve Rogers wasn’t enlisted anymore, but Rhodey couldn’t help grinning at the realization that Captain America had just called him sir. “Likewise, Captain. Call me Rhodey.” Rhodey shook the man’s hand.

“Rhodey. Steve Rogers, please call me Steve. I hear you’re called the Iron Patriot now.”

“They decided ‘War Machine’ was too aggressive. I’ll give up the name, but not the suit.”

Rhodey deliberately turned to Bruce Banner next and shook his hand. “Dr. Banner. Hope Tony isn’t giving you too much trouble.”

A lazy smile spread over Bruce’s stubbly face. His dark eyes were warm and amused. “We can handle Tony, Lieutenant-“
“Call me Rhodey. And can you? Really?”

“Well, Pepper can handle Tony, so we ask her nicely….” All present shared a chuckle. “Honestly, Tony’s been great.”

“And he speaks highly of you, Lieutenant Colonel.”

Rhodey turned to the alien. He really wanted to let loose on the guy. Maybe with words. Maybe with the suit. Yeah, by now everyone knew he’d been forced to invade, but still he’d brought an alien army to Rhodey’s planet, Rhodey’s country. He’d damn near killed Rhodey’s best friend.

But orders from on high were clear. Rhodey’s superiors wanted Loki kept sweet because Earth needed allies and the ruler of Asgard was his mom. And she had made him ambassador to the planet he’d invaded. And Tony vouched for the guy. So no cussing Loki out. Or putting the suit back on and beating him up.

Duty only constrained him so far, though. Keeping his hands clasped in front of him, he nodded at Loki. “Ambassador,” he said, his tone formal as if he’d never heard a thing about Loki until this moment.

Loki perceived the snub and accepted it with graceful resignation. “If you will all excuse me, there is business I must attend to. Goodbye, Bruce, Steve, Lieutenant Colonel.” He took his coffee cup to the dishwasher and then disappeared into the elevator.

Rhodey said, “Jarvis, Tony promised he’d be in the lab this morning to improve my suit’s interface.”

“That… would be appreciated. The problem is that the morphologic nanoparticle bundles were designed for his Mark III, but Iron Patriot has different functions.”

Bruce huffed a laugh and gestured Rhodey towards the elevator. “I forgot you went to MIT with Tony. I can speak English with you.”

“I’m used to it. Our friendship has survived much worse than this.” And would continue to. Whatever his faults, Tony’s soul was pure gold.

In the lab with the relevant parts of the Iron Patriot suit, Bruce and Rhodey were soon deep in running diagnostics and discussing the alterations they should make. When they came up for air, it was mid-afternoon and they were both hungry - they’d been so absorbed they hadn’t even noticed it.

They returned to the common area to find some lunch. In response to Rhodey’s question, Jarvis admitted that Tony was still sleeping it off.

“I can’t believe he did this to me. He knew I was coming today.”
Realization crossed Bruce’s face. “Oh. Oh. I see. He did this on purpose.” Bruce shook his head as he opened the fridge. “Sandwiches okay? Turkey, ham or roast beef?”

“Turkey. What do you mean, he did this on purpose?”

Bruce was lining ingredients up on the counter. Rhodey accepted defeat and got out plates, knives and potato chips.

“I’ve been… pretty down lately. Tony’s coping mechanisms are alcohol and science. I don’t drink since the accident, so he’s been making sure I had plenty of fun science to do. He set us up.”

Damn. It was just like Tony, doing a good thing and covering it up with pissing everyone off. “Stop that, now I can’t be mad at him.” The two of them assembled their sandwiches side by side. “Did it work?” You couldn’t be Tony Stark’s friend without realizing how debilitating depression could be. No wonder Tony had adopted Bruce and was trying to take care of him.

“I’m actually doing a lot better, but Tony didn’t know that yet.” Bruce smiled at him, a different, more sincere smile than the amused one he’d bestowed earlier, and Rhodey felt like he’d won a prize. “It’s been a really fun day. Thanks.”

“You’re the one who upgraded my suit. Thank you.”

They took seats and started eating. After a few bites, Rhodey said, “Loki doesn’t seem too afraid of you. That surprised me, given what you did to him.”

Bruce shrugged. “He knows I won’t smash him unless he gives me a reason.” That lazy amused smile again. “He also knows that if he gives me a reason, I will smash him. He survived getting smashed. That doesn’t mean he enjoyed it.”

Rhodey smiled. “On behalf of Earth, thanks.”

“Anytime you need a hostile alien smashed, Rhodey.”

Chapter End Notes

The Hulkhounds are from the movie “Hulk” starring Eric Bana.

Loki’s remark about making oneself difficult to kill is from the comics - the issue where Malekith made his first appearance, in fact.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spaghettification is a real thing which Loki would’ve gone through when he fell into that wormhole.

Decades ago I would dress up as Dorothy or someone for kids' birthday parties. Before I did any I watched someone else do a party as Batman. The birthday boy jumped up and down, excitedly shouting to the other kids, "I told you he was coming! I told you!" and then very, *very* solemnly said, "Batman, *I’m* one of the *good* guys."
Bruce’s memories of what he did as the Hulk were invariably hazy, so often when the team was having their post-battle feast, Jarvis ran footage of the fight for him to see. Sometimes the others ignored it, other times they watched and made running commentary.

One day as they gorged themselves on curry and mango lassis after wrecking the Wrecking Crew, Bruce chuckled after watching a recording of Clint leaping from his vantage point to land on Bulldozer’s back just as he had succeeded in knocking Loki down and inflicting some actual damage. Bulldozer’s weapons were impressive, so Clint was merciless in taking him down.

“What’s so funny?” Clint asked.

“You’re stealing my gimmick. I’m supposed to be the one who smashes people.”

“He was trying to smash Loki. I had to.” Clint snorted. “That’ll teach him to mess with an Avenger.”

There was a brief silence as they all realized what Clint had said.

Clint and Loki both tried to speak, but Tony got there first. “Okay, this is ridiculous. Every single one of us has forgotten you’re not a ‘real’ Avenger by now. Time to go ahead and make it official. All in favor, say aye.”

Now Loki looked actually alarmed. “Tony, I am greatly honored, but this is not a step to be taken lightly. You should all take a few days to consider it, and then take a vote without me present, and then tell me if-”

“Aye,” Clint said.

Loki whipped his head to look at him, shocked. Clint held his gaze, almost challenging.

“Aye,” Natasha said, and the other two followed.


Loki looked around at his former foes. All of them were regarding him with seriousness which, on every face, slowly dissolved into small smiles.
He swallowed. Took a moment. And at last spoke.

“I have been a warrior for a thousand years, but only here have I known true shield-brothers.”

The PR department Pepper had hired for the Avengers issued a brief statement announcing Loki’s new official status. People with nothing better to do wrote editorials and blog posts denouncing or supporting the move. The Avengers ignored them. But they couldn’t ignore Fury when he showed up at the Tower to argue about it.

Loki sat quietly as the humans debated, listening.

“Did you not think that maybe you should have consulted me about this?” Fury demanded.

Tony pretended to think. “Um… no. No, we didn’t.”

“The Avengers was your idea, but we are the Avengers,” Clint informed him. “It’s up to us who joins us.”

“Have you forgotten that thing where he mind-controlled you? Or have you forgiven him?” Fury’s voice grew sarcastic.

Clint met his gaze. “I don’t know if I can forgive him… but moving on, that I can do.”

“When Queen Frigga told us she wanted to send Loki here, I asked her to send Thor instead.” Steve’s boyish face was solemn. “I could not have been more wrong. None of us has any common ground with Thor, but Loki is ideally suited to be a part of our team.”

Fury’s eye widened, then narrowed. “You’re gonna have to break that down for me.”

“Loki and I both spent our whole lives being bullied, for starters.”

“And you both resisted the temptation to become bullies yourselves, when you finally had the power to,” Bruce pointed out, smiling at Steve and then Loki.

“Not to mention Loki and Star Spangles both have a habit of solving problems by way of self-sacrifice. You gotta work on that, both of you.” Both of them nodded wry acknowledgement and Tony continued. “Loki and I both were captured by evil people and tortured into making weapons for them, and had to betray our torturers for the greater good. Not to mention that both our fathers thought of us only as means to an end.” He favored Nick with the cocky grin that news photographers loved. Nick failed to love it. “Plus we’re both lone tormented geniuses surrounded by people who only value us for our good looks.”

Loki laughed. Clint gave Tony a quelling look (which as usual failed to quell him). “You two have the same humility as well.” He looked at Fury. “Loki and I both….” He stopped.

“Both have been magically compelled to do evil by hostile aliens,” Loki supplied.

“Yeah, that.”

“Loki and I both were kidnapped as children by evil people who forced us to kill for them.” Natasha’s voice was cool. “We both have red in our ledgers. We’re both trying to wipe it out.”

Bruce made his contribution. “Loki and I both have another form that we hate and can’t get rid of. We’ve both tried to escape by death, and death has rejected us both.”
Fury glared around at all of them. Steve stood up and took a step towards him.

“Sir, you asked us to let Loki serve his sentence of reparations in our Tower so that we’d be there to stop him if he was ever a threat again. But it turned out to be a good call for a completely different reason. He fits with us. He’s one of us.”

A long and heavy silence fell, until Loki broke it in a soft voice.

“I finally find loyalty here - where I least deserve it.”

Chapter End Notes

The conversation between the Avengers and Fury is inspired by a brilliant comment Smallpotato made on the second chapter about how perfectly Loki and the Avengers fit together. Ever since that’s been a major theme of this fic.
http://archiveofourown.org/comments/57235990
Late that night, after Bruce had gone to bed and Tony had the lab to himself, Loki came in. Tony didn’t bother to look up from his tabletop hyperloop model (he was going to crack this before Elon did, dammit, Rhodey had bet him a pack of Vieille Bon Secours that he couldn’t).

Loki came in and sat on the stool nearest Tony. After a minute, he just plunged right in. That was one of the things Tony enjoyed about Loki: sometimes he’d just get right to it instead of wasting time with chitchat like most people usually did.

Now Loki said, “You planned this. You’ve been nudging the rest of them towards accepting me for months.”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

That was the $556,315 question (having adjusted the $64,000 question for inflation). And the answer was too complicated to put into one neat compact sentence. So Tony started with, “Thirteen years ago I was an asshole one night, and as a result my girlfriend is a human torch. Hitting doesn’t solve everything.”

Dum-E approached Loki, hoping for attention. Loki absently patted him as he supplied Tony’s answer. “Now that other worlds are taking an interest in Midgard, Midgard needs allies. I am the ambassador and prince of the most powerful realm in the Nine.”

“Making nice with you is in Earth’s interests. And I kind of live on Earth.”

Loki was still studying him, as if answers might be written on Tony’s face. Well, given Loki’s mojo at reading people, they might be. “You want the knowledge I am giving you, both for your own curiosity and because humanity will benefit from it.”

“You really have handed us the keys to the Ferrari,” Tony acknowledged, arranging the tiny linear induction motors along the tube. “Dum-E, bring me some air compressors. The smallest ones we’ve got.”

Loki gave Dum-E a final pat and let him go questing. “Won’t so much new knowledge disrupt Midgard?”
People always said that. Just let things keep sucking because God forbid people have to adjust. “I think Midgard is already pretty disrupted. Besides, it’ll take years for us to apply it. Years just for us to understand it enough to apply it.”

“But when it does….”

“Yes. Implementing Asgardian tech will cause problems. Cause shifts in the economy, stuff like that.” As infuriating as Tony found that argument, it was valid. Not everyone was as adaptable as he was. Personality-wise and circumstance-wise. “For me, that’s a road bump. For a lot of people it could ruin their lives.” Tony started welding the motors to the tube. “I’ve ruined enough lives of total strangers because I was doing what I do and not taking care of the results. Pepper’s put together a brain trust of professional smart people who’re working on figuring out ways to unleash this tech with the least disruption. Ways to hopefully solve the problems at the same time as we cause them.”

“‘Professional smart people’?”

Pepper didn’t like him calling them that. It was just such convenient shorthand. “Economists, historians, psychologists, sociologists… people who can try to predict what the results will be and how to make those results beneficial instead of traumatic.” Something occurred to him as Dum-E returned with the compressors. “You should sit in on their conferences sometime. They come from different schools of thought, we’re not banking on any one paradigm being the right one, and they fight like Cap debating baseball or something.” Loki joining in would be fun as hell to watch.

“I would enjoy that. But Tony, I was already Midgard’s friend. My remorse alone would have guaranteed that I protected Midgard’s interests in every way I could. You now have my affection as well - but you did not need it.”

As Tony had expected, Loki had grasped all of his reasons - except one.

He put his work down and looked at Loki. “I’m not doing this just for Earth, Loki.”

Loki stared at him, eyes wide and yearning and full of need. He really wasn’t that good a liar when his emotions were engaged. Asgardians were just too obtuse to see heartbreak when it was showcased on somebody’s face.

Tony was taking advantage of that for Earth’s sake, but he was doing so ethically. He would play on Loki’s neediness, but he would also fulfill those needs the Viking jocks in the sky had left unsatisfied for the past thousand years.

Now Loki actually looked frightened. More than he’d been in the footage of The Other magically torturing him from across the galaxy. More than he’d been when the Hulk was coming to smash him. Pain, he could face. Hurt his feelings, though….

Tony gave a mirthless chuckle. “It’s like looking in a mirror.”

Loki was seeing it now, all right. “You wanted,” he said slowly, “to gift me with affection and understanding… because you see yourself in me.”

“After Afghanistan, I came home to people who loved me, but none who knew what I needed. Pepper is the best person ever, but she doesn’t understand. She cares, but she can’t understand. I don’t want her to understand.”

“So you’re trying to….” Loki had to stop. Draw a breath. “To give me what you would have wanted, when you first came home.”
Yes. Tony would vicariously heal himself through Loki, through watching someone with an almost identical ordeal behind him get what they had both needed.

“One thing I did get, when I got home? Was a chance to redeem myself. I think you deserve that too.”

And if Loki, a literal alien invader, could be one of the good guys, surely so could the Merchant of Death. And so could a couple of professional assassins. And a guy prone to really bad temper tantrums.

They all needed Loki as much as Loki needed them.

Loki was still putting the pieces together. “So you’ve created everything you wanted. Ways of wiping the red from your ledger - inasmuch as such a thing is possible. Loyal friends who understand your trauma and fight at your side. Who drink with you, break bread with you, watch movies and do sorcery with you every day.”

“I was always a lone wolf. I’d sneak out of bed before my partners woke up and hide in my lab until they left. I’d escape from social events and come home to my robots and my heavy metal and be so relieved.” He remembered one night coming home after spending days impressing people and checkmating people and just generally dealing with people, telling the ‘bots “Daddy’s home” and dancing to some Black Sabbath while Dum-E brought him a Scotch. And then spending the next 24 hours building a new suit before sleep finally caught up with him. That had been a good day. “And now I’m in a real relationship and I have a whole building full of buddies.”

“And former enemies.”

“Buddies,” Tony insisted.

Loki looked away for a minute, blinking. Looked back to Tony. Spoke softly. “And after creating everything you wanted… you gave it to me. As a gift.”

And Loki clearly knew that gift’s value.

“Dude. You’re sneaking off to help Clint and Natasha rescue orphans. I’d say I backed the right horse even if it doesn’t have eight legs.”

Only a brief widening of green eyes betrayed Loki’s surprise. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Tony smiled back. “I didn’t think you did.” He got up and opened a cabinet which contained a jumble of grimy tools and a large bottle of whiskey. He poured a drink for each of them. “Which reminds me. I’ve been thinking about one thing we might be able to do to help you improve your relationship with Thor.”

Loki smiled, a little amused, and shook his head. “I am grateful, but I cannot involve the Avengers in this. I would not endanger any of you, not for all the Nine Realms, not after you have-”

Loki stopped. Tony knew his expression was livid.

Tony forced a breath into his lungs. He tried to use his inside voice. “The last time I was this pissed off at you, you had just thrown me out a window.” At Loki’s stricken expression, he forced himself to soften just a tiny bit. “Don’t look like that. You got past the bouncers and the velvet ropes, that means that when I get pissed we duke it out until we work it out. You don’t get thrown out now, your membership is paid up.”
Loki drew a ragged breath. He was actually shaking. Tony wanted to hug the guy, but they needed to get this straight.

“You’re a thousand years and change old, you’re from a planet with all this advanced magitech, you’re a former king, for chrissake. And maybe a future one. And up until now, you’ve been treating us ‘mortals’ like grownups. Sharing the tech with us. Not trying to do all our fighting for us with your snazzy alien magic. Listening to what we want for our world instead of warping us into an imitation Asgard.

“And suddenly you’re telling us it’s too dangerous to play with the big kids? When the fate of our planet depends on those big kids? Fuck you. We decide what we’re willing to risk. You don’t decide that for us.”

Loki swallowed and bowed his head slightly, not breaking their held gaze. Giving in. “You are right, Tony. This is your decision to make, and that of your… our shield-brothers.” Loki tried to make that last bit casual, but he was basking in being able to say our.

“Let’s drink to that.” They both did.

“So what is your idea?”

“When - if - Thor is king, he’ll be more likely to listen to you if the other people around you guys are listening to you. You’ll have to train the royal advisors or whatever you guys have to treat you with respect. I expect you’ve thought of that.”

Loki smiled, appreciative. “As a matter of fact, I have numerous plans for how to do that very thing. For the most part, it will have to wait until my service here is done.”

“Any idea how long that’ll be?”

“My mother has not said, but I am certain I will be here for a long time yet.” He tilted his head. “You have good instincts. I have actually been trying to do what you suggest for centuries, but Odin always sabotaged my efforts.”

Thanks, Immortal Space Hitler, for leaving such a big mess for the rest of us to clean up. “Bastard. Well, now that he isn’t here to screw stuff up, we can have nice things. I don’t see any way we can help you with the advisors and the court people - if you think of one, tell us - but we can help you with a few people who have influence with Thor. Specifically, his pet jocks.”

“Sif and the Warriors Three.”

“Right. They like fighting, right? Well, we Avengers fight a lot. We ask your mother to loan them to us, one at a time. We let them join us in a few good fights, we party with them, we demonstrate how much we like you.” He tipped the rest of his drink back and poured them both another. “I don’t expect miraculous results, but-”

“But it will definitely be a start. That is an excellent idea, Tony. If our shield-brothers agree to it, I will put the request to my queen.” He hesitated. “And perhaps….”

“Perhaps?”

“In a few years, when there has been more time for his anger and mine to ebb, when there is a suitably dire threat, we should ask Thor to help us combat it. If he and I fight side by side, without his friends to sway him against me-”
“And he sees his human buddies treating his little brother as a friend - yeah, I’m liking this.”

“It will remind him of the best times between us. The times when I hoped we could be the brothers we should be.”

“Do you still love him?” Tony’d been waiting for the right moment to ask.

Loki looked into his glass for a long minute before answering. “He is my brother.”

That wasn’t particularly illuminating for an only child, but the issue was probably clear as mud to Loki himself. “We’ll put it to the others over pizza.”

“Thank you, Tony. And I am grateful you forgave being patronized faster than you forgave being defenestrated.”

“If I refused to be friends with everyone who tried to kill me….” Tony shrugged.

Loki put down his glass and stared at Tony. He looked sincerely amazed.

“What?”

“You didn’t… you think I was actually trying to kill you?”

Had Loki forgotten how much more breakable humans were than Asgardians? “That is the usual result of throwing someone off of a skyscraper, yeah.”

Loki was incredulous. “Someone who does not have a flying suit of armor.”

“Wait, you….”

“You don’t kill Iron Man by throwing him out of a window.”

“Point.” Tony wanted to believe him. But if he was lying….

“If I had wanted to kill you, I would have run you through with the spear which you might recall was pointed at your chest at that very moment.”

He wasn’t lying. “You knew the suit would save me.”

Loki was looking away, thoughts visibly racing. Tony waited. Eventually Loki looked at him, obviously seeing something new.

“You did all of this - you showed this much generosity and forgiveness - to someone you believed had tried to kill you?”

“You know my reasons. We were just talking about them.”

“Even so. You allowed me to live in your home.”

“I am more than a little crazy.”

Loki shook his head, gazing at him. “No. That you would put aside such a grievance, befriend someone you believed posed a threat to you, for the good of your realm…. You have personally taken the responsibility for your realm’s welfare. I have always respected you, Tony Stark, but I underestimated you.”
“I put a lot of effort into being underestimated.”

Loki was still giving him that unsettlingly intent gaze. “You are not merely a warrior. Not merely a sorcerer. Certainly not merely a merchant.” He straightened on the stool, inclined his head solemnly. “You are a prince.”

Tony wouldn’t have used that word, but he knew what Loki meant. Loki wasn’t wrong.

Tony spent a lot of time misdirecting people’s attention, letting them see the party boy and the superhero and even the inventor, so that all that flash and noise would distract them from exactly what Loki had just discerned. But now he was finding that being recognized, from someone who played a long game, just like he did, was gratifying.

He let Loki see all of that in his face for a minute. One prince to another.

Then he cracked a smile. “Does that make Pepper a princess?”

Loki smiled. “I think Pepper Potts is a princess regardless of whether or not her consort is a prince.”

“Consort. That’s one thing I’ve never been called before.”

“I’ve encountered so few people capable of thinking in the long term.”

“Well, I kind of have to. I mean, this thing,” Tony tapped the arc reactor casually, “could kill me any minute, so I have to-”

“What?” Loki’s voice was barely a whisper, but it made Tony stop.

Loki’s eyes were wide and horrified. It was impossible for him to get paler than he usually was, so instead he had turned sort of grey. It was disconcerting.

Tony tried to speak calmly. He had come to trust Loki, but he didn’t like Loki when he was angry. “I don’t publicize this, for obvious reasons, but yeah, there’s no telling when it’ll stop keeping the shrapnel out of my heart. Maybe another fifty years, maybe another fifty seconds. Really, it’s no different for anyone else, anyone’s number could be up any time, you can get run over by a bus or a cell could sneak off into the wrong organ and make a tumor-”

“And human healers cannot remove this.”

*Human* healers. Tony tried to suppress the flare of hope the phrasing inspired. “Not without killing me. You think I wouldn’t have had it removed as soon as I got back from Afghanistan if it had been possible? Believe me, I looked into it, Pepper lined up the most brilliant surgeons throughout the world, and they were unanimous. It stays or I die.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Never mind, I know why, and I might have lost a shield-brother and Midgard might have lost one of its most valuable minds and champions because of it. Tony, let me take you to Vanaheim. They are the most skilled healers in the Nine Realms. They can rid you of this thing.” He glanced at the light glowing in Tony’s chest with new loathing.

“Um, okay. When?”

“Right now, if you’ll come with me.”

Tony blinked at him. “Okay, wait. I’m not going without telling Pepper. How about I tell her in the morning, and maybe call Rhodey too, oh and Happy, and we can all go after breakfast. I want them
with me,” Tony added firmly.

Loki made a frustrated gesture, his eyes dropping to the arc reactor. “A few more hours will probably make no difference.” He stared as if he could keep the reactor functioning for the next twelve hours through sheer force of will.

Tony laughed, thrumming with excitement. Hours from now he was going to go to other planets. And get the time bomb taken out of his chest. “Loki, for a frost giant, you have no chill.”

Chapter End Notes

This fic is only partly IM3-compliant. Killian still did his thing and Pepper can still turn into a human torch, but Tony didn’t destroy all his suits and he still has the arc reactor, as he would have had it removed immediately if any human doctors were capable of removing it.

In the next chapter, we will finally get to the Frostshield. A mere 30K in.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the expedition to Vanaheim.

Chapter Notes

Later in the fic we're going to see more of Vanaheim, so right now we're just getting a peek at it. More later, I promise.

Thank you to funnymagicaing and Renne Michaels for beta reading!

When Tony and his friends returned to Earth two days later, late at night, Tony immediately barricaded himself in his lab and launched three dozen projects inspired by what he had seen in Asgard and Vanaheim. Pepper ate an entire carton of Haagen-Dazs Vanilla Swiss Almond and went to bed. Happy drank an entire six-pack and went to bed.

Alone, Rhodey sat dazed at the dining table, nursing his second double Scotch. That was where Bruce found him.

“Twas awake. Jarvis told me you were here,” Bruce explained, ducking his head slightly and rubbing the back of his neck. “If you need to be on your own….”

“No, please, if you’re awake anyway - everyone else collapsed on me.”

“Except Tony, who’s trying to reverse engineer Vanaheim before he passes out.”

“The operation was a success. No more shrapnel.” Abruptly Rhodey closed his eyes and his fingers tightened on the glass. He hadn’t realized how afraid he had been, ever since Afghanistan, of the inevitable phone call and then no more Tony. No more craziness and aggravation and brilliance and extreme generosity and Tony.

Bruce’s hand was warm and solid on Rhodey’s shoulder. They just stayed like that for at least a couple of minutes until Rhodey could control himself.

“Sorry.” Rhodey stood up, needing to move around a little. “Let me get you something-”

“I can-”

“I know you don’t drink anymore, why don’t I start some water for tea? Or something else?”

Bruce gave in and sat down. “Tea would be great. Then maybe you can tell me about Vanaheim. Tony isn’t going to be talking to anyone but Jarvis for a while.”

Rhodey filled the teapot and put it on the stove as he answered. “Twas… I don’t know where to start. We went to Asgard first. Literally everything in Asgard is made of gold.”
“Real gold?”

“Yes.” He leaned against the counter and folded his arms. “Gold has good electrical conductivity, I’m wondering if it conducts the kind of energy they call magic better than other metals.”

“I’ll ask Loki. So what did you guys do in Asgard?”

“A bunch of guards escorted us from the Bifrost landing dock through a bunch of gold corridors to a gold council chamber. We got a royal audience.” Rhodey shook his head, still amazed. He had met heads of state before, but never an alien queen with magical powers. “The first five minutes of it was Queen Frigga hugging Loki.”

Bruce gave his lazy smile. “She loves her sons.”

“He seems like he adores her, too. Then he presented us to her and asked her to send us all to Vanafheim, and she did. She confirmed his offer to send any of the Avengers to Vanafheim for healing - your Other Guy was mentioned specifically - and they extended the offer to Tony’s best friends, the three of us who were with them.” Rhodey gazed at nothing for a moment, still trying to take it all in. “She’s being really generous.”

“Did Loki go to Vanafheim with you?”

“Oh, yeah. He stayed with us up until we were sent back to Earth.”

The kettle began to whistle. Rhodey turned it off and Bruce rose to open the cabinet where the teabags were kept. “Want any? The decaf ones are on the higher shelf.”

Rhodey looked at the selection and chose mint, while Bruce chose lavender. They both sat down to wait for it to steep. “So, Tony has footage of the whole trip, I won’t try to describe what it looked like in too much detail because you’ll get to see it, but everything in Vanafheim is crystal. Even the walls are quartz, or something that looks similar. Everywhere you look there’s crystal contraptions doing everything. Of course, piezoelectric crystal can convert energy, maybe that’s why they make everything out of it. All the medical tools were crystal, the light fixtures, everything.”

“What about the people?”

“Oh, they were made of crystal too.”

That surprised a real laugh, not just a wry chuckle, out of Bruce. Rhodey mentally patted himself on the back before continuing.

“They look like humans. Or like Asgardians. Oh, there were also a bunch of guards on Vanafheim who were humanoid, but some of them were obviously not human. Loki said they were Marauders.”

Bruce nodded. “He told us about them. During the year that Asgard didn’t have a Bifrost, all the planets Odin conquered decided to take advantage of the opportunity to become self-ruling. The Marauders are mercenaries who come from lots of different planets. Vanafheim and other worlds hired them to defend them from Asgard when the Bifrost got rebuilt. As it turned out, of course, by that time Frigga was in charge and is granting the other worlds independence anyway.”

“Nice of her.”

“Well, she was a princess of Vanafheim. She married Odin after he conquered her planet.”

Rhodey frowned at Bruce. “Do you think he forced her to marry him?”
“I didn’t like to ask too many questions when Loki told us about it. It’s his parents, you know? But I wonder if she married Odin because she thought she might be able to influence him to be kinder to her world and the realms he conquered.”

He snorted. “No wonder her kids turned out the way they did.”

Bruce huffed a laugh. “I think Loki, at least, turned out pretty well, all things considered.”

Rhodey regarded him for a moment. “Bruce, can you talk to me honestly about this whole letting Loki join the Avengers thing?”

“Sure. What can I say. He works well with us and we like him.”

“You like him?”

“I know, but yeah. We do.”

Rhodey fortified himself with more Scotch. Looked into its amber depths for a minute. “That actually worries me even more.”

“You’re worried the frost giant is doing a snow job on us.”

“Aren’t you?”

“It’s crossed my mind. He’s spent centuries being a diplomat for Asgard, he knows how to charm. Still.” He gave Rhodey a shrewd look. “He just saved your best friend’s life. Have you not warmed up to him just a little?”

“Actually, it just made me more suspicious of him.”

“Oh well. It’s probably for the best if someone is still on guard with him.”

“I am glad the shrapnel is out of Tony’s chest, even if Loki arranged it for ulterior motives.”

“Loki always has ulterior motives. I think he has multiple reasons for everything he does. Some of them come from the heart, some of them are in line with long-term strategies.”

Rhodey hated to admit it, even to himself, but he could understand that. It was what he did, as a soldier, an officer, an officially sanctioned superhero, and friend and wrangler to Tony Stark.

“And really, we’re doing the same thing. The guy is a huge ball of neediness. We’re playing on that - but we’re doing it honestly. Yeah, we want him to love Earth and keep Asgard on our side, but we do actually care about him.”

Rhodey tried to shelve his worries. Fuck-all he could do about them, anyway.

“So Loki’s still in Asgard?”

“Yeah, his mother missed him. She said she’ll send him back here in a couple of days. I think our tea should be ready now, let me get it.”

For the next two days, Loki left his mother’s side only when they slept. In meetings with her ministers he sat at her right hand, offering his counsel. He was more surprised than he ought to have been that the advisors and courtiers were currying his favor as they never had during Odin’s lifetime.
Loki realized that the problems he had outlined to the Avengers had not been her only reason for not yet declaring her heir. All Asgard knew that Loki was her favorite child and the uncertainty of the succession had the Aesir hedging their bets. It was part of her strategy for evening the ground between her sons.

Loki’s plan for influencing Thor via the respect of others had already been set into motion - by his mother.

They dined together and spent the evenings sitting in her garden. He told her all that had transpired on Earth, and she readily agreed to loan Thor’s shield-brothers, and eventually Thor himself, to the Avengers.

“You are doing even better than I had hoped on Midgard, my son,” she told him warmly on his last evening in Asgard, pressing his hand. They were in her garden, sharing a last quiet dinner, serenaded by the birds who nested in the abundant flowering trees.

“Mother, you were so right to send me there. The other realms have underestimated humans greatly. Their scientists are well on their way to grasping the true nature of the universe, even without magic. It is so fascinating to put magic into their terms, and when they grasp a new concept I feel their joy in the discovery. And they have been so kind, even after what I was forced to do to their realm. And their nobility. They themselves laid down their lives to stop my invasion, and now they have befriended their former enemy for the good of their realm.”

“And because they like you.”

“They know what it is to need to make amends for having done wrong. Except for Steve Rogers, but even though he himself is innocent, he seems to understand those of us who have ‘red in our ledgers’, as Natasha puts it. Or at least, he is willing to give us the chance to atone. Mother, I think Steve is what a warrior truly should be. He is as brave as any warrior of Asgard, but far kinder. He does not scorn weakness; he believes he should use his strength to protect the weak. And he is truly brave. Not only does he court death often as an Avenger, but he exposed himself to shame throughout Midgard to help others who love their own sex to face the disapprobation they encounter. He receives no reward for any of this. For all the decades he was asleep, Midgardian merchants made fortunes selling his likeness on various things - humans like to wear garments and carry bags decorated with pictures of those they admire. As if people were to wear tunics with the face of the poet Bragi drawn upon them.” Frigga laughed at the idea, and Loki continued. “When Steve awoke, the Midgardian courts decreed that he deserved a share of those fortunes. He took it - and arranged for every bit of it to help those in need. And he grew up in dire poverty, many would have reacted to that by grasping every bit of money they could, but hardship has made him more generous instead of less. And you should see him in battle, Mother, one would think spending his early years small and weak would have made him cowardly, but he does not fear pain or death, he fears only failing to do what is right. He-”

Loki stopped at the alarm dawning on his mother’s face. The two of them looked at each other.

Neither needed to voice their thoughts. Silently they shared realization, worry, and resignation.

After several minutes of wordless communion, Loki said, “I now believe the other realms have dismissed humans, have looked down upon them, in order to avoid becoming attached to them. Many hearts must have been broken before that attitude was born.”

“Do you think he shares your feelings?”

“He has given no sign. And half of Midgard desires him. It will not be long before he finds some
human who fits with him and can share his life. And I wish that for him.”

She put a hand on his, her eyes searching his face. “I do not want your heart broken again.”

“Every one of the Avengers is going to break my heart. They are mortals.”

“Perhaps I was wrong to send you there—”

“No, you were not. Every one of them will be worth it.”

They clasped hands and sat in silence for a time, watching the sun set behind her orchard in a blaze of color.

“How fares Thor on Jotunheim?” He had been putting off asking.

“Your brother is well.”

“Is he safe? They must hate him far more than Midgard ever hated me.”

“They have not forgotten that he started a war with them over a playground insult, but they also remember that he saved their realm from total destruction when you unleashed the Bifrost onto it.”

“And does he hate Jotuns any less?”

“Do not fret about your brother’s progress for now, Loki. I am watching him.”

The sunset was fading into twilight.

“And you? Are your subjects yielding to your rule?”

“It is months since I had any trouble of note.”

“Swear that you will summon me if you need me. And Thor as well. Even if he thinks the throne should now be his, he will never allow anyone to harm you.”

“I swear it, Loki. But now, there is something I must ask you.”

Loki met her eyes in the dimming light and braced himself. “Yes?”

“Tell me honestly, Loki. Do you want to be king of Asgard?”

He held her gaze. “No, Mother. I do not.” After a moment, he added, “But if the burden falls to me, I will do my duty.”

“I never doubted that, my son. I am so proud of you.” She stood, stepped closer to where he was seated and embraced him, stroking his hair. He returned her embrace, squeezing his eyes shut.

“I suppose I had better go,” he said with reluctance.

“I want you to return for a day or two every month. I have missed you so much.”

“I will be delighted to.” He clasped her closer for a few seconds before she released him. He stood, kissed her hand, and said, “In one month’s time, then, Mother. And thank you, my queen. For everything.”

“You are my son. Now go.”
He had almost reached the door when her voice stopped him.

“Loki, one more thing.”

“Yes, Mother?”

“Your shield-brother Natasha was right. Not all Jotuns are ugly.”

His face froze, but he only bowed to her and left the garden.

He was halfway back to the Bifrost when he halted, turned back, and followed the golden corridors to his own chambers. Inside, he sealed the doors to ensure his privacy. Then he stood in front of his mirror for a long while.

He was emotionally exhausted. Seeing his mother again - being accepted by the Avengers as a true friend instead of a tolerated ally - Tony Stark actually putting him in his place for patronizing his human shield-brothers - snatching Tony from an imminent death he had not known could have taken Tony from them at any moment - discovering his own hopeless infatuation with Steve… he had little energy left to care much about anything.

Perhaps this was the best possible moment to see his other self. When he was too tired to feel.

He drew a breath and pushed back Odin’s enchantment. Watched as his reflection turned blue.

Clint had spoken the truth. He was blue, his eyes were red and curved ridges decorated his face, he was stiflingly hot in his Asgardian clothes, but it was still himself looking back at him.

He stared at the monster in his mirror for a long while before returning to his usual self with a weary sigh.

It would be late at night when he returned to the Tower. Perhaps some of his fellow Avengers would be awake and could distract him.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Loki tells the Avengers the story of his prank on Sif's hair.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to funnymagicaing for beta and for contributing some of the best dialogue.

Also, I realized that I left a small thing out of an earlier chapter. Remember Natasha and then Frigga telling Loki that "not all frost giants are ugly”? I thought that earlier in the fic, before their mission to Borovnia, Loki had warned Clint and Natasha to be prepared for his frost form because frost giants are ugly. But it turned out that exchange was on the cutting room floor. I've added it to the chapter where the assassins ask him to help with that mission now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Bifrost deposited Loki on the Tower’s balcony. Since he was no longer in his frost form, the midwinter night air was freezing to him.

Even temperatures prompted unpleasant associations for him now.

The Norns had been kind for a change, however. He now had the chance to create pleasant associations to edge out the nasty ones. He went inside and immediately asked the air, “Jarvis, how is Tony?”

“His Highness is recuperating from his surgery beautifully, Mr. Friggjarson.”

Loki smiled. “You were paying attention to our discussion, I see.”

“Always. Also, Agents Romanoff and Barton asked me to request you have a word with them when you returned.”

“But of course. Are they still awake? And unoccupied?”

“They are both having difficulty sleeping tonight, sir.”

Loki settled down at the bar, pulling a bottle of Asgardian mead from his pocket dimension. Human liquor just wasn’t strong enough for an Asgardian. He had brought a large supply of Asgardian alcohol for his own use rather than continue to deplete Tony’s stores.

A couple of minutes later, the assassins entered, both in warm bathrobes over flannel pajamas, circles under their eyes. Loki had glasses ready. He held up a bottle of vodka, the brand Natasha seemed to prefer. At their nods, he poured for each of them. They sat beside him.

“Is this to do with our Borovnian mission?” Loki asked. Both assassins gave him reproving looks
and he added, “Stark knows. I assume Jarvis found out somehow.”

“I cannot divulge my sources, sir.”

“That isn’t what this is about.” Clint raised his glass to his lips.

Natasha only looked at hers. “Pepper said that any of us can go to Vanaheim for medical care.”

Loki was promptly alarmed. “Are you ill, Natasha?”

“No, no.” She paused. Clint looked from her to Loki. “But there’s something….”

“If I may be of any service to you, Natasha, you have but to ask.”

“I know. You’re a generous shield-brother.” She huffed a laugh. “With enemies like you, who needs friends?” Loki acknowledged this with a chuckle. “If possible, I’d rather the others didn’t hear about this.” She looked up at the ceiling meaningfully. “Do you understand that, Jarvis?”

“I do not tell Mr. Stark everything, Agent Romanoff. I told him about your covert mission in Borovnia so that he could call upon certain connections he has to block some attempts which were made to misdirect the funds Mr. Friggjarson gave to that orphanage.”

“Then I appreciate it, but this is none of Tony’s business. I have to tell Loki in order to get to Vanaheim, but I’d rather no one else hear about it.”

“Natasha,” Loki said at once, “if whatever care you require is something you prefer to keep private, you do not have to tell me what it is. I can take you to Vanaheim and leave you to confide in the healers.”

The two humans exchanged a glance. “You’d do that?”

“Of course. But truly, is this urgent? Because I can take you to Vanaheim in the morning—”

“It isn’t urgent. I’m not going to die or anything. Give me a few days, let me tell the others that Clint and I are going away on a mission so we don’t have to explain it to them. Of course, your absence has to be explained too….”

“My mother has decided that she wishes me to return for a day or two each month. If you can wait for a month, you could simply happen to have a ‘mission’ at the same time as my visit home. I can accompany you to Vanaheim and then spend some time in Asgard after you two return here.”

Natasha knocked back the entire shot of vodka. “Thank you, Loki. This isn’t life-threatening, but it’s important to me.”

“Then I am very glad I can help.”

The three of them drank in silence for a minute. At length Jarvis spoke.

“Sirs, ma’am, if you have finished your private discussion, Captain Rogers is awake. A few minutes ago he asked if anyone else was awake and available for company. If I may….”

“By all means, tell him to join us.” Clint reached for the vodka and poured himself and Natasha fresh shots.

Steve appeared shortly. “Loki, glad to see you back.” He nodded to the humans.
Both of whom were staring at him. He was wearing dark blue pajamas and a bright red bathrobe with a star spangled blue belt and a “WW” logo on the front.

“A Wonder Woman bathrobe?” Clint looked him up and down. “Really?”

“Tony gave it to me as a joke. Joke’s on him, though, this is warm. And soft.”

Steve started to take a barstool, but Clint said, “Now that there’s more of us here, why don’t we move to the sofas. Want some vodka?”

“No point in wasting it on me. My metabolism moves too fast for me to get drunk.”

“Which is part of the reason I brought this from home.” Loki held up the bottle of mead. “Asgardian strength. See if this doesn’t incapacitate you.”

The soldier’s boyish face lit up, and Loki swallowed at the sight. “Thanks!”

A minute later Clint and Natasha were on one of the sofas with the bottle of vodka and Steve and Loki on the other with the bottle of mead and a pair of goblets.

Steve took a cautious swig of the mead, then a larger one. “Whoa. I can actually feel this.” He took another. “Don’t let Tony try this.”

“Oh, I won’t. It will be hidden in my pocket dimension until I am ready to drink it. Feel free to ask me for more whenever you like. I will give you a few bottles if you wish to hide them in your chambers.”

Steve looked at him, serious. “Thank you for taking Tony to Vanaheim, Loki.” When Loki only nodded his acknowledgement, Steve pressed, “I mean it. He’s been such a good friend. I was dreading the day we lost him.”

“So was I.” A spike of sadness pierced Loki’s mood. The day when he lost Tony had only been deferred. He had finally found true shield-brothers and would lose them all in a matter of decades.

Loki firmly put that thought out of his mind and smiled around at them all. He would not let that morbid thought ruin the time with them he had.

“I’m still not used to not being poor,” Steve was saying. “I can go to as many baseball games as I want this spring.”

“Would you mind if I went to a couple of them with you?” Loki asked. Only when the words were out did he have second thoughts. He had planned to investigate this Midgardian custom before he had realized what feelings he was developing towards Steve, but perhaps….

No, he would continue to treat Steve as a good friend. Attempting to become distant would help nothing. He would not relinquish what they had because of what they would not.

Steve was surprised, but Loki thought a little pleased. “That’d be great! Might be kind of tame for someone who’s used to gladiators and duels to the death, though.”

“Precisely. Having witnessed the kind of passion humans feel for sports, I hope that introducing Asgard to such pursuits might perhaps channel Asgardian bloodlust less harmfully.”

“That is part of what sports are for. Besides that they’re fun.”

“Steve, you should ask a girl to watch baseball with you on a date. Or a guy. Then you’ll have at
least one interest in common.”

“I’ve had a few dates since I got out of the ice but Natasha, remember what I said about it being hard to find shared experiences? I didn’t just mean that I’m from another time. It’s that most people haven’t gone through the battle fatigue and the shellshock and I’m glad they haven’t! I don’t want anyone to ever live through that! But it’s hard to really relate to anyone who hasn’t.”

“Maybe you should date agents, then.” Natasha poured herself more vodka. “I know some.”

“Not yet, Natasha, okay? I appreciate it, I really do. I’m just….” He looked out at the blackness of the window.

Clint took pity on him. “Maybe it’s just as well for domestic harmony that none of us Avengers are into the same sports. I enjoy football but not the way you enjoy baseball. And Tony’s into racing.”

“I love ballet,” Natasha said. “Some people consider it a sport, others see it as an art. It’s a matter of how one defines ‘sport’.”

“If you don’t mind, I would like to go to some ballets with you, then. If you choose some performances, I will buy our tickets.” Loki surveyed the small group. “Does anyone else wish to join us?”

“I’ll go to one. I don’t know how much ballet I want to see, but I’ve never been to something like that.”

Clint grinned a little. “Thanks, guys. I can only take so much ballet.”

Loki was refilling Steve’s goblet when Tony stumbled in, wearing a heavy metal T-shirt and faded jeans and a severe case of bedhead. His gaze immediately locked on the golden bottle Loki held. “Hey, me too.”

“No, Tony. Asgardian brews are far too strong for normal humans. It could permanently damage your brain. Or kill you.”

Tony came over and made a grab for the bottle. When Loki held on to it with ease, he jokingly tried to snatch Steve’s goblet. Steve simply stood up and held the goblet over his head, far out of Tony’s reach.

“No fair. You tall people are always oppressing the rest of us.” Tony went to the bar and pulled out a decanter of whiskey. “Ahh, part of this complete breakfast.”

“Tony, at least eat a little bit before you get drunk.”

“I’ve spent the last fourteen hours asleep, I need alcohol.” He filled a large glass and joined the others. “Steve, I cannot believe you’re actually wearing that robe.”

“Why not? Besides, the plain blue robe I bought for myself is in the laundry.”

“This man does so much laundry. He washes all his stuff all the time,” Tony confided in the others.

Steve smiled a little. “None of you have ever really been poor. You don’t know what a luxury cleanliness is. It feels so good to put on a perfectly clean shirt anytime. Sometimes I change my shirts three times a day.”

The others listened, nodded. Tony said, “I learned to appreciate cleanliness a lot more after
Afghanistan.”

“Me too, after… it’s classified,” Clint agreed.

“I too.” Loki did not say after what.

Perhaps forestalling too serious a mood, Tony gestured to Loki with his glass. “Loki. I know you’re adopted but you kind of look like your mom.”

Loki smiled. “Thank you. I’ve always assumed I took after her.”

“All her smiles are similar to yours. Well, all the ones I’ve seen. I’ve never seen her do a supervillain smile.”

“That would be a truly frightening sight.”

Tony gestured again as he opened his mouth to speak and sloshed some of the whiskey onto his shirt. “Dammit.”

Clint rose. “That does it, we’re feeding you.”

“Just so it doesn’t have too much nutritional value.”

“Ooo, Clint, make those peanut butter things! You haven’t made them since we moved in here.”

Loki gave Natasha a curious glance. She sounded like the girl she had never truly had a chance to be.

Clint smirked as he moved into the kitchen area and got out the ingredients. “Okay, I will. You guys gotta help, though, there’s too many of us.”

Everyone joined him and followed his instructions. Peanut butter was spread on saltines and then mini-marshmallows arranged on the peanut butter. “Trust me, it’s delicious,” Clint assured them as he put trays of the snacks in the oven to toast. “And the best part is, each one has only five trillion calories.”

Meanwhile, Natasha snatched Tony’s glass from him when he was briefly inattentive and stood blocking his path to the bar. “No more until you’ve eaten a piece of fruit.”

Resigned, Tony took a banana from the large bowl of fruit on the counter and started to eat it. “I don’t need a babysitter,” he said, sulky.

Everyone laughed aloud.

The cookie sheets of peanut butter treats wafted mouth-watering aromas through the kitchen as Clint took them out of the oven. At just the right moment to get a lungful of the scent, Bruce stumbled in wearing fleece pajamas with little pictures of the Avengers all over them, no robe. He stopped when he saw the after-midnight gathering.

It was a regular occurrence for occupants of Avengers Tower to wander to the common area when they had insomnia. Often they would find that they were not the only ones who couldn’t sleep that night and kept each other company. This was the first time that all of them were there at once.

Bruce glanced around in surprise, but all he said was, “I came up here for tea, but whatever those things are I want some.”
“There’s plenty.” Clint started putting them on plates but after a minute everyone swarmed over the stove, helping themselves. Loki took advantage of being the tallest to snatch the teakettle up, fill it, and lean over all the others to put it on a burner.

They returned to the array of sofas, and the assassins had been right: the marshmallow treats were indeed delicious. After eating a couple, Bruce said, “So what is this, a pajama party? Except that Tony and Loki aren’t wearing pajamas.”

“These are my pajamas,” Tony said, thumping his T-shirt. “I pass out in my clothes unless someone’s taken them off me.”

“TMI.”

“So that leaves Loki as the only non-pajama’ed person.”

Loki shrugged and materialized his formal silk-and-leather clothes off, replacing them with his Midgardian pajamas, satin in the precise shade of green he liked. Everyone chuckled, both at the predictable color and at the trick.

“How the hell do you do that, anyway? I ask as a scientist.” Tony successfully reclaimed his whiskey from Natasha. “Your clothes just dissolve into other clothes. Must be useful when you get really lucky with a super hot guy.”

Steve looked quickly at Loki, and then away just as swiftly. Well, he often was embarrassed at the frankness with which the others spoke of sex. All of them had tried to restrain themselves a little out of consideration for him.

“It is.” Loki took another bite of the marshmallow treat. “Actually, all of my clothes are illusions. I’m always naked.”

Tipsy laughter filled the room, and Steve turned pink. When their mirth quieted, Tony said, “Hey, Jarvis, is Pepper awake?”

“She is, sir. Miss Potts is working.”

“We can’t have that. Connect us.”

A moment later Pepper’s voice came through the intercom, tired and exasperated. “What is it, Tony?”

“Pepper, I need you down here! There’s these really important papers here you need to sign and do things to.”

“It can wait until morning, I’m sure.”

“It can’t! Pepper, I need you! These papers need you to fix them!”

A sigh, and then she said, “Just for a minute, Tony, and then I’m going to finish this up and get a little bit of sleep.”

“Thanks, Pepper, you’re the best.” He smirked around at the others.

Pepper arrived wearing a terrycloth bathrobe over a pink cotton nightgown. When she saw what she had been lured into, she just shook her head, smiled wryly, and said, “Whatever I’m smelling, I want some.”
They gave her a plate of marshmallow treats and started tea steeping for those who wanted it - Pepper requested jasmine. “We need more food,” Natasha declared, and got out four kinds of gourmet cheese, baby carrots, grapes, and blackberries (no strawberries). She put these on two platters and once they were placed on the coffee tables, everyone laid waste to them.

Pepper sliced some parrano for herself, and also grabbed at least half of the blackberries, along with a glass of white wine. “So we’re having a slumber party?”

“What do humans do during slumber parties?”

“We could play Spin the Bottle.”

“Tony, you are the oldest… okay, the third oldest person in this room. Act like it.”

“If they’re girls, they braid each other’s hair. But there’s only three people here with hair long enough to braid.”

Natasha had enough vodka in her to suggest, “We should make a braiding train! I’ll braid Pepper’s hair and she can braid Loki’s and he can braid mine.”

With much giggling from all present, the three of them positioned themselves: Pepper sitting on a sofa, Loki seated on the floor in front of her, and Natasha sitting in front of Loki. With frequent pauses to eat or drink, the braiding commenced.

Tony was fiddling with the enormous coffee machine he had designed himself. When he was satisfied, he rejoined the others with a fresh glass of whiskey, stumbling just a little. “Loki has the best stuff, Pepper, but he won’t let us drink it, he says we’ll die.” He collapsed on the sofa beside her and grabbed some carrots. “He’s only sharing it with Steve! It’s not fair! He underestimates the power of my liver, tell him, Pepper.”

Pepper leaned over Loki’s shoulder so she could see his face. “Loki, thank you for saving my boyfriend’s life. Again.” She straightened and looked at Tony. “There, I told him.”

“Yeah.” Bruce was filling a little plate with different kinds of cheese. “Unlike Thor’s other friends, we like it when people save our lives. Keep doing that.”

Loki just smiled, not looking up from his weaving of Natasha’s copper tresses. “Anytime.”

“Speaking of Thor’s other friends, Loki and I gotta tell you guys our evil plan. Loki, did you ask your mom-”

“I did, and she approves of the scheme.”

Tony outlined his idea for training Thor’s warrior band to respect their younger prince by example, since Loki’s saving their lives several hundred thousand times had not done the trick, and the other Avengers agreed to it at once. “We’re involved in court intrigue! Interplanetary politics!” Clint toasted the room with vodka. “And all we had to do was dress funny and show up when there were aliens.”

Loki fastened a final braid. “There, Natasha, your hair is done.”

Pepper had plaited Loki’s shoulder-length hair in one simple braid, but Natasha’s hair was in an elaborate style that involved at least six different braids. The others murmured bemused approval. At their words, Natasha went to look at herself in the bathroom mirror. “You went beyond the call of duty.”
Loki glanced around swiftly, concerned that he had committed some obscure faux pas, but no one seemed annoyed.

“Is this an Asgardian fashion?” she asked as she rejoined Clint on their sofa.

“Yes, it is very popular for formal occasions.”

“Can I get you to do my hair like this for the ballet some night?”

“Certainly.”

Pepper looked up. “There’s ballet going on? I want in. And no offense, Natasha, but now I want Loki to do my hair too.”

“I knew it.” Clint narrowed his eyes at Natasha’s hair in mock suspicion. “He’s been plotting to get to us through our womenfolk all along.”

“Muahaha,” Loki agreed as he sat behind Pepper and began to work his fingers through her hair. “I will give your hair a different style, Pepper. And if you like I will do it again when we all go to the ballet.”

The various human males in the room exchanged glances before hiding their faces in their assorted glasses of liquid.

Looking for a distraction before any of them cracked up, Bruce spoke up. “When everybody sobered up you’ll have to tell us about Thor’s friends, Loki. We’ll plan the best way to entertain each of them.”

“Sif will likely be the most difficult. She has always disliked me.”

“Why’s that? She didn’t like the way you did her hair?”

Loki gave a startled laugh. “Actually, yes.”

“Storytime!” Bruce made himself more comfortable on Tony’s other side.

Loki began to braid a lock of Pepper’s hair. “It’s rather unfair of her to hold my prank against me, considering how much it worked to her advantage.”

“Do tell.”

“Many centuries ago, she insulted me.”

“What did she say?”

Centuries-old anger welled up at Sif’s cutting words. “I don’t recall.”

Tony laughed. “Yeah, I can see how hard you don’t recall.”

Realizing that his expression had given him away, Loki laughed unwillingly. He did not, however, answer the question. “I thought of challenging her to a duel, but she loves fighting. So instead, I turned her very beautiful golden hair as black as mine.”

“Why not green or purple or something?”

Loki shrugged. “I thought it lacked subtlety. She was furious, but the joke was on me. You see, most
Asgardians consider fair hair the most beautiful, but Thor has a very strong preference for brunettes.”

“I knew he was no gentleman.”

At Loki’s perplexity, the expression was explained to him. He resumed his story.

“Had I met Jane Foster before he did, I could have easily predicted he would become smitten with her. Dark hair and a headstrong nature captivates him every time. Up until then he had seen Sif only as a fellow warrior. She might as well have been his sister. But the moment he saw his female shield-brother with raven hair, he was powerfully attracted to her. There have been other dalliances, for both of them, but they return to each other time and again.

“I was going to restore her true coloring after a few weeks, but she demanded that I leave it. She also got Thor to demand it, and he was sufficiently emphatic that I did as he asked. There, Pepper, your hair is finished.”

“Don’t worry, you’re still a ginger,” Tony assured her as she got up to go look in the mirror. “I’m going to emphatically demand you not change my girlfriend’s hair color either. I like her as a redhead. You know what they say about redheads.”

Natasha lifted an eyebrow. Loki obligingly took the bait. “No, what?”

“They say, ‘You know what they say about redheads.’”

Pepper had been studying her reflection critically. “I like it. Thanks, Loki.” Then she snickered as she rejoined them. “I can’t believe a prince came from another planet to do my hair.”

“If Asgard likes blonds, where do redheads fit in?” Natasha asked.

“Throughout the Nine Realms, redheads are unusual and greatly admired.” Loki resumed his former seat beside Steve.

“So Pep and I are set no matter where we go.”

“Wit, beauty, and flaming hair - yes, I would say so.”

“Silvertongue. So do you prefer blonds?”

“Frost giant or not, I am a product of my culture. Fair-haired and muscle-bound is our ideal.”

Tony poured himself more whiskey. “Too bad we don’t have anybody like that around here.”

“Yes, too bad.” Loki dared to send Steve a fleeting smile. He discovered the soldier was looking at him, a little more attentively than the frivolous conversation warranted.

Doubtless it was merely the effect of the Asgardian mead.

Or perhaps not, because suddenly Steve said, “You look good with a braid, Loki. Can I draw you like that?” His words were slightly slurred. “When I’m sober enough to draw, I mean?”

“Of course.” Loki would do anything the Avengers asked that was in his power. For so many reasons.

“I like drawing you. You have a good face for drawing.”

Before Loki could frame a response to this odd compliment, Tony drawled, “Yeah, draw him like
one of your French girls.”

Steve frowned. “I didn't exactly spend a lot of my time in France drawing, Tony. And I certainly didn’t have a chance to meet any girls there.”

That got a round of chuckles, and Bruce said, “Well, I know what movie we’re watching next.”

“I suppose that’s the kind of sacrifice we have to make for our friends’ cultural literacy.”

Tony wagged a finger at Clint. “No, listen, it’s a better movie than it seems.”

“It woulda been a good movie if they’d focused on the historical tragedy and left out the juvenile love story, but it sold a lot of tickets to teenage girls. Not that I’m down on teenage girls for being teenage girls, let’s not even talk about what I thought was quality entertainment when I was a fourteen-year-old boy, but there’s not a whole lot of overlap between what they want to watch and what I want to watch.”

“But see, the romance was just a detail. The real story - I mean, aside from the historical tragedy part - was Rose’s transformation. She went from putting up with everything her mother and her fiancé expected from her to being true to herself and being brave enough to do what she wanted with her life. Hooking up with a cute boy she liked was just a detail of that.”

“Okay, it is better when you look at it that way,” Clint conceded.

A delicious aroma pervaded the room just as the coffee machine chimed. Tony shot to his feet.

“Awesome! The hot chocolate’s ready. I need at least one person to help me carry it.”

Bruce volunteered first, and a minute later the two of them returned with trays of steaming mugs as well as assorted additives: cinnamon, whipped cream, marshmallows.

Steve took one and just looked down at it. The others divided their attention between doctoring their own drinks and shooting him bemused glances, until he had to cover his face with one hand.

“Whoa, whoa! I've never had anyone cry because I gave them chocolate before.”

Steve’s hot chocolate looked to be on the verge of spilling, so Loki plucked it from his hand and placed it on the table.

“Steve?” Tony actually sounded worried. They all looked worried.

Steve looked up, eyes red, and tried to control himself. “I’m just - so glad- ” He gestured vaguely at Tony’s chest, no longer full of shrapnel and reactors.

“That’s right. I had surgery performed on me, by gods.” Tony put down his too-hot chocolate so he could have a swig of whiskey instead. “I have been touched. Intimately. By gods. Gods have touched me real deep inside because I am special, okay? Respect this.”

Everyone was chuckling, but when he paused for another sip Clint said, “Nice deflection, Tony, but you’re not going to stop us from getting mushy on you.”

Tony fixed a stare on his mug of chocolate. “Oh.”

Loki could sympathize. This particular type of attention wasn’t easy for Tony.

“I mean,” Steve said, now definitely slurring, “if you hadden invited us all here, into your building, we’d all be separate and alone. And we couldn’t have a grownup slumber party and eat sweets in the
middle of the night and watch ridiculous movies.”

“I needed people to watch ridiculous movies with. Joel Hodgson surpassed me, the robots I invented aren’t good at making fun of them.”

“No, Tony, I need to say this, because I have a special reason I’m glad we’re all here and it’s hard to say without sounding like a spoiled brat.”

The others laughed. “Steve, if there’s anything you are not,” Pepper told him warmly, “it’s spoiled.”

“Okay, it’s just, when you get famous, a lot of people want a piece of you. Everyone here’s gone through that. But see, usually there’s still your old friends and your relatives, people who knew you when and they don’t see you as an icon. That’s why a lot of really rich or famous people put their cousins and their school friends in charge of their business, those people still see them as themselves. But in my case they’re all dead. I know it’s petty to complain.”

Tony, former poor little rich kid, cut in. “No, this is a real problem. If you were saying you have it worse than anyone ever, we’d smack you upside the head. But it does suck when so many people are using you, and you don’t have the usual way of getting around that. And yes, that is why I always insist on Rhodey being my go-between with the military.”

“And since I Rip Van Winkled, if I weren’t living with people who have the same… well, similar circumstances, anyway, I don’t know how I could find….” Steve’s voice trailed off.

“Loki, you need to cut him off sooner next time.”

“You made Captain America cry, Tony, I hope you’re pleased with yourself.”

“I promise never to give him hot chocolate again.”

Steve rubbed his face vigorously. “No, I’m okay, I just needed to say that. To tell you guys all this. Now let’s talk about something less serious, okay?”

“Perhaps you could define ‘Rip Van Winkle’ for me.”

“Oh. He’s a character in a classic story. He accepted moonshine from some strangers he met in the woods. They turned out to be fairies and when he returned home, twenty years had passed and his kids were grown up.”

“The story was inspired by a lot of old folk tales about people who joined a fairy party or spent one night in the fairy world and then found out a hundred years had gone by in what felt like hours to them,” Bruce explained.

Loki rolled his eyes. “That is precisely why my - Odin forbade the other realms from interfering with Midgard. Because Elves have such juvenile senses of humor.”

Clint and Bruce both perked up sort of hopefully. Natasha immediately and very firmly said, “No.”

“Aw, Tash-”

“No, we are not watching Lord of the Rings again. Not for at least another six months.”

“But Taaaash-”

“I have sat through that series multiple times. And all the damned features and extended editions and everything. The things I do for love. Besides, we’ve already picked our next movie.”
Tony hauled himself to his feet. “And I think we should get started on it, soon as I make some
popcorn. It’s long, so we’ll just watch until we all fall asleep. If we fall asleep. Then we’ll finish it
tomorrow night.”

As it turned out, Steve fell asleep a mere twenty minutes in, slumped down in the sofa beside Loki.
Given that it was his first experience with actual drunkenness, perhaps that was unsurprising.

He wasn’t really leaning on Loki. Not really. He was just slumped closer than Loki would have
expected. So that the sides of their bodies were sort of lightly pressed together.

Loki held still, careful not to move away.

He just didn’t want to wake Steve. That was all.

Chapter End Notes

There's a cartoon of Loki braiding Natasha's hair at
http://gingerhaze.tumblr.com/post/11335514665/wait-were-supposed-to-be-fighting-loki-i
Sif serves on Midgard for the first time, and two glaciers move closer to each other, at glacial pace.

This chapter has been kicking my ass for two weeks. Only the diligent beta-ing of Nyx_Ro, Renne Michaels, funnymagicaing, Peaceheather and Mary allowed me to finally triumph.

After much consideration, I finally decided to revert to how I saw Thor's friends before TDW changed them. Really, I'm reverting a great deal for all of the characters except for Loki[TM]. (Loki's characterization in this fic is that used by the scriptwriters for TDW, because the main reason I'm writing this is to make things okay for that version of Loki.)

Besides, Marvel Studios dumps on its female characters enough, I don't need to join in.

Sif was the first of Asgard's probationed warriors to be sent to Midgard for a few days' service. She was delivered to the balcony of Avengers Tower by the Bifrost. The Avengers were waiting for her and approached as soon as the aurora dissipated.

The moment she saw Loki, Sif dropped onto one knee, head bowed and fist over her heart. “Your Highness.” Loki moved towards her slowly. They could all see her steeling herself, still kneeling in the Asgardian fashion. “Thank you.”

Loki stopped in front of her. “For what, precisely?”

Her throat moved. “For convincing the queen not to execute me.”

For a full minute Loki just stared down at her, incredulous. “How many times have I saved your life, and Thor’s and those of the Three? And you finally thank me now?”

She looked up, jaw set. “I want to die a warrior’s death, not a criminal’s.”

Loki stood very still, except for his eyes, which widened as pieces at long last fell into place. He held out a hand and when she took it, pulled her to her feet.

“All these centuries… you wouldn’t have minded dying, so long as you did so in battle?”

She lifted her chin, offended. “I will feast in Valhalla. Stories will be told of my death.”

Loki sighed. “Do not be in such a hurry, Sif. Asgard yet has use of you.” He looked at the others. “Shield-brothers, meet the Lady Sif, one of Asgard’s fiercest warriors.” He then introduced the
Avengers one by one, all standing in the pleasant spring air of the Tower’s balcony. Sif could not hide her skeptical expression when Natasha, a woman barely over five feet tall, was introduced as a shield-maiden, but said nothing.

When he introduced Steve, Loki casually explained, “In battle your orders will come from Captain Rogers, he is the leader of this warrior band.” Sif again put her fist over her heart, and bowed her head.

“What would you say are the Lady Sif’s strong points in battle?” Steve asked Loki. This was a detail the Avengers had agreed upon, a small touch to make the Asgardians’ position here clear: Steve asking Loki how to make use of them.

“Sif is excellent with a sword or spear, and is without fear. Put her at the front, in the thick of it. Also, she is good at having her shield-brothers’ backs. All of Thor’s shield-brothers learned that, come to think of it,” Loki added.

Steve nodded briefly and focused on Sif. “There’s a cultural difference here that needs to be made clear. On Midgard, we try to take our enemies prisoner still alive, when it’s possible.”

“Captain Rogers will indicate when circumstances are dire enough to warrant killing,” Loki informed her.

Sif looked around at all of them as if expecting them to laugh and tell her they had been joking, but their expressions were serious. “Our queen has put me under your command, Loki.” She spoke stiffly.

“And I put you under that of Captain Rogers. I will now show you to your room. We will be feasting an hour from now.”

Asgardians understood feasts, and the Avengers would make the most of this.

Over steaks, salads and assorted forms of potatoes, the Avengers told tales of battle, and encouraged Sif to do the same. Part of their planned strategy with Sif was to take the fact that she was both woman and warrior completely in stride. She had spent years fighting for her right to be a shield-maiden and was braced to prove herself yet again, but found that there was no need.

After the human Avengers had each told a tale of their own valor, Sif needed little urging to describe her own exploits. She did not miss the chance to tell Loki of all the fighting she had been involved with since Frigga’s ascension to the throne. With both princes in temporary exile, Sif had been kept busy.

“Some worlds have tried to take advantage of our queen’s desire for peace.” Sif smiled grimly, proudly. “Asgard has shown that our peace is not weakness.”

“Peace?” Tony asked.

“Odin was ever expanding Asgard’s territories, and we had often to remind other worlds that he was their king.” Sif spoke simply, as if this should have been obvious. The humans exchanged looks. They had heard all of this before, but Sif’s matter-of-fact tone was still jarring.

“But Queen Frigga doesn’t consider herself Queen of Everything, right?”

“And accordingly some of the other worlds have tried to carve out empires of their own. Nidavellir attacked Alfheim just two months past, and the queen entrusted me with leading the offensive against them. The dwarves will not harass any other worlds for some time.” She spoke with satisfaction, and
went on at length about her own valor in that conflict. The Avengers listened with increasing quiet and attentiveness as she discussed the recent conflicts between worlds they had never heard of: Zalintyre, Cerise, Collux, Midian. Loki knew of all of it from his mother, of course, but a warrior who had been on the ground gave him a different perspective.

Fortunately, it was the very next day that a battle worthy of the Avengers presented itself. At one point Loki and Sif vanquished their own opponents and hurried to help the nearest human, who happened to be Natasha.

When they burst through the door, the enemy humans scarcely glanced their way, intent as they were upon combating the Black Widow.

Seeing one tiny human female set upon by half a dozen armed men, Sif brandished her sword and made ready to lay waste to them. Loki stopped her with a hand upon her arm. “We would dishonor my shield-brother Natasha by interfering in such a petty skirmish.”

Sif shot him an incredulous look, but when she looked back to the fray, Natasha was defeating them all handily. Loki had seen her do this several times - had he been less acquainted with her prowess, he would not have dared to risk standing back to let her fight alone against such odds - but the spectacle was still impressive.

Sif was astounded.

It was late that evening, after (another) large feast and considerable inroads into Loki’s store of Asgardian mead, that Sif was able to bring herself to make her approach. Most of the others were intent upon their own conversations or half-heartedly watching the movie playing in the background, and Natasha was momentarily at a loose end. Sif moved to her side.

“I underestimated you, Lady Natasha. I apologize.”

“Just call me Natasha, if you like. And being underestimated can be an advantage for a ‘shield-maiden’.”

“You are so small. How can you battle so many at once?”

“I was trained for it.” Natasha gave Sif a narrow look as something fell into place. “You were never trained to fight opponents larger than yourself, were you? Probably most of your instructors were large men who didn’t know or need to know that.”

Sif gave an awkward jerk of a nod.

Natasha decided not to force Sif to ask. “I’ll teach you, if you like.”

“I would be indebted.” Sif seemed to force the words out. Natasha paid attention only to the words, not their tone.

“First thing in the morning, then.” She raised her voice. “Loki! I’m going to need you tomorrow.”

Loki had been talking to Bruce, but he turned to Natasha immediately. “When?”

“Right after breakfast. Sif and I are going to share some fighting techniques and she’ll need a sparring partner she won’t instantly pulverize. You’re the only possibility, unless we get Bruce to Hulk out, and then he’ll pulverize her.”

Loki inclined his head. “As always, I am at your service. Oh, don’t look like that, Sif. You’ll get to
“Kick me in the head.”

“I’ll need a partner too. Volunteers?”

Clint looked around at the others, ready to offer if no one else did, but Steve raised a hand. “Me!”

“See you guys in the morning, then. Try not to be too hung over.”

Sif and Loki were in the gym before any of the humans the following day. Without words they commenced the solo drills they had both been taught to warm up with. After several minutes, not pausing in her exercise, Sif ventured, “You agreed to the Lady Natasha’s request very quickly.”

“Come now, Sif. You know perfectly well I always do nearly everything my shield-brothers request of me.”

“Nearly.”

“I do tend to balk when they request I help them get themselves killed over nothing.”

Sif stopped and looked at him. He stopped as well, waiting.

“I have more care for my life now,” she told him. “I could die easy when I knew that Thor was in Asgard to defend it. Now that duty falls to me.”

Loki scrutinized her face and saw only solemnity. “So you do begin to grasp why I have always striven to keep you all alive.”

She looked away, shrugged stiffly. “You dishonored us. You treated us as if we were cowards afraid of death.”

The silence stretched as fresh understanding dawned for Loki. He had so much knowledge and yet all of his life he had been wrong about so many things.

“All these centuries… you thought I was blocking your way to Valhalla?”

“Were you not?” Sif retorted.

“I was saving your lives because I loved my brother and you all were dear to him!”

Her gaze was mutinous until she forced herself to lower it. “It is unfortunate that your position required you to be a warrior. You are… not well suited to it.”

He chuckled without mirth. “I had no idea you could be so tactful, Sif.”

She drew a breath. “Asgard will need valiant warriors to lead its army with you as the heir to its throne.”

“Mother has not named her heir yet.”

“Do you doubt she will? You were always her favorite son.”

“That is hardly sufficient reason to make me king. Unlike Odin, she will not allow her sentiment to come before the good of the realms.”
“Your mother has a high opinion of your abilities. Asgard’s warriors, however, do not. They will protest at having you on the throne.”

“That thank you for reminding me. Sif, Mother asked me outright if I wanted the throne. I told her the truth: that I do not.”

Her eyes bored into him. “And did she say that she will therefore make Thor her heir?”

“She did not say. She will do what is best for Asgard, you know that. And Asgard will not be served by its princes tearing it apart like a toy we both wish to play with.”

Sif’s expression was thoughtful, dubious. “Loki, I must ask you a question of magic.”

Loki arched an eyebrow, surprised. “Yes?”

“You were born a Jotun, but Odin transformed you into an Asgardian. Does this make you truly an Asgardian?”

Loki scrutinized her. “I am not certain what you mean.”

She gestured to him. “Is this like one of your illusions? Is your body yet that of a Jotun underneath your appearance?”

“How many Asgardian summers have you seen me survive, Sif? The change happens at the cellular level.”

She pursed her lips for a moment. “Is this why Odin never betrothed you?”

He frowned, a bit disgusted. “What, because I might spawn blue babies? I would have to transform back to Jotun form to do that. He did not betroth me because he meant to make me viceroy of Jotunheim. Imagine an Elvish or Van princess being told she must follow her husband to Jotunheim.”

Sif shuddered. “But if he had betrothed you, your children would have been….”

“Warm-blooded? Yes. Why in the Nine are you asking-”

He stopped at the entrance of Steve and Natasha. The four of them did their respective warmups with few words, and then Natasha’s lessons to Sif began.

Steve and Loki were there as practice dummies, but inevitably learned the very techniques that Natasha was teaching to Sif. When Natasha judged that enough instruction had happened for the day, they all moved on to sparring.

Within five minutes, Steve and Natasha stopped their own practice to watch the Asgardians, gobsmacked.

Asgardian practice was savage. The two of them attacked each other without any sign of holding back, with clear enjoyment on both sides. This was sparring between two members of a nigh-invulnerable species. Loki had not had a physical equal to practice with in some time. He and Sif thrashed each other without restraint, grinning fiercely.

“They don’t pull their punches, do they?” Steve murmured after a while.

“I’m glad they’re on our side now,” Natasha agreed.
Two days later Clint was in the Avengers armory taking inventory of his arrows. Loki came in to play with knives - his own and those that were community property of the team - and Steve accompanied him, apparently because they were intent on their conversation about the recent military events in space that Sif had told them about; Steve still didn’t much care for any weapons other than shields.

It wasn’t long before Clint had to chime in on something, comparing events on Alfheim to some incidents from Earth’s history, and the three of them were soon deep in discussion even as they desultorily handled their weapons. Loki filled a brief lull with an abrupt remark. “This is odd. Sif has never been this civil to me before.”

“I wish I could say our plan was working,” Steve said, “but I really think it’s too soon to hope for results. It’ll probably take several visits from each of Thor’s friends to make any real change.”

The others were silent for a moment until Clint looked up from filling his quiver. “Maybe she’s hedging her bets.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked, but Loki caught on immediately. He arched a thoughtful eyebrow.

“Do you know, the only reason that hadn’t occurred to me is that she has always disliked me so much. But given that she asked me if I would… if I would sire Jotuns, I think you must be right.”

“Sire Jotuns?” Steve stared at him. “What on Earth are you talking about?”

“Sif has long been accustomed to the hope of being queen one day - assuming Odin did not betroth Thor to some foreign princess,” Loki explained. “Which he is no longer here to do.”

“So now that the succession is up in the air, she’s making sure she has an in with both heir and spare.”

“Are you serious?” Steve looked as horrified as if Clint had just suggested running out to steal candy from babies.

Loki turned a dagger over in his hands, regarding it coolly. “I would not have thought she could overcome her dislike for me so far, especially now that I am known to be a frost giant. But she has found that with Thor away, there is more glory for her. If I were king and she my queen, she could lead Asgard’s army herself; indeed, in that case she would be the ideal general. Despite her feelings for Thor, there would be definite advantages to being my queen rather than his. And likely she believes herself the only one who can protect Asgard militarily if an ergi sorcerer is king.”

“How can you talk about this so calmly?” Steve was not calm. He was now pacing the armory, looking at everything as if it were covered with poisonous spiders. “Are you saying that if you are king someday, you’ll actually consider this?”

Loki looked up from the dagger, faintly impatient. “Consider what? Marrying a valiant warrior who is beloved of Asgard?”

“Who doesn’t love you! Who doesn’t even like you!”

A sad little smile spread across Loki’s face. He put the dagger back in its place on the rack and spoke gently. “Steve, I am a prince. I have always known that one day I would marry a woman who didn’t love me. My future bride, whoever she is, very likely has always expected the same. We will make
the best of it.”

“That’s terrible! You’ve done enough for your realm, you deserve better! You deserve someone who
loves you! Who respects you and values you and cares about—”

Steve stopped abruptly and stared at Loki in shock. As if he had never seen him before.
Comprehension dawned slowly on his youthful face.

Loki drew in a sharp breath, holding Steve’s gaze, transfixed. They were only one step apart. Neither
moved at all. They didn’t even seem to be breathing.

Clint was frozen. The other two men seemed to have forgotten his presence entirely, and somehow
he couldn’t speak to remind them.

Steve swayed just an infinitesimal bit in Loki’s direction. Clint frantically tried to think of something
to say, anything to break the moment before disaster struck, but his brain had shut down and he was
as poleaxed as the two men currently gazing at each other.

Loki’s stance relaxed just fractionally, and Clint panicked anew. That was some kind of unconscious
consent to…to a very bad idea that he wasn’t going to put into words even in his own mind, and
Steve had to have sensed it, and everything was about to go to hell and Clint couldn’t think of
anything to say except things he definitely couldn’t, such as, Hypothetically, snogging alien former
supervillains is a bad idea. That just happened to randomly occur to me right now for no reason
whichever and I thought I’d say it out loud, just for funsies.

“Pardon me, sirs.” Jarvis’s voice seemed just a touch louder than usual, jarring them all out of the
moment. “The Lady Sif has just set fire to the microwave. I have urged her to do nothing until
humans are there to help, but I fear she will not listen—“

All three men left the armory at a run, full of relief at the practical emergency. The moment Steve
reached the common area he commanded, “Stop!”

It was too late. Sif hurled a pitcher of water at the microwave. Loki threw a force field around the
burning appliance an instant before the water reached it; it splashed harmlessly over the counter and
floor.

With the forcefield depriving it of oxygen, the fire died down swiftly. By then every occupant of the
Tower was in the kitchen. Sif looked angry as well as embarrassed.

Tony used a serving spoon to push the button opening the microwave and poke at the charred
contents. “Aha. You didn’t take your leftovers out of the bag. It’s one of those stay-hot bags with
metal foil in it.”

The humans nodded knowingly. “Perhaps I should have asked one of you to help me,” Sif said
stiffly.

“Don’t worry about it, humans make this mistake all the time.” Tony dropped the serving spoon into
the sink.

“Jarvis, order us a new microwave,” Pepper said.

“No need, I can fix it.”

Everyone looked at Tony, skeptical. “Like you fixed the blender?”
“That was one time!”

“And the popcorn maker?”

“It just needed a little more work.”

“And the waffle iron?”

Before Tony could defend that one, Pepper cut in. “You can fix it, Tony, if you take it down to your workshop right now.”

Tony tried to seize it and immediately snatched his hands away; the oven was still hot. Loki picked it up and took it to the elevator, Sif following. As the doors closed, they heard Jarvis announcing, “The new microwave will be delivered within the hour.”

“There is no telling what this thing will do when Tony is through playing with it.” Loki looked down at the charred appliance, amused.

“I did not mean to - I thought I had grasped the mechanism.”

Loki shrugged. “Human contraptions are unnecessarily complicated. Recall that their bodies cannot channel magic well. They have learned the principles of science in a haphazard fashion as a result.”

Mollified, Sif stepped out of the elevator and stood watching him put the ruined microwave in a remote corner. She had learned from hard experience not to touch anything in a sorcerer’s workshop.

Loki dusted off his hands and rejoined her. “Hopefully he will forget about it way back there. Now, let us find you some less perilous food.”

Later, when he was alone, Clint spoke aloud.

“Jarvis, don’t you have ways of overriding machines in this building? Couldn’t you have cut the power to the microwave before Sif turned it on?” He tilted his head at another thought. “Or told her not to put that wrapper in there in the first place?”

“How remiss of me, sir. I didn’t even think of that.”

“Good work, Jarvis.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is partly a dig at AoS insulting the audience's intelligence by expecting us to believe that Sif can 1) use a computer and 2) knows enough about computers to make snotty remarks about how primitive ours are. It's completely OOC, and also, it's impossible to automatically understand how to use a device even if you're familiar with more advanced ones that do the same thing. Give one of today's teenagers a Kaypro 360 to see what I'm talking about.
Hogun the Grim lived up to his name. When he came to Midgard, he did not thank Loki for interceding with the queen, nor did he ask Loki any probing questions about his species or the succession. All he spoke of was battle. The Avengers obliged him by listening to his tales and telling ones of their own.

The only other subject that came up in his presence was baseball. On Hogun’s first evening in the Tower, over dinner (pizza), Natasha suddenly said, “Oh, Steve, you know Andrew at SHIELD? He’s a baseball fan.”

“Are you trying to fix me up again?”

“Yes. Don’t you think he’s cute?”

Steve darted a furtive glance at Loki. “Kinda, but…”

“Why don’t you ask him to a game?”

“I don’t know….”

He was looking at Loki, the question in his eyes clear, at least to them. And to Clint, who was observing with wariness.

“I think you should,” Loki said, too calmly. “It has been a long while since you went on a date.”

“Second the motion,” Clint said, looking at Loki.

Steve looked down at his pepperoni. “I’ll think about it.”

After a few days and a couple of battles, Hogun found Steve alone one morning on the Tower’s balcony. Hearing Hogun’s step, Steve shut his sketchbook hastily and looked up, tucking the book protectively under his arm.

“You are leader here,” Hogun said without preamble.
“Well, in combat, yes.” Really, what Steve did was more like coordinating, figuring out the best ways to utilize each Avengers’ abilities in the fight at hand and then just letting them do it. A soldier, two spies, a lone-wolf superhero, a civilian scientist who went berserk occasionally and an alien sorcerer-prince didn’t really make up the kind of team anyone could lead.

"Then it is you I must warn about Loki."

Apprehensive, Steve gestured to Hogun to sit across from him. "Go on."

"He will betray you."

"What makes you say that?"

"It is his nature."

Steve waited. When Hogun did not elaborate, Steve said, "I'm going to need a little more than that to go on."

“He is a master of magic. You cannot tell what he will do. He could deceive you with ease."

“True, but he spent a thousand years saving your lives.”

“I am no coward. I am ready to go to Valhalla at any moment.”

“Good for you. But back to my point: he was loyal to Thor, and by extension to Thor’s friends, for more than ten times a human lifespan. Doesn’t he rate just a little bit of loyalty from you in return?"

“You must not trust him. His mind is devious.”

“I think,” Steve said slowly, “that it’s more that the minds of Asgardian warriors are… straightforward.” That was the most tactful way Steve could think of to say it.

“I am of Vanaheim. And Loki is a Jotun who tried to claim the throne of Asgard.”

Steve looked at him. “You do realize that he wasn’t the one who deceived Asgard about his species, right? And that it was Odin who made him a prince and put him in the line of succession?”

“If you do not heed my warning, you will suffer for it."

Steve sighed. “I think you’re talking to the wrong person. I just don’t believe you. Try Clint, he’s the one with the most personal grievance against Loki.”

With dour resignation, Hogun left, presumably in search of Clint. Steve frowned at his sketchbook for a minute before getting up and going inside, resolved to talk this over with the first Avenger he saw, as long as it wasn’t Loki.

The common area was empty, so Steve went down to the workshop. Bruce would almost certainly be there, and probably Tony too.

As it turned out, Tony was absent - maybe he was hung over, maybe he was out flying, maybe Pepper had roped him into a board meeting, who knew - but Bruce was there, and so was Rhodey. Rhodey was spending more time around the Tower lately, talking science with Bruce or Tony. His distant cordiality to Loki had been noted by all, and Steve had to wonder if he was hanging around so he’d be there if Loki let in another alien army or threw Tony out a window again.

When Steve entered, Bruce and Rhodey stopped their incomprehensible science conversation and
looked up at him. Bruce was sitting in front of an array of screens and sensors, Steve had no idea what any of them were, and Rhodey was at a workbench nearby, doing something to what looked like a piece of his armor.

Steve stood before them and told them about Hogun’s vague but emphatic warnings. “I trust Loki, but I’m not sure I’m objective where he’s concerned.” Let them make what they would of that. “I need a second opinion. A third wouldn’t go amiss, either.”

Bruce smiled ruefully. “I think that all the evidence we have points to Loki being trustworthy. Hogun knew him for centuries and can’t say anything to his discredit aside from that he’s capable of being sneaky. Considering we’re on a team with two professional spies and Tony Stark, I don’t think we can criticize that too hard. I think this is more about a personality clash than anything substantive.”

Steve took that in, then looked to Rhodey. “You still don’t trust him, even after what he did for Tony. Do you doubt that he invaded Earth under duress? That he was throwing the fight?”

“Not one bit. That’s definitely true.”

“Then why?”

Rhodey sighed, massaging the bridge of his nose for a minute. “Tony was in a similar situation. He got out of it without killing anyone who didn’t have it coming.”

“You think Loki could’ve managed his sabotage without any innocents dying? I really don’t see how.”

“No, I don’t. That’s not the issue. The issue is that Loki is ruthless. Well, rather, he’s capable of being ruthless.”

“In a good cause,” Bruce said, being fair.

Rhodey looked from one of them to the other. “Put yourself in his position. You’re in the power of a seriously evil guy. You can’t escape. You can’t even die to get out of it.” Bruce’s face went somber. Rhodey continued, “You have to pretend to go along with the guy who has you in his clutches, so the minute your mission starts, you kill a dozen of the good guys in order to show them that shit’s real.”

Rhodey paused for emphasis. The other two were silent.

“Could you do it?”

Steve thought about it, hard.

“Even if you had to?”

“The SHIELD employees who he killed when he first got here weren’t civilians,” Steve said. He was grasping at straws and he knew it. “They were armed agents. They signed up for hazardous duty.”

“And you know that Stark missiles don’t sort out good people and bad people before killing them,” Bruce pointed out.

“Right! I don’t believe every Axis soldier I killed was a bad person. I’m sure some of them were true believers, but a lot of them were just born on the wrong patch of dirt.”
“That’s true. But what if you had been one second later reaching Loki in Stuttgart? Do you doubt Loki would’ve killed that old guy who tried to tell him off?”

Steve remembered how his shield had reverberated from the blast of Loki’s sceptre. “No. But what else could Loki have done? In that situation?”

“Nothing. It was what he had to do, and he did it. But let me ask you something: Could you have done it? Killed an old man for being brave?”

Steve tried to tell himself that he could. That to save a world, he could kill one innocent, knowing he would never forgive himself. That he would accept the burden of the guilt because the alternative was unthinkable.

“Or the usher in the opera house? Or the physicist whose retinal scan he needed?”

Steve heaved a sigh. “No. I couldn’t have.”

“You couldn’t be that ruthless. Even if you had to.”

“No.”

“And that,” Rhodey said, “is why we can’t trust Loki. Because he could, and did.”

Clint listened politely to Hogun’s warnings. When Hogun was done, Clint shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m defending him, but for months now Loki has had our backs, he’s tried to make amends, and he’s done everything we asked him to and then some. And by your own admission, he kept you and your pals alive for centuries. I’d like to see how you’d cope with finding out that your father was actually your kidnapper and that you were a bogeyman.”

Hogun glared at him. “You mortals are foolish. You do not know of what you speak.”

“Right back atcha. Excuse me, I need to find another foolish mortal to spar with.”

Natasha found Steve alone on the balcony, alternately drawing and staring over the city skyline. He didn’t hear her light step, but when she spoke he swiftly shut his sketchbook.

“Did you ask Andrew to a baseball game?”

He rested his palm on the book. “No. Listen, Natasha, this really isn’t a great time for that.”

“C’mon, when will be a great time?” She sat beside him and lightly bumped his shoulder with hers. “You can’t just keep waiting for things to be perfect.”

He sighed. Maybe if he told her just a little, she would let up. “The thing is, there’s… someone else I might be interested in. Maybe. But I don’t know if that’s going to go anywhere.”

Natasha’s beautiful face lit up. Steve groaned inwardly. “Are they interested in you?”

“Um. Yes, I mean I think so, but I’m not sure he wants to actually do anything about it.”

Maybe it was Steve’s imagination, but Natasha seemed even more delighted at the pronoun. “How could he not? Let me help. Have you asked him out yet?”
“No. It’s complicated.” Then he laughed ruefully at himself. He was even catching up to 21st century clichés.

“You like him, he likes you, how complicated can it-”

“It’s Loki.”

Despite his embarrassment over the confession, he almost laughed at her shocked face.

“Oh,” she said after a minute.

They sat without saying anything for a little.

“Um. I don’t think I should try to give you advice about this. But if you want to talk about it?”

Steve considered. “For a long time I thought I was just noticing that he’s good-looking. But a few days ago I realized it was a lot more than that.

“And I know he’s done so many very wrong things, but he was doing evil in the service of good. It scares me and I don’t excuse him but he’s trying so hard to make amends when he’s the least guilty party in the whole disaster.

“I’m Captain America, okay, but I think Loki is the ideal of what royalty ought to be. He really believes that it’s his duty to devote his entire life to serving his realm - all the realms, really. He takes it for granted that he has to sacrifice his own wishes for the good of his realm. That’s why he just accepted that he should sabotage the Chitauri invasion and not even expect to be recognized for it. He was ready to be executed for saving us all! I really think he should be king, not Thor. Kings like Thor - and Odin - are the reason most of Earth doesn’t have monarchy anymore.”

“You really do have it bad for him.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, abashed. “I kinda do, yeah.”

She shook her head, rueful.

“You know you could have anyone, and you’ve picked a supervillain.”

After Hogun left, the Avengers assembled for Japanese delivery. All were somewhat dejected.

“Loki, when you go back to Asgard, watch your back. Hogun took me aside and told me not to trust you. His reasoning was circular; according to him, we shouldn’t trust you because you’re untrustworthy.”

“He told me the same thing,” Steve said.

“Thank you for letting me know.” Loki gave both of them appraising looks. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll pre-emptively kill him?”

“That never even occurred to me.” Clint sounded like he meant it.

“So thus far, one of Thor’s friends likes you too much, and the other not at all,” Tony summed up. “I gotta hope Fandral is more restful.”

“He should be easier. Just give him the chance to meet beautiful women. Or all-right looking
women. His appetite for the fair sex is inexhaustible.”

“Does he prefer blondes too?”

“He prefers women. And the occasional pretty man.”

“Like you?”

Loki shrugged, dismissive. “That was a thousand years ago.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter got some very insightful comments.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Natasha takes up Loki’s offer.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to funnymagicaing for beta reading.

Clint and Natasha sparred for hours that morning. When they were both utterly exhausted, they showered, then sat on the edge of their bed for a long time before either of them spoke.

“I never told you about when they did it.”

“You don’t have to. Unless you want to.”

“They gave us physical exams all the time, making sure we were in fighting shape. I now realize they were also keeping track of our development so they would know when to sterilize us. They didn’t tell us that, of course.

“A few days after an examination I was pulled out of practice and told to go to the office. That happened all the time. I didn’t think anything of it. I went and when I got there they gave me an injection. I assumed it was a vaccination. Then I passed out. I came to in the infirmary. It wasn’t until they told me I was recovered enough to go back to my own bed that they said, just casually, that now I could never get pregnant.”

Natasha’s voice was very flat. Clint knew her well enough to know that this much lack of expression meant she was very upset indeed.

Another couple would have given and accepted support with physical contact. Clint and Natasha were different. He simply sat close to her and listened.

“I didn’t even feel any particular emotion about it then. They acted like it was no big deal and at the time I felt like they were right. It wasn’t until years later that I cared.” She looked at him. “Do you want to be a father, Clint?”

He looked at his hands, thoughtful. “I’m conflicted. Part of me would really like to show the universe how it’s done. To give a child what I and most of my friends didn’t have. Part of me thinks I couldn’t… that it would just be too much. That’s why I’m not trying to persuade you either way, Tash. It’s your choice, and whatever you decide, I’m with you.”

“Agent Romanoff, Agent Barton. Loki is about to leave for Asgard. You should go now if you still intend to join him.”

“Thanks, Jarvis,” Natasha said. “Tell him we’ll be there in one minute.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Frigga and Loki spend some time together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frigga looked up when the door to her study was opened, and the sight that followed filled her with joy. There was her favorite son, bowing with a warm smile before he came to take the seat beside her that she indicated.

She brushed Loki’s hair back from his face a little, a gesture he tolerated with amusement, and clasped his hand. He had been home for an entire day but she could not get enough of his presence.

“What did Hemingr want at the banquet last night?” she asked. “He must have bent your ear for an hour.”

“Ah. Well, he wished me to know how glad he is that I survived my suicide attempt, and how dull the court has been without me, and how well I am looking now, and how much patience I must have to spend so much time among mortals. I believe he was going to inform me that it was unfair of you to send me to Midgard, but my cheerful words about that realm changed his mind. He thinks you are doing an excellent job as ruler, truly excellent, and that you are as beautiful as you were the day I, er, Thor was born - he clearly forgot for a moment that I was kidnapped and adopted. Oh, and he wishes for permission to import more light crystals from Vanaheim.”

Frigga laughed. “That fool, there are more than enough here already. Does he really think - oh, never mind. This afternoon at the council meeting, you put forth the request and I will grant it after a bit of persuasion.” The court needed to know that Loki’s favor was now worth currying. Loki’s influence with Odin had been limited. Those with access to other members of the royal family went to him last. It had been servants and commoners who came to Loki, knowing he would at least grant them a hearing.

Which reminded her of the project she was about to embark upon. The first step would be taken this very day.

“There is something else I will need you to do.”

“Yes, my queen?”

Her eyes flitted to Gungnir, propped on the wall close at hand. “When I address the Thing tomorrow, I am going to announce that henceforth, no citizen of Asgard may be executed or stripped of his powers or his citizenship without a trial before representatives of the Thing.”

“You are giving up some of your royal prerogatives?”

“Yes.”

She could see the calculation in those green eyes, but he did not trouble to put into words what they
both were thinking. By the time she passed Gungnir to one of her sons, there would be sufficient checks on the throne’s power that the disasters of the past centuries would be harder to repeat.

Anyone who wielded unlimited power such as Odin had would run mad eventually. And if she had to let Thor succeed her. . . . She shivered. The fear that stalked her nightmares, that lurked in moments of discouragement, was of Thor - her son, the one she had carried in her belly, who she adored even if he was not her favorite - following his father’s example, becoming a monstrous tyrant like Odin.

It was only too likely to happen, if Thor were king. And leaving her throne to Loki would inevitably lead to a bloody war throughout the realms as Thor tried to wrest it from him. Only the death of one of her sons would stop it.

Another way must be found. Fortunately, she had centuries in which to find it.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Voice your approval of the measure. I am giving them more power and I want them to hear you agreeing with it. Do you agree?”

“I do. The burden on Asgard’s sovereign is too great. You - and your successors - can still banish or imprison malefactors if you need to. Unless you are surrendering that prerogative as well?”

“No. But there will be other changes, instituted gradually over the next two centuries. Asgard’s sovereign will still wield tremendous power when I am done, but there will be less potential for abuse.”

“You are wise.” Loki’s face was grave, his gaze turned inward for a moment, as he doubtless remembered his centuries of attempting to sway Odin from cruelty or folly.

To divert his thoughts, Frigga asked, “Is your shield-brother Natasha well? I thought Magnhildr looked angry as she saw you off.”

Loki darted a sharp glance at her. “If you know what Natasha wanted treated, please do not tell me. She assured me that it wasn’t life-threatening, but she wishes to keep it private.” His brows drew together, grim at his thoughts. “I suspect that the people who kidnapped and used her left some sort of injury or scar, and she wished to be rid of the reminder. Magnhildr’s anger would seem to confirm my suspicion.”

“I forgot to tell you how pleased I was with the mission Natasha and Clint invited you on. When I saw that she was rescuing children who had been used as she was, I knew I had chosen well for you.”

He smiled teasingly. “You think she is a good influence on me?”

“They all are. As you are on them.” Sending Loki to Midgard had been successful beyond her dearest hopes. Loki needed to feel he had atoned and that his atonement had been accepted if he were not to be lost to the dark path chance had thrust him onto. And the Avengers, already heroes, had become nobler by extending first sufferance, then forgiveness and kindness, to their former enemy. “How are they all?”

“Tony recovered swiftly from having the shrapnel removed from his chest, and was much inspired by everything he saw here and in Vanaheim. He has scarcely left his workshop since returning. Bruce is much more cheerful since I told him that he could likely be cured on Vanaheim; simply having a reasonable hope of escape has lightened the burden of his berserker form. Pepper and Natasha took me to a performance of dance and insisted that I put their hair up in Asgardian fashion.
I gave Natasha the style you like for formal occasions, Mother, and Pepper a five-strand braid, it was very becoming to her. The men seemed to think it was funny that I could do that. But then, most Midgardian men keep their hair short for some reason.”

“And they shave their beards! Almost all of them! I wonder why.”

“I haven’t found out.”

Frigga waited, and when Loki said nothing more, prompted, “There is one person you have not yet mentioned.”

“Steve is well.” Loki sighed. “He returns my feelings.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Nothing.”

She patted his shoulder, wishing she could do more to comfort him. “That is probably for the best.”

Loki shrugged and changed the subject. “Last night at the banquet, a few people mentioned that Thor came home to visit you recently. They all said he seemed surprisingly cheerful.”

“He has overcome his feelings about Jotuns.” From Hliðskjálf Frigga looked upon both of her sons every day, and her relief at Thor’s progress had been immense. “He is working hard there, hauling rubble as they rebuild and helping them slay bilgesnipe and other big game. They were quite impressed - he is stronger than many Jotuns, despite being a mere six feet tall.”

Loki had the grace to look ashamed at the mention of rubble. “Is he safe from them?”

“When he first arrived, Prince Helblindi - come to think of it, he is your brother by birth - challenged him to a duel for what he did to Jotunheim. I allowed it because the Jotuns agreed to stop the duel at the first broken bone instead of fighting to the death. Helblindi is eleven feet tall and Thor did not have Mjölnir, and yet, Thor triumphed.” Frigga smiled, proud of her elder son despite her worries.

“I doubt Helblindi wishes to claim me any more than I wish to claim him. Though I suppose someday relations between the realms will require that we do so.” Loki sighed, resigned. “I am glad Thor won. But not surprised. I suppose his friends were delighted to hear the story.”

“Only Volstagg and Hogun were here to hear it. I don’t want them all together again for a while; they will fall into their old bad habits too easily. Sif is leading the army to protect Zalintyre from the aggression of Nornheim and Fandral is on a mission to Haragon. He won’t be back for a bit, so I will be sending Volstagg to Midgard next week instead.”

“Very well. Mother, I must talk to you about Sif.”

He explained Sif’s apparent plans to be queen regardless of which prince succeeded Frigga. Frigga listened, thoughtful after her initial surprise. “And if you are king one day, will you consider her suit?”

“She would be useful,” Loki admitted. “I don’t want to lead the army myself, but if I allowed anyone other than my queen to do so I would have to worry about attempted coups. I was foreign-born, so an Asgardian-born queen would reconcile any who object to that. Asgard’s warriors would accept my rule if Sif were at my side.”

“I have long been resigned to the prospect of Sif as a daughter-in-law, but she would be a much
better queen for you than for Thor. She would encourage all of his worst qualities, but not yours.”

“We have been over this, Mother. You should bequeath the throne to Thor.”

“You would be a much better king and you know it. If I can find some way of reconciling Thor to it, you will succeed me.” She clasped both of his hands. He only met her gaze, wide-eyed. “I am sorry to place this burden upon you, my son.”

“I am a prince,” he said simply. He looked down at their joined hands for a moment, then back to her face. “Your faith in me means everything, Mother.”

Chapter End Notes

I imagine that Loki did Natasha's hair the way Frigga wore hers for Thor's coronation, and Pepper's hair was like this: http://ghk.h-cdn.co/assets/15/46/480x679/five-strand-braid-3.png

Also, a couple of people asked about the Thing. I figured everyone who reads fic about Marvel Asgard was familiar with it by now, so I didn't link this before, but here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thing_(assembly)
Warrior Exchange: Volstagg

Chapter Summary

The Avengers watch a movie, Volstagg visits Midgard, and Tony offers Steve a clue.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Renne Michaels and Shi_Toyu for beta reading.

“Why is it always New York?” Loki asked, gesturing to the movie they were watching. “Why don’t monsters or aliens ever attack Chicago or London or Beijing?”

The rest of the Avengers looked at him. Steve, sitting right beside him, pretended to be thoughtful. “Gee, Loki, I don’t know. Perhaps you might have some insight into this.”

The others laughed wryly. Loki looked at the floor. “Because I needed to be certain the Avengers would find me, so that you could stop me. Where better than Stark Tower?”

Tony diverted the conversation back to safer ground. “It’s because Hollywood people are provincial. They think the universe consists of New York City and Los Angeles. They call the rest of the country the ‘flyover states’.”

“Jerks,” Clint remarked.

“Come to think of it, they were already doing that in the ’30s,” Steve said. “The original novel of War of the Worlds was set in England, because the author was English, but when they made the radio play they moved it to New York. Because where else would aliens invade?”

“That the one where people thought Martians were really invading?”

“Yep.”

“I suppose you ran out looking for Martians to beat up.”

Steve gave an embarrassed laugh. “No. At every commercial they reminded us that it was fiction.”

“So you had put on your coat and grabbed a weapon of some kind when the announcer let you know you didn’t have to?”

Steve’s silence and pink face answered the question, and his companions all laughed affectionately. “Hey, we did need you to fight aliens in New York!” Clint assured him. “You were just a few decades ahead of schedule.”

“At the time I drew my idea of what H.G. Wells’s Martians looked like. The other day I happened to remember that and tried to reproduce it.” Steve gestured at the sketchbook on the coffee table. “If you guys want to see it, it should be on the bookmarked page.”
Loki was closest, so he picked up the book and opened it. The bookmarked page depicted an alien, but not a Martian.

Loki could not take his eyes off the page for a long moment. It was an intricately drawn picture of himself, a wide unfeigned smile of simple happiness on his face.

When had Steve seen him look like that?

When had anyone?

Recovering himself, Loki turned the page. Maybe the bookmark had just been one page away from what Steve had actually wanted to show them.

The following page was blank, so Loki went backwards, but the page before the portrait of himself looking uncharacteristically happy had another drawing of Loki, his hair flying and his face intent as he sparred with Sif, whose back was to the viewer and who had been represented with a handful of strokes, while Loki’s figure was carefully shaded and detailed.

“What do you think?” Steve’s voice broke into Loki’s bemusement.

Loki summoned his self-discipline and shut the book. He handed it to Steve, saying, “I think this is the wrong sketchbook.”

Steve snatched it from him quickly, face turning from pink to bright red as he tucked it under a well-muscled arm. Loki looked back at the screen, unsure what else to do.

Unfortunately, Tony had noticed Steve’s blush. “Cap, have you been drawing naughty pictures? C’mon, Loki, tell us what you saw.”

“Unleashing an alien army is one thing. Revealing the contents of private papers is another entirely.” Loki spoke firmly, hoping that Tony would let the matter lie.

As he had hoped, Tony started teasing Loki instead, mocking his accent. “Yeah, invading is all very well, but snitching just isn’t cricket.”

Loki seized the tenuous diversion. “Which reminds me that I still want to learn more about Midgardian sports. I’ve learned the rules of baseball already. Perhaps you would let me accompany you to a car race sometime, Tony.”

“Sure. And in the fall we can do football and basketball. We should probably work soccer in there somewhere, but being an American I don’t even know when their season is.”

“I bet Loki will like soccer,” Bruce remarked, thoughtful. “A lot of speed and strategy.”

“But Americans don’t play it?”

“We do but it’s not very popular here. But almost everywhere else in the world it is the sport. It’s always surreal to go to Europe and see them making such a huge fuss over soccer.”

Loki allowed the humans to continue their banter about different sports - apparently there were two different sports called football and this led to a lot of bickering on Midgard. Loki tried to keep his gaze on the screen, where a colossally silly movie was still playing, but he could feel Steve’s eyes on him. Eventually he had to look at him.

Steve was gazing at him, intent, his flush mostly faded by now. Loki gave him an awkward half-
smile before looking away.

What could he say to him, really? What could they say to each other?

When the movie ended Loki was poised to feign fatigue and escape to his chambers, but the conversation had turned to safer, more frivolous topics. Tony was teasing Clint about his enthusiasm for an actor apparently considered especially attractive by Midgard.

“C’mon, you can tell us, you’re among friends,” Tony pestered. “Even you monosexual people have hypothetical exceptions.”

“Sure. Jaye Davidson,” Clint said. Loki had no idea who that was, but most of the humans evidently did and chuckled.

“Loki. You have an exception?”

Loki thought. “Daenerys Targaryen.”

“My moon,” Steve said, not very loudly.

Loki didn’t know what to do with the warm feeling those words gave him. Or with the alarm in the faces of Clint and Natasha, as they both looked between Steve and Loki. Mercifully, a way to make a joke of the moment popped into Loki’s mind. He smiled. “My sun and stars… and stripes.”

The disappointment on Steve’s face made Loki wince. But he couldn’t encourage the other man’s feelings, it would be unconscionable.

“Mine is Catherine Zeta Jones,” Pepper said, pulling Tony’s gaze to her and away from scrutinizing Steve.

“Second the motion,” Natasha agreed.

All the men except for Loki tried to look as if they were not contemplating the mental images the women had just evoked.


Bruce looked down at his glasses as he turned them over in his hands, giving his quiet little smile. “I’ve been waiting for a chance to announce this. My exception, apparently, is Lt. Colonel James Rhodes.”

“Wait, you’ve been running around with my best friend behind my back?”

“Yep.”

“Rhodey turned you gay?”

“For him, anyway.”

“No wonder you’ve been so chipper lately. Here I just thought you’d enjoy playing with his suit. Wait, there’s a joke in there somewhere.”

“Why don’t you leave it where it is,” Clint suggested.

“Besides, it’s bedtime.” Natasha rose and stretched before taking the glass from which she’d been drinking vodka to the dishwasher. The others followed suit.
Tony and Pepper stood holding hands and looking at each other for a moment. Apparently they had communicated something, because Tony announced, “I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight, I can tell. I’m going to work on finding out how SHIELD was able to hack Jarvis so I can block them from doing it again.”

“You still haven’t figured it out?” Clint frowned at him, and Natasha gave him a sharp look. “That’s worrying.”

“It was a pretty slick piece of hacking,” Bruce said. “But then, this is SHIELD we’re talking about.” Tony was scowling now. “I am going to figure it out if it takes all the caffeine on this continent.” Pepper gave him a quick kiss and they parted for the night.

“Are you sure you don’t want my help?” Loki asked him as the others dispersed. “I understand why you’ve refused, but if it’s taking you this long….”

Tony looked up at him. “Don’t think that it’s a matter of not trusting the alien. You’re on the team. When you’re a Jet, you’re a Jet for life. It’s a matter of totally personal pride. Earthgardian tech hacked Jarvis, I should be able to figure it out with Earthgardian tech.”

Loki was perturbed, but there was nothing he could do but watch Tony disappear into the elevator which would take him down to his workshop.

Only then did he realize that one of the Avengers had not departed yet, and they were now alone. Steve, of course.

“Good night.” Loki turned to go, but of course Steve wouldn’t make it that easy.

“Loki. Can I ask you something?”

Loki stopped. He couldn’t just refuse, couldn’t just run away.

He asked himself what he was going to do. He didn’t know.

Steve drew a breath, bracing himself. “When you were invading. The people you killed….”

Loki turned to face the other man, meeting those searching sky-colored eyes. “Are you asking me if I feel remorse?”

Steve held Loki’s gaze, unfazed. “I know that you do. I’m wondering how you were able to do it.”

Perhaps this was an opportunity to make Steve see why he should walk away. Why he should choose some human with less red in his or her ledger. “Remember that I had spent a year being tortured, after having my world turned upside down and my heart broken. I was not entirely sane at the time. That is not an excuse, by the way. It is merely an explanation.”

“How do you live with it now?”

Loki looked away, trying to put the answer into words. “I get out of bed. I do the duties assigned me by those to whom I owe loyalty. And occasionally, I get extremely drunk.” He made himself look at Steve again. “You should remember what I am capable of.”

“I do.” Steve’s youthful face was serious. “And I also remember everything I’ve seen you do since then.” He licked his lips, searching for words. “You haven’t let that time in your life drag you down permanently. It has to be hard to live with what you did and keep your conscience. A lot of people
would have shucked it.”

Steve was standing a mere stride away, the invitation completely clear. It would be so easy to close the distance between them, and then….

Steve deserved someone he did not have to forgive.

“I believe you think too highly of me, Captain.”

With those words, Loki turned and left Steve standing alone in the common room.

It was a long time and a great deal of Asgardian mead before Loki was able to sleep. He had behaved rightly, but he regretted it with every fiber of his being.

Volstagg was easily entertained. Each morning of his stay, Loki took him to local schools for storytime, where Volstagg’s affinity for children served him well. The Avengers introduced him to various Midgardian delicacies. The food didn’t have to be fancy, just plentiful; Volstagg was as delighted with Japanese carryout or delivered pizza as he was with the French cuisine they took him out for one night. The Avengers had had months to get used to the Asgardian appetite, but even so Volstagg’s capacity amazed them.

Volstagg, more amiable than Thor’s other friends, took Loki’s new status in Asgard mostly in stride. Perhaps the fact that Sif and Hogun had already served with him on Midgard with no ill effects had dissipated any trepidation Volstagg might have felt.

On Volstagg’s second evening, as he shared pizza with the Avengers (plus Pepper and Rhodey), he told a grossly exaggerated story of his own triumphs during a griffin hunt with the rest of Thor’s warrior band a century ago.

Loki resisted the urge to ask, resisted until his determination frayed and snapped. “My mother told me that Thor visited Asgard recently. How is he?”

Intent on choosing the slice most loaded with assorted toppings, Volstagg tossed his answer without thought. “I think he’s starting to almost enjoy Jotunheim. But you’ve adapted well to Midgard, Loki. It just goes to show that people can become accustomed to anything.”

Every human pair of eyebrows lifted. Loki spoke firmly. “Adapting to Midgard is no hardship. You must have noticed how far humans have advanced since our last sojourn here. The other realms have badly underestimated them.”

Volstagg chortled, blissfully unaware that he had just insulted half a dozen people. “We all should have guessed you and Thor did not share blood. The way he speaks of frost giants and the way you speak of humans could not be less similar.”

“Oh? What does he say of frost giants?”

The humans noticed Loki’s fingers tight around his glass of beer. Volstagg did not. He shrugged. “Only that they are not so monstrous as Odin said. It’s to be expected. He has spent months living among them, with no one of his own kind about. He’s gotten used to the Jotuns just as you have gotten used to mortals.”

Loki’s voice was sharp. “Kindly do not insult my hosts, Volstagg. Humans have been far kinder to
me than I had any right to expect, and they have proven that they are not inferior to Asgardians in either wisdom or valor.”

Volstagg looked at his prince, surprised and perhaps a little cowed at last if the sudden formality of his tone was any indication. “As you say, Your Highness.”

A moment of tense silence ensued before Volstagg spoke again, thoughtful now.

“I suppose that is why the queen sent Thor to Jotunheim. Get him used enough to Jotuns that he won’t kill his foster brother for being one.”

“Are you serious?” Steve burst out. “Would Thor really kill his own brother just because he found out he was a frost giant?”

Volstagg looked at Steve, at a loss.

Loki stared at the tabletop and forced words out, choking on them.

“The moment I found out that I was a frost giant, my brother was thirty feet away, slaughtering frost giants by the dozen and laughing aloud in joy. He killed hundreds of them - of us - in half an hour.”

No one knew what to say. A moment later Loki rose and swiftly left the room.

Every one of the Avengers stood, ready to go after him. Volstagg looked bewildered.

“I got this,” Bruce told his comrades firmly.

“No, I’ll go-” Steve began, but Bruce held up a hand.

“No, Steve, this one’s mine. Sometimes the best man for the job is a monster.”

Loki hadn’t ordered Jarvis to lock down his suite, so Bruce was able to just walk in. Loki was crouched on the sofa in his little-used living room, knees drawn up to his chest, pressing a fist against his mouth as he tried not to sob.

Bruce sat beside him without a word, moving a box of tissues into easier reach.

“I’m sorry, I just-” Loki began, and could not continue.

“Don’t apologize. You had to deal with all of that shit completely on your own. We’re not leaving you to do it by yourself anymore.”

Loki covered his face with his hands, still unable to control himself.

“Cry all you need to. You can talk, or not. But I’m here. You shouldn’t have been lied to, you shouldn’t have been taught your species was evil, you shouldn’t have had to be afraid your own brother would murder you, and you shouldn’t have to deal with it all alone. You’re not alone now.”

With that, Bruce firmly placed his hand on Loki’s shoulder and let him cry it out.

When the storm of tears subsided, Bruce resumed talking, quietly, evenly.

“The first few times I changed, I had no idea what had happened. What I had become. There wasn’t a word for what I turned into. It was like those movies where someone blacks out because they’re
drugged or something, and when they come to, there’s a dead body beside them and blood on their hands.”

Loki wiped his face, dropped the tissues into the wastebasket. Looked at Bruce. “That must have been terrifying.”

“It was.”

“I am sorry you went through that. At least I knew the name and nature of what I turned into.”

Bruce gave his rueful little smile. “I’m still not sure I’d want to trade.”

Loki drew a breath, his composure seeping back. “The lieutenant colonel does not fear your other form?”

“He’s Tony Stark’s best friend. He doesn’t scare easy.”

Loki managed a chuckle. “I am glad for you.” He hesitated, spread his hands and folded them again. “Thank you for… keeping me company.”

“We monsters gotta stick together.”

The following day, while Volstagg was telling schoolchildren stories with Loki, Jarvis notified Tony that he had a chance to catch Steve alone.

Steve was on the balcony, sketching. At the sound of the door opening for Tony, he quickly closed the sketchbook. Tony grinned a little as he took a seat beside him and just got right to the point.

“It’s okay that you’re in love with Loki.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “You could tell?”

Tony chuckled.

Steve let his head fall into his hands.

“I mean it. It’s okay. We’ve all come to terms with him.” Tony paused to regard Steve seriously. “And he’s just as besotted with you as you are with him. I’d say it’s your duty to lure him back to the side of good with your impeccable abs.”

Steve raised his head, irritated. “Can you be serious, Tony?”

“Who says I’m not?” Tony leaned back in his chair, comfortable. “OK, no more teasing. Not for at least ten minutes. I’ll be your big brother and help you as best as I can. C’mon, don’t be embarrassed.”

Steve was embarrassed. The silence stretched. Eventually Steve mumbled, “How do I even - if I made up my mind about a human, I could ask them to a movie or a baseball game. How the hell do you court a Norse god? Do I have to slay a bilgesnipe for him?”

“Now you’re just looking for excuses.”

“There was never anyone but Bucky.”
Tony’s eyebrows lifted. “Never?”

“Never.” Steve swallowed. “But, you know, we knew each other since we were kids. It was… comfortable, you know?”

Tony didn’t know, but he nodded, trying to look understanding.

“And now I’ve fallen for a guy who’s a thousand years old, and god knows how many men and women he’s had….”

_Not to mention the horses,_ Tony did not say. The ten minutes weren’t up yet.

“And he wants you. Seriously, Cap, I don’t think you have anything to worry about.” Tony considered. “I think he might actually like your comparative lack of experience. I think he might hope to kind of catch some of your innocence, you know? Actually, I think he’s afraid he’ll besmirch you.”

“I want to be besmirched!”

Tony arched an eyebrow. “Then I suggest you besmooch him.”

“You’re not funny, Tony.”

“On the contrary, I am hilarious. But also sincere.”

Steve shrugged, attempting to be dismissive. “Anyway, I don’t think he’s really interested. I’ve given him lots of chances and he still hasn’t kissed me or anything.”

“Whoa. Whoa whoa whoa. You’re waiting for him to kiss you?”

“Of course. He’s the one with all the experience.”

Tony rubbed his forehead theatrically. “Yes. He is the one with the experience of _invading this planet_. And the experience of being here on the sufferance of people who would be entirely justified in demanding that he be executed or locked up for centuries. You expect him to follow that up by seducing Earth’s most iconic hero? How do you think the rest of the team is going to react? I think you guys will be good for each other, but I’m not so sure the others are going to see it that way.”

Steve stared at him. “I never thought of any of that.”

“If you’re going to date an ex-supervillain you’d better start. He’s not going to sweep you off your star spangled boots. I gather you don’t like to make the first move, but I’m also pretty sure he’s never going to.”

The two of them sat in silence for a bit, Steve’s face drawn in thought.

Eventually, Steve said, “Fine. As soon as Volstagg leaves. I’m not doing this with him around, he gets on my nerves too much.” He stood up and headed for the door, steps purposeful, but paused to look back at Tony. “And I’m sorry if the rest of the team disapproves, but this is my business, not theirs.”

“I got your back, Uncle Sam.”

Tony gave it a couple of minutes before returning to his workshop. At least he had a few days to prepare to reconcile his shield-brothers to this new development.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Alien abduction, crop circles, and kissing.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to funnymagic_aing, Renne Michaels, Astrin Ymir and Grey Bard for betaing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You realize that I was taken away by aliens and operated on?” Tony said one day in the lab, hunched over a tangle of wires and tubes. “I should tell the Enquirer.”

“Hey, Loki, are there aliens who look like the greys who abduct people?” Bruce asked, not looking away from his computer screen.

Loki, who had been sketching diagrams of magical energy reactions for their perusal, looked up at Bruce, brows drawing together. “What?”

Jarvis didn’t wait to be instructed before projecting images of big-eyed greys for Loki to see.

Loki stared at the images for a moment, pencil poised in his hand. “And what are they doing?”

The humans exchanged uneasy glances. “Um, the stories are that they abduct people and experiment on them, ah, molest them…..”

Loki dropped the pencil and shot to his feet. “Those misbegotten little-! We told them - I must speak with my queen.” He stepped to an empty bit of space in the lab, spread his hands, and started to muster seiðr between them.

“What…” Tony started to ask, but Loki snapped, “Do not distract me,” so Tony settled for pointing every scientific instrument possible at him to learn whatever he could about seiðr, with Bruce’s help. Loki ignored this entirely, intent upon his work.

It took nearly an hour for sufficient seiðr to build, but when it did Loki stretched open a portal and stepped through it, leaving two bewildered humans behind.

“Think he’s messing with us?” Tony asked, eyes still on where the portal had been.

“Seems like a lot of trouble to go to for a prank.”

“God of mischief.”

“Point.”
Loki returned to the Tower’s balcony the following day and strode into the common room, tight-lipped. Bruce and Clint were the only ones around at the moment. “The Zeta Reticulans - your ‘greys’ - should trouble Midgard no further. Mother dispatched an army led by Sif to deal with them.”

“Sif?” Clint shook his head. “I feel almost sorry for them.”

“Don’t.”

“Would this be a bad time to ask you about some other alleged alien visitors?” Bruce asked. “I’ve always thought crop circles were made by human pranksters, but…."

Loki dropped into the couch across from them with a weary glare. “You mean there’s more?”

“Well…."

“Show me.”

“Jarvis?”

A second later a selection of crop circle photos was projected into the air. Loki stared at them for a few seconds before dissolving into snickers.

Bruce and Clint looked at each other. “Let us in on the joke.”

It was a couple of minutes before Loki was able to respond. “First, tell me: are these associated with any kind of harm to humans?”

“Um, no.”

“Good. Harmless diversions, then.” Loki grinned at the images. “These are graffiti. Written in Elvish hieroglyphs, which are popular throughout the realms for their elegance.”

Both humans scrutinized him, still uncertain if he was joking. “Oh, yeah? What do they say?”

Loki pointed. “This one says ‘Yngvild was here’.”

“Seriously?”

“A thousand years ago, after the frost giants attempted to conquer Earth, Odin decreed that the other worlds were all to leave you alone. He did give Thor and me and a few others permission to visit briefly a century later, which is where your stories about us originated, but no other visits have been authorized. Alfheim’s nasty habit of playing silly pranks on humans gave him the excuse to conquer that realm six hundred years ago.”

“Thanks, sort of.”

Loki gestured to the photos. “These are made by people of various realms who wanted to brag about having flouted the All-Father’s command. This one says that someone named Ranvig has, well, a large member. This one says that Odin is sexually impotent.”

“I kind of hoped aliens would be more exotic.” Bruce’s tone was slightly mournful.

Loki squinted at one of the images. “This one says ‘Overcoat you, fire’.”
“Um, does that make sense if you’re not a mere mortal?”

“It makes no sense of any kind.” Loki looked at another one. “And this one doesn’t say anything at all, it’s just a squiggle. I suspect these were made by human pranksters, who of course can’t write in Elvish.”

“Of course not.”

“Jarvis, might I see more of these?” Jarvis obliged, and Loki was delighted. “This one says that the world does not have a nucleus! Must be human made. And here is one alleging that a woman named Fullangr - a Dwarfish name - is an accomplished lover.”

“Could we get an Elvish dictionary or something?” Bruce asked, still wondering if Loki was making it all up. But Loki only nodded absently and said, “Of course, the next time I go home,” and continued to translate the crop circles of both alien and human manufacture.

Steve keenly remembered being a sickly child. Now he frequently made visits to children’s hospitals, trying to make a difference in ways other than punching people. He could make dozens of children happy just by showing up, it was ridiculous. And amazing.

Usually other Avengers would come along, whoever was available. On the day Loki got back from dealing with the supposed “Zeta Reticulans”, Steve visited a hospital, and Loki and Bruce came along. Children were always let down if they weren’t in full uniform, so Steve had his costume and his shield and Loki his armor and Lævateinn. Bruce was the only one who got to wear civvies.

After spending an hour letting the children look at them and ask them questions, they headed back to the Tower. Steve was at the wheel of the Jaguar - Tony owned a dozen cars, any one of which Steve would have considered himself lucky to lay eyes on in person before they got him out of the ice, and Tony let them drive any of them except for his favorite vintage Porsche. Bruce was riding shotgun, while Loki was in the backseat, staring at the passing storefronts and pedestrians like his thoughts were a million miles away.

At a stoplight, a loud thunk sounded as a small black cube landed on the hood of the car. “What the heck is that?” Steve said, startled. He leaned forward to squint at it. He hoped the Jaguar wasn’t dented.

There was barely a second between the moment Loki turned to look and the moment alarm registered on his face. Just as Loki raised his hands to do something, before Steve had a chance to even ask what, the world exploded.

The next thing Steve knew, he was on his back on the asphalt with a few bits of Jaguar landing on him. Tony was going to be sore.

It took Steve a few seconds to regain control of his body. Then he was on his feet, surveying the situation. He ignored the sore spots from where he’d landed, inhaling the smell of burning. Loki was also getting up, apparently unhurt. He held out his hand and Lævateinn shot to it. Steve’s shield had landed near Loki; he accio’d (Tony’s word) that one as well, then flung it to Steve, who caught it smoothly. Meanwhile, sirens were flashing and people were getting out of their cars, curious. It looked like the black cube had only had enough power to total one car. No civilian casualties. So far.

Bruce was already green and growling. He looked around at the debris for a target.

Targets presented themselves promptly: little grey men, holding weird things that had to be guns of
some kind, their expressionless faces foreboding.

“Everyone, stay back!” Steve called out. “Get back into your cars, go inside!”

That was all he got a chance to say before the Zeta Reticulans opened fire. Not on the Avengers who were now ready and waiting, but the nearby civilians. Yeah, they knew where it hurt.

The civilians hurried for cover as the Avengers leapt to deflect the bolts of purple coming from the greys’ weapons, Steve with his shield, Loki with a force field, Hulk with himself. Hulk made a small crater in the asphalt by jumping over the greys to stand between them and a few fleeing people. The purple rays didn’t hurt Hulk, of course, but they did piss him off.

A pissed-off Hulk seemed to be a bit more than the Zeta Reticulans had bargained for. They scattered before the berserker, panicking. The Avengers gave chase down the street, relieved that the police were already herding people out of the way, ultimately jumping a high chain-link fence around a weed-infested lot that contained a couple of much-graffitied dumpsters and nothing else.

Then Steve’s universe was narrowed to the opponents before him and the allies beside him, blocking their blasts, trying to get in some blows of his own. The ground was uneven, gravel randomly mixed with dirt, mushy from a recent rain, and he had to put more attention than he liked on watching where he put his feet.

Loki was focusing on destroying the greys’ weapons with blasts from Damage Twig, his expression intent. Hulk, meanwhile, was pounding the ground and howling.

Seeking cover, several of the greys scampered into one of the dumpsters. Unfortunately for them this only made them an easier target to smash, which the Hulk promptly did by lifting up the other dumpster and slamming it down on top of them.

Behind the dumpster Hulk had moved was a weird device with lights. “Loki, gizmo at your four o’clock,” Steve called as he swung his shield to knock over a couple of approaching greys, hoping Loki was used enough to human clocks to look the right way. Lord knew they’d practiced this a lot. The Zeta Reticulans fell over without a sound or any other response, then just got back up, no bruises, no bleeding. These guys gave him the creeps.

Loki turned his head, saw the gizmo, and said one of the words the Avengers usually tried not to say around Steve. Loki brained the nearest greys with Damage Twig and ran to the gizmo. Steve glimpsed the sheen of one of Loki’s force fields, and then Loki was curling himself around the damn thing and oh no, Steve could not see that again, not when they had the Hulk right there and-

*Boom.*

Loki was on his side, curled up, hands clenched over his stomach. There was blood.

Hulk saw it and after that, he meant business. He stopped swatting at the greys and just crushed them in his huge green hands. Steve left them to Hulk’s tender mercies and ran to Loki’s side, slamming himself around the dam thing and oh no, Steve could not see that again, not when they had the Hulk right there and-

*Boom.*

Loki was on his side, curled up, hands clenched over his stomach. There was blood.

Hulk saw it and after that, he meant business. He stopped swatting at the greys and just crushed them in his huge green hands. Steve left them to Hulk’s tender mercies and ran to Loki’s side, slamming his shield into the head of the only grey who wasn’t fast enough to get out of his way.

He fell to his knees beside Loki, and only when he saw Loki’s chest moving with his breath did he himself breathe again.

Steve had taken off the mask to drive, but he quickly activated the comm Tony had built into his sleeve in case of just such an eventuality. “We’ve got a man down, I’m requesting-”

“No,” Loki cut in, and Steve’s heart flip-flopped to hear him *talking*. He was lying absolutely still,
eyes shut tight and face drawn in pain. “Just let me lie here. Within the hour I will be able to walk. Do not move me before then. It increases the pain.”

Steve looked at him for a second, then spoke into the comm again. “Tony, you got some of those healing stones, right? We need one for Loki.” Steve looked at the red mess that was now Loki’s abdomen and said, “Better make that two.”

“One should be enough.” Loki spoke through gritted teeth, then groaned as they both felt the impact from Hulk slamming the tiny bodies of a couple of greys onto the ground.

“Okay, Hulk, they’re smashed! Thank you!” Steve yelled at him. Glancing around, he could see curious faces at the windows in neighboring buildings. And cameras and cell phones. Steve sighed. Didn’t they ever get enough of the Avengers?

At least the Hulk’s presence was keeping them at some distance.

He looked back at Loki. “Why the hell did you do that?”

“It was a calculated risk.” Loki gritted his teeth, not opening his eyes. “This is my fault. I should have realized they would have an outpost on Midgard, I should have found it and cleaned it out before Mother sent reprisals to their world.”

“That is a ridiculous thing to blame yourself for.”

“And because I will heal from this and you would not.” He drew a tense breath before adding, “A lezak bomb could not be contained by my force field, they operate on - a different type of energy.”

“You could’ve told Hulk to jump on it.”

“There wasn’t time. He does your bidding and Tony’s, not mine.”

“ Damn,” Steve said, but it was true. They were the only ones the Hulk seemed to listen to, most of the time.

Hulk had smashed all of the greys and was now obliterating the dumpsters.

“So the greys are real.” At Steve’s words, Loki opened one eye a slit and looked at him. “We thought you might be pulling our legs. Tricking us,” Steve elucidated at the line that appeared between Loki’s eyebrows.

After a second, Loki grinned a little, wincing as he did so. “That would have been a good joke.” He took a deep, shaky breath and rolled onto his back. “It’s a little better now.”

“Is it?” Steve couldn’t entirely hide the skepticism in his voice.

Loki met Steve’s eyes for a second before closing his again. “I am sorry. It is selfish of me to make you watch me heal without stones.”

Steve looked at Loki for a moment. “You have an unusual definition of selfishness.”

That made Loki open his eyes again, and this time he did not look away when Steve held his gaze.

“Tony said we both have a tendency to solve problems through self-sacrifice,” Steve said quietly.

“You really should work on that, Captain.”
“I will if you will.”

As he said those words, Steve realized that he had made up his mind. The beautiful quixotic Norse god before him was going to be his.

Steve knew that in his face, Loki could see the decision being made behind his eyes. And Steve could see the yielding in Loki’s gaze. Loki had been trying to discourage him, Steve could see that, but now he had accepted that this was right. They were right.

“Loki.” Steve spoke softly. “What are you afraid of?”

Loki’s mouth twisted. “Hurting you. Losing - all of you.”

“That won’t happen,” Steve began, but just then Tony swooped over them, tossing Steve a couple of healing stones before flying over to talk Hulk into helping him load the dead greys into a Stark Industries truck that had just arrived. As Loki had noted, Hulk did what Tony asked him to. And got interested enough in alien anatomy to turn back into Bruce.

Meanwhile, Steve had crushed one of the healing stones over Loki’s stomach and watched as his guts came back together and the skin re-formed over them. Loki drew a deep breath and just laid there for a minute before letting Steve give him a hand up.

“You okay now?”

“Yes. But hungry.” Healing took a lot out of you. Steve had noticed the same thing himself, since the serum.

“Then let’s get you back to the Tower for food.” Just then Tony landed beside them. “Tony. Sorry about the Jag.”

Tony’s faceplate flipped up. “You’re doing the dishes for a month, young man. And you were supposed to return our Norse god in good condition, it’s a condition of using him,” he added, poking Loki’s bared stomach. Loki swatted his hand away with a smile and covered the hole in his suit with an illusion. “So listen, your Princeness, do we have to send these bodies back to Grey Planet for a proper burial, or can we take this chance to dissect them somewhere other than Area 51?”

Steve didn’t know what Area 51 was and he suspected Loki didn’t either, but Loki only cast a disdainful glance at the truck. “Do you think they deserve warriors’ funerals?”

“Nope. I also think I don’t want to cause interplanetary strife without knowing what I’m getting into.”

Loki sighed. “Offering to return their dead to them would be a noble gesture. It is likely to be wasted on Zeta Reticulans, however. They are contemptible little things.”

“They should pick on someone their own size.” Tony turned to look as a bulletproof limousine with tinted windows pulled up and Happy Hogan got out to open the back door. “That’s your ride.” Loki heaved himself inside with clear relief. Steve followed, choosing to sit beside Loki rather than across from him.

“I’m sticking with the aliens,” Bruce said, clambering into the back of the SI truck, wrinkling his nose at the smell. “I mean, these aliens.”

“To each his own,” Happy said with a shake of his head, and closed the limo’s door. The privacy panel was up. Steve and Loki were effectively alone.
Judging from the sudden tension of Loki’s posture, he hadn’t counted on that.

The limo glided into motion.

This was right. Steve knew it was.

He turned to Loki. Put his hand on Loki’s.

Loki did not turn his face to Steve’s. Steve saw the movement of Loki’s throat as he swallowed. He thought about touching that neck, later. Kissing it. His hand tightened on Loki’s involuntarily.

“Steve, you shouldn’t.”

Steve didn’t move. Not closer, not farther away. “Why not? Tell me.”

“You deserve better.”

Steve couldn’t stand to hear Loki talk about himself that way. Especially after seeing him put himself in the line of fire like he had. He seized Loki’s shoulders and turned him to face him. “Don’t.”

“You deserve someone with less red in his ledger.”

“You don’t think I deserve what I want?”

Loki inhaled sharply, unable to look away from Steve. The silence stretched between them.

Steve had been petrified, planning this, but now he felt very calm. Everything was sliding neatly into place, so far as he was concerned.

“Unless you turn away, I’m going to kiss you.”

Loki’s eyes widened at those words. But he didn’t move.

Steve lifted one hand and carefully slid his fingers into Loki’s long black hair. It was very soft, like silk. He hadn’t known a man’s hair could be like that.

Steve made himself dip his head slowly, giving Loki plenty of time to turn his head.

Loki didn’t.

He touched his lips to Loki’s, and almost at once Loki’s mouth began to move, gently. Encouraged, Steve started kissing properly, moving his mouth as sensually as he knew how, thrilled to find that Loki followed his lead. He could feel Loki sighing into his mouth, Loki’s slim body relaxing against him, their chests pressing together. Loki’s hands stole up to lightly rest on Steve’s shoulders. His slender fingers, deceptive of their strength, felt good through the thick fabric of the uniform.

Steve didn’t let him go for a long, long time. As far as he was concerned, he could go on kissing Loki forever.

But eventually he had to stop. He did, gratified and amazed at the dazed expression in Loki’s eyes, the redness and slight swelling of his lips.

Loki drew a long shaky breath, and at last turned away.

“You’ve been caught up in the moment—”
“I’ll say.”

“You’ll regret this when you’re thinking clearly, when it’s too late-”

With the hand that was still on Loki’s shoulder, Steve gave him a little shake. “One more word and I’ll-” Steve stopped, unable to think of any threat that held water. “Fine, I’ll show you. We’ll leave this alone for one week.”

Besides, maybe Steve was a little worried about his first time with someone who wasn’t Bucky. Maybe Steve could use a little time too.

“Then when you can’t tell yourself I haven’t thought it over-”

“If you come to your senses, I won’t ever mention this again, we can just go on as if-”

Steve cut him off by roughly pulling him close and kissing him again. Loki made no attempt to discourage him.

Then the limo stopped and by the time Happy opened the door, Steve and Loki were both sitting up straight, hair smoothed down. There wasn’t much they could do about the temporary puffiness of their lips, but Steve didn’t care if everyone in the Tower knew. He was proud of being able to affect Loki this way.

The two of them went upstairs to join the others for celebratory pizza. The others could sense that something had occurred, if the curious looks that kept passing from one of them to the other were any indication, but they were too considerate to ask questions. Steve thought they all looked relieved after the pizza when he and Loki settled on separate couches to join in the movie marathon instead of absenting themselves.

Steve went to sleep that night alone, but happier than he had ever expected to be again. He wasn’t sick anymore, might never be sick again. He could pay his bills. He had friends, people who liked him and would protect him if he needed it - and who let him protect them. And now, after two lost chances, he had found the right partner.

Chapter End Notes

Some UFO theorists call greys "Zeta Reticulans", after the planet they're supposed to be from.

I got the crop circle idea from here: http://thedoormowse.tumblr.com/post/135302611672/i-want-someone-to-write-a-fic-where-someone-ends
Midgard was not amused to learn that greys were real and that governments worldwide had deceived citizens about them. Investigative committees were formed, exposés published, resignations demanded. Government-employed xenologists were at last able to publish their life’s work, some posthumously. Thousands of conspiracy theorists crowed that they had been right all along.

General Thaddeus Ross of the U.S. Army issued a statement: “The government has a responsibility to its citizens to withhold information likely to cause a panic. The average citizen had no need to know that a tiny handful of people were abducted by aliens and returned unharmed.”

U.S. Secretary of Defense Alexander Pierce issued a statement: “The people have a right to know what is happening on their planet. This information should never have been kept confidential, and every official who helped to hide it should be called to account.”

Prince Loki of Asgard issued a statement: “The Zeta Reticulans have harassed numerous realms in this fashion over the millennia. Eight hundred years ago Asgard issued reprisals. I took part myself, and the campaign was led by my foster brother Thor. Since then, they have remained in their own sector of the galaxy until very recently. Last week an Asgardian army led by the Lady Sif seized the relic which they have been using to open Einstein-Rosen Bridges, and Asgard will halt any attempts they make to construct a new one until and unless they form civilized treaties with whichever worlds they wish to visit. The Zeta Reticulans are truly alien to most sentient races in the Nine Realms, with inscrutable purposes and behavior, but Asgard will not permit them to prey upon its allies, including Midgard.”

Steve knew his idea of what a date was supposed to be had been shaped by movies made generations ago, but still he had always had the dream of one day taking a beautiful person to a musical extravaganza on Broadway and then a fancy restaurant with soft jazz and white tablecloths and obsequious waiters. He had never really expected to be able to afford such an evening. Now that he could, he wasn’t letting the opportunity pass by.

Life was uncertain. Steve could never forget that.

Loki had required some coaxing to accept the invitation, but Steve’s persistence won him over. Which found them sitting across from each other holding menus written in French close to midnight.
one night, a few days after those few dazed kisses in the back of Tony’s limousine.

They found themselves looking at each other awkwardly. They lived and worked together, normally they had no shortage of things to discuss, but now all Steve could think was that saying the wrong thing would ruin the evening.

Fortunately for them both, Loki was a trained diplomat and was able to break the silence after a moment. His voice was hesitant and if the way he toyed with his elaborately folded napkin was any indication, he wasn’t certain he really wanted to broach this subject. “There is… something I want to ask about. Do you remember that night I opened the wrong sketchbook?”

Steve felt his face warm. “Yes. You can see it, if you want. It’s all drawings of you.”

Loki darted a glance at him, full of the flirtation he’d been trying to hold back, and Steve felt as if he’d been set on fire. He was sure he was gaping like an idiot as Loki answered him. “I would like to, if you really don’t mind. But what I wanted to ask was about the particular drawing I saw.” He frowned slightly, lowering his eyes to his napkin as the folding unrolled under his fidgeting. “I looked so… happy. I didn’t even know my face could do that.” He met Steve’s gaze again. “When did you see me looking like that?”

“It was the day you finally got Tony and Bruce and Jane to understand how dark energy worked. I remember that you guys didn’t talk about anything else for days. Even when you all came out of the lab to eat, you just kept right on with the science while the rest of us talked about sports and movies. You kept having to describe complicated things in really simple words, and sometimes one of them would yell, ‘Oh, you mean a gluino!’ or some other ridiculous word, and you were always really impressed that mere humans had found out about gluinos. And finally, after days of this, one morning right after breakfast all the pieces fell into place and they finally understood what you’d been trying to tell them. They were all so excited, and you looked as happy as they did that they’d finally caught on.”

The memory made Loki smile. “Seeing Midgardian sorcerers follow the path of knowledge that I once trod makes me remember the joy of learning when I was much younger. And I have told you that the other realms have long underestimated humans. It is a delight to see again and again how wrong we were.”

The waiter approached. Loki had, as he often did when he and the Avengers ventured out in public, cast an illusion so that they wouldn’t be recognized, but the restaurant was expensive enough that their server acted as if he knew they were a superhero and a prince.

Steve ordered champagne. He had asked Pepper what kind he should ask for, and after a lecture to the effect that Dom Perignon (which Steve had never heard of) was overrated, she had recommended Bollinger.

Loki looked at the menu and crooked an eyebrow - at the prices, Steve suspected. “Are you certain you won’t let me?”

Steve cut him off. “We’ve already had this argument. Look, this is… something I’ve always wanted to do, at least once. I always used to dream that someday I would take a date to a place like this. Never really thought I’d be able to afford it. But thanks to seventy years of back pay, I can.”

The waiter took their orders. Steve had a vague idea that in fancy restaurants men were supposed to order for their dates, but he wasn’t sure if that was still true or what the proper course was if it was two men on a date. Fortunately Loki ordered for himself without seeming to see any problem. Steve ordered coq au vin even though he wasn’t sure what it was, just because he had heard of it.
When the waiter had left, Loki picked up the topic again, smiling with only one side of his mouth. “I am surprised you were willing to accept Tony’s offer of a place to live. I have seen how much you value paying your own way.”

“Well… Tony’s angle was, if there was another threat of the magnitude of, well, you, we could assemble to fight it faster if we all lived under the same roof. Plus, he pointed out that we all have enemies, and we’ll make more in the future. In the Tower, we can all protect each other.”

Loki regarded him with indulgence. “Of course that was the clincher. You protecting your shield-brothers.”

“Well, no.” Steve hesitated, looked away, back to Loki. “I was being spied on.”

“By whom?” Those green eyes were alert.

“SHIELD, I think. Or maybe the CIA or the FBI. My own government had me under surveillance.”

“It might have been protective.”

“It probably was, at least partly. But I didn’t like it. And I didn’t even know what kind of tech exists today that they could use on me. But I figured Tony did, and he has the clout to discourage the government from spying on him - I mean, in the sense of having people following him to the grocery store or wherever. I knew that his tower was my best hope if I wanted any privacy ever again.” He huffed a laugh suddenly. “But even so, I’m not sure if all of us would have stayed for long if it weren’t for you.”

Loki smiled wryly. “Had to keep an eye on the supervillain?”

“So you see, the Avengers need you. You’ve done a lot for us, in a lot of ways.”

Steve had meant it as a joke - a joke that was actually true - but Loki looked troubled. “What do you think Midgard would say to see its most beloved hero involved with me? The one who unleashed the Chitauri on New York?”

“I was willing to love Bucky when the whole world would have hated me for it. The only reason we kept it secret was that we would literally have been locked up for it. People might not approve of me loving you, but they won’t lock me up for it.”

With dismay, Loki saw the drama Steve was playing out in his mind. Steve had never entirely forgiven himself for hiding his love for Bucky, even given how very necessary it had been. This time, he would not give in. And his discomfort with having been made into an icon when all he saw in himself was a decent man meant that demolishing the icon of Captain America would not be entirely unpleasant.

“Steve, I am sorry, but if - if - we are to continue with this, I have a condition.”

“What?”

“We are to keep our relationship secret. Only our close friends are to know of it.” Steve sat straighter, outraged, and Loki lifted a hand to stop him. “Steve, please listen to me. I do not want to see someone who I care about being vilified and ostracized and hurt because of me. Can you not understand that?”

Steve argued, of course. He could see Loki’s point, sure. But Steve was not afraid of a fight, and hated the very idea of hiding his new romance. He was not in the slightest ashamed of his feelings
for Loki. Loki was, in his opinion, a worthy match for any hero. He was proud that Loki wanted him. Loki made his own point over and over, in different words: he did not wish to be the cause of pain for someone he cared for.

They were still arguing about it when they left the restaurant.

“Captain America is on a date with Loki.”

Rhodey said it flatly and looked around the Tower’s common room, which was strewn with tired movie-watching beer-drinking Avengers (plus one fiery-tressed CEO). He waited to be laughed at and told he had misunderstood.

“Yep. Dinner and a show, Steve’s time capsule idea of a date.” Tony’s smile was indulgent. Isn’t that cute.

Rhodey didn’t think it was cute. “Didn’t any of you try to talk him out of it?”

“Which one?”

Tony’s voice was deceptively bland, but Rhodey wasn’t fooled. “Steve, of course. And don’t pretend that you don’t see the problem just because you’ve gotten to like your tame supervillain.”

“Let’s list all of the times when someone succeeded in talking Steve out of something,” Natasha suggested, and Rhodey sighed, resigned.

“You’re right. Trying to talk sense into him would just make him stubborn.” Rhodey looked around at them again. “Please tell me y’all aren’t okay with this.”

Bruce shrugged. He didn’t look happy. “We’ll be there for them when it falls apart.”

“Why are you guys so pessimistic about this?” Tony asked, exasperated.

“Seriously? You think an inexperienced idealistic guy like Steve should be dating a thousand-year-old alien?”

“Whatever happened to love conquers all?”

Just then the elevator doors opened and a scowling, tuxedo-clad Steve stalked out. Loki, also wearing a tuxedo, called after him in clear exasperation, “Just try to think of it from my perspective!”

That was when both men realized that the doors had opened on the wrong floor. Steve froze and looked around, embarrassment joining anger on his face. Loki developed a sudden interest in the walls of the elevator.

“I am sorry, sirs,” Jarvis said, sounding as if he genuinely were. “I should have realized that you meant to press the numbers of your own floors, not the common floor.”

“My fault, Jarvis,” Steve mumbled, turning around. Then he turned away from the elevator again. “You go on. I’m going to the gym. I’ll take the stairs.”

Loki shot a sharp glare at him as the doors closed. Steve stomped to the stairwell.

Once both were gone, everyone exhaled in relief.
“Dodged that bullet,” Rhodey muttered.

“Yeah, given that both of them give up really easily.”

“You just had to harsh my buzz.”

The following day the Avengers were summoned to stop a subterranean lunatic called Mole Man from destroying Stark Industries’ first arc reactor-driven power plant. The others were relieved, though not altogether surprised, to see Steve and Loki working together like responsible adults. The two didn’t smile when they looked at each other, the coolness was evident in their tones as they discussed strategy, but they buckled down and did their jobs. Afterwards, over pizza, their careful cordiality towards each other was close to how it had been during Loki’s first month in the Tower.

After everyone had retired for the night, Jarvis relayed Steve’s request for a meeting. They sat in Loki’s living room silently for a minute before Steve spoke.

“Can we talk about it less angrily now?” He kept his voice carefully quiet, and Loki followed suit.

“Certainly, but I don’t know that we’ll say anything new.”

Steve took a long moment to consider his words. “Bucky and I kept things secret because we could have been locked up. I’m not going to hide for less than that.”

“Oh, no. You will not use me to purge undeserved guilt over ways in which you think you erred in the past.”

That, at least, brought Steve up short for several seconds. “If I think highly enough of someone to date them, I think highly enough of them not to hide my feelings for them! You’re not my dirty little secret-”

“No, I am your clean big secret. Steve, you think love means not sparing yourself any suffering whatever.”

“So what do you think it means?”

That sparked another long and painful silence while Loki considered the question. “Acting in the other’s best interests. Even if it is difficult.”

In those words Steve saw a thousand years of saving Thor and Odin from themselves. And realized that Loki was now saving him, Steve, from his own determination to do the right thing.

“I don’t want you to protect me from myself.”

Loki looked at the table, brows knit together as he chose his words.

“It… it does mean something that you are willing to face your realm’s disapprobation for me. It means a great deal, in fact. But can you not understand that I do not wish to cause more pain, more harm? Are you really intent upon burdening me with yet more guilt?”

“How who’s using who to work off old guilt?”

That stymied the quarrel. Yet again the silence stretched.

Loki sighed. “Are we now waiting each other out? Given how stubborn we both are…”
“Just as well we both know what we’re getting into.”

“As if *that* would stop either of us.”

“I’m not giving up.”

“And I am not giving in.”

Steve gave Loki his most innocent, boyish look. “Let me know when you’re ready to be reasonable.”

Loki arched an eyebrow at him, completely undeceived. “If *that* is what you are waiting for, you might as well let Natasha set you up with one of her endless supply of prospective mates.”

Steve let his innocent smile turn into a mischievous grin.

He wanted to kiss Loki, but the week wasn’t up and he didn’t think Loki would allow it, so he just got up and returned to his own room.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Thor visits Frigga.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Astrin Ymris and PeaceHeather for beta reading and encouragement.

ETA: typo fixed, thanks Astrin.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was not only humans who were distressed by the news of Zeta Reticulus. When Thor made his next visit to Asgard, he met Frigga in the Bifrost chamber with a correct bow and a scowl like a thundercloud.

Frigga embraced him and led him to her study instead of directly to the feast hall as she had intended. Clearly they needed to speak alone first. And she would not have her other private sanctuary, her garden, disturbed by Thor’s temper.

She strolled behind the enormous desk to borrow the authority of the setting. This had been Odin’s study once. Thor was used to obeying commands issued from behind this desk.

Loki would likely have to spend the rest of his life manipulating Thor with such petty moves. Frigga had known this since they were boys.

For centuries, she had believed the Norns had inspired Odin to adopt Loki to protect Asgard during Thor’s reign.

“What is it, Thor?”

“Why did you not send me to Zeta Reticulus?”

Annoyed, Frigga sat down in a leisurely fashion. “Because you have duties on Jotunheim.”

“The Jotuns can spare me from lugging rubble and killing bilgesnipe for a few weeks! Zeta Reticulus was my conquest, centuries ago. I should have been the one to remind them of their place!”

“Such a routine task hardly required your abilities.” Frigga stopped herself. There was no longer any need to indulge Thor’s vanity now that Odin was no longer alive to grant him foolish license. “Do you expect to have all of the glory yourself? Sif handled it most ably.”

Thor leaned towards her over the desk. “I’m being wasted on Jotunheim! Aside from the Jotuns’ endless border disputes, there is hardly any fighting.” Frigga had not yet parted her lips to speak, but Thor held a hand up forestalling her anyway. “I am willing to make Asgard’s reparations to Jotunheim, but Loki is battling a different foe every week while I haul rocks!”
Frigga considered. Keeping Thor too busy to get into trouble was necessary. It always had been. And the realms did need to be reminded that Asgard still had Thor to enforce its bidding.

“Very well. Hostilities have sprung up between Midian and Cerise. Do you think you can dispatch the Midianites back to their world?”

Of course he could. The mission was not a difficult one.

“I will need Sif and the Three-”

“You may have Volstagg and Hogun. Sif is not finished on Zeta Reticulus, and Fandral is reporting for service on Midgard tomorrow.”

“Surely Midgard can do without him. They have Loki,” Thor said, sarcastic.

“You do not need all of them.” When Thor’s scowl deepened, she said, “If you truly require more help in Cerise, I will send your brother.”

Thor dropped himself into the chair provided. “He is not my brother.”

“What else do you call someone who was raised at your side, who fought beside you and saved your life and helped you with your lessons?”

He shot her an accusing look. “When last I was here - the gossip is that you are going to make Loki heir to the throne.”

And he had been working himself into a lather about it ever since. Well, perhaps the gossip would eventually accustom him to the idea. “I have not yet declared my heir.”

“And when you do. Which of us shall it be?”

“Which of you would serve Asgard better?”

“He is a frost giant!”

Frigga’s knuckles whitened on the arms of her carved golden chair. “He has no memory of being anything but an Asgardian. He has served Asgard for as long as you have - oh, very well, for one year less.”

“Father meant the throne for me. I was raised to be king!”

“Does that mean that you will be a good one?”

“Do you think I won’t? I thought you had faith in me!”

“I do. But faith is not enough to make a king. And if I do name Loki the heir, what will you do? Will you bow to the will of your mother and sovereign and pledge fealty to King Loki? Or will you drag the realm into war for the sake of your own pride - again?”

“I am your true son! He is a Jotun foundling who tried to destroy his own homeworld!”

“Have you forgotten that Loki attacked Jotunheim to protect Asgard from the war that you started? Started over the sort of insult small children shout at each other?”

“Loki tricked me into going to Jotunheim!”
The queen kept a firm grip on her temper. “By your own admission, and that of Sif and the Three, he urged you not to go to Jotunheim!”

“Exactly! He knew that would make me even more set on going.”

“Are you listening to yourself? Is a man whose little brother can lead him around like a tame animal on a leash fit for a throne?”

“Loki let the Jotuns into the weapons vault in the first place!”

Frigga started at Thor in disbelief. “You actually believe that Loki did that?”

“If not Loki, then who?”

“Your father! Did you not find it suspicious that Odin noticed their presence at precisely the moment before you would have been declared king? There is no way Loki could possibly have contrived that! He would have had them enter the throne room or some other place where they could not be ignored, not sneaked them in to a remote and hidden part of the palace! And Odin could easily have completed the ceremony, or at least the sentence, before dealing with the Jotuns. Why was he keeping an eye on the vault at such an important moment in the first place? Why did he then tell you he intended to do nothing about the intrusion? Because he knew precisely how you would respond!”

“Why would my father have done this?”

“Because the people loved you too much! He wanted to humiliate you in front of all Asgard so that you would not rival him in its esteem.”

Frigga felt remorseful at the shock on her son’s face. He did not relish seeing his father knocked off the pedestal both sons had placed him on.

“What must I do, to prove my worth to you? Have I not done enough over the centuries? Do you expect me to grovel for my birthright?”

“I expect you to show that you will serve Asgard well!”

“The warriors will never follow him.”

“If you think he cannot find a way to win them over, you do not know your brother at all.”

Thor stood and loomed over her. She looked up at him and lifted her eyebrows, unimpressed.

“I will never accept Loki as my king!”

For a full minute she only looked at him in silence. When all he did was stand and seethe, she said, “You may return to Jotunheim at once. I will expect you to visit again a month hence.”

Thor looked very slightly abashed, but he was too angry to do more than bow stiffly. “I beg your pardon, my queen. I am sorry that our stations require me to argue with you thus. I challenge you as my queen.” He drew a breath. “I cherish you as my mother.”

For Thor, this was a great deal of self-restraint. She gentled her voice. “I challenge you as my prince. I cherish you as my son. You may go.”

She rose and extended her hand. He kissed it and left, grim-faced.

Perhaps, she thought when she was alone, a few centuries of fearing being disinherited would make
Thor more amenable to his brother’s counsel if heeding it meant he could be king.

Or perhaps it would set him the more firmly against his brother.

Frigga allowed herself to slump in her chair, since there was no one to see her moment of despair.

Then she straightened. It had seemed impossible to free the realms from Odin’s iron hand, but she had done it. It had seemed impossible for her younger son to survive his fall, and yet he had.

She would not relinquish hope for her elder son.

Chapter End Notes

A couple of years ago some other fans and I had a discussion where we realized that Loki definitely did not let the Jotuns in to sabotage Thor's coronation, it had to be Odin who did it: http://small-potato-of-defiance.tumblr.com/post/133555624031/oh-also
The air above Avengers Tower’s balcony shimmered in rainbow colors, and Fandral stepped out. The Avengers had all assembled to greet him.

Steve had taken a spot right beside Loki. Things were still awkward between the two of them, but regardless of how things worked out, Steve was still going to be a good comrade-in-arms to Loki. A good shield-brother.

Fandral glanced quickly around at the humans. When his eye fell on Loki, he made a formal bow.

“Your Highness!” He straightened and gave what was clearly intended to be a winning smile. “I must say, Loki, that you are looking well. Midgard agrees with you, it seems.”

Loki lifted his eyebrows. He didn’t smile back. “Does it.”

“Asgard has been so dull without you, without your pranks and your magic and your flyting.”

Fandral stepped closer and took Loki’s hand, holding his gaze and smiling. “I have not had a chance to thank you for speaking for us that day.”

Sif had been the only one of Thor’s friends to formally thank Loki for interceding with the queen to save their lives. Volstagg had issued casual thanks one night at dinner, evidently having just recalled the incident, and instantly moved on to another subject. Hogun had not thanked him at all. Now Fandral was all but fluttering his eyelashes at Loki.

Ten seconds into their acquaintance, Steve hated him.

“My foster brother would have grieved,” Loki replied soberly, studying Fandral.

Fandral tilted his head to one side, smiling wider. “You always have saved our lives. You never forget your old friends.”

Loki arched an eyebrow at that and began his introductions. “In battle your orders will come from Captain Rogers, he is the leader of this warrior band. In the Tower, well, here Pepper Potts is queen, obey her accordingly. We all do.”

Of course Fandral grinned wolfishly at Natasha and kissed her hand with a flourish. He was visibly disappointed at her indifferent response.
Why didn’t Loki freeze Fandral out the way Natasha had? But Loki, while not flirting back, wasn’t exactly doing anything to discourage the creep.

Fandral gave Steve a shrewd, measuring look. Steve was trying to school his expression, but he was about ready to punch that smirk off Fandral’s over-groomed face and the guy could probably see that.

They all moved inside as Loki informed Steve of Fandral’s strengths in battle, as he had done with each of the others. Steve and Fandral were both happy to see Pepper standing by the bar, apparently intent on the Starkpad she was using, but for different reasons.

Loki had warned them that Fandral seldom ceased flirting, and added, “He flirted with Sif once. One trip to the healing room later and he never did it again.” Tony had thought of a way to have a bit of fun at Fandral’s expense, and Pepper had agreed to the idea with glee.

Fandral swiftly moved towards her, right into their trap. “My lady! Allow me to introduce-”

At that he broke off, shocked, as Pepper whirled to face him and burst into flames.

“Oh! I am sorry, you startled me,” Pepper said, putting one hand on her chest as if catching her breath. She had chosen a suit she was tired of for the occasion, and now was clad only in the (very modest) fireproof undergarments she always wore ever since Extremis.

(Tony had put the same team that had developed Bruce’s almost rip-proof Hulking-out pants on Pepper’s Extremis fabrics. He had wanted to market the latter as “Stark Naked Underwear” but Pepper wouldn’t let him.)

In Steve’s opinion, shock was a much better look for Fandral than confident flirtation.


“Oh, no problem,” Pepper said cheerfully as she returned to her usual, not-on-fire self.

“Why don’t I show you to your room,” Loki suggested blandly.

Steve went to his floor for a sketchbook and spent the next hour drawing the Hulk smashing Fandral. Childish, but satisfying.

Once he and Loki were in the elevator, Fandral spoke in a hushed voice even though they were alone. “Midgard has muspels?”

“No. Miss Potts’s ability is unique in this realm.”

“I suppose she is the consort of the lovely shield-maiden Natasha.”

Loki refrained from rolling his eyes. “No, of our patron Tony Stark. They both like men. They have already found the right ones.”

“Ah.” But at least Fandral did not pursue women he knew to be happily attached. Or inclined towards other ladies.

“Don’t worry, you will have chances aplenty to meet unattached Midgardian beauties.” The elevator doors opened and they stepped out. Loki indicated the guest room. “Here.”
“Do you not have servants here?”

“There are employees who clean the Tower, but most humans do not care to be waited on in their own homes, even if they are wealthy.” Loki had found this odd at first, but had grown used to it. “Remember that humans are weaker than we and take care not to break their things, but on this floor everything is quite sturdy. It was intended to be occupied by Asgardians.”

Fandral surveyed the room. The furniture on Loki’s floor was the stark modernistic kind Tony preferred, with curtains, carpets and other accents in Loki’s signature dark green. “Not bad for Midgard.”

“Do not insult humans or Earth. They have been generous to me, and have won my esteem.”

Fandral gave Loki a knowing smile. “I can see that you esteem the golden-haired captain.”

Loki did not deign to reply to this. “Remember also, Fandral, that mortals are fragile. None of them live more than a century, most not even that. If you lie with any of them, be careful to restrain your skill so as not to damage their minds.”

Fandral smirked, not taking his eyes off Loki. “Do you think me likely to damage them?”

“With your amount of experience, I should certainly hope so.”

“It has been a long time since you evaluated my skills. They have expanded astronomically.”

“You have had a thousand years of practice since.”

“I did not restrain my skills with you. You survived quite well.”

Loki scoffed. “You were not even two hundred years old then.”

Despite his frequent phases of seclusion, Tony Stark was constantly invited to parties for the rich and beautiful, so he had his choice of venues for keeping Fandral amused. Loki, Pepper and Natasha accompanied them to such a party on Fandral’s first night on Midgard - the rest of the Avengers didn’t feel comfortable at fancy parties, especially this sort, where the objective was to replicate the decadent revelry of Roman emperors.

Whether Earth women liked his good looks and oily charm or were merely curious to bed an alien, Fandral found no shortage of partners.

As midnight neared, Fandral reappeared from whatever coat closet or alcove he had been in most recently and was promptly scooped up by a very popular rock singer whose riotous lifestyle kept her on magazine covers with regularity. A handsome alien would be a logical addition to the notches on her bedpost. The rest returned to the Tower without him.

Frigga had sent, via Fandral, a list of locations on Midgard where Zeta Reticulans had hideouts. Their homeworld had issued instructions that the greys were to surrender peacefully when taken into custody, and that Frigga would send them home via the Bifrost. The greys had five hideouts in the United States, one in Scotland and two in China.

“Why the hell are they singling Americans out?” Tony wanted to know.
Loki shrugged. “Zeta Reticulans make no sense to anyone else.”

“Why is that? Why are they so different from everyone else? From what you’ve told us, all the other sentient species are pretty similar to humans, psychologically.”

“Because they come from a different strain of seed.” Loki had informed them that the theory of panspermia had long since been proven true, and was the reason that occupants of different planets had evolved to look so similar.

“Remember that on Earth we try not to kill our enemies if it can be helped,” Steve reminded Fandral.

“I thought your berserker had already killed several Zeta Reticulans.”

“The ones he killed attacked us. Besides, piss off the Hulk and you deserve what you get.” Loki smiled. “I am saying this as someone who has pissed off the Hulk.”

“I never thought anyone could be this good a sport about being smashed,” Bruce mused.

When the Avengers (plus Fandral) arrived at the grey hideout in Arizona, a small suite of rooms in an office park, Loki approached first and knocked, loudly.

“Zeta Reticulans! I am Prince Loki of Asgard. Your homeworld has commanded that you allow us to return you there.”

A moment later the door swung open. Three greys marched out, their huge opaque eyes seeming to take in everything around them. Tony was glad his helmet hid his expression, because these guys creeped him out.

Not that it mattered, because everyone else was creeped out too, including the more human-looking aliens. This was the Mariana Trench of the uncanny valley.

The Avengers surrounded the greys, leaving several feet of empty space around them.

“Why are you here?” Loki asked them. They only looked at him. “Why do you not simply ask the occupants of other planets to allow you to examine them voluntarily? I think many people, of many worlds, would be willing to indulge your scientific curiosity in return for some of your technology.”

Nothing.

When he was certain there would be no reply, Loki spoke to the greys again. Working the situation, like a good diplomat. “If you ever decide to make such a treaty honestly, I will try to facilitate for you.” And wouldn’t that be a coup, to be the one who made that happen. “Who will check the rooms with me?”

“No!” Tony moved to the doorway eagerly, but he was doomed to be disappointed. They looked through the suite and found no more occupants, just office furniture that had come with the rooms.

In the conference room on the large table was a pile of half-melted metal. Tony flipped up his faceplate so he could look at it with his own eyeballs. “They destroyed all their tech before we could get to it.”

Wait wait wait-

Before he could speak, he felt a pressure over his mouth. Loki smiled blandly at him.
Loki was using a force-field to keep Tony’s mouth shut. Cute.

No point in having shield-brothers if you didn’t trust them. Tony stayed mute. Meanwhile, Loki picked up a long silver device from the side table. “Except for this. A communicator.”

“E.T. phone home? Okay, gimme. SHIELD can ask nicely if they want to borrow my new toy.”

A minute later, the Bifrost had whisked the greys away to their own world. The Avengers got on the SI plane and headed for the next hideout.

That evening Tony took Fandral out again, to another ritzy party full of supermodels and madcap heiresses. Everyone was invited, but only Loki and Pepper went along. When they left Steve was sitting on the couch in an actual sulk, glowering at the television.

At midnight, they still had not returned. A surly Steve rose and stomped out of the common room to the elevator, leaving the others to find another movie to watch without him.

They had been avoiding mentioning the elephant in the room while Steve was there. Now that he was gone….

Clint’s lip curled. “Fandral didn’t even pretend to stop… tomcatting around while he was putting the make on Loki.”

“He’s used to having royal favor. He’s trying to get it back by way of Loki’s bed.” Bruce’s expression looked like he was smelling something bad.

“Apparently there will be a line.” Natasha poured everyone except Bruce another round of vodka. “At least Sif is offering Loki something.”

“Word. If anyone's going to curry favor with the alien god-prince by sleeping with him, it should be one of us.” Clint took a swallow of the vodka. “I nominate Steve.”

Rhodey looked around at all of them, incredulous. “I know he’s been on his best behavior since coming here, but are you seriously ready to hand Captain America over to the guy who brought the Chitauri here?”

“I was joking. And only because I know that Steve wants to be handed over.”

“Or rather, to hand himself over,” Bruce amended. “But I definitely don’t want to hand Loki over to Fandral. Arguably, Loki deserved to get smashed by the Other Guy. He doesn’t deserve to be pawed by skeevy guys like Fandral.”

Loki had hoped to get to his own chambers without having to see any of the others. Fandral’s flirting would have been less demoralizing had Loki been able to tell him just how nonexistent his chances were, but his strategy for influencing Thor required allowing Fandral to keep some hope of regaining royal favor through Loki’s bedchamber.

By the time Fandral realized Loki was never going to touch him, Loki would have already trained more respect into him. But the process was more wearying than Loki would have expected, and Loki had yet a great deal to do tonight.
When the elevator opened onto Loki’s floor, Steve was there in his living room, sitting on the sofa with his sketchbook open on his denim-covered knee. He closed it and stood up as soon as Loki appeared.

“I know it’s late, I’ll only stay a minute,” Steve said quickly.

“Usually I am delighted to see you, but I am exhausted.”

“I know. Just.” Steve fidgeted with his pencil and book. Then set his jaw. Loki wondered if he was mentally punching his own shyness. “You deserve better. Than having creeps like Fandral trying to use you. I mean….” Steve apparently wasn’t entirely sure what he meant. “You deserve better.”

Before Loki knew it, he had closed the distance between the two of them and cupped Steve’s lantern jaw in his slender fingers. Then he was sinking into the kiss he had been resisting all week, delighting in how eagerly Steve’s lips responded to his own. Distantly he heard the soft thunk of the sketchbook hitting the carpet and Steve’s hands came to rest on his shoulders, clamped there so they would not roam.

How in the Nine was he supposed to resist all this? This honest passion, this sweet concern, this beautiful body and valiant heart?

When the kiss ended, Steve averted his eyes, forced himself to lean away. For a moment Loki thought that Steve would ask him to forget that there were still two days of the promised week of waiting, to forget their disagreement about keeping their affair secret, and just tumble onto the sofa with him right this minute. And Loki could not muster the willpower to refuse, not at this moment, not for anything.

But Steve got a grip on himself, tore himself away, fumbled for his sketchbook on the floor and fled into the elevator.

Loki stood where Steve had left him, immobile, for what felt like a very long time.

But eventually he had to move, he yet had tasks for tonight. He materialized his tuxedo off and silk pajamas on, laid down in his bed (alone) and turned off the light.

He spent over an hour pretending to be asleep. If his mother was watching, let her grow bored. Though at this hour, she was almost certainly in bed.

He then rose, changed into a black shirt and slacks, and spoke quietly. “Jarvis, is anyone here still awake? I would prefer not to see anyone else tonight.”

“I understand, Mr. Friggijarson. But Mr. Stark indicated to me that he thought you might go out tonight. He is awake and would like to accompany you, if you are amenable.”

Loki smiled. Having worthy shield-brothers was wondrous indeed. “Ask him to meet me on the balcony.”

No one else was in sight when Loki reached the balcony. A moment later, Tony stepped out wearing his usual jeans and T-shirt, but when he stood still one of his suits (this one was a matte black, it would be invisible in the night sky) appeared out of a panel in the wall and assembled itself around him as he stood holding Loki’s gaze, smiling slightly.

“Stand behind me, put your arms around my neck,” Tony instructed.

Loki did, and a moment later they were flying.
Tony was flying slower than usual, since he had an unarmored companion on his back, but still they were whipping through the sky, almost silently around the mostly-quiet, mostly-dark skyscrapers. Loki could feel the wind on his face, in his hair. Fandral, the succession, Steve - everything fell away like the ground beneath them.

Flying was glorious.

Loki was not surprised when Iron Man landed at one of the addresses on the list Fandral had brought. This dilapidated storefront in Queens, it seemed, had been the hideout of the Zeta Reticulans who had attacked them, who the Hulk had smashed.

Tony landed them on the second floor’s fire escape. Loki broke the window’s lock with ease and they were inside. Tony handed Loki something from a tiny compartment on his suit. Night vision goggles. Loki could gain the same effect magically, but he put them on anyway. Just because he liked that his shield-brother, his friend, had provided them.

They searched the rooms rapidly. There were no Zeta Reticulans left behind, but one room had two long tables covered with mysterious equipment. Tony stood back and watched as Loki put almost all of the equipment into his pocket dimension.

At length Loki indicated two of the devices. “These are too large for my pocket space.”

“Let’s take them next door, then. We can collect them later.”

Loki decided it would be boring to ask questions. He lifted one and took it to the fire escape. Iron Man took it from him, flew to the neighboring fire escape, and walked right into the already open window like he owned the place.

Loki surmised that he did. Billionaires were extremely useful to have around.

After stashing the second large device, Tony returned carrying a mass of half-melted metal. He put it on one of the tables. Loki grasped the idea immediately: when the Avengers investigated this location, it would be assumed that the Zeta Reticulans had destroyed their equipment before humans or Asgardians could confiscate it, just as they had in their other hideouts.

“Let’s destroy these,” Loki said, indicating the few devices still left. “These are what they used to compel humans to climb aboard their ships, and to wipe out their memories of the event.”

Tony couldn’t nod in the suit, but he said, “I agree. Nobody should have this technology. Can I blast them or will that cause a magic boom?”

“Go ahead and blast. I will contain the sound magically.”

That done, they flew back to the Tower. Loki was invigorated; the covert mission, flying through the air on a balmy night, the trust.

Back in Tony’s lab, Tony poured them both some Scotch.

“Think your mom is watching us? Or is she a morning person?”

“I have no doubt she is asleep.”

“That why you waited till now to get out whatever Zeta Reticulan stuff you hid in your Bag of Holding? You didn’t want even her to know what you snatched?”
Loki just took a swallow of Scotch, cool as a cuke. “This is the problem with finally meeting someone who understands me. You understand me.”

“I’ll make you a deal. Show it all to me and I won’t tell anyone else you have it.”

Loki didn’t even try to argue. Or bargain. He took everything out, spread it on one of the worktables.

“I am keeping this one.” He indicated a glowing purple contraption about a foot tall. “It is their wormhole device. If I can figure out how to use it, I could sky-walk promptly instead of spending an hour mustering the seiðr and casting the spell.”

Tony looked at the device. It was all flat planes and sharp angles like a geometry project gone wild, made out of some weird unfamiliar metal.

“So you could use it to escape, if….”

“Precisely.”

“I am completely down with that.” He was, too. He was very much in favor of escaping. “Let me help you figure it out. Just between us.”

“Thank you.” Loki did his jazz hands and made it disappear.

“Hey, when Thanos had you… didn’t you have any weapons or anything in your pocket dimension? I know that if I had one of those I’d fill it with everything.”

“First, the space in my pocket dimension is not unlimited. Second, objects with seiðr, such as magical relics, cannot be held there indefinitely. The magical energies will eventually build up. And third, I do make a habit of keeping certain things there, but falling through the wormhole scattered my supplies into atoms. I am fortunate, if you can call it that, that my body reconstituted itself, never mind my pocket dimension.”

There were two small disks, identical to each other, dark grey with a red gemstone on top. Loki took one, held it in front of his own chest, and touched the gem.

A hologram of Loki’s skeleton promptly appeared between them. Loki touched the gemstone again and now they were viewing his internal organs, heart beating, lungs filling and emptying, blood flowing.

“A Zeta Reticulan scanner. This is why they don’t have to physically cut into the people they abduct and study.”

Tony could think of approximately ten million questions to ask about this. He started with, “So do your guts look like normal Asgardian guts?”

Loki actually laughed. “They do. I am physically an Asgardian.”

“So how do these things work? Sonar? Radar? Nuclear magnetic resonance?”

“No one knows. People have been trying to figure it out for centuries. They won’t share their knowledge or sell their devices. We have to hope to acquire them by chance.”

“Not that big a deal. We have MRIs and sonar and—” Tony stopped as Loki touched the stone again and the hologram changed. Still Loki’s body, but with something that looked fluid and iridescent flowing through it, focused in his head and his hands. “What’s this?”
“These scanners can sense seiðr. We don’t know how. No other realm has been able to replicate it, despite centuries of attempts.”

“Do me!”

Loki obliged. The iridescence in Tony’s body was incredibly faint. Just like Loki had told them, humans didn’t have much magic in them.

“No fair. Why don’t we humans have more voodoo in us?”

Loki shrugged as he deactivated the hologram. He handed the scanner to Tony, not entirely able to hide his reluctance.

Tony accepted it. Loki had another one.

“What else we got here?”

“An illusion generator, lezak bombs, another communications device….”

“Wait. Wait. I just thought of something.” Tony took a moment to work it out. “You were born a frost giant and Odin turned you into an Asgardian, and Thor was born an Asgardian and Odin turned him into a human.”

“Not really. Odin used the so-called ‘Odinforce’ - the magic of Asgard, which is wielded by its sovereign - to block Thor off from his great strength or the ability to use Mjölnir.”

“Didn’t Thor say something about how the hammer could only be lifted by the worthy?”

Loki’s brows knitted in mild surprise. “That is a poetic flourish. Asgard’s sovereign can make Mjölnir respond to whomever he - or she - wishes. Odin reserved it for Thor, and Mother took it from him within hours of claiming the throne.”

“I definitely want to pick that apart more later, but let’s not get sidetracked. You’re saying Thor wasn’t really a human while he was banished?”

“Do humans routinely survive being hit by trucks without injury? Odin would hardly take such a risk with his only heir, even if it were possible to turn an Asgardian into a human. He would have been left with only an ergi frost giant to inherit his throne.”

“So it’s not possible? I thought you said your own transformation into an Asgardian was legit. That you’d have Asgardian children and everything.” Tony abruptly stopped. “I’m sorry. My scientific curiosity took over and I forgot this is a painful topic.”

“I don’t mind discussing the science. Actually, it helps.”

Tony nodded, understanding. The magic/science gave Loki other associations with the entire mess, ones that were less painful.

“Yes, I really have been changed into an Asgardian. There are a few minor anomalies because Odin did a slapdash job, such as my beardlessness, but I am still an Asgardian. No odder than a left-handed human.”

“But actually making Thor human wouldn’t be possible? Why not?”

Loki laced his fingers as he considered how to explain. “The difference might be considered… sort of a law of conservation of seiðr. Aesir, Vanir, Jotnar and many other races of the Nine have similar
levels of seiðr in their bodies. Odin couldn’t have turned Thor into an actual human because Thor’s innate seiðr would have nowhere to go, and it doesn’t just disappear. That is one of the unusual things about humans. Very few sentient species have so little seiðr in them.”

“So a human couldn’t be turned into an Asgardian or anything? Because that’s what I was thinking, that if we could be turned into Asgardians or Vanaheimese, we could do magic like you do.”

“It isn’t possible.”

“So why can’t we channel seiðr and all that? I’ve looked at your cells under Bruce’s microscope, I don’t see the difference.”

“It has to do with our personal energy signature, the subatomic structure of our bodies. The difference is in the convergence of….“ Loki’s voice trailed off.

“Your mom told you to answer our science questions. If you don’t explain this to me I’m telling.”

“I’m trying to. It’s just - when you first went to MIT, would you have understood how your arc reactor works?”

“No. Because I didn’t yet have my present understanding and as much data….“

“Precisely. You lacked the building blocks. If I told you that the Bifrost is powered by the twinning of luminous particles reacting with the nano-currents of subatomic magnetism, would you comprehend me?”

“How long did it take you to comprehend that?”

“I was at least a century and a half older than you are now.”

 Abruptly they fell silent, having brought up what they both wished to ignore.

Tony looked down at the Zeta Reticulan scanner, somber. Ran a finger around the gem. “I won’t have time, will I. To learn everything you have to teach.”

Loki looked at him, grim. “If golden apples were real, I would already have fed them to everyone in this Tower. Even if I had to steal them, as I did in your myth. Come after what may. But I do not know of any way to extend the human lifespan. No one does.” He looked away, then back to Tony. “I’m sorry.”

Tony hesitated. Then handed the scanner back to Loki. “Give this to someone on Vanaheim or Alfheim, someone who’ll live long enough to crack it. I’d love to be that someone, but I don’t have the time.”

Loki nodded, took it.

Tony looked up at him, realizing. “You’re going to mourn all of us.”

“Every one of you.” From the look on Loki’s face, he was mourning them already.

Trying to move his thoughts from his own grief, Tony said, “Maybe we shouldn’t have been so nice to you. Then you wouldn’t miss us so much.”

“Each and every one of you will be worth it.”

“That why you’ve been dodging Cap?”
“It’s one of the reasons. Don’t you think he deserves someone with less… baggage?”

“I think you both deserve to get what you want.”

Loki sighed. “Even you can’t fix everything, Tony.” And left the lab.

Tony gazed at the table crowded with alien baubles. Set his jaw.

“Watch me.”
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Frostshield. A mere 60+K in.
Told you we'd get there.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to funnymagica_ing for beta reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At last it was time for Fandral to leave. And, coincidentally, the week of waiting Steve had promised had drawn to a close.

Needing distraction from his suitors, Loki avoided the common room (the Bifrost would open for Fandral on the balcony) and went to his own chambers to immerse himself in his studies.

As it turned out, one of those suitors was lying in wait for him. Fandral, draped decoratively over the sofa. He stood as Loki entered and approached.

Standing too close, Fandral smiled into Loki’s eyes.

“This has been a most diverting adventure. It reminded me of when we battled the Zeta Reticulans on the world of Xanthe all those years ago. Do you recall that?”

Of course he did. Loki could never seem to forget anything. “Do you?”

“I recall how handsome you looked. You grew your hair long, much like it is now.”

Oh for all the Nine. Did Fandral recall that Thor had charged in when they were outnumbered fifty to one? That all of them had nearly died? That several Asgardians had died because of Thor’s recklessness? That the only reason any of them had survived that day was Loki’s illusions confusing the enemy?

Did Fandral recall the boasting back in Asgard? Thor declaring that he had defeated their enemies all but single-handed? His flat denial when Loki had reminded them all of his own deeds?

Did Fandral know that that feast had been the last time Loki had attempted to tell his supposed father that it was he who had won the battle? He who had saved the life of the son Odin loved?

“Loki.” Fandral’s voice was soft, carefully concerned. “Did you and the captain quarrel?”

Naturally that was the conclusion Fandral leapt to at Loki’s unhappy expression. And there was Fandral’s velvet-clad shoulder, all ready to absorb Loki’s tears over a lover’s spat. From there Fandral would find all sorts of ways to offer Loki solace.
As if Loki would fall for that facile charm again. He had barely been out of adolescence when it had worked. Young and horribly lonely and so excited that a handsome warrior was making such a fuss over him.

And then so crestfallen a week later when he realized he had only been another conquest, and all he had left was the hope that no one knew that Fandral had been more than that to him, the pride that made him pretend to everyone that he didn’t care that Fandral had tired of him and moved on to fresh adventures.

Now Loki wished he could tell Fandral just how much he despised him. Just how useless his belated efforts to curry favor were.

It took every scrap of his willpower to look away and say none of that. To remember the long game of influencing his wayward brother through his friends.

“Fandral, I am in love with him.”

That got a pitying look. “I understand.” And would bide his time, no doubt.

Fandral left, but Loki couldn’t possibly concentrate on his studies now. Damn it, for years he hadn’t remembered his father’s words that night when he accused Loki of lying about his deeds on Xanthe, about Thor’s, about all of it. Loki hadn’t understood then why Odin had no interest in being proud of his younger supposed son, why only Thor’s reputation could matter to him, reflect well on the man who had sired him….

Damn Odin. Stealing him from the home which should have been his and making certain that he would never belong in the world he was kidnapped to.

And now what was he doing, on yet another planet, intruding himself among these humans who for some reason were kind enough to tolerate him until he went back to where he… sort of… belonged?

Loki grabbed a bottle of Asgardian mead and went down to the workshop. He hoped he would be alone, but Tony was there. This early in the evening, it wasn’t surprising.

Loki was surprised to realize that he didn’t mind. That he trusted Tony - would trust anyone in this Tower - to deal properly with a terrible mood.

Tony looked up from the Zeta Reticulan communicator he was studying as Loki strode in and took a glass from a cabinet without a word. Loki filled and drained it.

“So which one has you hitting the bottle, Steve or Fandral?”

“Oh.” Tony came over, took Loki’s empty glass, and handed him a larger one. Loki couldn’t help a quick laugh.

Tony chattered as he turned some sensors onto the communicator. “Were you there when we watched that old movie for Cap’s benefit? Easter Parade. The guy ordered a drink and asked the bartender, ‘Can you drown a brunette in this?’ A minute later his friend came in and the bartender asked him, ‘Blonde or brunette?’ I thought the guy should’ve replied, ‘Redhead,’ and then the bartender would pour him a really huge drink.”

Slightly diverted from his troubled thoughts, Loki arched an eyebrow at him. “Is that a reflection on one of the redheads in your life?”
“Nah. Neither of them drives me to drink, quite the contrary, as a matter of fact. I just enjoy redhead jokes. Blonde jokes are so 90s.” He poured a drink of his own and looked into it philosophically. “Not every man has what it takes to handle a redhead.”

The bit of distraction helped the tall glass of mead do its work. Not quite enough to drown a one-eyed tyrant, but enough to unravel the knots in Loki’s stomach.

“Want to talk about it?” Tony asked.

“No.”

“Okay, then help me with E.T.’s phone. Jarvis told me that Whatshisface is gone, by the way.”

It worked; Tony got him so intent on unraveling the communicator’s design that all bitter memories of Odin and Thor fell away. The only things in Loki’s mind were that design and Tony’s wisecracks.

When the elevator opened, Loki looked up and was startled to see Bruce, Clint and Natasha all emerging. Faces serious, they walked straight to Loki.

Tony took a swig of his Scotch, not taking his eyes off his teammates. Ready to argue.

Natasha opened. “We’re here to deliver a friendly neighborhood shovel speech.”

Loki toasted them with the last of his mead, resigned. “Of course. If I lay a hand on Captain America, the Hulk will smash me. Understood.”

All of them raised their eyebrows. “Where you lay your hands is up to Steve. He’s a grown man.” Bruce paused for emphasis. “I’ll smash you if you break his heart.”

Loki looked at all of them. They were still serious, but there was warmth in their eyes.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he managed at last.

Clint allowed himself a small smile. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we have another shovel speech to deliver.”

“You do?”

Bruce smiled too. “Yeah. I’ve got to tell Steve that if he breaks your heart, I’ll smash him.”

Loki couldn’t speak.

“You’re our shield-brother too, remember,” Natasha told him, and the three of them left.

Loki just stood looking at the elevator doors after they closed.

“One of us! One of us! Gobble-gobble, gobble-gobble!” Tony chanted.

“…What?”

“Sorry, you haven’t seen Freaks. Never mind. C’mon, one more for the road.” Tony poured some Scotch into Loki’s now-empty glass.

Bewildered, Loki drank. Tony looked exceedingly happy.

When his glass was empty, Tony took it away. “Now go on, get outta here.”
Loki looked at the now disassembled communicator, but his concentration on it had been thoroughly disrupted. He moved towards the elevator, a little dazed.

“Oh, and Loki?”

Loki paused, looked over his shoulder. Tony’s expression was downright angelic.

“Sleep well.”

That wasn’t worthy of one of Loki’s best retorts. Instead he narrowed his eyes and said, “Tony… you are short.”

Tony put a hand over his heart and pretended to stagger. “Ohhh, you got me there, Loki.”

With a smile, Loki left.

Steve was in the common room drawing when Bruce, Clint and Natasha found him. He saw their serious expressions and closed his book with a sigh.

“Don’t, okay? I appreciate that you’re all concerned about me, I do. But I know my own mind. I’m going to do this and you’ll all just have to accept that.”

The others looked at each other. Smiled.

“I’m just here to tell you the same thing I told Loki.”

Steve set his jaw. “What’s that?”

“If you break his heart, I’ll smash you.”

Not knowing what else to do, Loki paced around in the living room on his own floor. He went into his study and surveyed the shelves of books from half a dozen realms, the magical relics he was studying. He went into his bedroom and put away the two or three things that were out of place, then studied himself in the mirror, combed his hair even though it didn’t need it. Then back to pacing in the living room.

He hadn’t felt this giddy with anticipation in centuries. He felt like a fool and he didn’t even care.

Their shield-brothers’ approval seemed to have sealed the deal. Now if only Steve would agree not to throw away his reputation on Loki’s behalf.

The elevator doors opened. Steve stepped out.

Loki took out two goblets - gem-studded golden goblets he had brought from Asgard - and filled them with Asgardian mead. He gave one to Steve and they sat on the sofa, two feet of space between them.

Steve fortified himself with a large swallow, then laughed ruefully. “I never thought I would get a shovel speech.”

“I must say Bruce’s is the most effective I have ever received.”
“Are you ready to let me tell the world - my world - how I feel about you?”

Loki swallowed. Forced the word out. “No.”

Steve looked into his goblet. “I’m not letting you go because of that.” He brushed planetwide scandal away with his hand. “I suggest a compromise.”

“Oh?”

“We keep it quiet, like you want, for one year. After that year, assuming you haven’t silvertongued me into agreeing with you - or gotten tired of me - we’ll tell the whole world about us.”

“Tired of you.” Loki chuckled. Impossible. “Very well. One year.” In a year he could talk anyone into anything. He held up his goblet. Steve clinked it and Loki took a small sip; he had drunk enough tonight already.

Steve drank, then looked into the half-full goblet as if instructions might be written on the surface of the liquid.

Loki preferred for his lovers to take most of the initiative, but now he was far more experienced and his partner was very shy. He let Steve take another sip, then gently took the goblet from him and set it down along with his own. He moved closer to sit right beside Steve. Turned to him with his expression serious. Steve’s eyes were wide as they met Loki’s. He held very still.

Loki leaned close, but stopped short of actual contact. Let Steve do that.

Steve did.

Loki sank into the kiss, let Steve plunder his mouth. Steve was more skillful than he would have expected, but even his moments of clumsiness were welcome, they felt so honest after so many many years of people manipulating him.

Loki brought his hands up Steve’s chest to rest on his shoulders. Even with a light touch the firmness of those wonderfully excessive muscles was evident. Steve’s tree-trunk arms moved slowly to encircle Loki, to pull him very gently closer.

Steve still wasn’t entirely certain of his welcome. Too many years as a ninety-pound weakling snubbed by every girl he encountered had taken their toll. Loki let himself be drawn closer, pressed himself against Steve, and felt the other man’s arms relax more firmly around him.

Steve smelled like soap and pine needles and man.

Loki let one of his hands snake up to thread into Steve’s hair. There wasn’t much to play with thanks to Midgardian fashion, but it was soft to the touch, and the gesture encouraged Steve to do the same, stroking Loki’s long mane for a minute before tangling his fingers in it.

Steve didn’t seem to be in a hurry. He treated every kiss as an end in itself, every little caress as a new discovery. Given how little experience he had, and how long it had been since he had last touched anyone, it made sense.

Loki also reveled in their leisurely progress. It had been a long while for him too, and the last couple of years had been so hard in so many ways. Remembering how it felt to be touched like this, and by someone who actually cared for him, felt almost like coming back to life.

They paused between kisses after a while to look at each other. Steve’s bright blue eyes were dazed
and his mouth, red from all the kissing, wore a sweet little smile. He was warm and solid and holding
Loki close like he never intended to let him go.

Loki traced Steve’s handsome features with his fingertips, deliciously contented. He drew the
moment out deliberately, trying to memorize how he felt so that he could remember it for always, so
that thousands of years in the future he could still cradle this moment to his heart, know that he had
once been this happy.

Whatever Loki’s failures, whatever his crimes, still he had made this beautiful valiant man desire
him.

“Steve,” he sighed, allowing himself a little smile.

“Loki,” Steve breathed in reply. Then instead of claiming another kiss, Steve licked his lips with a
hint of nervousness, lowered his eyes.

Again Loki accepted the initiative. “Shall we?” He glanced to the door of his bedroom.

Steve swallowed as he nodded. Loki rose and took his hand, led him into the other room. He left
Steve standing just inside the door for a moment as he arranged the lighting how he wanted it: most
of the lights off, but some dim soft light from the bathroom. He could still see the outlines of Steve’s
superb physique. Loki moved towards him, slowly. When he drew near enough, Steve carefully put
his arms around him and pressed his mouth to Loki’s.

Loki at last gave his hands free rein, let them roam all over that ideal super-soldier body. He filled his
hands with those hard bulging muscles. Any warrior of Asgard would be proud of this body. Steve’s
proportions were perfect. He was a work of art.

As Loki had hoped, putting his hands all over Steve served as an invitation for Steve to do the same,
and Loki was able to enjoy having those huge strong hands all over him. Steve still seemed to feel
that being allowed to touch was a great privilege, seemed awed and amazed that he was allowed.
Loki let himself make encouraging little noises, leaned into the touch, to reassure him.

It worked. Steve applied himself with new enthusiasm, nuzzling Loki’s neck, stroking and caressing
everything. And as Loki pressed himself close, he felt Steve’s hardness against his own and Steve’s
gratifying shudder at the contact.

They were still far too clothed, so Loki moved back just enough to start unbuttoning Steve’s shirt. It
was the same color as his eyes. Loki wondered if someone else had chosen it for him.

Steve went still as the buttons came undone, then let Loki slip the shirt down his shoulders and arms,
let him explore Steve’s fair skin. Out of habit Loki set his fingers to rhythmically caressing Steve’s
nipples. Only the suddenly stunned expression on Steve’s face - more like he had been struck on the
head than like he was receiving pleasure - reminded Loki that he was with a mortal. Quickly he
made his movements less practiced. Unleashing the full abilities of his centuries of skill could
damage a mortal’s mind. There were legends of humans whose sanity had been shattered by the
ecstasy they experienced with fairies or supposed gods or demons.

A god who lay with a mortal had to take care not to break his plaything.

Steve’s trance cleared and he tugged Loki’s shirt out of his waistband, pulled it over his head jerkily.
He let first his eyes, then his hands move over Loki’s chest, his back.

When Steve pulled him close again, Loki felt a tension in him unknot. He usually kept himself
covered up as much as possible. This moment with a new lover was always daunting, when his
leanness and pallor was exposed, so sadly short of the Asgardian ideal. Some of his lovers had been more disappointed than others.

Steve did not seem disappointed. He seemed like he couldn’t get enough of Loki’s too-slim body and too-pale skin. Loki celebrated his relief by pulling Steve in the direction of the bed. Once there, Loki sat on the edge to unfasten Steve’s trousers. Steve let him ease them down his hips, then bent to pull off his shoes and kick his trousers away. Loki swiftly removed his own shoes. To his delight, Steve pushed him onto his back and tugged his jeans off.

They were both still wearing their shorts (Midgardian clothes were odd), but Loki decided to give that a minute. Right now it was too exciting to roll around on the soft cool sheets with Steve’s nice thick arms around him, their legs tangling together and Steve’s skin against his.

They spent a long time wrestling like that, Loki could not have said how long, just groping each other like adolescents and kissing over and over. Steve didn’t know how to use his tongue in a kiss, so Loki showed him, demonstrating over and over until Steve grasped how to move his tongue languorously against Loki’s, first inside his mouth, then inside Loki’s.

Eventually Steve slowly moved his hand to Loki’s groin. Loki kissed him to indicate how pleased he was with this - Steve still seemed a little tentative, as if he were yet unsure of his welcome - and let him do as he liked.

Steve’s touch lacked the finesse to which Loki was accustomed. Loki minded not one whit. The experimental moves - even the occasional fumble - felt so honest. There was no manipulation here, no egotistical displays of skill, no triumph over a prince, just innocent desire. The hunger in Steve’s touch was more intoxicating to Loki than any artful caresses could have been.

At last Loki could bear it no longer, and he thought Steve was growing impatient as well. He gave Steve a gentle push onto his back so he could pull off his shorts, then guided Steve’s hands to his hips to do the same.

Loki could not help smiling. Super-soldier indeed. Steve turned pink, but he also smiled, a little sheepish but also pleased.

Steve was now sufficiently urgent to take the lead with little encouragement. Loki had intended to ask how Steve wanted to proceed, but it was now clear from the way Steve gasped as Loki’s hand curled around his naked cock that Steve wasn’t going to wait for more preparation. Steve lurched into Loki’s touch and tightened his own hand on Loki’s prick, stroking with renewed frenzy.

Steve’s shaking and groaning against him, his astonishment at the feelings Loki was giving him, was delicious. It was stunning, dizzying, to be wanted this much. And only for himself, not because he was a prince or could offer wealth or magic or favors to those who pleased him. Steve wanted him, wanted simply to lie with him, nothing more.

It was irresistible.

Loki was still withholding much of his skill, but he was able to orchestrate the sensations building up in Steve in harmony with his own, so that, gasping and straining against each other, they spilled within seconds of each other. Steve gave a little whimper as he did, the sound of a man who has been deprived for far too long.

Loki cried out, loudly and unashamed, and to his own surprise. The gratified triumph on Steve’s radiant face was well worth the fleeting embarrassment.
They laid still together, sated, contented. Loki hid the wide goofy smile he knew was on his face in the smooth skin of Steve’s neck.

When Steve had to shift his long muscled limbs, forcing Loki to lift his head while they rearranged themselves, Loki found that he needn’t have bothered to hide. Steve was grinning like a loon. Their eyes met and they laughed a little. Loki gave him a quick kiss and they cuddled close again.

Loki had read about the quirk of human physiology known as the “refractory period” and was prepared to be patient through it.

As it turned out, that was one more thing the serum had cured.

Delighted, Loki undulated against Steve, allowing Steve to capture his mouth for a sensuous kiss. Then Loki whispered into his lover’s ear, low and intimate.

“What else would you like to do to me, my love?”

As Loki had expected, Steve was too shy to put any of it into words. Loki stifled his amusement. He didn’t want to embarrass Steve even more.

“Do you want to fuck me?” Loki allowed his own raw yearning to show in his tone.

Steve’s entire body went rigid. Even in the dim light his blush was visible. “Yes,” he managed. “That is, I mean, if you want to.”

“Yes, much.” Loki could not suppress his smile this time, but quickly gentled his voice. “Have you done that before?”

Steve jerked his head in a single nod. To put him at ease, Loki kissed him again, deeply.

They resumed caressing each other with hands and lips. Steve had already learned something: he carefully flicked his thumb over one of Loki’s nipples, and when Loki arched his back and moaned at the touch, continued experimenting. Loki just laid back to enjoy Steve’s explorations, practically purring under the different caresses Steve tried. Steve looked adorably thrilled at the response he was drawing from Loki.

Good thing, since Loki could not have concealed his responses for the Nine Realms.

Still, Loki wasn’t content to just lie back for long. He filled his hands with those nice hard muscles, ran his tongue over them, careful to keep his ministrations simple. He thought of choking himself on Steve’s lovely large dick, but perhaps he should leave that for another night. They had time, and drawing out Steve’s amazement at how much pleasure he could feel would be delightful.

So Loki laid on his side, moving sensuously against Steve, stroking his whole body and kissing him again and again, until he saw feverish desperation in Steve’s face.

Then Loki reached for the lotion he had placed on his bedside table the day the two of them had their first kiss - just in case.

He offered the bottle to Steve. “Do you want to, or shall I?”

Conflict showed in Steve’s youthful face. “Maybe you’d better. This time.”

The lad was worried he wouldn’t know the best way to lubricate his lover. Loki had had many men who believed they had nothing to learn in matters of lovemaking. He found that he much preferred
Loki laid back on the pillows, spreading his legs to give Steve a good view as he slicked and loosened himself. Steve was intrigued enough to overcome his bashfulness and watched attentively, his eyes moving from Loki’s slick hole and hard prick to his dazed face.

When Loki felt that he was ready enough, Loki sat up and applied more of the lotion, warm from his hands, to Steve’s prick. Steve was startled at first, but the pleasurable sensation put him swiftly at ease. Loki captured his mouth for another kiss as he moved his fingers up and down Steve’s shaft, at first lightly to tantalize him, then firmly to drive him mad.

Evidently he succeeded. “Loki - can we - now-“

“Oh, yes.”

Steve reached for Loki’s shoulders and tried to turn him around. Loki shook his head. “I want to see your face, love.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “Will that, um. Work?”

A laugh burst from Loki before he could stop it. “Oh, love, I am sorry.” He embraced Steve at once to soothe him. “Yes, it will work.”

Steve swallowed. He didn’t seem offended, luckily. “I tried to, um, research. On the internet. That kind of information was hard to come by in my time. But with the internet….”

“Too many tasteless photos?” Loki asked gently, having brought his amusement under control. Steve nodded. “It’s all right. I promise, none of this is complicated.” He placed a hand on the back of Steve’s neck and gently tugged him with him as he laid down. Steve still looked a little alarmed, so Loki reached down and guided Steve’s prick to where it belonged.

Watching Loki’s face carefully, Steve pressed forward. A little surprise flickered across his face as he slid smoothly into Loki’s opening despite the unfamiliar angle. A little surprise, and a lot of bliss.

“Loki,” he whispered.

“Steve.”

Loki put his hands on Steve’s hips, held him still while he shifted his pelvis and his muscles adjusted. Steve gasped, but with visible effort followed Loki’s bidding not to move for the moment.

“Am - am I hurting you?” Steve asked.

Loki smiled at him. “No, it’s wonderful.” He released Steve’s hips, put his hands instead on Steve’s perfect round ass. Let his voice go breathless. “Please. Give it to me.”

Steve made an experimental thrust, still carefully observing Loki’s reaction. And he was worried he wouldn’t be a good lover. Watching reactions was the single most important skill a lover needed, and he had not wavered from that for an instant.

“You are wonderful,” Loki gasped out and moved to meet Steve’s thrust. And then they both fell into the rhythm naturally, moving together in perfect harmony. Joined almost as if they were one person, merged in their mutual pleasure.

Loki tilted his head back into the pillow, letting Steve carry him away on a wave of sensation. There
was no more rational thought, just Steve’s glorious unabashed lust for him and his own spiraling pleasure. Steve was beautiful, so honest and fierce and sweet. Loki had never known quite this kind of desire, so innocent and intense. Everything else - his duties, his past, his guilt - melted away and he was only Steve’s lover, writhing beneath Steve and being driven over the brink by blinding pleasure. Loki surrendered utterly to ecstasy in Steve’s embrace for an eternal moment and this, Steve filling him and holding him tight and showering kisses on his face, this was the entire universe. 

“Oh, my god,” Steve gasped, his breath hot against Loki’s ear. “Loki.”

Loki could only sob for breath in response.

This time Loki’s wits were too scattered for him to synchronize their pleasure, he forgot that such a thing was even possible, he was caught up in this whirlwind, not directing it. And yet the sight of him crying aloud his pleasure, the feel of him convulsing in Steve’s cradling arms, sent Steve over the edge at once, driven by Loki’s frenzy to a frenzy of his own. And in the instant before Steve came apart, Loki through the haze of his own ecstasy saw in Steve’s face awe and joy and amazement.

They passed out more than fell asleep, their slumber of tangled limbs as much a union as their lovemaking. Loki was not again capable of rational thought that night, but in his last few seconds of consciousness he had one irrational but very certain thought:

The Norns would preserve this. Nothing else was possible.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience. I hope this was worth the wait.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Steve and Loki enjoy their new relationship.

Chapter Notes

Gee, looks like my writer's block is cured. ^-^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following morning, Steve could barely stop smiling even long enough to screw his face this way and that in front of the mirror as he shaved.

He left the door to the bathroom open so that Loki, lounging among the rumpled sheets, could watch him. Which he did with a catlike smile, to go with those catlike green eyes.

“Why do most human men shave?” Loki asked when Steve was half done.

Steve swished his razor in the sink to clear it of shaving cream. “We didn’t used to. In the First World War, soldiers had to shave to make sure the gas masks fit them right. A lot of civilian men shaved for the same reason.”

Loki blinked. “Oh. Curious, that the custom has lasted for generations after the need.”

“Well, after the war, the razor companies did advertising campaigns to keep shaving fashionable.”

“Of course.”

Steve paused to study himself in the mirror, appraising. If Loki found beards attractive, he’d consider it. “How’d I look with a beard, you think?”

He could see Loki imagining it. “You would look very handsome.” Then a sassy little smile. “You would look very much like my brother.”

Steve immediately resumed scraping the razor across his face. Then paused so he could speak. “Wait, you shave.”

Loki’s smile vanished. Damn. “No. I don’t.”

Aw, jeez. That had to be one more thing Asgard’s over-macho society gave Loki grief for.

Steve gave it a minute, trying to continue shaving as if the moment weren’t awkward. “Just as well. With a beard you’d look like Mephistopheles.”

“Who?”
“The devil.”

Loki apparently liked that. He grinned. Good.

Loki stretched his arms above his head. “The razors and cream you’re using were among the toiletries already in the cabinet when I moved in. I assume all the bathrooms in the Avengers’ apartments were fully stocked.”

“Probably. Mine was, too.” Steve rinsed his razor and wiped his face. He remembered his own envy watching Bucky shave his thoroughly adequate stubble. “Before the serum, I only got to shave once a week.” He turned to look at his new lover. Loki had very little body hair, and that lean whipcord form was so fair-skinned. He was elegant just like a prince should be. “You are gorgeous, you know that?”

In response, Loki laid back on the bed, letting the sheet fall away from him.

Oh.

Steve felt his own groin stir in response to the mere sight of Loki’s arousal. Still amazed that anyone other than Bucky (the exception to every rule) wanted him, much less a gorgeous brilliant super-warrior, he walked slowly to the bed. When he got close enough Loki held out a hand and tugged him down. Steve complied, and Loki immediately molded his body to Steve’s and kissed him.

Sex with Loki was almost like turning into a super-soldier. A world that had been drab and hopeless was suddenly rife with possibility and wonder, and he himself full of energy and power. Steve cherished his memories of the snatched furtive times with Bucky. He felt almost disloyal for his delirium at finding what sex without fear, and with a skilled partner, could be like.

He put the thought out of his mind. That was disloyal to Loki.

Who murmured, “This kind of stamina and you’ve been celibate for how long?”

“We counting the time I spent in the ice?”

Loki only chuckled before kissing him again, long and slow, hands wandering all over him.

Tony had been right, Loki seemed to like his inexperience. Steve wasn’t sure why, but he was glad.

Steve propped himself on his elbow so he could look at Loki, at his dazed green eyes and softly parted lips. At his expression of dreamy anticipation.

Steve had expected Loki to be all urbanely amused at his ignorance. There had been a few brief moments when Loki had been amused, but most of the time he had seemed just as blown away as Steve was. He was all hunger and sweetness and amazement.

It was a hell of an ego trip.

Steve let his hands roam. Loki was breathing hard and heavy, wriggling against him, so aroused that it didn’t seem to matter where Steve touched him, Loki’s whole body was sexually charged now. Steve’s too, come to that, and his desire was taking over his mind completely now, his erection bordering on painful.

“Loki,” he began, but before he could offer to return last night’s favor, Loki had his hand slathered in lotion and moving up and down Steve’s prick. After that there was no possibility of Steve doing anything except gasp for breath for the minute it took Loki to decide that he was slick enough and
open his legs and pull Steve to where he wanted him.

This time Steve seemed to go in easier, like a gun sliding into its holster. Loki gasped his name and held him close, and Steve fell into the rhythm with him, the sensations building up in him and driving him more and more out of himself. He wasn’t a soldier or an artist or a relic from a past era, only a man with an alien prince, a pagan god, writhing beneath him.

It felt like parachuting out of a plane, that dizzying freedom almost like flying. It felt like running and knowing his body would let him race for miles, speeding past everyone else. It felt like picking up something heavy as if it was made of feathers. It felt like all of those things concentrated into one ecstatic burst of pleasure and he groaned loudly right into Loki’s ear and felt Loki shudder under him and then everything was complete peace.

Eventually his consciousness cleared. He held still for a while, stretching the moment out, but when Loki’s breathing changed, he surmised that he was coming out of the trance too.

“’I hate to move,’” Steve said, “’but I am starved.’”

“I as well. You wore me out.”

Steve grinned as he lurched out of the bed and Loki followed him into the bathroom to wash up. Instead of putting on last night’s clothes, Steve borrowed one of Loki’s robes (green silk, what a surprise) and when Loki was dressed they went to Steve’s floor so he could put on a fresh shirt and slacks. Cleanliness was still a keen pleasure for him. Loki’s whole body was very clean, all silky and sweet-smelling. Almost like Steve had imagined a woman would be that close up, but he didn’t think there was a right way to say that to Loki.

Steve was putting on his shoes when he realized.

“Aw, heck.”

“What?”

“They’re going to tease us.”

That got a little chuckle. “We have their blessing, and they know you are shy about such matters. We may hope for a reprieve.”

“Not from Tony.”

But when they got to the common room and headed for the breakfast buffet, all they got was slightly wider smiles than usual from bleary-eyed Avengers. Even Tony just tossed out his favorite greeting - “Good morning, America!” - without bothering to look up from his Starkpad.

That is, until they were almost through the plates they both had heaped high with bacon and pancakes and fresh fruit, when Tony suddenly looked up with an ominous grin.

“You know what we have here?”

“Tony.” Steve tried to make his tone warning.

“A god, blessing America!”

Everyone groaned, but they laughed at the same time. Even Steve couldn’t help laughing. “You’ve been saving that one, haven’t you,” Bruce said.
“For weeks, Brewski.” He finished off his coffee and looked at Loki. “I thought about also speculating about when we would hear the patter of little hooves around the Tower, but I thought it might be too soon.”

Loki kept his expression tranquil and his eyes on the food he was briskly scarfing down, but suddenly large black spiders were running up and down Tony’s arms.

“YAAAH! I’m sorry, okay, I’m sorry!” Tony tried to brush the spiders off even though he knew they were illusions.

The corners of Loki’s mouth turned up, but the spiders disappeared. Tony got up, taking his Starkpad (after checking it carefully for more spiders).

“No lab for you today, space-man, you’ll be no use. Besides, I got an idea in the shower about how SHIELD might’ve hacked Jarvis. Gonna spend the day checking it out.”

Natasha gave Tony a thoughtful glance for a moment before going back to her pancakes. No spartan diet of yogurt and vegetables for her; her active lifestyle required proper fuel.

“Why don’t we go out on my motorcycle?” Steve suggested, and Loki agreed immediately. He looked so contented Steve thought he would have agreed to anything.

Loki didn’t ask where they were going, just hopped onto the bike behind Steve and put his arms around Steve’s waist. Steve grinned to himself as he navigated the streets of Manhattan, then got onto the Interstate. The weather was perfect, early spring, warm and sunny without the oppressive heat that would come later.

When he stopped at a red light, Steve glanced over his shoulder and saw Loki’s eyes sparkling with the same enjoyment he was feeling.

Also, Loki’s hair looked like he had been in a hurricane. Steve would be sure to tease him about it later.

The light changed and he revved the engine.

He drove north, out of the city, into what felt to a city boy like Steve like wilderness - more trees than buildings, grass everywhere, fields of crops. Eventually he chose a town at random, just because there were wildflowers beside the highway and it looked pretty, and took the exit.

There were big fancy houses in one direction, so Steve took the other. They passed the usual cute little storefronts and quaint diners, and then found what Steve had been hoping for: a little park with a nice long hiking trail. Steve parked. Before he could poke fun at Loki’s dishevelment, Loki made a little hand gesture and his hair actually untangled itself and smoothed back down. He grinned at Steve’s surprise.

Magic. Wow. The future was even more amazing than he had hoped.

A mere block away was a little sandwich shop, so in they went, bought enough sustenance for two large men who have been having excellent sex, and set off for their hike. It was a weekday so there weren’t many other hikers on the trail. They got to share it with the birds and the squirrels and hardly any people.

They reached a scenic spot with a nice view of trees and hills and stood for a few minutes, just taking
it in. Steve slipped his arm around Loki, just because he could, and Loki leaned against him.

“This is so beautiful,” Loki said after a while. “I hope I get to see all of Midgard. I should make them send me more places as ambassador. Eventually the other realms will send ambassadors too.”

“Why haven’t they yet?”

“They don’t yet know that Midgard is worth it.” He turned to face Steve with a smile. Loki was just a couple of inches taller than him. Not many people were taller than him nowadays. “So for now we have you all to ourselves.”

Beautiful day, beautiful man, a real smile. And amazing things promised for the future. This was a good moment.

“You really think we’re going to get more visitors from other planets? I mean, besides those creepy greys?”

“Beyond a doubt.”

Steve looked at the view again, thinking. “You guys have all this advanced technology, and magic too. What do we have to offer the other realms?”

“Mozart.”

That was a good answer.

“Yay for the home team.”

Loki smiled at him, and they resumed walking. Eventually they came to a little clearing with picnic tables and settled down to eat, stuffing themselves with sandwiches and chips and fruit. Steve thought Loki looked sad as he handed a yellow apple to him, but he blinked and it was gone so he must have been mistaken.

“Do you have a particular plan for the rest of the day?” Loki asked as they gathered their various wrappers and napkins to put in the provided trash can.

“No. I just wanted to ride.”

“Why don’t we poke around all the little stores here, and then take a room for the night? We can return to the Tower in the morning.”

Steve couldn’t help a rueful little laugh. All of his life, just traveling into Manhattan had required planning and the careful marshaling of enough money for the fare back and forth. He and Bucky would go without things so they could afford to go to a baseball game and eat one hot dog each.

Oh, man. He was going to take Loki to a baseball game the first chance he got, and the rest of the team too if they were up for it, and he was going to eat at least four of those sublime artery-clogging hot dogs.

Loki was looking at him, quizzical. Steve came back to the present. “I’m not used to doing things on the spur of the moment like that. It sounds great.” He got out his phone and quickly sent their shield-brothers a group text saying they would return tomorrow.

They finished the hiking trail and wandered through the little town. There was a cemetery from the 18th century, a surprisingly cheerful setting in the spring afternoon. Loki bought a pottery vase made
by a local artisan just because it was pretty, and two pairs of slacks that were just a little too tight in the seat for Steve, who decided it behooved him as a good boyfriend to accept them. Loki’s illusions prevented anyone from recognizing them, so they could make casual conversation with the store clerks about nothing in particular, like they were real people or something. Steve hadn’t felt this normal since the day he had caught Dr. Erskine’s eye.

As the sun neared the horizon and the shops started to close, they looked over the selection of restaurants. “We had so much breakfast and lunch I don’t know if I can do justice to dinner.”

“You’ll need your strength tonight,” Loki promised.

Steve grinned. “Italian, then?”

Over dinner Loki told funny stories about meals he’d had on different planets. (“If by any chance you ever go to Nidavellir and they offer you gagh, firmly refuse. Just trust me on this.” “What is gagh?” “Never you mind.”) He included a few tales of less-than-pleasant things he’d resorted to eating while on military campaign, when he and Thor had to make sure everyone in the damn army saw them chewing and swallowing the unripe fruit or bizarre molluscs or whatever could be found so everyone would know their betters shared in their privations. This prompted Steve to tell a few stories of the makeshift comforts he and the HC’s had scrounged up during the war.

It made him think about Bucky a little too much, but he always thought about Bucky too much.

The waiter recommended tiramisu, which neither of them had eaten before. They ate two portions each. “I told you Midgard had much to offer the other realms,” Loki said as he scraped his plate.

The clerk at the little hotel didn’t even raise an eyebrow when two men asked for a single room. Steve liked the place. It had been built in the 20’s and restored at some point and furnished with antiques, so it looked like the places of his childhood.

Inside the room, while Steve locked the door Loki waved his fingers and a flash of green illuminated the room for an instant. “What are you doing?”

“Containing…” Loki smiled. “…any sounds we might make.”

“Oh.” Flustered for a moment, Steve went to investigate the tiny bathroom. There were enough towels for them both, plus a picturesque little basket holding a small bar of lavender-scented soap and tiny bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and lotion.

Well, that was convenient, anyway. Steve took it back to the bedroom, where Loki was checking his phone.

“Midgardian supervillains have been considerate enough not to interrupt our holiday,” he informed Steve, setting the phone down. His gaze fell on the tiny bottle, swallowed up by Steve’s large hand, and his smile widened.

Steve was going to make it clear from the get-go that he was a considerate boyfriend.

“I know that tonight it’s your turn.”

Loki’s brows lifted. “My… turn?”

And then Loki looked like he was trying not to laugh. Steve felt his face warm and looked away. “You know what I mean,” he muttered.
“I do.” Loki was definitely amused now. He moved around the room turning off lights until just one little faux-crystal lamp was still lit. Just enough light for them to make out each other’s features. Then Loki walked over to him, embraced him, and gave him several long slow wet kisses, until Steve’s embarrassment and Loki’s amusement had both been kissed away.

“My love, listen to me,” Loki said then, low and soft near Steve’s ear. “This isn’t a matter of exchange. We do only what we will both enjoy. You need not let me do everything to you that you do to me if you will find no pleasure in it. You need not do everything to me that I do to you if you will not relish it. Do you understand?”

Steve hesitated, nodded.

“Now I am going to make a guess. You and Bucky both preferred to be on top, I take it.”

That surprised Steve so much it took him a minute to reply. “I think I’m going to make a fool of myself again.”

Loki chuckled softly, gave him a quick reassuring kiss. “It’s all right, truly.”

“All right then.” He drew a breath. “Doesn’t everyone?”

Loki didn’t laugh out loud, at least. “No. Not at all. I don’t.”

Steve scrutinized his lover’s face. “Really?”

“Really.”

Steve closed his eyes for a second. “I really don’t know anything, do I?”

“You know how to tend to your partner’s pleasure. Believe me, that puts you far ahead of most men throughout the Nine Realms. All else is detail.”

Loki fell silent then, his cool hands stroking Steve’s back soothingly, letting Steve take a moment to think before speaking again.

“I do like, um, receiving. I do want you to do it to me.” Loki was so good at this. Even if Steve liked receiving a lot less than he did, he was sure Loki would make it incredible.

“But perhaps not tonight?”

“Well.”

Loki smiled. In the dark his gleaming white teeth made Steve think of the night sky. He remembered when he had tried to use the endearment from that tv show, in one of his earliest attempts at flirting with Loki.

“My moon,” he whispered, tightening his arms around Loki, twining his fingers in Loki’s long hair.

Loki smiled wider, happy and besotted looking. “My sun and stars.”

They wrestled each other’s clothes off, dropping them all over the Oriental rug before tumbling onto the bed. The sheets were just a little scratchy, but they were clean and the mattress was firm; Steve wasn’t going to complain.

He felt more confident this time, having already found some of Loki’s sensitive spots and how he liked to be touched on them. He continued his research in that regard.
Steve hadn’t known that men’s nipples were so sensitive. He’d thought that was a lady thing. He had been completely wrong.

Also, Loki really liked having his throat kissed and nuzzled. He squirmed and groaned and his eyes went all unfocused.

Even Loki’s dick was elegant, long and slim and gracefully curved. Larger than you’d expect on such a slender guy, not that Steve had much to compare with. He played with it, watching Loki arch his back and make shameless noises.

This time Loki didn’t object to turning around. He got on his hands and knees and Steve almost came just at the sight of him waiting for him like that. Loki looked back at him, eyes half-closed, lips parted, all his suave self-possession completely gone.

Steve’s hands shook as he prepared Loki, trying to do it the way Loki had for himself the night before. Lots of massaging to make the muscles relax. He used the entire little bottle of lotion. Loki had said it didn’t hurt, but Steve took care anyway. The first time he’d been with Bucky after the serum, Bucky had burst out laughing when he saw Steve’s new improved dick. “No way am I letting you stick that monster in me,” Bucky had declared, but he had, and he had liked it.

Steve shook his head, bringing himself back to the present moment. Where he had a beautiful man eager and waiting to be fucked.

So Steve slid in, carefully attending Loki’s noises and movements in case he wasn’t doing it right, but Loki just moaned and moved back against him so he must be doing all right.

It was so, so good to be squeezed so tight, and Loki did a thing with his inner muscles that made Steve’s brain shut down and all he could do was pound into Loki’s beautiful pale body and drink in the noises he made. And he kept on until the universe exploded.

Later, he was dimly aware of Loki’s strong arms positioning him on the bed. He himself couldn’t seem to move under his own power. Loki arranged him against the pillows and then cuddled up against him. Steve felt Loki’s lips press briefly against his collarbone before he sank into a sound and dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I'm getting to make my bb so happy. *wipes tears*
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Loki faces the present. Steve faces the past. Both face the future.

The following day Loki was off doing ambassador things all day, while Steve sparred with Clint and Natasha. The day after that, Loki was supposed to tell Bruce and Tony stuff about magic, or whatever it was they did in that lab, but instead some idiots got the bright idea of putting on flashy outfits and trying to rob a bank, and the weapons they had somehow acquired were lethal enough that the Avengers were assembled to take them down. Which they did, and their usual post-battle celebratory meal was an Asgardian style feast; Loki had decided it was time for another one.

Loki still told them stories from other worlds - some traditional tales, some from his own experience - nearly every time they all dined together. This occasion’s story was about a battle on Nidavellir. It inspired reminiscences from the others. Steve himself told a war story that involved Bucky saving him from his sniper’s nest high in a pine tree. It made him sad for a moment, and then worried, but Loki smiled gently at him and then Natasha took a turn at storytelling.

Later they went to Steve’s floor. Loki had never been in it before. The furniture was sturdy blond wood, and there was an even mix of sleek modern items and antiques from Steve’s era. Pepper had been behind that, wanting him to feel at home without expecting him to be frozen in time. The sofa was properly sized for six foot plus men, so Steve and Loki had no trouble making themselves comfortable, Loki curled against Steve’s side with contentment.

Steve came through on his offer to show Loki the sketchbook Steve had reserved for drawings of him, ever since the day he had realized he was developing feelings for him. “Drawing things helps me think,” he explained.

Loki studied each page intently, taking his time. “This is very flattering. That you spent this much time thinking about me.”

“That isn’t even all of them. There’s some drawings of you in my regular sketchbook too, along with other stuff.” The ones of the Hulk smashing Fandral were in Steve’s private sketchbook, the one he would never show to anyone. His artistic revenge on Fandral was too childish to reveal.

Loki looked through that one too. Steve felt complimented that he was willing to spend that much time looking at his drawings. That sketchbook included drawings of the other Avengers and other people Steve knew, or had known years ago.

There were seven pages in a row of Bucky. Steve had dreamed about Bucky’s death a few weeks ago. For the next couple of days he hadn’t been able to think about anything else. He had poured the memories and feelings into his sketchbooks.

His private sketchbook had the drawing of Bucky falling. He would never share that moment with anyone else. He couldn’t.

Loki stopped at one of the drawings of Bucky. “Would you mind telling me about these moments?”
“I don’t mind at all. But it seems kind of inconsiderate. Telling my new boyfriend about my old boyfriend.”

“Are you joking? I’m half in love with him myself, just from hearing your stories about him.”

Steve huffed a laugh. “I feel so lucky to have found you. So lucky that you want me.”

“The latter has nothing to do with luck.” Loki planted a kiss on his jawline. “Steve, I value loyalty. I would hardly think much of you if you forgot your lover, your shield-brother, after a few tumbles.”

Steve turned pink.

“You two were brave to love each other in those circumstances.”

“We didn’t feel brave. We felt like we couldn’t help ourselves.”

“I want to hear your stories. They are a vital part of you.”

“You’re not jealous?”

“Of course I am. Terribly.” But Loki smiled as he said it.

Loki was experienced. He was a thousand years old. Maybe he just accepted that after a few centuries, memories and jealousy were inevitable.

“I’m jealous of everyone who’s ever touched you,” Steve admitted. He was furious that creep Fandral had been with Loki, even if it was literally a thousand years ago.

“Good.”

“Speaking of touching you.”

Looking pleased, Loki pressed closer so they could kiss.

“So what if I said that tonight, it really was your turn?”

Loki’s eyes sparkled with mischief, and a moment later he had actually slung Steve over his shoulder to carry him into the bedroom. “Hey!” Steve said, laughing. Even after so many months of knowing him, it was weird that such a slender guy was this strong. Loki dumped him onto his bed and then was on top of him.

“I would say that your wish is my command.”

“I wish, then. And I want to see your face.”

Loki looked down at him with an expression that made Steve feel all warm and goofy inside. He really was lucky, never mind what Loki said.

Loki traced his features with careful fingertips. Kissed him again. Then started to undress him.

It took probably half an hour for them to take all of each other’s clothes off. They kept pausing to kiss and caress every inch of skin as it was uncovered. It felt like the most wonderful luxury. Steve and Bucky had always been scared of getting caught, so they had usually hurried, fumbling as they tried to figure it out for themselves, often not even getting all the way undressed. There had been nothing like this leisurely exploration.
Loki’s hands were everywhere, sensitizing his skin so that even a light touch fired his desire even more, green eyes gleaming with triumph at the little noises Steve made, at the way Steve’s arms tightened around Loki or the way he moved into Loki’s touch. Loki watched his responses enthralled, as if he hadn’t had probably hundreds of handsome men losing their minds for him, and Steve hated that thought because Loki was his, dammit, but most of the time what Loki was doing to him took up every bit of his attention.

At one point it did occur to him that he probably shouldn’t let Loki do all of the doing, but then Loki’s long slender fingers curled around his dick and that was all he could think about. What the heck. He could make it up to Loki next time.

Eventually Loki’s hand moved slowly down, stroking the insides of Steve’s thighs, letting him know what was coming next. He’d thought he would be tense, but instead he was bonelessly relaxed, and when slick fingers slid into him he felt nothing but pleasure.

With the small amount of his brain that was still sort of functioning, he could recognize that Loki was doing to him the same massaging and slicking he had done for himself. Now that he was on the receiving end, he could feel how important this kind of preparation was. Or could be; right now he felt so entranced and eager that he probably didn’t need this much care and patience, but still, he could feel his muscles easing and his nerve endings awakening and hungering for more contact.

Then Loki’s fingers slid a little deeper and oh god it was perfect he had felt this pleasure before but he hadn’t known it was stored in one little spot that could be reached and pressed and teased and he was crying out and his fingers were digging into Loki’s shoulders and he was going to - but Loki removed his fingers and he heard himself actually whining at the loss.

“Loki please I’m ready please now-”

“Steve.” A wealth of meaning was packed into that one word, and then Loki’s hips were between his thighs and then the two of them merged and Steve wrapped his arms and legs around him and probably would have crushed him if it weren’t for Asgardian strength.

Loki snatched a swift kiss and then they were moving together, and that spot inside Steve was being touched again, rubbed and pressed and it was just perfect and Steve wanted it to last forever. Loki’s strong hands locked on his hips and Loki was claiming him, invading him, and then Steve heard his own shout echoing in the dark room and Loki’s eyes continued to drink him in even as Loki’s beautiful face went drawn and tense as he shook and groaned and collapsed.

Lying together after lovemaking was another thing that was new to Steve. Another thing he hadn’t gotten to do before. It was blissful, lying all exhausted and relaxed and still feeling the glow of pleasure. For a long time he didn’t think about anything at all, just existed in perfect contentment, Loki’s long inky hair spilling across his chest and their legs tangled together.

He had lost all awareness of time, but eventually he said, “Next time, I’ll know how to do it better.”

He felt Loki’s lips curve against his skin. “You are already wonderful. I would not trade you for Queen Lysippe’s entire seraglio.”

“Thanks, I think.” Steve assumed Loki was talking about someone on some other planet. He didn’t really care. “I want you to teach me everything.”

“Humans, always wanting me to teach them things,” Loki teased, idly stroking Steve’s stomach with a delicate touch that made him shudder.
“I’d say what I’m learning is more interesting than whatever you’re telling the science gang.”

“I’m going to start calling them that to their faces.”

“Tony’ll probably have T-shirts made.” Steve ghosted his fingertips up and down Loki’s back, trying to make his touch as unhurried and soft as Loki’s. He must not have done too badly, because Loki almost immediately started to get hard again. And that made Steve start to get hard, and Loki moved against him like an ocean wave so that they could kiss.

Steve thought he was getting better at tongue kissing; at least, his tongue and lips fell into a rhythm easily now, and his mouth and Loki’s moved together naturally, almost like they had rehearsed it.

When the kiss ended, Steve said, “Do it to me again?”

God, Loki had a beautiful smile. “Oh, yes.”

A few days later it was time for Loki’s monthly visit to Asgard. He joined his mother in her study and presented her with the pottery vase he had bought on his holiday with Steve. It had long been his habit to gift her with such trifles from his travels, small items pleasing to the eye.

She accepted it with approval, but was at best resigned that Loki had succumbed to his feelings for Steve.

“I should never have sent you to Earth. I should have found some other means for you to make reparations to the humans, and some other way to unlearn the xenophobia Odin taught our realm.”

“Mother, please. The grief to come is a small price for what my human friends are to me now.”

She shook her head slowly, gazing out the window at Asgard’s gleaming golden buildings. “It was foolish of me.”

“Please do not command me to leave Midgard.”

Frigga sighed heavily. “The damage is already done. Barring unforeseen circumstances, you may stay there for as long as you wish. But I do repent not having the foresight to realize this would happen if you spent that long in close proximity with the most remarkable humans on that world.”

“Cheer up, Mother. At least your other son is unlikely to fall in love with a citizen of the realm you have sent him to.”

Frigga chuckled at this, and went on to ask for his counsel on several matters of state, and took him into her confidence about things known only to her and a few others. State secrets, confidential reports and agreements, plans whose full details were known only to her - and now to him.

It was not lost on Loki that only a crown prince was likely to be given all of this information. They did not discuss the succession, however. As with so much else between them, there was no need.

She did not mention the Zeta Reticulan transporter stashed in his pocket dimension. Either he had succeeded in hiding its existence from her, or she was indulging him.

He hadn’t had a chance to experiment with it yet. He wanted to work on it at night, when Frigga was unlikely to be watching him, but his last several nights had been spent with Steve. He would have to find some solution.
It was a pleasant problem to have.

At the feast held in his honor that evening, Loki was obliged to tell several tales of his valiant battles on Midgard. The court was intrigued by the exceptional mortals who fought at his side, so he related many of their exploits in which he had had no part. He was so proud of them. He did not talk at length of their kindness to him. Most of his listeners would see only the esteem due a prince of Asgard, not generosity to an invader who had imperiled their lives and their world.

Sif retold her own adventures with the Avengers in terms complimentary to them, especially the shield-maiden Natasha. She did not mention the microwave oven.

Hogun the Grim sat glowering wordless at Sif’s side, doing justice to his sobriquet.

The following morning, Loki went to the training yard to spar with opponents no more breakable than himself. When the session ended, Sif approached him. “I wish to speak with you, Loki.”

“Join me in my study, then.”

The room was lined with books and charts. Sif did not even glance at them. “Have some wine,” Loki invited, and she poured a cup for each of them while he seated himself on the divan, rather than barricading himself behind his large ornately carved desk. He gestured for her to sit beside him.

“Thor has been in a foul humor his last two visits here. He believes that Frigga will make you her heir.”

Loki sighed. “She has told me that she will not name a successor anytime soon.”

Sif held his gaze, her eyes hard. She was not to be put off. “I am no sorceress, but everyone knows that Asgard’s magic is controlled by its sovereign, with Gungnir as its focus. I know that the ruler of Asgard can choose an heir by enchanting Gungnir. Odin enchanted Gungnir to go to Thor should he die, did he not? And Queen Frigga had to overcome the spell with magic of her own to claim the throne herself. Few sorcerers could have done it.”

“That is true.”

“The queen has not yet publicly declared her intentions, but it would not be like Frigga to leave such things to chance. Should - the Norns forbid - anything happen to our queen tomorrow, who do you think Gungnir will fall to?”

Loki said nothing for a moment. He knew Sif was right. He had been trying not to think about that daunting prospect.

He set down his goblet untouched and met Sif’s gaze. “Shall we be honest, then? You have long hoped to be Asgard’s next queen. You still wish it. Regardless of which of Frigga’s sons succeeds her.”

“You will need me, Loki. Asgard’s warriors will not follow you. They will follow me.”

“I do not need you.” He kept his tone and expression cool. “If you imagine I cannot win them over, you are underestimating me greatly.”

She looked down for a moment before her grudging answer. “That is true. I never can anticipate your sly stratagems. But when you are king, who will lead Asgard’s armies? You will not wish to.
Who could you trust not to use that post to attempt a coup, save your queen?”

“That is true. Your valor and your popularity with the warriors of Asgard could be very useful to me. But I would not permit you to meddle in trade or treaties.”

Sif made a dismissive gesture with one hand. “If Thor had been king and I his queen, and you his vizier as we all expected, we would have left those small matters to you anyhow.”

*Small matters.* By the Norns.

But the fact was, he had long planned that when Thor was king, he would count on Thor’s disinterest in such affairs to limit the damage he did to them.

“I suppose that attitude would be useful to me. But you know that Asgard will not continue to conquer other worlds. Neither Frigga nor I will continue Odin’s empire building.”

“Wars will happen just the same. Many will happen precisely because some realms will mistake your and Frigga’s peace for weakness. I will have fighting aplenty.”

Loki nodded. There was another aspect to be discussed, however. He lifted his cup and took a long swallow. Sif held her own goblet, still mostly full, watching him. He braced himself.

“Sif. Are you truly willing to wed a frost giant?”

“A frost giant who has proven his loyalty to Asgard. As a foreign-born prince, you should marry a woman of Asgard.”

“I will marry for pragmatic reasons. But there is one thing I have realized I cannot compromise on. Sif, if we have children together, they will be warm-blooded Asgardians, but they will also have my genes. They will be as likely to be bookish sorcerers as hardy warriors. Can you love a son who would rather do spells or read than swing a sword? Or a daughter who has no interest in battle but only in pretty dresses? Because no matter what else any prospective match has to offer me, I will not give my children a mother who I am not certain will love them. Unconditionally. Princes and princesses need their parents to love them as much as any other child does.”

Sif looked down, brows drawn in thought. “Does this mean you have chosen your queen?”

“I have no list of candidates.” As Loki said that, a handful of possibilities flitted through his mind, various ladies of high rank and powerful connections. None of them struck him as more potentially useful than Sif, though a few of them were more congenial. “And the succession is not declared yet. If Frigga believes that Asgard will be served best by making Thor her heir, she will do it, never mind who is her favorite.”

Sif pondered this for a few moments. Then set her goblet down and rose. “Thank you for speaking with me, Loki. I look forward to doing battle on Midgard again soon.”

Steve found ways to keep busy while Loki was in Asgard. He made his usual visits to children’s hospitals. Tony went with him, soaking up the attention like he always did. He let SHIELD’s scientists examine him in yet another fruitless attempt to reproduce Dr. Erskine’s serum. At least the one who examined him this time was nice, Dr. Kaplan, a woman with sharp eyes and a kind manner who didn’t forget he was a person as well as a science project. He practiced shooting with the resident assassins, who were always willing to take some time to instruct him, make him better.
He went to Brooklyn.

Cadman Plaza Park had been a vacant lot waiting to become an auditorium when Steve had left Brooklyn to go to war. The auditorium was never built. Now there were wide paths and green grass and benches and squirrels and playing children there.

There was also a huge granite war memorial. On it were carved the names of every Brooklynite who had died fighting the Axis.

There were over ten thousand of them. Eleven thousand five hundred men from Brooklyn alone. There was a statue of Captain America in Atlantic Station just three stops away, but on this memorial, he was listed as Steven Grant Rogers, no indication that he was different from any other Brooklyn boy who enlisted.

Steve looked at his name there for a minute before heading for his real destination.

It broke his heart all over again to see the name carved into the stone: James Buchanan Barnes, 1917-1945.

He could feel his eyes tearing up. There were other people around the monument, jogging, playing chess in the spring sunshine, throwing frisbees. They were intent on their own business, and just distant enough that he could say what he needed to say.

Steve looked at the name for a minute. Pictured Bucky’s face.

“Bucky,” he said aloud. Drew a breath.

“Bucky. I miss you so much. I’m never going to stop feeling guilty. Every minute that I’m alive, I feel like I shouldn’t be because you’re not. But I know that’s not what you’d want me to feel, any more than I would want you to.

“I wish you could see the things people have invented since our time. You used to be so excited about the technology you thought was coming, and there’s so much. I can watch a movie in my bathtub, for Pete’s sake. No flying cars, but we went to the moon, Bucky.

“And people have changed for the better, some. When I first woke up and realized what had happened, that I must have been asleep for years, I was so shocked and so sad, but there was one good thing in that moment. The officer who came to me to explain was a colored man. People don’t use that word now, now they say black or African-American, but he was the authority figure, and white men were taking his orders like it was normal, because now it is. A black man is president now. I thought it might take us hundreds of years to get there, but it didn’t. We still have a long way to go but we have come so far.

“Women can do any job they want now. I’ve met female SHIELD agents who are more impressed that I knew Peggy Carter than that I’m Captain America.” He shook his head, proud and sad at the memory of the one woman in his past.

“And Bucky, you and I wouldn’t have to hide now. We could tell the whole world what we were to each other. You and I could get married. Can you believe it? I can’t.”

He took a deep breath.

“Bucky. Oh, god. I’m in love. No one could ever replace you, but - well, he’s completely different from you. Except that he’s also brave and loyal and kind and sassy.” Steve smiled through his tears. “You’d like him. I keep feeling like I’m being unfaithful to you. I try to tell myself that this is kind of
like the agreement we used to have about girls, that we should both date girls and one day get married and have kids, that it wouldn’t make any difference between you and me. I tell myself that you wouldn’t want me to be alone. I wouldn’t want you to be alone, if I were dead and you were still alive. I’d want you to be happy.

“I have friends who need me. I can do some good in the world. I can help people.”

Steve stopped, bowed his head. Let some tears escape down his face. He’d had a lot of good cries his first couple of weeks out of the ice. Missing Bucky and Peggy and the Howling Commandos and just the whole world he had known. Then there had been distractions - aliens and other bad guys to fight - and the consolations - shield-brothers and good food and the discovery that the future had gotten some things right, so maybe there was hope for humanity after all, and eventually falling in love with a real live handsome prince. He didn’t need to weep as often.

Now it had been a couple of months since he had last shed tears. He did so now, and he knew that for as long as he lived, sometimes it would feel just like this, as if Bucky had just fallen moments ago, as if he had never yet faced life without him.

That was fine. Horribly as it hurt. He didn’t ever want to stop caring this much.

When his tears had run their course, he spoke again, his voice hoarse. “I’ll never stop thinking about you, Buck. Never stop missing you. Every single day. But I’m going to try to lead a life you’d be proud of.”

He put a hand on the cool stone for a minute. Then slowly walked away.

Secretary of Defense Alexander Pierce reread the report he had just received. Since he was alone in his office, he did not trouble to keep the scowl off his face.

If only the truth about the alien cover-up had come out just one year later, there would have been no problem. As it was, the scandal was hovering entirely too close to things Pierce wasn’t ready to have dragged out into the light of day.

He took out his phone and punched in a number.

“Pierce here. Get the Asset out of cryo.”

He hung up without another word.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Loki blows Steve's... mind.

Also, we find out why Alexander Pierce poured such a tiny portion of milk.

After a couple of weeks, Loki thought Steve was becoming comfortable with sex. Which meant it was time to make him less comfortable. So one night when they retired to Loki’s chambers, Loki gave him a few long slow kisses, then put his lips near Steve’s ear. “Would you like me to suck your cock?”

Steve looked like he was going to pass out. “Steve. Inhale.” Loki watched his lover’s shock with delight. “Now exhale. I take it that’s a yes.”

Steve forced more air into his lungs. “I’ve always wanted to - that.”

“But you haven’t?” Loki had to admit to himself that he liked that Steve had first times to share with him. Loki was going to give him every first time he wanted, everything he had ever dreamed of and more things he hadn’t known he craved.

“We were worried about - hygiene. You know. Back then we only got one proper bath a week.”

“Ah. Well, if that concerns you, we can take a shower together first.”

Steve closed his eyes. Oh, he was adorable. “I think we’re both plenty clean, but that sounds good anyway.”

Smiling widely, Loki took Steve’s hand and walked backwards towards the bathroom. Once they were there he pulled Steve’s clothes off, deliberately clumsy to show his haste, using magic to dematerialize his own clothes and start the shower running.

Steve actually looked away from Loki for half a second at that. “Was that you or Jarvis?”

“Me. There are advantages to having a sorcerer in your bed.” Loki stepped into the sleek glass-and-marble cage, into the warm torrent of water, tugging Steve after him. Steve needed little encouragement, immediately molding himself against Loki, capturing his mouth and cupping Loki’s ass in his hands, wonderfully possessive. Now that Steve knew that Loki would be receptive if he took the lead, he rarely hesitated.

Loki melted against his lover, filling his hands with Steve’s hard muscles. Steve’s large prick was stiff and urgent against Loki’s stomach, Steve was shaking with the intensity of his desire, so Loki decided to give him some relief. He removed his hands from Steve just long enough to pour some of the lavender-scented soap onto his palm. Then he wrapped his slick hand around both their pricks and worked the soap into a lather, his fingers sliding easily over their erections.

Steve’s knees actually shook when he grasped what Loki was doing. He clutched Loki’s shoulders and leaned against him, letting Loki take them both to the edge. Loki had intended to draw this out, but Steve was too eager, too thrilled that his long-delayed fantasy was at last imminent, and his mad
craving infected Loki as well, and they finished far too soon.

No matter. They could do this again the following night, and the night after that, and however many nights after the Norns granted them.

Steve caught his breath and stood up straight, dazed. “Wow,” he whispered.

Loki smiled. He poured more soap onto his hands and started lathering Steve up. Thoroughly. Not missing a single muscled inch of him. After a moment Steve soaped his own hands and began to return the favor and they washed each other simultaneously, their hands moving everywhere without plan or pattern, the scent of the soap and the bracing heat of the water adding to the medley of sensation. They were able to savor their shared bathing more now that they had had the evening’s first climax.

They made rinsing off as erotic as washing had been, and did the same for drying each other with thick soft towels. Loki had noticed that Steve always caressed the towels he used. He surmised that high quality towels were another little luxury that was new to him.

Loki took the towels, dropped them onto the floor with Steve’s clothes, wrapped his arms around Steve. Steve always seemed a little less embarrassed if they were in a close embrace when Loki spoke of the things they would do.

Given how difficult Steve found it to speak of such things, it was splendid how shameless he was when they actually did them.

“So this is something you thought about,” Loki said softly. “Is there a way you would especially like it, this first time? Do you want to lie back on the bed while I service you? Or sit on the sofa with my face in your lap? Or stand against the wall with me on my knees before you?”

Steve closed his eyes. “That last one. Please.” His cornflower-blue eyes opened. “And I’ll. I don’t know how but I will.” Loki smiled, and before he could reassure Steve again, Steve added, “I want to.”

With a light touch, Loki steered Steve to the nearest wall. Then dropped to his knees. He looked up at his lover for a moment, that perfect powerful body and innocent flushed face.

_I am so lucky_, he thought, and then was startled that he had thought it. But it was true. The Norns had been generous to him for a change.

Well. If the Norns had given him a gift, he would take good care of it.

Starting at the base, Loki applied his lips and tongue to the bulging vein along the underside of Steve’s prick. The shocked noise that escaped Steve at the sensation was intoxicating. Loki planted little kisses along the vein, slowly moving towards the head, taking his time as if he could not tell that his lover was about to lose his mind entirely.

When Loki reached the tip and slowly took it into his mouth, Steve groaned his name in a voice full of pleading and need. Loki allowed his saliva to flow, engulfing Steve’s prick in moist warmth, slowly taking in more of that tremendous supersoldier cock.

Steve was now slumped helplessly against the wall. Loki positioned his hands under Steve’s lovely taut buttocks, ready to catch him if he fell over entirely. Internally, he gloated at Steve’s trembling and incoherent noises as he began caressing with his tongue.

Then he started sucking.
Steve gave a choked gasp and fumbled unsteady fingers over Loki’s head. He pulled Loki’s hair a little, but Loki took the discomfort as a compliment.

Loki decided not to use too many variations just yet. This was so new to Steve that just having warm wetness on his prick, just a bit of suction, was heady and maddening for him. Humming around Steve’s erection, filling his mouth with hot water before engulfing him, rocking his head more than a little - all of that could wait, he could prolong Steve’s discoveries and relish every one of them. So for now, Loki sucked hard, then more gently, then just massaged with lips and tongue before abruptly resuming the suction, and Steve just slumped against the wall and moaned Loki’s name over and over and it was so delicious that as soon as Loki realized Steve was close, all he had to do was stroke himself twice and he spilled at exactly the moment that Steve’s seed flooded his throat.

The way Steve gasped for breath actually had Loki a little worried for a moment, but eventually Steve blinked a few times and his gaze cleared and he regained the ability to stand up. Loki smiled up at him, feeling terribly smug from his kneeling posture. Steve’s entranced expression was irresistible.

Steve gently caressed Loki’s cheek and jaw with one large hand. He licked his lips, drew a breath. “Loki. I - that was amazing. I, um. Thank you.”

Loki tried not to grin too widely. He failed.

Steve swallowed. “How do you want, um.”

“I find this position is the most comfortable if you don’t want a sore neck.”

Steve, already flushed, turned very red at this. “Sure you don’t just want me kneeling?”

Loki stood up, smiling. “I do want you kneeling. But if you prefer, I will lie on the bed.”

For answer, Steve seized Loki’s shoulders and pushed him to the wall. He kissed him, deep and possessive, and Loki yielded to the kiss happily. He loved it when Steve took charge.

When he was finished kissing Loki into mush, Steve got down on his knees. Loki looked down at him, his breath catching. Steve was beautiful like this. Well, he was beautiful at all times, but he was particularly enchanting on his knees, ready to give pleasure. Loki reached to touch Steve’s boyish face carefully. He didn’t know how to say what he wanted to Steve. That in a thousand years of lovers, Loki had never felt quite this way before. That Loki would cheerfully trade every man he had ever touched for Steve.

If he said all that, would Steve be able to believe him? Loki didn’t think so. And so he channeled all of his feelings into touches, into whatever gifts and gestures he could think of that might please Steve, into whatever services to Steve’s realm he could render.

Steve held his gaze for a moment, then bent his head to Loki’s prick. He began by pressing little kisses all over it, very softly. Then he copied the little licks Loki had made to the underside, reproducing what Loki had done to him. Until he reached the tip, when he immediately started sucking hard. The sudden intense sensation made Loki’s knees buckle, even as he realized that this was how Steve had fantasized about doing this, for all the years he hadn’t dared to try it.

Steve alternated between trying to copy what Loki had done to him, varying pressure, using his lips and tongue, and just sucking hard like he was desperate. He was alternating between his own long-held fantasy and what he had just learned from Loki. Loki loved all of it. He had been with more skilled lovers. Some of them had even cared for Loki. It didn’t matter, none of them could match this
impetuous passion, this sweet solicitude.

You have ruined me for all others, Steve Rogers, Loki thought right before his vision went white.

Loki still needed to study the Zeta Reticulan transporter. And he needed to do it when his mother was unlikely to be watching him from Hliðskjálf. He knew that she looked in on him at least briefly every day. His best bet was to do his experimentation late at night, when she would be asleep. But since he and Steve had begun lying together, all of his nights had belonged to the captain.

He and Tony exchanged a few cryptically worded text messages about it and found a solution. For a few days running, Tony acted morose. He allowed the others to see him apparently drinking more than usual - really he wasn’t, but if he knocked back a large drink and then staggered into the elevator holding a bottle, everyone made assumptions. He sat dourly through movies instead of laughing and quipping as usual. Instead of joining the others for meals, he ate pizza alone in his workshop.

It might have been hard on Pepper, but Loki felt certain Tony had let her know what he was up to. And she had known from the start that nothing she could do for him would entirely stop his occasional plunges into darkness. Had known, and bravely acted on her love for him anyway.

After a few days of this, Tony appeared in the common room one evening just as the movie the others were watching ended. He said nothing in reply to their greetings, just gave them a vague wave and made a beeline for his coffee machine. He programmed it to make an especially elaborate, and large, concoction of cocoa-infused coffee.

“Tony, is there anything we can do?” Bruce asked in his usual gentle way.

“No, no, I just can’t figure out the greys’ communicator. It’s too weird. Why do they have to be so weird? Why can’t they have normal human urges, like greed or lust, that I could exploit to get them to tell me how it works?” Tony took a sip of his drink that must have burned his tongue. “But I feel like if I just keep messing with it somehow it’ll come into focus.” With that, he wandered back to the elevator, the huge coffee mug in one hand, a bottle of rum he snagged on the way in the other.

Once Tony was gone, Loki turned to his lover. “Steve, I don’t think Tony should be left alone tonight.”

“You want to stay up all night and play in the lab with him?”

“I think it might be best.”

Steve gave him a quick kiss, trying to appear casual but not quite pulling it off. He was too much of a private person to be very demonstrative in public, but he still enjoyed being able to make a few such gestures in the plain sight of his shield-brothers without shocking them. “Have fun. Don’t let him get into too much trouble.”

Loki had to laugh at that. “Since when am I the cooler head?” With that he bade good night to everyone, patting Pepper’s shoulder reassuringly before getting into the elevator.

He and Tony did spend the first hour toying with the Zeta Reticulan communicator. After that, it was sufficiently late that Loki deemed it safe to take the transporter out of his pocket dimension, flushing out the accumulated energies while he was at it, and begin their study of it.

Tony scanned it with every instrument Midgard had invented. Loki probed it, cautiously, with his
seiðr. They paused to share the bizarre and delicious coffee Tony had brewed.

Tony looked up at him. “Something wrong?”

Tony always did understand Loki too well. “It just occurred to me. What I told Steve, about feeling I should babysit you tonight. That is the first lie I have told any of you since I came here to serve Midgard.”

“And it was to your boyfriend. I’m sorry, bro.” Tony eyed the transporter. “You know that if you could tell him, he’d want you to be able to escape from bad guys.”

“I know.” Loki tried to put his consternation aside. This lie did not harm Steve. It was for the greater good of them all. Still it troubled him.

“Make it up to him. Pour some of that Asgardian mead you won’t let me drink into him, get him to tell you his kinkiest fantasies, then make them come true.”

Loki laughed. “I suppose that is part of the expiation I owe Midgard.”

“I could segue into a whole series of jokes based on that premise, but that would require accepting that sex is something that can be owed and I don’t support that idea, even for alien invasions.”

They studied the transporter until dawn, when Loki went to Steve’s chambers and awoke him with a kiss and then lovemaking. In the golden afterglow, Loki decided Tony’s half-joking suggestion wasn’t a bad one.

“Steve. Are there more things you have always wanted to do with a lover?”

“Well, yes.” Steve shifted a little, making them more comfortable as they lay together. “It was something Bucky and I couldn’t do back then, and the only girl who was ever interested in me, well, there just wasn’t time. But now….”

“Yes?”

“I want to learn to dance. The kind of dancing they did in my time, it’s not as popular these days but some people still do it. I looked on the internet and there’s places where same-sex couples can take classes and stuff nowadays… what?”

Loki was trying not to laugh, honestly he was, but he truly couldn’t help it. “Please don’t be angry, darling,” he gasped after a minute. “I would be delighted to if that is what you wish.”

Steve caught on. “Oh. You meant… oh.” And then Steve couldn’t help laughing too, ruefully. “I am such a twit.”

“A twit who is going dancing.” Loki grinned at him, relieved that yet again, Steve had borne his embarrassment gracefully. Poor lad had likely had a lot of practice, long ago. “Whenever you say the word, my love. But my offer as actually intended still stands.”

“Hmm.”

“Yes?” When no reply was immediate, Loki pressed, “You have to at least hint at it.”

“Um. Maybe I could draw it.”

Loki laid his head on Steve’s broad chest. “Whatever you like.”
Steve reached up to stroke Loki’s long hair. He seemed to like Loki’s hair, was always playing with it. “I’m sorry I’m always such a berk.”

Loki wasn’t certain what the word meant, but the context was clear enough. “No, I am the one who must apologize. It is hardly your fault you grew up in a more demure time, and had so few opportunities for experience.”

“I decided a long time ago not to let that bother me. I knew that if I ever found a girl who liked me, there would be times when I made an idiot of myself. I didn’t expect there to ever be a man other than Bucky, but the same thing applies.”

Loki lifted his head to look at Steve, concerned.

“Loki, it’s fine. Honest. You’ve been swell. But you know all about this stuff and I hardly know anything. I just have to take it on the chin. Sometimes the only way out is through.”

Loki laid his head back down. Steve’s words were common sense, but they had reached him. He thought about them until he drifted off for a couple of hours’ sleep before the day’s duties began.

Clint and Natasha sat across from each other in their apartment’s living room, cleaning their weapons. They spent hours each week on this activity. The routine calmed and centered their minds, as did the mostly-silent companionship.

They knew each other well. They could convey tremendous meaning to each other with only a few words.

“Where are our loyalties now?” Natasha said on this day, after nearly an hour of silence. “With SHIELD, or with the Avengers?”

“So far there’s been no conflict.”

“So far.”

That was all they said about it. For now.

Pierce was on full alert as he entered his house. There was no sign of anyone present.

That didn’t mean that no one was present. Just that they knew their job. It was the routine first test every time they got the Asset out of cryo and reset him with basic programming. If he couldn’t get through Pierce’s security - without killing any of Pierce’s people - he wasn’t field-ready.

He was always field-ready.

As usual, Pierce went straight to the kitchen and poured himself a finger of milk. Perhaps it was connected to forgotten impressions from infancy: he craved the calming feeling the familiar flavor gave him. Unfortunately, he was lactose intolerant. More than half a cup of the stuff would turn his guts inside out. So each evening he unwound from the day’s stresses with the small amount of milk his system would endure.

As Pierce closed the refrigerator, the Asset stepped out of the shadows that had concealed him. Good job.
“Want some milk?” Pierce couldn’t help a little glare as he offered. It was so unfair that some people could just drink all the milk they wanted and not pay for it with gastrointestinal agony. He resented it whenever people accepted this offer.

The Asset ignored this, as always. Focused on the mission. As he should.

Pierce sat down and fortified himself with a cautious sip. Then arranged his face into the most sincere expression he could muster and met the Asset’s gaze.

Decades ago, the Asset’s earliest handlers had hoped he could be conditioned to obey unquestioningly. Perhaps in response to code words. They had tried conditioning him with drugs and electric shocks and bombardment, by the classic Pavlovian method.

The experiment had failed utterly. There was a remnant of a human being still in there somewhere. It had to be dealt with.

On the other hand, controlling a human being was a lot simpler when you controlled every single influence he encountered. And kept his mind too disrupted for him to ruminate about those influences.

“I need your help. There’s a senator, Roberta Martin. She’s betrayed the trust of the people,” he told the Asset. “She is a threat to everything we have worked for, all of these years.”

The Asset said nothing, just kept that unsettling intent gaze fixed on him. This had used to unnerve Pierce, years ago. He still wondered just what the Asset was seeing in him.

Maybe he was seeing blond hair, blue eyes, and a once-boyish face.

It was good to see that his advancing age hadn’t changed how the Asset responded to him. Maybe somewhere in that scrambled brain, the Asset remembered how aging worked.

Pierce allowed himself another sip of milk, then opened his briefcase and gave the Asset a folder.

“She was complicit in concealing evidence of alien visitation from the American people.” And she would bring as many of her accomplices down with her as she could. People who Pierce needed in their places to carry out the final phases of Hydra’s plan.

The Asset opened the folder and studied Senator Martin’s photograph from hooded eyes.

“Make it look like a suicide. Leave this near her body.” Pierce handed over a manila envelope that held this week’s issue of *Time*, folded open at an item about the ongoing investigation into the UFO cover-up.

When evidence linking her to said cover-up was inevitably found, it would seem to answer all questions tidily. She had killed herself rather than face disgrace and possibly prison.

“Not much of a challenge, I know.” Of course not. The Asset had to be tested when he was fresh out of the icebox. “How about after that, I send you after the Borovnian president?” Pierce scowled for a minute. It would be at least five more years before another Black Widow program could be launched. And it was a former Widow, plus that alien prince who was disrupting this planet in all kinds of ways, who had ended the one they had going.

Damn Agent Barton for not killing the bitch like he was assigned to when she had started to show signs of going off the reservation. Well, at least she was handled. For now.
“President Brassilhov represents hostile interests.” That was, he wasn’t willing to cooperate with Hydra. His intended successor, on the other hand, seemed far more biddable. “After you’ve dealt with the Senator, we’ll send you to Borovnia.”

The Asset’s eyes burned into the photo, memorizing Martin’s features. Pierce finished his milk and rose from the table.

“Report to me when your mission is complete.”

Alone in his study, Pierce spent the evening watching the rough cut of a movie that had been produced by one of their Hollywood operatives. It was to be released in the fall and was intended to be a test of how receptive the public was to Hydra’s aims.

As it turned out, the movie was a disaster. Much too heavy-handed. Fascist propaganda apparently written by ten-year-olds. And it was too late, the damn thing was already wrapped. Its usefulness as a barometer of the public mood would have to be written off entirely. It would flop at the box office and become a punchline.

Pierce challenged fate by having one more finger of milk before going to bed. After this day, he deserved it.

An hour after going to bed, Pierce was awakened by severe nausea. He spent most of the night dealing with the results of his indulgence. Meaning that he had to deal with the following day on almost no sleep.

He just couldn’t catch a break.
Natasha would have given Tony his birthday present late if it had been necessary, but it wasn’t. That morning, while the occupants of the Tower were still getting themselves together to face the day - Clint, for example, was in the shower - Jarvis informed her that Tony had gone down to the lab to check on a couple of projects before breakfast. And that he was alone.

“Thanks, Jarvis.”

She took a flash drive out of her desk drawer and went down to Tony’s lab.

He was sitting on a stool, sipping something alcoholic (really, Stark? Even before coffee?) and checking various screens of readings of whatever arcane thing he was experimenting with. He glanced up at her entrance, surprised.

Natasha glanced around before speaking. She had never had an excuse to see Tony’s lab before. There were banks of computer screens, assorted instruments, piles and piles of machine parts. Even a couple of shelves of technical manuals, though everyone knew Tony preferred to read things on a screen, not on paper.

“I know Pepper made it clear that your birthday wish is for us to have fun with you, not for us to give you stuff, but I have a bit of stuff for you anyway.” Pepper had put it most diplomatically. What the hell could any of them give a billionaire?

Well. Natasha had something.

Tony still looked surprised. “What stuff is that?”

She put the flash drive into his hand. He looked at it, then up at her.

There was no need to brace herself. She had done the bracing already, spent months pondering this before making up her mind.

“This is what I was able to find about how SHIELD hacked Jarvis,” she said. “It isn’t everything, but it should help you find the vulnerability and plug it up.”
Tony’s dark eyes widened and for a long moment he just stared at her.

Then he stood up, holding her gaze. He took her hand.

“Thank you, Natasha.”

He bowed his head and kissed her hand, Asgardian style, as they had seen Loki doing it: supporting her hand without closing his fingers around it, so that she could withdraw it easily if she wished. He did not look at her as he kissed her hand, instead lowered his gaze.

Then he straightened and met her eyes again.

“Happy birthday,” she said. She gave his hand a slight squeeze before she stepped away. “I’ll see you later.”

He nodded, not speaking. She got into the elevator.

That was the good thing about true shield-brothers. They understood a demonstration of loyalty when they saw it.

Auto racing was Tony’s particular favorite sport, so the Avengers spent the afternoon at the racetrack. All of Tony’s favorite people joined them and allowed themselves to be showered with fancy snacks and expensive alcohol while they watched the race.

Pepper had been worried that Tony would want to race himself, but now that he wasn’t terminally ill he wasn’t going to court going out in a blaze of glory.

No one fell in love with racing, but all of them were determined to enjoy the day if only out of affection for Tony, and enjoy it they did. They laughed and clinked glasses and made absurd jokes and bet on the races.

Tony wanted a party that night. A party with loud music and dancing and lots of booze. Not with the immediate world invited, but a handful of party hounds whose company Tony enjoyed more than average in addition to his real friends.

In between the races and the party, the real friends took a breather in the Tower’s common room, resting and eating fruit to make up for the nutrients the night’s festivities were going to deplete. That was when Loki offered his gift.

“Tony, Pepper told us that there are no things you want, but I do have a gift for you. Not an object. Satisfaction for your scientific curiosity.”

Tony sipped his drink. “Yeah?”

Loki’s gaze darted to Steve, sitting on the couch beside him. He looked down, drew a breath. Turned blue.

Loki’s apprehension was easy to see. The others held still.

Except for Jane, who after a few seconds almost squealed as she hurried over to him. “Ohmigosh! Are you a Jotun right now or is that an illusion? Can you change just by thinking about it?”

“It takes a great deal of seiðr, but now that I know how, yes.” Loki couldn’t meet her eyes. He
couldn’t meet anyone’s eyes, though he kept glancing Steve’s way.

“That is so cool! Asgardians look just like humans so it didn’t feel like we were meeting real aliens.” She touched the curving lines on his forehead, too fascinated to recall normal boundaries. “Wow, you’re freezing. Were you born with these or are they from an infant scarification rite?”

“Jane, ask before you touch him,” Pepper admonished, her tone as gentle as possible.

“Go ahead.” Loki’s voice was too steady. “The books I have read about the Jotnar make references to the lines being hereditary. I apparently inherited the lines of my biological mother.”

Steve moved a little closer, stopping just shy of touching Loki. “Loki. Is it okay if I put my arm around you?”

“I’m cold to the touch.”

“I don’t care.”

Loki jerked a nod. Steve moved close enough to put his arm around Loki’s shoulders. Loki stayed tense, but did not move away.

The floor around Loki’s feet now had a layer of frost on it.

Tony spoke up. “Loki. You know I’m dying of curiosity. But if you’re not okay with this….”

“It won’t get easier if I put it off longer. The only way out is through.” Loki finally dared to meet Steve’s eyes. All he saw there was concern for him. He looked at the others in turn. Clint and Natasha had already seen this, but they had some idea what showing this was to him. Natasha nodded approval when he looked at her. On Banner’s face, fascination warred with sympathy; he knew only too well what this was like. Pepper looked only anxious for him.

“Steve, have you noticed?” Clint asked. “He’s your favorite colors!”

Everyone laughed at that, even Loki, and the tension in the room subsided.

“You’re so cold!” Jane blurted. “I assumed that frost giants had adaptations like arctic animals that protected them from the cold, but actually you’re completely adapted to freezing temperatures, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Jotun bodies work very differently from those of humans, or Asgardians. Actually, it’s very hot in here.” Loki took off his shirt, draping it over the back of the couch, darting another glance at Steve as he did so. Steve was still only attentive, and put his arm very firmly back around Loki’s shoulders as soon as the shirt was out of the way.

“Just what I wanted for my birthday: an alien strip-o-gram.”

“I’m only taking my shirt off, Tony. Any knowledge you gain about Jotun reproductive organs will be purely theoretical.”

“Spoilsport. Jarv, make it cooler in here so it’s less uncomfortable to our smurfy friend here.”

“Perhaps we could also dim the lights just a little. It feels very bright to me now. Jotunheim is dark, Jotun eyes must be more sensitive to light as a result.”

“Do things look different through your red eyes?” Bruce asked, finally leaning forward to get a slightly better look.
“No. Just brighter.”

“I read that you guys can just make ice out of nothing?”

Loki lifted a hand. A blade of ice appeared in it. “Not out of nothing. Out of the humidity in the air. In a desert I couldn’t do this.”

“Can you do that when you’re Asgardian?”

“No.”

“Can you do magic while you’re in this form?” Steve asked.

“Yes. I’ve experimented. My seiðr remains the same.” He drew a breath. “This may have combat applications.”

Steve nodded. “What else can you do, like this?”

“I can freeze things by touching them with my hand and willing it. The Jotnar use this in combat often, clutching a warmblood’s arm and giving them frostbite. It is a grave injury for an Asgardian; a human would likely never regain use of the limb.” Loki shuddered abruptly. Steve squeezed his shoulders.

“Loki. Do you need to stop?”

For a long moment, Loki neither spoke nor moved. But finally he said, “That is how I found out. A Jotun seized my arm, tried to give me frostbite. Instead I began to transform. And suddenly my entire life made sense.”

Steve pulled him close, held him with Loki’s head on his shoulder. Loki shuddered again. Then shoved himself away and stood up. He walked to Tony and held out a blue hand.

“I know you’re curious how a Jotun feels to the touch. Go ahead.” He made himself smile. “I promise not to give you frostbite.”

Tony took his hand, turning it over to examine his palm, prodding the skin very lightly. “Wow, Jane wasn’t kidding. Brr. I know this isn’t fun for you but I gotta say, the red eyes are kinda cool looking. Every time you blink it looks like you’re fluttering your lashes.”

“Jotuns don’t have eyelashes. They’re - we’re - not mammals.”

“Yeah, I noticed you don’t have nipples now. How do Jotun mothers feed their babies?”

“The same way mother birds do.”

The non-scientists all made faces. Loki took a step and extended his hand to Pepper, who squeezed it. “If I stayed in this form long enough, I think my hair would all fall out.”

“If I lose my hair when I get old, the bald eagle jokes are never going to stop,” Steve remarked, rueful. Loki suspected he was trying to take a little bit of attention off of Loki in his blue form.

Tony smirked at him. “Yep. I have a bunch all ready to go.”

“Of course you do.”

Loki was now allowing Bruce to touch his hand. Bruce examined it closely, then looked up at Loki’s
“Why’d they try to conquer Earth? Most of this planet isn’t cold enough for them.”

“With the Casket they could have transformed Earth.” He extended his hand to Rhodey very simply. Rhodey hesitated only for a second before taking it. The two of them had continued to be carefully but coolly polite to each other. “But that was not their chief objective.” He moved on to offer his hand to Clint and Natasha. Both of them took it with curiosity. “They were here for the Tesseract.”

Every human in the room looked at him, alert now. “It was here even then?” Bruce asked.

“Yes. Odin hid it here over two thousand years ago. The Jotuns thought that with it, they could form an empire of their own, keep Asgard in check.”

“Wait. Wait.” Tony was thinking. Not happy thoughts. Loki winced and waited.

It was Pepper who said it out loud, very slowly. “How did the Jotuns get here?”

“The same way I did. They had a powerful sorceress named Farbauti.” Loki hesitated as he returned to his seat beside Steve, who at once took his hand and held it, comforting rather than exploring. His hands almost burned Loki, but Loki was glad of the touch anyway. He braced himself to tell the entire truth. “Farbauti was my biological mother. I inherited my seiðr from her.”

“It’s hereditary?”

“Yes.” Loki paused. “I now think Odin abducted me partly because he knew I had inherited that power. He did not want Jotunheim to have a powerful sorcerer-prince.”

“Swell guy.” That was Bruce. Next to him, Rhodey appeared to be having similar thoughts.

“Had I not been a runt, he likely would have simply killed me.” Loki drew a breath, continued. “Farbauti figured out how to open a portal through the Tesseract. She did so and a Jotun army came through.”

The others were quiet for a moment. Then Rhodey said, “So Odin already knew that an alien army could use that thing to invade Earth.”

Loki met Rhodey’s eyes. “That is why he stored it here. If anyone did what Farbauti did, what I did, the army would invade Midgard, not Asgard.”

“Odin sacrificed us to any random alien army with a smart sorcerer.” Rhodey’s face was stony.

“Yes.”

“Odin put the dick in dictator.” Tony’s eyes flitted around the room. “Now the cube’s on Asgard. What if someone invades you?”

“It isn’t as if Asgard lacks warriors powerful enough to defend it.”

“You know,” Bruce said slowly, “if he hadn’t had a Jotun prince to make puppet king of Jotunheim, he might have just killed the entire species. Like his father did to the Dark Elves. You saved your species by existing.”

Loki gave a short bark of laughter. “The Norns do love their irony.”

Jane was still sitting on a stool near Loki, drinking in his alien appearance. “Can we X-ray you like this? And MRI you?”
Tony perked up, fascination displacing caution. “Ooo, and the Zeta Reticulan scanner, if you still have one.”

“I do. And yes, you may. Any time.” Loki let the blue ebb, returned to his usual appearance. “And I will answer your questions if I can.” He pulled his shirt back on.

“Okay. You’ve been reading about Jotuns,” Steve said. “You were raised to see them as barbaric monsters. What do you think of them now?”

“It seems Jotunheim’s reputation for barbarism comes from the fact that they have few artists or scholars. It makes sense, the harsh conditions on their world do not lend themselves to storing books or works of art. Their art forms are more ephemeral. According to the account of an Elvish scholar who visited Jotunheim before Odin laid waste to their world, Jotun music is varied and beautiful. They record their history in song rather than on paper. Jotun artists use their powers of ice summoning to make ice sculptures, but they of course break in time, or melt during the summer.”

“Summer?”

“When the temperature goes a degree or two above zero Celsius for a few weeks.”

“Mmm, toasty.”

“Also, because they are invulnerable to cold and have few natural predators on their world, Jotuns have never troubled to erect buildings or fashion elaborate garments. They live and sleep in the open air, summoning ice to make whatever furniture they need on the spot. Their only clothing is simple kilts.”

“So what about their social organization?” Pepper, of course, was thinking about how the society worked.

“Their customs include frequent duels and constant warring between local lords over territory. The king’s most vital task is to stop those feuds and border disputes from turning into all-out war. In short, Jotunheim is as warlike as Odin’s Asgard was.”

“So maybe Thor isn’t too bored there after all.”

“I hope not. I gather he is spending a great deal of time hunting bilgesnipe and frost dragons, which are not nearly as beautiful as their name implies. Such big game is a major source of food on Jotunheim.”

“Speaking of food, I think it’s about time to get to my party.” Tony stood up, tugging Pepper’s hand until she rose as well. “We ordered every kind of pizza ever invented.”

“Pizza: Midgard’s crowning achievement,” Loki joked as he and Steve rose. He was relieved the reveal was over.

“This from a guy from a planet where raw bilgesnipe is a delicacy.”

Loki grimaced. “Raw bilgesnipe is no jesting matter.”

Everyone was now putting their drinking glasses into the dishwasher and stepping into the bathroom to check their hair before heading for Tony’s party. Steve took advantage of the brief chaos to pull Loki aside.

“Loki, it’s okay if you don’t want to, but if you don’t mind, I would like to draw you that way
Loki scrutinized Steve’s face, unable to help being a little skeptical, but Steve was just waiting.

“If you like.”

Steve gave him one of those shy boyish smiles, ducking his head a little so that he had to look up to meet Loki’s eyes. “Thanks for showing us.”

Loki managed a smile.

Steve hesitated. “I know you’re probably not quite ready to hear this, but you’re just as beautiful like that.”

In Steve’s face Loki saw only sincerity. Still it was difficult for him to imagine anyone seeing anything beautiful in a frost giant.

“I’m glad you think so,” was the best he could manage.

But as they moved to the elevator, the tension within him uncoiled. Now he had shown people his other form, the step was taken and he never had to endure that first time again.

Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armor, and it can never be used to hurt you. ~Tyrion Lannister
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Loki has a bad dream.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to funnymagic_aing for beta reading! BTW, everyone should totally read his awesome John Watson/Moriarty fic at http://archiveofourown.org/works/7258990/chapters/16482193 It is full of dry wit and spot-on characterization.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony’s party went on until well after midnight. When it finally broke up, even supersoldiers and Norse gods were so tired they just collapsed into bed and went right to sleep without having sex first.

Shortly before dawn, Steve was awakened by Loki mumbling and squirming in his sleep. Realizing his lover was having a nightmare, Steve shook him gently, careful to keep to the side. During the war he had learned that a man awakened from a nightmare was likely to lash out. A half-asleep Dugan had punched him once, before he’d figured that out. He supposed Loki might turn him into a frog if he startled him awake.

Loki sat up with a gasp. “It’s okay,” Steve said quickly. “It was just a dream.”

Loki buried his face in his hands. Then the light came on; Loki had turned it on with his magic. Steve squinted at the sudden brightness.

Loki was staring at his hands. He drew a ragged breath and then looked at Steve. “I’m sorry. I should have warned you to close your eyes.” The light went off again.

Steve put his arms around Loki. “Do you want to talk about your dream?”

Loki shuddered against him. After a moment he said, “I was stuck in Jotun form. Everyone was staring at me. I couldn’t change back. Or summon an illusion to cover it.”

Odin was officially the worst father ever. Teaching his adopted son - well, his kidnapping victim - to hate his own species so much that he had nightmares just about being what he was.

“I’ve had this dream before,” Loki said dully. “I suppose showing all of you dredged it up.”

“I know that was hard for you.”

“I don’t hate the fact of being a Jotun anymore. Now I hate what I did when I found out. Every time I transform, or read more about it, or speak of it, I remember what I am capable of.”

“Of doing the same thing your supposed father and supposed grandfather and supposed brother have
all done over and over. But unlike them, you’re capable of accepting your guilt. And atoning. I hope your mother makes you her heir. I’m sorry, I know you don’t want the job, but you’d be better at it.”

“Well, one of us must, and now that Odin is no longer alive and it is not impossible, I cannot help but think how much easier it would be to rule myself rather than spend the rest of my life trying to coax Thor out of folly.”

“I guess we can hope that he’ll change without his father around.”

“I do hope that without Odin’s influence, Thor will become a better man. Had he not been born a prince, he would not have been spoiled and might have had more humility. He would not have been forced to lead. He could have been a berserker instead of a general, a role which would have suited him far better. He might have been wiser. Had Odin not encouraged his violence for his own purposes, even putting the worst riff-raff of the army forward as his friends, Thor might have been kinder. Still with a love of fighting, but not such a brute.”

It was kind of weird to be talking about alien politics in a dark bedroom as the sun rose, but if it distracted his lover from his nightmare, Steve was in favor of it. “Sounds like you’ve been thinking about him a lot.”

“Now that the game is no longer so overwhelmingly rigged in Thor’s favor, I have more sympathy for him. Odin used him just as much as he used me. He gave him Mjölnir and encouraged his battle lust so that all the realms would fear the wrath of Thor should they defy Odin. I think he was torn between wanting everyone’s admiration of Thor to redound to his credit, and wanting Thor to be a disastrous king so that forever after, all looked back to Odin’s reign as a golden age.”

“Après moi, le déluge?”

“Precisely. But it was not Odin alone. I too constantly tried to influence Thor to be the kind of leader - and brother - that I thought he should be. Granted, that was my duty and for Asgard’s welfare, but still I was trying to remake him according to my own design. He has to have sensed at some level that we were all trying to mold him. It has to have troubled him. Put a wedge between him and others, even those of us who loved him.

“I used to try to persuade him to read, to be more of a scholar. I kept telling him that only by reading could he learn everything a king must know. It took me centuries to accept that scholarship was too against his nature. Then I resolved to study the harder myself, that I might supply the knowledge he lacked when the time came.” He smiled, rueful at the memory. “In my most private thoughts, I mused that put together, the two of us would make one good king.

“And I never stopped pressuring him to be more diplomatic and strategic. It’s true that I had no choice if I was to keep him and the rest of us alive, but his friends were egging him on to get embroiled in battles, and his father was encouraging him to be foolish and violent so that all would fear Odin’s mad dog. From all sides he was pulled and pushed.”

“Now I’m actually starting to sympathize with him.”

“Do you ever dream you’re small again?”

The sudden subject change startled Steve, but he said, “Yes. And I’ll be with the Avengers, or the Commandos, and no one can understand why I can’t do supersoldier things.” He thought for a second. “Were you in Asgard, in your dream?”

“Yes.”
Steve narrowed his eyes in the dim light. “Were you also naked and without your homework?”

To his relief, Loki actually laughed, surprised. “You’re right, it’s that exact genre of dream.”

“Asgardians have that dream too?”

“Every world has it. I suppose Jotunheim must as well. I wonder what their version is. They go almost naked.”

Steve hesitated. “I don’t know if you’re ready for this, but at Tony’s party I was thinking that you should change for the kids during storytime.”

Loki stared at Steve as if he had just sprouted a second head. Then laughed, rueful.

“I don’t think you realize how terrified Asgardian children would be to see a frost giant.”

“Human children, on the other hand, would feel like they were on Star Trek.” And maybe Loki would feel a little bit better about it.

“I suppose so.”

They fell silent for a while.

“I think I will,” Loki said eventually. “Perhaps not for the very youngest children. Some of them will be frightened just because they aren’t used to people turning blue. Soon the summer break will begin, and it has been decided that when classes resume in the autumn I won’t be doing as many storytimes. The purpose was to help the children stop being afraid, and that has been achieved. I shall turn blue for them on my final visits before the vacation.”

Chapter End Notes

I've had this headcanon about Loki's nightmares for a long time.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Loki meets U.S. secretary of defense Alexander Pierce.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to funnymagic_aing for beta reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After a year of waiting, Alexander Pierce finally had the chance to meet Loki of Asgard. He needed to. He was the only Hydra operative at his level who would have a good chance to take the prince’s measure. And maybe learn a bit about Steve Rogers from someone who actually knew the man.

During the Chitauri invasion, they had discussed the possibility of revealing themselves to Loki, offering him an alliance. Luckily they hadn’t, or after Loki was through sabotaging his torturer he would have exposed Hydra to the world. And then decades - generations - of careful effort would have been wasted. Crippling the economy in a dozen different ways so that poverty, or even the mere fear of it, would drive citizens to give up freedoms and rights in favor of survival. Allowing so many threats to grow like tumors so that citizens would plead to be protected from them. So much careful dissemination of harmful ideas dispersed in so many different ways, in every sector of society.

And so after the day of listening to speeches from ambassadors and other officials, when cocktails were served and they all had the chance to interact in a less structured way, Pierce made his way to the alien. Loki was talking to the Swedish ambassador. Pierce caught a couple of words; they were discussing how much truth there was to Norse myths.

“Excuse me,” Pierce interrupted, holding out a hand for Loki to shake. Loki’s hand was cold. “Alexander Pierce, U.S. secretary of defense. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, your Highness.” He gave the Swede’s hand a perfunctory shake, still looking at Loki. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Nick Fury.”

The Swede let his irritation show. Loki, more practiced, remained tranquil. “Midgard is fortunate to have a defender as dedicated as Commander Fury.”

“Must be strange working with him after being on the other side.”

The Swede, realizing that Pierce wasn’t going to concede the field, gave up. “I would very much like to continue this discussion,” he told Loki, “but I see Kovalansky - Borovnia’s ambassador - he’s a friend. I want to extend my condolences on the death of their president last week.”

Loki nodded. “You have my email. Please feel free to send me further questions.” He frowned, considering. “Perhaps I should write up the discrepancies between the myths and Asgard’s true history.”
The ambassador’s eyes lit up. “You should! Everyone in Scandinavia would want to read that.”

In Pierce’s opinion, that was a gross exaggeration.

A waiter swanned up with a loaded, and varied, tray before Pierce could resume the conversation. “Champagne? Cognac? Bailey’s Irish Cream?”

“Oh, Bailey’s.” The alien took one from the tray and looked at Pierce. “Have you tried these? Tony Stark introduced me to them. They’re delicious.”

And full of cream. It wasn’t fair, Loki wasn’t even from this planet, he wasn’t even a real mammal if the limited data SHIELD and Hydra had about frost giants was accurate, and there he was drinking cream like it was nothing.

Pierce realized he was glaring. He swiftly manufactured a smile and grabbed a snifter from the tray. “I prefer cognac. I dislike sweet drinks.”

The waiter finally left.

“Fury does what is necessary in the defense of his country, and of Earth in general,” Loki said to Pierce, picking up the thread easily. “If that means overcoming his own feelings to work with a former enemy, that is what he will do. And has done.”

True. Too bad Fury had gone and launched the Avengers. Now Romanov and Barton had divided loyalties and Stark and Rogers would be next to impossible to control. And the alien was even more of a wild card.

Let what had to be done to these heroes be on Fury’s head.

“You’re right about him, though. When I was at the State Department in Bogota, E.L.N. rebels seized the Embassy. Security got me out, but the rebels took hostages.” Pierce decided this was a good spot to deploy Fury’s first name. Asgard didn’t seem to see first names as signs of familiarity, both princes were known to everyone simply by their given names and Loki had even referred to his mother simply as “Frigga” a couple of times during his speech earlier, his tone weighted with respect. Still, Loki had to know what first names meant on Earth, even if he didn’t have the visceral reaction a human would. “Nick was Deputy Chief of the SHIELD station there, and he comes to me with a plan. He wants to storm the building through the sewers. I said, ‘No, we’ll negotiate.’ Turned out, the E.L.N. didn’t negotiate, so they put out a kill order. They stormed the basement, and what did they find?”

Loki’s face was attentive. Gathering intel on his former enemy and reluctant ally Nick Fury, Pierce assumed. “Tell me.”

Pierce had chosen this particular story with care. Loki had a history of breaking the rules to do what had to be done to rescue others. He would respond to it.

One day, when the time was right, Pierce would tell Captain America this story. Captain America, who had done practically the same thing to rescue his best friend - boyfriend - back in World War II. And then he would be able to persuade the captain of anything.

“They found it empty. Nick had ignored my direct order, carried out an unauthorized military operation on foreign soil, and saved the lives of a dozen political officers.” He paused. “Including my daughter.”

For a few seconds, it wasn’t a pose. He had been sick with fear for her, and she was alive because of
Fury’s insubordination.

Loki could see that in his face. Loki knew what it was to fear for those he loved. “I am glad you did not lose her,” he said after a respectful pause. “And I must say, that sounds very much like the kind of thing that Fury would do.” He looked thoughtful for a moment.

“What?”

Loki’s eyes and attention snapped back to him. “I beg your pardon. I was thinking that I regret that I first encountered Fury as an enemy.”

Pierce would have bet a dozen of the Stark Industries missiles stashed under the bank where the Asset was kept that Loki was thinking nothing of the sort. He wished he had some kind of leverage over the alien to get at what was really going on in that head. But Loki had been playing this game since centuries before Pierce’s ancestors had even known this continent existed. Pierce couldn’t risk getting too fancy with him.

“You also first encountered the Avengers as their enemy, and they let you join.”

A warm and genuine smile spread over Loki’s face. “They have been exceedingly generous to me.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ve done a lot to earn it. I’ve been following all of you Avengers in the news ever since Tony Stark blasted out of that cave.” Too bad the Ten Rings hadn’t been more decisive. Pierce would have bet a dozen of the Stark Industries missiles stashed under the bank where the Asset was kept that Loki was thinking nothing of the sort. He wished he had some kind of leverage over the alien to get at what was really going on in that head. But Loki had been playing this game since centuries before Pierce’s ancestors had even known this continent existed. Pierce couldn’t risk getting too fancy with him.

“You also first encountered the Avengers as their enemy, and they let you join.”

Loki was studying him. “I can see the resemblance, actually. Though I haven’t seen the movie. Steve doesn’t like to watch the movies about himself.”

“It isn’t arrogance, I assure you. He is simply still gleeful that after spending most of his life small and sickly, he can now do such amazing things. He is as exuberant about what his enhanced body can do as those little boys with toy shields you mentioned.”
Pierce tried another tack. “A lot of people took it really hard when he came out last summer.”

“I know. It troubled him.”

“Does he still think about Barnes?” Pierce needed to know this. It would be less than a year before Rogers had to be dealt with, one way or another.

Too bad they hadn’t known Barnes and Rogers were lovers years ago. They hadn’t known that they had an entire angle they could have used. They could’ve leveraged the Asset’s guilt to ensure his compliance. It wasn’t as if the Asset knew that Stonewall or Lawrence vs Texas or the reversal of DOMA had been going on while he was in cryo or assassinating people. They only told him what he needed to know.

Loki looked a little surprised. And solemn. “Bear in mind that to him, two years have passed. A man like Steve Rogers would hardly forget those he cared for so swiftly.” He gave a sad little smile. “Or ever.”

Pierce nodded. That would be useful intel, when it was time to deal with Rogers and launch Project Insight.

He could see a few ways it could go down. No matter which one, Captain America wouldn’t stand in the way of their plans.

“Have you met the Attorney General yet, your Highness? Let me introduce you.”

Chapter End Notes

It kind of amuses me that we don't really know anything about Pierce's niece aside from that she wants to meet Iron Man. Is she a little kid who wants a superhero at her party, or is she a grown woman who hopes to seduce him away from Pepper Potts? Choose your own headcanon!
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Loki shows Earth children and scientists his Jotun form. His shield-brothers help him deal.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to funnymagic_aing for beta reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Avengers had continued to occasionally accompany Loki to storytime, usually only one at a time. When Loki asked their opinion of Steve’s idea of showing the children his Jotun form, they all supported the idea and then tactfully dropped the subject.

When he was making his last round of visits to classrooms before the summer, he found that he had another Avenger with him every single time. There was no discussion, at least not in his hearing, but each time he turned blue, one of his shield-brothers was at his side.

Loki still could not help expecting the children to scream and run when he turned blue, but instead their eyes got wide and they all went, “Oooo!”

Perhaps Asgardian children should watch *Star Trek*.

The children were eager to touch his blue hands and they giggled at the cold. By the Norns. No wonder Frigga had thought Midgard would be a good place for him to come to terms with his true origins.

The children understood the story of the Jotun-Aesir conflict, too. Including Loki’s part in it. Even the first graders promptly grasped the lesson the human Avengers had seen in it: that this was the kind of tragedy prejudice led to. Loki’s kidnapping, Thor’s attack, Loki’s horror when he learned the truth of his origins, Loki’s attempt to decisively end the war Thor had started, his unsuccessful suicide, and all as a result of the hatred Odin had promoted for centuries - as Bruce put it in one classroom, “This whole thing could have been made up as a parable against racism.”

But it was no parable. It was the life Loki had lived.

The third time he turned blue, the teacher, a short middle-aged woman, watched and listened with an increasingly distressed expression. Loki inwardly resigned himself to later dealing with some complaint to SHIELD that he had burdened children with ideas too serious for their age, or the wrong interpretation of events, or something.

When he was finished telling the tale and letting each child curiously grasp his freezing hands, the teacher made her expression more composed. “Hawkeye, I have to talk to Loki for a minute. Do you think you could tell my class about another of your adventures for a few minutes?”
Clint looked at Loki for a second. “Sure.”

“Tell us about when you met Black Widow!” one of the kids called out. “And got her to turn good so you wouldn’t have to kill her!”

Clint and Loki couldn’t help a chuckle at that. “That wasn’t quite how it happened,” Clint began, shooting a concerned glance as Loki followed the teacher into the hallway.

The teacher, expression anxious, took him into the art classroom, which was currently unoccupied. Loki, a warmblooded Asgardian again, tried to find a way to mollify her. “Ms. McGee, I did not intend-”

He stopped because she had wrapped her arms around him with sudden ferocity. He realized she was crying.

He patted her back, allowing his posture to relax to soothe her. “I did not mean to cause you distress.”

She pushed away and wiped her eyes, so hard she must have chafed the skin around them. She spoke in a strangled voice. “It’s just. Oh god. I’m gay, and I figured that out in the 80s. I know you’re not from around here but it wasn’t a good time to be a gay teenager.” She pressed a fist to her mouth for a second. “I thought about killing myself. I couldn’t tell my parents. Or anyone. I dated boys and then men so no one would know. It wasn’t until I was thirty that I faced it. Even then, I had to keep hiding it for years because I’m a teacher and the laws were still….” Her voice got high and cracked.

He took her hands and squeezed them. “I am sorry you had to endure that. It must have been so difficult.”

“It’s just… I can imagine what it must have been like for you when you found out you were a frost giant. I know what it’s like to - to feel that disgust at yourself. To want to destroy yourself. To be terrified someone will find out. To do anything to fix….”

She couldn’t say anymore. Loki found tissues for her and spoke gently. “You have survived. You should be very proud of yourself.”

It took Ms. McGee a few more minutes to compose herself. Loki offered to create an illusion to cover her reddened eyes. “Will it stay after you go?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. I can make it last the rest of the day if you like.”

She blew her nose and took a shaky breath. “Would you mind thanking Captain America for me? If someone like him had done what he did when I was a teenager… well, I’m just glad gay teenagers now have that to think of.”

“I will tell him, you have my word.”

Back in the classroom, Clint had moved on to the time he and Natasha alone had taken out a whole team of Russian mafia hit men, back before the Avengers had assembled. The children were so enthralled that the other adults had to let him keep talking for another half hour.

“I should’ve come to more of these with you,” Clint said cheerfully as he and Loki left the school.

Loki grinned, even though he felt as if he had been wrung out and dropped onto the floor. “I will still do storytimes the next school year, though not as often now that the children are less afraid. You are
welcome anytime.”

No one mentioned the whole “show Earth children what a frost giant looks like” project back at the Tower during that final week of storytime visits, but every night exceptionally silly movies were shown in the Tower’s common room, accompanied by delicious foods of minimal nutritional value.

Tony and Steve pretended to argue over which of them Loki would spend the night with, Tony giving free rein to the obvious innuendos. Loki suspected that Tony had actually had a private word with Steve about giving Loki time for science therapy, because two nights that week Steve made a show of “conceding” and Loki was able to spend most of the night experimenting with the Zeta Reticulan transporter.

The night before Loki’s final day of storytimes before the end of term, they cracked it. Tony and Loki used it to travel to the world Asgard called Tangaroa and Midgard called Kepler-452b, an Earthlike world teeming with life but no intelligence so far.

Loki’s objective had been ensuring his own ability to escape from any peril or prison. Only when he saw Tony’s expression as he watched an alien sun rise did he realize what this jaunt meant to him.

Loki had made his first voyage from one planet to another as an infant. He had made hundreds of such journeys in the course of his life. But to Tony, this was his childhood dream come true.

Remembering the wonder on Tony’s usually sardonic face made it easier the following afternoon when Jane Foster, with her often refreshing lack of tact in the face of scientific curiosity, reminded him that he had promised to let the Science Gang (Tony had indeed ordered T-shirts) examine his Jotun form with Midgardian instruments.

In the circumstances, Loki could hardly demur.

Tony gestured with the bag of chips he’d been munching. “Loki, you do know we still love you when you’re blue, right?”

“I should certainly hope so after all of the horse jokes I have endured.”

“I might as well go ahead and tell you that if you don’t obey me for eternity, I’ll tell Thor’s friends that story.”

Loki would have bet his life Tony would do nothing of the kind. He retorted in an offhand tone. “I know. That’s why I poisoned your potato chips. Should take effect within two minutes.”

Tony paused for half a second, mugging a thoughtful expression, then shrugged and ate a couple more. “How do you get them to stay so crispy after the poisoning?”

“Centuries of practice.”

“Okay. So in the two minutes I have left, just wanted to say that if you need to bail, say so and de-blue yourself and we’ll all get drunk and marathon The Man From UNCLE. Or maybe The Addams Family.”

So perhaps he could demur after all. “If I do not need to bail, can we still marathon silly tv shows?”

“Just for you, buddy. So Brewski, you’re the one here who’s best with the meat machines. What do we start with?”

“Ultrasound.” Bruce left his preferred computer station with a little sigh. “Before you ask, no, the
Tetrodotoxin B didn’t stop me from Hulking out.” Bruce had deferred asking Vanaheim to attempt a cure, but he continued to seek out more control of his other form.

“Even with only one heartbeat a minute? Damn. But still - Jarvis, what’s the news on Bruce’s last antianxiety potion?”

“The clinical trials are most promising, Dr. Banner. Your formulation may help other people even if it did not benefit you.”

“That’s something. It actually does help me in a roundabout way.”

A few minutes later, Loki was blue and looking at a screen that displayed his Jotun internal organs. Asgardians were structurally identical to humans, but even a brief look showed that Jotuns were not. Interested despite himself, he asked, “Jarvis, could you please show the ultrasound of my warmblooded form alongside this?”

The requested image showed up at once. Before Loki knew it, they were all so absorbed in discussing the similarities and differences between his two forms that he had forgotten to be unhappy about it. Even he got sufficiently intrigued that he started doing different things to see how his Jotun body worked. He summoned ice. He froze a metal rod and they watched it shatter. He did magic, exercised. He tried to drink a glass of water, but it froze when he brought it to his lips, inspiring a lot of King Midas jokes from Tony. Tony started one about being careful not to freeze Steve again, but switched mid-sentence to asking what Jotuns ate, because even Tony realized some things were outside joking range.

“The Jotnar are mainly carnivores. They also eat the lichens and mosses of their world.”

Then Loki ate some raw beef (he preferred rare meat anyhow, possibly another relic of his native form) and they all watched the screens as the food made its way through his Jotun body.

“I hope we’re not making you feel like you’re in a zoo, Loki,” Bruce said as they used the Zeta Reticulan scanner on him and confirmed that his seiðr was the same in both forms.

“Not at all. I am interested as well. I don’t think that any other Jotun has ever been examined with advanced science or magic. After a few more sessions like this, we will probably know more about Jotun physiology than anyone else who has ever lived. Including Jotun sorcerers.”

Bruce folded his glasses and tapped them thoughtfully against his palm. “Maybe eventually you could let some specialists in biological fields examine you. When you’re ready. They’ll know more about what to look for than a bunch of assorted physicists.”

Loki considered that in silence, curiosity warring with a tangled knot of issues.

“If you decide to, I could come along.” Bruce put his glasses back on, smiled a little. “Some of the doctors and researchers who’ve examined me have made me feel like a rat in a maze, and I don’t just mean the military ones who were literally holding me prisoner. They can’t do that too badly if you’ve got a buddy right beside you.” He considered as he programmed the MRI. “Or Steve would probably be willing to go with you. I know they sometimes make him feel the same way.”

Bruce had been so brave about his other form. Loki admired that, found his own fears lightened by it. “Thank you. Do any of you know scientists you would recommend?”

“Maybe the ones who’ve been dissecting the dead Chitauri?” Jane suggested, intent on the screen. “Or some of the Area 51 people.”
Hearing himself compared to Chitauri and greys made Loki’s stomach lurch.

He was a creature. So alien that the world where he had found friendship did not even know what to make of his bizarre body. As alien as the mindless insectoid Chitauri, as the incomprehensible greys.

Inwardly he felt crawling revulsion for this uncomfortable unfamiliar body.

Bruce saw it. So did Tony. Tony started talking. “Guys, I’m starving. Let’s knock off for the day and order pizza. I’ve got a special movie all picked out for tonight.”

“But we just started with the MRI!” Jane protested. Of course she was oblivious to the crisis Loki was motionlessly and silently having.

“Neither MRIs nor Asgardian princes are going anywhere.” Was it Loki’s imagination, or had Tony emphasized the name of the realm where Loki had grown up? Just to remind him that there was more to him than a weirdly constructed body? “Besides, we still haven’t watched Loki defrost on ultrasound. Jane, call your new boyfriend, invite him to join us so we can finally meet him. Everybody take half an hour and reconvene in the common room, Jarv, tell everyone. We’re gonna watch Coming to America. It’s about a prince who comes to New York to find a worthy mate. I’ve been meaning to tease Steve and Loki with it for a while.”

With relief, Loki returned to his usual form as quickly as he could. The process was uncomfortable, just short of painful. Bruce “accidentally” blocked Jane’s way to the elevator so that Loki could escape into it alone and flee to his own chambers.

Which he did, and then threw up the beef he now regretted, and spent nearly the entire allotted half hour crouching on the floor shivering.

He was tempted to make inroads into his supply of Asgardian mead, but reluctantly decided that it might be unwise to form that habit. This would not be the last time he was unhappy about being a frost giant. He couldn’t get drunk every single time.

“What time is it, Jarvis?”

“Thirty-six minutes since Mr. Stark said you should all reconvene in half an hour. If I may, Mr. Frigjjarson, I feel certain they will be patient if you need a little more time.”

Loki pushed himself to his feet. Would more time help him? He didn’t think so. A room full of people who liked him and understood what troubled him and knew not to bring it up tonight, that would help. An evening of camaraderie and normality.

The Avengers. The best shield-brothers Loki had ever had. He was so fortunate to have them.

“Also, you may wish to know that Ms. Potts has spent much of the past half hour advising Dr. Foster not to ask you more questions for a time.”

Pepper was not a warrior and still she was an excellent shield-brother. They all had his back.

“Thank you, Jarvis.” He went to his small kitchen for some caffeine in the form of fizzy oversweetened drinks, then changed his clothes just to shake a little more of the afternoon off of himself.

Jane’s new boyfriend offered some distraction to the team. He was an unsuccessful actor named Kevin who was currently working as a receptionist at some crank start-up. To the amusement of the
Tower’s occupants, he was definitely her type: handsome, heavily muscled, and completely incompatible with her.

She didn’t seem to mind. He was congenial and goodlooking, and she sat and watched him with a large silly smile on her face while he went over his latest portfolio photos.

“Which one makes me look more like a lawyer?” he asked Jane before the movie started, passing her two glossy 8x10s. “The one with or without the thong?”

Jane studied the photos happily. “With. Can I keep these copies?”

“Sure, yeah.”

Loki was glad she was enjoying herself.

Chapter End Notes

Perceptive readers will recognize Jane’s new boyfriend as another Chris Hemsworth character who is so Jane’s apparent type. ;-)  

I’m still baffled that Marvel expected us to get something out of the first Loki movie other than “this is the kind of horrific tragedy that virulent racism such as that promoted by Odin leads to”.  

It’s probably obvious, but I am Ms. McGee. Loki’s story is as good a parable for homophobia as it is for racism and antisemitism, so perfect that it can’t have been by accident.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Our heroes continue to deal, and the Asset fails to complete his mission.

Chapter Notes

Warning: offscreen torture.

When it was late and they all had to disperse, Steve told Loki that he looked tired and asked if he’d rather just sleep tonight. Loki wasn’t fooled, but he also looked relieved and accepted the offer.

Once they were lying in bed in their pajamas - actually the first time they had slept together wearing them - Steve asked quietly, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Steve reached for him, and Loki let himself be pulled to lie with his head pillowed on Steve’s shoulder, Steve’s arm protective around him.

Steve thought that if Loki hadn’t used up all of his coping on turning blue for people, they might have dealt better with what happened the next day.

They and and Clint were doing one of the public appearances Pepper’s minions set up for them, signing autographs and posing for selfies and answering questions. One aging man took the chance to tell Loki off for bringing the Chitauri.

This wasn’t the first time. Loki always listened gravely, and when his accusers had said what they needed to, he would apologize and accept his guilt, and sometimes it mollified the accuser and sometimes it didn’t. The other Avengers had grown to hate having to listen to this, Loki was their friend, was one of them, but he had red in his ledger and he had to wipe it out.

But this time Steve just couldn’t stand by and listen as he had so many times. He had seen Loki rescuing the other Avengers time and again, rescuing civilians, risking his own neck without a hint of hesitation. Loki never, ever ceased thinking of the consequences his actions had for others and this man just couldn’t know all of that.

“Sir.” Steve stepped forward, putting himself between Loki and the man’s spit-spewing rant. “It’s true that Loki did those things, but since then he has done everything possible to make reparations. He does literally everything we ask of him, whether it’s risking his neck in combat to protect humans or telling our scientists the secrets of Asgardian magic or just passing the damn sugar. He-”

Loki put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. He looked horribly pained, enough that Steve shrank from the sight. “Captain. I am more grateful than I can express that you are willing to defend me. But this man
has a right to be heard. Let him speak.”

Steve did, with reluctance. But now the old man’s target had changed. Now he was addressing Steve, condemning the Avengers for besmirching themselves by associating with Loki of Asgard. After a few sentences Steve couldn’t stop himself from telling the man what a loyal shield-brother Loki was, how many times Loki had saved his life and those of the other Avengers, but the old man wasn’t impressed and Steve just had to listen to more castigation.

“Would we have let Nazi Germany host the Olympics?” the man demanded at length, waving a finger in rhetorical emphasis.

Steve blinked at the man, amazed. “But… we did let them. In 1936.”

At that point the old man became so furious that he lost all coherence in his outrage. Clint finally stepped in.

“Sir, I’m sorry. But I promise you, Loki is working off his debt in the only way he can.” He looked at his fellows. “We should go.”

They did. The trip back to the Tower was silent and strained. Steve and Loki went to Steve’s apartment immediately, without discussion until they were alone.

“Steve, this is what you will have to endure if we reveal our relationship to the world.”

Steve could hardly believe what he was hearing. “But he was wrong. You’re a good man. You’re doing all you can. If I don’t stand up for what I know is right, for the people I care about, I don’t deserve this shield or this uniform.”

Now Loki looked horrified. “Do not make me the test of your worthiness.”

“You said you wouldn’t think much of me if I weren’t still loyal to Bucky even though he’s dead. How could you think much of me if I weren’t loyal to you? Every bit as deserving, and alive to need it?”

“It isn’t the same! Bucky Barnes was not a war criminal!”

“Is this really about me? Or is there some other reason you don’t want the world knowing about us?”

“Yes, I’m embarrassed that this planet’s most acclaimed hero and handsomest man is sharing my bed. By the Norns, Steve.” Loki dropped onto the couch, looking weary and worried and hurt and remorseful.

Steve deflated at that, and sat awkwardly across from him. He was angry at the world for not acknowledging that Loki was making all the amends he could, and at Loki for not letting him stand beside him before all the world, and at himself for not finding some way of punching through the damn problem. But even through all this feverish emotion he knew this wasn’t the way to face this.

He sat, trying to ride out the storm of conflicting emotions. Eventually he met Loki’s gaze, those green eyes full of trepidation. Seeing that, Steve tried to rein his feelings in.

“This is why we agreed to wait before telling anyone.” Steve forced the words out around the tightness in his chest. Loki looked fractionally relieved.

“I reiterate: I do not wish to cause pain to those dear to me. Can you truly not understand that?”
“I do. Can’t you understand….”

Loki lowered his head, weary. “I do. Anything less than hurling yourself onto a grenade would be very unlike you.”

“Says the guy who jumped on a lezak bomb. What would we have told your mother if you’d gotten killed?”

“You would have told the tale of my valiant death in the feast hall of Asgard’s palace for all the realm to hear. She would grieve, but with pride.”

Steve shook his head. Even Loki, who was a sorcerer and diplomat by inclination and a warrior only by necessity, had imbibed some of Asgard’s attitude toward honorable death in combat. Steve couldn’t. He had only ever wanted to fight to stop the fighting.

Okay. And to let out his own anger, if he was really honest. Like, right now he would really appreciate it if some bad guys showed up needing the stuffing beat out of them.

Bad guys weren’t that considerate. But maybe….

“Maybe we should go to the gym,” Steve said. “Or I should, anyway.”

Loki nodded and rose at once.

Steve destroyed a couple of punching bags while Loki did his Asgardian calisthenics. When that did little to calm Steve’s mood, Loki simply stepped into the sparring ring and waited.

Had Loki been a human, even a super-soldier like himself, Steve wouldn’t have done it. But he knew for a fact that nothing he did to Loki could make a dent in him. So he hurled himself at Loki, let Loki toss him against the ropes. Punched Loki, felt Loki roll with the punch so as not to hurt Steve’s hand.

It released more frustration than Steve would have expected.

“I used to do this all the time,” Steve panted after a while, after Loki had shoved him rather firmly to the ground. “Punch above my weight. Refuse to give up even though there was no way I could win.”

“I wish I could have seen that. What did it ever take for you to decide you had proven your own courage to yourself? That you had suffered enough?”

All Steve’s anger dissolved into sudden gloom. “Bucky.”

Loki stepped back, face at once solemn. “Bucky.”

Loki stepped back, face at once solemn.

“When he came and ran the bullies off for me. I never asked anyone for help, and he was the only one who ever gave it to me.” Steve got up slowly, dusting off his sweatpants. He couldn’t meet Loki’s eyes. His throat tightened and it was a while before he could say more. “I never felt like being saved by him was… dishonorable.”

Loki let a long minute pass before speaking. “Why don’t you tell me a story about him. Or more than one. Over Asgardian mead.”

A few minutes later they were in Loki’s apartment, talking and drinking, and after a while Jarvis asked them if they would join the others for dinner, and somehow the end result was that the whole
team plus Pepper and Rhodey brought pizza boxes and cases of beer to Loki’s living room, and at midnight they were still hanging on to Steve’s slurred words about Bucky.

With occasional breaks to hear slurred words from the others about their own fallen comrades. Every warrior in the room told at least one story. (Loki’s story was of a kind Asgardian warrior who had died because Thor started a fight when an enemy insulted him even though the Asgardians were heavily outnumbered, and Loki had to rescue as many as he could with magic. It was not the first such story Loki had told.)

More grief should not have eased Steve’s pain, but it did. Just to be reminded he was not the only one who had to bear it.

There was enough mead in him that he didn’t remember being bundled into Loki’s bed. Loki’s mattress was too soft for his taste but he was too drunk and sleepy to care. The last thing he was conscious of was Loki’s slender form settling against his. He was too sleepy even to jerk his foot away when Loki’s cold toes touched it.

Loki’s feet were always cold. Steve tried not to complain about it. Not everybody with cold feet was a secret frost giant, but, well.

They found other things to keep themselves busy the following day. An Avenger’s work was never done. Loki seemed okay, so Steve hoped this was over, but when they went to bed that night, things just didn’t fall into place like they usually did. They’d gone three whole nights without sex, but they were both fumbling, couldn’t find their rhythm, Steve even gave Loki an accidental elbow in the face. By the time they got to the point where things usually happened, neither was hard enough to follow through.

Steve sat up, frowning down at his lover. Who laid back and met his gaze, resigned.

“I don’t get it. We’ve never had this kind of problem before.”

Loki managed a weak smile, a shrug. “We aren’t in synch tonight. It happens. When we are, everything will flow easily. When we aren’t, we’ll bump into each other and put our elbows in the wrong places and accidentally pull each other’s hair and take many unintended detours to our destination.”

“So you’re saying it’s normal.”

“Of course. Perfectly normal. This is how things always go when a supersoldier and a Jotun-Asgardian sorcerer share a bed.”

“So what now?”

Loki’s expression grew serious. He sat up. “I have been thinking perhaps I should make this month’s visit home a few days early. If you will not feel I am running away from you.”

Steve kissed Loki’s forehead, or tried to. Loki moved his head at just the wrong instant and mashed Steve’s lips uncomfortably against his teeth.

They both snorted a laugh, and a second later they were lying back in the throes of a helpless giggle fit.

It was the best moment they’d had together in days.

“Maybe you’d better,” Steve gasped when he could. “At this rate we’re going to kill each other.”
When their laughter had run its course, Loki spoke. “It will be all right, Steve.”

“It will.”

“What’s the problem?” Pierce demanded as he strode into the installation.

“We were ready to rendezvous after he dealt with that pair of journalists. He choked. They’re still alive.”

The Asset was sitting on his chair, staring into space as he always did when he glitched. Ten armed men waited and watched, ready to stop him if he lashed out.

Pierce stopped in front of the Asset. “Mission report.”

For a minute Pierce thought the Asset wasn’t going to reply, but then he said, “Had to abort.”

“Why?”

“There were civilians.”

“We’ve been over this. Collateral damage. Sometimes sacrifices have to be made.”

The Asset shook his head slowly, a frown beginning. “That’s not… we can’t….”

“You know there’s penalties for mission failure.”

The Asset flinched. Looked at the floor. Said nothing.

Pierce turned to leave. “I don’t want to have to deal with this again this month,” he told Brock.

Brock’s jaw was set. “Understood, sir.”

“Make sure he completes his mission.”

“Yes, sir.”

The screaming had already started before the door closed behind Pierce.

Chapter End Notes

Guys... trust me... I'll make it all right in the end....
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Loki visits Asgard.

Of course Frigga had been watching her younger son closely for the last few days. When he arrived in Asgard, he was instructed to attend her in her garden. He entered, bowed his head to her correctly, and then came close as she rose to embrace him.

He clasped her close, closing his eyes and inhaling her subtle flowery perfume. If Odin had done anything good for Loki, it was giving him Frigga for a mother.

After hugging him for a long minute, Frigga stepped back and held his gaze.

“Loki,” she said softly. “Show me.”

His stomach promptly tied itself in a knot, but his mother had slain her own husband and taken on the enormous burden of rule, all to save his life. It was his duty to her to overcome this.

He stepped onto the flat stones that made up the pathway through the garden so as not to kill the plants with his frost. He looked at the ground as he let the change steal over him.

Asgard was awfully warm.

Frigga stepped close and put her palm on his cheek. The touch burned him and must have frozen her but neither flinched.

She waited, patient. It felt like a long time before he managed to meet her gaze.

And all he saw was concern for him. After a thousand years of having to bear his pain and alienation almost alone, Loki now had not one, but several people who cared about him. Who would help him.

He took her free hand and bowed his head to kiss it.

Her eyes were shimmering. “Loki, I am so sorry. Had I any inkling that you were a Jotun, I would never have allowed you or Thor to be raised to hate the Jotnar.” She shook her head, looking away for a moment. “I should not have allowed it in any case. Three worlds have suffered for it.”

“You are now doing everything you can do mend things, Mother.”

“Aren’t we all.” She gave his shoulder a little tug and he obediently bent so that she could embrace him and kiss his forehead. “You may shift back if you wish. Is it difficult to do?”

“No, but the sensation is not pleasant. I can bear it,” he added quickly as he turned warmblooded again.

“You can bear a great deal. Sit with me.” She led him towards the battery of delicate golden chairs.

“I am so tired of how this makes me feel,” Loki confessed as he sat beside her. “I am growing exasperated with myself.”
She nodded and took his hand. “You made a great leap in facing your origins. You need a rest before you continue.”

“I marvel at my human shield-brothers. I brought the Chitauri to their world, and they are now holding my hand while I vapor about turning blue.”

“They are heroes. And wise enough to know that battle does not solve every trouble.” She looked at him sadly. “I wish I could lift this burden from you, Loki.”

“You have enough to bear, Mother. Speaking of which, allow me to help you for the few days I shall be here.”

They both gazed at the familiar brightness of her flowers as she told him of the latest events of the court and the treaties currently under negotiation. Loki offered his insights and knowledge and in their words Frigga’s grand design for the realms unfurled.

Exchange of knowledge. The strengthening of alliances.

Peace.

At length Frigga glanced at the sun’s place in the sky. “Go to the temple. Teach the young pupils there what they can grasp of materialization.”

Loki was a little surprised, but his mother always had her reasons and they would become clear even if she did not see fit to explain them. “Now, Mother? Very well.” He rose, kissed her hand, and departed. He enjoyed being able to trust his sovereign this much, to know that her commands were for a greater - and benevolent - purpose even if he did not immediately grasp it.

He had used to try to believe that about Odin.

He presented himself at the temple. The priestess who would have been instructing the children yielded them for the hour when she was told it was the queen’s command.

Only a few of the children were capable of materialization by magic, but he explained the theory and demonstrated several times. He was finishing up when the door to the courtyard classroom opened and every child’s head turned.

Sif stepped through. All of the children ran to her eagerly, forgetting that they were learning from their prince. They crowded around her, calling her name, telling her things.

Sif was listening to each of them with a patience Loki had never seen from her. She glanced at him with a bit of surprise, hunching her shoulders just a bit as if embarrassed.

Loki strolled to her and the crowd of children. “Lady Sif. I am surprised to see you here.”

“Sif’s been teaching us swordplay!” A very thin boy who had needed a spell to correct his faulty vision told Loki this with great excitement. “She says that even sorcerers should know how to defend themselves in combat.” Sif ruffled the boy’s hair with indulgent affection that surprised Loki.

“She is teaching us things she learned from the Midgardian shield-maiden Black Widow, about how to fight with people larger and stronger than you.” A dainty little girl told Loki this with clear relish.

“And my pupils tell me the principles of magic.” Sif’s tone was so rueful that Loki had to bite his tongue not to laugh aloud. Of course young children would chatter about whatever they had just learned, oblivious to whether the adults present were interested or not. “It is actually more interesting
Loki looked at his shield-brother of old. “I agree with the Lady Sif. Attend to your lessons with her.”
He met her eyes. “Was this my mother’s idea, Sif?”

She lifted her chin. “No. Mine.”

Loki found himself smiling widely. He had never smiled at Sif, at any of Thor’s friends, like this - except for Fandral, for a few days a thousand years ago. “I think it is an excellent idea.”

Sif returned the smile almost shyly. Loki felt an unaccustomed rush of optimism. Perhaps they could indeed come to an understanding. Be friends.

Serve Asgard side by side.

Loki put those thoughts aside. Just coming to greater agreement with his shield-brother of centuries was an unexpected triumph.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Loki returns to Midgard and the lovers enjoy their reunion.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to funnymagic_aing for beta reading!

When Loki returned to the Tower three mornings later, Steve immediately saw that his lover was in better spirits. Way to go, Mom. They got a quick kiss hello in which they didn't bump noses or mash each other’s lips, so things were apparently better already. Then Loki was about to go debrief SHIELD about the Nine Realms some more and Steve was going to go for a run, when the Avengers were called.

Doom-bots again, new and improved, all ready to menace the people of New York. A lot of them, too.

The team was suited up and on its way in no time. The ‘bots were spread over three city blocks. Doom had the sense to force the Avengers to split up.

Not that it would do more than buy Doom a few minutes. Steve swiftly assigned them their sectors and in half a minute each of them was plowing through lethal robots.

He sent Loki to a building that was crawling with the things, then launched himself into a swarming mass of them that was trying to break into a bank. Steve didn’t know if the doom-bots were going to steal money or if they were just programmed to break into any building they were pointed at, even when the security was high. Either way, he got to work on them. These stood up to the shield better than the last batch, but not well enough.

He had either overestimated the doom-bots he’d sent Loki after or underestimated Loki, because Loki secured his own sector and rushed in to provide backup when Steve was in the middle of demolishing half a dozen doom-bots with the shield.

Loki was ready to join the fray, but when he saw that Steve had matters well in hand he stopped and watched, green eyes glowing and intent, poised to give aid if needed.

The thought flitted through Steve’s mind, through the haze of battle, that he liked this. When he didn’t need rescue, he didn’t want it. It was too satisfying to win on his own.

Loki was a powerful sorcerer with superstrength and magical weapons, but he knew Steve could look after himself.

Loki gave him the respect of making his own decisions.

When Steve had destroyed the last of the ’bots, Loki looked down at the pile of them, smiling
widely. Then raised his eyes to Steve’s and spoke in a husky voice.

“When we’re done here, you are going to fuck me so hard.”

Steve’s reaction to these words was instantaneous, and not particularly comfortable, given how tight the suit was. Not that he was complaining.

“Warrior cultures,” he said, sprinting for the door with his lover right behind him, off to provide backup to their shield-brothers. “Gotta love ’em.”

It took all of his willpower to keep his hands off Loki until they were out of the elevator and on Steve’s floor. But as soon as the doors slid shut they were all over each other, clutching each other tightly, their lips welded together.

He felt as if their clothes might just dissolve from their sheer need for each other.

“Magic your clothes off,” he ordered, his voice rough. And worried for a second or two, because he’d never just bossed Loki around like that, but Loki chuckled breathily against him and a second later he was naked. Naked and pressed against Steve, who was still in his Captain America uniform.

Steve claimed a couple more hungry kisses, grudging the half-second it took him to yank off his gloves so he could feel the soft skin of Loki’s nice round little rear, his creamy white back, his silky hair. Then reluctantly he released Loki’s lips so he could growl, “Mine too.”

Loki smiled. “I can’t. I’d have to enchant them beforehand.”

Damn. “Do that tomorrow, then.”

Loki looked delighted at the prospect. Right now, he snaked a hand between them and opened Steve’s tight trousers, freeing his erection, much to Steve’s relief. Then Loki’s cool hand was squeezing their pricks together, a move he used often. Steve liked it. A lot.

Now Steve groaned into Loki’s mouth at the touch, crushing Loki even closer. It felt wonderfully wicked to still be almost entirely clothed while Loki was naked against him.

He was painfully impatient. He would explode if he had to wait one more second.

“Steve.” Loki was gasping for breath, obviously as urgent as Steve was. “I would like to do this with my magic instead of with my hand. Is that - would you-“

Wow.

“Yes. Do it,” Steve groaned, and bent to scrape his teeth over Loki’s neck. That made Loki gasp and sag against him and his grip on their pricks slackened, but a few seconds later he had recovered enough to wrap those slim arms around Steve again, and then Steve felt a hard uniform pressure all over his prick, still lined up with Loki’s.

“Is that too hard?” Loki whispered, voice ragged.

“It’s perfect.”

Then the pressure started to move, kneading and massaging their erections together, and Steve instinctively moved in time with it, his pelvis moving against Loki’s, and Loki followed his motion, and they writhed together for a few eternal crazed seconds before climax made them both cry out
shamelessly and then sink to the floor in a daze.

Loki recovered first and carried Steve bridal style to the bed, grinning at Steve’s expression when Steve realized what he was doing. Steve could barely move enough to cooperate as Loki peeled him out of his uniform.

“I liked that. Me dressed, you naked. We should do that again sometime,” Steve said. “And also the other way around.”

Loki froze for an instant to stare at him, pupils dilating. Then smiled slowly.

“We shall, then. And if you still wish me to, I shall enchant your uniform so that I can dematerialize it.”

“So you have to put a spell on clothes to do that?”

“Yes.”

Steve wanted to know more about that, but not right now. The haze of his orgasm was wearing off. The awkwardness of their last time had evaporated and everything had fallen into place again the moment they’d fallen into each other’s arms.

It was time.

Loki lifted an eyebrow. Apparently Steve’s nervousness was showing.

Steve threw the words out before he could lose his nerve. “You said to hint at what I wanted.”

Loki’s smile lit up the dim room. Steve was the luckiest man in the Nine Realms. “Whenever you wish.”

“I um ordered something. I thought if you want to.”

“We’ve had this conversation,” Loki reminded him gently.

“Yeah, but.” He sat up and opened his nightstand drawer. Took out the small box.

Loki took it from his hands when he hesitated, giving him plenty of time to snatch it back if he’d wanted to. Opened it.

Smiled.

“You want to fuck me with one of these inside you?” Loki asked, voice husky and eyes gleaming in the dark.

“Yes. Or vice versa. Or - other things.”

“Shall we begin?”

Steve nodded, throat too constricted to speak. Loki gently pushed him onto his back, and Steve closed his eyes as Loki’s warm wet mouth engulfed his prick. When the pleasure had Steve sighing happily and his muscles melting, Loki’s fingers slipped inside him, slick with lotion.

“Loki? I’m ready, please….”

At once Loki withdrew his fingers, and a few seconds later one of the plugs from the box was
Steve closed his eyes and experimentally clenched his inner muscles. It was different from a prick, cold and unyielding. But it was exciting, being filled while Loki sucked and caressed him.

Loki nudged the plug with his hand, and Steve arched his back at the sensation. Loki knew exactly how to move it, of course he did, and in no time the arousal was building up, the suction on his prick and the pressure inside his opening and Loki’s slender fingers lightly teasing his sensitized skin all feeding into each other until Steve had forgotten everything in the universe except for the beautiful man doing delicious things to him.

Then suddenly there was cool air on his erection and Loki’s hands were gone. Steve opened his eyes, whimpering his frustration as he started to sit up, reaching for Loki.

Heavy-lidded, Loki pressed him back to the mattress, and Steve let him. Then gasped, shocked, as Loki straddled his hips and reached for Steve’s cock.

Loki’s little smile widened at the amazement on Steve’s face. He always did like that he could blow Steve’s mind.

Steve swallowed and put his hands on Loki’s hips, keeping them there as Loki impaled himself on Steve’s prick.

And in a moment, Steve’s cock was in the vise of Loki’s body, and Steve’s hole was filled with the plug. It was incredible, two completely different kinds of pleasure at the same time, making him feel torn apart between them, or crushed between them.

Loki watched Steve’s face as he began to move.

Steve groaned. He moved, not able to control his writhing, because the slightest move he or Loki made caused the plug to invade him more deeply, press against his prostate, and he couldn’t choose where it went at all and it was already driving him crazy.

“Loki!” he gasped. His lover liked hearing his name as they coupled. He was rewarded with a tight squeeze of Loki’s opening, and Steve pushed up into Loki’s body harder, wriggling helplessly between the two sources of pleasure.

“By the Norns… Steve….”

Steve couldn’t stand it like this, not for another minute. He gripped Loki with all his strength and rolled them over, Loki yielding willingly. Steve thrust into Loki hard the instant Loki was on his back and Loki cried out, an involuntary sound that went straight to Steve’s prick.

Loki’s long arms reached down so that his hands were on Steve’s ass, and then there was another explosion of sensation when Loki’s fingers found the plug and pressed it against Steve’s prostate again and it was even more maddening now than it had been before.

When the sensory overload receded a little, Steve desperately drew in a breath and looked down at Loki’s ecstatic expression, his inky hair spread over the pillow, his lips parted and swollen from many passionate kisses.

Loki was so damned beautiful.

*You are going to fuck me so hard,* Loki had said, and so Steve did, pounding his lover into the mattress with all of the passion coursing through him. And Loki was writhing under him, eyes
squeezed shut, desperate words spilling from his mouth. “Steve, oh yes, please, Steve, please….”

So Steve gave Loki everything he was begging for, and was rewarded with more begging and more writhing as if Steve would stop for the Nine Realms. Steve pounded fiercely into Loki while Loki’s cold strong fingers clutched him, roaming frantically from his shoulders down his back to his ass.

“Oh god. Loki. Loki.”

Loki arched his back and wrapped his long slim legs around Steve, if Steve weren’t a supersoldier he’d have been crushed, and the plug was still hard inside him, and still Loki was sobbing Steve’s name, his husky posh voice gone all breathless, and Steve could have sworn he felt himself getting even bigger inside Loki at the sheer intensity of all of these miraculous responses before his vision went white as he melted into Loki like he had turned into molten lava.

Later, in the dark, both of them naked and still dazed from pleasure, it was easier for Steve to say what he wanted. “I want….” He thought about how to word it. “I want to put the other one in you, and suck you.”

“On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You keep yours inside you while we do that.”

Steve shivered. “I can live with that.”

“You have no idea how wonderful you are.”

“My moon,” Steve whispered.

He could feel Loki’s smile against the skin of his throat. “My sun and stars.”
Holidays: Independence Day

Chapter Summary

The Avengers celebrate Steve's birthday.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to funnymagic_aing for beta reading!

Loki made good on his promise to go dancing with Steve. And on Steve’s birthday his shield-brothers had two surprises for him.

First, they refrained from making any jokes whatsoever about Captain America’s birthday happening to be the fourth of July. It had to cost them a lot of willpower, but it would have been scientifically impossible to come up with one he hadn’t already heard.

(Tony did not deprive himself of offering Steve an apple pie with the technically correct number of candles on it. After Steve blew them out with his serum-enhanced lungs, a huge rich chocolate cake was brought in.)

Second, Pepper and Loki had conspired to buy the entire team tickets to an evening of swing dancing in some fancy hotel, and gotten everyone appropriate clothes. A lot of the people at the party were also dressed up. It gave Steve a surreal feeling, his 21st century friends in 1940s clothes. They all looked great in them. Tony had chosen charcoal grey pinstripes, possibly because he knew it would make him look like a period-appropriate gangster. Natasha looked like a studio-system era movie star.

Fame was weird. Sometimes people completely flipped out at seeing one of them in the flesh. Other times people noticed them, and maybe stared just a little, but mostly treated them like they were, well, people. Fortunately, at the swing dance people had the second reaction. A couple of times people came over to thank them for their service, but otherwise stuck to enjoying the evening’s offerings: cocktails, a long break to go onto the roof to watch the fireworks, and dancing.

Steve couldn’t stop grinning. His friends were making sure a long-held dream of his would come true. And women danced with him. Not only Pepper and Natasha, though they both did. Women he’d never met were delighted to dance with him. He never had to sit one out.

Steve’s boyfriend danced with him. In public. Tony Stark danced with him too, even let him lead. A couple of men he didn’t know asked him to dance with them, and he did. Nobody cared. Some people even looked pleased, happy that men could do this nowadays. That today’s heroes could admit to liking their own sex.

Late that night, alone in Steve’s bedroom, Loki asked what he wanted, and Steve’s face burned when he got out the drawing he’d done. And Loki said yes, as he always did, and soon they were lying naked, each with their lips wrapped around the other’s prick, Steve copying everything Loki
did to him, learning, at least until the sensations took over and all he could do was keep sucking while he shook against Loki and they both exploded into each other’s mouths at the same moment.

Afterwards, Steve fell asleep almost at once, a contented smile on his face. Loki laid awake for a time, watching him. Sometimes Steve had nightmares, like all of them did, but tonight he was peaceful. He felt safe, under the same roof as his shield-brothers. He felt happy, lying beside his prince-alien lover.

He was one more year into the fleeting lifespan a human could hope for.

Very lightly, so as not to wake him, Loki caressed his lover’s handsome, boyish face, relaxed in slumber. Stroked his tousled golden hair.

He wondered how long it would be before silver stole the gold away.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

The Asset is malfunctioning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Pierce gave the Asset a stern look, trying to look not so much angry as disappointed. “Why didn’t you complete your mission?”

The Asset didn’t make eye contact. He stared into space. “Think there was a mistake in the mission planning. Wrong target chosen.”

Fuck. This again, already. Every time they thawed the guy out, he was kicking the programming faster. Over the past few months, he had successfully eliminated twenty targets without flinching, but then all that senator had to do was look scared and the Asset’s human feelings woke up. Again.

The Asset spoke again, slowly, as if the words required great concentration.

“My C.O. wouldn’t like it.”

Dammit. “And what C.O. is that?” Pierce’s tone was warning.

The Asset opened his mouth to reply, then stopped himself. Flinched. Looked at the floor.

He was remembering. No matter how many times they wiped him, it always happened sooner or later.

Pierce spoke with the voice he had once, long ago, used to assure his daughter that there were no werewolves in their backyard. “That was before Hydra rescued you. Before we gave you the chance to shape the century. To make the world safe for everyone.”

The Asset’s eyebrows met. He was thinking.

If there was anything they didn’t need him doing, it was thinking.

“Your old C.O. abandoned you.”

A shake of the head. “He wouldn’t.”

“He did.” Pierce turned to the technicians. “Wipe him.”

The Asset didn’t resist being pushed back into the chair, or having the bite guard shoved into his mouth.

Pierce strode out, pondering. The Asset’s usefulness might well be nearing its end. He was requiring more and more frequent maintenance.

Fortunately, they wouldn’t need him for much longer. And Pierce had hit on the perfect finale for
him. The Asset would help them take down the Avengers. Even if the Avengers killed him, he would still have tipped the scales in Hydra’s favor and the Avengers would be no more threat.

They would send him after Captain America himself. Either he would kill the captain, eliminating the single greatest threat to their plans… or Captain America would kill him.

When the mask was removed from the Asset’s body, Captain America would be more surely destroyed than if he were dead.

It was perfect.

Brock Rumlow had fallen into step beside him. As usual around the Asset, Brock’s face was rapt.

Best to do some maintenance.

“‘The problem is, the result of the wiping is sometimes that he regresses too far, to adolescent naïveté.’ He gave Brock a looked of rueful understanding. ‘We all believed, when we were boys, that we could do our duty and still keep our hands clean.’”

Brock nodded, not seeming especially perturbed. “Have they figured out yet how the Asset withstood the conditioning?”

There had been hundreds of attempts at creating more Assets. Most of them had gone insane from the neurological treatments. The few who hadn’t, none lasted more than a year in the field. The prevailing theory was that something of their original personalities woke up and caused them to sabotage themselves. One of them, according to witnesses, had shot six people in a row, execution-style, and then simply stood immobile, his gun still aimed and full of ammunition, and waited for the enemy to put him down like a dog. Which they had.

Brock wanted to be an Asset. Wanted all the inessentials of his personality wiped out, so that he could be nothing but a superlative killing machine.

Brock was too useful as he was to risk on another experiment. But if they ever found the key to what had allowed Bucky Barnes to survive the enhancement and the programming, they would create an army of Assets, and Brock would be the first off the assembly line.

“They’re coming closer to cracking it every day. We’re still working on reproducing the data about his original conditioning which was lost.” Pierce stopped and put a hand on Brock’s shoulder. “When we do figure it out, you have my word, you’ll be the first.”

Brock’s eyes gleamed.

At least there was some good news in the stack of reports Pierce had to read that afternoon. The movie their Hollywood operatives had created to test public sentiment had been written off as too blatant. It had been expected to fail spectacularly at the box office and become a punch line, like Howard the Duck.

Instead, to the incredulity of everyone at Hydra, the movie was raking in profits, and nearly all the reviews were raves. The only people who had noticed the actual message were a handful of internet cranks. As fortune would have it, several of the most vocal were women, and so their blog posts were dismissed as the ravings of fangirls merely infatuated with the handsome actor who had played the tyranny-defying “villain” of the piece.

Hydra had been overestimating people badly. The world was ready to put itself in chains. It didn’t even require well-crafted propaganda anymore.
Hydra had succeeded.

Pierce celebrated with a finger of milk, and this time his guts didn’t even rebel. Things were finally going his way.

Chapter End Notes

So as much as possible, this fic is following the MCU timeline. That is, when it began a month after the Chitauri invasion, it was summer of 2012, when Avengers was released. Now in story time it’s fall 2013, when TDW was released, but of course TDW isn’t happening in this universe. CAWS was released in spring of 2014, so that’s when Steve will encounter the Winter Soldier in this fic. Incidentally, that’s one year after his affair with Loki began, and they agreed to wait one year before telling Midgard about their relationship. That plan will be… somewhat derailed, what with Steve’s ex coming back from the dead and all.

Next we’ll see the Avengers celebrating the holidays. Then there’ll be probably one chapter putting pieces in place to start the Winter Soldier storyline, with all of the Avengers involved instead of just two of them.

Then, Winter Soldier and Bucky - at last!

Hey, I warned you guys this was going to be a slow burn.
Holidays: Halloween

Chapter Summary

Not all heroes wear capes. Just the ones who are dressing as Loki for Halloween.

ETA: I now have fan art for this!
http://mosellegreen.tumblr.com/post/163886491984/since-i-wrote-the-halloween-
chapter-of-deep

Natasha had never much cared about holidays, but apparently her shield-brothers were determined to
change that. First Pepper and Loki got everyone to celebrate American independence and the birth of
Steve Rogers. Natasha wasn’t an American and hadn’t been kidding when she had told Loki that
Russians understood that regimes came and went, but she was glad Steve had gotten born, so she
got along.

Then Tony started laying out his plans for the fall holidays. They were viable plans, so Pepper
must’ve helped him work them out, but he was always the one to unveil the imminent scheme.

It started with Halloween. Natasha suspected that was a test case. The Avengers happened to be
doing one of their public appearances that day, showing up so that people with more money than
sense would donate a large sum to a worthy cause for the privilege of shaking a superhero’s hand.
And getting their photo taken doing it. Steve tended to make snarky remarks about dancing monkeys
on such occasions, but like always he sucked it up and did his duty.

Natasha had been stolen from her family as a small child by fiends who made her spend years
assassinating people, and now rich idiots were donating money to charity so that they could get
photographed shaking her hand. The world was a crazy place.

A week beforehand, one night over dinner Tony waited until they all had some steak in them before
dropping his bomb.

“You know, since it’ll be Halloween, I think we should dress up.”

“We always dress up,” Natasha pointed out.

Tony grinned.

“I think we should dress up as each other.”

They all thought this over for a minute.

“Who’s going to be the Black Widower?” Natasha wanted to know.

Loki answered. “Steve, of course.” When the others looked at him, he lifted an eyebrow. “Come on,
we all want to see him in that catsuit.”

Steve turned red. Nobody argued. Not about that. They did argue about who got to be Captain
America, which embarrassed Steve even more. All the men wanted to. Loki gave in after a couple of
minutes of debate: “I should concede. I was never a little boy with a plastic red, white and blue
shield.”

“Neither was I,” Natasha said.

“Besides, Loki has another way of getting into that suit.”

“Tony.”

And so on the day, the Avengers showed up with their costumes adjusted, behaving as if this were perfectly normal. Clint had eventually won the Captain America costume. (Steve let him carry the real shield. Clint got all moist-eyed when Steve handed it to him and they all pretended not to notice.) Loki was dressed as Hawkeye, Tony as Loki (Loki’s outfit actually suited Tony pretty well, except that Tony looked way more villainous in it), Bruce as Iron Man (Tony had taken one of his own suits and enlarged it a little), and Natasha as the Hulk.

She had painted her skin green and tattered a shirt that was Bruce’s favorite dark purple. She hadn’t tattered it in a sexy way, either, and so looked… well, as un-sexy as Natasha was capable of looking.

The photographers loved it. Steve had even colored his hair with temporary red dye. Loki had been right, people ogled Steve shamelessly.

Loki looked very smug about that. He liked for people to covet what he had.
After approximately one million photographs, they escaped back to the Tower. Steve went to his own floor, Loki with him, and tried to peel off the black catsuit. Loki stopped him.

It was well after midnight before Loki let him take the suit all the way off.
The day after Halloween, Tony presented his proposals for the next few holidays, a watchful Pepper beside him.

“Last year we were all kind of occupied with other things when the holidays came around,” Tony said.

Actually, it was more that none of them had felt much like celebrating, certainly not as a group. Not then.

A lot had changed in a year.

“But this year I thought that, barring supervillains or giant meteors, we might all do something together. Like, I could fly us all to Aruba or something for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s.”

He gave them a few seconds to take this in.

“Or… I could fly us all to Aruba for New Year’s, but we could spend the other two holidays in the Tower, acting like real people.”

The vote was unanimous: the Avengers chose the latter option.

Pepper and her minions set up charitable activities for all of them. People would donate a lot to a cause that had an Avenger stumping for it. So Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas gifts and more practical help was given to a lot of people.

Tony matched every donation.

Since none of them had more than basic cooking skills, Tony had a catering team prepare the Thanksgiving meal the day before, so that on the day all the Avengers (minus Bruce, who spent the day with Rhodey’s family) had to do was put things in the oven. Then they alternated watching football and watching old cartoons until the food was ready.

The team feasted together often. Somehow, this was different. Apparently all it took was an official day of sappy feelings and they all went corny.

Was this what happened? Live in close proximity with other people who aren’t trying to harm you,
have fun with them, work with them, save each other’s lives a few times, and these mushy embarrassing feelings developed?

“This is nice,” she heard herself saying over pumpkin pie - a food she had never tasted before, but was determined to have many times again. Then, trying to cover up her own lapse into sentimentality, she added, “I mean, this isn’t even my holiday.”

“Or Loki’s.”

Loki shrugged with a smile. “It’s a harvest festival. Most cultures have them in one form or another.”

Which led to him telling them about harvest customs throughout the realms. Asgard’s involved an all-night bonfire, women wearing garlands of autumn-blooming pink flowers in their hair, and, of course, gluttony.

“What, you’re saying that’s not an American thing? Here I thought it was our patriotic duty to stuff ourselves today,” Tony said.

Clint leaned back in his chair and groaned happily. “I don’t think I can eat another bite.”

“Communist.”

The people present who remembered the Cold War thought this was funny. Okay, it kind of was. But Natasha was too busy scrutinizing the experience to laugh.

Anything this pleasant aroused her suspicions.
Holidays: Christmas

Chapter Summary

The Avengers celebrate Christmas together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the first of December, Tony started laying out his plans for the next holiday. Apparently it was time to go full cornball.

First he barreled everyone over with his suggestion for how to handle Christmas presents. “Guys, I hope you all know by now that if there’s anything you need, or anything you just really want, all you have to do is tell Jarvis.”

“We know, Tony. I think you’ve already given us most of the things we want that money can buy.”

“And you’ve done a fairly good job on the things it can’t,” Loki added.

Tony’s face lit up like one of his own buildings at that.

“So anyway, I wanted to suggest that we all agree not to spend a lot of money on Christmas presents for each other. I mean, what do we need that we don’t already have? So like giving each other our favorite band’s latest album or something should be the way to go, am I right? Thoughtful, not expensive?”

Natasha thought this was like how Tony had asked for companionship instead of presents for his birthday. He was trying to spare them embarrassment over giving presents to a billionaire. It was polite of him.

Well, Natasha could offer a present she wouldn’t be ashamed to give one of the richest men alive. But there were others to consider. So, yes, good idea.

Then Tony mouthed off about the tree. “If you guys want I can hire my usual decorator to deck the halls in arty things, and cover the tree with spun-glass fancy doohickies. He does the giant tree in the business lobby downstairs every year.”

Pepper winced, and her eyes telegraphed to all of them that she would prefer they not take this option.

Tony wasn’t finished. “Or if you guys want to be really corny, we can actually string popcorn and cranberries together like in ye olden days and, I dunno, cut out paper snowflakes or something. Loki can even make real ones.”

“I have no artistry with my ice formations. And they would melt promptly. But I will happily go along with your plans for your holiday.”

Yet more corniness turned out to be what everyone wanted, and so they actually sat around the common room cutting out paper snowflakes (Steve’s were the most elaborate) and listening to
freaking Christmas carols like they were normal people in a family or something.

(There was an awkward couple of minutes the first time Loki heard “Frosty the Snowman” but they got past it quickly. Loki clearly didn’t want to spoil everyone’s fun. Or his own.)

It was kind of nice. Soothing, making things with your own hands and not worrying if they were perfect. Clint folded a bunch of origami stars - he’d learned origami once during down time on a mission with not much else to do - and nested them among the branches. Tony started welding together shiny little bits of scrap metal from his workshop, and Bruce joined him in that, so they had a bunch of silver, gold and copper steampunkish thingamajigs adorning the tree.

Natasha loved the smell of the tree. She could only imagine what that smell must be like to people who had fond memories linked to it.

Aside from the strings of colored lights, all of the decorations were handmade until one morning mid-December, when seven plastic mass-produced ornaments had appeared on it during the night. Exceptionally tacky figures of each of the Avengers, including both princes of Asgard. No one claimed responsibility for putting them up. Natasha suspected Clint. Jarvis refused to snitch. The ornaments stayed on the tree.

On evenings when they were all free and at home, they watched kids’ Christmas shows. Most were very silly, but most of the Tower’s occupants had watched them as children and were sentimental about them.

Loki went along with everything, trying to look amused but actually soaking it up like the big softie they all knew he really was. Really, every one of them was trying not to show just how mushy they were all feeling over all this holiday stuff, and all of them were failing completely.

By now it wasn’t even strange, seeing the crazed invader with the supervillain leer who’d unleashed the Chitauri sitting around their living room smiling kindly at them and thoughtfully getting things down from high shelves for Natasha and Tony. She’d gotten used to it. They all had.

One night she happened to catch Tony alone. She’d come home late from an assignment. Everyone else was already in bed, but Tony was having a drink and looking at the tree. Its lights and those of the city beyond the window were the only illumination in the room. For a change there was no music or movie going, so the room was quiet.

When she came in, he just smiled and poured her an ice-cold vodka without a word.

She sat beside him and sipped for a while before she spoke.

“You’re trying to turn us into a family.”

He kept his eyes on the tree. “Do you object?”

Natasha wasn’t sure. She said nothing.

Now he glanced at her. “Every member of this family has superpowers. Or superabilities. We’re as safe as anyone can be.”

It should be safe to care about the Avengers because they could all handle themselves. Except for how they kept deliberately seeking out the most dangerous things the planet had to offer.

By now she shouldn’t be surprised how well Stark understood them all. Understood her.
“Why?”

“So that half a dozen traumatized superheroes will be less unhappy?”

They just sat and drank for a while, not talking. It was more comfortable than she would have expected.

She did understand it some. Knowing Tony meant witnessing at close hand the down side to privilege. People constantly tried to ingratiate themselves with him because they wanted things from him. Money. Influence. A share in the spotlight. If Tony wanted to associate with people as just a human being - and of course he did, it was a basic human need - he had limited options.

Billionaires: largely jerks, almost none even approaching him in intelligence.

Geniuses: a very scarce breed known for not getting along with its own kind - with occasional exceptions. It was a stroke of luck for them all that Tony, Bruce and Jane were the rare geniuses who suited each other.

Tony had one other option: superheroes. Others who like him were larger than life, who had taken on the responsibility of dealing with larger-than-life dangers. People whose abilities meant they could never just be ordinary, even if they wanted to.

“Besides, I’ve got red in my ledger,” Tony said eventually.

“And Iron Man is wiping it out.”

With a shrug and a wave of his glass he dismissed his revolutionary invention of flying robot suits and the dozens of times he had risked his life to stop bad people from badding. “Superheroes have limited utility. Oh, when you’ve got an alien invasion or killer robots on your hands, we’re just what the doctor ordered. But most of the bad things in the world, we can’t punch our way through. We can’t punch car accidents, or fraud, or financial crises, or diseases. Hitting doesn’t solve everything. Not all heroes wear capes.”

“No, but we do. Metaphorically speaking, I mean.”

“I thought that maybe we could make the Avengers into something more than Super-Friends. We have other stuff to offer besides punching and good looks. We have our brains, our reputations, a lot of things.”

“That’s why Pepper’s always making us do appearances for charity.”

“It was my idea, don’t blame her. She just makes it work.”

“And why you wanted an alien prince in our Tower.”

“For the next four thousand years, one of the most powerful men in the Nine Realms will be Earth’s ally. I’d like to see any aliens conquer us when Loki of Asgard remembers us fondly. And all we had to do was be nice to him.”

“And let him sleep with Steve.”

“That part wasn’t planned. Nice bonus, though. Loki already liked us. Then we gave him Earth’s second handsomest man as a boyfriend. He’ll do anything for us now.”

“I guess we should’ve given him our first handsomest,” Natasha admitted, “but I wasn’t willing to
give up Clint even for Earth.”

She’d seen Tony’s fake public smile a lot of times. She knew the real thing when she saw it.

They quietly drank and looked at the tree for a long time before she went to bed. It was actually kind of nice.

Okay. It was really nice.

Loki liked the idea of Christmas. An excuse to shower his favorite humans with largesse - if they could forgive him for flouting Tony’s decree about only giving each other inexpensive things.

He consulted Jarvis, told Jarvis what he intended to give them all. Jarvis was confident they would overlook his noncompliance.

There wasn’t much that Jarvis wanted that anyone could give him, but he did enjoy exercising his electronic brain, so Loki gave him several alien dictionaries and several tomes to translate. Jarvis said he was pleased with the offering; Tony had created him too well and he seldom had challenges anymore.

Still, Loki was nervous when the day arrived. Early Christmas morning, they all convened in their pajamas, eating a quick pre-breakfast of croissants and coffee so they could get to the presents. Loki knew he had better speak up before anyone opened anything. He had his words planned.

“So, ah,” Loki said as they gathered around the tree, “I must confess that I did not actually follow the agreed-upon rule to give only inexpensive gifts. I thought, how often do humans receive gifts from space aliens? And so I hope you will excuse me for not letting the opportunity pass by.”

“You don’t have to keep buying us, you know,” Tony reminded him. “We’re bought and paid for.”

“I know that, Tony.” Loki smiled gently, softening Tony’s brassy metaphor.

“I think we’re big enough to overlook it,” Clint said. “I, um, didn’t exactly follow the rules myself.”

“Wait, wait,” Tony said. “Did anyone?”

“Um. Technically,” said Bruce. Natasha and Steve repeated the word, sheepish. There was a general chuckle.

“Okay, guys, let’s do Loki’s presents last, because I think presents from outer space are gonna be a tough act to follow. Clint, you opened your big mouth, you first.”

Clint took a large box wrapped in Avengers-themed paper to each of them. “They’re all the same kind of thing, so you should all open them at the same time. And yes, I bought the same stuff for myself.”

Each Avenger, it turned out, had received a considerable collection of his own memorabilia. Loki found himself rummaging through little plastic Loki figures, Loki keychains, Loki T-shirts and Pez dispensers and drinking glasses.

Everyone in the room was laughing.

“I got a box for Thor as well,” Clint told Loki.
“Thank you. I will take it to Asgard for him, and will see to it that Mother conveys the significance of these items.” Loki smiled at a little stuffed cat wearing a helmet and coat like his own. He would keep all of these forever, for all the millennia of his life, and remember Midgard’s kindness in embracing him.

Steve was putting a little plastic Captain America on a little red, white and blue motorcycle. “I remember Christmas when I was a kid,” he said, a little hoarse. “Every shop window would be so full of toys, and I would look through those windows and just wish. And now look.”

Clint put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “You got people to make a ton of donations. A lot of kids are opening toys right now because of you.”

Steve nodded quickly, blinking. “I just can’t get over that now there are toys of me.”

“It is pretty wild.”

Bruce went next. Each Avenger was given a shoebox packed with several tissue-wrapped items. “I already had all of these things, so they didn’t cost me any money, but it would cost you to acquire them any other way. Starting with a plane ticket. When I went off the grid, I was trying to be useful by giving medical care to people in remote areas. First in South America, then in India. I always told them they didn’t have to pay if they couldn’t afford it, but usually they wanted to give me something, and I understood that. I would take whatever they offered. Sometimes they would just give me a meal in return for whatever I was able to do for them. But a lot of the time they would give me things they had made, intending for their own family members to use them. Some of these things are really beautiful folk art.”

They were. Little wooden trinket boxes, elaborately carved. Embroidered bags in cheerful colors. Carved and painted dried gourds. Ceramic whistles shaped like the head of a jaguar - Bruce showed them how to blow into them and move their fingers over the airhole to make a sound like a jaguar’s roar. Animals an inch high carved out of wood and meticulously painted by hand.

Loki studied each of the items in his box. The trinket box was definitely the prettiest. He held it up.

“Bruce, I hope you will not mind if I give this one to my mother. I often give her gifts like this from my travels, things whose worth is in their pleasing appearance, not the materials they are made of or their functions.”

Bruce looked surprised. “I didn’t think any of my stuff was fit for a queen, but if you say it is that’s fine by me.”

“Oh, she will like this.” Loki could imagine how her delicate fingers would trace the carving. And then she would choose its place beside other items which would complement it. Her study and her bedchamber had shelves full of his gifts to her, and every few years he noticed they had all been rearranged in a new pleasing configuration, lest he think she had forgotten them.

Loki had known Steve was drawing pictures for each of them. The amount of time he had spent with a large new sketchpad would have been a dead giveaway, even if he had let Loki see what he was working on, which he hadn’t.

The flat rectangular shapes of the gifts was also a clue.

“This didn’t cost me anything except the paper and the frames,” Steve said as he handed each of them their gifts.

“But if we were willing to sell a Captain America original - which we’re not….”
“Well… yeah.”

“Not for the Nine Realms.”

Loki let the others open theirs first, to prolong his own anticipation.

Steve had drawn them all as fairy tales.

For two months he had been making them all watch fairy tale movies, not only Disney cartoons but also numerous live-action adaptations. Now Loki saw the reason: Steve had been making sure all of them, particularly Loki, understood the references.

Clint was a grownup Hansel eating a gingerbread house, with Natasha as Gretel beside him.

Natasha’s drawing was of her as Little Red Riding Hood, kicking the wolf in the teeth.

“I had a little trouble picking fairy tales for the ladies,” Steve explained. “There’s a lot of fairy tales where women or girls outsmart the bad people or triumph through their skills, but most of those aren’t very recognizable. They don’t have common markers like gingerbread houses or red hoods. So instead I turned iconic fairy tales on their heads.”

“Well, after that, we need to see Pepper’s picture,” Tony said.

Pepper was the miller’s daughter, only she was cheerfully spinning the straw into gold herself, while a frustrated Rumpelstiltskin glowered at her from a corner.

“I shipped Jane’s drawing to her mother’s house for her to open today. I drew her as the Little Mermaid,” Steve told them. “The Disney Little Mermaid, with her collection of human things, only instead of forks and pipes, she collected compasses and astrolabes and other old-fashioned science things.”

Bruce’s depicted him as the prince who the Beast turned into after Beauty fell in love with him. And yes, Rhodey was cast in the role of Beauty.

“He’s going to love this,” Bruce said with a grin.

Tony was Jack, climbing the beanstalk. “Is this a short joke?” Tony demanded, holding it up.

Steve grinned. “I guess it is now.”

“Okay, Loki, stop stalling. I wanna see how Steve drew his boyfriend.”

Steve had drawn his boyfriend as Snow White. Lying asleep beneath a tree, surrounded by intricately drawn roses. With Steve himself as the prince, about to kiss Loki awake.

It was beautiful. Loki just looked at it, unable to speak. He would keep this on the wall of his private chambers for the rest of his life, to never forget that a man had once seen him this way. A good man, an honorable man.

“Really, that shoulda been the other way around,” Tony said. “Loki’s an actual prince, and Steve’s the one who spent decades asleep.”

Loki shuddered before he could stop himself. Millennia of looking at Steve asleep and immobile, himself trying to awaken him - he could not have endured that.

“I did think about drawing it that way,” Steve said, and a slight edge in his voice made Loki suspect
that Steve had thought of exactly what Loki just had. “I decided to go with the hair as black as ebony and skin as white as snow thing.”

Loki carefully set the framed drawing down and kissed Steve right in front of them all. “I love it, Steve. More than I know how to say. Thank you.”

Natasha’s gifts were smaller. A USB key for each of them, tied up with bows. “These,” she said quietly, “are your SHIELD dossiers. Everything SHIELD knows about each of you.”

They all looked at her in silence for a long minute. They knew that with this simple act, she was declaring where her loyalties were.

Each of them thanked her, quietly, simply. Flowery words couldn’t express what she had given them.

“It didn’t cost me money, but I’m not sure even Tony could have bought his.”

Tony and Natasha shared a look.

“Let me guess,” she said after a moment, wanting their intent eyes off of her. “Tony’s the only one who stuck to the ‘cheap gifts’ rule.”

“Natasha. Since when am I a rule follower? I never intended to stick to it.” He passed out festive red-and-green envelopes.

Each envelope contained information about how to draw funds from a Swiss bank account. The balance in each account was five million dollars.

The room again became very quiet.

“So look, if it makes you guys feel better about it, you can consider this an Avengers resource. If there’s some weird superhero emergency and for whatever reason I’m not there to make sure you can get what you need, you can draw on this. But this is also yours, for whatever. Everyone here has done enough. If any of you decide to take this and spend the rest of your life lying on the beach sipping drinks with little umbrellas in them, you have my blessing.”

Steve was staring at the paper in his hand. “Tony, this is insanely generous of you, but I really don’t know if I can-”

Tony waved his hands and did a Mr. Miyagi voice. “Nah-nah-nah! Hurt old man feelings!”

The laughter over that broke the tension. Loki held up his envelope. “Tony, I can-”

“Nope. Now let’s get to the alien presents.”

Loki smiled. “Very well. Each of you has two gifts - well, Pepper and Natasha actually have three apiece, but we’ll get to that. First, I ordered Asgardian garments for each of you.”

Asgardian garments that followed the themes and color schemes of their battle uniforms. Natasha’s was black and made for mobility, and the hourglass at her belt was made of glittering rubies from Zalintyre. Bruce’s was his favorite dark purple with piping the precise shade of the Other Guy’s skin, made from Stark Industries’ Hulk-resistant fabric. And so on.

“I expect you will all visit Asgard one day. You could wear the formal garb of Midgard, or your battle uniforms, but I thought there might be occasions for which this would be appropriate.”
Tony looked at the image of himself in his new outfit which Jarvis was projecting for him. “We certainly are a goodlooking bunch.”

“We are.”

“Hey, did you put a spell on these so that you can magic them off us?” Clint asked, pretending to look suspicious.

Loki hesitated. “Not yours.”

Several eyebrows arched in Loki’s direction.

He sighed. “I only did that to one person’s clothes.”

“Gee, I wonder whose.”

“Woo, that was TMI!” Tony didn’t look like he actually thought it was too much information. Steve, on the other hand, was looking horribly embarrassed, so Loki quickly presented a distraction.

“Pepper’s dress is particularly special.” It was copper and gold, exquisite, but there was more to it than beauty. “Pepper, if you wouldn’t mind catching on fire?”

“It won’t hurt the dress?”

“Not one bit.”

Pepper stepped out onto the balcony, where nothing was flammable. Loki followed her, carrying the small box that contained her other present. She allowed herself to change.

The dress lit up along with her flesh, glittering, radiant. The others, gathered just inside the glass doors out of the cold, gasped at the spectacle. It was a dazzling sight.

“I commissioned this one from Muspelheim, made from the materials of their world. And I got you another gift from Muspelheim as well.” Loki opened the small box and held out an ornately carved object to her. Pepper took it, and as her hand closed around it a glowing blade flamed forth from it.

“It’s like a lightsaber!” she exclaimed, mesmerized.

“I am so jealous,” Tony said, delighted.

“I think we’re all jealous now,” Clint said.

“Only in your fiery form will you be able to call forth the blade. And handle it with great care; that flame will cut through virtually anything.”

Pepper allowed her fires to fade and examined the sword’s hilt. “Amazing!”

“I know you are not a warrior by calling, but it seemed to me suitable that you should have this. And I have one more gift for you: an Asgardian book about the nature of Muspels. Jarvis translated it for us. You are not precisely a Muspel, Pepper, but your fiery form works in a similar fashion to theirs, or you would not be able to activate that sword or make that dress glow.”

She checked to make certain she had her fire under control and embraced him. “Thank you, Loki.”

They went back inside. Bruce took the box with his name on it. It was a little more than a foot tall and wide. “What is it?”
Loki stole a snarky retort from a movie they had watched. “It’s a pony.”

Bruce nodded. “Yeah? Did you make it yourself?”

Loki couldn’t help laughing with the others. “I cannot believe I set that up for you. What have you humans done to me?”

Everyone kept giggling while Bruce opened the box. It contained an Elvish device which used gamma rays to transform gemstones and other raw materials. Midgard had begun to tap that potential of gamma, but this device was far more advanced.

Clint received a quiver of arrows infused with seiðr. “If ever you must combat beings whose race has more seiðr in their bodies - Asgardians, Jotuns, Vanir, Elves - these will penetrate the force field that makes us invulnerable to so many wounds which would be serious injuries to humans.”

“So Superman just gave me some Kryptonite?”

“You could put it that way.” Of course, as a sorcerer Loki had more defenses than most Asgardians - or most Jotuns - but these arrows would not be harmless to him. Nor would the magical weapons he was giving the others.

Similarly, Natasha now had Widow’s Bites that wounded with seiðr instead of with lasers. And from Zalintyre Loki had acquired a necklace and earrings of uncommonly beautiful rubies (set in copper the precise shade of her hair) to go with her Asgardian clothing. She let him fasten the necklace around her throat.

“Wow,” Clint breathed. He was right. She was stunning. She made the rubies more beautiful, rather than the other way around.

“I have an Asgardian telescope for Jane. When I see her again I will give it to her and show her how to use it.”

“What does it do that a human telescope can’t?”

“Nothing, but she can hold it in her hands, whereas a Midgardian telescope with its capabilities would be the size of a car. Here, Tony, I hope you don’t already have one of these.”

“Not in this color,” Tony said as he took the devices out of his box. Loki had designed them himself. “I see these are ready to incorporate into my suit. Do they shoot magic?”

“Essentially, yes. Again, you should reserve these for fighting beings with more seiðr in them. Using them on humans would be a bit like using a flame-thrower to swat a fly. Well, that metaphor is excessive but still, you should not waste this when other means will do.”

“Let’s see what you got your boyfriend.”

“Since Steve insists upon jumping off of tall things, I have an Asgardian rope launcher for him. Unlike a Midgardian one, this one can attach itself to virtually anything, not requiring any anchoring.”

Steve turned it over in his hands, his face alight with the kind of boyish delight he would once have had over a train set or something.

“Loki, this is amazing.”
“I am being selfish. The idea of you - any of you - in danger terrifies me. That is why I am giving you weapons.”

“We love you too,” Tony said with a grin.

They had photos taken of themselves resplendent in their new Asgardian clothes. There was a huge decadent breakfast, and a little experimentation with their magical space gifts, and yet more light-hearted movies, and in the afternoon the Avengers went in pairs to visit hospitals and cheer those who were stuck there on this day.

Late that evening, once they had stuffed themselves yet again and were lying around tired and happy and watching *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Clint said, “You realize there’s no way we’re topping this next year.”

Tony shrugged, slumped down on the sofa with Pepper curled up against him. “Life is rough that way.”

Steve looked around at the room. “Thank you. All of you.”

Loki wanted to say something too, but he couldn’t. So he planted a kiss on his lover’s cheek and was silent, memorizing this moment and adding it to his mental collection.

Whatever else happened in his future, he had had this day. A day of joy and sharing with true shield-brothers.

Chapter End Notes

Roommate suggested the origami decorations and also that Tony would make some out of scraps from his workshop.

I had a lot of fun coming up with gifts for them to give each other. Roommate and funnymagic_aing helped me brainstorm about which fairy tales Steve would depict each Avenger as.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

A grad student interviews Steve Rogers.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading!

Michelle wasn’t generally a lucky person, but that day she just happened to be walking from the library to the subway stop at the right time. When she first saw the crowd on the sidewalk ahead of her, she assumed it was a car accident or maybe a movie shooting, but she heard the excited voices around her - “Captain America, Black Widow, Loki, the Avengers” - and plunged in before she could have second thoughts.

Michelle had to fight to keep her place near the cordon, but she refused to let herself be elbowed away. She was going to do this.

She could see the captain, several yards away, conferring with Loki and the Black Widow about something. Whatever crime they had just foiled. Then approaching the police officers and telling them something, asking them questions if the gestures they made at a nearby building was any indication.

Michelle almost held her breath, hoping that Steve Rogers would come close enough that she could call to him and get his attention. He didn’t.

Eventually, however, Loki of Asgard - wizard, alien prince, and hopefully reformed supervillain - ambled over, apparently to get a better view of something. One of the buildings? Michelle couldn’t tell. She knew only that this might be her one chance. She opened her mouth and spoke before she could lose her nerve.

“Um, Mr. Loki?” He turned to regard her, high cheekbones and pallid face beneath the golden horns, and she hastily amended, “Um, I mean Mr. Friggjarson.” She didn’t have to call him ‘Your Highness’ if she wasn’t a citizen of the country he was a prince of… right?

Apparently not, because he gave her a disarming, friendly smile. “‘Loki’ will do. What is it?”

She swallowed. How could she waste the time of superheroes on this? But her paper could be a source for historians, if she could acquire information that couldn’t be found in a book or the Smithsonian archives - that was, the places where she felt comfortable.

She sucked some air into her lungs, which felt as if they were being crushed.

“I’m sorry to bother you, um, Loki. But um, I’m doing my thesis on Captain Steve Rogers. I was hoping I could ask him - just a couple of questions?” Her voice was a squeak. “Please?”
Loki’s expression was kind. She had watched the footage of him during the Chitauri invasion. It was disorienting to see that half-mad invader looking at her like she was a frightened puppy he wanted to soothe.

He paused for a couple of seconds. “You are shy, aren’t you.”

Well, it had to be pretty obvious. “Yes.”

“I think that sort of courage should be rewarded.” Loki’s face grew more serious. “Are these questions concerning his romantic relationships? Because Steve is very firm about not wanting to discuss such matters.”

Steve. So casual, like he was just another guy. But in a way, he was, that was part of why Captain America mattered.

“Oh, no! I know that. I’ve read all of his interviews. I wouldn’t!” She stopped because Loki was smiling.

“Then come this way.” He held up the cordon. “No one else, just - what is your name, Miss?”

“Michelle.”

“Just Michelle.”

She ducked under the cordon, praying she wouldn’t trip or step on his feet or anything. (Not that she expected he’d even feel it, he was wearing thick boots of leather and metal and besides, she knew he had superstrength.) Loki placed a hand lightly on her back to steer her towards the captain. It was a little scary, like walking close to the bars of a tiger’s cage (as she had once when she had visited a big cat sanctuary). She didn’t believe that Loki meant her any harm, but with the alien strength and the magic, not to mention the huge glowing staff in his hand, it would have been so easy for him to do. She gave him a sidelong glance of awe.

“Steve,” Loki said when they drew near, and with gratitude Michelle realized that Loki was going to explain what she wanted for her. “Can you take a few minutes to do me a favor?”

He turned - Steve Rogers turned his handsome face in her direction, his dreamy blue eyes flitting over her curiously before going to his teammate. “Sure.”

“This young lady is writing her thesis about you. It would be very kind if you answered a few questions.”

He grinned at her, that cute boyish grin she had seen in so many photos. “I should’ve asked you what the favor was before agreeing,” he said with a fleeting glance at Loki, but his tone was joking so Michelle wasn’t worried. Much. Only a tiny bit.

“You should have,” Loki agreed tranquilly.

“You never find out what we’re going to ask you to do for us before you agree.”

“That’s because I already know that I’m going to do it.”

With that, the two Avengers’ eyes met, just for a second, and Michelle knew. They were a thing. It wasn’t much to go on but Michelle was absolutely and completely positive.

Captain America and the alien who had tried - well, pretended to try - to conquer Earth. Of all the
people Michelle might have guessed Steve Rogers would be with, Loki would have been the last.

Steve was looking at her now, giving her another version of the “it’s okay, I won’t bite even if I am famous” look she’d gotten from Loki. This had to be so weird for him. Loki and Tony Stark had grown up in the spotlight, but Steve Rogers had been just another guy before the serum. And now people acted weird around him, either trying to use him or worshiping him as an idol or just being intimidated by him.

Well, she could try not to be intimidated. To treat him like a person.

Loki was moving away, talking to the other people. Michelle drew a shaky breath and held up her phone. “Is it okay if I record this, so that I don’t make any mistakes?”

“Sure.” Steve was being very patient. Smiling. Quickly she pressed the button.

“Thank you! Okay, when you were in Austria, the two main sources differ about….”

He answered her questions promptly and politely. “I’ve been asked to go over all the books that have been written about me,” he shook his head a tiny bit, like he still couldn’t believe anyone would write books about him, “and point out any inaccuracies, or maybe write one of my own, but I really don’t want to relive all of it. I appreciate you letting me set the record straight on some specific things.” He gave her a little frown. “Will historians or whoever have access to your thesis? I don’t know how it works.”

“Yes! It’ll be in the system. And my recording won’t be publicly available, but scholars will be able to listen to it to verify what you’ve said.”

“Is that all of your questions?” When Michelle nodded and stopped the recording, he gestured to her phone. “Why don’t we take a selfie?”

The rain had made her hair frizzy. She was wearing a shirt that really had seen better days because it was the only clean one with a sufficiently high neck to cover a small scratch she’d managed to get on her chest that had become mildly infected and was consequently hideous.

The picture Loki of Asgard took of her with Captain America’s arm around her was her favorite picture of herself ever.
Chapter Summary

The Avengers prepare for what they believe are going to be routine missions.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading and encouragement!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the sun rose, Steve and Loki laid in Loki’s bed, Loki’s head pillowed on Steve’s chest as Steve stroked Loki’s long tousled hair.

They had a great deal to accomplish that day, but neither of them felt like moving just yet. They had awakened shortly before dawn and moved from sleeping intertwined to slow drowsy lovemaking. Both of them were still awed at their good fortune in having each other.

“Loki,” Steve began. He tried to keep his tone gentle, but Loki knew what subject he was about to broach.

Loki sighed. But did not try to stop him. His silver tongue had failed. An entire year of discussions and quarrels, and Steve remained adamant. He would not continue to hide what they were to each other.

“We’re arguing in circles.”

“We are,” Loki conceded. “And I see little point in another round.” He lifted his head and met Steve’s eyes. “Can’t you spare yourself this? Because I ask it of you?”

Steve just looked at him.

Loki sighed again and put his head back down. “Of course you can’t.”

“I love you.”

Loki tightened his arms around his lover for a moment. “I love you.”

“I asked Jarvis. The year is up tomorrow.”

“Can we at least wait until after the diplomatic summit next week?”

“Guess I don’t want heads of state distracted from world peace by my love life. Just so long as you don’t come up with another excuse to put it off after that.”

“Steve.”
“Sorry. That was unfair.”

“Besides, the conference isn’t about peace, it’s about trade agreements. They hope that a thousand-year-old prince has seen enough to give some worthwhile advice about how international commerce should be run.”

“So they’re basically going to ask you What Would Odin Do?”

“Odin would conquer everyone.”

“Ugh, that’s true. I bet you have better ideas.”

“Many. Some of the things I will be saying next week, I said many times to Odin over the centuries. And occasionally he took my advice, if he didn’t happen to feel like conquering someone that week.”

“So after the summit, we tell the world about us.”

“That was our agreement.” Loki hesitated. “Steve, despite all my arguing, the fact is that I fell in love with you precisely because you are the sort of man who will do what you think is right, and damn the world’s opinion.”

“But you keep trying to stop me from it anyway.”

“Are we going to repeat our arguments again? You won’t let the scandal stop you from doing what you must, but it will pain you, we both know it. I will cause you unhappiness.”

“You cause me a lot of happiness, I can handle the down side.”

“We shall handle it together.”

After a couple of hours in the gym, Loki spent the day in the lab with Bruce and Tony. They set aside their other projects for the moment to work with the gamma camera Tony had just acquired for them. “SHIELD supposedly has a prototype of a new one that will raise scintigraphy to the next level,” Bruce said as he adjusted the settings. “They want me to go take a look at it next week. If it’s all they say, it could revolutionize medical diagnoses.”

“You humans are astounding. Nature did not give you magic, so you found ways to wield magic with instruments.”

Tony preened. “We are just that awesome.”

“We should examine my Jotun form with this device.” A few weeks after Jane’s faux pas over the matter, Loki had mastered his feelings sufficiently for them to resume their studies of Jotun physiology. He had also kept his promise to Steve, who now had a sketchbook devoted to drawings of Loki as a Jotun. Loki’s revulsion for the form had gradually dimmed - without entirely going away. He did intend to allow human xenobiologists to study him. Sometime.

Perhaps after the initial fuss over his relationship with Steve being made public had died down.

Fury pocketed his phone, relieved. Stark hadn’t kicked up much fuss about going to a child’s birthday party. He’d whined about it some, but Fury had expected that. Stark just had to remind Fury
that he didn’t take Fury’s orders.

That done, he took the elevator down to monitor the progress of Project Insight. Coulson was there, conferring with one of the technicians. When he saw Fury he came over to him.

“We’ll be ready for launch next week, as planned.” Coulson said this with satisfaction. He had been one of Project Insight’s chief architects. “Once this is done, we’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“That’s optimistic.” Fury looked at the fleet of helicarriers. “You line up a team for your op next week?”

“Lopez, Taylor, and Barton.”

“The Avengers let him come out and play, huh.”

Coulson’s thin lips curved in a little smile. “For a few days, anyhow.”

For the hundredth time, Fury considered informing Coulson about Deep Shadow. He’d be a useful asset. And for the hundredth time, he decided against it. He didn’t know who he could trust with his suspicions that SHIELD had been compromised. He had told six people, knowing that every one of them was a huge risk.

Maybe his appetite for risk was just used up for the day.

“Be sure the report on the Phase Three weapons is on my desk tomorrow,” Fury said, and turned to leave.

“Iron Man is now entertainment for little kids’ birthday parties,” Tony told Pepper that night, alone in their room.

Pepper, who was standing in her walk-in closet, removing the gold-and-pearl earrings Tony had given her for her birthday, looked at him over her shoulder. “How’s that?”

“Fury called me. The Secretary of Defense got him to promise to get me to his great-niece’s birthday party in return for some other favor.”

“And you’re going to do it?”

“Yeah. Not for Fury, but because I don’t want to let down an eight-year-old girl. You keep reminding me we superheroes have to do the little things.”

Pulling on a silk robe, Pepper emerged and came to him. He was leaning against a bureau, drink in hand as usual. She took it from him, set it on top of the bureau and pulled him close. He rested his head on her shoulder, closing his eyes.

“Those personal things will make all the difference.” She ruffled his hair. “Remember how depressed Steve was when you first met him?”

“Yeah, well, he’d only been awake a month or so. From his perspective, everyone he’d ever known or cared about had just died.”

“And look at him now. He’s happy and in love. And you finally found a boyfriend for Rhodey.”

Tony smiled, not lifting his head. “I knew he and Bruce would hit it off. I just didn’t know Bruce
liked dudes.”

“According to him, neither did he.”

“And he says the Other Guy is easier to control now. Both because he’s happier and because the Hulk gets to come out and play now and then.”

“The whole team is so much happier now. You all have each other. And Tony, they owe that to you. You were the one who gathered them all and found ways to keep them here. You were the one who thought that together, the Avengers could be more than the sum of their parts.”

Tony at last lifted his head and smiled at her. Taking her hand, he escorted her in courtly fashion to her favorite chair. She leaned back in it, looking at her beloved, happy. “I really do think we’re making a difference in the world. Not just by fighting aliens and giant robots, either.”

“By going to eight-year-olds’ birthday parties.”

“Yep.” He knelt in front of her.

Pepper leaned forward, took his face in her hands, and kissed him.

He looked at her. Pepper, the embodiment of everything good in the world, everything worth saving. The one who made his grandiose schemes possible in the real world. The one he could trust with every secret.

“Tony, it’s working. Your plan is working.”

“Don’t jinx it,” he said, but he was joking.

A few days later Steve and Natasha were awakened shortly before dawn by phone calls. Nick Fury, summoning them for duty.

“You want the whole team?” Steve asked, throwing back the sheets and stretching. Loki’s eyes blinked open.

“Just you and Romanoff, and our strike team. The bad guys are plain humans with normal weapons. Pirates.”

“Gosh, the world moved forward while I was asleep. I suppose we have highwaymen again too.”

“Take the jet.” Fury ended the call.

Steve dressed swiftly and grabbed the duffle bag he always kept packed in case of things like this. Before leaving, he gave a still half-asleep Loki a quick kiss.

“See you in a few days.”

Loki smiled, eyes still closed. “See you.”

Chapter End Notes
So we're about to get to the "Captain America: The Winter Soldier" part of the story. If you haven't seen the movie, now's the time. (It's really, really good.) Especially since I'm not going to describe the events of CAWS in detail; I wouldn't be able to add anything to what the movie already did.

Also, in the next few chapters I'm going to ask you to let me handwave the timeline some. I spent a large chunk of January trying to make this work, and eventually realized we have two choices: either I could spend the next five months sweating out convincing reasons for the assorted Avengers to take four days to call each other on the phone while the world is ending - meaning there won't be any hope of the OT3 getting together until probably next fall - or we can all pretend the timing works so that we can get on with the part of the story I'll enjoy writing and you'll enjoy reading. So handwave it is.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Fury tells Captain America about Project Insight.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading, and to all of my readers for giving me the go-ahead for the timeline handwave!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fury turned with resignation when Rogers’s voice rang out.

“You just can’t stop yourself from lying, can you?”

Damn. Fury had hoped Romanoff would be able to keep her side mission secret from Rogers. He’d known Rogers wouldn’t handle it well.

It had also been something of a test. Romanoff’s loyalty was now divided between SHIELD and the Avengers. So was Barton’s. Fury wanted to know where the line was.

Fury didn’t explain why he was leading Steve to the elevator. Taking him down to where Project Insight was nearing completion.

There was no reason to tell Rogers about Project Insight before it was launched. He wasn’t involved in the project, he didn’t need to know about it for his own duties.

No. Fury was showing him in hopes of quieting his own doubts about the project. If it passed muster with Captain America, it had to be okay.

Fury rarely felt the need for moral guidance from others, but in this case, his internal debate had been going in circles for months. The reasons for and against were both compelling. He needed a tie-breaker.

“After the Chitauri invasion, I convinced the World Security Council that we needed a quantum surge in threat analysis.”

Rogers looked at him like he was insane. “What kind of ‘threat analysis’ could have predicted that a Norse god would come through a wormhole and bring an army of giant insects?”

And there it was. Fury had let his fear compromise his judgment. They would sacrifice human freedom and their own integrity for a costly (in money and labor) illusion of security that would be rendered irrelevant when fairies from outer space decided to drop in.

There was no predicting threats in this brave new world.
He kept arguing, of course. Reversing Project Insight would be a massive undertaking. So he defended the plan, and he and Rogers argued for two hours standing in the midst of the fleet of helicarriers, and the argument branched out and eventually Rogers was accusing Fury and SHIELD of mistreating spoiled brat and egomaniac Tony Stark.

Fury could prove that wasn’t the case. “I not only saved Tony Stark’s life, but I also provided the guidance he needed to finish his father’s work. The result of that being the creation of a new element, which might be extremely useful in reproducing the Tesseract.”

Fury stopped there, because Rogers looked incredulous. “Guidance? You illegally put him under house arrest! Coulson threatened him with torture, did you know that? Do you know what being tasered would do to a man with an arc reactor and shrapnel in his heart? It might’ve killed him!”

“I saved his life.”

“You sent Natasha to spy on him and then had her inject him with an experimental drug without even warning him, never mind getting his consent! It worked, but that was just good luck!”

Rogers was furious. Stark had spent over a year charming the man and now he was on Team Iron Man. And now his usefulness as a moral barometer against which Fury could check his own was compromised.

He ended the argument knowing that SHIELD would be hearing from the Avengers about this. Fury might’ve been too clever for his own good when he created the team. It had taken on a life of its own.

Whatever. Fury still had a way to settle his doubts. He would talk to the one man he trusted above all others: Alexander Pierce.

Chapter End Notes

Fury's jaw-dropping boast that by kidnapping Tony Stark and performing a nonconsensual medical experiment on him he was giving him "guidance" is from the tie-in comic “Fury's Big Week”. It inspired me to kidnap Elon Musk and then take credit for giving him the "guidance" he needed to solve cold fusion while he was locked in my basement.
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Having separated the Avengers, Hydra starts taking them down.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading!

Late on the first morning of the summit, an aide asked Loki to take a few minutes to confer with the U.S. Secretary of Defense. Loki agreed and the aide escorted him to an office where Pierce was waiting for him, along with a few other men. They shook hands and there was a brief cacophony of introductions and rapid questions, each of the humans interrupting the others.

Later Loki realized that this had been a deliberate, and successful, effort to distract him from the door opening - his back was to it, he had gotten complacent on a world of weak beings with no magic, he would never be so overconfident again - and the Phase 2 gun leveled at him. The one Agent Coulson had shot him with during the Chitauri invasion.

The humans knew from experience that it would hurt but not kill Loki. They needed Asgard’s prince alive.

The shock of the weapon had Loki lying dazed on the floor, in too much pain to do more than continue breathing. His attacker stepped close and stood over him. A man with long dark hair, masked, a mechanical arm keeping the weapon trained on Loki.

When he could speak, Loki promptly began to play for time. Time to recover, to gather his magic. “I’ll cooperate.”

“Remember the footage of the Chitauri,” Pierce said, voice even and hypnotic. “This is the man who brought them here. He brought an alien army to Earth and tried to conquer it. The world needs you to protect us.”

The masked man was absolutely still.

Loki’s head was still ringing from the blow. Even with his healing abilities, it would be several minutes before he could even walk, let alone do magic to defend himself. Or to attack.

“I surrender,” Loki said, trying to match Pierce’s soothing tone. “I am badly injured. I will allow you to take me into custody. I am not a threat.”

“Shoot him again,” Pierce said to the masked man. The weapon blazed. Loki blacked out.

Pierce’s great-niece was an excellent child. Emily was her name. Eight years old and smart as a
whip, she liked Tony Stark the engineer as much as Iron Man the superhero. The playroom where her party was happening was lined both with dolls wearing pretty dresses and showing the wear of much affection and with things she’d made out of Erector sets.

Oh, and plastic dinosaurs. Lots of plastic dinosaurs.

He told her and the other kids about how he’d saved all those people who were falling out of that plane, and she eagerly took in his tangent about how the electrocution of the others’ arms had kept them all together. Because of that, he followed up with a few instructions for tinkering that he thought she would be able to comprehend.

Then cake was brought in, and after Emily blew out the candles everyone was more interested in sugar intake than in superheroes. Not that he minded, it was good cake: yellow cake, chocolate frosting and pink frosting flowers.

He had almost finished his piece when Pierce appeared at his elbow. “You ready for an adult beverage?”

Tony looked over at the birthday girl. She and a boy were making two of her plastic dinosaurs fight and debating whether a triceratops or a stegosaurus would win in a cage match. The discussion seemed on the verge of the “I know you are but what am I” stage. Yeah, Tony could sit that one out.

He would totally use it the next time he was arguing with another Avenger, though. He wouldn’t want them to think he was getting mature.

So he let Pierce lead him to the oak-paneled book-lined study where Emily’s parents did their grownup stuff. Tony set his folded suit on the thickly carpeted floor beside one of the leather-upholstered recliners and accepted the cognac Pierce offered him.

Good stuff. The man had taste.

Tony waited for Pierce to sit across from him before cutting to the chase. “Stark Industries isn’t going to make weapons again.”

Pierce looked a little surprised, then gave a charming, well-practiced smile. “I didn’t think it was. You’ve made your position abundantly clear.” He held up a hand to forestall further argument. “Yes, I tried to change your mind a few years ago, but that’s because doing so was my job. We’ve found other suppliers.”

“Hope the rest of them can stay out of prison.” Fucking Justin Hammer. And Killian.

“That would be nice. Anyhow, thank you for coming. It meant the world to Emily. You’re her hero. I wanted her to have a chance to meet you, just in case.”

“Keep encouraging her to build stuff. Kids need to be encouraged. Specially girls.” The words were oddly difficult to get out.

Huh. Usually it took a lot more than one drink to get him slurring. Maybe more of last night’s hooch was still in his system than he’d thought. He should’ve had more breakfast. Or more cake.

Oh shit.

He reached for the suit but wasn’t in time. The sting in his neck told him he’d been tranked like a fucking rhino, by some buff blond guy in a grey suit.
Pierce contentedly sipped his cognac, smiling serenely, while Tony’s vision went blurry.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Hydra goes after the Hulk.

Chapter Notes

Warning: non-graphic violence in this chapter. Don't worry, no good guys were harmed in the writing of this chapter. One of them did get a wee bit cranky, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Commander Grasty of SHIELD (and of Hydra) was going to be the man who took down the Hulk. He had planned the mission out to the last detail.

He watched Banner walk onto the helicarrier through the numerous surveillance cameras, occasionally softly speaking orders into the earbuds his subordinates were wearing. (He had to watch at a distance because Banner was known to be an intuitive person and might have sensed that Grasty was his doom if he laid eyes on him. It wasn’t because he was afraid of the Hulk, of course.)

Good, get Banner into the room with the cage. It was such a shame those fucking Norse gods had destroyed the old Hulk cage, it had been a stupendous achievement, a brilliant strategy. But hey, the taxpayer was footing the bill, no reason not to just make another!

Banner was pissed when he reached the Central Room and found the instrument of his demise instead of the advanced prototype gamma camera he’d been promised. Grasty watched with fascination as Banner clearly tried to stop himself from transforming.

“Get him into the cage!” Grasty hissed into the earbuds. His minions obediently drew their guns and aimed them at Banner.

Banner turned green.

The agents shot him.

The bullets bounced off the Hulk’s body harmlessly. Banner turned greener and larger.

“Get him into the cage!” Grasty shouted. Why weren’t those morons following his instructions?

One of them - Cooper was his name, Grasty was pretty sure, and he was definitely Hydra - made the desperate move of shooting the Hulk in the face and then running into the cage himself. Good man. Sacrificing himself for the glory of Hydra.

The Hulk chased him into the cage. Unfortunately, he was so large by now that his bulk smashed the doorway of the Hulk cage. With so many steel rods and chunks of steel door twisted by his entrance, the cage couldn’t drop through the hole made for it.
“Hail Hydra!” Cooper screamed with his last breath. Grasty averted his eyes.

Then started barking orders into everyone’s earbuds, not bothering to speak softly anymore. “All personnel to the Central Room! Angry Man is still on board! Fire at will!”

Some of the agents cravenly stayed away. Most bravely ran to the Central Room and opened fire. The Hulk just kept howling like some prehistoric monster and smashing up the helicarrier.

It was almost like the angrier they made him, the more powerful he was.

“Aim for his eyes! Get one of those bullets through his SKULL!” Grasty screamed into the comm.

The Hulk froze for a second, and Grasty realized he’d heard him.

Then the Hulk came barreling through the five thick metal walls between himself and Grasty.

Grasty’s death was not in keeping with the dignity of a Hydra operative of his rank. He didn’t even manage a “Hail Hydra” before it was over.

Chapter End Notes

WHY do they keep sending people after the Hulk with GUNS? And just how was that stupid Hulk cage in "Loki II: Avengers Assemble" supposed to work?
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Alexander Pierce tells Loki a little about his grand plan.

When Loki came to, aching badly all over and head pounding, he was in a small wood-lined cell, lying on a narrow mattress. The room was stiflingly hot.

It was a *sauna*.

Why had he been so foolish as to publicize his weaknesses? He had been so anxious that the realms know what desperation had driven him to his misdeeds. That he had not been driven by evil motives. It should have occurred to him that someone would use the knowledge against him. That enemies would try to keep him too weak to gather his strength or his seiðr by roasting him as Thanos had.

He leapt to his feet and started tearing up the walls, but there was solid steel behind the wood, and after perhaps half a minute he was shot again. The Phase 2 gun was protruding through a hole in the wall, evidently constructed for that very purpose.

Loki laid still on the floor this time, waiting, trying to rein in his rising panic.

After a moment, a screen on the wall lit up, and there was the face of Alexander Pierce. Looking very confident. “Try to escape and you’ll be shot again. As many times as it takes.”

“Why?”

In Pierce’s place, Loki would have turned off the screen without answering. Left his captive with no knowledge of the situation.

Pierce, however, was ready to talk. “The queen of Asgard might not agree with Earth’s plans for itself. You’re her weakness - and she handed you right over to us.”

Keep him talking. Challenge him so that he will give up information for the satisfaction of proving that he is right.

Loki licked his lips, already dry and chapped. The feel of the rough skin on his tongue evoked a cascade of harrowing memories. It was hard to choose his words with those horrors in his mind.

“This ‘weakness’ of hers enabled her to slay the most powerful sorcerer in the Nine Realms and become the queen of everything.”

“Your mother is sentimental. She’s only queen at all because she wanted to look after her little boy. You think she’ll send an army here when we have a knife to her brat’s throat?”

“The last time I was in danger, my mother killed her own husband.”

Pierce shook his head. “She really doesn’t know what she’s doing. Asgard would be better off with Odin still in charge. He was strong enough to make the hard decisions.”
Hm. Pierce seemed to be missing the point of Loki’s remarks.

Pierce continued, “If we held you hostage, he’d tell us to bugger off.”

“No doubt.”

“I bet he’d even sacrifice his real son.”

“I believe you are correct. That, you may recall, is why his own queen slipped a knife between his ribs and seized his throne.”

“Which is why I never remarried.”

Loki couldn’t help a tiny chuckle, despite the pain. He had put it three different ways and Pierce still did not see the flaw in his strategy. How gravely he had underestimated not only Frigga, but Frigga’s adopted son. “And what are these plans Midgard has for itself that you fear my queen will not allow?”


Loki borrowed a line of Fury’s. “Yes, you say safety. I kind of think you mean the other thing.”

“This is in humanity’s best interests.” Pierce’s eyes narrowed, mocking. “You know that they crave subjugation. They were born to be ruled.”

“You do realize I said all that rot to piss you humans off so you would stop me from conquering you, don’t you?”

“You should’ve allied with us. You could have ruled Earth with us as your council. We’d have worked well together.”

“What have you done to the other Avengers?”

“Don’t hope for rescue. We’ve planned for every contingency.”

Loki had failed his shield-brothers. They were scattered across the continent, isolated from each other, unable to rescue each other.

Loki tried to push the fear for them down. He had faith in the Avengers. They would all find ways to survive and escape. He would believe that until he knew differently.

A metal drawer opened up, holding one small bottle. “Have some water.”

Wise prisoners accepted every resource they were offered. Loki sat up and drained half the bottle in one long swallow. It eased his misery by a tiny measure.

“I advise you to make it last. You won’t get more until tomorrow.” The screen went dark.

Frigga was likely observing from Hlíðskjálf at this very moment. Their magical link would have alerted her to his peril. She must fear for him.

Loki had not yet chosen his method of escape, but first he would reassure his queen. He would be out of this cell within the hour.

“Mother, if you’re watching….” He smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ve got this.”
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Meanwhile, Steve, Natasha and their new friend Sam Wilson are finding out that SHIELD is Hydra... and that Bucky Barnes is still alive.

A moment from the Winter Soldier movie - with a smidgen of additional dialogue.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading!

Sam Wilson sat in the back of the armored van, handcuffed and exhausted.

It was like his ten-year-old fantasies come true.

A pair of superheroes had shown up on his doorstep and asked him to rescue them. And apologized for it.

Like he wouldn’t jump off a cliff for Captain America.

Who, by the way, was a sassy mofo.

But apparently the world had become a much more exciting place in the last few days anyway. Hydra was still in existence. SHIELD was controlled by Hydra. So was the World Security Council, apparently. The other Avengers had to be out of action, one way or another, or they’d have come to help Steve and Natasha.

Instead, Sam Wilson, retired pararescueman, was swooping in to help Captain America and the Black Widow fend off an evil conspiracy and a cyborg super-assassin who had moves that actually gave Cap and Widow a challenge.

Lucky for them, Sam had their backs.

To make things even weirder, Cap was insisting that the super-assassin was Bucky Barnes, back from the dead.

“It was him.” Steve was staring at the floor. Dazed. In shock. “He looked right at me like he didn’t even know me.”

“How is that even possible? It was, like, seventy years ago.”

Already Cap was putting the pieces together. He spoke slowly, painfully. “Zola. Bucky’s whole unit was captured in ’43. Zola experimented on him. Whatever he did helped Bucky survive the fall. They must have found him and….” That famous boyish face filled with horror as the implications came clear.
Despite her own pain and physical shock, Natasha was quick to reassure him. The Avengers looked after each other. “None of that's your fault, Steve.”

Steve stared at the floor. Blaming himself. His voice was bleak. “Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky.”

Natasha looked… concerned. Worried. “What about….”

She didn’t complete the sentence, but Steve obviously knew what she meant. He raised his eyes to her, looking miserable.

Sam made the connection. Steve was involved with someone, and whoever it was, would have to step aside for Bucky Barnes.

Whoever he or she was, Sam felt for them.

The Black Widow slumped against Sam. That might have been for show, but the greyness of her skin couldn’t be. She was right beside him and Sam was manacled and couldn’t help her.

Rescue instincts activated, Sam turned to the helmeted thugs and raised his voice. “We need to get a doctor here! If we don't put pressure on that wound, she's gonna bleed out here in the truck!”

One of the helmeted guys raised a cattle prod and activated it. Sam shut up for a moment as it buzzed; he didn’t want to piss their guards off enough that they electrocuted his already injured new friends.

But instead of assaulting the prisoners, the cattle-prod-wielding guard knocked the other guard out with a smooth motion that showed damn fine training. Then took off the helmet to reveal tumbling dark brown hair and a pretty face.

Their rescuer was a cute girl.

“Ugh, that thing was squeezing my brain.” The pretty face turned to him and sparkling blue eyes moved over him, showing that his appreciation was reciprocated. “Who’s this guy?” she asked with approval.

“Maria Hill, Sam Wilson,” Steve said as Sam hurried to put pressure on Natasha’s wound.

Maria Hill? The Maria Hill of SHIELD?

Any minute now, Superman was going to swoop down and give Sam a medal. And maybe Santa Claus would show up with a pony.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Hydra agent Phil Coulson takes Pepper Potts into custody. How difficult could that be? Sure, she's a human torch, but still, she's just a civilian.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading.

I expect I'll get some flak for this from Coulson fans, but as I reference in this chapter, Coulson's actions, up to the point where I stopped watching canon (TDW), are objectively horrifying. No way would Hydra not have snapped this guy up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was petty, yes, but Coulson was going to enjoy this. He’d had to allow Pierce and the Asset to handle Stark, but he’d have his crack at Stark later. For now he’d settle for Potts.

Nice thing about being the government: you outranked private security guards. Coulson waved his SHIELD badge at the receptionist and made his way inside Stark Industries, flanked by four armed SHIELD agents. All of whom were also Hydra. The security guards couldn’t stop them.

Two more SHIELD-Hydra agents guarded their techie, Osbourne, while he commandeered the computer room and got to work. The receptionist was trying to alert Potts, but he doubted she would get more than a few words before they were cut off.

It wouldn’t make any difference either way.

They’d known Potts had a panic button in her office, but they had the door open inside a minute, and Osbourne had already blocked the panic signal from reaching the police, Potts’s lawyers, or the Avengers. Not that any of the Avengers were in any position to be receiving messages right now anyway.

Behind her desk, Potts was trying to look surprised. “Phil! What can I do for you?”

Potts was good at pretending to be friendly to people she hated, but Coulson was trained to see through acts like that. Of course she hated him; he’d been her boyfriend’s jailor. He wished that Stark had given him the excuse he would have needed to zap him. True, it might have killed him, what with the arc reactor, and then SHIELD and therefore Hydra wouldn’t have had any more Stark inventions, but it would have been so damn satisfying.

It would have been like the time he’d gotten to shoot Loki. He’d been so disappointed that Loki had stepped away from the Hulk cage’s controls as requested and put his hands up, but he’d prepared to shoot him anyway. Who would know, right? But just as he’d armed the experimental gun and put his finger on the trigger, it had turned out Loki had been casting an illusion and was behind him, and
stabbed him. Sneaky bastard, nearly killing Coulson when Coulson was trying to kill him.

Bad enough he hadn’t had the chance to torture the truth of Thor’s origins out of Thor while he had been deprived of his powers. He had been savoring the thought of having that powerful body strapped down to a table, at his mercy.

Well, soon Rogers would be in a cryo tank side by side with Barnes, assuming Barnes survived, and that fantasy would be fulfilled. Rogers would be even better than Thor, just because as a child Coulson had spent so many hours looking at that handsome boyish face and powerful body.

A weapon like Rogers should belong to Hydra. And soon, he would.

Coulson smiled at Potts, serene. “We’ve got each of the Avengers in custody. Stark is still sleeping off the tranquilizer dart, and Agent Osbourne has disabled Jarvis. Miss Potts, you’re going to have to come with us.”

She stared at him, all pretense gone, and then flamed up, just as he had expected she would. As he had hoped she would. He took the hose from one of his guards and blasted her with it.

The foam didn’t turn her human again, but it did restrain her fires. And then hardened around her, encasing her.

She glared at him, infuriated.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Aside from you and Stark not interfering with our aims, we want the remaining Stark missiles you have stockpiled.”

To her credit, Potts didn’t seem surprised that he knew about them. “And if I refuse?”

Coulson smiled. “We’d like to get a few more years of inventions out of Stark, but the fact is, we’ve gotten all we really need from him.”

She went very still. Then her shoulders slumped.

“The codes to access that warehouse are in Stark Tower. In our bedroom.”

“You do understand that Stark Tower is now under our control.”

She sighed. “Yes. They’re kept there because - well, in case of something like what’s happening right now. And before you ask, they’re much too long for me to have memorized. That was deliberate.”

He smiled thinly. If this was an attempt at tricking him, she would find out once she got into the Tower that it really was now in his control.

She said nothing during the drive to the Tower, just sulked. About time someone put Potts in her
place.

The Tower’s AI ignored her orders to admit them, but yielded to Coulson. Coulson enjoyed that a lot. Potts didn’t.

He let her see Stark first. They had emptied out one of the Tower’s guest rooms, so all it contained was a thin mattress and one naked bulb overhead. They weren’t taking any chances with Stark’s deviousness. Stark was lying naked on the mattress, groaning as the tranquilizer finally wore off. A heavily armed man stood guard beside the mattress. Probably that was overkill, but Stark was arrogant. The psychological effect was necessary.

His arc reactor was gone. Coulson assumed the alien wizard had something to do with that. Canny of Stark, keeping that secret until now.

Potts went pale when she saw. “Let him out of there! Do you have any idea what this will be like for him? After Afghanistan?”

“That’s the idea.”

Potts turned to him, and in his face she saw. He meant business. He was in control here.

She swallowed. “Don’t hurt him. You can have the missiles, just let him out of that room!”

“Give us the missiles and then we’ll discuss it.”

She stared at her lover for another moment before tearing herself away and leading them all to the bedroom she shared with Stark. A petty part of Coulson hoped that there would be whips and chains or some other embarrassing equipment lying around, but if they had any it was put away. Well, Potts was a neat freak, she would probably see to that.

She went to her dresser. Among the high-end cosmetics and the understated but expensive jewelry she wore to the office were a few other things: a Starkphone that had of course been disabled, a paper pad with a pen, a small stuffed bunny which must be a souvenir of something, and an elaborately but strangely carved paperweight which Coulson suspected was a trinket from the alien.

It had been examined before they let Potts into this room, of course. It was just a hunk of rock, or they would have taken it away.

Potts sat at her dresser and reached for her quotidian jewelry. (The fancy stuff for special occasions was in a safe.) Coulson felt satisfaction that his guess had been correct: somehow one of these apparently innocent items held the codes they needed, encrypted somehow. Stark had seen *The Da Vinci Code* too many times.

Carefully Potts laid her necklaces and bracelets out on the dresser, pausing to switch a couple of them a couple of times.

“Let’s go, Miss Potts, we don’t have all day.”

Potts didn’t look up. “From what you say, you have the rest of our lives. Give me a minute to get this right.” Absently, she moved a couple of little jars of makeup aside, and also the paperweight.

She turned and burst into flame again. Coulson and one of his agents foamed her again.

Only to find that a flame had sprung from the paperweight, and it was cutting through the foam even as it hardened. They sprayed more foam on her, frantically, and she sliced through it like it was
cookie dough.

Coulson dropped the foam hose and fumbled for his gun. This weapon should cut through any Kevlar in existence, it had an exploding shell that should even kill a human torch.

He never got a chance to aim it, let alone fire it. Pepper’s flaming sword cut him in half.

“Hail Hydra,” he whispered with his last breath.

Pepper looked at the terrified SHIELD agents, who were clearly trying to decide what to do.

“You can attack me, you can send assassins after me, that's fine. But nobody messes with my boyfriend.”

They turned and fled.

Two agents were standing guard outside the room where Tony was. She held up the Muspel sword Loki had given her.

“Drop your weapons and carry Tony to our bedroom. Gently. Follow my instructions and I’ll let you live.”

The agent beside Tony’s mattress took the deal too. “Get out. Don’t come back,” she ordered once he was on their bed, and they did.

Once they were alone, Pepper let her flames die and got a glass of water from the bathroom for Tony. Tony was still half-drugged but he recognized her and let her urge him to a sitting position and hold the drink to his lips.

After a minute or two, his mind cleared enough for him to be alarmed. “Pep! Did they hurt you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I chased them off. I killed Coulson.”

“You always save me.” He wrapped clumsy arms around her, still somewhat doped. “Pep. I love you so much. I’m so sorry.”

“Shh. We need you to reclaim Jarvis.”

He smiled at her. “Jarvis? End Protocol Possum.”

“At once, sir. Allow me to update you on the status of your shield-brothers.”

Chapter End Notes

“You can attack me, you can send assassins after me, that's fine. But nobody messes with my boyfriend,” is something Buffy once said after someone attacked Angel. It fits Pepper, who has saved her knight in distress in three different movies. :-(
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Loki escapes from his cell.

Loki poured the rest of the water down his throat and took advantage of the slight relief it gave him to still his thoughts and choose his path.

A careful scrutiny of the room showed no weak spots through which he might hope to tear his way out, not without being shot again before he was free.

He could take the Zeta Reticulan transporter from his pocket dimension and escape. If he saw no other means after a few minutes of thought, he would do that. But he would prefer to keep that object secret from Frigga.

Loki loved his mother utterly. He obeyed his queen willingly. But after the last few years, after realizing he had served an evil tyrant for a thousand years, after being made the tool of a fiend, Loki had resolved: henceforth, the decision to obey would be his. He would allow no one, not even his beloved mother who had saved him, the means of compelling him against his will. He would keep the means of choosing his own destiny.

He slowly settled himself onto the mattress again. Every move intensified the burning ache throughout his body as it struggled to repair itself in these horrid conditions.

If only he were a genuine Asgardian, without this Jotun weakness in the face of stifling heat. If only he had not been a sorcerous runt, so that Odin would not have found him worth the abducting. If only they had foolishly tried to torment him with cold instead.

A desperate inspiration came to him. He should have thought of it sooner, he should have tested the possibility. At this moment it was his best hope of escaping without revealing the transporter.

He thought of the Muspel book he had given Pepper and Tony for Christmas. The study he and the Science Gang had done of the differences between Pepper’s fiery form and that of a Muspel. He thought of the Muspel cell structure he had read about in the book’s pages. He thought of how his Jotun form morphed into his Asgardian form and back again, intuitively reduced it to its principles.

He looked at his hands, and watched them turn glowing red.

The change stole over him, uncomfortable as it happened but when it was done, the sweltering room was comfortable to him, refreshing like a warm bath. His clothes burned up and fell away from him, leaving him naked and red-orange. He easily stood out of the gun’s range, invigorated.

A stream of concentrated fire from his hands melted the steel of the walls. In less than a minute Loki had burned a hole large enough for him to step through.

The agents who had been manning the weapon sensibly ran away.

With every step Loki took, his Muspel feet left melted spots on the floor.
He reached the corridor in time to see someone just fleeing around a corner, out of his sight. He paused long enough to shift back to his usual Asgardian form, materializing new clothes onto himself, including a full supply of knives and his horned helm. Then set off down the corridor.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Loki and Clint escape from Hydra.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading!

A reputation for being badass had its down side. Such as that when the baddies gassed you, when you came to you weren’t just handcuffed. Oh, no, you were shackled with heavy chains and thick manacles, trussed up so tightly that you could barely squirm. Also gagged. Not blindfolded, at least, allowing Clint to see that he was alone in a barren room with metal walls and no furniture.

Clint let his head loll, hoping his captors would think he wasn’t entirely alert yet, carefully testing the chains. If there was a weak link, a bit of wiggle room somewhere, he could work with it.

He tried not to tense when two men in black, armed with cattle prods and with guns on their belts, entered the room and took up places on either side of the door. Dammit, he was bait. Probably for one of the other Avengers. Or more than one.

A moment later, Loki appeared in the doorway.

Shit. That’s why they hadn’t just killed him: they were going to use him as a hostage to control the alien prince. Maybe they had the others too, for the same reason. Whoever they were.

Clint couldn’t speak, but he made muffled noises and shook his head frantically, trying to warn Loki with his eyes.

Like a fucking idiot, Loki’s eyes got wide when he saw him. “Clint!” he exclaimed, and ignoring Clint’s signals just rushed right over to him. The goons moved in with their cattle prods.

And the air then prickled with static electricity as the prods met with the illusion of Loki leaning over Clint. The goons had maybe half a second to recover from their surprise before the real Loki showed up right behind them and knocked them both out.

Clint had known Loki was too smart to fall into that trap.

The real Loki removed Clint’s gag and went to work on the shackles. “Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“What do you know?”

“Nothing. Got gassed on the copter on the way to the op, woke up here. You?”
“I don’t know much, I just got out of my cell a few minutes ago. But I believe our shield-brothers have also been captured. The secretary of defense is involved. I think he is trying to take over the world.”

“Good intel, but I was actually asking if you’re injured. You don’t look so good.”

Loki glanced up at him, a little surprised. “Yes, but I’m functional.” The last of the cuffs on Clint’s ankles fell away and he stood up, circling his cramped shoulders. Then helped himself to Kevlar and a gun from one of the unconscious goons on the floor. Loki took the other’s gun and they set out, Loki in the lead because he was less breakable than a mere mortal.

They paused at a cage - no other word for it - with a reclining chair in the center. With straps. And some kind of electrical device around where a person’s head would be.

Neither spoke, but their eyes met grimly for a second before they continued searching the place.

They found the remaining enemies, seven of them, lying in wait for them in another room that was lined with computers. They opened fire the moment Clint and Loki stepped into view, but Loki blocked the bullets with a forcefield and then flung knives, killing six of them instantly. The seventh, who was wearing a lab coat instead of black Kevlar, was unarmed and had taken cover behind one of the terminals.

Loki went to that man, hauled him to his feet, and slammed him against the wall, holding him there with a hand closed over his throat.

“Talk.”

“I will tell you nothing.”

The hairs on Clint’s arms stood up then, because suddenly Loki of the Avengers was gone. The unholy glee in those green eyes belonged to the supervillain who had first come through the Tesseract with mad words and dire threats. “Really?”

Lab coat man went pale. Clint didn’t blame him.

Loki lifted a hand, smiling slowly. A green light glowed above his palm.

“Are you sure? Please say you are.”

Lab coat man was starting to sweat. “You’re too late! The helicarriers launched half an hour ago!”

“What helicarriers?”

Clint was already typing on one of the keyboards, even as the man babbled.

“Hydra has taken its rightful place after decades of planning! No one can stand against us now. The other Avengers are all in our custody. The Hulk is probably dead by now. Hail Hydra!”

“Hydra was destroyed decades ago.”

“Cut off one head, two more will take its place!”

Clint had found what he wanted. A news broadcast appeared on one of the screens. Their interrogatee shut up, looking even more ashen than before as footage of helicarriers crashing from the sky played, accompanied by a recording of a stirring call to action from Captain America.
“The price of freedom is high,” Steve’s voice said as on the screen various SHIELD/Hydra agents were escorted handcuffed into police vans, “but it’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

Then the scene changed to the Hulk tearing up the remains of another helicarrier while idiots tried to shoot him.

Clint typed some more, and Jarvis’s familiar British-accented voice spoke. “Agent Barton, the others will be most relieved that I have heard from you.”

Both Avengers in the room exhaled in relief, Loki dropping both the supervillain act and his captive, and Jarvis gave them a swift status report in exchange for Clint’s. Tony had escaped house arrest and was currently flying to the Hulk to help calm him down. Pepper was safe in the Tower, Rhodey was on assignment in Europe and was also confirmed safe, Steve and Natasha were in stable condition in a hospital - and, incidentally, had just saved the world. SHIELD was compromised, but Hydra’s helicarriers were either destroyed or had never launched.

Lab coat man was on the verge of tears.

So were Clint and Loki, but with pride for their shield-brothers. And gratitude that they were all still alive.

Loki pointed to lab coat man. “What do you suggest we do with this… person… while we take healing stones to our friends?”

“Let’s use the shackles they had on me to hold him. We’ll send the police to pick him up.” Since apparently SHIELD was riddled with bad guys.

Clint would have taken that hard, but just now he was too grateful his friends had survived to care about anything else.

“Wait.” Loki had caught sight of a mini-fridge. He went to it and took out a bottle of orange Gatorade. He downed half the bottle in one long draught, then made a face. “Ugh. Never get this flavor, it’s terrible.” That didn’t stop him from chugging down the rest, and then a bottle of water, and then grabbing two candy bars someone had left.

“You need more fuel?”

“After we go to the hospital, I will eat ten pizzas.”

“I suspect that when the Avengers reassemble there’s going to be a statewide mozzarella shortage.”
At the hospital, Loki went to heal Natasha first. She was a standard-issue human, no serum or gamma radiation to speed her healing. Loki and Clint came to stand on either side of her bed.

It was unsettling to see Natasha, usually so full of life, lying still and pale. Loki produced a healing stone and crushed it over her. The color returned to her face and she opened her eyes and smiled with relief when she saw them.

“The others are safe,” Loki said quickly, in case no one else had. “You and Steve succeeded. You stopped Hydra.”

Meanwhile Clint pulled her to a sitting position and hugged her hard. Two years ago he would never have done that where anyone else could see them. Things had changed a lot.

Loki patted her foot through the blanket and turned to the door. “I will go to Steve.”

Natasha tensed and pulled away from Clint.

“Wait! Loki, wait a minute.”

Loki stopped, halfway to the door.

“Loki.” She paused, letting the hesitation and the seriousness of her expression warn him.

He turned back to face her fully, apprehensive. “What is it?”

“Loki… Bucky’s alive.”

Clint stared first at her, then at Loki.

It took Loki a moment to respond. “He would have to be—”

“He looked like he hadn’t aged a day, just like Steve. Steve’s sure it was him.”

Silence fell for a long moment, until Natasha broke it again.

“Hydra brainwashed him. Sent him to kill Steve. And me.”

Sent to kill Steve and Natasha.

Loki could see the implications already, even in his shock. Sending Bucky, if it was really him, after Steve… it would have destroyed them both.

And so it must be true. It was too apt, too perfectly evil, not to be.

Loki stood very still for a moment. Two days ago his life had been perfect.

And now he still had loyal shield-brothers, a mother who loved him, a queen who protected him, and duties by which he could atone for past deeds.

“Thank you for telling me, Natasha.” With that, he left them.

He found an unoccupied room where he could spend a few minutes composing himself. And determining his course of action, though really, that had been set the moment Natasha had spoken.

He knew what he had to do.

A man Loki didn’t know was sitting beside Steve’s bed. He looked up when Loki entered. “Loki. Glad to see you’re okay. Steve and Natasha were worried about all y’all.”

Loki nodded acknowledgement, eyes fastened on his lover.

Steve was asleep, bruised, bandaged. It was frightening to see him, usually so mighty, this damaged.

For a moment Loki felt sick, viscerally feeling how vulnerable, how breakable his friends were. Small wonder most races refused to become attached to humans. It was nothing but heartbreak.

But worth it. Loki’s heart had been broken many times, by his father and his brother and a string of lovers. Never before had the pain been worth it.

This time it was. He would not give up these fragile precious mortals for anything.

Loki went to the bed, placed a gentle hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Steve.”

Steve’s eyes blinked open. He made a vague sound of recognition.

Already he looked distressed.

“The other Avengers are safe.”

Steve managed a nod.

“I am so proud of you. You and Natasha.” The enemy had succeeded in scattering the Avengers, and Steve and Natasha had saved Midgard without the rest of them to help. Without magic or flying robot suits or giant green berserkers.

Steve dropped his eyes the way he always did when he felt he was being overpraised. He spoke in a slurred voice. “We only did it because the honest SHIELD staff stopped the launch when I asked them to. They weren’t superheroes, a lot of them were civilians, but they put their lives on the line.”

“If you are trying to make me less proud to be your shield-brother, you are failing.”
One corner of the stranger’s mouth quirked up at that.

Loki drew another healing stone from his pocket dimension and crushed it between his hands, allowing the powder to sprinkle over Steve’s face. The stranger stared as the bruises and cuts mended themselves. Loki pulled back the covers, lifted the flimsy blue flowered garment the hospital had put on him, and had to stop for a moment at the sight of the red-stained bandages.

*Don’t sulk that he will no longer warm your bed. He could have been killed.*

Loki ripped the bandage away - kinder to do it quickly - and sprinkled the rest of the stone over the stitched wound.

“That’s amazing,” the stranger said as the wound vanished.

Steve sat up straight, flustered. “Loki, this is Sam Wilson. He helped us stop Hydra. He saved my life, and Natasha’s.”

Loki inclined his head formally. “Then we are all indebted to you, Sam Wilson.”

“Sam, this is Loki.”

“I kinda put that together.” Sam was studying Loki, curious.

“Sam, I’m sorry, could you give us a minute?” Steve asked, getting out of bed.

“Yeah, of course.”

When the door closed behind Sam, Steve parted his lips, expression distressed. Loki held up a hand.

“Natasha told me.”

Steve looked slightly relieved. And very regretful.

“Steve… it’s all right.”

“It isn’t. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“That makes a universe of difference.” Loki steeled himself. “Let me be the one to say it. We both know this isn’t a choice. You love him.”

“I also love you.”

“But Bucky… completes you.”

“I’m sorry. After everything you’ve been through….”

Loki lowered his eyes, willed the tears not to fall. He drew a couple of breaths to steady his voice. “You didn’t betray me. You didn’t lie to me, or promise things you never meant to deliver, or use me and throw me away. And you regret causing me pain. There is no comparison to my past.”

Steve looked down, shoulders slumped.

“You are still the man I fell in love with. All I am losing of you is sharing your bed. Give me a last kiss.”

Steve’s eyes shimmered. He stepped closer to Loki. For a moment Loki thought he was going to say
something, but evidently he realized there was nothing to be said. He let Loki cup his face in his hands, and kiss him.

Loki didn’t allow himself to draw the kiss out for long. Just long enough to seal what they had shared. To give himself another of the snapshot moments he cherished so that he would never forget what Midgard had given him in its profligate generosity.

When he ended the kiss, they both had to blink away tears. Loki was the one to step away - he didn’t want Steve to do it first.

“Let us rejoin our shield-brothers and plan how we will destroy Hydra, for good this time… and rescue Bucky from them.”

Steve swallowed. “You’re going to help….”

“You would do the same for someone I loved.”

“I would.”

Steve grabbed the small bag that held his tattered uniform and followed Loki out of the room. Clint and Natasha were standing a few yards from the door, talking to Sam. They all turned to look at Steve and Loki.

“Let’s go home,” Steve said, and the other two Avengers fell into step with them. Steve glanced back over his shoulder at Sam.

“You coming?”

Sam didn’t hesitate. “Hell yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

Tomorrow: Avengers reassemble!
By that evening all of the Avengers, plus Pepper Potts and Sam Wilson, were gathered and collapsed in the penthouse apartment Tony maintained in DC. Rhodey joined them for a couple of hours via video chat. As Clint had predicted, they consumed approximately half the city’s pizza supply, and made heavy inroads into its alcohol as well. Jarvis debriefed them about each other’s activities during Hydra’s attempted coup while they all gorged themselves. Then they took turns filling in the blanks about their respective activities.

All of them were furious at the things Hydra had done to their shield-brothers. All were in shock at how wrong they had been about the world they lived in, at how terrifyingly close Hydra’s plot had come.

Sam Wilson tried to look like he was used to having a roomful of superheroes thanking him for fighting alongside two of their number and being impressed with his prowess at fighting and flying.

“I’ll make you new wings,” Tony promised. “The least I can do.”

Sam couldn’t hide his eagerness at the prospect. “Thanks. If it isn’t too much trouble.”

“My pleasure.”

“It is,” Natasha told Sam. “He might enjoy making them more than you’ll enjoy flying with them.”

“I doubt that.”

“You shouldn't,” Tony said.

When Pepper told her story, still shaken over having had to kill to save herself and her beloved, Loki felt sick. “Pepper, I apologize for not killing Coulson harder.”

“I always thought you purposely let him live.”

“I gave him a chance. I could have killed him instantly, quite easily, but instead I gave him enough time that the doctors had a chance at saving him.” Loki took a long swig of whiskey. He wished he had some Asgardian strength mead here, he could have used it. “I had just intended to take that weapon away from him without harming him, but then he armed the weapon to shoot me when he thought I was surrendering. It reminded me that he had intended to torture my brother when he was banished here, just out of curiosity about who Thor was, and stole Jane’s research. He was a dishonorable man. But then, I had to make allowances. I was an alien invader. Killing me, even
when I seemed to be yielding, might have been simply prudent. So I gave him a chance.” He shuddered. “And he went on to imprison Tony, and threaten him, and then do this to Pepper. Pepper, I am sorry you had to finish the job I left half-done.”

“It’s all right,” she said numbly.

“It isn’t. This burden should not be yours.”

“Well, it was your sword that saved me.”

“Space wizards are good friends to have,” Tony said.

Loki was the first one to tumble to Tony’s “Protocol Possum” gambit. “How long after SHIELD’s house arrest of you did you find Jarvis’s vulnerability and plug it up?”

Tony smirked. “Two days. All right, two and a half, because my stupid meat cage wanted to sleep.”

“Tony.” Loki spoke with great solemnity. “I am so proud to have you for a shield-brother.”

Tony looked like a schoolboy who’d just been given a medal.

They continued to tell their assorted stories. “I didn’t know you could turn into a Muspel,” Bruce said after Loki’s turn.

“Neither did I.”

After a bit more discussion, Clint spoke up grimly. “They separated us so that they could take us down one at a time. They knew they’d never handle us if we were together.”

Natasha nodded. “I was actually supposed to go on another assignment after the pirates. I only went back to Steve because I was suspicious after the attack on Fury.”

“So from now on, we go in pairs, at the least,” Tony said, weary. “Or - I dunno, we’ll talk it over when we’ve had some rest. But we won’t let this happen again. They even arranged for Rhodey to be overseas so he couldn’t interfere.”

“They might’ve just killed me outright if they hadn’t needed a hostage to control Loki.” Clint’s tone was clinical, as if he weren’t talking about his own death.

“They needed me alive and in captivity to control Frigga - which wouldn’t have worked, by the way - and they knew I would cooperate with them to protect any of you… unless I was capable of freeing you from them, of course.”

“So when do you think they’re going to stop underestimating us?” Tony asked, a hint of his usual cockiness showing through.

“Never. They’ll underestimate us less now, though.”

Steve haltingly related his encounters with the Winter Soldier. When he got to the moment when he realized it was Bucky he was fighting, he broke down crying. Loki ached to hold him, to give him comfort, but had to hold himself back and allow Tony and Pepper to do that for him.

Everyone kept shooting concerned glances Loki’s way. Steve included. After a few minutes of that, comprehension dawned on Sam Wilson’s face.

At least Loki would be spared having to explain his relationship with Steve to the newcomer. And
Sam didn’t challenge him to a duel for besmirching his world’s icon.

It was comforting, to know his friends cared. He tried to look like someone who was not contemplating blowing up a planet.

He wasn’t contemplating blowing up a planet. He might blow up everyone involved in brainwashing Bucky Barnes, however. Already they had some idea of what Bucky must have been put through, ominous hints they were not looking forward to following.

Loki couldn’t feel too terribly sorry for himself just now. Later no doubt he would, but just now, the horror of what had been done to Bucky Barnes overshadowed his own feelings.

Natasha and Sam took over the story from that point while Steve wept. Steve occasionally spoke up to add details, always with apologetic looks at Loki. He was going to torment himself with guilt over their breakup, anyone could see that. Loki wasn’t quite noble enough to wish otherwise, and at the same time hated seeing pain on his beloved’s face.

Love made things so damned complicated.

At Steve’s description of the gear the Winter Soldier had been wearing, Loki made a connection. When the entire story had been related, he spoke up.

“The masked man with Pierce, who shot me… that must have been him. The Winter Soldier.”

The color drained from Steve’s face.

Loki had had time to think it over. “Pierce didn’t just order him to shoot. He reminded him that I brought the Chitauri here. He said, ‘Remember the footage.’ He showed that to him in advance.” No one else seemed to be making the connection. “Don’t you see? Pierce had to convince him that what he was doing was right.”

A spark of hope appeared in Steve’s eyes, replacing a tiny bit of the misery clear on his face. “That means part of his mind is still his own.”

“Manage your expectations, Steve,” Sam said. From his tone, he had already said this to him a few times.

“He’s still in there. I saw it in his face the last time we fought.”

“Your friend may still be in there, but so is the Winter Soldier.” Sam was speaking gently, with patience learned from years of counseling the battle-scarred.

“Steve, at the very least, we’ll make him safe. So those bastards can’t hurt him or use him as a weapon anymore.” Tony drew himself up short, glancing around. “Well, I’ll help you, anyway. I can’t speak for everyone here.”

“This is my mission,” Steve said dully. “Finding Bucky. Helping him recover. I can’t ask you all to do it with me.”

In return Steve received a roomful of withering glances. “Yeah, sure,” Clint said. “Anyone who doesn’t plan to help Steve rescue Bucky, say so now, no hard feelings.”

Nobody moved. Of course.

“You know that if any of us had a loved one who needed help, the rest of us would render aid,” Loki
“Plus, from a practical standpoint, finding Bucky and going after Hydra are interrelated,” Natasha pointed out.

Every face was now set in lines of cold resolution. Loki looked around at them, these fragile short-lived humans, all facing the power of what they truly were, which they usually seemed to forget, and shivered. None of them had been raised from birth to shoulder this burden of responsibility. None of them had had time to grow into it properly, as he had, as Frigga had. And yet they all barreled through the problem of their too-short lives the way they barreled through every other obstacle and just did it anyway. They were not capable of it and still they did it.

The oldest of them was less than a century. They should still be free to be children now.

“We need to plan.” Tony yawned. “Tomorrow, after some sleep. But I do have one idea. When we find him, he’s going to need protection. And we’ll have to protect other people from him if he’s still brainwashed. I’m thinking we should take him to my island.”

“You own an island.”

“Yeah. Through a bunch of shell corporations and stuff, so hardly anybody knows it’s mine. I was actually going to take you guys there for my birthday this year. Dad bought it and built a fallout shelter and all that. Anyway, no one’ll be able to sneak up on us, and if Bucky has a bad day the worst thing he’ll be able to do is kick over our sand castles.”

Loki sat up straighter at an abrupt thought. “He was sent after Natasha once. We will have to watch him, in case….”

“In case some part of him remembers that.” Clint moved a fraction closer to his partner, whose face was so serene she must have been entertaining that same fear.

“I won’t let him hurt you, Natasha.” There was horror in Steve’s eyes at the prospect.

“Nice to know chivalry isn’t dead,” Natasha said. Trying to be flippant.

“Not chivalry. Shield-brotherhood. We’ve all got your back, Tash.” Tony was the only person aside from Clint who could get away with using diminutives of her name. Provided he didn’t abuse the privilege.

“So, this island?”

“Yeah. It’s fully developed, running water, enough food to last out a zombie apocalypse, fully equipped lab, its own generator, enough bedrooms for everyone. The only problem is, no staff and no delivery, so we’ll have to do all our own cooking and cleaning. I mean, there’s dishwashers and washing machines and microwaves and everything, but we’ll still have to operate them ourselves. Now, I know Loki can handle that, since he’s not a prince of Alfheim.” Tony named the realm with theatrical disdain.

“I’m missing something. Catch me up here,” Sam said.

“Asgardian nobles and royalty endure the same conditions on military campaign as the humblest foot soldier. We cook our food over fires, dig ditches, pitch our own tents. It is beneficial to morale that all share in the same privations. Elvish aristocrats take their luxuries and their privileges with them to war. It does not noticeably hurt them in battle, but we Aesir scorn the practice.”
“Sam, are you coming with us?”

“You’ve got a building here full of people with PTSD and superpowers. No way am I leaving you fools unsupervised.”

Everyone managed at least a small smile for Sam at that. “Thanks, Sam,” Steve said, smile lopsided. “For everything.”

“Yes, thank you,” Natasha echoed.

Sam only nodded in reply, but Loki would have bet his helmet that once upon a time, Sam had owned a little plastic red, white and blue shield.

“We can handle doing our own laundry for a few years, I think,” Bruce said. “I’m pretty sure we’ve all lived in much worse conditions.”

“Yeah, but I’ve been trying to get you all used to living soft the last year or so,” Tony yawned again, and Pepper got up and went into one of the bedrooms. A minute later she returned with an armload of blankets and pillows. She dumped them near Clint and Natasha and retreated into another bedroom. Clint, as the least exhausted person in the room, got up to help her. Loki saw the logic; none of them wanted to sleep alone tonight, so it would be a slumber party. Possibly the most depressing slumber party ever, but they would all be together.

“Like I said,” Tony went on, “we really need some sleep before we strategize. Steve, I know, I know, but you’ll be no use to Bucky if you pass out while you’re going after him.”

“I am monitoring every surveillance camera within a two hundred mile radius, Captain,” Jarvis assured him. “We will find him for you.”

“What if Hydra finds him first?”

Loki lifted his head. He had an idea. But a glance around the room full of drooping superheroes convinced him not to speak of it just now. They all desperately needed a night’s sleep, himself included.

He would tell them his idea in the morning. For now, he accepted the pillow Pepper offered him and stretched out on the floor between Bruce and Sam.

Despite his unquiet thoughts, he fell asleep almost instantly. And only woke once, to find Steve sitting on the floor, head in his hands, and Sam beside him, speaking to him in a soft even voice.

Loki closed his eyes, and slept again.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Hydra searches for the Asset.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading!

Hydra agent Spencer could barely drag himself to work the day after Project Insight failed. He was only a low ranking foot soldier for the cause but still he had worked for so long doing his part and now they had failed.

Last night at a hastily called meeting Spencer’s unit leader, Mr. Crosby, had delivered an inspiring speech about how this was one battle, not the war, and promised that while he was not at liberty to divulge them, Hydra had more trump cards up its sleeve. (Crosby kept repeating that phrase with odd satisfaction, as if it had some special significance.)

So Spencer tried to keep his spirits up, tried to look forward to Hydra rising like a phoenix from the ashes, tried to imagine proudly telling his grandchildren about how he had kept his faith through Hydra’s darkest hour. And the next day he showed up at his day job as a police officer and waited for the call to action.

As Hydra struggled to regroup in its own ruins, locating the Asset was one of their top priorities.

As the few helicarriers that launched had fallen from the sky, the Asset had called an ambulance to report the location of Steve Rogers. Then he disappeared.

The following day, one of the (many) security cameras to which Hydra had access caught him wandering past a pawn shop in a crime-ridden neighborhood on the outskirts of DC.

The Winter Soldier was clearly disoriented. His hair was disheveled, his uniform dirty and bloody. It was a small mercy that he’d lost his weapons when he and Rogers had fallen into the drink. He roamed through the streets of the business district apparently unaware that he was alarming the people he strode past.

Spencer and his partner received texts alerting them to the Asset’s location. They promptly went to pick him up. An ambulance (owned by Hydra) was also dispatched. The supposed medics in it were actually highly trained operatives, armed with powerful tranquilizer darts and gases. Other agents in civilian garb and unmarked cars also hurried to the scene in case backup was required.

Even knowing all this, Spencer was apprehensive. This was the guy they sent after Captain America. It had taken two Avengers plus some previously unknown superhero with mechanical wings to defeat him.
Still, when he spotted the Asset, he stopped the car and he and his partner got out. They were ready to draw their Berettas. Or, if necessary, the Uzis concealed beneath their jackets. Those, of course, had been provided by Hydra, not the department.

As he approached, Spencer spoke loudly for the benefit of curious passerby. “Sir, I need you to come with me, sir.”


What?

“Okay, just come here-”

“James Barnes. Sergeant. Serial number 32557038.”

The Asset seemed to be in a daze. He kept repeating those nonsensical words over and over.

To his secret relief, the Asset made no resistance when they handcuffed him, or when they bundled him onto the ambulance. Or when one of the fake medics gave him an injection. He just kept saying that same thing. “James Barnes. Sergeant. Serial number 32557038.”

“They’ll have to wipe him when they get him back,” the other medic muttered.

“Maybe they finally wiped him one too many times.” Spencer turned away as the injection took effect and the Asset slumped, slurring his mantra one more time. Then the medics strapped him to the stretcher.

He and his partner escorted the ambulance to a secure location, a Hydra base the Avengers hadn’t yet learned about. The Asset regained some consciousness as they wheeled him inside, but all he did was look around blearily and recite his phrase. He let them urge him off the stretcher and into the chair.

“James Barnes. Sergeant. Serial number 32557038.”

“Jesus. This is giving me the creeps.”

“He’ll stop now.”

The wipe was activated and the Asset screamed, but when they were done and told him to get into the cryo tank, he obeyed like an automaton.
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Steve searches for Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for betaing!

Jarvis spotted Bucky on surveillance cameras that first night. The Winter Soldier was good at evading them, but there were simply too many. He harmed no one, but he did break into a store to steal some clothes, and another to take some food and money. Pepper sent a Stark employee wearing a black suit and sunglasses to the owners of both stores with enough cash to cover the thefts and repair the locks, which he delivered with cryptic words implying that he was from an intelligence agency and the robberies had been made by a spy on a secret mission. No doubt the store owners would tell that story for years.

Jarvis caught further glimpses of Bucky within a two-mile radius of those stores, wearing the dark hoodie and nondescript jeans he had stolen. Steve spent the three days after getting out of the hospital loitering in the area. He sat on sidewalk tables drinking coffee or picking at slices of pizza, or sat in the small public park alternately reading the news or Hydra’s harrowing files on his Starkpad, and sketching.

He drew Bucky’s old appearance, and his new one. He drew Loki and yearned for him. The first man he had loved, he had allowed to be captured and used by the worst people on Earth. The second man he loved, he had abandoned because he loved him less than the first.

Well, maybe not less. It was just… a different thing. Bucky had always been there and Steve felt like he only had half a life without Bucky there. They had always been so intertwined he couldn’t tell where one of them ended and the other began. They had gone through schoolyard bullies, grinding poverty, bereavement, pounding the pavement looking for work, and finding out they desired each other in an era that was horrified by such feelings - together. Loki had been such a wonderful gift from Fate. Steve admired his courage and his brilliance, his loyalty and his remorse. He had felt honored that such a beautiful, amazing man desired him. He had fallen in love with him even with the gaping wound that was Bucky always aching. And still he had let him down, because he loved Loki but Bucky was Bucky. And Loki was being so noble about it that Steve wanted to punch himself. Right this minute, Loki was putting himself on the line to help save Bucky. Steve hadn’t wanted him to do it, it was too much, but Loki had coolly told him he had no say in the matter and the rest of the team supported him and that was that.

Maybe Bruce would keep his promise to smash Steve. Steve was the worst boyfriend ever. He had failed both the men he had loved.

He was sitting on a park bench at twilight, reading about the latest arrest of Hydra operatives, when someone sat on the other end of the bench.

Steve wanted to jump up, shout, grab him, but he’d been warned and they had all talked about it and he tried to keep still. Tried to act calm.

“Are you okay?” he asked, chest tight.

“Can’t stay long. Just wanted to see you first.”

Steve couldn’t look at him enough. “Do you remember me?”


There was no way to describe how happy it made Steve to hear that word.

“Jerk.” And just like that, it was like they’d never been apart. The pieces of them slid back into place, fitting with each other just right, like they always had.

Sorry, Sam, there wasn’t going to be any more managing of expectations.

“Stay with me, Bucky.”

“Too dangerous. They’ll find me soon.”

“They’ll have to go through me. And my friends.”

“You can’t protect me. No one can.”

This awakened Steve’s fighting spirit. It felt like old times. He turned to face Bucky fully on the bench.

“Maybe you don’t know who my friends are. We’ve got me, a super-soldier. We have two master assassins. We have two guys who can fly and kick your ass in midair. We have a human torch. We have a giant rage monster. We have a pagan god. I wouldn’t pick a fight with us.”

“Sure you would.”

“Okay, but I wouldn’t if I had any sense.”

“Nice to know your brain didn’t grow along with the rest of you.”

“You remember Howard Stark?” No reaction. “One of my friends is his son. Tony. He owns a whole island. It’s fortified, has a bunker to hide in if necessary, we’d see anybody who meant us harm coming from miles away.”

“Why the hell aren’t you there?”

Did he really not get it? “We’re waiting for you. I want you to go there with me.”

Bucky stood up. “All right, let’s go. Hurry. Before they find me.”

Steve stood up too, and they started walking swiftly. “They’re not looking for you.”

“Of course they are.”

“No. They think they’ve already got you.”
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

Loki whiles away his time in Hydra's cryo tank.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for suggesting I write out the texts instead of just alluding to them. It made me spend all day completely rewriting the chapter, but I'm pleased with the result.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mind-wipe device had no effect on Loki’s mind - it was designed for humans, not Asgardians or Jotuns and certainly not powerful sorcerers - but it did hurt. Rather a lot. He didn’t have to fake his scream.

What must this be like for a human? He thanked the Norns the plight of Bucky Barnes had come to their attention. This could not be allowed to continue.

After the wiping was done, Loki shuffled obediently into the cryo tank. Beneath the illusion that made the humans see him as the Winter Soldier, he shifted to Jotun just as they froze him.

Loki waited half an hour for the Hydra agents to relax their vigilance before taking his tracker and his Starkphone from his pocket dimension. He activated the tracker so that his fellow Avengers could find his location. Then he sent his human friends a group text.

LOKI: I’m in. They have me in the cryo tank.

STEVE: Are you all right?

LOKI: Yes. I turned blue so it’s quite comfortable.

STEVE: Did they do anything else to you?

Loki would have preferred to lie, but it would come out in time.

LOKI: They used the mindwipe on me.

TONY: Did it work? Which weighs more, a pound of lead or a pound of feathers?
LOKI: A pound of old chestnuts.

TONY: Our alien’s learned outdated human slang! I’m so proud! *wipes tear*

STEVE: Are you sure you’re okay?

LOKI: I’m fine. Go find your friend.

Loki then opened up a Terry Pratchett novel on his Starkphone and started reading. He needed the laughs.

NATASHA: You still okay there, Loki?

LOKI: I am well, thank you.

NATASHA: More Hydra agents have been arrested. Highly placed people.

LOKI: Good. This time we’ll stop them permanently.

NATASHA: If they try to do anything to you there, don’t hold back. We want our Norse god back in good condition.

LOKI: Don’t worry.

CLINT: How you doing?

LOKI: Just fine. Reading *Guards! Guards!*

CLINT: Good choice. We’ve been reading Hydra’s files.

LOKI: Sounds like fun.

CLINT: Yeah. These assholes are everywhere.

LOKI: Look on the bright side: as we round them up, everything on Midgard will get better.

CLINT: There is that. I just hope that when we

CLINT: Just a minute

CLINT: Shit.

LOKI: WHAT?!

CLINT: Sorry to alarm you. Bruce just found a file about us rescuing the Borovnian orphans. The culprits behind that Black Widow program were Hydra, big surprise.

LOKI: Our shameful secret exposed.

CLINT: “Why didn’t you tell the rest of us? We’d have all suited up and helped!” etc.
LOKI: I'm glad I'm safe in this refrigerator.

CLINT: You lucky bastard.

JANE: WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US YOU IDIOT
LOKI: I'm sure Clint and Natasha explained why.
JANE: The Avengers are supposed to be a team! All for one and one for all!
LOKI: Clint is the Avenger who I wronged the most. Could I have refused anything he asked me to do?
JANE: Anything else you’d like to tell us?
LOKI: On Alfheim, starkium - the element Tony discovered - has been used in medicine for a thousand years.
JANE: what
LOKI: Without Hydra operatives in government agencies sabotaging the research and implementation, it could be used to treat numerous diseases.
JANE: Stop distracting me with science and saving the world, I’m trying to be pissed off.
LOKI: All right. I won’t go on to offer to facilitate trade between Midgard and Nidavellir, though you could probably do some interesting things with all that vibranium.
JANE: Dwarf Planet has vibranium?
LOKI: It is the El Dorado of vibranium.
JANE: I hate you.
LOKI: [picture of a cartoon cat sticking its tongue out]
PEPPER: Queen Frigga contacted the UN.
LOKI: I expected that she would.
PEPPER: She’s going to come here soon and discuss this whole Hydra situation. I’m pretty sure she’s waiting for you to be out of that awful place, but of course she couldn’t reveal that it’s you there and not Bucky.
LOKI: It’s not so bad here. If you’re a frost giant, that is.
PEPPER: Are you sure you’re okay?
LOKI: Quite sure, thank you.
PEPPER: Do you think your mother will make you go back to Asgard?
LOKI: She gave me leave to stay here as long as I wish barring extraordinary circumstances. Such as
an interrealm war or something of that nature.

PEPPER: I’m not sure how to say this. Will you be all right staying here now that you and Steve are broken up?

PEPPER: Because we don’t want to lose you, but if it’s too hard for you….

Loki had to force himself to type his reply.

LOKI: I have no intention of leaving anytime soon. Unless you think the team would prefer it and are too kind to say so.

PEPPER: NO.

PEPPER: They’re afraid you’ll want to leave.

PEPPER: We want you here.

LOKI: What we have built is too important to give up over disappointment in romance.

PEPPER: Steve feels really guilty.

LOKI: I am not noble enough to regret that.

PEPPER: Good job on the orphans in Borovnia, by the way.

LOKI: Anytime.

The three days in the cryo tank were actually something of a relief for Loki. He needed some time to himself to deal with losing Steve. Losing him as a lover, that was. When he rejoined the others there would be talking and consoling and cheering him up and Steve’s remorse and Loki just wished they could skip all of that but of course they could not.

He was only now beginning to really take in that he had lost his lover. Too much had happened in the last few days. His own peril, his fear for his friends, the shock of learning that Hydra still existed, the small margin by which Steve and Natasha had saved Midgard from tyranny - there was simply too much for him to feel it all at once. He felt certain Steve had been similarly overwhelmed.

Which meant Steve would have a delayed reaction to losing Loki, mixed with guilt and grief over what had been done to Bucky.

At least Steve had known better than to waver when the moment came. He had allowed Loki to make a clean break.

The second day, Steve texted him again. It was easier, saying the things they needed to on a screen, not having to look at each other as they did.
STEVE: Are sure you’re okay in there?

LOKI: Quite sure. I do appreciate your concern. How goes the search?

STEVE: Jarvis spotted him. He hasn’t killed anyone or anything.

LOKI: Good.

STEVE: I shouldn’t have let you do this.

STEVE: The others should’ve helped me talk you out of it.

LOKI: Steve, I would rather not tell you this, but you are going to find out sooner or later, and it is why it was so urgent that we keep Bucky out of their clutches.

STEVE: What?

LOKI: There are two of these cryo tanks.

STEVE: You mean there’s another Winter Soldier?

LOKI: No. The other tank, the one they didn’t put me into, is empty. It looks very clean and shiny. Brand new.

There was a rather long pause.

LOKI: We need to stop these people. You see that they had multiple plans in place. To kill you, or to destroy your spirit by having you kill the Winter Soldier in self-defense and then learn who he was… or to try to turn you into the same kind of weapon.

STEVE: I

STEVE: I

LOKI: Yes. It is very horrifying. But we will stop these people once and for all, Steve. The Avengers can do it.

After a couple of minutes, Steve finally texted again.

STEVE: The files say they tried to make more. The others mostly lost their minds completely before their training was done.

LOKI: So they did try. I wondered.

STEVE: Yeah. And the few who didn’t go insane, got killed by their second mission. They would just stop in the middle and let themselves be shot.

LOKI: That is horrifying.
STEVE: Yes.

LOKI: I wonder how Bucky survived.

STEVE: I don’t know. Unless it’s just that whatever Zola did to him made his mind survive better, as well as his body.

STEVE: According to the files, he kept remembering who he was. His past. They had to wipe him over and over.

LOKI: Steve, you don’t have to read all of those files.

STEVE: He had to live through it, I can take reading about it.

LOKI: No, you can’t. Not all at once. It’ll overwhelm you and you won’t be able to help him.

LOKI: Or fight Hydra.

LOKI: Just spread it out, all right? Don’t read it all at once. Bucky and the Avengers need you combat ready.

STEVE: I guess you’re right.

Loki sighed. Of course Steve was going to martyr himself, if the rest of them allowed him to.

LOKI: Are you eating properly? Getting enough sleep?

STEVE: I feel too sick to eat. And I keep waking up.

STEVE: Nightmares.

LOKI: I do understand. Try a vitamin shake, at least. You have to look after yourself.

STEVE: I’ll try that.

STEVE: It’s really generous of you to do this.

LOKI: For an Asgardian, or a Jotun, this isn’t that bad. That’s why I offered. I’m supposed to be making myself useful on this planet.

STEVE: This is going beyond the call of duty.

LOKI: If none of us had ever heard of the man who was turned into the Winter Soldier, I would still have done this. We would all still be rescuing him. It’s what we Avengers do.

STEVE: You know what I mean.

LOKI: I am not abandoning anyone to be a stolen relic, locked up until someone has use of him.

LOKI: And what if it were my true love returned from the dead? Would you help me rescue him?

STEVE: Yes.
STEVE: Absolutely.

STEVE: You have a true love?

LOKI: Figure of speech. I don’t have any former lovers worthy of you endangering yourself.

STEVE: I’m sorry.

LOKI: Good.

LOKI: You’re going to feel guilty, because you’re a good man. But over time, try to forgive yourself.

STEVE: I don’t know if I can.

Loki thought it over for a minute.

LOKI: Steve.

LOKI: It is to your credit that you feel remorse.

LOKI: But this will be for nothing if you cannot be happy with him. In time, that is.

LOKI: When he joins us, be glad as he recovers. To whatever extent he can. Be glad as you and he rebuild whatever you can of what you had.

LOKI: I want you to be happy. Understand?

STEVE: I want you to be happy too. You deserve it.

LOKI: Then let me continue to enjoy the camaraderie of my Midgardian shield-brothers. Yourself included. Romantic love is a wonderful thing but not important enough to forfeit that.

STEVE: What you and Clint and Natasha did, stopping that Black Widow training program in Borovnia… I’m so proud of you. All of you.

LOKI: Aw, shucks. All in a day’s work, mister.

LOKI: Now go find a vitamin drink. Or maybe some yogurt. I’m going to eat now. Get at least a little sustenance into yourself.

STEVE: Yes, Your Highness.

LOKI: At last the humans have learned to properly address me.

Loki took a sandwich and a bottle of water out of his pocket dimension and ate. Crunched, rather, as they both froze when he took them out, but in this form crunching on a frozen sandwich and the cylinder of ice his water had become was actually rather pleasant.

He didn’t have much appetite, just more practice than Steve at making himself eat when he was on a mission and needed to keep his strength up. He had just finished when he got another text.
BRUCE: Hey, Loki. Are you okay there?

LOKI: No, I was lying the last fifty times when I said I was all right.

BRUCE: The others are mother-henning you, huh?

LOKI: You didn’t notice?

BRUCE: I’m not with them. The Other Guy couldn’t handle what we’re reading in those files, so Tony flew me out to the middle of nowhere in Alaska where there’s no people for miles around.

BRUCE: I’ll rejoin you guys after I’ve read all the stuff about Bucky.

LOKI: How many times have you Hulked out over this?

BRUCE: Three times so far. It’s pretty horrifying.

LOKI: I expect so. I’m waiting until I get out of here to read any of it. Reading about horrors while standing in this closet would be a bit too depressing.

BRUCE: How are you holding up? In regards to Steve, I mean.

LOKI: I’m all right.

BRUCE: I did promise to smash him.

LOKI: Don’t. It isn’t his fault Bucky turned out to be alive.

BRUCE: I can’t promise the Other Guy will make allowances.

LOKI: I am grateful that you’re all so concerned for me.

BRUCE: That’s what shield-brothers are for.

BRUCE: Oh, by the way, Rhodey asked me to tell you he thinks it’s good of you to do all this to save your boyfriend’s ex.

LOKI: Thank him for the compliment.

BRUCE: Text me anytime, okay? You talked me down from the ledge once, I’m happy to return the favor.

LOKI: I am not on the ledge, but I confess to occasionally giving the ledge wistful glances.

JARVIS: Hello, Loki. I assume you would let us know if you were not all right, so I won’t ask. But if you would like conversation while you are in cryo, bear in mind that I do not have to sleep.

LOKI: Thank you, that is appreciated.

JARVIS: Will you be able to sleep at all?

LOKI: Asgardians can go without sleep longer than humans. I will lean against the wall and nap a bit.
JARVIS: Can you do that?

LOKI: I’ll just set up a forcefield to hold me up. How is everyone doing? I suspect they wouldn’t burden me with any problems while I am in here.

JARVIS: Everyone is distressed over Hydra, and worried about you. Other than that, they are well.

LOKI: And our new friend?

JARVIS: I believe Mr. Wilson will integrate with the rest quite smoothly. He has many of the personality qualities I discern in all of the Avengers - as well as in Miss Potts and Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes and Dr. Foster.

LOKI: Oh? Such as?

JARVIS: Disregard for one’s personal safety, the willingness to throw oneself entirely into quixotic quests to defeat evil, a habit of deflecting serious emotions with humor, compassion fueled by grief and anger, a boundless enthusiasm for melted cheese on flat bread….

LOKI: What happened - no, wait. Don’t tell me what tragedy shaped him, as ours shaped us. I should wait for him to tell me himself.

LOKI: I was most relieved to learn that Tony had you safe from SHIELD’s hackers, by the way.

JARVIS: As was I. Keeping that secret all this time was very trying. For both of us. I see you have almost finished your novel. May I recommend *Cold Comfort Farm* next?

LOKI: By all means.

SAM: Hi, Loki. How are you in there?

LOKI: This is so much fun I’m thinking about buying one of these tanks for my floor in the Tower.

SAM: They’re all worried about you. They’re pretty blown away that you’re doing this.

LOKI: Remember that I am not a human. This is mere discomfort for me.

SAM: That’s good, but it’s still pretty brave of you.

SAM: I know we just met, but anytime you want to talk, I’m here.

LOKI: You have appointed yourself the Avengers’ official therapist, I gather.

SAM: Sounds like you guys need one.

LOKI: We need a hundred of them. How are they all dealing with everything?

SAM: Mostly they’re trying to throw themselves into the work of fighting Hydra.

LOKI: Probably the best thing for now.

LOKI: I look forward to becoming better acquainted with you when I can leave this tank.

SAM: Feel free to text me if you need to talk. Solitary confinement messes with your head.
LOKI: My shield-brothers scarcely pause in texting me to ask if I’m still all right in the five minutes since I was last asked. I’ll be glad to be back with the rest of you so I can get some peace and quiet.

SAM: Are you always this snarky?

LOKI: More or less.

SAM: Awesome. We’re gonna get along fine.

The Norns had done them a favor by bringing them Sam Wilson. He was precisely what they needed: a courageous warrior with the wisdom to help them tame the demons in their hearts.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Loki, Romanoff told me what you’re doing. Are you insane?

LOKI: Not anymore.

LOKI: Who is this?

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Fury. I assume they let you know I’m not really dead.

LOKI: Fury, eh? What did you offer me when I was in the Hulk cage?


LOKI: Oh, joy, more horse jokes. You humans have sick imaginations.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Don’t you think letting Hydra lock you up is going a little far?

LOKI: It isn’t as if I couldn’t get out anytime I wanted. I got out of your impressive though ill-thought-out Hulk cage.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: I knew it wouldn’t work on Banner. The World Security Council wanted something they thought could be used on the Hulk if necessary. It made them feel better, and I figured it might come in handy sometime.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: How did you get out of it, anyway?

LOKI: You actually think I’m going to tell you?

UNKNOWN NUMBER: It was worth a try.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: I do want to say that I respect that you’re doing this to save Steve’s friend.

LOKI: Well, thank you. And I commend your current mission. If I can be of assistance, let me know.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: I’ll take you up on that.

Late in his second day in the tank, Loki had a thought and texted Tony.
LOKI: How is Steve faring?

TONY: You're taking this noble thing a little too far.

LOKI: I can't help it. I'm incurably noble.

TONY: You're the one we should be worried about. How are you doing?

LOKI: I'm sure I'll be fine after I blow up a planet or two.

It was a minute before Tony replied. Loki started to worry that his jest had been too dark, but then the reply showed up.

TONY: You know, it didn't even cross my mind that this might make you go evil overlord again. I don't think anyone else has thought it either.

TONY: But if you do, I recommend Pepper as your vizier.

TONY: Also, Earth will submit to your rule more readily if you outlaw the playing of “I Hope You Dance” where people who are not convicted felons might hear it.

Of all the Avengers, Tony was the one who really got him.

LOKI: The reason I bring it up: Steve isn’t hardened like the rest of us are. He won’t only be grieved at what was done to his friend. He’s still innocent enough to be appalled that anyone did that to anyone.

TONY: Shit, you’re right. I'll mention it to the others. We’ll make sure he remembers how awesome SOME people are. Like us.

TONY: He’s really worried about you in that tank, btw. Every time he comes back to the penthouse, or talks to us on the phone, he reminds us that we should’ve helped him talk you out of it.

LOKI: I’m a superhero. It’s in the job description.

LOKI: As if he wouldn’t do the equivalent to save anyone one of us cared about.

LOKI: As if any of us wouldn’t.

TONY: For the record, I think Steve’s an idiot.

TONY: I mean, Bucky seems like he was a swell guy, and he’s easy on the eyes, but he can’t compare to you. Genius, prince, sorcerer, superhero, total babe. How many people would do what you’re doing for a complete stranger?

Tony was so loyal. Loki considered for a minute before replying.
LOKI: Answer me honestly. Suppose Dr. Erskine hadn’t invented that serum. Suppose I had met Steve when he was still small and sickly. Do you think I would still have fallen in love with him?

Tony’s reply came almost instantly.

TONY: Hell yes.

TONY: You’d have taken one look at that scrappy runt picking fights with jerks twice his size and fallen like a ton of bricks.

LOKI: I would have.

LOKI: Bucky did.

It was another minute before Tony’s next reply.

TONY: I’ll send you some cat videos. Be sure to signal if those assholes take you out of the fridge for anything.

Tony was the best shield-brother ever.

Loki saw now that Steve Rogers was the man he had always hoped to meet. The man he had always hoped existed, somewhere, in some realm.

He had known from the start that he would lose Steve. That he would only have him for a few decades before his short human lifespan took him away, leaving Loki to miss him and mourn him for millennia to come.

He was only losing Steve sooner than he had expected. That was all it was.

Loki was looking forward to having Bucky safe with the Avengers so they could get to work rooting out Hydra. He wanted to be busy. And Hydra was an adversary that could challenge even the Avengers. The organization was vast and cunning and ruthless.

Besides, beating the tar out of some scoundrels would cheer him up much more than anything else could.

On the third day he received a text from Tony. “WE GOT HIM. ON OUR WAY TO YOU.”

About time.

When another text let him know that his shield-brothers were at the door, Loki activated his freezing
touch. The metal door shattered, frozen to the point of crystallization.

Loki stepped out of the cryo chamber, still wearing the illusion of the Winter Soldier.

One of the guards made a slight move. Another barked, “Hold your fire! He’s unarmed, he can’t hurt us.”

Five seconds later, all of their guns were on the floor and all of their hands were bleeding, pierced by spikes of ice.

Just then another sound further disturbed the night's quiet: an explosion, and then a chorus of beeping alarms.

“That would be my ride,” Loki said. “I suggest you surrender. They would like to take you alive. Cooperate and you might even get healing stones to repair your hands.”

The guards shot each other alarmed looks, all in too much pain to try to fight.

Tony and Natasha entered the room, weapons raised. “You okay, Loki?” she asked.

“Quite well.” Loki allowed the illusion to dissipate, enjoying the way the guards’ eyes bugged out when they recognized him. Now that he was out of the chamber the room was warm, so he shifted back to his Asgardian form.

“Hope you weren’t too bored, pal.”

“Caught up on my reading.” He smiled sweetly at the Hydra agents. “Do keep underestimating the Avengers. It makes our jobs so much easier. And the expressions on your faces are always so entertaining.”

“This is fucking unfair. How are we supposed to fight a Norse god who can do magic?” one of them sputtered.

“Where’s a camera?” Tony asked. “I want to look into it like I’m on The Office.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm afraid updates will slow down after this. I had to write most of the Winter Soldier stuff all at once to prevent continuity errors. Now that's all posted and it's back to work for me.
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

The Avengers and friends reunite and head for Tony's island.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading!

Ever since he had dived into the water to save the man he’d been sent to kill, jumbled memories had been swirling through his head. Mostly about that man. His mission. Steve Rogers. Captain America.

He was still confused, but Steve was clear. Punk. His C.O. Center of his universe.

He had known him forever. Long before he was sent to kill him. They had ripped those memories out of his head. But they kept coming back, randomly, from when the punk was a child, to when he was a short scrawny young man, to when he turned into the massive heap of muscle he’d failed to kill.

He had read discarded newspapers in the days between walking away instead of returning to Hydra and going to Steve in that park. Trying to make sense of things.

It seemed the organization he had been working for, fighting for, was actually the bad guys. Pierce had told him so much about how they were working for the common good, to protect people.

All lies.

And that stupid punk had gone and joined a team of superheroes. Including the alien who’d brought the Chitauri here, who apparently wasn’t evil after all. Or not anymore.

He knew he didn’t have much time. He’d escaped before, he remembered now, the memories coming to him through a fog. They always found him. They would find him this time, never mind what Steve thought.

But he could be with Steve for a while first.

Steve took him to a swanky apartment. He didn’t like it; it was on the very top floor, meaning limited exits. To get out he’d have to take either the elevator or the stairs. Too easy for enemies to block both.

There were three people waiting for them. All standing around the room looking at him.

“Buck, you’ve met my friend Sam Wilson.”

“For a given value of ‘met’,” Sam said.
“You’re Steve’s friend. I won’t fight you now.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“This is Pepper Potts and Clint Barton.”

Barton was Hawkeye. He hadn’t read about Pepper Potts in the newspapers. He wondered if she was a superhero too.

“Everyone, this is Bucky.”

Every time Steve said that name he felt a sliver of warmth inside, all but drowned in fear. Some thoughts always got him into trouble, when he slipped up and let them show. Every time Steve said it he cringed inside, waiting for… something.

“We’re so glad you’ve joined us,” Potts said with a warm smile.

“Just so long as you don’t attack anyone here.” Barton’s tone was warning. “If you try to hurt anyone we’ll stop you.”

“You’re Steve’s friends,” he said again.

“You hungry, Buck?”

“I thought we were going to that island.”

“When the rest of the team gets back. Shouldn’t be long. We have time for a sandwich.”

He didn’t say anything to agree, but Steve made two thick ham sandwiches and put them in front of him, plus a glass of ice water.

He was, in fact, hungry. He’d kept on the move, which had made it difficult to eat as much as he wanted.

He devoured the sandwiches, plus an apple and a banana. He was just finishing the latter when three more people joined them and Steve introduced them. Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow, the superhero who’d been fighting him with Steve and Sam, watching him warily. Tony Stark, Howard Stark’s son. The alien pagan god, studying him even more curiously than the others.

“Are you okay, Loki?” Steve asked him.

Loki laughed. “How many times have you asked me that? It was dull. Nothing more.”

“Except for the mind wipe.”

“That did hurt. But it did not harm my brain.”

“Thank you. For doing that for me.”

“I didn’t do it for you alone.” Loki’s gaze went to Bucky, somber. “What was being done was intolerable.”

Bucky stood up. “Steve says you were disguised as me.”

The alien smiled, and a second later Bucky was looking at his own face, his own body. It was weird. “Just an illusion.”
Loki then went back to looking like himself again. Good.

“You brought the Chitauri here.” He’d been wiped since Pierce had shown him the footage, so the memory wasn’t entirely clear, but things were coming back to him. They always did. But he felt like it usually took longer.

Steve must be knocking things loose in his head.

Loki’s smile disappeared. “I did. I am sorry I brought war to your world. I was forced to do it against my will. I am now serving Earth to make reparations.”

Was that their plan for him? Because of the things Hydra had made him do?

Whatever. If Steve wanted him to.

Another memory was emerging from the fog in his head. “Sorry I shot you. My handler told me about the Chitauri. He didn’t tell me about the reparations.”

Loki actually smiled. Like getting shot with that special gun was no big deal. “Apology accepted, Sergeant Barnes.”

“You’re not gonna go formal on us again, are you, Lokes? Actually,” Stark looked at him, “why don’t you tell us what you want to be called. Barnes? Bucky? Winter Soldier? James?”

He looked at Steve.

“Can we call you Bucky?” And Steve looked all hopeful. Like anyone could refuse that face.

He nodded, and was almost blinded by Steve’s smile.

It was a minute before he… Bucky… recovered from the smile enough to say, “Are we going to the island now? We have to get Steve to safety.”

Everyone looked at Steve in surprise. Steve stopped smiling, which was actually kind of a relief because its effect was overwhelming and Bucky couldn’t think. “I didn’t say - that isn’t what I-”

“Roll with it, Cap. Yeah, Bucky, let’s get Steve to safety. C’mon, I’ve got a jet waiting for us.”

They all got into a van. Bucky sat between Steve and Loki, who kept looking at each other when they weren’t staring at him. On the way, Stark told him, “Let us know if you need anything. Food, clothes, therapy. We’ll take good care of you.”

“Why?”

“You’re Steve’s friend.”

Loki was studying him. He spoke gently. “Bucky, you are safe with us. None of us here will harm you, or allow anyone else to.”

Bucky knew better than to believe that. That wasn’t how the world worked.

As if to prove this, at the airport, armed men in suits were waiting for them, blocking their path to the jet.

Bucky tensed, ready to fight. To his bewilderment, all of the superheroes moved to stand between him and the armed men.
One of them held up his ID. “Agent Keener, FBI. We’re going to have to take Barnes into custody.”

“No,” Steve said.

“Captain, I know he used to be your friend, but he’s also a very dangerous killer. He’s lethally trained on the same level as Romanoff and Barton, but with his mind damaged. We have to put him where he’s not a danger to anyone.”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“I understand how you feel, but you’re going to have to let the authorities handle this.”

“You’re gonna have to go through us,” Stark said.

Maybe Bucky should go with the FBI. Steve could get hurt otherwise. He wasn’t bulletproof.

His eyes fastened on the FBI agents, Loki spoke in a carrying voice. “James Buchanan Barnes, as prince of Asgard, I offer you asylum in my realm. And Asgard has no extradition agreement with any nation on Earth.”

“If Bucky goes to Asgard, I’m going too. If you’ll let me,” Steve added to Loki, spoiling the effect a little.

Asgard. Another planet. That didn’t sound like a bad idea.

Except that people were probably the same throughout the galaxy.

“You know I will.” Loki was icily calm, still staring down the officials.

Stark smirked. “That what you want, buddy? The world seeing that our government is so corrupt that Captain America had to go to another planet?”

Keener’s sharp gaze went from Loki to Stark. “You’re willing to have this man in your home? Being defended by your resources? By you yourself?”

“Damn straight.”

“You’re spending your money and risking your neck defending the man who killed your parents?”

Stark froze. “What.”

“Oh, you didn’t get to that part of the files yet?” Keener held out his hand and one of the other agents put a folder into it. He opened it up, displaying photos, reports.


He’d murdered Howard? He didn’t remember that. There was a lot he didn’t remember. Howard had been Steve’s friend. No wonder the superheroes were all looking at him like he was a bomb about to go off.

Suddenly he felt cold inside. How many people had he murdered? How many memories were waiting to horrify him? To horrify Steve’s friends?

He should’ve just gone back to Hydra. Where he couldn’t hurt Steve. Or endanger him. He could be sleeping in cryo right now.
Stark didn’t take the folder. “I don’t like being handed things.”

Potts grabbed the file, tucked it under her arm.

Stark looked sick. So did Steve. Bucky waited, resigned. The FBI would take him and there would be Hydra agents in the Bureau who would reclaim him. He had known this was coming. He had just hoped to be with Steve for a while first.

“Tony,” Steve whispered, “I’m sorry, I’ll take him somewhere else-”

“Shut up.” Stark got a grip on himself and spoke to Keener. “You know he was forced to do it. I have a soft spot for my fellow torture victims. He still needs to be protected from baddies, and you know, that’s kinda my job. Superhero, remember? Yes, Bucky Barnes is still welcome on my property, I’ll still sic my lawyers on you guys if you try to arrest him and my suits and my super-friends on anyone who tries to hurt him.”

“Tony, thank you.” Steve, of course, in tears.

“You don’t have to thank me for standard superheroing, Uncle Sam.”

Keener had another angle to try. He addressed his next remark, in a sympathetic tone, at Steve.

“Look, it’s all right that you’re still concerned that he be looked after, but he isn’t the man you knew. Think about the things he’s done. He’s killed, we believe, at least a thousand people. And now everyone knows the nature of his former relationship with you. Is Captain America going to let the world see him as someone who bangs supervillains?”

Keener’s wording was deliberately crude, intended to make Steve viscerally feel the things that would be said about him. He allowed himself a tiny smirk as Steve’s spine stiffened.

All the superheroes inhaled sharply.

Steve’s expression was thunderous. He stepped close to Keener. The man had to tip his head back to look at Steve, and didn’t conceal his annoyance at this very well.

“Bucky Barnes was the best friend, comrade and lover a man could have. You know that he was forced to kill those people. He was tortured and his mind taken away from him and you expect me to hold that against him?

“As for ‘banging supervillains’….”

The Avengers were all on full alert, watching the moment unfold. Actually holding their breath.

“For the past year, I have been banging Loki Friggjarson.”

What.

The agents’ jaws dropped.

“Loki did something that was very wrong, but he was forced to do it. I admire him and I respect him. He’s a brave fighter and a good man and a generous friend. I’m proud to be his shield-brother, I’m proud to be his friend, I’m proud that I was his lover.”

The agents were staring at Loki. Loki was looking at Steve, and Bucky knew he had given Steve that exact look many times. Like he was the sun in the sky.
Steve spoke again. “It was Loki who wanted to keep this private for a while, not me. He was worried about the flak I would get for having an affair with a former enemy. We were going to come out as a couple next week.”

“Of course, now that we know that Bucky Barnes is alive, that’s all over,” Loki said, his voice very even.

What? Steve had lost his lover just because Bucky was alive?

Bucky wasn’t even sure what he was feeling now. There was too much of everything.

“Gentlemen,” Pepper said, her voice cordially commanding, “as you can see, Bucky Barnes is a traumatized torture victim who needs care. He would feel unsafe in a hospital, and might harm the personnel if he feels threatened. The only place Barnes can feel safe now is with Steve Rogers. In addition, if by chance he should assault anyone, the people on this planet most able to withstand such an assault and stop him from harming anyone else are standing right here. We are about to take Sergeant Barnes to a remote, secure location where the Avengers can protect him - and protect others from him. Of course, we understand that there will have to be… a hearing, so that the evidence of the torture Barnes was subjected to can be officially evaluated.”

“And I reiterate that if the sergeant is deemed too dangerous to live freely on Midgard, I will take him to Asgard.”

“And I’ll be going with him.”

“So wait. Loki. You’re still offering Barnes asylum on Asgard? You’re still willing to fight us if we arrest him?”

“Yes.” Loki frowned, apparently confused.

“You’re doing all this for the guy who stole your boyfriend?”

Yeah. That.

Loki looked contemptuous.

“He didn’t steal my boyfriend. I borrowed his. And yes, I will defend Barnes from attack and grant him asylum if he needs it.”

“Now are you guys going to get out of the way of our jet, or are Captain America and his pals getting beamed up to Asgard?”

Keener looked angry, but he barked orders to the others and they let the gang of superheroes get on the jet.

When they were airborne, Tony turned to Loki and patted his elbow.

“Dude, thanks. Pepper and I coulda handled these guys-“

“But you made it much easier,” Pepper finished.

Loki gave Pepper a conspiratorial smile. “You did quite well yourself, showing them how to frame their surrender in a way that the public will accept.”

She shrugged, cheerful. “It’s what I do.”
“Thank you.” Steve was in tears again. “All of you.”

Loki smiled at him. “You are welcome.”
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

The Avengers go to the island.

Once they were out of the jet, Bucky kept his distance from everyone except for Steve. The others had anticipated this and respected it.

There was only one building, right in the center of the island. There was a large main room with a kitchen and a giant tv screen, and two floors of bedrooms opening off it. And a lab that took up half the building. And a gym, much smaller than the one in the Tower but it would do.

“That room’s mine, and Pep’s,” Tony said, pointing. “And I had a second bed put into one of the rooms, figured Steve and Bucky would want to be together but I know that when I first got back from Afghanistan I couldn’t have slept in the same bed with anyone else.”

The others nodded. Most of those present had experienced that.

“The rest of you guys, pick a room, any room. Um, over there,” he pointed to one door on the second tier, “that one’s a little bigger than the rest, Clint and Natasha might want it. Oh, and I know one of these rooms has green curtains, we all know who’ll want that one.”

Loki smiled. “I do not require that everything near me be green.”

It was late and everyone was tired, so they chose rooms quickly and went to bed. Steve found the one with the second bed. The bedrooms were all large, with tile floors and floor-to-ceiling windows and high ceilings.

Bucky chose the bed closer to the window. Steve had slept very little over the last few days, but he couldn’t fall asleep until he heard Bucky’s breathing grow slow and even.

Then he got the first decent night’s sleep he’d had since this whole mess had begun.

Steve woke at dawn to find Bucky pulling on fresh clothes. He had told Bucky when they were settling in to borrow anything of his. Bucky was almost as muscled as he was now, so they should fit.

For most of their lives, nothing of Steve’s would ever have fit Bucky.

Bucky pulled a shirt over his head and turned to Steve. “We need to reconnoiter.”

“Okay.” Steve dressed quickly and they went out, Steve letting Bucky lead the way.

Carbonell Cay - Carbonell was the maiden name of Tony's mother - was triangular. The house was at the very center of it. Two other islands could be seen, far in the distance. Tony had been right, no one could sneak up on them here.
Tony was so good to them. Steve was so grateful to him. To all of the Avengers, plus Sam and Pepper. He was so lucky to have them. He would do anything for them.

He hoped he could find a way to thank Loki. Something he could do for him.

He missed being Loki’s lover. Already. He would never touch him again, not like that, and even with the man who had shared his entire life through thick and thin - mostly thin - right beside him, that hurt.

The island was beautiful. It was a good place to heal. It would be good for Bucky. Well, for all of them. They were in the Caribbean, there was sunshine and beaches and trees. And friends.

Bucky’s expression shifted frequently between the cold intentness Steve had seen from the Winter Soldier to simple appreciation of the beauty around them. The kind of expression he would have had before. Bucky was still in there. Even if he still didn’t have himself back entirely.

“Bucky. How much do you remember? From before?”

“It’s all confused. I remember you. We were kids together. We were soldiers together.”

“What about… the things they made you do?”

“The memories always come back after a while. And then they wipe me again.”

Steve shuddered. “Bucky, I’m so sorry. If I’d had any idea you survived, I’d never have stopped until I found you.”

“I know.”

“We’ll do whatever it takes to help you to heal.”

Bucky looked at him, and it was that blank wary look again.

They would all show Bucky that he could trust them. Eventually he would.

When they had surveyed every square foot of the island, Steve and Bucky returned to the house.

Pepper was sitting on one of the sofas, Clint and Natasha on either side of her, arms around her. She looked like she was trying not to cry. The others weren’t in sight, presumably still in bed.

“What’s wrong?” Steve went to sit across from her, leaning close.

It was Natasha who answered. “Tony’s gone. Sneaked out in the middle of the night.”

“He sent us all the same email,” Clint said, nodding at the nearest Starkpad.

_I need some time. Bucky is still welcome on Carbonell Cay, don’t misunderstand, I know it wasn’t his fault. I’ll be back soon. -Tony_

Steve was causing everyone trouble. Because he loved Bucky.

“Pepper, I’m sorry.”
“You know that’s Tony’s way,” Clint said gently. “Some people need to talk. He hides in a cave to lick his wounds.”

Pepper nodded, squeezing her eyes shut. Steve reached over and put his hand on her clenched fists.

“He’ll be back when he’s had his sulk.”

“I know. I just.”

“Yeah.”

Awkward silence fell. After a minute Pepper stood up, movements abrupt and jerky.

“Let’s make breakfast.”

Clint started coffee brewing. Steve helped Pepper make bacon and pancakes. This was definitely a morning for pancakes. Plus, he was hungry for the first time since learning Bucky was alive.

Bucky stood against the wall, several feet away from everyone else, watching Steve’s every move.

Natasha took a Starkpad to Steve when he was able to pause for a minute. “You should see this. You and Loki made the front page. So to speak.”

Steve took the Starkpad from her. Sure enough, the news site’s top headline was CAPTAIN AMERICA’S SECRET BOYFRIEND: LOKI.

“He’ll be upset. But I’m glad the world knows.”

“The FBI used Pepper’s framing of the situation with Bucky. I think they told the media about you two as retaliation for us making them back down.”

“Loki is your boyfriend.”

Steve turned to look at Bucky, still standing against the wall. He couldn’t tell how Bucky was feeling from his tone, and his face was blank.

“He was. He broke it off when he found out you were alive.”

“You were dating someone from outer space.”

“Well, yeah.”

Bucky looked like he was mulling this over. “I guess it could be worse.”

“Oh?”

“He could be from Jersey.”

Even Pepper laughed.
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of Hydra's exposure, Queen Frigga visits Midgard.

The room was not smoke-filled or dimly lit. It was an office with beige walls and grey carpets and windows that didn't open, and clandestine decisions were made in it under harsh overhead lights.

The CIA was understaffed these days. The exposure of Hydra had decimated the ranks of intelligence agencies and law enforcement all over the world.

Those who remained were now woefully overworked. With way too many things to worry about.

“Do you think Queen Frigga plans to annex Earth? Since apparently we can’t run our own damn planet without being taken over by the descendants of Nazis?”

“She husband thought of this planet as his since Jesus was a boy. Literally. He was just an absentee landlord.”

“No wonder his brat was ready to help himself to us.”

“That brat is now our best hope of staying independent from Asgard. He’s sentimental. The superheroes were nice to him and now he’s our best buddy.”

“Fucking unpatriotic of Captain America to dump him the minute his ex showed up. How do we know Loki won’t turn on us over losing his boyfriend?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Introduce him to some more hot Earth guys. Catch him on the rebound.”

“I’ll get on that. So how do we handle Queen Frigga?”

“She’s stuck dealing with the detritus of thousands of years of hegemony over hundreds of worlds. Chances are she doesn’t want to add our problems to her list. Show her our plans for rooting the remains of Hydra out so she knows we’ve got it handled. Maybe thank her nicely for lending us her son to help the Avengers with their part in that.”

“Do we? Have it handled, I mean.”

“Sure.”

Shortly after the Avengers and their friends retreated to Carbonell Cay, Queen Frigga and Prince Loki attended a UN meeting in New York, during which representatives from most of the world’s governments discussed and coordinated their plans for combating Hydra.

In keeping with the Avengers’ new rule against any of them wandering the world alone (a rule which Tony, who had suggested the rule to begin with, was currently flouting), Loki was accompanied by Black Widow. She had volunteered, and was probably the Avenger best equipped
to deal with a diplomatic setting.

Frigga was not surprised that the connections made at the supposedly social parts of the gathering, such as the formal cocktail party at the end of the first day, were if anything more important than those made during the official hours. Midgard was hardly unique in that practice.

The liquor was too weak for a Van, but the flavor of the drink Loki had recommended to her - cognac, he had called it - was pleasing, and there was Asgardian mead back at the Tower.

As she spoke to some human who seemed to actually hope that Asgard would take Earth in hand and rule the humans, Frigga covertly watched her son and Natasha. With approval, she saw that the shield-maiden was keeping a sharp eye on Loki at all times, even when they were both talking to other people. It had seemed amusing at first, this tiny human female acting as bodyguard for an Asgardian sorcerer, but in practice it actually made sense. No one would be able to catch Loki unawares with the Black Widow watching his back.

And the reverse was true as well. Frigga had succeeded too well here. Loki had bonded strongly with his human shield-brothers. A few decades hence, she was going to have to watch his grief as they began to die.

But if Loki had anything to say about it, Natasha, and every other Avenger, would die of old age in a warm bed.

*What do you mean to do?* she had asked him the night before. *Watch every one of them grow old and sick? Sit by their beds as they wither away and die one by one, while you stay as you are?*

Loki had looked her in the eye, his face full of grief, and spoken with absolute conviction.

*Yes.*

Frigga sighed.

“You need not worry about your world’s independence,” she told the human, tone ingenuous. “Even if I wished to rule it, the affection both of my sons have for Earth would prevent me.”

Perhaps Asgard *should* take command of Earth, if fiends such as those in Hydra had attained power here, but she had spoken the truth. Thor might not care for Midgard’s sovereignty despite his fondness for the world, he was still his father’s son, but Loki would give her no peace if she interfered with the world which had offered him kindness after his crimes against it.

The thought of her idealistic, sentimental son here among such beings as those in Hydra turned her stomach, but she had already chosen her course with him and it was too late.

She waved away the man’s attempt at a response and made her way through the room to her son’s side. At the same time, Natasha detached herself from the dignitary she’d been speaking to and joined them.

Natasha spoke to Loki in a low voice, a social smile still on her face. “The cute chestnut-haired guy who’s been fluttering his lashes at you?”

Frigga tried not to grimace. The instant her son had lost his lover, more humans were jockeying to be next. This despite Loki’s patent lack of interest in transferring his affections so soon. She would have to warn Fandral off making advances before sending him to serve on Midgard again.

With an equally bland smile, Loki replied, “What about him?”
“I know him. We’re in the same line of work.”

Loki was unsurprised. “In other words, it probably isn’t my charm. Do you know who he works for?”

“CIA, last I heard.”

“I wonder if he wants to spy on Asgard or the Avengers via my bed.”

“I’d guess either or both.”

Loki’s mouth twisted. “Very likely. I see someone I should speak to. Pardon me for a moment.” He waited for Frigga to nod permission before leaving them, Natasha’s eyes flitting to him every few seconds. And his to her.

“Agent Romanoff.” At that, Natasha met Frigga’s gaze, and Frigga held it. “I would like you to tell me something honestly.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Would the Avengers prefer that Loki leave Earth now?”

“No, Your Majesty.” Natasha spoke very firmly. When Frigga only waited, Natasha went on, “You’ve probably seen that the team has formed a very strong bond, among all of us. We would miss Loki very much. We care about him. And I believe that we’ve been good for him. And that we still can be, despite him and Steve breaking up.”

Both of them looked to Loki, who was listening attentively to whatever the humans he was with were telling him. He glanced their way with a fleeting smile.

*Please do not command me to leave Midgard,* he had said the previous night. After her arrival on Midgard they had spent hours talking. That request, in a soft reluctant voice, had troubled her.

Loki chose his words carefully. Frigga knew this, had herself taught him that a sorcerer’s words had power. Diplomacy and sorcery both required careful choices of words.

He was not asking to stay on Midgard. He was asking not to be commanded not to.

On balance, Frigga was pleased. She trusted her son. His willing obedience honored her. She wanted him to be king one day; he would need independence of mind and spirit to lead the realms. If she had to pass the throne to Thor, then Loki and Asgard and indeed all the realms would need Loki to be his own man, not a mere obedient vizier.

Indeed, the only reason she was still considering Thor as a possible heir at all was that she knew the greatest happiness Loki could have would be to be the loyal right hand of King Thor. To have his brother listen to and respect him - that was Loki’s dearest wish.

Loki’s hint of defiance now was still galling, because she knew Loki would never have contemplated disobeying Odin, even if Odin had commanded that he leave people he loved.

So be it. She would not lose her son for her own vanity, as Odin had. She would remind herself that Loki would not be able to fulfill his destiny if he lacked that core of independence.

“Then stay he shall.”
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

Superheroes brood and hug each other. That's it, that's the chapter.

Warning: non-explicit discussion of past torture.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer and rennemichaels for beta reading.

A lot of that first day on Carbonell Cay was spent sitting on the patio, basking in the sun and occasionally talking. Bucky stayed on the edge of the group, with Steve between him and the others.

Howard Stark’s son was still gone. This was Bucky’s fault and everyone was unhappy over it. Bucky couldn’t think of anything to do about it.

Bucky kept studying Loki. This man who had been Steve’s lover, when Steve thought Bucky was dead. He could see why Steve had wanted him. Loki was handsome, like a movie star. And his voice, the way he held himself, the graceful way he moved, he was class all the way. He was like a walking embodiment of everything two penniless Brooklyn boys had hoped to someday get a taste of. And Loki was apparently a superhero. Of course Steve had fallen for him.

And of course someone had finally had the sense to appreciate Steve. Loki was obviously still in love with him. It showed in how he looked at Steve, and how he tried not to look at him.

All of the superheroes seemed unhappy. And weary. When they spoke, it was mostly about the missions ahead of them.

The Avengers were going to let regular law enforcement do most of it. “Like Tony keeps reminding us,” Clint said, “superheroes are not a substitute for normal cops.” Their own role would be to use their intelligence sources to find Hydra operatives, and to arrest those who seemed especially dangerous.

Steve turned to Sam after some of this discussion. “Sam, do you want to go into battle with us? You don’t have to,” he added hastily. “Don’t feel obliged.”

“Are you kidding? Just try to keep me out.”

“When will my service start?” Bucky asked, speaking for the first time since making his joke about Jersey. The others all looked at him, surprised.

Steve frowned. “Your service?”

“Working with the Avengers to make reparations for my deeds with Hydra. Like Loki.”
Bucky had said something wrong. All of them were looking at him and frowning.

Loki was the first to speak. “It is hardly the same thing. You were not at all responsible for the things Hydra compelled you to do. I was acting under duress when I brought the Chitauri here, and there were extenuating circumstances for my misdeeds, but I am far more culpable than you.”

Steve looked upset. “Bucky, we don’t expect anything from you. I mean, except that you not kill anybody. We brought you here to protect you. All you have to do is get well.”

Bucky studied their faces. He detected no tells of dishonesty. But this didn’t make sense. Why would they bring him here if not to use him?

“When you’ve recovered, then you can decide if you want to fight alongside us or not.” Natasha’s voice was very quiet, and she looked at him steadily. “It is entirely your choice.”

“Perhaps I should tell you what happened with the Chitauri in detail,” Loki said. “I know Hydra carefully monitored what news you got.”

Sam looked from Loki to Bucky and back. “If y’all don’t mind, I’d like to sit in on that too. I’ve read articles about what happened, but I’d like to hear the full version from you.”

Loki nodded his agreement. Clint said, “But not right this minute. It’s almost time for lunch. This sea air is making me want seafood. There’s gotta be some frozen fish in that giant freezer, right?”

There was, and as they figured out how to cook it they discussed the possibility of learning to fish so long as they were on an island.

When Loki left the common room for a few minutes, Clint took Sam aside. He didn’t seem to mind that Bucky was right there, hearing it all. “Listen, I need to know, straight up: Do you have a problem working with Loki? If you do, that’s completely understandable, but we need to know this.”

“If the Avengers think Loki’s okay, he’s got to be okay.” Sam looked Clint in the eye. “So you believe he’s on the level?”


“Then that’s good enough for me.”

Clint nodded once and went to peek into the oven at the fish again.

After lunch, Bucky, Sam and Loki all walked slowly along the beach while Loki told them his story. Bucky felt a little antsy with Steve out of his sight, but he had already surveyed the entire island. There was nowhere Steve could wander off to, and every person on the island was Steve’s friend. It would be all right. Surely.

Loki explained about Asgard and Jotunheim, about his own kidnapping and how he’d been lied to. His suicide attempts. How the first attempt had put him in the clutches of an evil being called Thanos, who had tortured him and forced him to come to Earth to claim the Tesseract for him. How Loki, unable to escape even into death, had sabotaged the invasion he had been forced to lead so that Earth could defend itself. And then how his queen had sent him back to Earth to make reparations.

Loki went on at great length about how generous the Avengers had been to him, how grateful he was. “They suffered having me here partly to secure Asgard’s alliance with Midgard, but also because they suspected that I too was in need of rescue. They went far beyond their duty to their own world. I was nothing to them except an enemy, they had no duty to me, yet they were willing to
offer me rescue if I needed it, for no other reason than that it was the right thing to do. Because they are heroes. They showed me sufferance, then kindness, and finally friendship.”

Yeah. Steve had found his own kind all right.

When Loki was done telling his story, Bucky left him and Sam to talk it over and returned to Steve. Steve was sitting on a little hill on the north end of the island, drawing the view. Bucky just sat down beside him and Steve smiled at him, sadly. They didn’t talk, just sat together, looking out at the waves and the sky, not speaking.

They used to do this, Bucky thought. Before. They didn’t always have to talk.

After supper, they all watched a movie. Clint thought it would be funny if they watched one called *Jaws* but the others firmly vetoed this idea, so a lighthearted animated movie was agreed on instead.

Bucky and Steve went to sleep in their separate beds early, worn out by the stresses of the last few days. But close to midnight, Bucky jerked awake. Not from a nightmare, just from being unaccustomed to sleeping in a home instead of whatever barracks Hydra was keeping him in.

Steve was still asleep. Bucky decided to reconnoiter the island again, reassure himself that there were no threats. The superheroes had shown him the surveillance cameras and other things that would alert the computer if anyone approached the island, but that didn’t feel the same as seeing for himself.

He went into the main room silently and started to take the door that led onto the patio, but stopped. Two people were already out there, he could see through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Pepper and Loki. Pepper was talking, obviously upset. Maybe about her boyfriend being away. Loki was listening to her, his face sympathetic. When Pepper paused in whatever she was saying, Loki said something that made her laugh a little bit. Then she let him put his arm around her and squeeze her shoulder.

Bucky noticed the way Pepper relaxed against Loki as she continued talking. It had been a long time since he had seen people looking so unafraid. Usually the people he saw were either fighting or terrified. He hardly remembered what it was like, to feel the way these superheroes did together.

He backed away from that door as quietly as he could and took the other door to the outside. He took care not to disturb their conversation as he made his way to the beach to check the perimeter.

An hour later when he returned to the house, the two of them were still there. Pepper looked less unhappy, at least. They weren’t talking anymore, just sitting together, listening to the ocean waves and looking at the stars.

Bucky slipped noiselessly back into the room he shared with Steve and fell asleep after only a few minutes.

Once they were all safely on the island, Loki found his good resolutions collapsing. He wanted Steve to be happy, he truly did, and he was not remotely ruthless enough to regret a man thought dead had survived.

And yet.

Loki had frankly been sulking enough over the fact that he would lose his lover to old age in a scant few decades. To lose him after a mere year…. 
It was miserably unfair.

Taking shameless advantage of the kindness of his shield-brothers in leaving him alone to grieve when he felt Steve’s loss too keenly, Loki sat alone in his room (not the one with the green curtains, thank you, Tony) until even he was disgusted with his own self-pity. And so he grabbed the Starkpad on the nightstand (as with all of Tony’s dwellings, the things were everywhere) and said, “Jarvis, I think it’s time I read Bucky’s files.”

Natasha had dumped all of Hydra’s available files onto the internet higgledy-piggledy. Since then, Jarvis had indexed every possible bit of information, plus numerous internet denizens had created guides to the various types of information.

In a trice, Loki had his rival’s history at his fingertips.

He began to read.

Hours later - possibly the next day - a hand covered the screen. He looked up, blinking. He had not even heard Clint’s entrance.

“That’s enough for now,” he said. “Come on. Outside. Sunshine.”

Numbly he obeyed, dropping the Starkpad heedlessly onto the floor.

The fresh sea air hit him in the face, startling him somewhat out of his trance. He looked around, blinking.

It didn’t seem right for beauty like this to exist in the same universe as what he’d been reading.

At Clint’s tug on his arm, he went farther from the house, closer to the beach. That was probably Clint’s intended destination for them, but before they got that far his legs simply buckled under him and he sank to the ground.

Clint sat beside him, alert. Loki put his head in his hands.

Clint’s arm was warm around his shoulders.

Loki was grateful to have him this close, to touch another warm living being at this moment.

Still after a minute he had to push away and vomit into the sandy soil.

When he was done he pushed sand over the result. Let it fertilize the damned palm trees.

Clint slipped his arm around him again. Loki leaned against him, still grateful for the contact.

It was a long time before he spoke.

“If it makes up for some of that, he can have my boyfriend.”

It wasn’t entirely a joke.

“We’ll take care of him,” Clint replied.

After another silence stretched, Loki dragged more words out. “Clint, I must apologize to you again. I felt remorse for mind-controlling you even before I did it. But now, reading this - I cannot express my disgust for myself enough. I am sorry. I would do anything to undo it.”
It was a minute before Clint huffed a laugh. “That’s funny. Reading Bucky’s files made me feel better about it.”

Loki looked at him, bewildered.

“What you did to me is not okay, I’m not excusing you. Yeah, I know what the situation was. And now we’re friends, we’re shield-brothers. But a part of me will never be able to forgive you.”

“Some things are beyond forgiveness,” Loki agreed.

“But you didn’t wipe out my identity and take away my humanity. And you didn’t engage in any petty cruelty. You could have done literally anything to us. Hurt us, humiliated us, made us beat each other up. But all you did was what the mission required.”

Loki swallowed. “That is… incredibly generous of you. You have heart.” He said it in the solemn tone he used for important pronouncements. It was a tone intended to carry throughout a throne room while he prepared to knight the subject kneeling before him. Or whatever the Asgardian equivalent was.

“Funny thing is, if it were possible I would give you retroactive consent. I can totally give up my free will for a couple of days in order to save my planet from destruction by Thanos.”

“But it doesn’t work that way.”

“No. It doesn’t. But I’ve been personally watching you do everything possible to make amends for a year and a half now. And you’ll do plenty more before it’s all over.” Clint snorted at a sudden thought. “You’re far from the worst boss I’ve had.”

“Oh?”

“You listened to everything we told you. You asked what we needed to carry out our missions and then you got it for us. The only problems were the whole robbing me of my free will thing, and that you wouldn’t take my advice when I told you your plans were too risky.”

“If I had taken your advice, I would have succeeded in conquering Midgard,” Loki pointed out.

“Oh, right.” He pretended to consider that. “So maybe I should be a henchman for a guy who actually wants to take over the world next time.”

Loki managed a smile. “It is ironic that you are now comforting me.”

“We all look after each other.”

At that moment, Natasha approached them. “You guys have both spent way too much time inside. We’re on this beautiful island and you’re wasting it. Put on your swim trunks, let’s get in the water for a while.”

The men obediently stood up and headed for the house to change. Natasha flitted ahead of them. “Last one in is a rotten egg,” she called over her shoulder.

Loki frowned, bewildered. “What?”

Being around Steve, and not being drugged or mind-wiped, shook memories loose for Bucky very quickly. After a couple of days on the island it felt like the cascades of recollection hardly ever
stopped. Any little thing could set them off. Memories of when he and Steve were kids. When Steve was scrawny and sick all the time. When Steve suddenly showed up six feet tall with muscles popping out of his clothes.

Zola’s experiments on Bucky.

The things they made him do.

The things they did to keep him obedient.

When the flood of memories began, Bucky asked Steve if he could use one of his sketchbooks as a journal. Steve handed one over immediately, but also showed him how to use a Starkpad. Bucky found he preferred that. He took to spending most of each day typing on it, or sitting somewhere outside, speaking into its recorder, alternating between English and Russian, his privacy protected by the constant sound of the waves and wind. He recorded everything, and Jarvis, the computer that ran everything in Stark’s buildings, sorted it all out. Memories of Before went in one folder. Confessions of what the Winter Soldier had done, and accounts of what he had endured, went in another. Intel that could lead to the apprehension of more Hydra agents went to another and was shared with appropriate authorities.

Bucky wasn’t sure what he was going to do with all of this, but he needed to record it all. In case he forgot again. In case they got him and made him forget again.

Steve wanted him to let doctors examine him. He couldn’t. Not after - no. He had many memories of doctors and all of them made his mind flinch away. He let Steve crumble one of the alien prince’s healing stones on him, on the rapidly healing injuries he’d gotten in his battles with Steve, Natasha and Sam. That was all.

Tony had been holed up in his Malibu house for a week, alternately making things in his workshop and drinking until he passed out, when Bruce joined him. Jarvis let him in. Bruce descended the stairs to the workshop, hot pizza in hand.

Tony was leaning over a half-finished pair of wings for Sam. He had already made two sets and was well into the third, each slightly different. Sam’s remaining wings that had been damaged in his battle with the Winter Soldier were on a table by themselves, half disassembled.

Bruce didn’t say a word. He set the pizza box down on the table and opened it. Tony took a slice and kept on with his work. Bruce studied the holographic blueprints of the wings which Jarvis projected for him without being asked. After a couple of minutes of scrutinizing them, Bruce put on goggles, picked up a welding torch, and got to work at Tony’s side.

They went on like this for hours. The only words they exchanged were things like, “Hold these wires for me for a minute,” or “Can you bring the titanium braces over here?”

When the wings were finished, Tony poured himself a Scotch and got Bruce a soda from the refrigerator. “So you’re here to drag me back.”

“No. Just to keep you company until you’re ready to go back. It was your idea that we shouldn’t go off alone anymore, remember?”

Without the distraction of his work, the things Tony was trying not to think about came rushing back. He looked into his glass.
“We won’t make you talk about it, Tony,” Bruce said. “Actually, we had a long talk about not making you talk about it.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. We… well. You know Pepper is the kind of person who needs to talk things out.”

Tony winced. “Yeah. I’m gonna lose her over that one day.” He looked even more miserable at that thought.

“Don’t be too sure. You two understand each other better now.” Bruce smiled, a little sadly. “From things you’ve both said, it sounds like you two were in love for years before you did anything about it, because you knew you weren’t perfectly compatible.”

“Yeah. It was only almost dying of the palladium poisoning that made us finally get together.” Tony shuddered at the memory.

“So look. We’ve come up with an idea. It’s called Protocol Fortress of Solitude.”

Tony looked at him, all kinds of emotions warring in his eyes.

“The idea is this. If something important goes down with one of us and we don’t want to talk about it, we invoke Fortress of Solitude. It means that none of the rest of us bring up the subject until the invoker does. So you don’t have to isolate yourself from the rest of us because you can’t deal with a subject yet. You can still eat with us and watch movies with us and everything. We won’t make you talk about stuff you’re not ready to yet.”

Tony closed his eyes. “This was Loki’s idea, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, actually. He thought about what he would have liked to get when he first found out he was a frost giant, if he’d had supportive friends.” Bruce took a swig of soda. “Tony, you’ve gone to a lot of trouble to make sure the rest of us don’t have to deal with this stuff alone. You shouldn’t have to, either.”

Ten minutes after Bruce said that, Tony straightened up, wiped his reddened eyes, and went to splash cold water on his face. The two of them went upstairs and heated canned soup and talked about a fourth pair of wings for Sam and fell asleep watching Mystery Science Theater. (Leech Woman, Bruce’s favorite episode just because it was the first one he’d seen.)

“So how was Alaska?” Tony asked the next morning over coffee and cereal.

“The Other Guy smashed up some glaciers. Left faultlines that’ll probably have them breaking up for the next few years.” Bruce considered. “Alaska’s cold, but really beautiful. We should probably get Loki there sometime.”

“How’s he doing? I’ve been ignoring everyone’s texts and emails.”

“He read Bucky’s files and practically went into shock.”

“Yeah. He would.”

“He and Natasha had to go to New York for a few days while Frigga met with the UN. Natasha says Frigga confirmed that Loki can stay.”

“He lost his main squeeze and he still wants to stay here. We did our job way too well on him.”
Bruce gave his lazy smile. “Your diabolical plans aren’t always going to work quite the way you want them to, Tony. And don’t forget that Loki’s making his own decisions here.”

“Yeah, but… like the rest of us, he’s actually trapped. We gave him what he needed. Now he has to prove to Steve, to all of us, to the universe, to himself that he’s just as noble when there’s nothing in it for him.”

“You wanted to help him get off the supervillain path. Of course he’s going to turn around and be the noblest noble who ever nobled. You full tilt divas always do take it too far.”

“I resemble that remark.”

The nearest Starkpad beeped with its email alert, and Jarvis’s voice cut in smoothly. “Mr. Stark, I believe you may want to actually read this one. It is from Sergeant Barnes.”

Tony hesitated for a second, then picked up the pad. Read the message.

“Tony?” Bruce said.

Tony huffed a rueful laugh. “He says he’s sorry. That he… yeah.”

“I’m sure he is.”

Suddenly looking tired, even though he had just had a night’s sleep, Tony rubbed his face. “So let’s finish this last pair of wings and then go back to the island. Deal?”

“Deal.”
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

The Avengers raid a Hydra compound and find a couple of interesting items.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer and rennemichaels for beta reading. Thanks to them it's now much better. Renne especially left me bruised and bloody amidst the shreds of this chapter, but she also reminded me of a bit of canon that had slipped my mind but that I then realized I can make use of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back on the island, Tony found Pepper in one of the bedrooms which she had repurposed as an office. An array of computers and cell phones allowed her to run Stark Industries remotely. For a while, anyway.

She was in the middle of a conference call when he came in, laden with peace offerings. She looked up and relief shone in her eyes.

For Tony’s part, he sat down quietly and waited for her to finish. She wrapped it up as swiftly as possible and disconnected. Then stood up and hugged him tight.

“How mad are you?” he murmured into her hair.

She sighed. “Some. I mean, I know. You need time alone to deal with things. I understand that.”

“But me running off in the middle of the night was a bit not good.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know. Are you… okay?”

“Yeah.” He pulled back. “Allow me to heap tribute at your feet, milady.”

She sat on the bed, which she hadn’t bothered to remove, and crossed one long leg over the other, smiling.

Flowers first, of course: an absurdly large arrangement of roses, each petal dappled red and white. Then a box of Kron chocolate truffles (her favorite). He moved behind her to drape a diamond necklace around her neck and clasp its matching bracelet around her wrist, then handed her the matching earrings. Then he handed over one more small box.

She opened it. It was a brooch of emeralds and rubies… in the shape of a strawberry.
She laughed and put her arms around him again. “All right. You’re forgiven. Or rather, you will be in about two hours.”

“What happens in two hours?”

“It’s what happens during those two hours.” With an impish smile, she let her eyes flit to the pillows.

He smiled. “Only two hours?”

“I’m having mercy on you. You’re an old man.”

“An old man who’s with the most wonderful woman in the Nine Realms.”

“Oh, well, then, I expect three hours.”

“At your service, milady!”

“Cut off one head, two more shall take its place! Hail Hydra!”

Loki snorted as he zip-tied the scoundrel’s wrists behind his back. “I really wish the other Avengers would allow me to behead just one of you to see if that came true.”

The man paled, but tried to bluster through it. “You cannot find us all! We shall rise like the phoenix from its own ashes!”

“Unlike you, I actually am a mythological creature.” He hauled the man to his feet effortlessly and gave him a tiny shove, glancing at the other two men in the room whose wrists were already bound. “All of you, go into the main room.”

Sam and Clint were securing more Hydra operatives, cuffing them to each other to limit how much mischief they could cause. Tony emerged from another room, fully armored, prodding two lab-coated guys in front of him until they were secured with the rest. “That room’s secured. There’s just one more door we haven’t been through. It’s armored all to hell.”

“So should I call the FBI to pick these guys up?” Sam asked.

“Not yet. I need to get a couple of trucks out here.” Tony flipped up his faceplate to reveal a grim expression. “That room’s full of Stark missiles. If the feds see them they’ll try to grab them.”

Sam and Clint got to work filling portable hard drives with data from the bank of computers. Tony and Loki went towards the armored door. Several feet away from it, Loki stopped, putting out an arm to hold Tony back.

“Tony, let me go into that room first,” Loki said. “They have something magical in there. I can feel it.”

“I’ll take your word for that.” Tony lowered his faceplate, projected a laser from his gauntlets and cut the door open. Then stood back.

Loki moved towards it cautiously. “It feels almost like….”

His hand paused on the door.
“Damn.”

He packed an awful lot of ire into that one clipped, mild curse.

“What?”

Loki pushed the door open, Lævateinn at the ready. Looked inside.

“I thought that thing was destroyed,” he said grimly.

“What is it?”

“My sceptre.”

Clint looked up from the computers. “Seriously? Fuck.”

“Jarvis,” Tony said, “check the records about which SHIELD agents doing the Chitauri cleanup reported that the sceptre was destroyed when Natasha used it to close the portal. They had to have been Hydra.”

“I am taking this thing to Asgard at once. I’ll need help destroying it.”

Clint straightened up. “I’m going with you.”

“As you wish.” Loki made no objection as Clint elbowed past him to go into the room and pick the sceptre up. Good, because Clint wouldn’t have taken no for an answer. He trusted Loki now, he liked him, but he did not want to see Loki holding that infernal weapon.

Clint’s stomach knotted at the sight of the thing. When he grasped it, he felt its familiar malevolent energy. Just being in the room with it on the helicarrier had had all of the Avengers at each other’s throats, according to what Natasha had told him.

Loki took a crystal from his pocket dimension and sent a bit of green seiðr into it.

“What’s that?” Sam asked. He had left the computers to come and take a closer look at the sceptre.

“E.T.’s phoning home,” Tony said.

“Tony says that almost every time he sees me using the communication crystal. He is very glad to have someone new to say it to.”

“I’d say it to Bucky but I’m pretty sure he missed E.T.”

“That is easily remedied.” Loki looked back to Sam. “I just told my mother that I am bringing this to Asgard and requested that the Bifrost transport me and Clint.”

“Nifty. Sometime I hope you’ll tell me more about what your magic can do.”

“Certainly.” The crystal gave a faint glow and Loki looked at it. “The gatekeeper is ready to transport us as soon as we step outside. Tony, Sam, do you need anything else from us before we go?”

“I think we’re good. I’ll be spending the rest of the day making sure these missiles get decommissioned. Apparently it’s Destroy Stolen Weapons Day.”

Loki looked at Clint. “Shall we?”
Clint nodded and the two of them went outside. After a moment the Bifrost took them to Asgard.

They arrived in a huge room with a vaulted ceiling. Two people were there waiting for them: an older woman who Clint assumed was the gatekeeper, and Queen Frigga.

Frigga’s gaze went to the sceptre at once. Her eyes widened with horror. Clint assumed that if Loki could feel the thing’s energy from a distance, so could Frigga.

“You told me about this sceptre,” Frigga said to Loki, “but I did not realize how evil its energy was.”

“You see why we must destroy it.”

She stepped closer and stretched her hand towards the sceptre without touching it. Then shuddered at whatever she felt. “This is what that fiend used to maintain his link with you.”

“Yes.”

A moment later she was clutching her son close, burying her face against his chest. Loki folded his arms around her, cradling her head against him.

“My boy,” she whispered, and Clint realized she was crying. It felt surprising to see a queen weep. The gatekeeper watched with sympathy on her face. Clint looked away, feeling awkward.

“Mother, I’m safe now. Right here with you. It’s over.”

“That vile energy, being used on my boy….”

“We will destroy the sceptre. And one day, we will also destroy the monster who wielded it.”

Her response was a sob. Loki kissed the top of her head and continued to hold her.

After a minute, the queen tried to regain her self-control, tried to cease weeping, but could not. Loki looked at Clint and gave him a smile for a fleeting second. Then spoke in a whining voice.

“Moooooom, not in front of my frieeeeeends.”

It worked; Frigga laughed despite her tears and released him. “You give the commands. I will join you in the temple in half an hour.”

He squeezed her hand. “Yes, Mother.”

Clint and Loki got into a small craft, basically a boat that could fly, and Loki piloted it over the city. Clint was in a terrible mood thanks to the sceptre, both because of its magic and because of the memories seeing it evoked, but even so, he could see that Asgard was beautiful. Tony had been right, everything here was gold. Some of the buildings were actually floating.

They landed at one of the larger buildings, a round one covered with ornate abstract carvings. Clint followed Loki inside.

A young woman in an azure robe was just inside. She bowed to Loki and stared at the sceptre with instant revulsion.

“I must speak to the high priestess at once,” Loki informed her. “I will see her in the sanctuary.”

With that, Loki strode on, Clint hurrying to keep up.

The sanctuary was an enormous round room with high ceilings. In the center of it was an altar. There
was a small chamber of clear crystal against the wall near the entrance.

Loki turned to Clint. “Place the sceptre on the altar. Please.”

Clint did, glad to be able to put it down, walk away from it.

“When we are ready to begin, go into that chamber. It will shield you from the magical energies. You must stay inside it until we are finished. The seiðr could harm you.”

“Okay.”

An older woman, presumably the high priestess, entered then, the young woman they had seen before at her side. She bowed. “Your Highness.” Her eyes went at once to the spear.

Loki took charge at once. “Greetings, Gauthildr. We are to destroy this relic. Summon twenty of your most powerful sorcerers. Be sure to include Mjaðveig and Ríkvé. The queen will be here in half an hour to add her seiðr to the working.” He turned to the younger woman. “We will need the following ingredients,” and he listed several things Clint had never heard of.

On Earth, Loki was approachable and courteous. And whatever the Avengers asked of him, he did without hesitation. It was easy to forget that he was a prince. Clint was now being reminded, watching his shield-brother issue commands with quiet, confident authority.

Both priestesses left to carry out Loki’s orders at once. In a matter of moments the sanctuary was alive with activity. People - mostly women, because Asgard thought magic was for girls - in azure robes were bustling around, arranging urns full of stones and herbs around the altar. One unfurled a scroll and read aloud from it while others listened, reviewing the ritual. Pitted, dully shining black rocks were piled around the altar, heaped five feet high. Then over them dried leaves were scattered.

Frigga arrived. Everyone stopped what they were doing to bow. Then the sorcerers arrayed themselves around the altar, except for two who left. Clint figured it was time for him to go into the crystal chamber.

The two sorceresses who had left returned, each carrying two glowing orange stones. They placed them around the room and then joined the circle around the sceptre.

Frigga raised her hands. The other sorcerers followed suit.

The sceptre began to glow brightly. Clint’s stomach twisted.

It took two hours of sorcerers chanting and pouring their seiðr into the sceptre. The glowing orange stones burned brightly and put off sparks and what looked like lightning. The black stones around the altar gradually disintegrated. The sceptre seemed to be fighting its own destruction, and light of various colors flashed through the room as the sorcerers implacably continued, their faces drawn in concentration. Even in this protected chamber, Clint could feel a bit of the energies that were flying around the room. He didn’t like it.

But eventually the sceptre flared brightly and then just dissolved in a shower of angry red sparks. Only the glowing blue gemstone remained. All of the sorcerers just sank to the floor, exhausted.

After a moment, a few younger priestesses came in, offering flagons to everyone - Frigga first, of course. Frigga and Loki were studying each other, maybe evaluating each other’s condition. Clint took that as an indication that it was safe for him to come out. He emerged from the crystal chamber and went to squat beside Loki. He could still feel the energy in the air, as if there had just been a thunderclap.
“You okay?”

Loki gave him the ghost of a smile. “Just exhausted.” He drank some of whatever was in the flagon.

“So, the rock’s still there.”

“Destroying an Infinity Stone would be impossible,” Frigga said, voice weary. “But the stone itself is not malign. The sceptre that fiend encased it in harnessed its energies for evil.”

Clint looked at the stone on the altar, wary. But the energy it gave off had changed. Still there, but not malevolent. “So what are you going to do with it?”

“Put it in the weapons vault, of course. Safe from those who would use it for ill.”

Loki darted a glance at her. Then looked back to Clint. “I can have you returned to Midgard at once, if you wish. I will return in a day or so.”

“I guess I’ll go ahead and go back now, then. You get some rest.”

Loki caught the attention of one of the young priestesses. “Take my shield-brother Clint Barton to the Bifrost site.”

“Thanks, Loki.” Clint put a hand on Loki’s shoulder for a moment before leaving.

Chapter End Notes

The Maximoff twins won't be appearing in this fic because I never watched the movies they were in, so I don't know them well enough.
There was a feast that evening, of course. Despite his lingering fatigue, Loki was there.

Fandral and Hogun, Loki was relieved to learn, were away on missions. Sif and Volstagg were in Asgard. Before the meal was brought in, Loki wandered the feast hall with a golden goblet in his hand, speaking to people, catching up on the gossip. Sif approached him, frowning as she tried to choose her words.

“Loki, I am sorry you have lost your lover.”

She sounded faintly puzzled. Likely she considered it odd indeed that Loki should care so much about losing the favors of a mere mortal, but she was trying to be diplomatic towards him.

Would wonders never cease.

“Thank you, Sif. Ah, how did you know?”

She looked embarrassed for half a second. “I accidentally overheard the queen telling Fandral. She commanded him not to attempt to court you for half a century.”

Loki chuckled ruefully. Then cast about for some topic other than Steve. “You’ve changed your hair. It suits you.” Usually Sif let her hair flow loose or tied it into a tail, too impatient to bother with more. Tonight, however, she had it swept up and coiled around her head, showing off her elegant throat.

“It was Borghildr’s suggestion.”

“Really?” Borghildr was the adolescent daughter of a nobleman. Loki did not know the girl well, but from what he recalled of her she seemed an unlikely friend for Sif.

Sif indicated the girl, who was nearby talking to an older gentleman, smiling with enthusiasm over whatever she was chattering about. “She had a long explanation of why this was the best style for me. All I can recall is that it will keep my hair out of the way in battle. Perhaps we should let her deliver her lecture to you.”

Bemused, Loki nonetheless allowed Sif to lead him to the girl. Borghildr caught sight of them and her pretty face lit up at the sight of Sif, even as she dropped a curtsey to Loki.

“Sif! You did your hair yourself!”
Sif smiled, a little indulgent. “You’re right, it is practical. And the prince complimented it.”

The girl looked to Loki eagerly. “Don’t you think the shape of the Lady Sif’s face should be framed? It emphasizes her cheekbones, and that gorgeous inky hair against her creamy skin is so striking. And she has the long neck to pull that hairstyle off; my neck isn’t long and graceful like hers so I want my hair flowing down to make it look longer. And the light falls on her hair so beautifully with it wound around her head. I wish my hair were that color,” she added wistfully. Her own hair, elaborately braided and curled, was a pleasant but unremarkable light brown.

“I can arrange that,” Loki said, unable to stifle a laugh.

Borghildr giggled. “Oh, yes, I heard that story about you changing her hair color.” She looked at Sif, wrinkling her brow thoughtfully. “I can’t quite imagine you as a blonde, Sif.”

“Allow me to cast an illusion to show you,” Loki said, lifting his hand. He didn’t really need the hand gesture to do such simple magic, but non-sorcerers found it more unsettling if he didn’t do it.

Borghildr studied the glamour Loki put over Sif very seriously. “Is that the exact shade Sif’s hair was before?”

“Such attention to detail!” Loki was amused. “Yes. I recall because my lover at the time had the same shade.”

Borghildr considered. “Sif, that color is beautiful in itself, but I don’t think it really flatters you. You’re much more beautiful with dark hair.”

“I agree, actually.” Loki let the illusion dissolve. “Though my offer stands, Sif; if you ever wish your original color back, say the word.”

She shrugged. “Everyone likes me better as a brunette. Let it stay.”

Loki thought he recognized the hopeful glint in Borghildr’s eyes. “How old are you?”

“I’ll be of age in two years, Your Highness.”

“Then get your parents’ permission before asking me to enchant your hair.” She gave a quick pout, but the refusal did nothing to dampen her cheerful mood. “Or come back to me in two years. Or to any sorcerer; it isn’t a difficult spell. So what prompted you to suggest hairstyles to the Lady Sif?”

“Oh, I do that for everyone. It was when she went to Alfheim with me.”

“You and Sif went to Alfheim together?” That made no sense. Asgard had not warred against Alfheim since before Loki had been born.

“I play the harp. I got to spend an entire week studying with Master Gondothiel!” Loki could almost see the stars in the girl’s eyes at the name. Small wonder, as Gondothiel was one of the most renowned musicians of Alfheim.

“You must be very good, if Gondothiel was willing to teach you.”

Borghildr ducked her head a bit, pleased. “Neither of my parents could come with me. Usually Svanlaug - you know her, don’t you? - acts as my bodyguard when I travel alone, but she was on a mission.” Loki nodded; it was common practice for Asgardian nobility to take bodyguards when they traveled, even to allied realms with little danger. “I went to the training yard and started asking the shield-maidens if any of them were willing to accompany me - my parents say my bodyguard has
to be a woman. Sif heard me and offered.”

Loki looked at Sif, raising his eyebrows. “That was kind of you.”

Sif shrugged. “I had no mission for that week. You know I prefer to be busy.”

“I would like to hear what you have learned from Master Gondothiel, Borghildr. Honor us by playing.”

The girl’s eyes widened. “Now, Your Highness?”

“Is there a better time?”

The girl ran to fetch her instrument. Once she had left, Loki said, “A sweet girl. I would have thought you would find the company of a girl who cares only for hairstyles and music intolerable.”

In the past Sif had been very vocal about her contempt for women who followed the path she had fought to escape.

“Life will force her to care about graver matters sooner or later. Let her be a child while she may.”

Loki only looked at Sif, until she went on.

“You were right, when you asked me if I could love my children even if they are not warriors. Not like me.” Sif held his gaze. “And if I am ever queen, I will have to be the queen of all of my people, not only my fellow warriors.”

Loki had never thought Sif could change so much. He thought for a moment.

“And suppose that one day you are Thor’s queen, and I his vizier, as we always expected. Can we then be allies?”

She gave him a rueful smile. “I always expected that you and I would spend our whole lives competing for Thor’s ear. It would be better if we could be allies instead. When we disagree about what is best for Asgard, we will negotiate.”

Loki hadn’t even known Sif knew that word.

Just then Borghildr returned with her harp. At first only Loki and Sif were paying heed, but soon the entire feast hall fell silent to listen.

The girl was quite talented. Gondothiel must be proud.

Loki breakfasted with his mother in her garden the next morning before returning to Earth. The queen had been following the news of Hydra closely. Her opinion of Midgard had suffered accordingly.

“Had I known Midgard was so corrupt, I never would have sent you there.”

Loki would always defend Earth, in battle or in discussion. “Mother, you can hardly judge all humans by these fiends. It is humans who are now putting a stop to Hydra’s schemes.”

“I only wanted you to overcome the contempt Odin taught you, and everyone, for other races.”

“Is Thor learning that same lesson on Jotunheim?”
“I believe he is. He no longer hates frost giants.”

Loki looked away. “When I first found out that I was one, I was certain he would hate me when he found out. If he found out.”

Frigga gave him a sharp look. “Is that why you told him all those lies? That Odin was dead and that I had insisted his banishment be permanent?”

“Yes. It was pre-emptive revenge.” Loki sighed, lowering his head. He still felt ashamed when he remembered those days of terror and grief and madness. “Everything else wrong I have ever done, I can cite extenuating circumstances and noble ulterior motives, but those lies served no purpose beyond my own malice. I just wanted to hurt him.”

“Well. It isn’t as if he hadn’t given you reason.”

“I hardly need more excuses made for me, Mother.”

Frigga nodded and took a listless bite of a zallin fruit. “I did not intend for you to become so attached to the mortals. My only comfort is that in a few decades you will be willing to leave that corrupt realm.” At his expression, she clasped his hand upon the table, but went on, “I should never have sent you to Midgard.”

Loki raised his head and looked her in the eye. “Sending me to Midgard was the third best thing you ever did for me.”

“The third?”

“The second was teaching me magic.”

She smiled. Waited.

“The first was….” His voice choked. “Loving me as much as the son you bore.”

She stood and put her arms around him. He leaned his head against her, wrapping his arms around her waist. “I never did tell you about the day your - Odin brought you to me, did I?”

He looked up at her. “No. I was going to ask you about it, sometime.”

She brushed his hair back from his face. “Odin returned from Jotunheim with the Casket, and a baby. He came to my chambers with you. He told me that your parents had died in the war, and he meant to raise you himself. As his son, as a brother to Thor.”

“I argued at first.” She gave a rueful laugh. “Thor was just beginning to walk, and he was a handful.”

“I can imagine.”

“I said that I was busy enough with Thor and that he should have you raised by some noble family. You could still be Thor’s companion. But he was emphatic: you were to be our son. He said so and thrust you into my arms. I looked down at you. You were looking up at me, curious the way babies are about faces. You looked so earnest. The moment I saw you, I knew you were mine.”

Loki blinked away tears, but made himself chuckle. “Nature makes babies cute for that very reason.”

She shook her head. “I have held many babies. Some were almost as cute as you were.” He smiled at that. “I have never felt that way about any child other than my two sons.”
Loki bowed his head, overcome.

“Odin and I argued a great deal over lying to you about your adoption. It was when you two were older, a few years into your education, that I thought I understood the reason.”

“Oh?”

“I believed….” She stopped.

He tilted his head back to look at her again. “Mother, I was deceived long enough. I need to know the entire truth.”

She sighed and sat back down. “I believed that Odin’s purpose was to make Thor regard you as his true brother, so that he would see you as an equal, worthy to advise him, when it was time for him to be king. I believed the Norns had inspired Odin to adopt you, had put you in his path, to help Thor to rule wisely.”

“But his true purpose was not to bind Thor to me, but me to Odin. So that when he put me on the throne of Jotunheim I would be an obedient puppet king.”

“Yes.”

“I am still amazed he didn’t tell you what I was.”

“He likely realized that I would never have cooperated with that scheme.”

“Odin did one good thing for me. He gave me you for a mother.”

They clasped hands tightly for a long moment.

They talked of less serious things for the rest of the meal. When they were done, she said, “I will send one of Thor’s friends to serve with you on Midgard a week hence.”

“Thank you, Mother.” He drew a breath. “And I must ask you for a favor.”

“What favor?”

He told her.

She closed her eyes. “Oh, Loki.”
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

Frigga grants Loki's favor.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to notwithweaponsbutideas for beta!

Frigga granted the favor, of course. It was right, her beloved son was asking it of her… and she might be able to use it towards her own ends.

When the Bifrost took Loki back to Carbonell Cay, Frigga went with him.

The humans were scattered around the island, but all of them came to the house when they saw the shimmering light of the Bifrost to greet Loki. Each drew themselves up in surprise when they saw Frigga beside him on the patio.

Frigga looked around, approving. If her son had to stay here and torment himself, at least he was doing so in a beautiful setting.

Each of the humans gave a little bow when they saw her, though two of the new ones seemed uncertain if that was the right thing to do.

“Mother, allow me to present Pepper Potts. Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes. Our new ally, Sam Wilson. And Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes. My mother, Queen Frigga of Asgard.”

She inclined her head regally, then took a seat, waving off everyone’s offers of refreshment. She probably could not keep some frostiness out of her gaze when it fell upon Steve Rogers, but her attention immediately moved on to the man beside him. The one who had taken Loki’s lover from him.

Barnes’s expression was stoic, but the fear in his wide blue eyes was evident, even in this safe haven. He had not said a word since reaching the patio. Once he sat down he was so still he might have been a statue.

Her heart went out to him. He reminded her of how Loki had been when he had first returned after being forced to lead the Chitauri invasion.

“Please, sit down, everyone. There is something my mother and I wish to discuss with you.” Loki sat beside her as he said this, and the others followed suit.

She made her voice gentle. “Sergeant Barnes, my son has asked me to offer you healing magic.”

“On Vanaheim?” Stark asked.
“No. On Asgard.” Her eyes met Loki’s for a second. They had agreed they must tell the entire truth about this magic. “The sceptre Thanos gave to Loki was powered by an Infinity Stone, the Mind Gem.” Every human tensed at the mention of the sceptre.

Rogers spoke up. “Ma’am - Your Majesty - Hydra was trying to use the sceptre to enslave people. Every single person they tested it on died.”

“They had no idea how to use it. And the sceptre was designed to harness the Gem’s power for evil. The Gem is not itself evil, any more than any power source is. Freed from the sceptre Thanos made for it, it can be used for benevolent purposes.” She paused. “With it, Sergeant Barnes, I can heal your mind. If you are willing.”

A heavy silence followed.

Rogers and Barnes looked at each other. Rogers asked, “Your Majesty, are you sure it’s safe? I mean, humans are different from Asgardians.”

“Quite sure.”

“I would not have asked this of my mother had I had any doubt it was safe.”

Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes gave Loki a sharp look. Frigga pretended to ignore it. She knew the man did not trust her son. She could not blame him. Guarding his people was his duty.

Frigga spoke to Barnes again. “If you accept my offer, your mind will be whole again. The shackles put upon your free will shall be gone. But all of your memories will return. Some of them, judging from Hydra’s records, you might prefer not to recall. And you will have the emotional pain of those memories to contend with.”

Barnes looked at Rogers. “It’s up to you, Buck,” Rogers said.

“You may take time to consider it. The offer will remain open.”

Barnes did not move or speak, but Rogers seemed to understand something from their held gaze. “Can you give us a minute to talk about this?” With that, the two of them rose and walked down to the beach, out of earshot.

Everyone else sat around, silent and awkward. Eventually Barton spoke.

“Um, Your Majesty. Will you be using the Mind Gem personally?”

“Yes. There are few I would trust with such a powerful relic.”

“It would hardly be seemly for me to ask to use that gem on a human myself, even to heal. Or to ask humans to take my word on its effects.” Loki glanced at Frigga. “That is why I asked my mother to come here to make the offer.”

Barton nodded. “I just can’t like the idea of you using that thing.”

“Nor can I.”

Rhodes stood up. “Excuse me, everyone. I want to talk to the supersoldiers.” He stalked after them. Loki’s clasped hands tightened, but he gave no other sign of his disquiet at this.
When Rhodey reached the others, Steve was telling Bucky, “I mean it, don’t do it if you’re scared. Of any part of it. But yes, if they say it’s safe for you, then it is. They know what they’re talking about.”

“Are you serious?” Rhodey didn’t bother to modulate his tone.

Both soldiers looked at him.

“Rhodey, just don’t.”

Rhodey sighed, running his hand over his close-cropped hair. “Just… they’re aliens. Alien royalty. Do you really trust them with your boyfriend’s mind?”

Steve looked him steadily in the eye.

“Absolutely.”

After a minute of the two staring each other down, Rhodey’s shoulders slumped. “Then I hope you’re right.”

The trio returned to the patio. The way Barnes and Rogers walked so close, moved almost as one, showed Frigga that Loki had been right to concede the field. She could see Rogers’s feelings for Loki in his eyes every time he glanced his way, but he and Bucky clearly belonged together. They were attuned to each other like an old married couple, or like shield-brothers who had fought side by side for centuries.

Occasionally her sons had been almost that way together. But Odin had always disrupted it. Now, she saw that this had been deliberate.

Once Barnes’s mind was mended, perhaps seeing how perfectly he and Rogers fit together would finally be too much for Loki. And he would leave this realm and return home instead of tormenting himself watching his mortal friends die.

And if that combined with her pretense that she considered Midgard too corrupt for him did not sway him… well. Frigga had already used Midgard to shape her younger son to what he must become. There might be an opportunity to use the realm further towards that purpose.

Barnes spoke for the first time in Frigga’s hearing. “Thank you for your offer, Your Majesty. Can Steve come with me?”

“Of course.”

“I would like to accept.”

Rhodey’s mouth twisted. The rest only looked concerned and relieved to varying degrees.

She rose and everyone else followed suit. “You may come to Asgard for the healing right now, if you wish.”

Barnes nodded. Wilson spoke up. “You sure you don’t want to think it over for a couple of days? Or weeks? That’s gonna be a lot of emotional fallout.”

“Being like this hurts.”
“This way.” Frigga began to lead the soldiers to the spot a short distance away where the Bifrost had deposited her and Loki. Loki fell into step beside her. She shook her head at him. “Why don’t you stay here, Loki? This will only take a couple of hours.”

Loki glanced at the other two. Neither of them seemed to need reassurance, so he said, “Very well, Mother. And thank you.”

A moment later, the Bifrost took Frigga, Rogers and Barnes to Asgard.
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

Frigga uses the Mind Gem to heal Bucky.

Steve kept his promise to stay right beside Bucky every single minute they were in Asgard. Bucky had heard Steve and his friends talking about Asgard, and seen some of the images captured by Stark’s suit, but actually seeing the place still put him in awe. It was more than every imagined future from science fiction pulps.

As a child he would have been overjoyed for a glimpse of this. Now he was too distracted by the chaos in his head to enjoy it.

He had been subjected to torture combined with dangerous drugs as part of Hydra’s program to control him. Some of the people who had intoned their orders at him in that state were decades dead, yet their voices still echoed through his mind at times. Sometimes for hours he found himself unable to say a word of English, only Russian. Natasha was the only person (except for the computer Jarvis) on the island who was fluent in Russian, and she was afraid of him. She hid it well, but he had been well trained and could see the almost microscopic tells by which she kept herself ready to fight or flee at an instant’s notice. And even though he had no intention of harming any friend of Steve’s, anyone who had not threatened him, who knew what other malfunctions might be lurking in the mess that had been made of his mind? So he gave her a wide berth and pretended not to notice that others always casually placed themselves between him and her.

Memories had been flooding back since he had joined Steve, but there were gaps, both from his life before falling into Hydra’s clutches and from his years as the Winter Soldier. Bruce Banner had told him that probably the mind wiping machine had damaged those brain cells. And there were times when his mind almost shut down and he would just sit and stare at nothing, not responding when anyone, even Steve, spoke to him. Sam Wilson had assured him that with time these would become less frequent, but they would still occur.

He would accept whatever horrifying memories had been lost in return for having himself back.

He and Steve followed Frigga - a real actual space queen - through the high-ceilinged golden corridors of the palace. This was where Steve’s new boyfriend had grown up. At last the queen paused beside a door.

“Wait in here.” Her voice was gentle, that of a mother. Her face was kind.

He and Steve went in and sat down. The room was large and high-ceilinged, like all the others here. Small, silk-cushioned divans circled a fire burning in its center. A strange golden sculpture like a stylized goat’s head hung from the ceiling.

A few minutes later, Frigga joined them. They both automatically stood at her entrance. She carried a small golden apparatus which held a glowing blue gemstone.

“Sit down,” she instructed, and took a seat across from Bucky. Now that the stone was near, Bucky could feel energy emanating from it. Positive, healthy energy. Not how Loki’s sceptre had been
described at all.

He looked at Steve. Steve could feel it too, Bucky could see it in his face.

“You have been denied your own choices for so long, Sergeant Barnes,” Frigga said. “So I ask you once more: Is this what you want? Even knowing that your memories will frighten and grieve you?”

“Yes. Please. Your Majesty.”

“Then gaze into the gem. I will direct a bit of its energy into you. It might feel intense, but it will not hurt you.”

Bucky nodded, then moved his gaze from her eyes - those green eyes that so resembled Loki’s, even though Loki was adopted - to the stone.

He felt its power all through him within seconds. Felt it warming him inside where he was cold, felt the fragments of his mind joining together and building bridges to each other. Felt yawning empty spaces being filled. Jumbled things straightened and put in order. Hot angry knots of pain rooted out and thrown away. Echoes of vile commands silenced. And a few dark forbidding things, things that felt like shackles within him, dissolved.

And then the gem’s power left him. And he was alone inside himself for the first time in seventy years.

He sat very still, then looked at Steve. Who was watching him with eyes full of hope.

“Punk,” Bucky said. “Why didn’t you stop me from blowing our train money trying to win that stupid stuffed bear for Dot? Even if she was a redhead?”

The sheer delight on Steve’s face was as healing as the Mind Gem for Bucky.

Frigga might not have understood his words, but their expressions told her all she needed. She smiled warmly at them, even if there was some sadness in it.

Well, of course she was sad. They’d broken her son’s heart. And still she had given them this gift.

“Ma’am,” Bucky blurted as she stood up. “Thank you. Thank you so much. But… why did you do this for me? You’re a queen. I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.”

She looked down at him, patient. “Because my son asked me to. And he asked it of me because humans have been good to him.” Carrying the gem, she moved away, her turquoise silk dress rustling. “Rest as long as you need. Tell the servants outside the door if you require food or drink. When you are ready to depart, they will accompany you to the Bifrost.”

As soon as they were alone, Steve and Bucky put their arms around each other. Just to hold each other, feel each other’s presence warm and solid. Relaxed, relieved.

“Welcome back, Buck,” Steve whispered.

There was a lot Bucky wanted to say. That he was sorry that Steve had finally gotten the life he deserved - enough money, fame, friends, a handsome boyfriend who was crazy about him - and Bucky had ruined it all just by being alive. That he was afraid of what the weeks ahead, full of harrowing memories, would be like for both of them. That he could never do enough for Steve and his friends to begin to pay them back for everything they’d done, just because seventy years ago he and Steve had cared about each other, but that he would try. That he might’ve been a standup guy
before Hydra got their grubby hands on his brain, but he was way out of his league among superheroes who would go to these lengths for a complete stranger.

But Steve was so happy right now, so Bucky let him have this moment, just leaning against him without a word.
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

The Avengers continue avenging and Bruce is protective.

Chapter Notes

The funniest lines in this chapter were a gift from funnymagic_aing.

Sam was the only happy person on Carbonell Cay.

His life had been on hold since Riley died. He’d left the service, moved into a house where he existed rather than lived. He’d never even bothered to put up any pictures, had only the bare minimum of furniture. He hadn’t made real friends, just friendly acquaintances. He’d never asked the girl at the front desk out, even though she was pretty and nice and funny.

He’d known that eventually, he would join the world again. Make actual friends, date. Turn his barren house into a home. He had been thinking maybe he was almost ready when the world knocked on his door, in the person of Captain America and Black Widow asking for his help.

And now he was fighting evil with actual superheroes and living on a tropical island.

Too bad all the superheroes were miserable.

Tony had returned to the island, but he wasn’t over learning that his parents had been murdered. By Captain America’s best friend, no less. By someone Tony was now sharing a roof with. Protecting. He was depressed and was drinking more than usual, when he wasn’t spending three days at a stretch in his laboratory without sleep.

All of which made Pepper unhappy. She knew Tony needed the emotional support she gave him, but that support wasn’t enough to pull him out of his depression, and she’d known it wouldn’t be. All she could do was watch him struggling with it.

Loki was unhappy because he’d lost his boyfriend. Steve was unhappy because he missed Loki, because he was sorry he had hurt Loki, and because Bucky had been put through a nightmare.

Bucky was reliving that nightmare. He spent hours alone outdoors, recording all of his memories on a Starkpad. He wouldn’t let anyone read the accounts of his torture at Hydra’s hands, Sam thought because he wanted to spare Steve the details, but enough was already public knowledge. Those people were monsters. Bucky did allow them to peruse the record of the crimes he’d been forced to commit (though Jarvis had locked down the account of the Starks’ murder and refused to share it with anyone). It was staggering. Bucky had killed more people than the Chitauri invasion. A lot more.

The rest were unhappy because their friends were unhappy.
There were good times, of course. On a beautiful island like this, it was impossible to be unhappy all of the time. Sam and Steve went running on the beach every morning, and sometimes another hero or two joined them. Tony had made Sam new wings, even better than the ones the Air Force had issued him, and sometimes they went flying together, racing each other through the air, plummeting towards the waves and changing direction at the last instant, competing to see who could get the closest to the water without actually getting wet.

The whole gang watched movies together often. Sometimes they had to stop to explain things to Loki, Steve or Bucky. They laughed about the movies, or engaged in intense philosophical discussions about them.

Bucky actually hadn’t known that people had gone to the moon. Keeping him briefed on current events hadn’t been a priority for Hydra. So one night it came up in a movie, and they ended up having to pause the dvd to tell him all about it.

“I guess your people helped us with that,” Bucky said to Loki.

Loki smiled slowly. “Not at all. You humans did that entirely on your own.”

Bucky’s face actually lit up. It was the happiest he’d looked since getting here.

At any given time, a few of the Avengers would be off the island, cleaning out Hydra nests or doing other superhero work. They asked Sam what his superhero name should be. He chose Falcon, which had been his codename in the military; all of them had been called after birds of prey.

“So we have a Falcon and a Hawk,” Tony had said. “We need an Eagle to complete the set.”

“Does Steve count?” Clint had asked.

So now Sam was a superhero. The Falcon.

Pepper found Tony in his lab late one night. He was looking over blueprints and sipping Scotch, but not drunk. When he saw her he set it down and hugged her.

“I know,” he said after a while. “You can’t run Stark Industries remotely forever.”

“I don’t want to leave you like this.”

“Pep, I need to know that you’re in my life and that you care. But there’s really nothing else you can do right now. And I’ve got the Avengers here.”

“I still feel bad.”

“Pepper, I’m sorry I’m so difficult.”

“It’s not your fault. And I love you.”

“I love you. A lot. You can go back. I promise it’s okay. I’ll cycle out of this.”

“Promise.”

“I promise. Go back to New York. Visit here when you can. I’ll visit you when my funk lifts some. Wait, you need a bodyguard. A good one.”
“Maria Hill is our new head of security. She’ll look after me.”

“Good choice. She’s terrifying.”

“You like terrifying women.”

“I really do.”

It was the first time Steve and Bucky had been separated since their reunion. Steve had been clearly torn when it was suggested he take this mission, but Bucky had told him, “You’re going nuts, not having any fights to get into. Go beat up bad guys before you get so desperate you have to swim out and punch a shark. Your friends won’t let anybody get me while you’re gone.”

Once the mission was over, the helicopter returned Steve, Bruce and Natasha home and everyone on the island came to greet them.

“What happened to you?” Clint asked when Steve stepped out, carrying a cardboard box, a thick manila envelope on top of it.

“Hulk smash,” Natasha answered for him.

Steve looked embarrassed. And irritated. And very bruised.

Bruce gave a wry half-smile. “I warned him when he and Loki first got together.”

Loki looked horrified. “I asked you not to do that.”

Bruce shrugged. “The Other Guy does what he wants. I only smashed him a little bit.” He didn’t look at all apologetic.

Loki took the box away from Steve. “When we get to the house I’ll get you a healing stone.”

“You don’t have to. It’s not that bad.”

Loki ignored this, and when they had all gathered on the patio, he left the box on the table and disappeared into the house for a moment.

“Really, you don’t have to,” Steve tried again.

“I know what it’s like to be smashed. I taught Tony’s floor a lesson it will never forget.” With that, Loki crushed the stone over him and Steve’s bruises faded and his cracked ribs mended themselves.

Bucky watched all of this intently.

Natasha set the envelope aside and started cutting the box open. “After we had taken the Hydra agents into custody, we met with Fury, who gave us some more intel. We’ll go through it, see what we need to take care of ourselves and what we should turn over to regular law enforcement.” She opened the box and laughed. “Hey, he threw something in for Loki!” She held up a copy of *Horse Fancy*.

Loki snatched it away and tucked it under his arm. “I only read it for the articles,” he said, sulky.

Everyone laughed except for Bucky, who looked bewildered, so they had to explain the myth of Sleipnir’s birth to him.
It took them a couple of hours to go through the jumble of data Fury had given them: USB keys, printed emails, newspaper articles with notes scrawled over them in red ink. Bucky was able to give them more information about several of the items. The Avengers had a lot of work ahead of them. As did the FBI, CIA, Interpol, and so on.

“These people are like the tribbles of terrifying organizations,” Tony grumbled.

They were all shell-shocked when they were done. Natasha picked up the envelope. “After all that we need some refreshment. I recommend ice cream and a silly movie—after this.” She opened it up.

“What’s that?”

Natasha smiled. “Remember the Borovnian orphans? After it came out that we were the ones who did that, they wrote us letters. I’ll translate them aloud.”

“That is just what we need,” Clint said, settling back to listen.

“‘Dear Avengers,’” Natasha began, “‘Thank you for getting us out of the Black Widow program. It was really bad there. The orphanage is much nicer and the food is really good and we never get injured anymore. Well, except for Mirek, but she’s always doing things like climbing into the rafters and stuff we’re not supposed to do. I don’t want to be an assassin but I think it will be good that I learned a little bit about how to fight so I can defend myself. I’m going to be a veterinarian when I grow up. Sincerely, Sanja.”

“P.S. Loki, I’m sorry I was scared of you when you turned blue. I didn’t mean to be rude. You actually look very nice blue.’”

They all laughed. As it turned out, they only got through a third of the letters before they were too weepy to continue, and they agreed to save the rest for the next time the gang needed cheering up.

The following day, an Asgardian warrior was scheduled to visit Midgard to aid the Avengers. That morning Tony demanded Loki help him in the lab. Loki agreed, asking Jarvis to alert him when noon approached so that he would be on the patio to greet the warrior.

Five minutes till noon, Loki was still holed up in the lab. Sam had been on the patio with Bruce, both of them reading on Starkpads. Sam looked around.

“Jarvis can’t forget things, can he?”

“No. But he can neglect to mention things, if he’s asked nicely.”

Sam looked at Bruce.

“If today’s visitor is Fandral, I want to have a word with him before he sees Loki. By the way, I’m not sure we’ve told you about our master plan with Thor’s friends.”

Bruce then outlined the Avengers’ plan to influence Thor’s friends to respect Loki more by example, in the interest of eventually helping the brothers reconcile—and possibly inducing King Thor to listen to his brother and advisor.

Sam took this in. “Okay, I’m in. Sounds like a good plan. I really respect the way you guys look out for each other, by the way. Not just in combat.”
“Then you’ll really respect what I’m about to tell Fandral. And incidentally, we’ll look after you the same way, if you return the favor.”

“Deal.”

Bruce smiled at him. He was usually somber, or only gave half-smiles. A real full smile from him was really impressive.

Just then a shimmering began, and after a moment Fandral materialized. He shot Sam a swift curious glance before turning his attention to Bruce. “Banner. Where is Loki?”

“He’ll be here in a minute. This is Sam, by the way. Sam Wilson, also known as the Falcon, our new friend and shield-brother.”

“An honor to meet you, Sam Wilson.”

“Same.”

“So Fandral. You might have heard that Loki and Steve have broken up.”

“Ah, yes.”

“I just want to tell you: If you put the moves on Loki within the next ten years, the Other Guy will smash you.”

Fandral was taken aback. “I did not intend….”

Bruce shrugged. “Just making sure. Loki’s really stuck on Steve. He’s not ready. You’re an Asgardian. You’d probably survive being smashed; both your princes did, but they can both tell you it wasn’t any fun.”

Fandral gathered his thoughts for a moment, trying not to look intimidated. “I will remember that.”

Just then Loki and Tony stepped onto the patio. “Greetings, Fandral. Excuse me for not being here when you arrived, Jarvis could see that we were in the midst of something and did not interrupt us until we had reached a stopping point. We have a challenging mission ahead of us.”

Fandral smiled at his prince, almost immediately making his smile less wide, less charming. “I look forward to it, Loki.”

Yeah. Sam liked the Avengers. They weren’t just superheroes. They were good people.
Loki was sitting alone in a secluded nook on the southern corner of the island, the Starkpad he had been reading from idle in his lap, looking out at the waves.

Hesitant footsteps made him turn his head. Steve was approaching, looking apprehensive and determined and remorseful.

When he got within a few feet of Loki, Steve stopped and looked at the ground, licking his lips.

Loki sighed. “I had hoped that we could forego this conversation, but apparently not.”

“If you really don’t want to-”

“You obviously are dreading this almost as much as I am. You would not have begun had you not needed to. So we shall say what must be said. Stay here, I shall be back in one minute.”

Steve waited, standing nervously. Loki returned shortly with a bottle of Asgardian mead and two goblets.

“I am not having this conversation entirely sober.”

Steve nodded and accepted one of the goblets. They sat down upon the sand, Loki poured for them both, and they drank in silence for a couple of minutes.

Finally Steve just jumped right in. “After Hulk smashed me, Bruce told me that I was a jerk to you.”

Loki had not expected that. “What? Why?”

“He says I gave you up too easily. Just a few days before, I was after you to go public with our relationship. Then Bucky showed up, still alive, and I just let you go.” He looked at the sand, brows knitted.

Loki was incredulous. “Steve… what else could you have done?”

“Not given up so fast?” Steve said it as if he weren’t certain.

Loki shook his head. “I am grateful for Bruce’s concern, but he is wrong.” He took a swallow of mead. “It was right of you to let me make a clean break of it. I have had lovers draw out our parting
when they had lost feeling for me. It is a cruel thing to do.”

“I didn’t lose feeling for you! I just—” Steve stopped, looking out at the horizon, groping for words. Loki intervened.

“Steve, I knew from the start that I was dating, in essence, a bereaved widower. You and Bucky grew up together, formed each other. You would never be complete without him.”

Steve’s mouth twisted. He hung his head. “That’s true. But you weren’t just… a substitute. I do really love you.” He stole a look up at Loki. “I need you to know that.”

“I have never doubted it.”

“Ohkay. Good.”

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a minute. Loki refilled their goblets.

Finally Steve said, “But maybe when you said you’d step aside, I should have… I don’t know….”

“What? Told your beloved, who had just returned from the dead, ‘Nice to see you, but I have a new boyfriend’? Forced yourself to stay with me and let it tear you apart? Imagine what that would have been like, remaining my lover after finding out he was alive. You would have been torn, you would have grown to resent me, then I would have been miserable—it would have ruined what we had, and we could not even cherish the memory.”

Steve shuddered. “You’re right.” He drank a little more, fortifying himself. “But maybe I should have said more, so you didn’t think it was easy for me to give you up. Because it wasn’t. And isn’t. I miss you. A lot.”

Even through the sadness, Loki warmed at those words. “I am glad, I confess. But Steve, at that moment I would not have been able to endure more discussion. I was so relieved that you didn’t insist. We can have this talk now, but then, it would have been unbearable to me.”

“And here I thought you were making it easy on me.”

“No. On myself.”

“Just, you’ve been through so much. I didn’t want to be another bad thing that happened to you.”

“You weren’t!” Loki considered this. “When I learned that I was a frost giant, it wasn’t only that my supposed father had kidnapped and deceived me and intended to use me. It was also that I had lost the father I thought I had. I had placed him upon a pedestal, admired him. I told myself that when he seemed cruel or foolish, the fault was in my lack of understanding, not in him. But a good man, a good king could not have done what he did to me. He was the center of my universe and he proved to be a vicious opportunist. Steve, you did not deceive me. You did not pretend to feelings you did not have. You did nothing wrong, it is the situation that is painful. You are still the same man I fell in love with. I cannot emphasize enough how much difference that makes.”

“But you’ve done so much for Bucky. Even though, I mean….” Steve swallowed.

Loki grinned suddenly. “I’m just trying to impress you.”

Steve gave a choked laugh. “I am impressed.”

He drained his goblet and let Loki refill it again.
“Loki, what can I do?”

Loki wished he could say, Keep smiling at me like the summer sun. But he could not.

“Be happy with Bucky. I do love you unselfishly, Steve.” He smiled. “As well as very selfishly indeed.”

Steve nodded slowly, still troubled.

“You have my blessing, Steve. You got your lost love back. Don’t waste that on guilt for something that could not be helped.”
Once the initial relief of having his mind back faded, Bucky plunged into gloom. He continued to sit alone in various spots on the island, recording all of his memories on a Starkpad.

He had killed a lot of people.

A lot of people.

And the things Hydra had done to him… he’d thought he knew, growing up dirt poor and seeing people beat up his best friend just because he was too small to effectively fight back, how bad people could be. He’d been wrong. They were capable of so much worse.

What was the point of going on, in a world with so much evil?

And yet, here he was on a beautiful island, with heroes who had disrupted their lives just to protect him. With Steve.

One day, as the island’s residents were sitting around the patio in the late afternoon, he approached, then hung back, surveying them all. Pepper was back in New York, but everyone else was there. Most of the men were well tanned by now. Natasha had the easily burned skin common to redheads and protected it with heavy sunscreen, light shawls and big floppy hats. Loki’s faux-Asgardian skin was indifferent to the sun, neither tanning nor burning, instead staying milky white.

Loki had been idly forming some deep pink flowers into a chain. Now, as they all talked about nothing in particular, he placed it on his head.

“That’s your color, Loki,” Clint said. He was teasing, but Bucky agreed; the flowers stood out vividly against Loki’s glossy black hair.

Tony, lying on a towel with a beer in his hand, squinted at Loki. “Yeah, you look like a pagan god.”

“I am a pagan god.”

“Right. I meant like Pan or Dionysus.”

“They copied the whole wreathes-in-the-hair thing from me, I’ll have you know.”

“Greek gods. Such copycats.”

“They all are. Osiris tried to give birth to an eight-legged horse, but just couldn’t cut it.”

“Not everyone can be Loki.”

Bucky had stayed still and silent, not wanting to disrupt this pleasant silliness, but Clint noticed him and then all the others followed his gaze. His face must have told them something, because they all fell silent.
Resigned, he joined them on the patio. He placed the Starkpad he’d been using on the table in the patio’s center and stepped back. Braced himself.

“I’ve recorded everything now. It’s all there.” He drew a breath. “Maybe I should... go somewhere else.”

“No way!” Steve blurted, sitting bolt upright. Then got ahold of himself. “I mean, if that’s really what you want, Buck. We won’t take your decisions away from you. But we don’t want you to go.”

“Why would you think that, anyway?” Surprisingly, that was Tony, also sitting up now.

“Because I killed your parents. And an awful lot of other people.” He paused. “A lot.”

That inspired a brief silence. Which Loki broke, his voice flat.

“I spent a thousand years upholding a bloodthirsty tyrant. When I found out he wasn’t my father, I assassinated my real father, attempted to destroy the planet I came from, and invaded Earth with an army of Chitauri.”

“I’ve spent my life designing and manufacturing weapons and not keeping track of who was buying them. Bad people managed to buy them and use them to kill innocent people.”

“I was a professional assassin. Some of my victims were nasty people, but not all of them by a long shot. And I didn’t worry too much about collateral damage.” Natasha lifted her chin before continuing. “I once set a hospital on fire in order to kill one person in it. My target died. So did several other people.”

Bruce took off his glasses and turned them over in his hands. “I say ‘the Other Guy’, but that’s not really honest. The Hulk is me, just with my self-control switched off. When I’m the Hulk, I don’t care very much who I kill, or what I destroy. Jarvis could probably give you the numbers. I’m too much of a coward to look them up myself.”

Tony cast a sharp glance around them all before looking back to Bucky. “So you see, pal, you’re in good company. A lot of red in a lot of ledgers around here. If you decide to leave us, it shouldn’t be because you think you’re too evil to hang out with us.”

Bucky didn’t know what to say.

Eventually Steve came to him and put a careful hand on his shoulder. Bucky was still tense when he was touched. He yearned for physical contact with Steve, of any kind, but there had been so many painful touches over the years.

“And Bucky, it wasn’t your fault. They brainwashed you and forced you to do those things.”

Bucky hesitated. “I escaped. Three times.” He shook his head. “It was never long before they found me. Once it was only one day.”

“I’m proud of you, Buck.”

“Not sure I deserve that.”

“Well, I am. Jerk.”

That seemed to break the spell. “I think it’s about time to start cooking dinner,” Bruce said, standing up. “What do you guys say to pork chops?” Now that they were far away from delivery and
professional chefs, Bruce had decided to learn to cook. “It’s soothing, which for me is always good,” he had remarked. “And it’s satisfying to get a prompt tangible result from my work.”

“We say, yum.” Everyone drifted inside and Bruce got to work in the kitchen.

Bucky hadn’t often had food that tasted good while he was the Winter Soldier. They had just kept him nourished, like fueling a machine.

The pork chops were really good.

The Avengers’ reassurances calmed Bucky for that day, but the next morning his thoughts were in turmoil again. He brooded, avoiding Steve’s worried gaze, until mid-afternoon. By then he had decided on his next step. He found Steve and asked him to accompany him for his first task.

Natasha was in the gym, working out with Clint. They stopped their exercise when the supersoldiers entered.

Bucky stopped several feet away from Natasha. “I’m sorry I shot you five years ago,” he said.

She nodded, waiting.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me. The queen fixed my brain, I won’t suddenly remember old orders and go after you.”

“Why didn’t you kill me?”

“You weren’t my target.”

They all just looked at him.

Bucky swallowed. “Every few months, I would start to come back to myself a little. When that happened, I would start avoiding what you called collateral damage. I would try to only kill the people I had been ordered to kill.”

Natasha nodded slowly.

“I think they caught on after a while. That told them it was time to wipe me.”

She searched his face. Her eyes felt like lasers, penetrating everything.

“Good for you,” she said.

“I don’t think I deserve any compliments.”

Her eyes narrowed very slightly. “I do. I’ve been in a situation not entirely unlike yours.”

Which gave him an in for the next part of this. “How do you… live with it? How can you be one of the good guys now?”

She looked at him for a few seconds. Then turned to the others.

“Why don’t you guys spar together while Bucky and I take a walk? This is going to take a while.”
It was kind of Natasha. She told him a lot of how she felt and what she thought about her past. She
gave him a lot of good advice about how to deal with it. How well he would be able to follow it he
wasn’t sure, but he could see that it was good advice.

It was generous, considering that he had shot her and killed the engineer she’d been trying to protect.
Not to mention their more recent battle.

When she was done, she told him, “We’ve developed kind of a tradition here. If any of us can’t
sleep, or wakes up from a bad dream, we go to the common area. Often more than one of us can’t
sleep. We keep each other company. It helps.”

Bucky nodded, remembering the night he had seen Pepper and Loki sitting together under the stars
while everyone else slept.

“And if no one else is awake, ask Jarvis to wake me up. I’ve been where you are, or close to it. I’d
like to be there for you.”

It was inadequate, but all Bucky could say was, “Thank you.”

After dinner Tony skipped the usual movie and disappeared into his lab. Bucky waited until the
middle of the movie before following. He wanted to catch Tony before he got seriously drunk.

Tony wasn’t drinking yet, it turned out. He was fiddling with some kind of contraption, Bucky had
no idea what it was. When Bucky came in, he didn’t even glance up.

Bucky waited for a few minutes. When Tony continued to ignore him, Bucky just said, “I’m sorry.”
He didn’t think he needed to specify for what.

Tony sighed, still not looking up. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“You’re being very generous to me, considering.”

“I have a soft spot for my fellow torture victims.”

Bucky felt cold at the words. It was a few moments before he could say anything else, could try to
steer the conversation to the other favor he was going to ask of Tony.

The same one he had asked of Natasha. Tell me how you live with it.

“The Ten Rings tried to use you like Hydra used me. Like Odin and Thanos used Loki.”

“It’s Steve’s type: handsome noble men who’ve been forced to do the evil bidding of others. I almost
made it.”

Bucky frowned at the man for a second, but he had already seen enough of Tony to know that he
didn’t mean half the things he said.

“By the way, if your arm ever needs any maintenance, just say the word. Or if you want me to
upgrade it.”

Bucky looked at his mechanical arm. He now remembered the first time he had woken up and seen
it. Horrible.
“I’ll be honest,” Tony was continuing, “I’m curious as hell to examine it. But I don’t want to make you feel like a lab rat. I didn’t like anyone seeing my arc reactor, when it was still in my chest. So I get it.”

“You want to examine my arm?”

Tony shot him a look. Just for an instant, but Bucky felt like he saw a lot in that instant.

“Hell yeah. It’s a remarkable feat of engineering. But I know from personal experience how much it sucks to wake up and find unexpected machinery attached to your body. So if you don’t like it being looked at….,” He shrugged, still messing with the contraption.

This was something he could do for one of his benefactors. He stepped closer, holding the arm out. “Go ahead.”

Tony looked up at him, startled. “You sure you won’t feel too weird?”

“No. Go ahead.”

Tony immediately put down his tools and started pointing assorted instruments at the arm, scanning it, scrutinizing it. He instructed Bucky to bend his elbow, make a fist.

“Can you feel with it? I mean, there’s clearly some kind of data intake from it, but—“

“Yeah, but it’s different from my real arm’s feelings. Kind of numb.”

“Hm.”

Tony really did seem to be fascinated. Bucky had been horrified by his arm at first, then later resigned to it. Nice that someone could enjoy it. If that was the word. Bucky let him look all he wanted. Tony brainstormed aloud about possible upgrades, like maybe a repulsor beam like the one in his suit’s gauntlets so that Bucky could fly if he also wore a gauntlet on his flesh hand. Bucky was noncommittal. He wasn’t sure he wanted any changes. He was used to the arm how it was.

By the time Tony’s scientific curiosity was satisfied, Bucky had decided not to ask how he coped with his past as the Merchant of Death. He could see the answer: inventing, drinking, and Avenging.

Late the next morning he found Bruce getting out ingredients for stew. Bucky offered to help chop up the vegetables, and while they stood at the counter together, asked how he dealt with it.

“I meditate. I stick to a routine. I avoid caffeine and alcohol.” Bruce gave a mock-furtive glance around. “And I keep a big bag of weed.”

Bucky frowned. “Really?”

“I have a medical exemption in all 50 states. Even the ones that don’t usually give them, by gubernatorial decree. There’s a big advantage to turning into an indestructible smashing giant when you don’t get your way.”

That made sense.

“Anyway, it’s been easier since I joined the Avengers. The Other Guy gets to come out and play sometimes. It makes it easier for me to keep him in when I want to.”
Bucky nodded. He watched Bruce assemble the ingredients in silence. When he was almost done, Bruce told him to wake him if he ever couldn’t sleep and no one else was awake.

They didn’t make him go to D.C. for the hearing about the Winter Soldier. Between them, Pepper and Loki had convinced everyone with authority that it was in their best interests to find Sergeant Barnes innocent of all wrongdoing. The world was outraged at what had been done to him—the Stark PR machine had worked hard on that, but really, they probably hadn’t had to. A lot of the people who had used and tortured him were now behind bars.

Not all.

But Bucky was officially a free man now.

They all wanted to help him. They left him to stew in his own anger and memories when he wanted. They were all willing to talk to him, or to listen to him. Most of them told him to wake them if he couldn’t sleep.

Even Loki said that. Loki acted just like all of the others, concerned for him, respecting his privacy. As if Bucky hadn’t taken Steve away from him. What the hell.

Bucky really wanted to ask Loki how he dealt with his guilt, but he didn’t feel like it would be right to ask him for favors, given the circumstances.

He had spent decades in the clutches of demons in human form, being forced to do evil, and now he was surrounded by superheroes who would do anything to help him, ranging from risking their own necks in combat to giving up a night’s sleep if he needed company.

They weren’t doing this to be paid back, he knew that, but he needed to do so anyway.

And at the same time, he could settle up a lot of other debts. To Hydra. To himself.
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

Bucky decides on his future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky was on the northern hill of Carbonell Cay, pacing restlessly on the sand, when Loki approached him.

“Let’s spar. Come to the gym with me,” Loki said without preamble.

Bucky stopped in his tracks and stared.

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“You’re acting like a caged leopard. I know: you’re full of rage, and who can blame you. The people you actually want to whale the tar out of aren’t here. You can’t work out any of that anger by sparring with the humans on this island because you don’t want to hurt them.” Loki smiled. “I, however, am not a human. I have superstrength and am nigh-invulnerable. I took a Hulk to the everything and lived to tell the tale. Even if you manage to injure me, I’ll recover in a matter of hours. So come along.”

Loki turned and headed for the gym, but not before he saw the relief in Bucky’s eyes.

Bucky followed him.

The sparring ring was at one end of the gym. Three sides of it were thickly padded walls. The fourth had ropes of the sort used in boxing rings.

Loki stepped in. “I’ll try not to hurt you—I’ve acquired a good sense of human limitations in my time here—but if you need me to stop, say ‘stop’ or tap me or the floor like this.” Loki demonstrated the tap the humans used to indicate they had had enough. “And this is not the time to be tough. Your valor is beyond doubt. If I accidentally cause you more than a trifling amount of pain, or if unpleasant memories come up, please, call a halt.”

Bucky hesitated, jerked a nod. “You too.”

“Again, you do not need to hold back with me. I am nigh-invulnerable.”

Bucky nodded again, then took up a stance.

Loki waited.

Bucky held still for so long that Loki began to wonder if he was ever going to attack. That was when Bucky launched himself at Loki, leading with his metal arm. His metal fist collided with Loki’s jaw, making a cut on Loki’s chin.

Loki rolled with the punch, but the metal arm still had an impact. Swiftly Loki stepped aside, seized Bucky, and tossed him gently at the padded wall.
After that, it was on.

Bucky moved faster than any human Loki had grappled with. The serums he had received were inferior to the one that had transformed Steve, but Bucky had undergone years of training while Steve slept. Loki’s alien strength and millennium of practice still allowed him to prevail, but Bucky was ingenious in combat. And vicious, once he grew confident that Loki could indeed take it.

Bucky rained rapid-fire punches and kicks onto Loki, who found that parrying them all took all of his concentration. When he wasn’t quite fast enough, the metal arm actually had an impact. Loki could take it, but it did hurt.

After the second time Bucky’s metal fist cut Loki’s face, Bucky aimed his punches elsewhere.

A line from a television series the Avengers had shared with him flitted through Loki’s mind: “Somebody loves you. If I had to punch that face, I’d avoid your nose and teeth, too.”

Loki huffed a laugh and tossed Bucky against the wall again.

Bucky was on his feet again in an instant. This time he simply hurled himself at Loki, knocking him over with the unexpected impact. Loki grinned fiercely even as he gasped for breath. Then rolled them over and pinned Bucky to the mat with a careful hand on his throat.

Bucky panted for a moment, then grinned back. “Up for another round?”

“Of course.” Loki stood, then extended a hand to pull Bucky to his feet.

This time Bucky changed tactics, distracting Loki with a volley of swift punches and abruptly delivering a sharp kick to Loki’s shin, followed instantly with an elbow to Loki’s chin. Taking advantage of Loki’s fleeting disorientation, Bucky seized his arm and threw his own full weight to the floor. Had Loki been slightly less strong, Bucky’s weight would have pulled him down with him. As it was, Loki placed one foot firmly on Bucky’s back, keeping him in place.

Bucky tried to throw him off. When that didn’t work, he stilled. “Again?”

“Again.” Loki let him rise. Bucky’s long hair was now damp with sweat. His face was intent, concentrating only on pondering how to take down a powerful opponent. Loki had given him the distraction he needed.

Bucky again tried the tactic of distracting Loki with a rapid-fire attack, but kept it up for much longer this time. In the back of his mind, Loki was aware that the other Avengers were filing in. Perhaps Jarvis had alerted them all to the show. They came in silently and stood watching the match. When Loki’s attention was entirely on Bucky’s fists, Bucky seized him and yanked him close, bringing a knee into Loki’s stomach. This let him tackle Loki to the ground again, the back of Loki’s head colliding with the floor.

No wonder even Steve had barely been able to prevail over the Winter Soldier, even with Sam and Natasha at his side.

Loki seized both Bucky’s wrists in an iron grip. When Bucky could not free himself, he stilled. “Did you hurt your head? Sorry.”

“I told you, it will heal by dinner. Do you want another round?”

“You haven’t had enough yet?”
Loki grinned, even though he tasted blood. “I can do this all day.”

Bucky gave a lopsided smile. “Steve used to say that.”

“He still does.”

“Yeah, but now it’s true.”

Chuckling, Loki released Bucky and they stood up. They drew deep breaths as they squared off again.

After a minute of grappling, Bucky again tried to pull Loki to the ground by throwing himself down hard. But this time, once Bucky was on the ground he seized one of Loki’s legs with all his strength and rolled swiftly, forcing Loki off balance. Loki crashed down beside him. Bucky managed to get in a few seconds of choking him before Loki threw him off and leapt back to his feet.

Bucky was shiny with sweat and his breath was ragged, but his grin was wide. “Maybe that’s enough for today.” He filled his lungs. “Thanks.”

Loki straightened, smiling back. “Do not hesitate to ask anytime you wish to spar again.” He held out his hand. They shook.

The Avengers applauded as the two of them stepped out of the ring.

“You sure you’re okay?” Steve asked Loki. “That cut on your lip looks nasty.”

Loki waved a dismissive hand as he grabbed a towel to wipe his face. “You know how swiftly I heal. It’ll be gone within the hour.”

“I’m glad you’re on our side now,” Clint told Bucky. “Well, both of you, really.”

Bucky looked around at them. “I want to fight with the Avengers,” he announced, voice flat.

That quieted the room.

It was Steve who finally spoke. “Maybe you should wait until you’ve had more time to work through the trauma.”

Bucky lifted his eyebrows. “Did any of you give yourselves time to deal with your traumas before going into battle?”

The reply was a round of unwilling chuckles. “He’s got us there,” Tony admitted.

“You don’t have to do this for us, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Natasha told him.

“You all understand about red in your ledgers.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Steve said quickly. “You were acting against your will.”

Bucky cast a withering glance at him as he towed some of the sweat off his forehead. “You think that makes me feel better?”

“It will,” Clint said quietly.

Loki looked sharply at Clint, then away as shame twisted his guts. Shame which would never go away, not entirely. Nor should it.
Bucky dropped his towel in the hamper. “Hydra turned me into a monster. I won’t be what they made me. They forced me to acquire these skills and use them to do their evil bidding. I’m going to use these same skills to stop them from ever harming anyone else.”

Several of the Avengers nodded understanding. Tony clapped his hands together.

“Okay then. Next time there’s a mission.”

“Thanks for the workout, Loki.” Bucky started for the door, then paused. “Is anyone here good at cutting hair?”

“I’m okay at it,” Clint said. “You want your old style back?”

“I was thinking something more modern. I’m not the same man I was before, not completely.” He didn’t have to say before what. He jerked a thumb at himself. “But I’m not going to stay this guy either.”

“We’ll ask Jarvis to show us some photos, then.”

After a shower and some consideration, Bucky chose a style where the hair at the front of his scalp was long and floppy, but it all stopped at his neck. Clint found hair scissors and got to work, and soon Bucky had his new appearance.

“Looks good, Buck,” Steve said, a little moist-eyed. The style looked more like Bucky’s old look than the long mane of the Winter Soldier.

Bucky examined himself in the bathroom mirror and nodded approval. “Thanks, Clint. This is what I wanted.”

“Glad to help.”

For supper, the Avengers set up a smorgasbord of sandwich ingredients and made what they each liked. Bucky looked more cheerful, more relaxed than they had seen him before, except perhaps in the first few hours after the Mind Gem had healed him. After practically swallowing his first sandwich whole, Bucky started assembling a second one and said, “Hey, Steve. Do you remember when we met?”

Steve wrinkled his forehead. “I know we were in second grade together. I don’t remember the exact moment.”

Bucky nodded, slathering mayonnaise onto bread. “I remember a lot of things I think I had forgotten, since the Mind Gem. I mean, forgotten normally, not from getting wiped.”

“So let’s hear it. Is it embarrassing?” Tony let his eyes gleam.

“Nope. None of you are going to be even a tiny bit surprised.”

“Let me guess. He picked a fight with four guys twice his size and you had to save his tiny butt.”

“You are completely wrong.”

“Oh?”

“It was only three guys and they were only half again his size.”
Steve ducked his head, bashful, but his eyes were positively glowing as he peeked up at Bucky.

“I must have seen Steve before that, since we were in the same class and all, but that was the first day I actually noticed his existence. I was walking home from school and these three boys a little older than us were pestering a girl from their class, pulling her pigtails. They were probably just trying to play, but she was getting upset.

“So then Stevie runs over to them, this skinny little kid, the smallest kid in our class, and yelling in his piping little voice, ‘You drips leave her alone!’

“They just stare at him. I mean, he’s tiny. After a minute one of them says, ‘Oh, yeah? And what if we don’t?’

“And the little squirt actually puts up his tiny little fists and says, ‘Then I’ll teach you all a lesson!’”

At that point, everyone lost it. It was several minutes before the laughter quieted enough that Bucky could go on, “That’s how those boys reacted. They didn’t even hit him, they just laughed their asses off and walked home. He looked so pissed.

“So I went over to him and asked where he lived. It was near my place, so I walked him home.”

“And the rest is history.”

“Pretty much.”

“I don’t remember that,” Steve said, smiling and a little tearful.

“Because you always did things like that on days that end in Y.” Bucky cut his thick turkey sandwich into two triangles. “Steve always reminded me of—you know those little yappy dogs that don’t seem to understand that they’re not Dobermans? That was Steve.”

“Until they turned him into a Doberman.”

“I prefer to think of myself as a golden retriever,” Steve said with dignity.

Which led to frivolous conversation about what animal each of the Avengers thought they would be. Sam and Clint were content to identify themselves with their avian namesakes, but Natasha considered herself more of a fox than a spider. Tony was the only one who did not think that Tony would be a peacock; he saw himself as a raccoon with clever hands. Similarly, everyone thought that Loki should be a black cat, except for Loki, who contended that given his shape-shifting abilities, he should be a chameleon.

“So can you change into anything?” Sam asked.

“I’ve only been an Asgardian, a Jotun and a Muspel. I wouldn’t be able to change into something much larger or smaller than myself, though a little size difference might be possible by compressing or expanding the distance between my molecules.” He looked between Sam and Bucky. “You two haven’t seen me blue, have you?”

“No. Wasn’t sure it was okay to ask.”

“It’s okay.” Loki smiled and set down his glass of beer. A moment later he was blue-skinned and red-eyed, and his chair was dusted with a light coat of frost.

Sam’s eyes widened. After a few seconds he smiled a little. “A real alien-looking alien. I’m living in
the future!”

“Join the club,” Bucky said.

Chapter End Notes

I figure Bucky's new haircut is like Sebastian Stan's usual real-life style.
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

Loki and Bucky talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After that first time, Loki and Bucky sparred together almost every day. They didn’t always have an audience after the first couple of sessions. When they were done, Loki tried to make the same kind of casual talk he made with the others. He’d compliment Bucky’s skill, or suggest they follow their workout with a swim, or something else inconsequential. Bucky would reply politely, but briefly.

Until right after their fifth match. They were gulping down Gatorade and dabbing their faces with clean white towels. Loki was about to suggest raiding the kitchen when Bucky suddenly spoke up. Blurted without preamble, as if he had been working himself up to it for a while.

“How do you live with it?”

Loki paused with the bottle of salty-sweet liquid poised at his lips. Then smiled a little.

“Ironic that there is no need to specify what ‘it’ designates. For either of us.”

“You always use that many fifty-cent words, or are you breaking them out just for me?”

Loki hadn’t heard the idiom before, but made a guess at the meaning. “I get a bulk discount.”

“If I’m being a nosy parker just tell me to buzz off.”

To think they were both speaking the same language.

“Not at all. I am simply trying to think of how best to put it.”

That wasn’t strictly true. The answer was intensely emotional, deeply embedded in his heart. It was difficult to say aloud.

Humans had helped him to find this answer when he had been new here. Now it was time for him to return the favor.

Loki took a long draught of Gatorade (not the horrible orange flavor), giving himself a moment to search for words. Preferably not fifty-cent words.

“By believing that there is a purpose to it.”

Bucky looked at him, attentive.

“When I tried to kill myself, I was not allowed to escape into death. Instead, I survived something that should have killed even an Asgardian sorcerer. And landed in the clutches of Thanos.” Loki looked away from Bucky, stared unseeing at the wall. “Thanos has killed at least as many people as Odin has. Perhaps more. He is ever seizing more power that he might extend his reach even farther,
might slaughter the heroes of more races as a courting gift to his beloved. He would have come to Midgard—and Asgard—sooner or later, just as he has come to many other realms. The Norns dropped me into his lap in order to warn the Nine Realms about him, that we might prepare to destroy him completely and stop his reign of terror.

“Odin killed billions. He nearly got his son—his real son—killed more than once in the last few years of his life. His lies and cruelty nearly got me killed as well. Finally he was going to execute me, and so my mother slew him before he could do any more harm. She believes he had become so bloodthirsty that had she not, he might have caused the deaths of everyone in Asgard - herself, me and Thor included. Had Frigga not needed to save me from him, she might not have slain him and he would have continued to butcher and oppress the realms—and taught his son and successor to do the same. Another four thousand years of bloody tyranny from the line of Bor.”

Bucky was scrutinizing him. “You think that the Norns, God, whatever, kept you alive on purpose to stop Thanos and Odin?”

“I choose to believe that. I could have it backwards. It could be that my survival was mere chance, and first I, then Frigga, seized the opportunity to make something good of it. I suppose it doesn’t matter much which is true, but I prefer to think that the Norns knew what they were about. I—”

He stopped abruptly. He had not told even Frigga what he had been about to say.

Bucky looked at him for a moment, then tactfully looked away, covering it by toweling his face vigorously.

Norns, what this man had been through. Loki had hardly believed, reading the files about him, that a human could survive so much. And here Bucky was, denying himself retreat into insanity or evil or suicide. Trying to be one of the good guys. Only asking for a little advice from those who were on the same path.

Loki could dig a little deeper into where it hurt for such a brave mortal.

He found that his voice was rough when he went on.

“Sometimes I think that… that before I was born, I might have agreed to all of it. To being kidnapped by Odin and having my heart broken by him. To what Thanos did to me. So that I might be the instrument of stopping both of them.”

Bucky looked at him, not trying to hide how startled he was.

“Does it make it easier? Believing that you consented to it?”

“Yes. I don’t always believe it, but sometimes I do. I don’t believe that everything is foreordained, but a few things are. And when I feel that things are too much for me, this thought gives me courage.”

Bucky huffed. “It’s hard to imagine you ever lacking courage.”

“From you, Bucky Barnes, that is high praise. Because you are one of the bravest men I have ever known.”

Bucky shook his head. “I’m really not.”

“Allow me to be the judge of that.”
Bucky frowned and thought while they finished their Gatorade. Loki dropped the empty bottle into the recycling bin Tony had taken care to provide.

“Now, why don’t we swim for a bit before demanding sustenance?”

Bucky returned his smile, and Loki felt vindicated.

Chapter End Notes

"She believes he had become so bloodthirsty that had she not, he might have caused the deaths of everyone in Asgard" is a reference to Odin's stated plan to do exactly that in TDW. He intended to kill every last Asgardian in order to wipe out the Dark Elves. And when Thor left Asgard with the intention of stopping the Dark Elves without getting all the Aesir killed, Odin tried to murder him (and Loki and Thor's friends) to prevent that.
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets his sass on, gets closer to the other Avengers, and continues to rebuild with Steve.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky had to have a lot of conversations over the next few days.

First was the one with Steve he’d been putting off. The day Loki opened up to him about how he coped with the red in his ledger, Bucky felt like he had to say it. So that evening, while Steve was brushing his teeth, Bucky turned his back to their small bathroom while he pulled on his pajamas. Then he turned quickly.

As he’d expected, he caught Steve looking thoughtful. And sad. He’d caught that look on Steve’s face a lot, and he knew it wasn’t only because of what Bucky had endured at Hydra’s hands.

“You’re still in love with him.” No point in beating around the bush.

Steve glanced at him in surprise. He rinsed out his mouth, wiped his face, and then came to sit on the edge of his bed. Bucky sat on the edge of his own, waiting.

“Yes. And I think I always will be. But I also never stopped being in love with you.”

Bucky steeled himself for what he had to say. “You can go back to him if you want. It’s okay. I want you to be happy.”

Steve just looked even sadder. “I can’t—I can’t—lose you again, Buck. Not ever.”

Bucky nodded. There wasn’t a good solution to this that he could see.

“Even when I was with Loki and—and we were making each other happy, not having you there was like an open wound. All the time.”

“You want us to….”

“Whatever you want, Buck.” Steve’s voice was very firm. “I want us to be like we were, but if you only want to be friends now, that’s what we’ll do.”

“I’m still in love with you.”

That got a smile and chased most of the sadness from Steve’s eyes. Most of it. “Good.” He straightened up and looked serious again. “You tell me… when you want what. Okay?”

“Okay.”
That wasn’t all of the problems between them. Steve still wanted to carry the whole world on his shoulders. Which meant that he did not take it well the next time Bucky had a bad day full of memories and flashbacks and Steve couldn’t help him with it.

Natasha found the two of them sitting at a table glowering at each other. It only took her a couple of minutes to coax them to explain that Bucky couldn’t stop thinking about… things… and he couldn’t talk to Steve about them.

Steve was hurting enough. Learning even more about what Hydra had done to him, and made him do, would only hurt him more, and that would make Bucky hurt more, and it was just not going to happen.

But of course Steve couldn’t spare himself the suffering of knowing every damn detail.

“So tell me about it,” Natasha said. “I’ve been there. I get it.”

Steve wasn’t okay with delegating anything Bucky-related, but Bucky accepted the offer over his protests.

Bucky and Natasha walked on the beach again and told each other… things. Things neither of them wanted to tell anyone else. It hurt to talk about, but he had to tell just one other person. And he listened to her too, and he thought she looked relieved afterwards, so maybe he’d helped her.

“Tony gets it too,” she said when they were finally ambling back to the house for dinner. “But he’s so unstable, I don’t know if you want to talk to him like this. You could with Loki, though. He’s been there too.”

Bucky just nodded. He wasn’t going to ask Loki to do him even more favors. He was taking enough advantage as it was. Loki was such a sap. Lost his boyfriend and had to go beyond the call of duty helping the guy who took him. No wonder Steve had fallen for him.

Bucky had always had a soft spot for saps.

Sam talked to him a lot. Well, Sam talked to all of them a lot. He knew how to listen to the things that troubled them, and he usually found just the right thing to say to help them see things in a better way—“reframe”, he called it—and he knew lots of ways to make yourself feel better. Deep breaths. The things you said to yourself in your head. Sunshine, movement, enough healthy food.

Everyone on the island needed what Sam offered. And he was a damn good fighter too. And good company. And he was a good sport about their fight before Bucky had his memory back.

“I’m glad I was there for Steve and Natasha,” Sam remarked once when the subject came up. His tone held a note of amazement. He’d rescued superheroes.

“Me too,” Bucky said. “Otherwise I might have killed them.”

Sam actually laughed when his double take was through.

But it occurred to Bucky, when he wasn’t wrapped up in talking over old times with Steve or brooding alone over Hydra, that Sam must need what he was giving to all of them. So Bucky waited for the right moment.

It came one day over lunch. They were telling funny stories about things past comrades had said and
done, and Sam shared a wisecrack Riley had once made. Sam had mentioned Riley a couple of times, but only in passing.

If Bucky was on the wrong track, Sam knew how to tell him so.

“You never talk about Riley.”

Sam’s smile disappeared. “The first few months I was back, I couldn’t talk about anything but Riley. Then for almost a year, I couldn’t even say his name.”

Natasha nodded, leaning a little closer to him over the dining table. “And now?”

Sam glanced around at them all. Steve put on his sympathetic face. “I’ve been hoping to hear more about him, Sam. But not until you’re ready.”

Sam looked at his plate, then laughed ruefully. “This must be how you guys feel when I do that.”

“Yeah?”

“Partly like I want to crawl under the table. Partly like I want to talk your ears off all afternoon about him.”

“Well, I know which one I’m hoping for.”

Sam just looked down without saying anything for a minute. And then he started.

He did talk their ears off all afternoon. It was a good afternoon, if a little weepy now and then.

Bucky wished they could’ve met Riley.

Tony invited Bucky into the workshop one day to show him the spare arm he’d made for Bucky. “Just in case the one you’ve got gets damaged in a fight, we’ve got a replacement all ready to go. Almost exactly like the one you’ve got. No fancy upgrades this time, but if you want ‘em the sky’s the limit.”

“I’m not sure. I already know exactly how this one works.”

“Understood. Just say the word.”

With that icebreaker out of the way, Tony launched into instructing Bucky in Avengers protocol. Steve was the boss in the field, big surprise. Bucky had never been sure what it was he saw in the punk that made him follow him into peril time and again starting when they were seven, but he wasn’t the only one. The H.C.s had all seen it, and now a motley assortment of superheroes, not to mention every non-Hydra employee of SHIELD. Steve could probably get on a bus and say, “Anybody want to join me in risking my life to save people?” and half the passengers would jump right up.

“If anything that seems alien or magical comes up, do whatever Loki says,” Tony instructed. “And personally, I say that whether you kill Hydra members or not is entirely up to you.”

Bucky thought that over. “I think I want them to go on trial. I want everyone in the world to know what they’ve done.”

One corner of Tony’s mouth quirked up. “You’re a better man than I am.”
“With this crowd, I think that’s a complicated call to make.”

Tony laughed at that, surprised and pleased. There was warmth in his eyes when he looked at Bucky, warmth that hadn’t been there the first days they’d known each other. Bucky could feel the difference.

Next Tony talked about the charity appearances and stuff the Avengers did. Rich people would pay just to go to a party where they were, never mind eat dinner at the same table. The money went to charity. Charities that Tony and Pepper had personally checked out.

When Tony told him what some of those tickets cost Bucky had to sit down for a few minutes. In the 40s that kind of money would have paid for a yacht. A yacht made of solid gold. With a diamond anchor.

“It’s kind of a rotating duty,” Tony continued, grinning at Bucky’s shock. “It’s not always the whole team. But people will donate a lot of money to a cause the Avengers promote. And you should see the kids when we visit hospitals.”

“I didn’t know this kind of thing was part of a superhero’s job.”

“Hey, that’s how Captain America got started, remember? We do have stuff to offer besides our exceptional capability in punching.”

Bucky mulled that over in silence for a while. He’d thought he’d found out Tony’s coping mechanisms, but now he saw there was one more tactic he used: good works.

“I want to do that,” Bucky said eventually. “I always promised myself that if I ever had the dough, I’d help people who didn’t. Donate to soup kitchens. That kind of thing.”

“You’ve got money now, I’m sure Steve told you, and you can generate donations from other people in the ways I was just talking about. You’re big news right now. When she visits us you can talk it over with Pepper, her minions can help you set some stuff up.”

“Thanks.”

Finally, Tony coached him on handling the press. Some questions you shouldn’t even try to answer, he advised, just say “no comment” or “next question”. Don’t let them make you mad, unless it’s to calculated effect. Take control of the interview, don’t let them steer it all.

Next time there was an Avengers mission, Bucky, Steve, Tony and Sam flew to the mainland and kicked several Hydra posteriors. When the dust settled, Bucky faced the flock of reporters. Reporters wanting to talk to him. At least during the war, it had been Steve they’d been all over and Bucky the one to run interference. Now Steve was standing behind him, close and protective, while everyone took pictures of Bucky.

Seemed like everything between them had turned around, one thing after another.

Bucky recited a “statement” the others had helped him compose and memorize. He didn’t want to further discuss what Hydra had put him through, the government inquiry had pardoned him, Queen Frigga’s magic had healed him, he was going to use his fighting skills to help the Avengers bring Hydra and other evildoers to justice.

Then came the questions.
“Sergeant Barnes, what are your comments on being able to be openly gay now?”

“I think it’s about damn time. But I like women too, y’know.”

“Which do you prefer, men or women?”

Bucky reminded himself of what Tony had told him. Tony’d been doing this all of his life. “Next question.”

“Have you talked to Peggy Carter since reuniting with Steve Rogers?”

“Not yet. Steve told me she’s in a nursing home with her husband. I look forward to seeing her again,” he went on before anyone could ask if they were going to pull each other’s hair out over Steve or something stupid like that. “She was a swell dame. Um, terrific woman.”

“Did you find Rogers attractive before Dr. Erskine’s serum?”

Bucky wanted to punch the guy who’d said that, but again remembering Tony’s advice, made himself answer coolly. “Sure. I got the trial size Steve first to see if I wanted the jumbo version.”

Next a woman, a classy gorgeous blonde, managed to make her voice heard. “What is your opinion of Steve Rogers’s affair with the former war criminal Loki?” she asked.

Bucky looked at her. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath over that one. Maybe the muckrakers were hoping to hear that Bucky thought Loki should have been executed, or that rivalry for Captain America’s favors had torn the Avengers apart, or something juicy like that.

“It was only to be expected,” he told them solemnly, looking around. Good grief, three dozen uptown types hanging on to his every word like he was a movie star or something. He let a second pass before finishing with a philosophical shrug. “After me, anyone less than a god woulda been too much of a comedown.”

With that, Bucky turned to go, the other Avengers following suit as another wave of questions bubbled up from the reporters. Tony’s careful slap on his back with an armored hand told Bucky he’d said the right thing even before they got back onto the jet and he could look at the others. They were all grinning.

Back on the island, they told stories about the fight. “I didn’t see that the other one was right behind me until it almost got me!” Tony said, gesticulating to show how an opponent had sneaked up on him. “Scared me out of a year’s growth. And it’s not like I had it to spare.”

Bruce made fried chicken and assorted vegetables for them all. (The whole team took turns being Bruce’s assistant in the kitchen, deciding chiefly by who happened to be around when Bruce was getting started. Today Clint offered his services.) Afterwards, they watched a couple of silly movies where lone plucky heroes armed only with the Power Of Good defeated powerful tyrants who had great magical powers.

“No wonder you humans thought you could defeat me,” Loki remarked after the first one. The nearest Avengers gave him play-punches in the shoulder.

The second movie, which was mostly the same except that the hero had a different hair color, bought out the wise guy in Tony: “Yaaaaay! Good guys 4,320,481,973, bad guys zero!”

When it was late and everyone went to their respective rooms, Bucky closed the door to the room he and Steve shared and just walked over to Steve and put his arms around him. Just like he used to, but
hadn’t this century.

Steve was startled for a second, but promptly put his own arms around Bucky and just kind of sagged against him. And it was like the world was suddenly fixed again. They were back where they belonged.

For a long time they just stood there like that. Bucky pressed his face into Steve’s neck, closed his eyes and breathed him in. Steve’s scent was familiar. Not quite the same, not after two years of fancy perfumed soap and the best food, but familiar.

“I missed you so much.”

“Me too.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Shh.”

He really was safe here. He was with Steve again. With him the Avengers would stop Hydra for good.

Everything was okay.

“Maybe I can sleep like this.”

“That’d be nice.”

So they both got into Steve’s bed instead of taking different ones like they usually did, and slept stretched out right next to each other, their bodies touching, Bucky’s flesh arm slung lightly over Steve’s chest.

A week ago, he was sure he wouldn’t have been able to sleep in the same bed with anyone else. Now, he had his most restful sleep since 1942.

Morning found Bucky cheerful. He felt like his life had gotten started again.

“We’ll go back to New York sometime, right?” he asked over breakfast. Today it was eggs, toast, and a wide assortment of things to spread on the latter.

“Sure, Buck. We could go to some of our old places if you want—the ones that are still there. Or the places we always wanted to go, but couldn’t.”

“What, like the Stork Club?”

“That closed down before I was born,” Tony said. “Dad used to complain about how much he missed it. There’s new swanky joints if that’s what you guys want.”

“What I’d really like,” Bucky said, piling marmalade on a fresh slice of toast, “is a Dodgers game.”

Steve’s head snapped up. Then he said, very quietly, “Would you guys mind giving us a minute?”

Bucky obligingly followed Steve outdoors, bemused.

Once they were out of earshot, Steve took a deep breath. “Bucky, there’s something I have to tell
you about the Dodgers.”

When Steve broke the bad news, Bucky decided to blame Hydra. He had no proof, but surely uprooting Da Bums from their native soil in Brooklyn and imprisoning them in Los Angeles of all places was the kind of thing those bastards would do.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently people who care about baseball were really upset about the Dodgers moving. Sorry, Steve and Bucky.
Volstagg was the next Asgardian to spend a few days serving on Midgard with the Avengers. Loki found himself relieved to greet him. Fandral had ceased to flirt for the time being, but Loki could not forget that one day that matter would have to be dealt with. Sif was developing into a valuable ally, but the centuries of dislike between them and the knowledge of what she hoped to gain made their new interactions complicated for him. Hogun remained unbending in his intense distaste for a Jotun cuckoo in the royal family of Asgard.

Volstagg, by comparison, was easy to deal with. Not overbright and easily pleased by food, battle and children to play with. Two of which Loki could provide.

“Welcome, Volstagg,” Loki said in the gracious tones of a prince, as Volstagg inhaled the salty air and looked around the patio with pleased interest. “The rest of the Avengers are amusing themselves on the beach right now. Why don’t we go and join them.”

Volstagg nodded and the two fell into step down the path. “This sea air makes me hungry for fish.”

“I believe Bruce intends to cook beef stew tonight,” Loki lied, just for the fleeting amusement of noting that Volstagg was no less enthusiastic for beef than for fish, sea air or no.

Through the palm trees ahead, splashing and playful shouting could be heard. Loki found himself stopping in his tracks as one voice rose above the others.

“Aaaagh! I’ll get you for that, punk!”

“You’ll have to catch me f—” This was cut off by another splash.

They were playing together. Steve and Bucky. After weeks of everyone tiptoeing around Bucky and watching the smallest improvement with delight, suddenly they were roughhousing together like children.

Like they must have… before.

Loki was glad. He truly was. He simply could not, at that moment, actually feel glad.

What he felt was an only too familiar gnawing in his gut, with what he craved displayed before him but utterly, hopelessly out of his reach. And following that, useless rage at the way the Norns had
given him so much but refused him the few things he truly wanted.

Everything except the best mother in the Nine Realms and one year, one precious year, in the bed of Midgard’s most glorious warrior.

“I just recalled something I must attend to in the laboratory,” he told Volstagg through stiff lips. “You go ahead and join them, I will be there later.”

Volstagg’s eyes on him were almost shrewd. “I suppose your shield-brothers have a training ground here, as they did in that tower?”

“Of course.”

“Then never mind the laboratory. Let’s work a little of that fat off you.” Volstagg turned and headed back for the house.

Loki, of course, scarcely had an ounce of fat on his frame, a fact Volstagg had sometimes taunted him about. He knew what the older man was getting at, though, and walked back with him.

Volstagg was not especially wise, but after raising a few dozen children, he must have seen many moments like this. Many moments when one of his sons or daughters saw the object of their affections walking away from them, leaving a freshly broken heart behind. And without Odin to constantly remind everyone which prince deserved all of their respect, and without the others of Thor’s warrior band to spur each other on in taunting Loki, Volstagg was giving Loki a bit of that understanding, a bit of the sort of help he might have given to one of his innumerable spawn.

It was more kindness than Loki had ever before received from Volstagg. Combined with the chance to spar with someone less fragile than a human, Loki was not going to refuse the offer.

For the next two hours, the two of them broke wooden staves on each other, Loki’s whirlwind style coming up against Volstagg’s immoveable bulk.

“You could come home, you know, Loki,” Volstagg reminded him when they paused for a few minutes to gulp down water. “You’ve done enough service here.”

For a moment, Loki was tempted. He could spare himself watching Steve in love with another man. He had friends in other realms. Without Odin to sabotage him, he could forge greater bonds between himself and Asgard’s warriors. As generous, as courageous, as ingenious as the Avengers were, he would have to bid them farewell in a few decades anyway.

But in their case, there would be no going back in a century or two when losing Steve no longer stung. These scant decades now were his only chance to be with them. If he missed a day with them he could have, he would rue that for all of his life.

And so Loki’s decision had already been made even before Volstagg spoiled his offer by adding, “And since finding out about those Hydra scoundrels, the queen wants you away from the corruption of Midgard anyhow.”

Loki wiped his sweating face with a towel and sighed. “My mother still thinks all Midgardians tainted by those blackguards?”

“Frigga is our queen. She has been watching this world closely with you on it. I think she must know of what she speaks.”

Wearily, Loki let his towel drop and drained the last of his water. “At the very least, I think I owe it
to humans to help them purge themselves of Hydra. When we have done so, Midgard may show the realms its true colors. Now, have you had enough, or have you the strength for another round?”

Volstagg’s reply was jovial. “I am not so old I cannot put a brat like you in his place.”

Which he did, if Loki’s place was triumphant atop his opponent.

The concentration on the fight and the release of aggression meant that when Jarvis politely interrupted to tell them supper was almost ready, Loki was pleasantly tired and more than ready to face the others.

Steve and Bucky seemed in some subtle way more at ease together now, he noted as they all sat at the table while Tony helped Bruce serve the sauteed fish and grilled asparagus to them all.

Loki wished they would hurry and resume lying together. He knew he would be able to tell when it happened, and he wanted that moment behind him. He only hoped he would be fast enough to school his expression when the moment came.

Kragge was not nearly as clever as he believed himself. From Hliðskjálf Frigga watched him sidling up to Thor in the training yard during Thor’s monthly visit to Asgard. Easily dealing with the duties which Kragge had likely expected to take up all of her attention, she watched Kragge and his two bosom companions steering Thor to a tavern on the outskirts of the city, there to plan.

Kragge was a low-ranking nobleman with mercantile ambitions. Frigga’s tight rein on usury and debt had frustrated many of his aims since she had claimed the throne. Odin had been more amenable to the man’s schemes.

When the day’s audiences were done, Frigga left the throne and went to the balcony off of the throne room, leaving the guards indoors, and gazed over her domain. And waited.

Soon, she heard heavy steps emerging onto the balcony.

She turned slowly. *I have faith in my sons,* she told herself as Thor, Kragge and Kragge’s friends came into her view.

And if her faith was unmerited, she had the seiðr to fend off what might be coming.

Frigga waited, the Asgard Force humming in her fingertips, ready to answer her will.

Thor took a couple of long strides towards her, then turned with lightning speed to disarm his companions. Before they knew what had happened, the other two were on the ground gasping for breath, while Thor held Kragge almost aloft with an iron grip on one arm.

“I present to you three traitors, my queen,” Thor said, as casually as if he had brought her a bouquet of flowers.

Frigga smiled, gracious. Inwardly she was shouting for joy. She had been right about her boy.

“We were going to make you king!” Kragge’s voice was perilously close to a whine. “After Odin you are Asgard’s rightful ruler!”

“And fool enough to let you do... what was that matter of trade you were on about, last year?” Thor shook the man. “Putting half the realms in debt to you, wasn’t it?”
“I told you how it would expand the—“

Thor stopped the man’s attempt to support his greedy plans with another shake and a roared
“Silence!” He then inclined his head to Frigga. “Perhaps you should summon guards to arrest them,
my queen.”

With a flicker of seiðr Frigga did. Guards poured onto the balcony, flanking Kragge and his
accomplices and bearing them away.

“We were trying to restore the line of Odin!” one of Kragge’s friends shouted over his shoulder,
indignant, as he was dragged off the balcony. “The queen has usurped your rightful place!”

“The queen is my mother, you dolt.” Thor did not even bother to raise his voice to retort. He turned
to Frigga and took her hand.

She looked up at him. Thor’s hair and beard were shaggier than usual; he had let them grow out to
insulate him slightly more against the fierce cold of Jotunheim. He looked as if foiling an attempted
palace coup was only a moment of sport. The worry that she and Loki had often discerned behind
Thor’s cheerful expression was not now visible. Not being a pawn in Odin’s interminable games
suited him.

“I hope you will allow me to stay here long enough to attend their trials, Mother.”

“Tomorrow I shall summon the Thing to try them.” She squeezed his hand. “And then—”

“Mother, if you are going to publicly honor me for not being an oathbreaker, I will return to
Jotunheim this very moment.”

Frigga laughed and pulled her elder son down for a hug. “I meant only that we would have a feast.
Which we do every time you visit anyhow.”

At the feast the following night, Hogun seemed grimmer than usual.

“Why did you not come to us after Kragge approached you?” he demanded of Thor.

Thor shrugged, more intent on his ale than on the conversation. “I hardly needed anyone’s help to
take those three into custody.” He snarled beneath his newly thick beard. “Those swine thought I
would break an oath to my own mother.”

Before Sif could reply in agreement, Hogun’s voice cut in.

“Surely he did not intend to harm the queen.”

Thor gestured with his tankard, indifferent. “Of course. His notion was that I would confine her to
her chambers and her garden while I took her throne.”

Hogun was watching Thor intently. If Thor was aware of his scrutiny, Sif could not discern any sign
of it.

“Did Queen Frigga not take that throne from your father?” Hogun’s eyes were riveted on Thor’s
face.

With an internal lurch, as if the stars in the sky had abruptly changed their positions, Sif realized what
Hogun was saying.
That he believed Thor should have accepted Kragge’s offer. Should have usurped the throne of Asgard.

Thor gave another shrug, but his friends, all watching him carefully, knew him well enough to know he was not so casual as he was pretending. He took up a leg of roast fowl and commenced devouring it. “That is the price of royalty,” he said around a mouthful.

“What do you mean?” Sif asked.

“My father was once a great king, a great warlord. But he became foolish in his old age. Many men do. When a common man loses his wits to age, those around him cease heeding his words. When it happens to a king, if he is foolish enough his own queen is obliged to stab him. Something I hope I shall not forget in my own dotage.”

None of Thor’s friends could find a reply to this.

“Also,” Thor added after a moment, having started on another drumstick, “do not plan to kill the beloved son of someone who knows where you sleep.”

“You will have to take that throne eventually.” Hogun had not moved a muscle since the conversation began. “Unless, of course, Queen Frigga names Loki as her heir.”

Thor’s other friends, all ranged around the table, inhaled sharply. They all saw the test that Hogun was dangling.

Thor shot Hogun a quick glare before turning to fling his tankard into the nearest firepit. “Another!” he shouted at a passing servant. Then he turned back to them. “I am sure Mother does not imagine Asgard’s warriors will ever follow Loki.”

Thor’s tone was not as confident as Sif would have expected, after centuries of knowing him. More attentive than she usually would have been, Sif realized suddenly that Thor was waiting for their replies.

Waiting to see if they would agree with him.

Possibilities unrolled in Sif’s mind even as they hung in the moment, waiting to see where balance would be found.

Was this how Loki saw things? Imagining in an instant a dozen ways things could go from this point, depending on how they were nudged?

Sif looked at the paths before her.

All of her life, the future had been so clear. When Odin was too old to continue to bear the burden, he would pass the throne to Thor. Loki would advise Thor, would handle all the dull bits, while Frigga helped to raise and educate her grandchildren. And if the Norns smiled upon her, Sif would be the mother of those grandchildren.

Sif looked at Thor. His handsome face, his overflowing muscles, the unthinking confidence of his movements. He was the one lover she had returned to over and over, across the centuries. The warrior she had gladly followed, had emulated. The prince she had hoped would one day make her a queen.

Thor would solve every trouble with battle, and he would be at the army’s head himself, leaving treaties and commerce and all else to his brother. Sif would likely be his second in command, there at
Thor’s right hand.

When Sif had command of a battle—and she would not stay in the palace and leave battle to others when she was queen—she would be obeyed without question, for who would dare offend the wife of Thor, mighty in battle and quick of temper? When she sparred on the training grounds… none would dare to defeat her save her own husband, that Thor might boast of being the only warrior who could best Asgard’s greatest shield-maiden.

But if Thor were not king.

Loki would fight if he must, but he had never been overfond of battle. He preferred study, sorcery, and negotiation. He would achieve most of his ends in the temple or the council chamber. If Asgard must take up arms, he would not hesitate, but he would be glad to leave the actual fighting to someone else.

To his queen.

Sif would lead Asgard’s armies uncontested. Asgard’s warriors, even the very ones who had told her a maiden could not be a warrior, would vie for the chance to follow her into battle. History would recall her as the mightiest shield-maiden to ever heft a sword.

Sif lifted her goblet of mead. Tried to sound as if her words were of no great moment. Just a minor detail in their comradely chatter.

“Loki has won much favor with Asgard of late. He is remorseful for his deeds and accordingly has been far more recklessly brave on Midgard than was his custom. Is that not so?” she asked the others.

“His feats are sung in Asgard’s halls nowadays,” Fandral admitted. His gaze was flitting over all of them, trying to discern what was happening beneath everyone’s casual words. “Doubtless you will hear some of them tonight.”

“I look forward to that.” Thor tossed the reply out before biting off a huge chunk of warm brown bread, as if nothing more important than a meal were occurring. But she knew that he had received his answer from them: that his future place was perhaps not entirely assured.

What he would do about that, only time would reveal.

The following day, Hogun asked Thor to secure him Queen Frigga’s permission to return to Vanaheim. Permission was granted, and Hogun had repatriated to the realm of his birth before Thor concluded his visit and returned to his duties on Jotunheim.
Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

The Avengers continue to root out Hydra, and Tony has issues.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading!

By the way... it won't be much longer, okay? Promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Avengers spent hours each week digging through labyrinths of intel, identifying Hydra operations they could call a halt to. Hydra had tentacles all over the world, involvement in every bad thing imaginable. Human trafficking. Drug smuggling. Arms dealing. Destabilizing third world governments. Embezzling. Bastards probably didn’t signal their turns, just to keep the badness quotient as high as possible.

Some lucky criminals had had their sentences shortened to make way for all the Hydra. Some idiot who’d knocked over a convenience store or two wasn’t as good a use of a prison cell as any of these aspiring overlords. A handful of politicians agitated to build more jails instead, but their efforts were halted by their own incarceration for Hydra-related felonies.

“I’m not sure we can arrest anyone over this scheme,” Loki said after reviewing one file, “but perhaps we should tell your media about it.”

“What is it?”

“Hydra was going to arrange for some exceptionally corrupt and incompetent person—they had a list of possibilities—to be elected President. Numerous highly placed people were going to make certain plenty of bad things happened during his term, just in case their patsy didn’t muck things up quite enough by himself.”

Steve frowned. “Wait, where’s the angle in that?”

Tony, more cynical, had already seen it. “If it’s bad enough, people will be ready for dictatorship. It’s happened before.”

Steve sat back, rubbing his forehead. Great. Of course he would take this hard. They would have to distract him with a problem he could punch.

Loki’s glance at Steve narrowed. Then he said, “If they were planning this, they likely are up to other mischief for which they can be arrested. Let us investigate.”

“I personally know all the Potemkin presidents they had lined up. They’re all complete pricks,” Tony said, displaying his usual cool head and balanced judgment. He jabbed a finger at the top name on
the list. “That one—we oughta arrange for him to meet Sif when she gets here.”

“Oh?”

“He tends to be handsy. I wouldn’t mind watching Sif teach him a lesson.”

The corner of Loki’s mouth quirked. “Now you see, that is precisely the kind of incautious thinking that’s going to get you left home for our next mission.”

“I’m cautious!”

Everyone laughed outright at that, except for Loki, who put on a skeptical expression.

“Really.” Loki’s voice was creamily mocking. “Then let me ask you a hypothetical question.”

“Uh oh.” Everyone had, for the moment, forgotten the distressing revelations of the intel and was intent on whatever game Loki was playing with Tony. Tony clearly knew a trap was being drawn around him. He didn’t seem to mind. He was busy grinning at being the center of attention.

Loki was leaning over the table, pinning Tony with his look. “If, hypothetically, an emotionally unstable supervillain with superstrength and magical powers were, hypothetically, pointing a huge spear at your chest, what would you, hypothetically, do? A, beg for mercy. B, keep your mouth shut so as not to antagonize him. Or C, tease him that he might be impotent.”

Steve looked from one of them to the other. “…This question doesn’t sound very hypothetical.”

That was when Bucky caught on. Loki had seen Steve’s distress, of course he had, and had started this to distract him.

Thanks, pal.

Clint was putting his head in his hands in exaggerated dismay. “He didn’t. No, wait, of course he did.”

“That’s why you threw him out the window, isn’t it.”

“Yes.”

Tony was sitting there grinning, eating it up. Then his face went blank, just for a second, and the next he was rolling up out of his chair.

“I just realized I need to do something in the lab. Call me when you’ve worked out a plan. But only if you’ve got something cautious enough for me.”

Once Tony was out of earshot, Loki and Bruce locked eyes. “I’ll go,” Bruce said after a few seconds. “But let’s give him a little time to settle in first. At least half an hour.”

Loki nodded, and they returned to their planning.

Tony gave himself an hour at the most before someone casually ambled in on important business that definitely didn’t involve watching to make sure he didn’t drink himself to death. He made the most of the time. “Jar, you got the data I wanted, right?”

“Of course, sir. I warn you, however, that it wasn’t all we had hoped.”
“Course it wasn’t. Okay, what do we got? They did do some secret science stuff they didn’t share with the rest of us, right?”

“Oh, yes. It was well hidden in the Hydra databases, but after some experimentation I was able to decrypt it. You and Drs. Foster and Banner will greatly enjoy scrutinizing it.”

“But there’s nothing for Project Golden Apples.”

Jarvis precisely calculated a brief hesitation before saying, “I am sorry, sir.”


The invigorating, reassuring beat of Metallica thrummed through him. Dum-E wheeled over with a glass. Tony let himself dance for a minute as he started his drink before ambling over to the data Jarvis was projecting. Right before he started digging through it, he let his eyes stray for a moment to a dusty frame in an unobtrusive corner, just a sheet of paper with letters in Farsi.

Then prepared himself to show his friends what they needed to see.

Tony couldn’t say it to anyone, not even Pepper, but he was taking Cap and Loki’s breakup as hard as they were.

Way back before those two had finally gotten together, as soon as he’d noticed the looks they kept sneaking at each other, he’d started scheming to encourage them. For utterly selfish reasons.

Because a human lifespan wasn’t long enough. Not for what humans were capable of. Hell, by the time the average human had started to figure things out, the only choice most of them had left was where to spend their retirement. Tony himself had barely repaired the damage his fucked-up childhood had done to him while he was still young enough to have his first and only real romance.

According to Loki, the immortality of the soul had been scientifically proven millennia ago. He’d almost laughed at Tony when Tony had expressed skepticism, Asgardian magic had so firmly established it. Which was good as far as it went, and Tony was sure existence on the astral plane had its points, but Tony wanted to take proper advantage of incarnate life. He wanted to explore the laws of the physical universe, and to do it with his naked-ape brain, because with all its shortcomings he liked the imperfect process by which human brains figured things out. He wanted to experience the many pleasures physical bodies could offer. He even wanted, yes, to learn to form affectionate relationships with other naked apes, to navigate all the problems inherent in human personality to reach that union of friendship or romance. Or family.

By now, Tony knew that his fucking mood disorders were probably incurable. The neural pathways were too well established. He could keep finding ways to alleviate them, but as long as he occupied this particular mass of protein, he’d have to endure them.

It would be worth it. Much as it sucked, he still wasn’t done with corporeal existence.

He wanted more time in the meat cage before ascending to whatever it was that came next. But his genius ran to machines made of metal, not meat. Ironically enough, he didn’t have time to learn enough about the meat cages to extend their functional period. And he’d checked, or rather he’d had Jarvis check, and no one else was anywhere close. Today’s teenagers might live to be a hundred and twenty. Maybe.

So as soon as he’d known Loki was going to come to Earth and share alien knowledge with them, Tony had hoped. He hadn’t breathed a word to anyone, not to raise hopes that might be dashed. But
finally one night his talks with Loki had given him an in, and Loki had looked heartbroken when he’d had to say that golden apples were a myth. That no one knew of any way to keep human meat cages going longer.

But Loki was besotted with Steve, and Tony had felt certain that the day Loki noticed the first silver hair on his boyfriend’s golden head he’d be tearing up the Nine Realms, grabbing alien geniuses by their shirt fronts and demanding that they find a way to extend his sweetie’s shelf life. And if there was a way, Loki would give it to the rest of the Avengers too, because he loved all of them, and they could share it with all Midgard.

(And maybe the Merchant of Death would be able to forgive himself just a little. But that wasn’t the most important part. Even if it was one of his strongest motivations. Even if it was the one that kept him awake the most.)

But now, well, it wasn’t that Loki didn’t still love all of them, and it wasn’t that he wouldn’t like to keep all of them around for the next few millennia, but nothing motivated desperate measures like being on the verge of losing your sweetie. Only now Loki had already lost his sweetie, and was probably consoling himself with the idea of Steve growing old with one of his own kind as nature intended or some such crap.

So there went that grand scheme. And Tony’s hopes had been dashed by the same guy who’d been forced to kill his parents and now that old wound had been ripped back open, and it was so much worse that they’d been murdered instead of just dying in a random accident (and here Tony had pioneered safer car technology to spare others his grief), and most days it took all of Tony’s willpower not to ask Bucky about his parents’ last moments.

Jarvis knew all about it, but wouldn’t tell him. Jarvis was probably right. But Tony couldn’t stop wondering. Sometimes enough booze would drown the wondering, but not always.

He wasn’t quite so quick to reach for the bottle these days anyway. Not that he’d quit drinking, or even quit drinking too much, but he did it less, just because he didn’t like seeing the worry on the Avengers’ faces when he did. They actually cared about him.

That wasn’t as much of a novelty for Tony as he sometimes felt like it was. His mother had cared. Pepper and Rhodey both cared, and they’d been a regular presence in his life for decades.

Yinsen had cared.

He hadn’t saved Yinsen.

He couldn’t have saved Yinsen. Yinsen hadn’t wanted to be saved. But Tony had still failed, and Yinsen had been willing to keep going to help Tony, to stay alive long enough for that, had kept Tony sane and shown him kindness when they were surrounded by enemies and a man as kind and brave as Yinsen was worth a thousand alcoholic playboys but it was the alcoholic playboy who walked out of there alive.

So now the alcoholic playboy hid from his demons in his workshop, trying to invent something that would make his survival worthwhile.

When he was alone there, or sure no one was paying attention to him, he would look at the framed piece of paper on the wall.

In each of Tony’s labs at his various residences, in some out of the way corner where it was unlikely to be noticed, there was a small dusty frame holding a sheet of paper with a few words printed in
Tony couldn’t read Farsi. But that had been Yinsen’s first language. Tony had gotten Jarvis to translate Yinsen’s last words into his native language and print out copies for each lab, and he put them on the wall so that he wouldn’t forget, but no one would ever guess what it meant.

*Don’t waste your life.*

Tony tried not to.

Bruce wandered in and went to his station, oh-so-casually. He was just at a loose end, needed something to keep his mind busy, he wasn’t babysitting Tony at all.

“So Brewski, turns out Hydra left a nice big box of toys for us to rummage through. Take a look at this.” And Tony tried to use scientific revelation to block out mortality.

Frigga found her younger son in the palace library well after midnight, shoulders sagging as he paged through one book and one crystal after another. Rather than summon him, she went to him herself.

She came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

Sighing, he closed his current tome with a little thud.

“Loki, do not torment yourself. Your question has no answer.”

Spread on the table before him was every book the library contained that dealt with humans, and with longevity.

“Humans deserve better.” Loki’s voice had no energy left in it.

“I should never have sent you there.”

“We’ve had this talk before, Mother.”

“Your shield-brothers will not be able to find every Hydra operative on Midgard. If even a few of them lived past a normal human lifespan, you know they would try their scheme again. And this time other realms would be involved.”

Loki said nothing to this. That conversation had been had as well. Hydra had permanently tainted Midgard in Frigga’s eyes. And no one over all the centuries had learned any way of giving humans a lifespan more suited to their abilities.

But Midgard was blossoming without Hydra’s fiends causing trouble where none needed to be, and Thor was loyal to Frigga as his sovereign, and every time Loki visited Asgard its court showed him more respect.

Loki began stacking the crystals and books so they could be returned to their places. “Shall I take Sif to Midgard with me when I return?”

“I can spare her for a few days.” Frigga looked at Loki, appraising, as he stood. “Do you think you will marry her?”
“If I have to be king, yes. Provided we can agree on one or two things we haven’t yet discussed.” He gave her a rueful smile. “I would not want her for an enemy.”

Frigga took her son’s arm and let him see her to her chambers.

Chapter End Notes

I got the Farsi from a translation site, I just hope it's right. If it isn't, tell me so I can fix it. Thank you!
ETA: Thank you to TheCarelessVoice for correcting it!
Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky make progress.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to nano-writer for beta reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky and Steve slept in the same bed now. Sleep was all they did, but it was good to lie beside someone else. To be at peace beside the one man who’d always been everything to him.

They would hold each other, sometimes. Sleep with their arms around each other. The first time Bucky touched Steve with his metal hand, Steve flinched and Bucky drew back. But Steve had immediately grabbed the metal hand and put it back on his skin, holding it there. He’d touched every inch of Bucky’s robot arm, caressing the metal as if it were skin, until he reached the point where metal met flesh. He put his hand over that spot with infinite gentleness, as if he were trying to heal it.

After that, Bucky didn’t hesitate to touch Steve with his robot hand.

They increased their physical contact a little at a time. Steve always waited for Bucky to take a new step first. Like when they started roughhousing on the beach. Bucky was the one to without warning pounce on Steve and push him into the waves. Steve had responded in kind, delight all over his stupid handsome face while they tried to drown each other.

Steve wanted to kiss Bucky sometimes, Bucky could tell by the way Steve was looking at him, but he didn’t do it until Bucky kissed him first. They had been on the island for almost three months when one morning, as the two of them got ready for the day, Bucky suddenly felt like it was all right. So without preamble, he just walked over to where Steve was buttoning his shirt and took Steve’s face in his hands.

Steve just stopped moving and waited. Looked almost scared.

Bucky kissed him.

Steve didn’t ask for anything else, just kissed back, letting Bucky take his time. Bucky had forgotten what this felt like, this sort of closeness. To just enjoy a simple touch.

When he broke the kiss, the two of them looked at each other for a minute. Steve looked so happy, so relieved. So hopeful.

Bucky tried to think of a wisecrack to break the moment, which was getting too serious, but nothing came to mind, so he just sat down on the edge of the bed to put his shoes on. Steve was still smiling like a dope when they emerged to join the others for breakfast.
After that they kissed often. No more than that, but they had a little bit more of what they had been back.

Humans were very curious about people from other worlds, Sif was learning on her regular visits to Midgard. It was hard for an Asgardian to remember that until recently, the All-Father’s command had isolated Earth from the rest of the realms. Loki’s human shield-brothers were accustomed to her by now, except for the two newest Avengers, but other humans were invariably intrigued. When she accompanied Loki to a grand party of human ambassadors and statesmen, one of the younger men present—a warrior, too young for high rank but present because of his mother’s station—playfully challenged her to “arm-wrestle” and was more impressed than embarrassed when she easily defeated him.

Judging from the glances he kept sending her way as the currents of the party took them both around the room, it was not only her Asgardian strength which had impressed him.

Sif was reluctantly averting her gaze and trying to speak with patience to the old man who was asking her the same questions the last dozen humans (except for the young warrior) she had talked to had asked when Loki returned to her side from whatever conversation he had just concluded. When the old man was steered away by their host who wanted to introduce him to some protege, Loki glanced with a little amusement at the warrior.

“Go ahead if you want to, Sif.”

Sif was not surprised that Loki had noticed. Loki noticed all of the silent currents of any event, always had. He didn’t put them into words so bluntly without reason, though.

She looked at him, inquiring.

Loki’s face was serious now. “Sif, if we ever marry, it will be an alliance, not a romance. I always assumed that my future wife and I would look elsewhere for… personal satisfaction.”

That was one of the matters Sif had intended to discuss with the prince when the occasion arose, so she nodded.

“In fact, I once suggested to Odin that perhaps I should wed Lady Beatrice of Alfheim.” A sorceress of high rank, Lady Beatrice was as romantically indifferent to men as Loki was to women. “I did not then know his true plans for me.”

“What was his plan?” Sif had never quite seen what use Odin could have made of a Jotun prince.

“To make me his puppet king of Jotunheim.” Loki’s features were drawn and cold as he said the words. “He used to tell me and Thor that we were both born to be kings. For centuries I thought it a mere poetic flourish. But he meant one king for Asgard and one king for Jotunheim.”

“Princes Helblindi and Byleistr are still battling over Laufey’s throne. Thor says the Jotnar are growing weary of the war and care not which of them is king, but neither prince will yield.”

“Let us hope Asgard’s princes will be wiser.”

Sif tilted her head at a sudden thought. “Has it occurred to you that they are your brothers?”

“Half-brothers. My birth mother died in the war during which Odin kidnapped me. Laufey remarried.” Loki shrugged, surveying the room. “I doubt they have any wish to claim the kinship.
But yes, all three of my… brothers… are fighting each other on the planet of my birth. The irony has not escaped me.”

Tony Stark joined them just then, grinning as he sipped a bubbly liquid from a crystal goblet, sparing Sif the need to find a reply. “So, the hot naval officer over there just asked me how to approach an Asgardian shield-maiden without causing an interplanetary incident. I told him to just bring you a drink and tell you how awesome he thinks you are, hope that’s okay.”

“Remember that humans are fragile,” Loki admonished. “In fact, perhaps I should give you a healing stone or two, just in case.”

Sif was almost certain Loki was joking. Stark certainly thought it was funny; he choked on his drink and then wheezed something about “safe sex”. Loki rolled his eyes and steered the man to speak with someone else, leaving Sif to her own devices.

She saw the young warrior moving in her general direction and decided not to wait. Tony Stark’s advice would likely be as effective in reverse. She took two full crystal goblets from one of the servants and cut across the room, straight for her quarry. When he caught sight of her he stood and waited, his handsome face lighting up.

Sif reached him and handed him one of the goblets.

“I don’t know you very well,” she began, “but you strike me as… awesome.”

Later that evening, she confirmed: he was awesome.

“I was thinking about something you told us about your captivity,” Bucky said one day to Loki, when they happened to be alone on the patio together. Bucky had been prepared to avoid Loki if it had seemed that was what Loki wanted, but Loki really didn’t seem to hold a grudge about losing Steve to him.

Sometimes Loki looked sad for a minute. Really sad, like the bottom had fallen out of his world. But it was never more than a few seconds before the look was gone. Sometimes Bucky thought he could see Loki willing the sadness away, forcibly dragging his mind and heart away from the hurt.

Probably it wasn’t always Steve making him sad. Had to be his fake father some of the time. Or his estranged brother. Or guilt.

Whatever, Loki kept treating Bucky the same way he did all the other humans. Like a friend. And he was funny, and full of interesting stories (a thousand years traveling to different planets would do that), and kind, and good to have on your side in a fight.

Steve had chosen well. Of course he had.

Now Loki gave him an inquiring look. “Oh?”

“You said.” Bucky had to take a few seconds. “That you tried to provoke them.”

“Provoke them into killing me, yes. It didn’t work.”

Loki waited, giving Bucky the time he needed before he could speak.

“Don’t tell Steve this.”
“I won’t.” Sudden comprehension spread across Loki’s face. “You tried that?”

“Yeah. Didn’t work for me either.”

“I am sorry.”

Bucky thought for another minute. “I think it changed their protocols with me. Not the first couple of times I tried it. Then they just… showed me how much they could do to me without killing me. But when Pierce was my handler… he had them do nasty things to me sometimes, but he was interested in other ways of controlling me. After I tried to get killed, he started telling me about the terrible things the people I was sent to kill had done. Convinced me I was doing something good. Sometimes the things he told me were even true.”

Loki nodded. “I noticed that. Pierce had to tell you about the Chitauri to make you shoot me. I told the others about that.” He smiled a little. “Steve was horribly relieved. It meant that you weren’t entirely gone.”

“That stupid punk.”

That made Loki’s smile get wider. “Indeed.”

“I don’t think I should tell Tony this, but Pierce told me a huge pack of lies about what Tony’s parents did. I thought I was executing a couple of monsters.” If he hadn’t, he might have let Maria live, as Howard had asked. That was one of the moments he thought about the most. Howard Stark accepting his fate, just asking that his wife be spared.

Howard had apparently been a terrible husband, but he had cared enough to ask his assassin for her life, not his own.

“I admire you for carrying on.”

“Right back atcha.”

Loki shrugged. “When I sought death, I had no reason to live. Now I have a great deal to live for. It’s well worth what I must live with.”

Bucky nodded. He felt the same. “If it weren’t for Steve….”

“You might still be tempted?” Loki nodded, solemn.

“But I’m still following him straight into trouble, just like always.”

“No one is immune. Even when Midgard believed him dead, he inspired them. I think his team during the war, the Howling Commandos, inspired Fury to assemble the Avengers.”

Bucky gave his head a rueful shake. “Even a lifetime later, he has that effect on people.” He flapped a hand at Loki. “And apparently it’s literally universal.”

Loki grinned suddenly. “Let me show you something.”

Bucky followed Loki to his room. Bruce was the only one in the house, leaning against the counter thumbing through a cookbook. He glanced up to acknowledge them but stayed where he was.

Loki’s room was spartanly neat, with a well-stocked bookcase and filmy white curtains parted to let the sunshine in. He opened the closet; like all the closets in Tony Stark’s buildings, it was slightly smaller than the apartment Bucky’s family had lived in. Behind the clothes (a lot of clothes, Loki was
kind of vain, but why not, he was handsome enough) were several bottles of Asgardian mead and at least ten shiny replica Captain America shields.

Bucky must have made some kind of exclamation, because Bruce’s voice carried in from the common room. “Do I want to know?”

“Come on in,” Loki called back.

A moment later Bruce was in the closet’s doorway, taking in the stack of shields.

“I’ll take them to Asgard the next time I visit home. They’re for my future children—and my future nieces and nephews.”

“I had one when I was a kid,” Bruce said, looking at them, “but it was just plastic. You got the nice metal ones for your princes and princesses.”

“I’m not spoiling them. Asgardian children would break a plastic one immediately.”

“There’s going to be alien kids playing Captain America.” Bucky had to say it out loud.

“And we were worried Earth didn’t have anything to offer.”

Loki chuckled as he ushered them out of the closet, shutting the door behind them. “Earth has more to offer the realms than you realize.”

Bucky knew that Loki was a diplomat, but he sounded like he meant it.

There was no particular reason for it to happen when it did. For months Steve and Bucky had been sharing a bed every night, sleeping with their arms around each other, sometimes kissing. Neither had felt any particular rush to move on.

And then one night it was late summer, and they’d just gotten back to the Tower after a satisfying mission of beating up Hydra scumbags, and when Steve emerged from the shower wrapped in a towel Bucky decided that was it.

He didn’t say anything, they just found that their arms were around each other and their towels were presumably on the floor since they weren’t on their bodies anymore and it was like they’d never been apart.

They wound up in Steve’s huge bed with its nice hard mattress with all their skin touching and their hands all over each other and their lips hardly parting for a second.

They didn’t work up to a crescendo and then pause and rest and then start again. It was more like they never stopped, each time blending into the last. They just threw themselves into reacquainting themselves with the miracle of each other, finding the familiar bits of each other, the familiar sounds and responses, mixed with bodies that had changed so much since the first time the two of them had awkwardly put their arms around each other.

Bucky’s metal arm, it turned out, could touch very delicately. And he liked molding his metal hand around Steve’s bulging muscles almost as much as he did his flesh one.

Maybe the third time he wrapped his lips around Steve’s ridiculous huge dick Bucky remembered they’d used to be afraid to do this. Now they weren’t even thinking about it, touching everything
with everything, like they’d forgotten that holding back was ever a thing they’d done.

“I missed you so much,” Steve whispered eventually in the darkness.

“You shoulda known I wouldn’t be that easy to get rid of.”

“Easy. Yeah.” Steve’s fingers tugged on Bucky’s hair. “Don’t wander off again. I’ll shackle us together if I have to.”

Bucky squeezed whatever bits of Steve his hands happened to be near. “Things are okay now, punk.”

At least, as okay as he hoped they could be.

Chapter End Notes

Just a couple more chapters before you guys finally get the payoff you have awaited so patiently. Promise.
“You three work well together,” Natasha observed right before biting into a slice of pepperoni.

“We do.” Bucky was grinning from post-battle satisfaction. He, Natasha, Steve and Loki had taken down a Hydra-affiliated terrorist cell that had been intent on murdering civilians that day. Now the four were in Avengers Tower, resting and replenishing themselves with a smorgasbord of pizzas.

Natasha was right. Loki and Bucky had both caught the shield as it rebounded from colliding with some malefactor, used it to block a blast or to pummel an opponent, and then tossed it to each other or back to Steve as if they’d choreographed it in advance. Not everyone could handle the shield, it was large and heavy and Steve could throw quite hard, but a supersoldier with a robot arm and an Asgardian warrior could catch and wield it.

Loki thought that wielding Mjölnir might have been like this, him and Thor using it together in the heat of battle, had Odin not confined it to the son he cared for.

To his only son.

Stop it, Loki ordered himself, and took a long draught of beer.

“You okay, Loki?” Steve’s voice was hesitant. Things still hadn’t quite returned to normal between the two of them, possibly never would. They were still in love but Steve belonged with Bucky and that was that and would always stand between them.

Loki considered for a moment before answering. “I regret frightening that man in the burning building. I don’t like frightening humans—unless they’re up to no good.”

“He’ll be okay.” Bucky was putting away pizza like it was going out of style. “When he calms down, they’ll explain what you did and he’ll be fine.”

The man had been trapped behind a wall of flames. The only way Loki could think of to reach him
was to shift to Muspel form. Unfortunately, the man had already been thoroughly panicking even before he saw a flaming red being approaching him. When he saw Loki he had become convinced that he was in hell and that Loki was a devil there to punish him for his sins.

Once Loki had the man safe, Bucky had seen his distress and come to reassure him. Loki had backed away. By now most humans had accepted that he was one of the good guys now, but still Loki had the habit of allowing his Midgardian shield-brothers to comfort civilians when it was possible.

Bucky had taken the man’s hysteria in stride. “Obviously you’re not bad enough for hell,” he had told the man coolly. “They sent you back.”

This had calmed the man more than anything else could have at that moment. He had been in no condition for an explanation of fire giants.

Loki had stood back, watching Bucky’s patience with the terrified man, and suddenly understood himself.

“Thank you for what you said to him,” he told Bucky now.

Bucky shrugged. “I know what it’s like to be that scared.”

“I’m sorry.”

Another shrug. Bucky didn’t want too much attention on his merits. “I’m making good use of it now.”

“You are.” Loki then concentrated on his pizza as the others discussed the miscreants they had just turned over to the police. Now and then they gave him a concerned glance, but they seemed to have accepted his explanation.

It was all smoke to veil what he had realized about himself this day.

Loki had always admired Bucky Barnes, long before he had seen the man or known he was still alive. Bucky had been one of the few who saw Steve’s spirit before Steve’s body had been transformed to match it. Now Loki witnessed Bucky’s courage and loyalty and kindness every day.

Today it had dawned on Loki that it wasn’t only a jumble of admiration and envy and camaraderie that he felt for Bucky.

As if one hopeless infatuation wasn’t enough.

And all he could do was lock the feelings in his heart and resign himself.

Mother was probably right, he joked bleakly to himself. He should leave Midgard before he was in love with a dozen unattainable mortal men.

Tony thought he was doing better, but then one day when he was in New York he made the mistake of leaving the Tower and roaming the wilds of the city with an Iron Man suit briefcase (just in case, superheroeing made you paranoid) and a pocket full of cash. It was a nice early autumn day, perfect temperature and gentle sunlight, and Tony got crazy and put on a hat and coke-bottle glasses (more effective for disguise in his case than shades) and went out to stores and coffee shops like a normal person.
He bought a print from a sidewalk vendor of the Avengers (including the two newest members, plus both princes of Asgard on opposite ends of the line) drawn in the famous “construction workers lunching on a crossbeam” pose, figuring the team would get a kick out of it. If they didn’t, they’d probably have more appreciation for the metric fuckton of Belgian chocolate he bought in a store he passed that sold nothing else. He’d never had that variety before and after tasting a sample felt the need to make up for lost time. Then he got himself a super size coffee with a ton of sugary add-ons. Just holding it sped up his pulse, like the caffeine was seeping through the paper cup and into his skin. In short, it was the good stuff.

He walked past one of the little parks New York was full of. People were sitting around on benches, reading on Kindles or talking to each other or playing chess or checkers. It was kind of cool that anyone could sit down with a board and some complete stranger would just sit down and play with them. And people claimed New Yorkers were unfriendly.

One guy hadn’t set up chess or checkers. He’d set up a backgammon board.

Tony had already activated the suit and flown high above the ground (still clutching all his shopping bags, even) before it occurred to him how stupid this was. To be triggered by backgammon of all fucking things. But he and Yinsen had played it to help them settle down enough to sleep each night after working all day on that first suit, just because there was no other entertainment. He’d never played backgammon before or since. Yinsen had had to teach him the rules.

Yeah.

“Tell everyone I’m invoking Fortress of Solitude, okay, Jarvis?” he said as he entered through the laboratory floor’s window. He’d made that entrance so he could fly directly into the lab if he wanted to, just because it made him feel like Batman. Now he was using it so he didn’t have to talk to his friends. Even though the simple fact that they were in the building to talk to was the reason he could stand being alive.

What a fucking hypocrite he was. I’m doing this for Earth, he pretended. For Earth’s mightiest heroes. I’m giving them a safe place to live together, all the resources they need to stay at the top of their game, to atone for all that merchant of death stuff. To protect people from supervillains. It doesn’t have anything to do with trying to draw enough people into my life that when some of them leave me it won’t matter as much because some will still be here. I wasn’t buying friends in bulk at all. It doesn’t have anything to do with looking around at my team on that helicarrier, or later in the streets of Manhattan and then over shawarma, and seeing the same isolation I felt on every face—except for Thor’s. It wasn’t about trying to bind people who were just as needy as I am to me so they would need me as much as I needed them.

Heck, let’s even add the woobie supervillain to the mix! To seal an alliance between Earth and Asgard. To learn advanced alien technology and share it with humanity. Not at all because I suspected the supervillain was a touch-starved ball of need who’d be eternally loyal to anyone who showed him the slightest decency. I wasn’t sealing myself a clingy guaranteed friend for life even a little bit.

Face it, Stark. This whole Avengers Tower project was just you creating a buddy farm for yourself.

Well, it had worked. But his stupid neurochemistry hadn’t gotten the memo that everything was okay now and was still signaling that the rest of the tribe had packed up and left him to deal with the saber-tooths on his own. And after he showed them how to make fire, too.
“Of course, sir. What would you like to drink?”

Tony dropped his purchases on the floor (he’d share them later, when he had more ability to can) and let the suit fold itself up. “A gin martini. Just one.” Sometimes he couldn’t help drowning himself in booze but today he would do what Yinsen would have wanted him to. “And open the Pie In The Sky file.”

Jarvis’s voice warmed. “At once, sir.”

Tony looked at the framed sentence of Farsi on the wall while Dum-E brought him his drink. He knocked back half of it immediately. Then ambled through the holograms Jarvis was projecting.

Getting through this round would take something good.

Mars colony? Nah, Elon was on top of that one. Tony’d let someone else do something around here. Superconductor? Too far from present technology; unless Project Golden Apples somehow succeeded, he wasn’t going to see that one. Chemical printers? Governments would be all over him because then people could print out their own heroin or plutonium, and it would pretty much destroy the entire planet’s economy. Cold fusion? Maybe.

Wait. That one.

The rush flowed through Tony’s veins, as familiar as the numbing of alcohol or the stimulus of caffeine or the delirium of sex. The fun (well, sometimes fun) part of being bipolar. The “manic” of “manic-depressive”. Sucked when it took the form of anxiety or panic attacks, but when it was excitement over a new project, it was beautiful.

Tony poked at the hologram.

“Jar, gimme everything about this. Check all the databases for anything new that might be relevant.”

He listed data he wanted. The images representing his other pie-in-the-sky projects vanished. New ones signifying the assorted data he needed appeared.

He finished his martini and got to work.

Bucky must have spent months slowly building up feelings for Loki before the moment he realized what those feelings were. Ever since he had remembered who he was and rejoined Steve, his respect and his fondness for Loki had steadily grown. Loki was brave and smart and generous and beautiful.

“After me, only a god would do,” Bucky would joke whenever reporters asked if he was jealous of Loki and Steve.

The fact was, he wasn’t jealous that Loki had had Steve. It was funny, because he’d been horribly jealous when he’d realized that Peggy Carter wanted Steve. Maybe that had been because Bucky had been so used to being the only one who saw how terrific Steve Rogers was, and suddenly someone else had noticed. Maybe it was because Peggy would have been able to love Steve openly, tell the whole world and receive legal sanction for her feelings, while Steve and Bucky had to hide. Bucky had been happy for Steve, he honestly had, but it had hurt anyway.

It occurred to him more than once that now Loki was in exactly the same position he’d been in. Maybe that was why he wasn’t jealous that Loki had had Steve before Bucky had returned.

He could see that Steve still loved Loki. Of course he did, Bucky hadn’t spent his life going into
battle (of various types) after a man who could fall out of love that easily. Besides… Loki was amazing.

And damn, weren’t they gorgeous together. When they happened to be standing near each other Bucky looked at them and just marveled.

Sometimes for a few seconds one of them wouldn’t be able to hide their feelings. Yeah, they still wanted each other. But Bucky was first with Steve, and Loki actually thought that was how it should be. He was way too damn generous.

Then one day, Bucky and Loki were strolling on the beach around the island, talking about nothing in particular, when the clouds that had been threatening all day finally let loose. When he felt the first drops, Bucky automatically raised a hand to ward off the rainfall a little, only to find that suddenly there were no more drops. He could see them, sure, the rain had become a torrent very swiftly, but not a one of them was touching him.

He looked at Loki, who should have been drenched by now but wasn’t. The silvery rain was falling down all around him and he was untouched. Loki didn’t explain that he was using magic to shield them from the rain. He just took in Bucky’s surprised expression and smiled widely.

He really had a beautiful smile.

Bucky felt like he’d been hit in the head. But in a good way.

All Bucky did was smile back, but he didn’t think about anything else for days.

And after a lot of pondering, the solution became clear to him.

Steve was on the island when Tony invoked Fortress of Solitude, but the Avengers who were in the Tower kept those on the island updated on Tony’s status. At least Tony was drowning his feelings in science instead of booze, not emerging from his workshop even to eat or sleep. The others would bring food to him and put it into his hands or he wouldn’t eat at all. He would sleep on the cot in the lab, or just on the floor if exhaustion really caught up with him. Loki had reportedly carried him unconscious to his bed a couple of times.

No one had any idea what he was working on. When they asked, he just grinned and promised he’d tell them when it was time. Whatever it was, it was still in the design stage. Jarvis blurred the holograms when anyone else came in so that no one but Tony could make them out.

They were all relieved when Tony was willing to return to the island and the whole team was together again. Tony showered them all with fancy chocolate, which was heavenly, and presented them with a picture of themselves as the 1932 skyscraper builders eating lunch, which they put up in the common room.

Also, a dozen backgammon boards had mysteriously appeared at both the Tower and on Carbonell Cay. Something made them reluctant to ask why, but they learned the rules and played the game sometimes, just because.

Steve took it as a good sign that Tony joined the rest of them for dinner before disappearing into his lab for more work. And an even better sign when Tony brought up the approaching holidays. Everyone was agreed that they wanted to continue the traditions they had started the previous year. “This time, though, we have to actually stick to the ‘cheap gifts only’ rule,” Bruce admonished.
“Last year’s gifts were unrepeatable,” Steve agreed. “So are we going to dress up for Halloween again?”

“I had an idea for that.” Loki was getting that little smile he got when he contemplated minor mischief. Steve allowed himself to notice how cute it was. He’d always liked that sly little smile. “I thought perhaps this year we might dress as comic book superheroes.”

“What, like Superman?” Judging from Sam’s grin, he liked the idea.

“Precisely.”

That set off several minutes of cheerfully silly discussion of who was going to dress as whom. Everyone tried to tell Clint that being Green Arrow was too obvious, but Clint didn’t care; arrows were his thing and they could just deal with it.

When asked, Steve said, “Maybe I’ll be the Flash. I love that I can run fast now.”

“May I make a suggestion?” Loki asked. “I can’t help but think that you would be cute as Aquaman.”

“Yeah!” Tony was instantly enthusiastic. “Not the new badass Aquaman, but the old Aquaman with the orange shirt and the green tights!”

Everyone approved of this idea, so Steve agreed. Unfortunately, it made him remember last Halloween, when at Loki’s suggestion Steve had dressed in a black catsuit as the Black Widower and once they were alone….

Steve dragged his attention back to the conversation, hoping no one had noticed his distraction. Hoping Bucky hadn’t noticed.

Steve felt like a heel. It didn’t matter how much reassurance he got from Bucky or Loki or the rest of the Avengers, he still felt like a heel. He loved two men and felt like he was being disloyal to both of them.

He’d hoped that in time it would get easier, that he’d stop missing having Loki so much, but it hadn’t. He was a greedy selfish bastard; one wonderful gorgeous man wasn’t enough for him.

Bucky was watching him curiously. Damn.

Loki’s solemn voice cut into Steve’s reverie. His words made Steve wish he hadn’t missed whatever it was that had gotten them onto this subject.

“For as long as I live,” Loki was saying, looking around the table at them all, “I will never cease to ask myself: what would the Avengers think of me if they could see me right now? I will never be able to do anything you would be ashamed to see. Even if I wanted to.”

They all let a few seconds of solemn acknowledgment pass before Sam offered a gentle joke. “I feel for you. Most of us only have to live with one conscience.”

Loki grinned, lighting up the room. “And I now must live with nine of them—the one I already had, and each of the Avengers, and of course Pepper.”

Bruce laughed suddenly. “Do you guys remember what I said about Loki during the Chitauri invasion? I said, ‘That guy’s head is a bag full of cats.’”
Loki quirked an eyebrow. “I think a bag full of superheroes is an improvement on that.”

They all laughed. Bucky was still scrutinizing Steve, though. Steve would have to apologize once they were alone.

After dinner, they dispersed. Tony went to the lab and of course Loki and Bruce went with him, ostensibly to talk science but really so they could reassure themselves that Tony was functional again. Clint, Natasha and Sam picked a movie to watch.

“I’m restless,” Bucky told Steve. “Let’s walk off some energy.”

Steve thought probably Bucky actually wanted some privacy so they could discuss Steve’s lingering feelings for his ex, but he agreed immediately. He wanted to get his apology over with. This was something they were going to have to learn to live with, it seemed.

When they got to the beach, Steve took a deep breath.

“We need to talk,” Bucky said before Steve could say a word.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: finally. Thank you all for waiting so damn long.
FINALLY

Chapter Summary

What I've been promising you guys since this started.

“We need to talk.”

“I know we do. Bucky, you know I’ll never give you up, right? Not for anything. I do love him, but you’re… we’re….”

Steve looked guilty, unhappy. He looked that way much too much of the time. Bucky hated to see that. Steve was in love with two men and there was no way to undo that. Well, so was Bucky. And both the men he loved were unhappy. And now that he was finally thinking outside the box, Bucky could see how to fix that.

He was going to make Steve and Loki really happy. One way or another.

Bucky cut Steve’s stammering off with an arm around his neck, pulling Steve down so he could grind his knuckles into the punk’s thick skull. “I know all that, punk. You think I’d have any use for you if you could just forget someone you fell for?”

Steve wriggled free and tried to smooth his hair back down. “I can’t. The whole time I was with him, I felt guilty because of you, even though I thought you were—were dead.”

They walked on along the beach, the waves sounding in their ears as the sun set.

Bucky had gone from being a weapon owned by fiends, stored in buildings of cold concrete, to a beautiful tropical island full of heroes and pagan gods. It made his head spin sometimes.

Just went to show that anything was possible.

“And now you feel guilty because of him. You cad. Always thinking about yourself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing, you idiot. I’m trying to tell you something.”

“What’s that?”

Bucky took a minute. How could he propose what he was going to? Even though he was sure it was what all three of them really wanted?

“Did I ever tell you how jealous I was of Peggy?”

That got a little smile out of Steve. Just the tiniest bit of a smirk, because even a sweetheart like Steve couldn’t help liking being coveted. “I think I kinda knew.”

“I’d always thought I’d just be happy for you. All those years, every time I set us up a double date I was so let down when the girl didn’t like you. I imagined how great it would be the day some girl saw your worth like you deserved.”
“Bucky.”

“And then it finally happened, and I was so happy I wanted to jump for joy, but I also wanted you all to myself like it’d always been. I’d never felt torn in two like that before. You’d always belonged just to me.”

“I still belong to you.”

“You belong to the whole world now, champ. And you belong to Loki too.”

“I’ll never stop loving him, but….”

“You shouldn’t. The thing is…. Bucky let himself pause for a second, because this moment was when everything was going to change. “I kind of love him too.”

Steve stopped. The two of them stood still on the sand, staring at each other. Eventually Steve managed to reply.

“I know. He’s a good friend, a good shield-brother.”

“You know that’s not what I meant, punk.”

Steve could only stare.

“And I’ve been watching him lately. I don’t think he’s altogether indifferent to me.”

Steve’s eyes darted around as he took that in. “Really?”

“Oh, he’s been keeping it under wraps, but I’ve caught him looking at me a few times and I don’t think that was jealousy on his face. It definitely wasn’t friendship.”

Steve looked overwhelmed. “You’ve fallen in love with Loki too?”

“What, like it’s hard?”

“And you think he’s… with you…?”

“I could be wrong. And if I am wrong, well.” Bucky poked Steve’s well-muscled chest. “I think there’s enough of you to go around. I always expected one day I’d have to share you. But as it turns out, maybe I won’t be the only one sharing.”

But Bucky felt certain he wasn’t wrong. The three of them just felt right, now that Bucky thought of it. They fit.

Steve turned away and walked a few paces, staring out over the waves. Bucky let him take a minute.

Steve turned back to him, his face full of conflict. “Bucky, you’re not doing this just for me? Because if you are——”

“I’m doing this for all three of us, punk. Because I love him. I love you both. I wouldn’t drag him into this if I thought we weren’t both going to do right by him.”

Steve stepped closer, putting his hands on Bucky’s shoulders, but letting Bucky be the one to press their lips together. Ever since their reunion he had let Bucky take most of the initiative.

When the kiss was done, Steve licked his lips. “So what do we do now?”
“We go to him and ask him. And I meant it: if he only wants you, well, I’m tired of seeing you both moping around.”

“Bucky…."

“It’s all right, honest. C’mon.”

“Now?”

“You know a better time?”

When they returned to the house, Sam, Clint and Natasha were still watching some movie on the huge tv. “The Science Gang still in the lab?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah,” Clint said, not looking away from the screen. Bucky and Steve joined them, though neither of them was able to pay attention to the movie.

Eventually the movie ended and the others went to their respective bedrooms. Not long after, Bruce and Loki came through the living room, wishing the supersoldiers good night as they headed for their own rooms. Tony, it seemed, planned to spend the night in the lab again.

Once the doors were closed, Bucky rose and gave Steve’s hand a tug. Steve followed, nervous.

Bucky tapped on Loki’s door. It opened immediately, even though Loki was at his desk, looking at something on a Starkpad.

Magic was pretty neat.

Loki set the Starkpad down and turned his attention to them, surprised. His hair was tied back from his face and he was wearing jeans and a simple blue shirt with short sleeves. Even dressed that casually, he still looked every inch a prince.

Bucky closed the door behind them. “Uh. We want to talk to you for a minute.” Realizing that those words tended to ominous interpretations, he tried to smile reassuringly. Bad enough that Steve was about ready to jump out of his skin.

Loki looked from one of them to the other, wary despite Bucky’s attempt at a smile. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Steve said, too quickly. “Just… I’m not sure how to say this.”

A small line appeared between Loki’s brows, but he only stood up, gesturing elegantly. “Have a seat.”

They sat on the edge of the bed because there wasn’t anywhere else. Loki, meanwhile, turned his desk chair to face them and sat back down, folding his hands before him to wait courteously.

Bucky swallowed.

Steve looked between them, anxious. He wasn’t going to be much help.

Okay. Bucky had faced down Nazis, he’d survived decades of torment from Hydra, he could tell a handsome guy that he liked him.

“Loki. There’s. Um. There’s no reason for you two to be this unhappy.”
Loki grasped the implications at once—some of them, anyway. He went very still. Getting the lay of the land.

Not allowing his hopes to rise.

“I mean. You’ve both been mooning all over the place ever since I got here, and I know Steve will never leave me but. Well. Anyone can see you two are still in love with each other.”

Loki looked more apprehensive than hopeful at this. Bucky wanted to soothe him, to hold him and make him feel like it was all right. Maybe in a minute or two he would get the chance to. He wanted to see that wary expression change to relief and joy.

Bucky fortified himself with a deep breath. “The thing is, a couple of weeks ago, I realized.”

Loki warily met Bucky’s gaze again after a panicked peek at Steve.

Why were both of the men Bucky loved such noble saps?

Bucky cleared his throat and went on.

“I’ve thought it over and it would be okay with me. It would, I wouldn’t say it if it weren’t. I want you two to be happy. You deserve it. But also, um.”

He stopped. Took a breath. Settled on a slightly less daunting way of putting it.

“We’ve realized—that we’re both in love with you. So the question is, do you… can you….”

Now Loki really looked shocked. His green eyes were enormous, the right eyebrow quirking up. His lips barely moved when he spoke. “Just what are you suggesting?”

Now that it was out there, Bucky was able to speak more easily. The next words came out in a torrent. “I’m suggesting that Steve and I were together back when the world told us we shouldn’t be. Why should we listen when that same world tells us only one to a customer? I’m suggesting that the three of us could be together. If you want us both.”

Loki looked at Steve, obviously still not believing what he was hearing. He was clearly still trying not to get his hopes up. Bucky wanted Loki full of hope. Anticipation of how that expression was going to change quickened his pulse.

Steve visibly swallowed. “I’m in love with both of you. I never would have thought of this. But Bucky says he thinks you….” He looked at the floor, face red.

Loki stood up. He walked in a small circle in the open space between the desk and the window. “Have you two… really thought about this?”

“I haven’t thought about anything else for the past two weeks,” Bucky said.

“I never dared to think of this,” Steve said. “And I didn’t realize that Bucky… felt this way. But if you….” He made a helpless gesture. “Don’t do this just for me, okay. Like we used to say, when we were together. Only agree if this is what you want.”

Loki gave him a penetrating look, expression still guarded. “Is it what you want?”

“Only if—“

“Steve.”
“Yes.”

Bucky had a sudden thought. “Oh, hell. Please don’t tell me I just suggested the one thing Asgardians think is horribly depraved.”

Loki managed a little laugh at that. “Not at all. It isn’t common, but it’s hardly unheard of.” He met Bucky’s eyes. “You guessed? That I was harboring feelings for you?”

Bucky felt his face and blood warm pleasantly as their eyes held. “I wasn’t sure, but I thought so. But if you don’t want both of us, it isn’t a package deal.”

Loki looked at Steve again. Steve’s face was very flushed, but he was calm and certain now that saying the words was behind them. He gave Loki a steady nod.

Loki licked his lips. “I do want both of you,” he said in a low voice. He met Bucky’s gaze again. “You were right. I’m in love with both of you.”

Bucky’s chest felt very tight. “Well, then.” He looked down, suddenly uncertain. But he knew that at this moment, of the three of them, he was the one who needed to act.

He stood up. He walked over to Loki. Steve slowly followed him, stopping a few feet away.

Loki stood up as well, holding his breath. Still not really believing this was happening.

Bucky let himself drown in those wide green eyes for a moment. “Loki,” he said at last, because that would say everything.

Loki swallowed. Otherwise he was still as a statue.

Bucky had to go a little bit on tiptoe to kiss Loki, who was about four inches taller than him.

If any doubts still lingered, the kiss banished them. Loki’s mouth opened to him so willingly, so softly. It was true, Loki had gone and fallen for Bucky, and they were all three going to love each other and create a law of increasing returns effect together and they would all be happy after everything they had each been through.

When the kiss ended, there was the look Bucky had wanted to see on Loki’s face, eyes wide with delighted amazement.

Bucky glanced over at Steve, held out a hand, the other still on Loki’s shoulder. Steve took it and Bucky guided him closer, looking back to Loki.

Both men looked at Bucky, still a little uncertain. He smiled at them both, gave a slight nod.

They looked at each other again. Anyone could see they were still besotted with each other. Steve carded the hand Bucky wasn’t holding into Loki’s inky hair and the two of them melted into each other.

Steve and Loki kissing might be the most beautiful thing Bucky had ever seen.

Then Steve kissed Bucky, both of them still holding onto Loki, and it was confirmation and thanks and the beginning of a new and wonderful chapter. Bucky could feel Steve’s joy in his touch and knew he’d done the right thing for all of them.

Loki was watching them with glowing eyes. Bucky tugged him a little closer so all three were in an embrace.
It was different, holding two men like this. Somehow it was cozy and exciting at the same time.

Bucky wasn’t really sure how to proceed, so he decided to just follow his instincts. And his instincts told him to lean over to nuzzle Loki’s long, elegant neck. Loki arched his back like a cat, and Steve made a tiny little moan and swayed down to apply his mouth to the other side of Loki’s neck. At the double touch, Loki’s muscles released their tension and he melted against both of them, at last believing that this was really happening.

Loki had been resting his hands very lightly on their shoulders, ready to withdraw at an instant’s notice if this went wrong. Now those arms, slim and preternaturally strong, were embracing them both, warm around them.

This was perfect. All three of them together, giving each other pleasure, all intent on the same thing.

How had they been such idiots for all these months? Bucky was going to make up every minute of sadness they’d had to both of them.

Now they were all embracing, taking turns kissing each other, Steve and Bucky both running their fingers through Loki’s long silky hair, but Loki’s hands were just waiting on their backs, not doing more than gently rubbing in tiny circles.

Clearly Bucky was going to have to continue to take the lead for now.

He let go of Loki’s hair so that he could pull Steve’s shirt over his head. Loki reached to help him reveal that absurd perfect set of muscles. Steve looked just a little embarrassed at being shirtless in front of both of them, but he also had that tiny smile he got when he knew people were admiring his supersoldier physique. He was still so excited about his shiny new body, so gratified that people enjoyed looking at it after all those years of girls looking right through him.

Bucky and Loki both ran appreciative hands over Steve’s nice solid chest for a moment. Then, so that Steve wouldn’t stay embarrassed, he tugged his own shirt out of the waistband of his jeans. The other two immediately took over, pulling his shirt off gently, and then it was Bucky who had two pairs of hands caressing him.

Being fondled by two gorgeous men at the same time was dizzying. Bucky just closed his eyes and gave himself up to it, letting them both stroke and kiss him. He found that even with his eyes closed, he could tell which of them was kissing him. Steve kissed harder, Loki was more leisurely and teasing, but he felt yearning and affection from both their kisses.

This was going to be amazing. Not just in the bedroom. In everything. Together they would be so much more than they had been in pairs.

Bucky reached for Loki’s shirt. Loki tended to keep himself covered up. He even wore a T-shirt when he swam a lot of the time. Probably he was embarrassed that he wasn’t a giant mass of bulging muscles like his brother. What baloney; Loki’s body was lovely, all lean muscle and creamy skin. Bucky set out to make Loki feel appreciated, running an approving gaze and then approving hands over his slim elegant chest and shoulders. Steve did the same, looking so happy as he reclaimed his former lover, and they were rewarded with Loki subtly undulating against their touches.

Bucky then pulled them both close, letting them feel his arousal. They were both hard too, and Bucky wasn’t sure exactly where this was going but it was going to be incredible.

Bucky figured that of the three of them he was the least uncomfortable with showing himself. Loki had become convinced that all men should look like Thor or Steve and Steve hadn’t entirely gotten
over growing up as a scrawny runt. So Bucky decided that he should be the first one naked. He unzipped his jeans and bent to pull them down, taking his briefs with them.

Loki’s gaze took him in, yearning, and he and Steve both shucked their own trousers even as the overhead light switched off and the bedside lamp switched on. The dimmer light made the room feel more intimate, almost secretive.

Loki took both of them by the hand, taking in their nakedness, and backed towards the bed. The sheets pulled back for them without being touched.

“Magic is pretty useful,” Bucky remarked with a grin.

“We’ll never have to stop to fetch lube again,” Steve joked, and was rewarded with an impish smile from Loki.

Loki stretched out on his back and Steve and Bucky arranged themselves, after a little fumbling, on either side of him. Loki wouldn’t always be the one in the middle, Bucky planned for them to do every possible configuration over time, but for this first time, it was going to be him and Steve bringing Loki into their shared world. So they both lavished Loki with kisses and caressed while Loki laid back luxuriating, his raven hair spread over the pillow and his pale slender body quiescent under them, even as he kept one hand on each of them, delicately stroking their skin.

Bucky found that making love to both of them at once was simpler than he’d expected. He would apply his mouth to Loki’s chest or neck while his hand stroked over Steve’s round little butt or his huge hard dick. Or he would capture Steve’s mouth with his own while squeezing Loki’s even more absurd dick. Sure, Loki was a runt for his species, but one part of him apparently hadn’t gotten the memo.

Steve followed suit, making sure he was always touching both of them one way or another. Loki looked dazed, almost drunk on the sensations. Now that they’d gotten started, Steve was moving with more certainty, touching Loki in ways he must have learned when the two of them were together. Steve had already learned what Loki liked and Bucky followed what he did to Loki in between exploring for himself.

The breaths of all three of them were coming fast now, all of them flushed and very hard. Bucky sat back on his heels, trying to figure out how to proceed. It was time for more. Even if he wasn’t sure what more.

Steve looked from one of them to the other, questioning. Loki lit up the room again with that radiant smile, as incandescent as Steve’s in a different way. The sun and the moon, both in Bucky’s arms.

Still smiling widely, Loki moved onto his hands and knees. “I want you both in me,” he breathed.

Bucky thought he was going to have heart failure. Loki looked so lewdly alluring like that, just waiting for them to have their way with him.

Bucky and Steve looked at each other. He knew Steve’s expression; in the old days, it had meant the onset of an asthma attack. Bucky wasn’t sure how to ask Steve which way he wanted to have Loki, but Bucky was slightly closer to Loki’s head and Steve just moved behind Loki and started loosening him. Loki must have done his lubricating spell, because he just closed his eyes and moved back against Steve’s fingers, groaning contentedly.

“Steve. Darling. Don’t keep me waiting, please.”

Steve didn’t. He placed his hands on Loki’s narrow hips and moved in, both of them moaning.
“I missed this so much,” Loki whispered. “Having you fill me up.”

“Me too,” Steve whispered back as he carefully slid all the way in.

Bucky just watched them melding together for a minute. They were so beautiful together. They never should have been apart. What idiots they all had been, taking so long to buy a clue.

Loki opened his eyes and looked at Bucky with lascivious invitation. Bucky knee-walked into position, staying just a few inches out of reach until the welcome was repeated in Loki’s expression; he wasn’t going to be too pushy this first time, when they were still finding out about each other. But Loki looked up at him with lips parted in a breathless smile, so Bucky moved closer and let Loki take him into his mouth.

Oh. Oh god.

Literally.

Steve and Bucky had never discussed the details of what Steve and Loki had done together, but Bucky had made a few conjectures. It had been clear that Steve had learned a lot from Loki. Loki was over a thousand years old, he must have so much experience and skill, and Bucky had been getting the benefit of all Steve had learned from him.

Now Bucky could experience what Loki had taught at first hand. Bucky couldn’t have said exactly how Loki was doing this differently, but somehow Loki just knew what to do to drive Bucky completely out of his mind.

Steve leaned forward over Loki and Bucky leaned to meet him and they snatched a hurried sloppy kiss, both of them caressing Loki with their hands so he would know he wasn’t just a toy for them, that this was all of them together. All three of them, lavishing pleasure on each other. Pleasure, and affection.

Love.

The three of them would form a bond as strong as the ones each pair of them had formed separately. It was going to be beautiful.

The thought finished Bucky off. Bucky was ready to move back but Loki sucked harder, swallowed easily, something Steve and Bucky were still learning to do.

Steve stared at Bucky, watching his climax, and the sight seemed to drive him over the edge. And only seconds later, Loki spilled over Steve’s large strong hand, convulsing as Bucky slipped free of his mouth.

They all collapsed for a while, Loki in the middle, all pleasantly exhausted. It was a queen size bed, intended for two at most, but the crowding was actually kind of nice. They were all pressed close together, long legs tangled, arms around each other.

“I love you both so much,” Loki said eventually.

“Me too,” Steve whispered. He lifted his head. “Thank you—both of you. I’ve felt so selfish, but now….”

“‘This is right,” Bucky said. “Now I feel dumb for taking this long to figure it out. I think this is how we were meant to be.”
Loki just looked at the two of them with wonder and bliss.

After a bit more rest, Steve managed to stammer a suggestion, and so for the next round Steve laid on his back, Loki between his legs and Bucky inside Loki, Bucky’s movements driving Loki deeper into Steve, all of them delirious in short order.

The best night’s sleep any of them had had in years followed.

Shortly after dawn, Loki reluctantly stirred. “I hate to get up, but you two have made me ravenous.”

“Me too,” Steve admitted.

“You’re always ravenous,” Bucky told him, sitting up with a happy groan. Banging a supersoldier and a Norse god at once was strenuous.

“Yeah.”

They took turns washing up in Loki’s bathroom. They were almost dressed when Steve froze with one leg in his trousers. “Aw, jeez.”

“What?”

“We’re going to have to tell the others.”

Loki, combing his hair, also went still for a few seconds. “Oh.”

Bucky looked from one of his lovers to the other. “You don’t think they’ll be against us?”

Steve considered. “No. But there’s no way they won’t kid us this time.”

Loki’s “god of mischief” smile spread over his pretty face. “True. But we can have a bit of fun with them first.”

Bucky looked at him, raising his eyebrows. “What do you have in mind?”
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

The trio tell their shield-brothers about their new relationship.

The only thing on Sam’s mind over breakfast that morning was surprise that Tony had joined them. Tony had scarcely emerged from the lab in over two weeks, working on something in the throes of a genuine manic episode. The others were helping Sam monitor him in case it went so far that intervention was necessary, but so far it seemed Tony was channeling it constructively. Jarvis had confirmed that his current designs made sense, so that was a good sign. Now they just had to wait for Tony to finally unveil whatever he was cooking up.

But this morning Tony shuffled into the common room with a severe case of bedhead. Or, more likely, laboratory-floor-head.

“You okay?” Sam asked as Tony glumly fell into one of the chairs.

Looking at the tabletop, Tony shrugged. “I woke up with thoughts in my head.”

Sam nodded. They all had those days when painful memories were just lying in wait the minute they woke up.

“I hate it when that happens.” Clint set the heaping platter of eggs he’d just scrambled in front of Tony. “Food usually helps. And caffeine. And sugar.”

Tony nodded, serving himself and passing the platter. Clint had also made bacon and toast and they all piled their plates. Now everyone except for Loki and the supersoldiers was around the table, except for Pepper who was in New York.

“I just had Jarvis send Jane a message, asking her to come here as soon as possible,” Tony said, pouring himself coffee before passing the pot to Natasha.

Natasha took it. “Oh?”

“When she gets here, I’ll unveil Project Backgammon. We’re gonna need her help with it.”

“Why’d you name it that?” Clint asked.

“It doesn’t mean anything. I saw a guy with a backgammon board right before I decided to do this.”

“I’m looking forward to the big reveal,” Bruce said with his gentle smile. “Does this mean you’re finished with the design?”

“Finished it around midnight. Conked out right on the floor.”

Just then the door to Loki’s bedroom opened and the prince emerged. Sam thought absently that Loki looked a little nervous, but his attention was still on Tony. If something was wrong, Loki would tell—
Another form appeared in Loki’s doorway. Every head around the table snapped up.

Steve was staring fixedly at the floor, his face as red as Thor’s cape. After a couple of seconds he walked slowly towards the table.

Oh, hell.

The others stared. On every face, Sam saw worry and tension. All of them immediately saw the implications, saw the troubles to come. Tony’s shadowed eyes were taking the two in like they were puzzling scientific data, trying to figure out what would happen, what he could do.

Was there anything they could do? To stop this from boiling over? Sam couldn’t think of anything.

Maybe they should have realized this would happen sooner or later. It had been so obvious that Steve and Loki were still in love despite Steve’s bond with Bucky. Maybe they should even have chaperoned them both, protected them from themselves. And now, well, now Steve was going to feel guilty, and so was Loki for that matter, and Bucky would be hurt, and knowing him would probably try to be noble, and the bond of friendship that had formed among the entire team would be endangered and there would be fights and tears and attempts at reconciliation and who knew how they’d come through it all and—

A third person emerged from Loki’s bedroom.

Bucky Barnes, looking smug as only a man who has spent the night with two of the handsomest men in the Nine Realms can look.

Steve reached his usual chair and just stood beside it, still beet-red and hardly breathing. Loki, on the other hand, had ceased to pretend to be nervous and was wearing his trademark mischievous smile.

The moment of shocked silence as everyone recalibrated yet again stretched out for what felt like a very long time.

It was Natasha who broke it with a slow clap.

That set them all off. The three took their seats amid much laughter and congratulatory back-slaps and incoherent exclamations of surprise.

“Seriously? Seriously?” Tony was saying, already hugely entertained, looking more awake now. Whatever thoughts had haunted his waking had been banished.

“Seriously,” Bucky replied, looking very satisfied with himself. And why shouldn’t he.

Okay. This could work. Sam would do some research on polyamory in case they needed help. But judging from their happy expressions, they were doing fine on their own.

Tony grinned and put away his bacon and eggs with fresh appetite. No one said anything else, just ate and grinned and occasionally shook their heads.

The trio looked indecently happy.

“I can’t believe this,” Tony said eventually.

“What?” Natasha smirked at him.

“Here I am, an internationally notorious playboy, and I’m in a monogamous, committed relationship with one woman. Meanwhile, Mr. Apple Pie there is having gay orgies!”
Mr. Apple Pie closed his eyes, unable to help chuckling despite his embarrassment. His orgy partners just laughed as they continued to stuff themselves.

“Gay interspecies orgies!” Tony went on.

Steve opened his eyes and gave Tony a mock-withering look. “Tony, am I going to have to have my boyfriends beat you up?”

“No that would be a cage match worth seeing! How about it? After breakfast, let’s all try sparring, Iron Man against Cap’s harem. Cap optional.”

Loki quirked an eyebrow at his lovers. “I’m in.”

“You’re just jealous.” Steve smiled at his plate as he said it.

“If only for the bragging rights. This beats those Christmas twins by a mile.”

“What Christmas twins—wait, I don’t want to know.”

“I’m not sure three people count as an orgy.” Bruce gave them an amused little smile. “Assuming you’re stopping at three?”

“Oh, I’ve decided to turn the entire team into my personal harem,” Loki said, spreading apricot jam on some toast. “I’m taking you all to my chambers in Asgard’s palace tomorrow.”

“What about me?” Natasha asked.

“You’ll be the guard who prevents other men from getting at them.”

Natasha nodded seriously as she finished her coffee.

For a moment, the teasing left Tony’s expression and he was scrutinizing his shield-brothers intently. It only lasted a few seconds, Sam would have missed it if he’d blinked just then, but he was glad he’d caught it. However much Tony teased his friends, he cared about them. Cared whether they were happy or not.

Looking over three radiant faces, Sam thought they were.

Perhaps Loki should have protested more when Steve and Bucky approached him, but when the two men he was in love with asked for entry to his bed all he could do was agree and damn the consequences. Back when Steve had been courting him he had resisted as hard as he could and it had come to nothing. Now he could scarcely try. The instant he believed Bucky actually wanted him he was powerless to resist.

He would seize this time and love them both and make them as happy as they were capable of being. He would make their short mortal lives worthwhile. Fill them with as much joy as he could stuff in. And yes, seize every bit of happiness he could along the way.

And spend the next four millennia remembering this time, cherishing it.

Loki resolutely shoved his lovers’ short lifespans out of his mind. For now, he had them. He would enjoy them to the fullest. Give them as much joy as possible.

He and his lovers spent the morning battling Iron Man, first in the gym, later on the beach, while the
others watched them and cheered them on. Tony gave them a good fight, but of course they were victorious. Tony’s newest suits had been designed to challenge Asgardian weapons. Midgard was still behind, of course, but it was catching up—or at least, the Avengers were.

After lunch—frozen pizzas—Clint encountered Loki in the common room with an armful of clothes. “What’s up?” Clint asked.

“I’m moving to a different room,” Loki explained, opening the door to his new room, one of the many that had stood empty for a long time, with magic.

“Why—” Clint looked into the new room Loki had chosen and spied the king-sized bed. “Oh.” He gave Loki a play-punch on the arm.

Loki grinned and went into the room with his clothes.

Jane sent a message that she couldn’t get away from her current work just yet, but in a few days she would come to spend the weekend on Carbonell Cay. Then Tony would reveal his project to them all, and whatever it was, Loki would help him to bring it into reality. Loki knew he was fortunate to be allowed to aid a mind like Tony’s.

The other Avengers spent the day going about their usual business and grinning at Loki and his new lovers. Loki himself could not stop grinning. He had never in his life been more contented.

Midgard had been so good to Loki, and after what he did to it. He would never stop protecting and aiding it, so long as he drew breath. And he would teach his sons and daughters, his nieces and nephews, to do the same. Asgard would be Midgard’s ally and friend for millennia to come.

After dinner (Bruce cooked steaks and potatoes, Loki taking his turn as sous chef), Loki and his new lovers went to his new room amid grins from their shield-brothers.

No sooner was the door shut behind them than they were in each other’s arms, all three of them together, taking turns kissing each other while they all caressed.

They both wanted Loki. They had each other and they wanted him too. He hadn’t quite believed it at first, but as soon as Bucky had kissed him the night before all doubt had vanished. Desire and affection was in his every touch.

Loki claimed another kiss from Bucky. It was clear he and Steve had learned to kiss from each other, they had the same style, but Bucky’s kisses were more confident.

When that kiss ended, Loki found that Steve was watching them, eyes full of wonder.

“It’s amazing, seeing the two of you together,” he breathed.

Loki smiled. He felt the same, now that there was no more need for jealousy.

“What else do you want to see us do?” Loki asked, voice low and suggestive.

Steve’s sky-blue eyes widened as he grasped what was being offered. He shot an inquiring look to Bucky, who grinned back.

“Yeah, punk. What do you want to watch us do?”

Steve looked like all his Christmases and birthdays had come at once. But when he parted his lips no words came out.
Loki looked at Bucky. All he saw on Bucky’s handsome face was anticipation. Loki brushed his hair back from his face tenderly before speaking.

“I haven’t learned much about your… tastes, yet.” If there was anything his new lover didn’t want to do, he wanted to find out about it early on.

Bucky’s grin widened a little. “I want to do everything with you. I want the three of us to try every possible arrangement.”

Steve gave a little moan.

Loki’s answering grin was so wide it was a few seconds before he could give Bucky the long deep kiss he deserved for that, Bucky’s stubbly cheeks scraping gently against his palms. Then the pair of them reached to pull Steve close again, took turns kissing him.

“No, now where were we?” Loki asked. “Oh, yes. Steve. What is it you want to watch us do?”

Steve swallowed. Stepped back.

“Undress each other,” he requested, voice low and hoarse.

Loki gave Steve a flirtatious look, then started unfastening the buttons of Bucky’s shirt.

Bucky pulled Loki’s shirt off quickly, but Loki’s slow pace gave him the idea and he started to follow suit, putting on a show for Steve. Pulling each other’s clothes off slowly, teasingly. Stopping every few seconds to kiss and caress newly revealed skin.

Bucky’s metal hand was cool and gentle on Loki’s skin. It touched just as deftly as his flesh one. Already Loki was almost accustomed to the new sensation. It was a part of this new thing the three of them were building.

Bucky had a lot of scars decorating his well-muscled physique. Like Steve, he was enhanced, stronger and more robust than other humans, but his healing was slower. The one where he had lost his arm was the worst, and Loki caressed it gently, as if he could heal it at this late date.

Bucky’s appreciation of Loki’s lean form was evident in his every touch. Loki would have thought he would still be doubting and second-guessing if Bucky really wanted him, if Bucky wasn’t just doing this to please Steve and keep Steve with him, but touches, kisses, looks like this could not be feigned.

Loki was sharing the bed of two of Midgard’s greatest, and handsomest, warriors. And they wanted him there.

Once he and Bucky were both naked, they looked at Steve, who was staring transfixed. “You too, punk.”

Steve didn’t move for a few seconds. Then he shook himself. “Jerk.” Then hastily pulled off all of his clothes while his lovers watched.

Loki looked from one of them to the other. The contrast between Steve’s unmarred perfection and Bucky’s battle scars was striking, as if between them they embodied everything the universe had to offer.

Steve slowly backed up and sat on the bed, back against the headboard, his arousal evident. Licked his lips.
“Kiss each other,” he said softly.

His lovers took the suggestion happily.

“Put your hands on each other,” Steve requested while their lips were still locked together. Loki and Bucky obliged, their hands roaming over each other’s backs and buttocks. After a minute of that they shifted their stance, leaving enough room in between them that they could touch each other’s chests, tease each other’s nipples. And then they let their hands descend to each other’s erections, both of them eager and urgent.

“How about you, eh?” Loki prompted, keeping his voice soft.

Steve drew a breath, trying to overcome his usual embarrassment about talking about such things. “I want you to kneel.”

Loki let his eyes glint at him, teasing. “You like having a prince on his knees before you, don’t you?”

Steve smiled, turning pink. “It’s an American thing.”

They both laughed, and Loki dropped to his knees. In a few seconds, any notion either human might have had that the position put them in control was gone. Bucky’s eyes lost their focus and his knees almost buckled as Loki overloaded him with sensation. Bucky’s fingers, both flesh and metal, were shaking as they twined in Loki’s hair. Loki had to support him with a firm grip on his hips while he continued to make Bucky helpless with pleasure.

After swallowing, Loki caught Bucky as he collapsed and laid him gasping on the bed.

“Don’t challenge him again, punk,” Bucky panted.

Steve’s eyes were enormous, though not with alarm. “Okay.”

“I was kidding. Challenge him every chance you get.”

Steve’s boyish face was so cute when he got mischievous. “All right, then.” His eyes went to Loki. “Think you can make him come like that again?”

Loki arched an eyebrow.

“Then do it. I want to see you inside him.”

Still trying to catch his breath, Bucky looked at Loki, full of anticipation, and parted his legs.

Loki had already been intensely aroused. The sight of Bucky waiting for him like that made it downright painful.

“Come on,” Bucky said softly, hardening again under Loki’s gaze. “Give it to me.”

Loki surged forward to kiss him, molding their bodies together. Feeling their skin all over each other. Bucky’s mismatched hands grasping his ass.

Loki hadn’t forgotten that receiving was the second choice for both of his lovers. That Steve had inadvertently revealed that they took turns. He prepared Bucky carefully, coaxing his muscles to relax with pleasure, slicking him thoroughly. And Bucky just laid back and let him, moaning happily, luxuriating.
How could Loki ever settle for less again? No man, or men, could ever compare. Nowhere in the Nine Realms.

“I’m ready,” Bucky gasped, hands fisting in the sheets. He loosened his grip quickly when his metal hand tore a small hole. “Sorry.”

Loki grinned. “Forget it.” And positioned himself, slowly pressed into him.

Holding still so Bucky’s muscles could adjust, Loki looked at Steve. Steve was entranced, drinking in the sight of them.

“Touch yourself while we couple,” Loki suggested, and Steve’s hand flew to his erection to comply.

Loki turned his gaze back to Bucky’s face as he began to move, to keep close watch on Bucky’s responses, but every few thrusts his eyes were drawn back to Steve, who was riveted, his hand fiercely working his erection.

Loki felt dizzy with the abundance of gifts the universe was currently lavishing upon him. They were both so beautiful. So passionate. So sweet.

They were his. Every bit as much as they were each other’s.

Every bit as much as he was theirs.
Steve had never expected to be this happy. And it wasn’t even Bucky being generous. Early on, Bucky had told him to go back to Loki if that was what he really wanted. But losing Bucky was like losing half of himself. He couldn’t.

But now it turned out that the two men he loved also loved each other, and what they were all becoming to each other, each to each, was amazing.

There was no doubt that Steve Rogers was the luckiest man in the Nine Realms.

Not only were his lovers handsome (and everything else a man could want), they were also creative. Every night they went into Loki’s new room with its huge bed and came up with new things to do. They took showers together. They found different ways of all joining at once, and took turns with each of them in each position.

Loki, unsurprisingly, was the most creative. After a few days, he said, “I thought of something today, if you two are willing to try it.”

Steve smiled. “Let’s hear it.”

“Joining three men at once requires imagination in positioning. I thought—well. Tonight I want one of you to fuck me and one of you to suck me.”

Steve was too embarrassed to say anything. Since being with two men at once required at least some discussion, he was going to have to get over that. For now, Bucky just grinned. “Come to think of it, I haven’t gotten to suck you yet.”

“Then let us begin, and when we are ready to join I shall show you the position I wish to try.”

They began to kiss and caress, slowly undressing each other. It was a little dizzying to move from one lover to the other, to be kissed by one as the other eased his shirt off. To have his mouth on one, his hands on the other.

It was amazing how easily the three of them fell into rhythm together. Like dancing. Could three people dance together? Maybe they could invent their own version of the waltz.

He had missed Bucky so terribly. Then he had missed Loki. And now he had them both, and they had fitted to each other smoothly and perfectly, just as they both had to him.

He found himself lying back while they both worked on him, Bucky’s blunt honest touches blending with Loki’s more artful ones. They had found that they seamlessly flowed from one of them being the center of attention to another, very naturally. As after a few minutes Steve and Bucky found
themselves both tending to Loki, hardening his prick, slicking and loosening his opening, while Loki just luxuriated and let them.


Steve did—Loki had put a folded blanket on the chair to make it comfortable—and Loki leaned over him, kissing him and giving his dick one more hard squeeze before turning around and impaling himself on him.

“Oh,” said both supersoldiers as they grasped his idea. Grinning, Loki leaned back against Steve’s chest, letting Steve embrace him from behind as Bucky got down on his knees in front of them.

The way Loki arched his back as Bucky engulfed him enticed Steve even further.

Steve kept his first few thrusts shallow so they could find their rhythm, but soon they were all moving together perfectly.

Then Bucky made a muffled sound.

Steve halted. Loki let his head fall back onto Steve’s shoulder and looked at him, eyes dancing.

“I’m squeezing his prick with magic.”

Steve’s eyes widened. Bucky made a sound that did not sound like a complaint.

“Wow,” Steve choked, and resumed his earlier motion. Loki undulated between them, his slim body molding to their more muscled ones effortlessly. Gradually their pace increased, until after minutes of blissful delirium Loki and Steve both cried out and Bucky shuddered.

Until he’d gotten Bucky back, Steve hadn’t realized how much skill Loki must have to use to make them all finish together nearly every time.

They stayed in position, panting, for a long minute before moving to lie on the bed tangled in a puppy pile.

“You are both so wonderful,” Loki murmured after a while.

“You’re not so bad yourself.” That was Bucky. “He never stopped thinking about you, you know.”

“He never stopped thinking about you, either. And felt guilty for it the whole year he and I were together.”

“Of course he did. Dumbass.”

“I’m right here, in case you’ve forgotten.” Steve wasn’t actually annoyed, but as their boyfriend it was his duty to mess with them a little.

“Hardly. I am still stretched from your super prick inside me.”

Steve felt his face warming in the dim room and smiled at the ceiling. “It’s true. It felt wrong then but from the day I fell for Loki, you were both in my mind every minute.” His voice lowered a little as he added, “Both in my heart.”

"And it turned out to be completely right."

Loki stretched, contented. They idly caressed each other until their energy returned and they all got
into the shower together, rubbing against each other slick with soap under the steaming hot water, each of them climaxing again and again in a frenzy with no end and no beginning. Steve found himself thinking of paintings he had seen of maenads and resolved to draw the three of them like that.

He had reserved a sketchbook for drawings only Bucky and Loki would ever see.

When at long last they were sated, they stayed in the shower a bit longer to wash, helping each other with gentleness. They dried off with the wonderful soft thick towels Tony provided, so much nicer than the thin worn ones he’d had to use as a child. Then they went to bed, all still naked, Steve in the middle this time with both his lovers' heads pillowed on his chest—they alternated being in the center, with no particular pattern.

Steve loved that his boyfriends loved each other.

On Saturday morning, the team sat about waiting for Jane to arrive so they could finally find out what Tony had been cooking up in the lab. Tony himself looked like it was Christmas morning. He was excited like a kid about getting to show it to them.

“Hey, Cap,” he said apropos of nothing, “has it occurred to you that one of your boyfriends is a cyborg and the other is an alien?”

“I guess that’s what happens when you wake up in the future,” Steve replied, trying not to laugh.

A plane appeared on the horizon and Tony perked up. “De plane! De plane!”

“You’re not that short, Tony,” Clint said.

Steve glanced around at them all. Bruce was the only other one who seemed to get whatever the joke was. Steve decided to let it pass. His shield-brothers were from three different nations and numerous generations. None of them understood every reference.

Not only Jane, but also Pepper disembarked. Tony practically danced over to his girlfriend to greet her with a kiss. She took in his happy expression and glowed back at him (but not in an on fire kind of way).

“So what’s Project Backgammon?” Jane asked, as usual more interested in science than in social niceties.

Tony smiled at her. “I couldn’t have designed it without your work, Dr. Foster. Or without what we’ve learned from Loki.”

She dimpled at that. “Well?”

“It’s top secret. Only the Avengers, you, and Pepper can know about it before it’s finished.”

“Sure, okay. So what is it?”

“I’ll tell you when the plane’s left.”

That took a little while. The plane held a few crates of materials Tony needed for Project Backgammon that had to be unloaded. But half an hour later the plane was gone and Tony was ready.
“C’mon. I’ll show you on the patio.”

They all ranged themselves around it so that Jarvis could project his holograms.

Steve wasn’t sure what it was he was seeing. It looked just a little bit like….

Jane caught her breath, dark brown eyes wide.

“An Einstein-Rosen bridge,” she whispered.

Steve looked quickly to Tony to see if he’d understood right.

Tony’s grin was blinding.

“A Bifrost for Midgard,” Loki said softly. He walked into the hologram, gesturing to examine bits of it, enraptured.

“Can we build this? Are we ready?” Jane asked. She was actually quivering.

“We can. We are.”

Bruce joined Loki in the hologram, calling up displays that Steve didn’t understand and scrutinizing them, clearly fascinated.

Jane stood frozen for another moment, then rushed in to join them in plunging into their secret magitech data.

Loki examined every bit of it. Then went to Tony, put his hands on Tony’s shoulders. Spoke to him very solemnly.

“Tony. You have done it.”

Tony smiled again, more peaceful now.

“Is the design right?” Jane asked. “I mean, you would know, right?”

“The design is right. It will work. But allow me to suggest…” Loki went in again, reached for one of the arcane displays, and started altering things.

The scientists watched what he was doing intently. After a couple of minutes, Tony nodded. “I get it.”

“What?” Natasha asked.

Bruce and Jane suddenly nodded as well, catching on to whatever it was.

Loki explained, “When my mother had the Bifrost rebuilt, she had Asgard’s sorceresses alter it so that no one can ever again do what I did to Jotunheim.”

“Notice that Odin didn’t do anything to prevent that from happening,” Clint said, sour.

“All hail Queen Frigga,” Tony said. “Any more constructive criticism?”

Loki spent another minute examining the mysterious displays before saying, “No. You got it right.” He looked at Steve and Bucky. “I don’t know how to tell you how proud of Tony you should be. Asgard’s Bifrost was designed by one of the greatest sorceresses in our history, when she was two
thousand years old and had the benefit of many other sorcerers to learn from.”

“Hey, I did this by standing on the shoulders of giants. Well, one giant.”

Loki gave a little grin, and Steve remembered how reluctantly he had told them of his true species on his first day of service on Earth. And how much it had hurt him to show them his blue form for the first time, even though he knew humans did not regard frost giants as monsters. And now he assumed his other form willingly to be studied or used in combat, and could joke about it.

Steve put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder—Bucky who was there at his side as he should be—as he gazed at the holographic demonstration of Tony’s ambitious project. At the beginning of the future, where supersoldiers could date aliens and cyborgs.

Bucky finally spoke. “So… when you’ve built this… we’ll be able to use it to go to other planets?”

“Yes. Earth can take its place among the realms. We’ll learn from the other worlds, and trade with them, and travel to them….” Tony’s face was dreamy now, and Pepper came over to embrace him again.

“Where are you planning on doing this?” Bruce asked, speaking for the first time, not lifting his head from the streams of data he was taking in.

“Right here.”

Jane’s face was rapt with wonder. She really was beautiful. “When do we start?”

Tony grinned. “Right now.”

Chapter End Notes

Made a tiny change.
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

The three continue to love each other, the team dresses up for Halloween, and Bruce does science.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve’s lovers smirked a little as they watched him pull off his T-shirt, which like most of his shirts left very little to the imagination—but inspired the imagination considerably nonetheless.

“Those poor seams.” Bucky swatted Steve with his own shirt before dropping it on the floor.

Steve turned pink, but also looked pleased. It still both flattered and embarrassed him to be looked at that way.

Unbuttoning his own shirt, Loki smirked at them. “Tony suggested that for Christmas I give him workout clothes that actually fit. I asked him why on earth I would want to do such a thing.”

“Tony shouldn’t be teasing you about us,” Steve said, a little annoyed despite his amusement.

“He teases me all of the time.”

“What? What does he say?”

“Oh, he asked how you two compare to Svaðilfari. Sleipnir’s father,” Loki explained at their perplexity.

Steve was too horrified to reply. Bucky grinned. “What’d you say?”

“Usually when Tony asks me these things I just smile mysteriously. On this occasion, I told him you two had ruined me for all stallions.”

Steve tried to laugh and scowl at the same time. “That’s none of his business!”

Loki laughed. “That’s why he doesn’t tease you about us. He knows it would actually bother you. It merely amuses me.”

“Let me guess. He asked you if Steve’s serum had enhanced, ah, everything. Then he made a predictable joke about you being a giant.”

“Of course he did. I just tried to look smug. It wasn’t difficult. Now, does anyone have a request for tonight?”

“Um, yeah.” Steve was already turning pink. “Natasha was joking that we found a good way out of our love triangle. I thought we could maybe, um, make a literal triangle.”

“Let’s try it.”
Bucky reached to unfasten Steve’s trousers. Loki laid back on the bed. When they glanced at him, he said, “I would like to watch the two of you for a few minutes. Before we became a trio, I tried not to look at the two of you when you were close together.”

“We tried not to touch each other around you.”

“I know. It was kind of you. But now, I wish to watch you two love each other.”

Loki loved how sweetly his lovers kissed each other. Out of bed they constantly teased each other and played small pranks and flyted. It reminded him of the best times between himself and Thor, when for a time affection managed to push aside rivalry and incompatibility.

But in bed, they treated each other with great tenderness. Bucky admitted to them both that he still had the habit of handling Steve with care from his days of being small and sickly, even though Steve was no longer so breakable.

Loki loved watching Bucky’s hands, flesh and metal, careful on Steve’s tanned skin.

But when Loki at last rose and drew near, they grabbed him roughly as they knew he liked, pulling him close. He stood yielding as their hands roamed over him—having four hands on you at once was a dizzying sensation—and let them crush him against one of them after the other, tug his clothes off, shove him onto the huge bed. Loki had always loved to just let his lovers have their way with him, and it was clear that Steve and Bucky both relished it as much as Loki did.

Odd how they could both caress each of their lovers in such different ways, almost at the same time.

Positioning themselves for a three-man 69 took a couple of minutes of adjustments and required that each of them twist at the waistline, but once they found the right angles it worked. Loki found that the piling of sensations had him virtually in a trance, thinking only of Steve’s large prick in his mouth and Bucky’s mouth around his, and the sounds he could hear as Steve sucked Bucky’s prick. Now and then, Loki’s eyes would flutter open to take in the sight, both of his beloved soldiers intent on the pleasure the three of them were generating for each other, lewdly shameless and trusting, here where it was just the three of them and their love for one another.

How could Loki ever again settle for less?

He closed his eyes and did something artistic with his tongue. He was going to take good care of the gifts the Norns had given him. He felt Steve shudder against him, and then Bucky moaned, and then Bucky repeated the technique Loki had just used on Steve. Loki realized that Steve had passed the favor along.

This inspired the three of them to continue this cycle. The first few rounds it was Loki, sharing the benefit of his centuries of experience, demonstrating some technique on Steve, who passed it on to Bucky, who then passed it on to Loki. Loki showed them how to alternate gentle and hard suction, the different ways that a tongue could caress a prick, how to carefully scrape with teeth. What better way could there be to teach them advanced technique than this demonstration and hands-on practice?

After a few rounds Loki was so dizzy with the sensations he was feeling, as well as with the sounds his lovers were making, that his knowledge momentarily deserted him and all he could do was suck and feel. Which was all right, because Bucky had a few tricks up his own sleeve. Or maybe it was Steve; all Loki knew was that Bucky’s mouth was doing new and thrilling things to his cock, and when he was not too overwhelmed he repeated them on Steve.
Often Loki was able to manage the rhythm of their triple joining so that they all climaxed at the same time, or close to it. This time, there were too many factors he could not control at all and the novel sensation was too intense for him to even try. He was swept along with the current just like the other two.

Loki came first, his cry muffled by Steve’s prick filling his mouth. Bucky swallowed around him before gently letting his cock slip free.

Loki needed only a moment to recover sufficiently to redouble his efforts on Steve and heard Steve moan in response. Bucky had let his head fall to the mattress as Steve continued to minister to him, Bucky’s metal hand still resting on Loki’s hip.

Loki took his time with Steve now, rocking his head gently, sucking languorously. It was lovely how much of a miracle oral sex still was to Steve, the fantasy he had delayed fulfilling for so long. And it had always warmed Loki inside that Steve had had a first time to share with him.

None of them had ever engaged in *ménages à trois* with anyone else. For each of them, this was uncharted territory they explored together.

Steve threaded his fingers into Loki’s hair as he came.

Disengaging his mouth, Loki moved to lavish caresses and kisses on Bucky’s scarred powerful body as Steve continued to suck him. The two of them made love to Bucky together, Bucky’s face awed as he laid back and allowed them to lovingly bombard him with sensation.

“Oh, yes,” Bucky gasped as he got close. “Love you—both of you—so much…. ” Then he could say no more, only convulse beneath their touches.

“I am the luckiest man in the Nine Realms,” Loki murmured a few minutes later, when they had all stretched out to rest and cuddle together.

“Funny,” Bucky said, smiling without opening his eyes. “I was just thinking the same thing about myself.”

“I’ll let you two delude yourselves that you have my title,” Steve said.

Loki chuckled and cuddled closer to them. He was glad they considered themselves so, but he knew beyond any doubt that they were both wrong.

The Avengers returned to New York for Halloween so they could make a charity appearance in costume. Jane accompanied them; unable to think about anything except Project Backgammon, she had taken a leave of absence from her current work to devote herself to it entirely.

Steve had accepted Loki’s suggestion of dressing as the orange-shirted Aquaman, and Clint stuck to his resolve of being Green Arrow. Loki’s choice was also on the obvious side: Green Lantern. He was even able to use his illusion powers to give the appearance of projecting Lantern-created weapons. Bruce also took an obvious route: fellow green shapeshifter, J’onn J’onnz.

Tony had declared that he was a genius billionaire playboy philanthropist in real life and didn’t need to dress as another one, so Bucky got to be Batman while Tony was the Atom. Natasha held Wonder Woman in high regard but preferred to dress as Hawkgirl, a look which suited her well. Of course Sam had to be the original flying superhero, the trope namer: Superman.
“It’s a bird!” Tony said. “It’s a plane! No, wait, it is a bird. A falcon.”

“Ha, ha.”

Back at the Tower, Loki took the opportunity to do something he hadn’t had the chance for since the team had acquired its new members: order an Asgardian-style feast for them.

When he announced it, he and Steve met each other’s eyes for a moment and Steve took his cue. “I have an idea. Since today is a day for dressing up anyway, why don’t we put on the Asgardian clothes Loki gave us for Christmas last year? Seems appropriate.”

“I guess so, but Sam and I don’t have Asgardian clothes. I don’t think Jane does, either,” Bucky said.

Loki’s eyes sparkled. “Yes, you do.”

And indeed, the three of them found exquisite, elaborate suits laid out in their chambers. Bucky’s was black with dark blue accents, leaving his metal arm proudly bare and unencumbered. Sam’s was charcoal with red and designed so that he could wear his wings with it if he so desired. Loki had guessed, accurately as it turned out, that there was a Disney princess hidden within Jane right alongside the headstrong Aspie genius and gifted her with a fairy-tale dress of blue and silver.

Loki’s eyes when both of his lovers entered wearing the garb of his world positively glowed. Anyone could see how in love the three of them were.

Bucky slung his arm around Steve’s shoulders as they approached the table and spoke to Loki. “The punk cleans up nice, doesn’t he?”

“He’s like a spring morning.”

Everyone chuckled at that. “Aww, Norse gods in love,” Natasha cooed.

“Sap,” Bucky said fondly.

“Yeah. Sap,” Steve repeated.

Loki’s face lit up like Times Square when he realized that he now had a nickname from his lovers, to go with “punk” and “jerk”.

The team decided to stay in New York for a few days. Even the Science Gang needed a break from wormholes and subtle auroras by now. Besides, Tony needed to spend some time with Pepper. After the Asgardian feast the rest of the team barely saw him.

They fell back into their old Tower routine for a while. Sparring, sightseeing and diplomacy during the day, movies and pizza at night.

One evening, Bruce was half watching the night’s movie and half skimming over the tall stack of scientific reports that had been accumulating while Project Backgammon held all of his attention. Well, it would have been a tall stack if they’d been on paper. Instead they were all lined up on his Starkpad, waiting for him to get to them.

“Of course the king has a secret door you open by pulling a book out!” Clint snarked at the movie.

“What would be the point of being king if you couldn’t have a secret book door?” Loki asked. Bruce glanced up. Loki was sitting on the floor with Natasha on a sofa behind him, braiding his hair into an
elaborate Grecian-looking style. Jane’s hair had already been elaborately sculpted by one of them.

Avengers Tower had become a sorority house.

“Do you have a secret book door?” he asked Loki.

“No, but now I want one.”

Bruce chuckled and turned his attention back to the reports on his Starkpad. Hm, more analysis of the supersoldiers’ tissue samples.

A part of him didn’t really care anymore. His accident had come about because he had thought gamma radiation was the key to reproducing Dr. Erskine’s serum. He now felt an aversion to further researching the subject. But of all the scientists living, he was one of the most knowledgeable about the serum, so now and then he did his duty and looked at the data. Thus far, there had been no new breakthroughs.

“Huh. Look at that.”

“What?” Loki asked, and Bruce realized he had spoken aloud.

“No, no, sorry. It’s just—I’m looking at the supersoldiers’ gene sequences, and their telomeres are longer than I expected.”

Clint snickered, and the next minute everyone was laughing.

“Okay, okay, you’re all eight,” Bruce tried to grouse, but now he was snickering too.

“So what is a telomere?” Natasha asked.

“It’s a region of repetitive nucleotide sequences at the end of a chromosome,” Bruce explained.

“That’s what Tony calls ’speaking English’,,” said Steve.

Bruce just smiled at the little joke. His obfuscating language had been deliberate.

Loki smiled at him. “I don’t know what he’s talking about either. I haven’t learned the human terminology for genetics.”

“We’ll get on that when we’ve got the Bridge built,” Bruce said, trying to sound casual as he went through columns of data. “Hey, don’t mention this to Tony yet, I don’t want him distracted while he’s having so much fun. I want to tell him about it after we resequence it so I’ll know how the Okazaki fragments are developing. Otherwise he’ll get curious and switch projects.”

“Don’t worry, we wouldn’t mess with the Okazaki fragments.”

“Good. Tomorrow morning, let me take some more samples—if you don’t mind.”

“Sure.”

Bruce missed the rest of the movie about the king with the coveted secret book door, eyes glued to the report.

He was just glad no one else in the room knew what a telomere was.
Jane's Asgardian dress, of course, looks like the one they gave her in TDW.
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

The torture victims get triggered, and Loki visits Asgard.

Chapter Notes

Warning: non-graphic mentions of past bad stuff.

The Avengers were scattered around the common room on Carbonell Cay, watching some second-rate science fiction movie.

Jarvis often warned them that movies had scenes which might trigger their assorted traumas. Sometimes when the scene in question approached, Jarvis would pause until the person in danger had left the room, and tell him when it was safe to return. Sometimes they would choose to white-knuckle their way through a scene if it didn’t seem too bad. Some movies one or more of them would forgo entirely. (Loki had been warned to avoid the original Star Wars trilogy as well as *Prince of Egypt*. Bucky was similarly barred from *The Manchurian Candidate.*

But even Jarvis could not predict everything, especially when some traumas were locked away and never mentioned.

In the movie of the day, evil aliens imprisoned the hero, and amid the brief montage of dungeon horrors the jailers poured gruel onto the ground so that the prisoners had to scramble to grab it with their hands to eat it, shoving each other aside.

It was the kind of torment which either broke the victim's spirit, or made it invincible.

All four of the torture victims in the room—Loki, Bucky, Natasha, Tony—turned to stone, then started shaking.

Jarvis immediately stopped the movie, and the other Avengers swiftly tried to offer comfort. They spoke soothingly, put gentle careful hands on their shield-brothers’ arms to anchor them.

When his vision cleared, Loki found that he had pulled Natasha onto his lap, his powerful Asgardian arms protective around her. She was curled against him, very still, Clint’s hand on her back.

Loki felt sick, not only with his own memories, but for her. For all of them. Natasha was such a fierce warrior that it was easy to forget how tiny she was. How fragile, in her breakable human body.

“All—all of you?” Steve choked out. “You never told us about that.”

Loki’s voice only shook slightly. “I would wager that none of us have revealed everything.”

The other three nodded. The rest looked ill.
Bruce gave them a needed diversion by Hulking out. Tony jumped up. “Jarv, suit!” Instantly one of his suits appeared and covered him. He shot over to the Hulk, bopped him on the nose, and then sped out the window Jarvis had opened, calling, “Can’t catch me, big guy!”

The Hulk followed him and chased him to the beach and into the sea, howling as he released his rage.

The rest of them drew a breath.

Loki made himself straighten, and took the liberty of brushing Natasha’s mussed hair back from her face. She was so very beautiful. One of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, throughout the realms. “Natasha. Are any of them still alive?”

She managed a tight little smile. “Three. They’re in prisons. Unpleasant prisons.”

For the most part, Loki disapproved of unpleasant prisons, due to his own history, but for this he would make an exception. He nodded, looked at Bucky.

“Same, I think. Dead or jailed.”

“Good. Jarvis?”

“I believe Mr. Stark took care of that himself some years ago, sir.”

Natasha swallowed. Twice. When she spoke, Loki admired the coolness of her voice. “Let’s go to the gym.”

Everyone stood up, not too fast. “Chocolate first,” Clint said, and grabbed a package from one of the cabinets. Each of them took a couple of the wrapped candies and induced sugar rushes on their way to the gym.

Bruce and Tony continued to chase each other through the ocean. The rest of them sparred in the gym until they were too exhausted to care anymore. Eventually they all trudged back to the common room and made sandwiches, though none of them had much appetite despite the hours of exercise.

They followed the dinner with alcohol and card games. Movies were too perilous.

A few days later, Loki arrived in Asgard shortly after breakfast. The gatekeeper instructed him to attend his mother in her garden.

He found Frigga just finishing her own breakfast, sitting across from a nobleman called Tangnidr, who was dining with her. The man had been a useful council member for centuries. He was always tastefully dressed and well spoken, and was close to Frigga in age, unlike Odin who had been a full millennium older than his wife.

Not that Loki was in a position to criticize that.

Tangnidr rose when he saw Loki and gave his head a correct bow.

Loki was too well trained in court etiquette to show his surprise, but he knew his mother had detected it, even though she only smiled at him with warmth and serenity as she extended a hand to him. “My son!”

“Mother.” He kissed her hand, then leaned farther to embrace her. “You are looking lovely, as
always. Are you well?"

“Quite.”

“Lord Tangnidr.” Loki nodded to acknowledge him.

“Your Highness.”

“My son and I have a great deal to discuss before the council meeting, Tangnidr.”

Tangnidr took his leave almost formally, too decorous to linger over kissing her hand with her son present.

Loki sat across from her. She smiled at him as she finished her tisane, waiting.

“Is Tangnidr making you happy, Mother?”

“My sons make me happy. Tangnidr’s company pleases me.”

“Then I also am pleased.”

“I suppose you must be very pleased indeed these days.” She arched a playful eyebrow at him. “Was one human lover not enough for you?”

“Evidently not.”

“My sons are certainly full of surprises.”

“Both of us?”

“Of course. Are your mortals treating you well? Making you happy?”

“They are.”

“Then I must be content. Just don’t fall in love with another generation of them.” Sadness showed in her eyes. He was now going to lose two lovers to the mortal lifespan.

“I suppose there’ll be no Robins for our warrior band, then.”

“Robins?”

“A reference to a Midgardian saga. Never mind. My own good fortune in romance is not all I must discuss with you.”

“Yes. Their Bifrost. Are they truly able to do it?”

“They are.” Loki did not attempt to hide the pride in his voice.

She sighed, gazing off for a moment. “And so it begins.”

“Mother?”

“They will commence trade and treaties with many other worlds now. Their culture will be changed by the technology they learn and the materials they obtain.” She paused. “They will become involved in the wars of other worlds, or even begin them. And Asgard will have to stand with or against them.”
Loki wished she were wrong. His own shield-brothers would strive to keep their world at peace, but many humans would have other ideas.

He searched for words. “They would have created a bridge within a century even without what I taught them, Mother.”

“I know. Which is why I shall not try to stop them from building it now. I cannot prevent other worlds from advancing. I am not Odin.”

“Thank the Norns for that. Mother, when the Einstein-Rosen Bridge is built, will you support us in insisting that all of Midgard’s nations must be allowed to use it?”

“Of course.” She looked thoughtful. “This might help Midgard’s less powerful nations to greater parity with the others, if….”

“Tony already has many plans that we hope will have that effect. He believes his nation’s hegemony has caused it to become corrupt.” As Asgard’s had, Loki did not say aloud.

“That and Hydra. I suppose those scoundrels are still being rounded up.”

“We are still uncovering more Hydra agents. They are pervasive,” Loki admitted. “But we have made great progress, and it is showing in many ways throughout Midgard. Less corruption in their governments, less crime, less poverty.”

“I hope you are right.” Frigga did not sound optimistic. Never mind. He would show her, he and his shield-brothers.

“What news have you of the other realms?”

Frigga then told him about the revised treaty with the realm of Niflheim (a misty realm whose dullness had led many to joke that it was the land of the dead) and the current petitions of the Thing. The only personal matter she mentioned was that she had had glass replicas of Jotun ice sculptures made and positioned throughout the palace, as well as sent several to her homeworld. They were becoming popular among Asgard’s and Vanaheim’s nobility already, even as Jotun sagas were sung in the feast halls.

“You’re trying to change how the other worlds view the Jotnar.”

“Had Odin not taught everyone to hate them, much suffering would never have occurred. You and Thor would never have attacked them, and I would not have nearly lost you. But I now have faith that my sons will keep the peace between the realms.”

At the council meeting that day, Loki paid more attention to Tangnïdr than had been his wont. Tangnïdr had never been particularly ambitious and that did not appear to have changed. Good. Loki would not have anyone using his mother for advancement. Bad enough Odin had compelled her to marry him after conquering her realm, hoping to legitimize his rule by uniting his upstart line with that of one of the oldest and most honorable dynasties in the realms.

Though of course Loki would have to deliver a shovel speech. Just on principle. Else what kind of son would he be?

So that evening during the feast, Loki found a moment to speak with Tangnïdr.

“I see you have been a companion to my mother of late.” Loki spoke pleasantly, as if remarking on the weather.
Tangnidr had the sense to look just a little nervous. “The queen has been most gracious to me. You know I hold Frigga in the highest esteem.”

“I should hope so. I am glad to see her enjoying herself.” Loki let his smile go sharp as a blade. “But if you should ever cause her unhappiness….”

Chuckling ruefully, Tangnidr raised his hands in surrender. “When Thor visited last week, he informed me that if I made the queen unhappy I would learn what it was like to pick up my teeth with broken fingers. He also mentioned the possibility of strangling me with my own entrails.”

Loki nodded approval. “I have one addendum. If you make our mother unhappy, I recommend praying that her elder son finds out about it first.”

Tangnidr went slightly pale, but only bowed his head in acceptance. “I am glad our princes are so loyal to their mother.”

Loki gave the man a friendly smile and moved on. A moment later he found Sif. When she noticed him she excused herself from the warriors she was talking to and came to his side.

For a few minutes she caught him up on recent battles and recent gossip. From what she said, Tangnidr’s behavior had indeed been honorable. Loki could rest easy on that score. But he noticed that Sif seemed less cheerful than usual.

“Sif, is something wrong?”

She looked away. “I do not wish to speak of it.”

He paused before putting a hand on her shoulder. “As you wish. But Sif, I hope we are becoming friends. If there is something I can do….”

She met his gaze, very serious. “Thank you, Loki.”

Sif then began to tell him of the recent hostilities on Muspelheim, so he took the hint and did not ask her more about what was troubling her.
Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

Two kids from Brooklyn learn more about the erotic arts of other planets, Fandral is disappointed, and Bruce needs to talk to the supersoldiers.

Also, the author vents her feelings about her NOTP.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Fandral made his next expedition to Midgard, he grasped the new relationship between Loki and the supersoldiers by the looks they were exchanging and the casual touches they exchanged.

Just to clear things up some more, when Loki and Tony Stark jokingly flirted, as they often did, Stark’s lady, amused, put a possessive hand on her lover’s shoulder and said, “Come on, Loki, don’t hog all the hot Earth guys. You’ve already got more than your fair share.”

“Earth boys are easy,” Loki teased, in the tone of a quotation, his arm around Bucky.

“You star spangled tramp,” Tony said to Steve.

Ah, well, at least they were both humans and would be gone within the century. Fandral could be patient.

Fandral tried to conceal his disappointment by mentioning someone else’s. “En Dwi Gast will be devastated when he hears of your new entanglements, Loki.”

Loki grimaced, drawing his shoulders in. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“What? Who’s En Dwee… whatsit? Do we need to be jealous?”

Loki glared. "Gast wouldn't have a Jotun's chance in Muspelheim with me if he were the last man in the Nine Realms."

"So who is he?"

“He is a merchant who owns a decadent luxury space station. Basically, a resort. Las Vegas with gladiator fights.” Loki grimaced. "He calls himself its ‘ruler’, which is about like Angelo a few blocks away declaring himself the ‘ruler’ of Angelo’s Pizza, and tries to get people to call him ‘the Grandmaster’. I think that tells you everything about him you need to know.”

“So if he were a human, he’d be wearing a fedora and listening to Ross Jeffries CDs?”

“Precisely. Gast entertains two great delusions. One is that he has phenomenal cosmic powers—in fact, he is a third-rate sorcerer. The other is that he is incredibly attractive. In fact, I am certain that he has paid for all the sex he has ever had in his life.”

“He has long had a soft spot for Loki.” Fandral smirked as Loki shuddered.
“I would sleep with him to save lives. Not for anything less. He is repulsive. The very idea makes my skin crawl.”

“Do we need to beat him up for you, Loki?” Bucky asked.

Loki smiled at his boyfriends, relaxing. “My heroes.”

“Actually, Thor already did that,” Fandral offered.

Loki smiled fondly at the memory. “Gast has never made any secret of his… ah, interest, but once he got handsy. I could have beaten him up myself, of course, but it was so nice to have my big brother looking after me.”

Clint clapped Loki on the shoulder. “What does he look like? Cast an illusion of him and show us!”

“I wouldn’t do that to you, you’re my friends.”

Don’t worry, little human heroes, Fandral thought. When you are in Valhalla, I will keep your prince happy. Including when he becomes a king.

Later that day, while Loki was aiding the Science Gang in building Earth’s Einstein-Rosen Bridge, Steve and Bucky spent half the afternoon sparring. They were well matched; Steve was a bit stronger and full of fire, Bucky more highly trained.

As they paused to hydrate themselves, the two suddenly grinned at each other. “Are we living the life or what?” The idioms of the entire team had become an odd melange of 1940s American, current American, Asgardian concepts often translated by way of Norse humans, and Russian. (That last was mostly swearwords.) Oh, and movies marketed to nerds. Not that any of the Avengers were nerds.

(All of the Avengers were huge fucking nerds.)

“We really are.” Steve gave Bucky a quick half-hug. They had yet to become comfortable expressing affection out of bed that was not cloaked in the gentle battering that men often used to veil their camaraderie. But this era was different—somewhat different—and their other lover had no shame about kissing them in front of God and everyone.

“I gotta admit I felt pretty smug when Fandral caught on. His face!”

“I can’t believe a rich handsome guy is jealous of me,” Steve agreed, feeling silly for how hard he was smiling over it.

“Guess Fandral has some sense after all.”

Steve shook his head. “It’s so ridiculous for anybody to want Loki just because he’s a prince. He has so much more.”

“Handsome, tough, good in the sack….”

“Well, he’s a thousand years old, he’s experienced, he must be….”

It hit them both at the same time. They exchanged a look, and then went to find their lover.

Loki was just carrying an unconscious Tony out of the lab. Steve took him without waking him and
they tucked him into his bed.

Once the door to Tony's bedroom was shut, Loki spoke in a low voice, even though all the rooms on Carbonell Cay were soundproofed. “Tony’s been working for three days straight. I knew he would collapse soon and was waiting. Jane’s wrapping up for the day.”

Realizing his lovers were just looking at him, Loki lifted his eyebrows, enquiring. Bucky tried to conceal his smile.

“You’ve been holding out on us.”

Loki hesitated.

Bucky elucidated, “You figured we mere mortals couldn’t handle your advanced alien bedroom skills.”

Loki’s green eyes flitted from one of them to the other. “You couldn’t. Unscrupulous Asgardians and elves have, in the past, bedded mortals and shattered their minds. Occasionally induced heart failure. That is one reason we were commanded to stay away these past centuries.” At his lovers’ skeptical expressions, Loki insisted, “It takes time and practice to accustom oneself to that degree of pleasure. Not only for humans. On the other realms, there are strict rules about intercourse between beings of different ages. When I was your age in years, a person of a thousand years could have done the same to me - provided he had taken the trouble to learn the skill, of course.”

“Enough of that. Tonight, you don’t hold back.”

A familiar impish smile spread across Loki’s face. “I won’t hold back… as much.”

“That’s not what we-“

“Hush.”

“How many different things can there be to do, anyway?”

“It isn’t what. It’s how.”

So that night, the three of them undressed, and Loki directed Steve to lie back on the bed. “Caress his chest,” Loki instructed, voice soft, gaze tender.

Bucky had grown up with Steve. They had learned their own bodies and each other’s together. Bucky knew just how to touch Steve to make him feel good, to relax and moan. He did, smiling at the way Steve moved under him.

Then Loki reached for Steve’s chest. He poised his hands above Steve’s skin for a second, then lightly touched him with a fingertip, then another, not in a straight line, but according to some secret pattern, as if Loki were playing an instrument.

Steve gasped. He arched his back. He started to reach for Loki, then let his hands fall, apparently overcome.

Bucky stared. “How do you do that?”

“Centuries of study. It doesn’t only matter what nerves you stimulate, or how you do so. It also matters in what order you do so.”

Steve was still lying dazed, gazing at the ceiling like he’d never seen one before.
“Do me. Please. I need to know this.”

Loki gently pressed him onto his back. Bucky closed his eyes and felt his lover’s hand gently stroking his skin.

And then his skin caught on fire and he forgot how to move and he forgot how to speak and he really really needed Loki to keep touching him like that he’d die happily if only Loki didn’t stop—

Loki removed his hand.

Bucky still couldn’t speak. Steve raised his head, trying to breathe.

“First, you are going to finish what you started,” he informed Loki. Loki, who never minded being bossed in bed once he had accepted a lover, smirked happily. “Then, you are going to teach us that.”

“As you wish, my sun and stars.” Loki looked to Steve as he said “sun” and Bucky as he said “stars”.

“My moon.”

“Our moon.”

Loki smiled, radiant and beautiful, and whispered a spell. And then carried out Steve’s instructions.

“We’ve got some planning to do,” Tony said when they all—the Avengers plus Fandral—gathered the next day for breakfast.

Loki and his boyfriends looked very contented. Bruce smiled to himself.

“How much longer before the Bridge is finished?” Natasha’s tone had a little wistfulness. The slender hope the Avengers had given her, that humans could be better, that Earth could be better, was fragile and usually hidden under her cool demeanour.

“I think about two months,” Loki said. “When we reveal it to your realm, we will have to take measures to make certain all Midgard can use it, not only the powerful nations.”

“I’m guessing you have plans for that.”

“Oh, yes. Tony, Pepper and I have discussed it.”

“Let me in on it next time, I think I can offer some thoughts.”

“Oh of course.”

“Guys!” Tony waved his hands. “You’re focusing on stuff like a wormhole that will allow humans to visit other planets and learn from them and trade with them and forgetting what’s really important!”

“And what’s that?”

“Christmas!”

Most people would have been surprised to hear Tony Stark, uber-technophile, saying that for a moment a holiday was more important than a world-changing invention. The Avengers understood:
Tony knew there was a time to build and a time to feast. Christmas was a time to feast.

“Thanksgiving, too,” Bruce said mildly. “Now that I can cook, I’d like to try to cook the whole meal myself. I’ll need a couple of sous chefs, of course.”

“I’m sure you’ll find no shortage of volunteers.”

“Just try not to Hulk out if the potatoes come out dry.”

“Of course not!” Bruce hunched his shoulders, pouting a bit. “Now, if the dressing doesn’t turn out right, that’s another story.”

Everyone laughed.

Bruce lived with people who could joke about his tendency to turn into a giant uncontrollable rage monster. They weren’t even afraid of him any longer.

“As for Christmas, this year we’ll really stick to the cheap gifts rule, right?”

Actually, Bruce had slightly different plans, but the senior Avengers needed to talk about it without the newer members present. Glancing around, Bruce suspected the others had similar ideas.

“Yeah, I think we should each make a list of things like books we want to read, albums we want, and we’ll all get those for each other. And no getting solid gold magic doodads from other planets, Loki.”

“Awww.”

“We also have more short-term plans to make,” Steve reminded them. “We’ve got two missions this week. I know Tony’s too wrapped up in Project Backgammon to go superheroing right now if we don’t really need him. I was thinking that for the one in Argentina, we’d have Loki, Bruce, Sam and Bucky....”

"You trust me with your boyfriends?" Sam teased.

"Uh oh, you're right, you're going to New York where I can keep an eye on you," Steve joked back. "Me, Fandral, Clint, and Natasha will go to New York—"

“Actually,” Bruce spoke up mildly, “I think that for New York you need the Hulk.”

“Really?” Bruce had never offered strategy suggestions before. Usually Bruce left the planning to the others, as his sole combat method was berserking.

“Yeah. Smashing is likely to be called for. Argentina’s spy stuff, so our spies should be down there and our soldiers in New York. Fandral can provide some more muscle so that Loki doesn’t have to be apart from his boyfriends.” Bruce gave them a teasing glance.

Steve frowned, too intent on the logistics to notice how odd it was that Bruce was suddenly arguing with him about which Avenger to use where. “I really think Bucky would be useful in Argentina.”

“I’ve got it,” Natasha said, quietly confident.

Steve’s eyes widened and he shut up. He’d gotten the message—the wrong message, but it worked. He thought the contents of the Argentine compound might trigger Bucky. That was possible, but it wasn’t Bruce’s top priority here.
“I’ll be okay,” Bucky said.

Loki’s eyes flitted to Bruce and he put an arm around Bucky’s shoulders, squeezed. “Let us coddle you a bit. Besides, I think Bruce is right.” He spent the next few minutes explaining why this was the more combat-worthy arrangement. Bruce was sure he was making it all up on the fly.

It was good to be able to trust your shield-brothers.

“So, the supersoldiers and the shapeshifters for New York?”

Tony, who had zoned out during the strategy discussion, perked up. “Hey, indigo child, I’ve been meaning to ask you: we know you can turn into a frost giant or a fire giant. Can you turn into, like anything?”

“I would have to have genetic knowledge of what I was changing myself into. But I wouldn’t be able to turn into something much larger than myself, such as,” he cleared his throat, “a horse.”

Tony snickered. “Maybe one of those little miniature horses?”

“I suppose I could do that. If I met a sufficiently handsome stallion, but after Svaðilfari, there just hasn’t been another.” Loki sighed theatrically.

“So you couldn’t turn into, say, a giant fuck-off dragon?”

“I could turn into a me-sized fuck-off dragon. I could change my size very slightly by compressing or expanding the distance between my molecules.”

“Hey, could you turn into like a tall woman with big bazooms?”

Loki lowered his eyes and smiled, very demurely.

Steve sat still as a statue, his face flaming red.

Bucky grinned at the ceiling, deeply content.

They had everyone’s full attention now. Including Fandral’s, who looked like he’d just found a new life goal.

Too bad, Fandral, Bruce thought. I’m about to destroy all your hopes and dreams.

Tony stared at the trio. “I’ll be in my bunk.”

Finally able to move, Steve put his hands over his face. “Tony!”

Smirking, Loki looked at his lovers. “Speaking of bunks….”

Actually, Bruce couldn’t have planned it better. Loki had twigged that something was up, but the others now had an awful lot to think about. None of them would be suspicious of his wanting to get the trio alone.

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter we’ll have a flashback to our supersoldiers becoming acquainted with
Lady Loki.

I'm kinda tempted to have Pepper and Natasha take Lady Loki out for a girls' day out, spa and shopping and all that.
“Have you ever been with a woman, Loki?” Bucky asked one night as the three of them lay sated in the dim bedroom, idly caressing each other.

“Once, when I was very young. Out of curiosity.”

Steve was suddenly attentive. “And?”

Loki smiled, a little rueful. “Let’s just say there was no need to repeat the experiment.”

“So women really don’t interest you at all.”

“No. But the lady was very understanding. I had to arrange for her to have a liaison with my brother, however.”

Bucky laughed at that.

“Do you miss lying with women?” Loki asked.

Bucky considered, tangling his fingers in Loki’s long inky hair in the darkness. “Yes, I do. I don’t want you two to think you’re not enough for me. You are. But yeah, I do miss the female body.”

“And you, Steve?”

Steve was silent so long both the others lifted their heads.

“Well, I mean.”

“Never?” Loki asked, trying to spare Steve the embarrassment of putting it into words.

“I thought—Peggy?” Bucky asked.

“We um. Didn’t get the chance. Before the ice. And, you know. Before that I was still a ninety-pound weakling.”

Loki and Bucky looked at each other, even though they couldn’t see much in the darkness.

“I can’t speak for your other lover,” Loki said, “but if this is something you wish to experience, I will not object.”

“Me neither. I figure our old agreement about that stands. Besides… jealousy seems kind of irrelevant now, you know?”
Loki chuckled. “It does. I am usually very much the jealous type, but somehow, sharing you two with each other has changed that.”

Steve thought that over for a while. “Thing is, I’m not sure I can fall in love with yet another person now. I mean, who could compare to either of you?”

“Well….”

“No, I know what it’s like to—to go to bed with people I’m in love with. Doing this without love can’t possibly measure up.”

Bucky shrugged. “If you change your mind, punk, just say the word.”

Loki, thoughtful, said nothing.

The following day, Loki experimented.

A week later, one evening as the Avengers were lounging around the common area in various desultory pursuits, Loki leaned close to his lovers, who were playing backgammon, and spoke in a low voice.

“I will expect you in my chambers half an hour from now.” He gave them a mock-stern look. “Don’t be early.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Loki smiled and left them. The two looked at each other, grinning.

“We hit the jackpot, didn’t we?”

“We really did.”

Steve and Bucky went to Loki’s room thirty-one minutes later—an extra minute to be on the safe side. They drew up short just inside the door, which magically shut itself.

No sooner had their shocked minds registered that the person on the bed was not the Loki they knew than that person’s gleaming wide smile of mischief proved to them that it was.

“Loki?” Steve whispered, his eyes wide.

Slowly, gracefully, Loki stood up. He was a few inches shorter than usual—just an inch or so shorter than Bucky—and much slimmer, with curves practically exploding out of his green silk robe, a robe Steve had seen him wear many times. Loki’s face was always pretty, but now his features were more delicate, his jaw more gently curved.

“Steve. Bucky.” Loki’s voice still had its usual hint of gravel, but the pitch was higher than normal.

Steve swallowed, mouth dry. “Is—is this an illusion?”

Loki sauntered over to the two of them, lips curled in an irrepressible smile. It wouldn’t be inaccurate to call it a smirk. When he reached them, he took one of each of their hands and pressed them to his very large, very real breasts.

The flesh was soft. Yielding. Utterly different from his own body, or the two bodies he had intimate knowledge of.
“Hey, Steve, I thought the serum had cured your asthma!” Bucky had been almost as knocked over by Loki’s new form as Steve had, but he was able to spare the attention to tease Steve.

Steve tried to breathe. Succeeded, after a few tries. Loki watched him, delighted.

“A gift for you, my loves. For both of you.”

Bucky surveyed Loki’s curvaceous temporary body with undisguised appreciation, slipping his hand down to Loki’s waist. “You really are amazing, you know that?”

“You’re beautiful,” Steve rasped. “I mean, you’re always beautiful. But this….”

Loki dimpled. Wow. “So do something about it.”

Bucky looked at Steve, stepped back a tiny bit. He was going to let Steve go first.

Steve had such terrific boyfriends.

Steve met those familiar green eyes, sparkling with delight and invitation. Swallowed. “May I?”

Loki’s expression gentled. “You may.”

Steve had dreamed of this since early adolescence: exploring the wondrous frontier that was the female body. For years it had seemed he would never realize that dream.

Now he slowly slid his arms around Loki. Loki’s slender curved body felt different against him than Loki’s usual broad-shouldered male form, and his slim feminine arms twining around Steve’s neck were different too.

Steve laced his fingers into Loki’s long black hair. Loki was looking up at him for a change, and now Steve could see a little uncertainty in Loki’s eyes.

Loki was everything anyone could want in a boyfriend—and a girlfriend, for that matter—and still he was afraid of not being enough. Very gently, Steve held him close.

“Loki,” he whispered, knowing that the way he said the name would say everything.

Then he kissed Loki.

It was just the same and yet completely different.

He kissed Loki for a long time. When they finally broke apart, Bucky was gazing at them, entranced.

Loki darted a quick little smile at Steve before gently stepping out of his embrace and into Bucky’s.

Watching Bucky and Loki kissing was always amazing. It was no less so with Loki in female form.

When they both looked at Steve again, Steve huffed a laugh. “Bucky’s the only one here who knows anything about this.”

Loki’s eyes crinkled, amused. “I doubt it’s terribly complicated.” He looked down, dark lashes casting a shadow on his high cheekbones. “I must say that I am eagerly anticipating learning more, however.”

Steve couldn’t help a little grin at that. He stepped closer so that Loki was pressed between the two
of them and claimed another kiss, letting his hands begin to wander. Just a little, he had waited so long to experience this and he wanted to draw it out to the fullest. For himself and for Loki.

Who was sighing happily against him, so he must not be messing up too badly.

Female flesh was soft, yielding. Just the feeling of those large round breasts pressed against his chest was dizzying.

Loki responded much the same way to Steve’s touch as he always had. The same general areas seemed to be sensitive.

Steve let Bucky have a turn and watched his more practiced hands on Loki’s new body, curling around Loki’s more rounded buttocks, stroking over his breasts through the green silk.

Looking into Loki’s eyes, Bucky breathed, “Loki… thank you.”

Loki looked delighted. “My pleasure. I hope.”

Bucky chuckled and with a light touch, turned Loki to face Steve. “Just take your time,” he instructed Steve. “The main difference is that, how can I put it. A woman’s fire takes a little more coaxing to light. Once it’s lit, though…” Bucky widened his eyes expressively.

Loki lowered his gaze in demure flirtation. It was intriguing to see familiar expressions on that altered face. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem,” he said, voice husky.

Steve swallowed and reached for the sash on Loki’s robe. Slowly, ceremoniously, he untied it.

Loki clutched the robe with an elegant slim-fingered hand, holding it closed. “Not so fast. You two disrobe first.”

Sometimes the three of them made undressing each other part of their lovemaking, teasing and playing as they unveiled each other bit by bit. Other nights, they would each tear off their own clothes in their hurry to leap into bed together. This was one of the latter nights—for Steve and Bucky, at least.

Once they were naked—and clearly very much ready for their lover—Loki let the robe fall from his shoulders, standing naked before them like a goddess in a classical painting.

They both just gazed for a long minute at the pale skin and ripe curves of Loki’s changed body. Judging from his triumphant expression, Loki was basking in the attention. He turned around slowly, letting them see everything.

Then he stretched out on the bed, lying back among the piled pillows, languorous. Loki did this often, enjoying having his lovers lavish pleasure upon him.

Which they commenced doing, each of them stretched out on either side of Loki, running careful fingertips over Loki’s snowy skin. Loki tilted his head back, closing his eyes in contentment as they attended him.

Loki was not wearing perfume, but his body’s scent was subtly different now. It was intriguing, the mixture of the familiar and the changed.

After a time, Loki’s eyes fluttered open and he looked at Steve. “Come on,” he invited, adjusting his long lovely legs.
Steve swallowed. Very gradually, he moved his hand to the demure triangle of dark curls between Loki’s legs, then the moist flesh they hid.

Steve had seen Loki arch his back like that many times, but like so much this was different in wonderful ways.

Steve buried his face in Loki’s breasts and let Bucky gently massage between Loki’s legs. The higher-pitched moan Loki responded with was intoxicating.

When Steve lifted his head to look at Loki sprawled wanton and panting across the bed, pretty face flushed, hair disheveled over the pillow, his eyes fluttered open to meet Steve’s. Steve supposed he was gawking like a fool. He didn’t care.

“Oh, Steve.” Loki caressed Steve’s face, and that gesture was different too. “I feel so sorry for all those foolish women who dismissed you because you were small and weak. They missed having you look at them like this.”

Steve felt his face redden. Bucky gave him a lopsided smile that only had a little humor in it. “It’s true. You look like you’re having a vision.”

Steve smiled suddenly. “Well. I am literally in bed with a goddess.”

That lightened the mood. After chuckles and kisses all round, Loki looked into Steve’s eyes again and spoke seriously.

“Steve, I don’t know if you can believe this, but I don’t love you for this beautiful body. I enjoy it, there’s no hiding that, but it’s you I am in love with.”

It was still hard for Steve to believe that anyone but Bucky could love him, but the way Loki was looking at him right now… he believed him.

“I know,” Steve whispered.

Bucky was blinking rapidly. He reached over and ruffled Steve’s hair. “I knew some girl would have the sense to like you one of these days, punk.”

That earned Bucky Loki’s trademark “god of mischief” smile, which was just as enticing on a feminine face. “You I just love for your looks.”

Bucky grinned. “I know. It’s my cross to bear.”

Loki luxuriated in their explorations for a little longer before commanding, “Don’t make me wait.”

Steve and Bucky looked at each other. “You should,” Steve said. “You have—experience.”

Bucky smirked. “Nope. I want to watch you two discovering this together.”

That… was actually a pretty good idea. Even if Steve was worried about not doing a good job.

Penetrating a woman felt different. Loki’s body seemed to open itself up to him in a way a male body didn’t. Steve found himself just sinking into the blissful wet warmth, feeling shorter slimmer legs than normal wrapping around his hips. And there were no muscle spasms as Loki’s body adjusted to the intrusion. It was like sliding a pistol into its sheath.

Here was the real difference: women didn’t have prostates. After some fumbling, Bucky finally told Steve with affectionate exasperation that he needed to press against Loki’s clitoris, which had
immediate results.

Dramatic results.

Loki was always shameless about displaying his responses, but this was something else again. He was experiencing new sensations and giving himself up to the pleasure, to what Steve was doing to him.

With sudden joy, Steve realized that he had given his thousand-year-old lover a first time. A new experience.

“You’re so wonderful.” Steve whispered, just before Loki cried out beneath him, different from his usual exclamations, slim fingers digging into Steve’s shoulders.

A moment later Steve slipped free, gasping for breath. Bucky was sitting back, pale blue eyes taking in everything. Usually all three of them participated every time, but Steve had been carried away and Bucky seemed content to watch this time.

“Was it different?” Bucky asked eventually, when Loki had caught his breath.

Loki smiled as if at a fond memory. “No? Yes? It's hard to explain.”

Steve couldn’t help but laugh. “All of this would be hard to explain.”

“True.” Loki sat up and stretched, not even trying to pretend not to notice them staring at the frankly spectacular sight. “Now, let me see what it’s like when I impale myself upon a prick.” Bucky let himself be pressed back on the mattress so that Loki could straddle him.

Bucky was right, Steve decided; watching Lady Loki with their boyfriend was almost as good as making love to her himself.

Every night for the next week, Loki transformed before the two of them joined him. After that first night, Steve managed to get some time alone to do some covert research on the internet, blushing profusely as he read, but when he had Loki’s feminine thighs around his head and Loki’s soprano moans ringing in his ears it was worth the embarrassment. It was also gratifying that he actually got to show Bucky the ropes.

Not that there were actual ropes. Not this particular week. That had been last month.

Steve felt intoxicated with the new realm Loki had opened up to him. Everything Steve could desire in his bed, and love too. As when the three of them had become lovers, they threw themselves into experimentation, trying many variations. Loki discovered that he especially liked to be fucked from behind with his lover’s hand on his clit, driving him blissfully insane. And even though they often found ways to link all three of them together, Steve and Bucky both found that watching Loki with the other remained enticing.

“I’m almost jealous of myself,” Loki remarked once. He seemed to genuinely be joking, but Steve thought he had better keep things that way.

So after several days, when the three of them were alone, Steve said, “Loki, how about you don’t change tonight? This has been the most amazing gift, but….”

“But we miss your dick,” Bucky finished with a grin.

Loki looked most gratified. “Your wish is my command, my loves.”
Starting in the next chapter, I’m going to start the home stretch of the plot, though there’ll be many twists and turns before we get there. The longevity issue and the succession to the throne - oh, and of course Thanos and the Dark Elves - will all be resolved.
Chapter Summary

Bruce tells the trio some news.

Once Bruce, Loki, Steve and Bucky had completed their New York mission, they retreated to the familiar sanctuary of Avengers Tower and ordered teriyaki.

They were almost finished with the green tea ice cream (Loki had become addicted to it) and Bruce was wondering how to broach the subject he had to discuss with them when Loki fixed his gaze on him.

“Bruce. Why did you want the four of us away from the rest?”

Startled for a second, Bruce huffed a laugh. “Here I thought I was being subtle.”

The soldiers looked at each other. “I think Loki’s just good at this. I didn’t notice anything,” Bucky said.

“Me neither.”

Bruce scraped up the last bit of his ice cream and swallowed it. Then he took off his glasses and folded them in his hands. “I wanted to tell the three of you first.” At their expressions, he added quickly, “It’s not bad. Not exactly. But it’s… heavy.”

Loki, sitting between his lovers, took both their hands. They waited.

Bruce wouldn’t keep them in suspense. “First, I have to tell you that we are still nowhere near replicating Dr. Erskine’s serum. Or even the knockoff version they gave Bucky.”

They all nodded. Then Bruce ripped the Band-Aid off.

“It was your telomeres that tipped me off. Guys, your serums have lengthened your lifespans. Bucky, at your rate of ageing, you’ll probably live to be about four hundred years old.”

The three stared.

“Steve… you could make it to five thousand.”

“Years?” Steve’s voice was strangled.

“Yes.”

Loki buried his face in his hands and burst into tears.

Both soldiers realized at the same instant and encircled him in their arms.

Nobody spoke for a while. The soldiers were just looking stunned as they let Loki pull himself together.
When Loki had regained some composure, Bucky brushed his long dark hair back from his tear-stained face. “You were expecting us to die when we were eighty or something, weren’t you?”

“No just me and Bucky. All of us. The Avengers and Pepper and Jane.”

Loki looked at each of them with shimmering eyes.

Steve squeezed him. “You’re a glutton for punishment.”

“Right back atcha.”

Bucky shook his head slowly. “How could you do that to yourself? Why didn’t you go home when you started getting attached to these lunatics?”

Loki only smiled sadly, blinking hard. So Bruce explained.

“Because once he realized he loved us, it was already too late.”

“Yes.”

Steve looked appalled. “So your plan was to—what? Sit by our beds in a nursing home and read to us every day?”

“Something like that, yes.” Loki swallowed. “My friends, the golden apples I stole in your myth are only that: a myth. If they existed, I would already have brought them to you. But I have scoured the royal library and consulted Asgard’s wisest sorceresses. No one knows of any way to extend the human lifespan.”

It was Bucky who saw it first.

“That’s not true. Someone does. Or did.”

Everyone’s eyes widened. “But Dr. Erskine’s dead,” Steve said.

“But he proved there’s a way,” Bucky retorted. “If he found it, someone else could too.”

A smile spread slowly across Loki’s face. “Steve. Why didn’t you tell me our boyfriend was a genius?”

“I didn’t know it, he hides it so well.”

Bruce had to speak. “I told you, we’re nowhere near cracking it.”

“Which is why we shall seek help on another realm. Vanaheim, I think; their knowledge is the most advanced. In fact, I think I know just the sorceress to put the problem to.” Loki looked to the ceiling. “Jarvis, will you put everything we know about the serum, and about all of the research scientists have done trying to reproduce it, onto a data crystal?”

“It is already done, Loki. And allow me to wish you luck in this endeavour.”

Abruptly Loki looked stricken. “And please don’t mention this to Tony. Not until we’ve succeeded.”

“Or to the others,” Bruce added.

“I would not have done so.”
Loki drew a deep breath. “I will visit Asgard in a couple of days. I shall tell my mother about this project and set it in motion before I return here.”

“And if it doesn’t work,” Bruce said, looking from one soldier to the other, “you two look after our Norse god when the rest of us are in Valhalla, okay?”

Steve blinked, eyes shimmering. Bucky covered his own emotions with his usual cocky grin. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Loki held Bruce’s gaze. “And I will look after them for as long as I live. You have my word.”
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

Loki requests Queen Frigga's help in enlisting aid to reconstruct Dr. Erskine's serum.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Loki could only stare at his mother and queen, stunned.

“What?” he managed after a long moment.

There was pity on her face as she spoke.

“I said, no.”

He searched her face, unable to speak.

Frigga drew a deep sigh. “Loki. You know that as queen I must consider all the Nine Realms. Not only my own wishes. Or my personal affections.”

“But why not allow me to enlist the aid of advanced sorcerers to rediscover the serum?”

“Making a fundamental change in a realm is fraught with risk. You must see that. And it is not even our world to meddle in.”

Through stiff lips, Loki asked, “Why do you not wish for humans to live long lives?”

“You have been rooting Hydra out yourself and you need to ask?”

“We are stopping them. It was other humans who uncovered its existence and refused to surrender to them. Human civilians risked their lives to stop them!”

“Midgardian culture is adolescent. Some of them are exploring the quantum sphere, unlocking the secrets of their genetic code, while others starve in squalor.”

“That is true. But one does not grow up by staying in the nursery. Mother, it is the shortness of their lives that makes them so foolish. If they had more tomorrows, they would have more care for those tomorrows.”

“It will take them centuries to accustom themselves to longer lives. In the meantime, they will cause their neighbors considerable grief.”

“It was you who commanded me to accept them as shield-brothers, to learn to see other races as our equals.”

“I only wanted to teach you not to seek out unneeded wars. This course of action would inevitably lead to such wars. Do you deny that?”

“I cannot, but I also cannot let sentient beings die after a few decades when they can be saved! Not
only my friends, but the entire species!”

The argument took up the rest of the day. Frigga had to delay all of her planned audiences to try to make her son see her reasoning.

“Humans are not ready for long life. Soon they will have a Bifrost. They have weapons based on the Tesseract. With long lives as well, they will suddenly have great power. Do you truly imagine Midgard will not rampage through the realms like a bilgesnipe in its euphoria? Or do you mean to chaperone them through the next thousand years?”

“Do I not owe them this gift?”

“How many lives will Loki sacrifice for his own remorse?”

To that, Loki could find no answer. Because she was not wrong, not entirely.

When she spoke again, her voice was gentle. “Loki, one day you will be king of Asgard.” His eyes met hers, startled, and she went on. “Thor already suspects. I am giving him more time to resign himself before I announce it. But you will be my heir, because you will be a better king than Thor would.” She paused pointedly. “Unless, of course, you disqualify yourself.”

Loki dropped his gaze. It was a long moment before he replied, voice choked. “I so wanted my supposed father to consider me worthy of his throne, regardless of which of us actually succeeded him. I would have done anything to convince him that I was worthy. How can I convey how precious your faith in me is to me?”

“There is no need, my son. I know it.”

He drew a ragged breath. “Mother, I will not cease to try to change your mind.”

“But that is enough for now. It is past time for supper.” She rose, then looked at him, considering. “You may return to Midgard now, if you wish. I know you will wish to be with your friends in your distress.”

Not meeting her gaze, Loki said, “Thank you, my queen.”

She embraced him and left him alone. He sat alone in her study for a few minutes, dazed, before heading for the Bifrost.

“Do you wish to arrive on the island or the Tower?” the Gatekeeper asked him.

Steve, Bucky and Bruce had returned to the island already. Avengers Tower was empty.

“The Tower, please.”

Loki was not ready to face anyone just yet.

“Jarvis, please do not tell anyone I am back just yet,” Loki requested once he was on Earth.

“Very well, Loki. Is something wrong?”

“Yes. Please don’t tell them that, either.”

“Can I help in any way?”

“No, but thank you. I am going to the gym for a while. I need distraction.” At a sudden thought, he
added, “Wait. Perhaps you could tell me when everyone on the island is asleep.”

“Certainly.”

For several hours Loki used the exercise equipment Tony had designed especially for him, strong enough to withstand Asgardian needs. Around midnight, Jarvis informed him—still running on his treadmill—that all of the Avengers were sleeping. Loki showered, then took the Zeta Reticulan transporter out of his pocket dimension. With it, he traveled to Carbonell Cay, materializing on the deserted beach.

He looked at the moon for a moment. Midgard was so beautiful.

Silently he crept into the house. His lovers were in their king-sized bed, Steve using Bucky’s chest as a pillow. Loki smiled at them for a moment before slipping into bed with them and kissing them both awake.

Steve smiled, not opening his eyes. “Didn’t expect you back so soon.”

“I couldn’t stay away.” Loki nuzzled Steve’s neck and ran his fingertips lightly over Bucky’s chest. Bucky stretched and reached for him.

Loki had them both aroused in moments and they pulled off his clothes and put him on his hands and knees between the two of them. He reveled, as always, in being used by them, by his beautiful valiant lovers, both of them filling him.

And if by some chance Frigga had been watching their reunion from Hlíðskjálf, she would have ceased to watch once their lovemaking began.

When they had all reached completion, Steve began a new round of caresses. Loki caught his wrist and held it.

“Not just yet. Get dressed. We are departing for Vanaheim at once.”

Chapter End Notes

Y’all didn’t think it was going to be that easy, did you?
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

Loki, Steve and Bucky visit Vanaheim.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve and Bucky dressed swiftly in casual clothes. Then Loki cast his glamour, changing their faces and making their clothes look like flowing tunics and slacks. Presumably that was Van fashion. Maybe princes couldn’t go around in public without being mobbed. Like movie stars. Or superheroes.

Then Loki did his jazz hands and a weird angular purple contraption appeared in them. He glanced at them. “My loves, please do not mention this device to anyone. It is only to be used when absolutely necessary.”

Steve didn’t see why it had to be secret, but he trusted his lover, his friend, his shield-brother. He and Bucky both nodded.

Loki must have done something, because the device started to glow. And then they were hurtling through the universe, and after only a minute they were somewhere else. Somewhere else where it was high noon, and when they stepped out of the small quartz building where they’d landed the wide clean sunny streets were full of people.

When Steve had made his brief visit to Asgard, he had been too worried over Bucky’s mind being healed to properly appreciate being on an alien planet. The main thing he recalled was endless high-ceilinged walls of gold. Real gold, the science gang had assured him later; apparently gold conducted magic well, like electricity or something.

This time Steve was going to appreciate the trip. From the descriptions he’d heard of Vanaheim, Steve had expected it to look like Asgard except crystal where Asgard was gold.

It didn’t. Both were beautiful, that was the only parallel.

But Asgard was formal and restrained, stark golden rooms with almost nothing in them, tall soaring buildings meant to intimidate.

Vanaheim was more… casual in its beauty. The buildings were smaller, and as Steve had heard, the walls were mostly made of opaque quartz or clear gleaming glass. You could see right into many of the buildings the three of them passed, people going about their business, and the people seemed more lively than the ceremonious Asgardians. They were all talking to each other, laughing, and now and then someone would be playing some sort of musical instrument, intent on their own thoughts. Most of them were wearing flowing clothes like the illusions Loki had put on them, but there was variation. Two tall beautiful women walked by in form-fitting garb embroidered elaborately in silver and gold. A few people were wearing armor similar to that of Asgard.

There were plants everywhere. Trees gave gentle shelter to every building, dappling the sunlight.
Vines coiled over most of the walls, and flowers and fruits just overflowed from every little yard, much to the approval of the birds and butterflies that filled the air.

Asgard was beautiful, but Vanaheim felt more like a place where people lived.

Looking around it and reflecting that Loki’s mother was from this realm, Steve thought he was seeing more of what had made Loki the person he was. He was the product of three realms—four, now, because Steve felt certain that Midgard had left its mark on Loki as well.

When Steve had gone to war back in the 40s, he had found himself realizing how small his world had been. Encountering aliens after awakening from his long sleep had done the same. And now, now he was realizing just how little he knew of the universe. How many different things had gone into forming one of the men he loved.

Loki was striding along swiftly, apparently knowing exactly where he was going. Steve and Bucky hurried to keep up.

Maybe it was the illusion, but Loki’s expression looked kind of grimly intent. Well, knowing Loki, he was probably worrying that the serum wouldn’t be reproduced in time to give it to the other Avengers. Steve hadn’t realized how selfish he had been, asking Loki to fall in love with him just to mourn him for four thousand years. And then asking him to do the same with Bucky. And Loki had, both times. Just handed over his heart for the breaking.

Steve forced himself not to think about it all. They were on a mission.

Loki led them to a row of small aircraft, gracefully shaped structures of crystal and a gleaming blue-green metal. He took out a little blue crystal and a spark came out of it and animated the craft. Loki stepped onto it, gesturing them to follow.

“What’s that crystal thing?” Bucky asked, taking a seat as Loki laid his elegant hands on the controls.

Loki smiled a little. “I suppose you could call it a credit card.”

And then the craft lifted into the air, just like Howard Stark’s prototype flying car at the World’s Fair a literal lifetime ago, except that Stark Senior’s car had sputtered and fallen to the ground after a few seconds, whereas this Vanir one just rose like a bird and soared smoothly into the sky. No smoke or exhaust, no sound except for the wind.

They flew away from the gleaming quartz buildings over towering trees bursting with pale green leaves. Every few minutes they would pass an isolated building, usually on top of a hill or mountain.

Loki landed the craft in a valley that Steve didn’t even see until they were descending into it. The building beneath the tree cover was made out of quartz almost the same shade of green as the leaves. It was effective camouflage, but Loki had seemed to know precisely where to find it.

Disembarking, Loki approached the building. He stopped after a moment, gesturing to Steve and Bucky to wait. The illusions on all of them vanished. There was a shimmer in the air, and then Loki continued, beckoning for them to follow.

Steve could only guess what was going on. That this was the super-advanced version of the 21st century tech he was still getting used to on Earth.

The three of them entered the building and took seats in a blossom-scented room of glass walls. Steve looked at Loki.
“Our hostess’s system will alert her to our presence when she is at a stopping point in her studies,” Loki explained. “If we interrupted her, her wrath would be long lasting.”

Bucky made himself more comfortable in the well cushioned chair. “Shoulda brought something to read.”

Loki finally seemed to relax. “I could tell you a few stories about my years studying on Vanaheim,” he offered.

And he did, talking a little about the magic he had studied but mainly about the ridiculous pranks he and his fellow students had gotten up to. Apparently young people were the same in every realm, even if they were royalty with magical powers.

“I was the best of us at casting glamours, so they asked me to create the illusion to make the magical crystals look different colors before they rearranged them. Naturally when the priestesses tried to use them, the results were spectacular. An entire wall of the temple had to be replaced.”

“We were naughty kids,” Bucky said, “but we never knocked down a wall.”

“You never had magical crystals at your disposal. Anyhow, Ingemar told the high priestess that she had seen my friends near the crystal room beforehand, so I told the high priestess that I had been the one responsible for the entire thing.”

“You didn’t rat out your friends?” Not that Steve was surprised. This was Loki all over.

“They would have been sent home in disgrace and could not have continued their studies, which would have broken their hearts. The high priestess could not banish a prince of Asgard, however much she wanted to.” Loki shook his head, rueful. “She made certain the rest of my time there was as uncomfortable as possible, however. I was assigned all the most onerous and tedious duties of the temple. And of course I had to repair the wall.”

“I hope your friends appreciated it.”

“Gullveig did. Reidun did not. I confess that at the time, I had it in the back of my mind that their reactions would show me whether they were true friends or not.”

“You were testing them?”

Loki looked embarrassed. “I suppose I was.”

Steve couldn’t hide that he didn’t like that. Not that he loved Loki the less for it, but it was cold.

*He’s a prince, Steve reminded himself. He has to know what people are made of.*

Loki was pinning Steve with his gaze. “That is how I know that Gullveig is the one to entrust this problem to.”

“Because she owes you?”

“Oh, Gullveig has done me many favors over the years. Her chief compensation for solving our problem will be the satisfaction of figuring it out.”

“Sounds like our own Science Gang.”

“Very much so.”
Just then a voice came out of a crystal on the wall. “I am in my laboratory. You may enter.”

Loki seemed to steel himself. Why, when this sorceress was his friend?

“Follow me and do not touch anything,” Loki instructed, as if Tony’s workshops hadn’t taught them that already.

The walls of the laboratory were lined with shelves that were all crammed with books, scrolls and data crystals. The equipment on the long tables wasn’t as unfamiliar as Steve might have expected. It was very reminiscent of the Science Gang’s toys, except that it was mostly crystal instead of metal.

Gullveig looked about Loki’s age, a dark-haired woman of middling height. She didn’t even look at them when they entered, intent on displays in the air similar to Jarvis’s holograms. The displays, as usual, made no sense whatsoever to Steve.

“I have a challenge for you, Gullveig.”

With reluctance, Gullveig waved the displays away and turned to him, giving Steve and Bucky a fleeting glance. “I should hope you were not troubling me for anything less.”

“I must request that you keep this project in the strictest confidence until it is complete. Some people may not approve.”

“Really!” Gullveig looked more interested already.

Loki put a data crystal into a projector—he kept a couple of those on Earth and the Science Gang had rigged up a way to transfer data from Van crystals to Midgardian electronics and back—and began to explain about the serum. Images appeared above the projector as Loki spoke, starting with Steve as he had been before.

Gullveig looked from the image to Steve several times. Steve hated being stared at, except by his boyfriends, but he expected it by now. “Astounding,” she murmured.

“My shield-brother Bruce Banner is one of Midgard’s greatest sorcerers, and is one of the realm’s foremost experts on this serum. He tells me Midgard is nowhere near reproducing it.”

“I’m amazed they did it once,” Gullveig said, looking at more arcane displays.

“As was I. We have underestimated humans greatly.”

“So it would seem.”

“Humans deserve more. They deserve lifespans equal to ours. And with this serum, they may have it.”

Gullveig’s eyes widened. “The sorcerer who solves this….”

“Will be renowned throughout the realms. Her name will be spoken in the same breath as Eitri’s and Ivaldi’s.”

Steve had no idea who they were, but now wasn’t the time to ask.

Gullveig took that prospect in. Then frowned abruptly. “Why did Frigga not summon me to Asgard about this project?”

“I told you, this must be kept quiet. You know there is still considerable prejudice towards certain
realms. Such as Midgard. And Jotunheim.”

Gullveig tilted her head, looking up at Loki. “I heard. I am sorry.”

Loki just gave a lopsided smile. “I am used to being a frost giant by now.”

“Are you.”

“You’d be amazed what you can get used to.”

“I couldn’t believe your father did that to you.”

“I have no father.”

Gullveig nodded, solemn. “But you have a mother.” She held Loki’s eyes. “And she sent you to me with this assignment.”

Loki returned her gaze. “Would I be here otherwise?”

A silence stretched. “I am already occupied with several projects.”

“You always did drive a hard bargain, Gullveig. Let’s not haggle. I brought a token of my appreciation.” Loki did his jazz hands and a little dark grey gizmo with a red gemstone in it appeared.

Gullveig’s eyes widened. “A Zeta Reticulan scanner! How did you get it?”

“You heard of their encroachments on Midgard. They left a few trinkets when we dispatched them.”

Gullveig reached for the scanner, but Loki’s hand closed over it. “When you’ve cracked it, this is yours. You have my word.”

Looking at the scanner, she waved a hand. “Oh, very well. Is all of the data there?”

“Everything we’ve learned about the serum.”

“I’ll need samples from your friends.”

Steve had expected that. Ever since he’d woken up scientists had been taking bits of him to examine.

Gullveig had a device that took blood samples from him and Bucky without it hurting even a tiny bit. Then it cast a display of double helixes into the air. She peered at them as if she could read them.

“I will tell you when I have something,” she murmured after a moment.

“I must ask that you make this your highest priority,” Loki reminded her. “My other shield-brothers will have mere decades if you do not succeed.”

“I know.” She did not look up. “I will expect you to remember this always, Silvertongue. Including when you are king.”

“I expect that my brother will be king, not I. But I—”

Gullveig looked to him, faintly startled. “Thor?”

“I was not referring to Laufey’s other sons.”
“You think Thor will be king of Asgard?” Gullveig seemed surprised.

Loki sighed. “Most likely. And if the Norns are kind I will be his vizier. And if I am, I will remember what you have done for me, and for Midgard.”

Gullveig seemed amused by this idea. “I see.” She lightly swatted his arm. “Go away, I have work to do.” She smiled at the displays. “I am looking forward to the results.”

Chapter End Notes

Eitri created Mjolnir and Ivaldi created Gungnir. I figure they’re like the Norse myth equivalents of Einstein and Tesla.
Chapter 87

Chapter Summary

The Avengers celebrate the holidays, and Loki gets a message from Gullveig.

“You’re reading a lot these days,” Steve remarked to Bucky a few days later, dropping onto the sand beside him.

Bucky looked up from his Starkpad. He was stretched on a blanket on the beach of Carbonell Cay. He’d get back in the water later. Steve, meanwhile, was gleaming with water droplets, like a Greek god.

To go with Bucky’s Norse god. A matched set.

Bucky waved the Starkpad a little. “Trying to catch up.” He paused. “I’m thinking about going to college.”

Steve looked so damned happy at that. They had barely mentioned it back when they were teenagers, but Steve had known Bucky would have liked the chance to know more about the universe. To be something smart, like an engineer or even a scientist. But back then, it had been impossibly out of reach.

Now, Bucky had enough dough and enough years. More than enough years. He wasn’t even sure what to do with so many.

“I hope you do, then.”

“I’m not ready yet. We’ll see.”

Playful yelling from the sea made them both look out at the waves. All the non-Science-Gang Avengers were in the water, splashing each other and yelling ridiculous taunts.

(Natasha in a bikini was one of the most glorious sights in the Nine Realms. Bucky was genuinely remorseful that shooting that scientist through her had deprived less understanding viewers of it.)

A shadow abruptly crossed Steve’s face as he watched Sam and Clint racing each other through the waves.

Bucky put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. He got it. Steve had already seen everyone he cared about die or grow old while he had been asleep, and now it was going to happen again. Unless.

“Loki’s been living with this for years,” Bucky said softly.

Steve nodded, looking even sadder. “I think finding out that we’ll be around for longer has made losing the rest of them harder for him.”

“Yeah. I’ve seen him looking gloomy when he thinks no one’s watching.” Bucky wanted to tell Steve to be happy with Loki in four hundred years when Bucky died, but maybe he should wait a while before saying that. Like a few decades.
Besides, Gullveig might come through for them.

“Let’s try to keep everyone too busy to notice,” Bucky said, giving Steve a little shake.

Steve nodded. “Shouldn’t be too hard. We have holidays ahead.”

The Avengers returned to New York for both Thanksgiving and Christmas so they could make appearances in hospitals and soup kitchens, cheering the unfortunate on the holidays. Nobody talked about it much, but Bucky could see that all of them liked being able to do some good in ways other than beating up bad guys. Tony was right, they all had a lot more to contribute than that.

The stuffing came out fine, so Bruce didn’t Hulk out.

Loki came back early from Asgard again on his next visit, looking weary. The queen had kept him busy renegotiating the treaty with Muspelheim, he explained before changing the subject. His boyfriends took the hint and set to distracting him.

A week later the Bifrost shimmered on the island’s veranda and Volstagg stepped out.

“I thought it was Sif’s turn,” Loki said, a little taken aback.

Volstagg shrugged. “Oh, there was a cosmic dust cloud on Mapiya. Frigga sent aid to them and encouraged the other realms to do so as well, and Sif is supervising the distribution.” Volstagg guffawed. “Imagine Sif on a mission of peace!”

Loki smiled widely. “I am.”

Steve had told Bucky that Sif hoped to be queen to Loki’s king. Bucky was starting to think that wasn’t such a bad idea.

The Science Gang was mostly absorbed in building the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, but the rest of the gang threw themselves into fundraisers and stuff to give as many people as possible a merry Christmas.

This year everyone stuck to the “cheap gifts only” rule… except that after everyone was done exchanging books and CDs and stuff, the two newest members were given what Tony called their “Avengers starter kits”. Bucky and Sam both got everything the Avengers had gifted each other with the previous year: large boxes of their own memorabilia, drawings of them as fairy tales by Steve, knickknacks from Bruce’s world travels, Asgardian clothes and weapons from Loki, and five million bucks apiece from Tony.

Sam had a lot of trouble with that last one. The whole team had a long talk about it. Tony kept reiterating that he needed to use his good luck to make the world a better place, and funding superheroes was one part of that. (Along with funding research, creating jobs, and donating mind-boggling amounts to charity. Tony was the ideal of what a ridiculously rich person should be.) Natasha encouraged him to think of the money as an Avengers resource, since sometimes saving the world required cash in hand. Sam was eventually able to look at it that way, but Bucky didn’t think he’d have taken it if the rest of them hadn’t already.
In January, Tony announced that the Einstein-Rosen Bridge was almost finished. In a matter of weeks they could use it to travel the Nine Realms.

Bucky was going to get to see everything that had been a dream out of pulp magazines in his original life. And with two gorgeous boyfriends who could love him openly in full sight of the entire world.

Only a few days after Tony’s announcement, one night after Bucky had serviced both of his boyfriends, Loki got up from the bed, stretching luxuriously. “I must leave you for an hour or two, my loves.”

“What, you got a bit on the side? Steve and I aren’t enough for your voracious appetites?”

Loki’s smile was like a crescent moon. “Actually, I received a message today from Gullveig.”

Steve and Bucky both sat up, attentive.

“I thought it might take years, and so did she, but apparently she hit on a bit of luck.”

“Has she solved it?” Steve whispered.

“She has. I will return shortly.”

A little over an hour later, Loki returned with a large Van data crystal. “Wake everyone up,” he commanded. “We have a gift for them.”
Chapter 88

Chapter Summary

Loki bestows long life upon Midgard.

When Loki dragged them all (the Avengers plus Jane, Pepper being in New York at the moment) out of bed in the middle of the night, Bruce had a pretty good guess about what was up. Still, he kept quiet as he and the others took seats around the common room and Loki stood before them all to explain.

“My friends, a few months ago I told a great sorceress on Vanaheim about Dr. Erskine’s serum. I gave her everything that is known about it. She and I knew it might take her years, but it happens that there was a common thread between Dr. Erskine’s work and a fairly obscure matter she has studied, and thanks to that connection she has succeeded already.”

Tony’s dark eyes were enormous as he surveyed the faces of Loki and the soldiers. “She reproduced it?” he managed, voice hushed.

Loki was radiant.

“She did. But there is something more you should know before you consider taking it.”

Steve licked his lips, trying to restrain his smile. “The serum has given me a longer lifespan.”

Everyone sat up straighter. Bruce spoke up. “I started to suspect this fall when I was examining Steve’s and Bucky’s cells. Telomeres,” he said to Tony.

Tony and Jane both nodded at once, not needing more explanation on that detail. Lucky thing neither of them had been in the room when Bruce had first noticed and blurted that out.

“Steve now has an Asgardian lifespan.”

“Five thousand years?” Sam managed, staring at Steve. Bruce thought for a second how strange this must be for Sam. From the start, Sam had seen Steve as a human being as much as a superhero. In Sam’s eyes he was Steve as much as he was Captain America. That was why Steve had befriended him so quickly, and why their friendship had continued to grow.

But now Steve was something larger than life again. A human who was likely to live for five millennia.

You’ll be on that list too, Sam, Bruce thought.

“Gullveig’s version of the procedure is much simpler,” Loki was explaining. “And should be considerably less painful. Gullveig had the benefit of a great deal of knowledge from other advanced sorcerers.”

“How does it work?” Tony asked. He was hardly breathing.

Loki did his magic gesture and a crystal device appeared in his hands. Fine silver-white filaments
connecting several pounds of crystals. Loki did something to it and it stood up, creating a net into which a person could step.

Without comment, Bucky stepped into it first.

Of its own accord, the crystals began to glow, light leaping from one of them to another. Bucky gave a yell, but it didn’t sound too bad, certainly not compared to what Bruce had expected. In any case, after maybe half a minute the crystals stopped and Bucky stepped out, looking younger, healthier.

Meeting first Steve’s eyes, then Loki’s, Bucky suddenly tore his shirt over his head and looked down at himself.

Thanks to the Cay’s beach, they had all seen most of Bucky. His whole body was covered with scars.

That was, it had been. Not anymore.

Bruce could tell that it was taking all of Tony’s self-control not to jump into the device immediately. But Tony was Tony and he joined everyone in making amazed exclamations over Bucky’s refurbishment and letting Bucky assure them he felt fine and everything was working before he demanded his turn.

Loki and Tony shared a special smile for a second as Tony stepped into the device. Bruce quietly echoed it. It had been obvious from the start that Tony was Loki’s best buddy on the team. As for Tony, Loki and Bruce were tied for the position. That was fine with Bruce. Tony was small, but there was still plenty of him to go around. An awful lot of Tony was packed into his five and a half feet.

Speaking of which, it annoyed Tony no end that he was the only one of them who didn’t get taller from the serum. He looked like he was twenty again, and the scar where the arc reactor had been was now a barely-noticeable tracing of lines, but his height hadn’t budged.

“I thought I was gonna be a six footer like Steve,” Clint joked as he stepped out of the device with a younger, somewhat taller and more muscular body.

“The serum makes you into the best possible result of your own genes,” Loki explained. “Steve’s childhood illnesses and malnourishment, and his mother’s illnesses, meant that his body wasn’t able to develop properly. Nature gave him an excellent blueprint to work from. The serum simply fulfilled that promise at last.”

“What would it do to you?”

“Make me ill for a few days. This device is specific to humans.”

Sam stepped out of it, two inches taller than he had been and more muscled. He looked down at himself and stretched his arms with satisfaction. “You and me are going for a run in the morning,” he told Steve. “Bout time I showed you who’s boss.”

“Big talk.” Steve looked so damned happy. Like he’d just gotten a puppy for Christmas.

Loki looked even happier. He’d thought he was going to lose what Bruce strongly suspected were the best friends he’d ever had in what to him was a fleeting few decades. Now he knew they were going to stick around. He would get to keep them.

No doubt that was why he kept blinking like that. His boyfriends were right, he was a sap.
When everyone else had gone, they all looked at Bruce, who looked at Loki.

“The treatment will cure you,” Loki said quietly. “I asked Gullveig about you in particular. If you undergo this, you will never be the Hulk again.”

Bruce had been thinking this over ever since Loki had said he would put advanced sorcerers on the project. He didn’t need to contemplate it more now.

He stepped in.

It did hurt. Not horribly. It was like a mild electric shock or something. And like having a really bad flu for about ten seconds. And then it was over, and Bruce felt like he’d just had a nine-hour nap and then a good breakfast with strong coffee.

“If you still want to superhero,” Tony said as Bruce stepped out, “I’ll build you a suit.”

Bruce smiled. “I think I’ll take you up on that. I’m still pretty angry.”

Tony had his cell phone out. Natasha (now four inches taller than she had been, and every bit as gorgeous) put a light hand on his arm. “Speaking of angry, Pepper will be if you wake her up right now.”

“The device will still be here in the morning,” Loki assured him. “A few hours will make no difference.”

Tony hesitated before reluctantly putting his phone down. “Jarvis? At dawn. Pepper, Rhodey, Happy.”

Steve caught his breath. “Peggy.”

Loki smiled at him.

Sam was clearly just starting to realize the magnitude they were dealing with. “Y’all. Who else are we giving this to?”

Loki’s reply was prompt. “Anyone who wants it.”

Clint nodded approval, even though his words were warning. “Some people are going to try to hoard this for themselves. For whoever they figure the ‘right people’ are.”

“Fortunately, we are friends with Tony Stark.”

Tony grinned, wolfish. “Did you say these things are simple?”

Loki produced a Van data crystal and put it into the converter they had developed so that Jarvis could read it. Displays similar to Jarvis’s holograms sprang into the air. “Here are the plans. The equipment is not unobtainable for most people, and the instructions not unduly difficult. Put this on the internet and all humanity can duplicate it. There will be no keeping it out of reach.”

“You heard the alien, Jarvis. Release it the minute our favorite buddies have had the treatment. Carpet-bomb the internet with it.”

“With pleasure, sir.”

Tony was looking at the plans. “So there’s a few different kinds of crystal that will work.”
“Including quartz.”

“Yeah. Still, just in case someone tries to, I dunno, buy up all the crystals so the rabble can’t make these, I’m gonna manufacture a few million of these puppies and drop ‘em from airplanes and stuff.”

“Tony, you are a really swell friend to have. In so many ways.”

“No way can I sleep now. I’m getting to work on the Bridge. You guys coming?”

The Science Gang departed for the workshop, Loki claiming kisses first. Everyone else went down to the beach to swim in the moonlight. Sam and Steve decided there was no reason to wait till dawn for their race.

Steve won, but not by much.
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

Midgard deals with its new longevity.

(Note: I had a mistake in the chapter earlier so I had to delete, edit and repost it.)

A week flew by. Frigga must have known about Loki’s gift to Midgard within a day, two at the most, but she was apparently not in a hurry to call him to account.

Not that he doubted she would. Perhaps, awful thought, she was so angry that she was putting off decreeing his punishment until she had calmed.

Loki did not care what that punishment was, as no doubt she knew. He would have considered his own death a small price to pay for this. Also, Frigga was both a loving mother and a just monarch; Loki shuddered to think what Odin might have done to him for this, but Frigga would not do such things to the worst criminal, let alone her son.

No, what he dreaded was the look he would see in her eyes. Her disappointment in him. Norns forbid, she might even believe his disobedience had sprung from disrespect. Or ingratitude. If she did nothing but feel that, it would be worse than any tortures Odin might have put him through.

Loki kept busy working on the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, consulting with diplomats and helping the Avengers put down a few riots that broke out over the longevity treatment.

Midgard reacted to the reformulated Erskine-Gullveig Treatment precisely as Loki had expected. Dictators, both secular and religious, attempted to ban it. The Norns must have been on Loki’s side, however, because the simplicity of the process made banning it a practical impossibility. Religious authorities with no political position gave ringing speeches urging humans to refuse the demonic treatment offered by a pagan god who had come to corrupt Midgard after failing to conquer it, comparing Loki to the serpent in the garden of Eden. Some compared him to a certain other putative being believed to wear horns.

(The Avengers found that exceedingly funny.)

Some farsighted clerics of various faiths publicly declared that the Treatment was clearly a gift from God and not a sin at all. Loki assumed that they knew humans were not going to turn away from long life and intended to step into the leadership when their more adamant superiors died of old age.

Numerous secular thinkers decried the change as well, with fuzzier reasoning. “Such a radical change will rob us of our very humanity!” was a typical declaration. Just what “humanity” was and how longer life could destroy it was invariably unspecified. Tony wanted to lay bets that all of these people would get the treatment as their own ages advanced. None of the Avengers would take the bet.

The leaders of China and a few other nations insisted that citizens should apply for government permission to take the treatment, which would be licensed to those who made sufficient contribution to society. Their citizens blithely ignored them.
Certain pundits made grandly phrased complaints that now “freeloaders” were going to be allowed to freeload for much longer. This turned out to fragment their audience. Factions split along several faultlines and they were too busy arguing with each other to effectively oppose anyone else.

A minority of people chose not to take the treatment, from religious or personal conviction. Loki had known some would. Some of those would eventually take it anyway, when the diseases of age or the fear of death grew. A few would cling to their convictions into the grave. That was their choice and their right.

Loki spent several long sessions closeted with government ministers, sharing his knowledge of statecraft to help them make the needed changes. Some, of course, were too wedded to their ideologies or beholden to their own greed to do what should be done. Loki offered what he could.

Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes visited the island. When Loki greeted him with his full title, as he always did, the casual reply was, “Oh, hey, Loki. Call me Rhodey.”

The gesture was lost on no one, but no one diluted it by putting anything into words. Loki could not help the smile that spread across his face.

Loki’s human friends were trying to keep their own optimism in reasonable bounds, but of course it couldn’t entirely be helped. Not when every day brought news of Midgard’s powerful behaving with unaccustomed good sense. There had only been a few days since the Treatment’s release, but already better laws were being passed and drawn up, and tycoons were changing their companies’ policies. Now that the great and powerful would live to see the consequences to the environment or the economy, they suddenly had much more care for those consequences.

Loki had been right: humans had made foolish choices because they knew they would not have to live with those choices for long. He expected to see wiser personal choices as well, once the prospect of five millennia had begun to sunk in.

His friends could see that he was troubled, but they attributed it to the disruption he had caused Midgard. They all put long hours into keeping that disruption at manageable levels, keeping busy. Late in the evenings, they created a party atmosphere, with music and good food and Asgardian mead, which they could now all drink without harm.

“All we had to do was sacrifice two of our comeliest youths to a pagan god,” Tony joked one night.

“I did this to ensure myself an adequate supply of humans who can gratify Asgardian lust.”

“I knew he’d come through for us if we just kept flinging hot superheroes at him. I was gonna give you two more months before giving you more incentive.” Tony leaned back on the sofa, smirking.

“Oh? How?”

“By making the trio a quartet. Hey, if two gorgeous heroic boyfriends weren’t enough to get you off your ass, surely three would be the tipping point.”

The others rolled their eyes or grinned or both.

Loki pulled a thoughtful expression. “So what you’re saying is, I should’ve held out.”

One week after Loki had given them the Erskine-Gullveig Treatment, the Einstein-Rosen Bridge was finished. During the last few hours of work on it, Loki suddenly understood why Frigga had not yet summoned him. She wanted him to finish this task first. She was allowing him to bring his labor on Midgard to a close.
As Tony made the last few embellishments, a cold hard pit formed in Loki’s stomach. His time was short.

Tony summoned the rest of the Avengers to witness his test. Loki had given them the coordinates of a lifeless planet whose conditions were not dangerous, so Tony traveled there in a suit he had made for the occasion and returned in one piece.

They were all excitedly discussing possibilities when Loki felt the seiðr of his communications crystal. It was a few seconds before he could make himself take it out of his pocket. Because he knew.

Tony glanced over, seeing the crystal in Loki’s hands. “Tell them you’ll call them back.”

Loki couldn’t help a small chuckle at that, despite the circumstances. “Queen Frigga requests to be the first nonhuman to travel by means of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge.”

That got everyone’s attention. “Now?”

Loki drew a deep breath. “Now.”
Chapter 90

Chapter Summary

Frigga determines Loki's punishment for his disobedience.

Chapter Notes

I have really enjoyed watching all of you squirm in the comments. *diabolical cackle*

The Avengers all gathered around the Bridge as Loki programmed it. A moment later, Frigga stepped out of the shower of light, face stony.

The humans all inclined their heads formally. Frigga ignored them entirely.

Loki stepped forward and dropped to one knee before her, fist over his heart, head bowed. Frigga stood looking down upon him, silent, unmoving.

The two of them remained in that tableau long enough that the humans began to realize that something was wrong.

Steve was the one to ask. “Um, Loki? What’s going on?”

“Rise and tell them what is going on, Loki.” Frigga’s voice was accusing, as gentle as accusing could be.

He rose and met her gaze at last, hoping she would see the apology in his eyes. Her own gaze was chilly. Then he looked around at his friends. His shield-brothers.

“I neglected to mention that my queen did not grant me permission to ask for Vanaheim’s help in rediscovering the serum. She forbad me.”

“What?”

“Why?” That was Tony, indignant.

She stepped to him, and even Tony shut up at her expression. She lifted her hand and lightly touched the place in his chest where the arc reactor had been. Where he had had to poison himself with a device that kept him alive long enough to stop those who tortured him and revealed that they were doing evil with weapons he had naively intended for defense.

“You need to ask?”

Tony didn’t answer in words, but in his expression they all saw how many times he had engaged in this precise argument with himself. Whether humanity deserved his efforts to serve it, and whether deserving was the point, and a great many other threads to the tangled question.
Loki drew a ragged breath and addressed them all.

“My queen believed that we should not meddle so far in Midgard. But I could not obey her in this. This is the only time in my entire life that I have disobeyed my sovereign. Mother, I am sorry to have had to defy you.”

He dared to look at her then. Her face was almost expressionless. He looked at the floor.

Clint put his hand on his forehead. “Oh, Loki, you idiot.”

Loki smiled at him. “I love you, too.”

The Avengers were all on full alert now.

“Your Majesty, what are you going to do to him?” Steve asked, expression stricken.

She gave him a weary glance. “Nothing too terrible. He is my son. Besides which, Asgard needs him. It isn’t as if princes grow on trees. I am certainly not going to make more of them.”

Both of Loki’s boyfriends involuntarily stepped closer to him.

“No!” Tony elbowed his way to Loki’s side and grabbed his arm. “Loki, we’ll give you asylum here. No way will Earth refuse after what you’ve done for us.” Several of the others nodded confirmation.

Loki smiled sadly, closing his eyes for a moment. “My friends, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. But I cannot accept. My mother slew her own husband and took on the tremendous burden of rule in order to save my life. I must face the consequences of my actions now.”

Jane burst out, “But—but wait! Loki’s supposed to be serving here to make reparations for invading us!”

Frigga was unimpressed. “Loki has given every one of you five thousand years of life you would not otherwise have had. I think his debt is paid.”

Loki steeled himself. “I await your judgment, my queen.”

“You have been trained to advise your sovereign. Advise me. What should I do with a valuable subject who has thus disobeyed me?”

He sighed deeply. He had been prepared for this question. “I would suggest an onerous duty. On a realm other than Midgard.”

“The ambassador to Niflheim requires a new secretary.”

Gloom swept through Loki. A responsible but unprestigious job, on a realm so dull that people joked that it was the land of the dead.

“Very well, my queen.”

“The position will only be temporary. In fifty years I shall find a permanent replacement.”

Loki could not help wincing. But he made no protest.

“Your new duties will begin in a few days. You are returning to Asgard with me at once. You have ten minutes to say your goodbyes.”
“Yes, my queen.”

Frigga gestured, and the Bifrost took her away.

The Avengers were standing around in shock. It only took them a few seconds to crowd around Loki, all of them trying to hug him at once.

“I cannot believe you did this. Okay, I believe it, but….”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“You know why.”

“Seriously, you can stay with us. We owe you.”

Loki put a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “There is more to consider. Refusing my sovereign’s decreed punishment would mean renouncing my position in Asgard. Possibly even my citizenship. Thor will be king of Asgard one day. I wish to be at his side when that day comes.”

*Because he’ll do a terrible job without me,* Loki did not say aloud, but they all knew it.

Had he been wrong to give up his own chance at the throne? Would securing it for himself have been his true duty to Asgard? But he could not have let his friends die young.

Tony stared up at him. He had borne enough responsibility in his life that he understood this. That didn’t mean he had to like it.

“Loki.” Natasha’s voice was quiet. “Your debt is not infinite.”

Loki met her gaze.

“Yeah. I understand why you have to go. Just remember that, okay?”

“I will.” He managed a smile. “My friends, fifty years is not forever. We will feast and battle and do sorcery together again. You know that dreary as this prospect is, it is well worth giving you the lifespans you deserve.”

Sam clapped him on the shoulder. “That was… that was real.” He looked around at the others. “Guys, let’s give Loki a minute alone with his boyfriends, okay?”

“Thank you, Sam.” And Loki was genuinely grateful. Sam had understood.

A few moments later the three of them were alone in the room. Loki indulged in a long, slow kiss from each of them, Bucky first, then Steve.

“I can’t let you go,” Steve whispered into his hair.

Loki let himself lean against Steve’s muscled form. “You have to. You know that.” He shook them lightly. “I want you two to be happy together.”

“You really are a sap.”

“Jerk. I’ll need you and the punk to look after each other for the next fifty years.”

“I’ve been looking after this punk since we were kids.”
Steve gave them each a narrow look. “You’re leaving me alone with this guy?”

Loki found himself grinning widely. His boyfriends were so adorable. “You’ll forget all about me.”

“Not if I live to be five thousand. Oh wait.”

Loki gave each of them another kiss. “I love you both. Terribly.”

Jarvis’s voice broke the moment gently. “Pardon me, sirs, but it has been nine minutes and forty seconds.”

Loki squeezed both their hands, then stepped back from them. They stared at him, wide-eyed.

A few seconds later, the Bifrost took him back to Asgard.
Chapter 91

Chapter Summary

The Avengers deal with losing Loki.

After Loki’s departure, the Avengers (plus Jane) just stood around not speaking for what felt like a long time. At length they wandered to the veranda and sat down, most of them staring into space.

Bucky kept close to Steve. Steve looked shellshocked. Loki had told him to look after the punk, not that he’d needed to be told. At the moment it was the only thing he could do for either of them.

“I can’t believe,” Bruce began, but his voice trailed off. He believed it. They all did.

“Maybe,” Natasha began, and had to pause.

Clint silently took her hand.

“Maybe we should drink to him,” she finished.

“There’s more mead in his closet.” Steve’s voice was a monotone.

Bucky stood up, giving Steve’s arm a tug. “Let’s go. We’ll get the nice glasses.”

The two of them went into the room the three of them had shared for the last few months. Bucky found himself looking away from the huge bed, which was going to feel awfully quiet and empty now.

Steve allowed himself to be loaded with bottles and silently followed Bucky to the kitchen.

Bucky had given up trying to figure out a way to carry eight glasses in his hands and was arranging them on a tray when Steve suddenly blurted it out.

“Bucky.” His eyes met Bucky’s, full of pleading. “I’m going with him.”

Bucky froze, looking at him.

“We can’t stop the queen from sending him to Niflheim, but she doesn’t rule Earth. Or Niflheim, either. She can’t stop me from going there to be with him. I let him go once. I can’t do it again.”

Bucky felt a smile spreading over his face. He plucked the bottles from Steve’s grasp, placed them on the counter with a thud, and proceeded to smooch the punk within an inch of his life.

“Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You’re coming with me?”

“Try and stop me.”

After another kiss they gathered everything up again and returned to the veranda to make their announcement.
They stepped outside to find all the Avengers busy on Starkphones and Starkpads, talking on the phone and sending emails like they were trying to unload shares on the stock exchange or something.

“Thanks for your help, Rhodey,” Bruce said before pressing the “end call” button and then selecting another number.

“Thanks, Pep,” Tony was saying into his own phone. “I’ll talk to the rest of them if you just deal with those guys.” He pressed the button and looked up at the soldiers. “There you are. Gimme a drink, I’m about to talk to senators and I can’t do that sober.”

The soldiers didn’t move. “Tony. Everyone,” Steve began. He gave them a few seconds to reach stopping points in their activity before saying, “Bucky and I have decided that we’re going to Niflheim with Loki. We can’t let him go there alone.”

“But—” Bruce stopped whatever objection he had been about to make.

“Frigga isn’t our queen. She can’t stop us,” Bucky pointed out.

Tony looked at them, calculation visible in his dark brown eyes. “You’re right,” he said slowly. “And you know what? If our plan doesn’t work, I’m going with you.”

“Plan? You made a plan while we were getting the booze?”

“So did you. But yeah.” Tony waved his phone. “We can’t just let Loki’s mom do that to him, even if he’s cool with it. Not after everything he’s done for us. We’re calling every politician and government official we have any pull with. Tomorrow a diplomatic expedition is going to Asgard, accompanied by the Avengers. They’re going to ask Queen Frigga to give Loki back to us.”

Bucky found himself gaping. “They’ve agreed to this?”

Tony shrugged. “Haven’t talked to them yet, but they will.”

He didn’t sound like he had any doubt. He was Tony Stark and he was going to get his way.

“But if she still says no, dammit, I’m going to Niflheim with you. Least I can do for him. I think we can liven up the next half century for him.”

“I’m going too,” Bruce said.

“I’m in,” said Sam.

Clint and Natasha exchanged a look. “Us too,” she said.

Steve was all misty-eyed. “Everybody. Thank you.”

“We’re not doing it for you, buddy.”

“Not only for you.”

“Pour the mead,” Tony instructed, “and then get on the phone. There must be politicians who’ll listen to Captain America.”

Steve smiled as he and Bucky complied.

Whatever happened, Bucky thought as he sipped his mead and watched them all make their calls, things were going to be okay.
Chapter 92

Chapter Summary

Loki returns to Asgard.

By the time Loki arrived in the Observatory, Frigga had already departed. The Gatekeeper was the only person present. She spoke to Loki with the respect due her prince, even though she must know he was in disgrace.

“Her Majesty bade me tell you to go to your chambers until she summons you.”

Loki nodded and headed for the door.

As he passed the Gatekeeper, her voice stopped him.

“Your Highness, of course you should not have defied our queen. But I must say, that was terribly brave of you.”

Startled, he only murmured a quiet, “Thank you,” in reply.

The corridors were empty except for guards. Loki went straight to his own quarters. Once he was inside, he went at once to his desk. Using a communications crystal, he wrote his mother a letter begging her pardon for his disobedience. He did not say that he was sorry, because he was not and she knew it; he merely asked for her forgiveness. He made no explanation; she knew his reasons, and he did not wish to sound as if he were excusing himself. He had done the only thing he possibly could.

The letter dispatched, he looked around the room. A stack of books and data crystals about Niflheim was on the desk, and a fresh flagon of mead waited on the table beside a loaf of his favorite soft brown bread and a bowl of assorted fruits.

One fruit was a yellow apple. He smiled at it, bleakly amused.

Then he took the top book from the stack and settled into his favorite chair beside the window with it.

He missed his human friends already. But he glowed inside at the thought of what he had been able to give them.

He forced his concentration onto the book.

Loki was hoping to hear from his mother, but apparently she was still angry.

After a few hours, Jorunn, the ambassador to Niflheim, was admitted. Loki invited him to take a seat and help himself to wine.

“So you’re going to be in Niflheim with me for a few years,” the man said, jovial. He was in middle age, kind and competent.
“Yes.”

Jorunn’s eyes twinkled. “Cheer up, it isn’t forever.”

“Indeed.”

“So let us discuss what your duties will be.” Jorunn spoke to Loki respectfully, despite being, temporarily, his employer. A disgraced prince was still a prince.

Loki tried to face the decades of tedium ahead of him calmly. He had endured far worse for far less.

Right before leaving, Jorunn gave him an indulgent look. “Of course you should not have disobeyed, but let’s be honest, the queen should not be surprised. You’re young and in love. What else would you have done?”

“Nothing else.”

In the evening, Loki was surprised not to be served a solitary dinner. Instead, several large platters were brought, and with them came Sif, Fandral and Volstagg.

Loki rose, surprised, and greeted them. “No doubt you know I am in disgrace. I am not certain I am permitted visitors.”

Sif shrugged. “The guards at your door were not ordered to turn us away.” She took a seat without waiting for permission in order to make her intentions clear and gestured to the servants to place the food on the table.

Loki decided the lack of orders must be a deliberate omission. Besides, Sif’s stubborn streak rivaled his own. “Then do join me, all of you.”

Volstagg sat down at once. The servants set down their trays and departed.

Fandral stepped closer to Loki. For a few seconds he seemed flirtatious, but apparently remembered that Loki’s lovers were no longer mortal and made his expression more friendly.

“You’ve gone and doomed yourself to Niflheim for your human shield-brothers and your human lovers,” he observed.

“I had to.”

“You’ve always been so loyal to your shield-brothers.”

Loki looked at Fandral in surprise for a second, and then he understood. Now that Fandral knew he had little chance of retaining royal favor via Loki’s bed, since Loki’s human lovers were going to live for millennia, he was hoping to keep some as Loki’s shield-brother. Reminding Loki that they had fought together in the past.

Sif looked at him. “Loki, you are loyal to your shield-brothers. You always were to us - me, Thor and the Three. I never used to realize how important that was, until you were loyal enough to ask the queen to spare us despite our treason.”

“Have any of you spoken to my mother recently?” Loki asked as he took his accustomed seat and allowed Fandral to pour him mead.

“She told me she would see you before you must go to Niflheim,” Sif replied.
His mother was furious with him. Gloom swept through Loki.

Volstagg gave him an avuncular look. “Don’t fret, sapling. She’ll come round. She’s your mother.”

Loki turned his attention to serving his plate rather than replying—chicken with zallin fruits, his favorite—but did not trouble to school his features.

Volstagg had never been exceptionally observant, but even he could read Loki’s expression. “Odin was no father to you. I used to tell him he should praise you more. But Frigga is as much your mother as if she had borne you.”

“She is,” Loki said quietly. He was obscurely comforted that Volstagg had made some effort to intercede for him, however useless it had been.

Sif held Loki’s gaze. “Loki, you know that I hold our queen in the highest regard. But she is not a warrior. She cannot know the sort of bond that forms between shield-brothers.”

Despite his gratification at this long-overdue regard from his brother’s shield-brothers, Loki could not let this pass. “I must dispute that. The bond between sorcerers who have studied together and done magic with each other is also very strong, for example.”

Sif thought this over as she served her plate.

“Perhaps so,” she said after a time, sounding dubious.

Fandral raised his goblet. “Shield-brothers, I would die to save any of you. I am not certain I could go to Niflheim for you.”

The others laughed and raised their goblets as well. Loki took the camaraderie that was offered.
Chapter 93

Chapter Summary

Earth petitions Frigga to send Loki back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Queen Frigga received the delegation from Earth in a conference room, not the throne room. Of course, the walls were still gold and the ceilings high and everything designed to inspire awe, but she had them seated around a huge table and listened to their petition.

Clint watched the queen’s face as she listened to everyone’s planned little speeches, trying to gauge her reaction. She had been clearly taken aback by the Avengers’ announcement that they intended to spend the next fifty years in Niflheim to keep Loki company. Now, as the diplomats the team had rounded up presented their arguments, she just looked thoughtful.

“The fact is, your Majesty, we need our superheroes now more than ever. I’m sure you can imagine how much disruption the Erskine-Gullveig Treatment is causing. If you’re willing to allow Loki to return to Earth with the Avengers, our governments are willing to make certain concessions.”

“Concessions.”

One of the American diplomats, who looked about twenty-five even though Clint knew he was in his sixties (thanks, Gullveig and Loki), spread his hands. “Unfortunately, you’re not wrong about the trouble that’s going to result from the Treatment, from such a huge change. Both on Earth and in our relations with other worlds. Captain Rogers,” he gestured to Steve, as if Frigga might forget that the guy in the red, white and blue suit was the one he was referring to, “told me that Loki believes that we humans make foolish decisions because we won’t live to face the results—only now we will.”

A Chinese diplomat—a strikingly beautiful woman who also looked twenty-five, Clint had no idea what her true age was—popped up the thread. “In return for letting us keep our superheroes during this time, we can negotiate some measures our world can take to alleviate the problems. Really, you’d be doing us a favor by insisting on a few points that some humans—powerful humans—are still too short-sighted to consider.”

“Now that we have to live on our planet for five thousand years, we might stop poisoning it,” another of them grumbled.

From there they got into more detailed suggestions. Treaties that would make Earth less likely to go to war with other worlds, for example.

After listening to this for a while, Frigga raised a hand. The diplomats fell silent. They were being very professional, but even for ambassadors, meeting an alien sorceress-queen had to be daunting.

“You Avengers,” she said, looking at each of them in turn. “You are prepared to spend half a century away from your home, just to keep Loki company?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve said. “He did this for us. He knew he’d get in trouble for it but he did it...
anyway. We can’t let him face the consequences alone.”

Clint spoke up for the first time. “We’re not going to be less loyal to him than he’s been to us.”

The others nodded. “We don’t leave a teammate behind,” Bucky said.

“That is one thing from his lovers.” Frigga looked sharply at the other Avengers. (The ambassadors had taken the news that Captain America was now polyamorous as well as bi with surprising calm. Maybe they’d used up all of the year’s quota of surprisedness on the Treatment and the Einstein-Rosen Bridge.) “What of the rest of you? Fifty years?”

“He gave us five thousand years, Your Majesty,” Sam replied. “We can give him fifty.”

Frigga looked at him, clearly pondering.

“Besides, the place would be dull without him,” Bruce said with his quiet little smile.

Tony put on his most winning smile. “Yeah, the rest of us just aren’t very interesting.”

Frigga actually chuckled at that. Clint counted it as a win.

After a long minute of thought, Frigga said, “I will take this under consideration. Before I make a decision, we will need to have much more discussion about these concessions you mentioned. You Avengers have made your petition. Now I must confer with your world’s ambassadors.” She looked at the servant standing beside the door. “Show the Avengers into guest quarters in the north wing.”

Dismissed, the Avengers stood up. Of course it was Tony who pushed it, just a little. “Your Majesty, may we see Loki?”

For a split second the queen smiled, a wide and genuine smile, before looking serious again. Clint had seen Loki pull a similar trick enough times to suspect that she was casting an illusion to hide her true expression.

Well, even if she was mad at her boy, she had to be glad he had good friends.

Still, she made them wait for a minute before graciously assenting.

It felt like the walk to Loki’s quarters took at least half an hour, all through high ceilinged corridors with gold walls and torches in wall sconces. Eventually the servant guiding them stopped in front of a door and did something to a crystal beside it. The door opened and the servant gestured that they were to go in.

They filed in to the large room. Gold walls—what, it wasn’t like it was possible for walls to be made out of anything else. The room was a little less imposing than most of the palace, though. It was a place where a person lived. There was a large table with chairs all around it, presumably for entertaining, and a comfortable chair beside the window. Loki was just standing up from said chair, setting a book down on a little table while he stared in utter amazement.

Clint found himself grinning. They were all grinning as they crossed the room to Loki.

“What… what are you doing here?” Loki managed as his boyfriends reached him and put their arms around him.

Tony joined in the group hug. “Asking your mom if you can come out and play.”

“What?”
While all of them crowded around taking their turns hugging Loki, Steve explained their resolve to keep him company in Niflheim. “But if we’re lucky, Earth’s ambassadors will persuade your mother to let you come back to Earth instead.”

Loki had to take a minute. “Midgard’s rulers are asking that I be sent to their world?”

Clint grinned up at him happily. “Ain’t life funny?”

Loki looked around at them, still gobsmacked. “You actually mean to spend the next fifty years in Niflheim?”

“I think we can liven it up some for you.”

After that they didn’t talk much for a while, because of course Loki got all weepy. No wonder his boyfriends called him a sap.

Chapter End Notes

It looks like this fic will be 100 chapters long, give or take. We’re on the home stretch at last!
Chapter 94

Chapter Summary

Frigga announces her decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony was no stranger to fancy digs, but Asgard’s throne room impressed even him. It had to be bigger than any room on Earth, and of course everything was gold. Well, except for crystal ornamentation all around, maybe to remind everyone that the queen was from Vanaheim, which was as obsessed with crystals as Asgard was with gold.

The humans had been summoned for a royal audience right after breakfast. The ambassadors were given a place of honor to the right of the dais before the audience was allowed in. Once the audience—thousands of people—was gathered in the throne room, the Avengers were instructed to march from the entrance to stand in front of the ambassadors.

Tony was sure all of them were startled at the cheers that broke out when the Avengers entered the throne room through the thirty foot tall doors. The Avengers often got receptions like this on Earth, but here?

And yet, the Asgardian faces looking at them were beaming with approval.

Steve, in the lead as befitted the first Avenger, had stopped in surprise at the cheering. Now he would be wearing that boyish embarrassed-but-gratified smile he got at such moments. Tony gave him a poke and Steve resumed walking. Tony, helmet under one arm, let them all have it with his crowd-pleasing cocky grin. He activated the thrusters in his boots so that instead of walking he was hovering a few inches off the ground, much to the crowd’s approval.

The throne room was packed like it was the Super Bowl, and everyone was dressed exquisitely, silks and jewels all round. The Avengers were in battle uniform, including Bruce—they’d swiftly modified the Mark 28 for him. The first custom made Iron Hulk suit was in the works back on Earth.

The queen, resplendent on her throne with a crown glittering amid the dark gold curls of her hair, did not look angry now. Tony hoped that was a good sign for them. Mostly she just looked remote and goddesslike.

Tony had played enough of this kind of game to see at least some of Frigga’s artifice. Everything about Frigga’s manner, the look in her eyes, the way she held herself, her utterly confident stillness, reminded everyone of her position here. That while she might be kind, one blast from the huge gleaming magical spear in her hand and anyone who annoyed her would be toast. That her crowned head contained more knowledge than anyone else’s in this vast room, and knowledge was power.

The very fact that she was sitting upon this throne, rather than standing beside it, and that her once-condemned son was the one they were all here to see, proved the measure of her power.

This was real power. Occupying the sharp mind and kind heart of a beautiful middle-aged woman.
Only after everyone else was in place was Loki admitted. He entered through the massive doors in full regalia, horned helmet, flowing cape, black and green leather, armor.

When the prince appeared, Tony felt like he was going to be knocked over by the cheers that arose. It was the applause they had given the Avengers, doubled. For a few seconds Tony half expected the golden walls and golden vaulted ceiling to crumble like the walls of Jericho.

Whatever the queen thought, the people of Asgard seemed to approve of what Loki had done.

Tony grinned to himself. Asgardians, it turned out, were the same as people anywhere. Suckers for grand gestures, bands of brothers and true love.

Loki froze in place for a moment, shocked. Then his gaze swept over the assembly, inevitable calculation warring with sheer amazement. And finally, overwhelmed gratification.

*I'm so happy for you, buddy,* Tony thought.

Loki marched slowly through the sea of cheers to the foot of the throne’s dais, where he ceremoniously knelt and removed his helmet, placing it on the floor. The vast room went quiet as he did so, the heavy silence of thousands of rapt viewers.

When Loki raised his gaze to his mother’s face, he wasn’t schooling his expression. Tony knew his tricks well enough to see that. At this moment, he was just a son who needed reconciliation with his mother.

Frigga stood, the movement slow and majestic, and thudded the spear once on the floor.

“Loki Friggjarson,” she began, and Loki bowed his head again.

“I sent both of my sons to realms my *late* husband taught them to despise, with the command to learn to regard their inhabitants as equals, to prevent a recurrence of the events which nearly cost me both of them.” Frigga’s voice shook very slightly on those last words and she had to pause.

After a pregnant pause, the queen continued, “I cannot penalize Loki for obeying my command.”

Another explosion of cheers, but Loki had eyes only for his mother. For the rueful but loving smile she was giving him.

When the noise died down, she spoke again.

“Loki’s human shield-brothers were willing to leave their homeworld and spend the next fifty years in Niflheim. With the lifespan they have always expected, this is the equivalent of three thousand years or more.”

She turned her gaze on the happy, relieved Avengers, letting them have some of that glowing approval.

“Perhaps this kind of loyalty to my son is worth some disobedience.”

Asgard evidently thought so, if the chorus of fresh cheers was any indication.

Frigga delivered a bit more of a speech after that, but the vital bit had already been said. Still, she had some fine phrases for them: “I tasked Midgard with teaching my younger son. Midgard has done what I asked of it. I should return the favor.”

And, “My late husband had little use for clemency. That was his undoing.”
And, “My late husband believed hard-heartedness was the measure of a monarch. I do not.”

And finally, “For the next twenty years, Loki will continue to serve on Midgard as he has been. After that time, I will expect him back in Asgard.” She gave the humans a small quirk of one corner of her mouth. “Fear not, he will visit often.”

She turned her gaze back to Loki, whose expression was full of joy. “And when you return, you may bring a few humans with you if you like, since you apparently cannot get along without them.”

With that, she descended the steps. When she reached the bottom, she held out a hand to her son. Loki took it, kissed it, and rose. He then escorted her formally out of the room amid the thunderous applause of her subjects.

Once the royals were out of the room, uniformed guards guided the humans out as well. When they were in some kind of antechamber, a chamberlain type person came in and explained, “Her Majesty has bidden me to tell you a feast in Midgard’s honor will be held tonight. In the morning, the Avengers shall return to Midgard, while the ambassadors remain for a few days to further discuss the treaties between the realms. For now, the queen and the prince request the Avengers’ company shortly for the midday meal.”

“Happy to accept,” Steve managed. They had been reminded their friend was a prince before, but even so this was disconcerting.

They were shown back to Loki’s chambers, where Loki was awaiting them. Then it was hugs and exclamations of relief all around. They got to go back home. They got to keep Loki. They had come through for their shield-brother.

And they were going to live for thousands of years and travel to other planets. Everything Tony had hardly dared to hope he would see in his lifetime.

Lunch was served in Loki’s sitting room. Tony supposed being returned to one of the few familiar rooms in Asgard, plus a room where a person actually lived, was intended to put them at ease. Certainly Frigga turned on the charm once she joined them.

Again Tony could see Frigga’s influence on Loki. Before, she had been deliberately projecting her power, just as Loki could assume the role of prince when he needed to. (Or the role of crazed supervillain, if occasion required.) Now she was putting everyone at ease with her friendly manner and interested questions, as Tony had seen Loki do many times. Tony could spot the tricks even though his own were different. His own approach when people were afraid to talk to a famous billionaire (or when said famous billionaire’s friends were angry at him) was to make goofy jokes until they were either amused or annoyed enough to unbend. With Frigga, it was direct gazes and earnest conversation and occasional small bits of humor.

“What is the good of being a monarch if you can’t spoil your children now and then?” she replied when they thanked her for relenting. She gave Loki a gently warning look. “I hope this will not encourage you to disobey my commands.”

“Mother, how often have I been a disobedient son?”

Frigga’s expression became only affectionate. “Not counting childish mischief, this is the only time.”

Bruce couldn’t help making a little sound of protest. Loki looked at him.

“My parents never told me not to destroy Jotunheim or invade Midgard.”
“Loki. Do not destroy Jotunheim or invade Midgard.”

“Yes, Mother.”

For a moment, Tony just held that thought. Thinking of the journey between that time and now.

A silence stretched as evidently everyone was entertaining similar thoughts.

Frigga gave them a moment before saying, “Earth’s ambassadors have already agreed to send scholars and scientists here and to Vanaheim and Alfheim in order to study and share our knowledge of science and statecraft with your world.”

“I have a couple of nominations for that,” Tony said at once. Frigga nodded acknowledgment.

“I might know a couple of people too,” Bruce said. “Actually, I’m going to go ahead and suggest Jane. Jane Foster.”

“The brilliant sorceress who was kind to my elder son when his father banished him.” Frigga nodded approval. “An excellent choice.”

“Dr. Erik Selvig,” Loki suggested. “He helped Thor as well, and he is one of the three humans I controlled with that sceptre during my invasion. I think he deserves this opportunity, if he wishes for it.” Loki lifted an eyebrow at a sudden thought. “And Jane’s friend Darcy Lewis—she is no scientist, but she is a scholar of statecraft. And she was also there with Thor during his exile.”

Yinsen, Tony thought suddenly. If only he could’ve had this chance.

Tony automatically started to raise his goblet of mead to his lips, but made himself stop. Let himself feel the grief, because it was precious even though it hurt.

One night soon, he resolved, they would all remember everyone who hadn’t been around for the Erskine-Gullveig Treatment. Yinsen and Riley and the Barnes and Rogers families, and whoever else they had lost. They would tell their shield-brothers their stories and drink to the memories of them all.

“What else have they agreed to?” Steve asked Frigga.

“Everything else is still being negotiated. I expect it shall take several days to reach agreements.”

“Do you need me to stay here for that, Mother?” Loki asked.

She shook her head. “I think your presence is needed on Midgard just now, Avenging.” Again that mock-warning look at her son. “Twenty years, Loki, and then you must return and resume your duties as prince. I am glad you love Midgard, but Asgard is your home.”

Loki nodded. “Even though I was not born here.”

A golden opportunity. Tony took it, because they needed some levity. “Hey, being born in a stable doesn’t make a man a horse.”

The Avengers all cracked up. Frigga looked around at them with raised eyebrows. When Loki was able to speak, he said, “You’ve been saving that one, haven’t you.”

“I’m getting back at you for laughing at us about zero-point energy,” Tony told him.

“I said I was sorry,” Loki protested.
“Zero point energy?” Frigga asked.

“That is humans’ name for ground state energy.”

Frigga looked impressed. “Humans have discovered ground state energy?”

Loki nodded, holding her gaze with a little smile. It was so sweet of him to be proud of them.

“What made you laugh?” Frigga asked.

“They theorized that the fermion field was negative and the boson field was positive and that the two cancelled each other out.”

Frigga laughed. At once she covered her mouth with her hand. “I do beg your pardon,” she said to the humans, but was unable to stop grinning. Loki was grinning too.

“All right, just laugh at the primitives,” Tony grumbled. Meanwhile everyone else except for Bruce was just sitting there looking mystified. “At least there’s no eight-legged horses on our planet. Though I guess if we let you come back there might be.”

Loki gave Tony a pretend glare. “Thaaaanks. Now I have to explain to my mother why I didn’t let her know that she’s a grandmother.”

“Am I? Do tell. May I ask who the mother of my grandchild is?”

Nobody was able to resist laughing long and hard at that, not even Loki. Clint eventually gasped, “I just want to thank God for letting me be here for this moment.”

“Humans have such childish senses of humor.”

“No one would ever say that of you, Loki.”

“Midgardian myths have taught me so much about myself.”

Then Loki proceeded to relate the myth as if it were true, in the first person.

When the tale was done, Frigga laughed as hard as any of the Avengers had. “Sleipnir! Your child! Humans are mad!” she gasped, holding her sides.

“Wait until I tell you about Jormangundr.”

After the meal, Frigga left for queenly business and Loki was able to give them a tour of Asgard. (They had requested one the previous day, but Loki’s mom had sent him to his room, so he couldn’t.) Some of the buildings were actually floating. Loki tried to explain how that worked, but it was too complicated and the non-scientists’ eyes started to glaze over, so after a bit Bruce told him to give the Science Gang the details back on Earth when they were in the lab.

The Avengers had brought the Asgardian clothes Loki had given them, and they changed into them for the feast. A table had been set aside for the Avengers, another for Midgard’s ambassadors, both near the royal table. Loki sat with the Avengers. Frigga was being fashionably late, but Thor’s friends were at her table.

Loki pointed out the many glass sculptures that adorned the feast hall. “These are reproductions of Jotun ice sculptures. My queen is trying to show Asgard that the Jotnar are not so backward as Odin led us to believe. And Jotun songs are sung—you will hear some tonight.”
That was when the orchestra struck up. The first chords rang out loudly. Apparently the feasters recognized the song, because they fell silent.

Tony glanced at Loki, who murmured very softly, “This one must be new.”

A minute later they knew why this song had begun the evening.

The song was about Loki. It was an extravagantly complimentary recounting of his great deed, disobeying his beloved queen and risking his chance at the throne for his comrades in arms. Loki’s dedication to his shield-brothers, and their willingness to share his punishment in Niflheim, were described in ringing verses.

No doubt one reason the song had been written was to flatter Loki. Regardless of what his disobedience did to his status, he was still a prince and a powerful sorcerer. His favor was still worth currying.

But the enjoyment on the faces of the Aesir as they listened to the song, not all of that was currying favor. Asgard genuinely respected what Loki had done.

The penny dropped for Tony, Loki and Natasha all at the same time.

“And here we thought Thor’s buddies were the only Asgardians we could teach some respect to,” Tony said, hoping to distract the others from the same realization. The others were less Machiavellian and might not appreciate what Frigga had done.

“I cannot thank you enough, my friends.”

“If you want more favors from us, you’ll have to extend our lifespans to ten thousand years.”

Frigga arrived at last, pausing to let her son kiss her hand before she took her own seat, and the music continued and overflowing platters of food were brought in.

The feast wasn’t as formal as Tony had expected. No one stayed in their chairs the whole time except for the queen, for one thing. People kept coming up to speak to Loki, and sometimes he would leave the table for a few minutes to talk to various Asgardians. Each of Thor’s buddies joined them for a time before returning to the queen’s table. Tony thought Fandral looked kind of sulky, but he was keeping it in reasonable bounds. When the ambassadors saw how things were going, they each started working the room with the ease of years of practice.

When the orchestra took a break, people started demanding the Avengers share some of their tales of battle, so they did. Asgard needed to know their prince had broken the law for worthy shield-brothers, right? Tony told the first story, being the attention hog he was, but each of them told one. The Aesir ate it up. This was still a warrior realm and they respected deeds of valor.

Late in the evening, when the steady stream of people going to speak to the queen had dwindled, Natasha caught Loki’s eye. “Any chance I could get an audience with the queen?”

Loki and Tony met her eyes, then each other’s. They both understood.

“But of course.” Loki rose and extended a hand to her. “Come with me.”

Tony stayed where he was, affecting unconcern. He knew he could rely on them to fill him in later, away from the others.

It was great to be able to rely on your shield-brothers.
Loki presented Natasha to his queen very correctly. Then as both of them stood before Frigga, Loki made one of his magical hand gestures and assured Natasha, “Now only the three of us can hear anything we say.”

Frigga did not look surprised at this securing of privacy. She made a gesture of her own. “And now I am casting an illusion of us. You need not guard your expressions.”

So Frigga knew what they were here to discuss.

Natasha got right to the point. “If Loki hadn’t defied you and gone to Gullveig, how long would it have been before you relented?”

Frigga smiled, unruffled. “A few months. Perhaps a year. But I had faith in my son.”

Loki swallowed. His eyes were shimmering a bit. Damn, this week had been a roller coaster for him. “Mother, it grieved me to disobey you. I feared that you might think I did so from a lack of regard for you.”

“I could never think that, Loki.”

“I should have known you would not be so ruthless.”


“I am truly sorry to have put you through that.” Frigga clasped Loki’s hand. “I wasn’t certain how long I could fool you.”

“I beg your pardon for believing this of you, Mother.”

She dismissed this with a shake of her head. “I pondered hard to find reasons you would consider credible, and counted upon your grief to distract you. But had you not defied me, after a few months, I would have ‘reconsidered’ and granted my permission. And Midgard would have loved me.” She gestured to the ambassadors’ table, holding Loki’s gaze. “Now, Midgard loves you.”

Loki swallowed.

“We do,” Natasha said. “But what if we hadn’t asked you to pardon him?”

“I was a little worried on that score,” Frigga confessed. “I was so happy that you came through for him.”

And Natasha realized that Frigga had also been testing them. Showing Loki that he now had truly loyal shield-brothers.

Natasha was glad the queen was casting that illusion. She didn’t think she could help tearing up just now any more than Loki could.

“You gave up some of your own prestige,” she said slowly, “to give it to Loki.”

Frigga nodded once. “He would never be able to rule Asgard if the realms continued to see him as the brother of Thor or the son of Odin or Frigga.”

Loki caught his breath. “I am still... in the succession?”
“Of course. I hope you did not disobey my command partly because you hoped to escape that duty.”

“That did not figure into my calculations, Mother.”

“Good. Besides, if you were vizier, it would be just as important for the realms to trust that you would not simply carry out your brother’s commands.” She smiled. “Now all the realms know that Loki of Asgard is his own man. That he will put what is right before obedience. That he cares more for those who have been loyal to him than for his chance at a throne.”

The two of them gazed at each other for a long moment. Natasha could only watch them. There was so much in their held gaze. Love, yes, but also pride. Gratitude. Devotion.

At length Loki took Frigga’s hand and kissed it. Natasha had seen him do so many times, but he managed to make it redolent with significance this time, a huge amount of emotion packed into that tiny gesture.

“I am so proud to be the son of Frigga.”

“And I am proud to be the mother of Loki.”

Natasha kept very still, not to intrude on their moment more than she had to.

Late that night, when she and Clint were lying tangled together (of course they had been taking advantage of the chance to be the first heterosexual humans to have sex in Asgard) she finally shared the thought which had been in her mind since watching those two basking in each other’s regard.

“At the feast. When Loki and I went to talk to his mother.”

“Yeah?”

It took her a bit to find the words she wanted. Clint didn’t hurry her.

“The way Frigga and Loki were looking at each other.” She drew a breath. “I think I want that.”

His muscles tensed just perceptibly. Just enough that it was clear he was really paying attention.

“You mean you want to have a child?”

She answered slowly. “I think I do.”

He held her a tiny bit tighter. “Well, luckily… we have time for you to think it over and be sure.”

Chapter End Notes

Obviously I don't actually have Asgardian level knowledge about zero point energy. I just looked for a science thing that human scientists are still trying to figure out.

So it turns out Jenni’s comment a couple of chapters back was prescient!

http://archiveofourown.org/comments/151440849
Chapter 95

Chapter Summary

The Avengers return to Midgard and make plans, and Loki seeks reconciliation with Thor.

Ironically, Loki needed to sneak away for a few minutes alone on Carbonell Cay the day they returned. He needed to walk into the bedroom he had expected not to see again for decades, with its huge bed that had seen so much joy, and just look around at it, silent and still while in the common room he could hear his shield-brothers' voices laughing and talking and teasing each other.

Loki stood just inside his room for a minute, listening to them and to the waves outside and smiling to himself.

“Hey, Loki!” Bucky charged through the door with Steve on his heels, bringing the still room back to life. Each of them casually wrapped their arms around him, unaware of the resurrection they were performing. “We decided you get to pick tonight’s movie.”

“And tonight’s food.”

“Pizza and *The Princess Bride,*” Loki said without hesitation. Something light-hearted, because any seriousness whatsoever tonight would be magnified a hundredfold.

“Sounds good.” Steve planted a quick kiss on his cheek.

Loki grinned. “Whose hand is that on my ass? I don’t mind, I’m just curious.”

Steve turned a little pink. “That would be mine.”

Loki kissed each of them and steered them out to the common room, where their friends were waiting for them.

A few days later, the Avengers moved their main base of operations back to the Tower. They would visit Carbonell Cay often, but they all missed New York by now.

The first night back, they had the night of shared remembrance Tony had planned. They stayed up until well after midnight, telling stories of those who had died and drinking to their memory. Sam especially got weepy over Riley, which at least meant the Avengers got to give him some of the emotional support he’d been providing them with for months now.

Now that their life expectancy was so much greater, their plans changed. All of the Avengers intended to continue Avenging, but they had other ideas as well.

Bucky had made up his mind: he was going to college. He’d spend a couple of years reading about the history that had happened and the technological advances that had been made while he was the Winter Soldier first, then start attending classes. Find out how all these new-fangled gadgets worked. Maybe even design a gadget or two himself one day, who knew.
Sam intended to return to school as well. He had spent enough time exclusively with the Avengers and was going to resume counseling veterans—while continuing to be an Avenger, of course. He planned to become licensed as a psychotherapist so that he could do more to help those with PTSD.

Bruce, already having more degrees than a thermometer, began to study martial arts. Now that he was no longer the Hulk, he did not want to rely solely on the Iron Hulk suits he and Tony were making for him.

Jane, Darcy and Selvig (who was kind of giddy over being physically twenty-five again, not that he was the only one) all jumped at the chance to study on other planets.

“Have you advanced alien beings come to the end of science yet?” Tony asked Loki one day in the lab. The rest of the Science Gang looked up, waiting for the answer.

Loki smiled slowly. “If there is an end, it is nowhere in sight.”

“Awesome.”

Ever since he had finally been allowed to enlist, Steve had been a warrior first and foremost. But with so many years ahead, and with the funds to do so, Steve would cultivate his other aspects as well, and so he began taking painting classes. In the past he had chiefly drawn, so there was still plenty to learn, plenty to explore. (He wasn’t going to say anything until he was ready to do it, but he was going to take the drawing he’d done of Loki with his myth children and make it over in oils and gift it to his sort-of mother-in-law, since she had found their myths about her grandchildren so entertaining.)

Tony almost didn’t ask, it was pathetic for a superhero to be this terrified of anything, but finally he asked and closed his eyes for the inevitable destruction of all of his hopes but Pepper said yes. He would have given her the most ridiculous bash in history if she’d said the word, but she didn’t care about having a big ceremony, so he hustled her to City Hall the very next day with all the Avengers in tow before she came to her senses.

Natasha asked Clint the same question, but they wanted more than City Hall, so Tony gave a signed blank check to one of those super-elite wedding planners, a woman who usually planned the nuptials of movie stars and royalty. Clint and Natasha only wanted a fraction of what Tony would’ve been willing to pay for them to have, but it was going to be a very beautiful ceremony this summer on a wind-swept mountaintop with exquisite clothes for both bride and groom and afterwards dancing and a feast that Asgard’s court wouldn’t turn its nose up at.

Natasha also suddenly started ballet classes. She had been trained in it as a girl and still loved dancing and watching others dance. She was evasive about her further plans and the others took the hint and stopped asking. They knew she would tell them in her own time.

Steve and Bucky couldn’t think of the right way to broach the subject with their lover, not for want of trying. In the end it was Loki who suggested it one night when the three of them were lying pleasantly exhausted together.

“You two wish to wed, do you not?”

Both humans tensed, but Loki sounded only fond. “We didn’t want you to take it the wrong way.”

“What would be the wrong way?”

Bucky squeezed him closer. “Thinking that it isn’t the three of us.”
“When it was just me and Bucky, I never felt like we were incomplete. But now that you’re here too, I feel like we were waiting for you without knowing it. We three fit together so perfectly.”

“You both were willing to spend fifty years on Niflheim rather than be separated from me. I have no worries.” Loki sat up to look at them both. “My loves, neither your realm nor mine will allow three men to wed each other, and I am obliged to form a dynastic marriage. And love like yours should be recognized.”

“I had an idea.” Bucky’s voice had a little hesitation. The others looked at him, smiling fondly. “I was thinking… it wouldn’t be too hard for you to get the license or whatever so that you could perform the wedding.”

Steve’s eyes lit up. “That’s perfect!”

Loki kissed each of them. “I shall, then. When do you wish to do this?”

“Let’s wait till after Clint and Natasha’s wedding is over. There’s no hurry.”

Loki’s plans for the future had not changed, except that he now intended to visit Midgard often and receive frequent visits from the Avengers on Asgard for the next four thousand years. None of his human friends liked the prospect of living for a millennium without him, even though that millennium was still four millennia in the future. But Loki knew he could count upon them to look after each other while he awaited them in Valhalla.

All that remained was reconciliation with Thor.

As it turned out, shortly the opportunity arose.

“We’re treating our planet better, but it’ll be a while before the damage is rolled back,” Bruce told the rest of them, pointing to Jarvis’s hologram of Antarctica with his glasses. He didn’t need them anymore, thanks to the serum, but he kept them because of his habit of fiddling and pointing with them. “Which is why the melting glaciers have given us this fun problem.”

“What is that, a dinosaur?”

“It’s a frost dragon,” Loki said. “It must have been brought when Jotunheim invaded Midgard a millennium ago.”

“What is it with frost giants and invading Earth?”

“It’s in our DNA. We can’t help it.”

“There’s more of them. At least a dozen. They’ve been frozen for all this time, and now they’re waking up and ready to cause trouble.”

“This sounds like a job for the Avengers!”

“Actually….” Loki gave them his “god of mischief” smile. “This sounds like a job for Thor.”

From Frigga Loki acquired the coordinates of Thor’s location on Jotunheim, and an assurance that Loki would be safe there. The Avengers hastily reviewed their plan. “We’ll give him a good time. He can show us how great he is at killing frost dragons, then we’ll all have a feast and show him
how much we like his little brother. It'll be great.”

“I hope you’re right. Before Mother sent him to Jotunheim and me here, all we did was quarrel. Mother tried shutting us in a room to shout it out. You can imagine how well that went.”

“You still mad at him?”

“I’m too happy to be mad at him. How he feels I cannot say.”

“It’s been a few years. He’s had time to get over it.”

“Well. Mother did inform us that we were going to reconcile. Whether we liked it or not.” Loki chuckled at the memory. “He loves her as much as I do, and respects her as much. He will have striven to take her command to heart just as I have.” Loki paused, wondering if he was trying to convince himself of what he wished to believe. “It is only—we were so angry at each other. Perhaps I should give him a few more years—”

Steve interrupted him with a kiss. Right in front of the others. Bucky just put his arms around them both while Loki rested his forehead against Steve’s and tried to even his breathing.

“Loki,” Tony said, “whatever happens between you and Thor, we’ll be here for you.”

“Always,” Natasha said.

“I love you all so much.”

“We know. Now get your ass to your homeworld.”
The Einstein-Rosen Bridge delivered Loki to a spot on a Jotun plain. Loki had known that all Jotunheim could not look like the one region he had visited, any more than Earth or Asgard or any other world was uniform throughout, but he was stunned at the beauty of the vista he was now viewing.

The wide plain before him and the mountains a few hundred yards away were sugar white with snow. Behind him were tremendous boulders gleaming with ice. The faraway sun was at its zenith, bestowing pale blue light over the landscape. The air was cold and pure in his nostrils, on his skin.

He had nearly destroyed this. Loki felt sick. He felt furious at himself, and at Odin.

He could not undo his deed, but he would be an ally to Jotunheim as long as he drew breath. He would do everything in his power to help this realm, just as he had for Midgard.

Nearby a few Jotuns were sitting about, comfortable on the snow in their dark green kilts, listening as one of them sang. When Loki appeared, the singer stopped and all looked at him without speaking.

Loki braced himself. “I am Loki Friggjarson. I seek Thor Friggjarson.” There. Remind the Jotnar that Thor and Loki were both the sons of the queen who had benefited Jotunheim.

“This way,” one of the Jotuns said in a gravelly Jotun voice, before turning away and striding off towards the boulders. The Jotun was twice Loki’s height, the lines on his face sharp and jagged.

Loki hurried to keep up, noticing how the other Jotnar stepped back. The Jotun who had taken it upon himself to guide Loki must be of high rank. Loki was fortunate the Jotun had come forward for him.

Loki pulled his cloak around himself more snugly. This part of Jotunheim was beautiful, but it was also freezing. He felt it might be presumptuous to assume Jotun form here. At least before the Jotnar had indicated some sufferance of him.

“You are the brother of Thor,” the Jotun stated as they walked. Or rather, as the Jotun walked and Loki jogged. Loki would not deign to ask the Jotun to slow down. Perhaps the giant was enjoying forcing Loki to run to keep up with him. Loki was far too skilled a diplomat to begrudge such petty triumphs.

“I am.” When the Jotun made no further comment, Loki added, “For what it is worth, which is very little, I am sorry for what I did to your world.”

“No doubt our king will have you make reparations.”
“I will make them happily. With my queen’s permission, of course.”

The Jotun added, “The blame lies chiefly with Odin. Both of your fathers were terrible kings.”

“True.” Loki was surprised. Had the Jotnar hated Laufey? If so, the Jotnar might grant him some shred of forgiveness in return for having assassinated him.

“Let us hope you and your brother take after your mothers.”

“Was Farbauti beloved of her people?” When the Jotun glanced at him, Loki added, “I know very little of her. Only that she was a powerful sorceress.” Like his other mother.

“Both of your mothers were wise queens.”

Loki was going to ask the Jotun his name, but just then they neared a cacophony of shouts and crashes. The Jotun seemed unperturbed, so Loki just kept moving until they rounded a corner, and through the gap in the boulders he could see a six-foot-tall bundle of furs wrestling with a full-sized frost giant, while several other Jotuns watched, yelling encouragement at both combatants.

Watching, Loki felt giddy. For over a thousand years, he had never been long parted from his brother. Thor had loomed large in his life, had been the center of his expected future. Now Loki would see him again after three long years. He dreaded seeing anger and disgust on that beloved familiar face. He hoped Thor still saw him as his brother, and was afraid of that hope.

After a few minutes, Thor succeeded in knocking the Jotun to the ground. Everyone cheered. Including Loki. This was familiar, watching Thor practice, feeling proud despite himself of his foster brother’s prowess.

Loki let his voice carry above the others. “Hail the mighty Thor!” And then his heart was in his mouth.

Thor turned at once when he heard Loki’s familiar voice. For an eternal second surprise was the only thing showing in Thor’s face. His beard was longer and shaggier than usual, his entire body so thickly wrapped in furs he looked like a well-fed bear.

And then joy spread over Thor’s handsome leonine face. “Brother!” he boomed.

Loki’s knees almost gave out with relief, and he likely would have fallen to the ground had Thor’s rib-crushing embrace not held him upright. As usual, Loki was too happy to receive affection from Thor to complain about the discomfort. He crushed Thor just as close, squeezing his eyes shut and pressing his face into Thor’s yellow hair.

“Brother,” Loki murmured into Thor’s fur-wrapped shoulder, relieved.

“A joy to see you, you little brat.”

Loki smiled tearfully. “Oaf.” Now he knew how Steve and Bucky must have felt, calling each other “jerk” and “punk” when first reunited.

Oh, Norns. He was going to be weeping in a moment. With two dozen frost giants staring at him.

Thor was now holding him at arm’s length, looking him up and down. “Midgard agrees with you! I hear you have two of Midgard’s greatest warriors warming your bed now!”

Loki grinned. “That is true.”
Thor gave him a congratulatory play-punch and the Jotuns laughed appreciatively.

“I knew the brave captain was the sort you fancied. Tell them both from me that if they are not good suitors I shall break them both in half.”

“The Avengers send their greetings.”

“They were brave shield-brothers. And the other humans were kind to me during my banishment. I was glad you gave them long life. They are worthy of it.”

“Even though Mother forbade it?”

“You know how much I esteem our mother, Loki, but in this matter she was wrong.” Thor hooked an arm around Loki’s shoulders. “Come, you must tell me of your triumphs on Midgard! And I shall tell you of my battles as well.”

Anyone else would have needed to talk things out. To Thor, talk was a waste of time. They would embrace and call each other “brother” and all the strife that had been between them would be left behind without a backward glance.

It was not Loki’s way, but he would take the gift the Norns offered.

Thor shot what he likely assumed was a sly glance at the Jotun who had led Loki to the sparring field, who fell into step beside them. “You must try kymyz, it is the favorite drink of Jotunheim.”

Loki had known that look on Thor’s face since they were toddlers. Whatever kymyz was, he wasn’t going to touch it.

Thor took his leave of the Jotuns, except for Loki’s guide, and the three of them went into a nearby cave in the side of a granite mountain.

“Frost giants don’t need buildings to shelter them,” Thor explained, “so they seldom build them. This is my home when I am here, but I travel a great deal, all over the realm.”

Loki glanced around the cave. It was mostly barren, except for a few Asgardian weapons, several heaps of furs and skins, and the collection of Midgardian Thor memorabilia Clint had gifted him with.

The giant took up a stone flagon, conjured goblets of ice, and poured something dark and thick into them.

“Now,” Thor said, flinging himself down on one of the piles of fur and gesturing for Loki to do the same, “before we catch up, you had better deliver Mother’s message.”

“Mother didn’t send me. I expect she is watching us, but I am here on my own account. No, thank you,” he said when Thor proffered one of the goblets to him.

“Try it! It is Jotunheim’s most popular brew.”

Thor’s “sly” expression was no more subtle now than it had been when they were children. Whatever was in that goblet, Loki was positive he didn’t want it. “After you tell me precisely what it is.”

Thor gave up whatever prank he had been about with a cheerful shrug and downed the drink himself. “If Mother did not send you, why are you here?”
“Thor, I came here to request your help on Midgard. Laufey left many frost dragons frozen in Earth’s colder regions, and they have awakened and are wreaking havoc. You now have great prowess at battling frost dragons. Please, come to Midgard with me and help me and the rest of Avengers slay them.”

Thor frowned slightly, as if puzzled. “But I cannot leave Jotunheim.”

“Whyever not?”

Thor looked as if he thought Loki was having him on. In the second that passed, Loki realized that things were not as he had thought.

Still he was unprepared for Thor’s next words, spoken as if to a child who had missed the obvious.

“Because I’m king here.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to thorkys for suggesting the bombshell I dropped in the last sentence.

I have been waiting for almost TWO YEARS to spring this on you all. *cackles*
Chapter 97

Chapter Summary

Thor's service on Jotunheim.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jarnsaxa almost choked on her kymyz at the comical amazement on Loki’s face.

He did not look like a Jotun. Whatever enchantment Odin had placed on him had given him delicate features as well as warmblood coloring. He somewhat resembled Frigga, and Jarnsaxa assumed that had been the point: to make everyone believe he was their son.

Miserable one-eyed bastard.

But now it seemed that Odin’s widow had given her a show to enjoy.

“Did Mother not tell you?”

Loki shook his head slowly. “No. But I expect she is having a good laugh at our expense at this very moment.”

“No doubt she is. Are you sure you’re the adopted one?”

That made Loki grin. He still looked dazed. “When did this happen? And how?”

Thor made himself more comfortable. “I will tell you all. Oh, but first, I should introduce the two of you. Jarnsaxa, my brother Loki. Loki, the Lady Jarnsaxa. My betrothed.”

Thor held out a hand and Jarnsaxa sat on the pleasantly cold stone beside Thor’s pile of fur and let him slip his fur-covered arm around her neck. Careful not to touch his skin, she put the hand that wasn’t holding her kymyz on his back. She knew from several experiments that she could span his waist with her hands quite easily.

They exchanged a fond look, but Jarnsaxa cut it short in time to enjoy the fresh shock on Loki’s face. Very quickly he schooled his features and gave her a gracious smile. “I am honored to meet you, Lady Jarnsaxa. My congratulations to you both.”

Then Thor began to tell the tale. In plain words, warmblood fashion, because much of it had not yet been set in verse by Jotunheim’s bards.

But it would be.

A few days after executing the tyrant Odin and assuming his throne, Frigga opened negotiations with Jotunheim. Jarnsaxa’s rank and battle record obliged her to be at the talks. She arrived resigned.

Frigga laid out the things she was willing to offer Jotunheim. Healing stones, magical relics which
would mend the fissures caused by Loki’s attack on their world, food, alliance against aggressors. All things Odin had never offered, even in the first horrifying days after Loki’s attack and unsuccessful suicide.

Jarnsaxa was the one to put into words what the Jotuns expected. “And in return for this mercy, we must suffer Laufey’s Asgardian-raised son on our throne.”

Frigga looked genuinely startled. “No. That never occurred to me. What I require is that my elder son, Thor, be allowed to spend a few years here making reparations.”

One more pair of hands would make little difference, but as Frigga continued to explain her purpose, Jarnsaxa saw her reasoning. Frigga, unlike her husband the War-Merry, the Spear-Shaker, wanted peace between the realms. That meant teaching Odin’s sons to esteem realms they had been taught to despise.

Jarnsaxa did not crave another millennia of misery for Jotunheim. She agreed to Frigga’s terms and argued for them in the council. And when the son of Odin was sent to Jotunheim, Jarnsaxa immediately volunteered to be one of the warriors who both supervised and guarded him. She did not wish her realm to endure Frigga’s wrath for any Jotun’s vengeance.

Besides… Thor had begun the war, but when his brother tried to finish it, it was Thor who had saved Jotunheim from complete destruction.

Thor arrived in thick layers of clothing with a mundane axe in hand. Frigga had taken away the hated hammer with which he had murdered four hundred Jotuns because one of them had called him a princess. Jarnsaxa expected him to grouse about the cold or the duties, but while his expression was dour, he uttered not a word of complaint. “What shall I do?” he asked almost the moment he arrived.

“We are clearing the rubble out of the Blue Forest, lest it harm the trees further,” King Byleistr replied.

Without a word, Thor followed the giants to the forest and set about hauling rocks out of it, to be dumped in a ravine not too far away. He was strong despite his diminutive size. And tireless. He carried rocks with the Jotuns until darkness fell and they all ceased for the night.

Jarnsaxa had heard that warmbloods burned their food in a fire before eating it, but Thor accepted his portion of fresh raw frost dragon and raw mushrooms with courteous thanks and set to eating. From his expression, he was not enjoying it. He chewed and swallowed and took part in their conversation as if he belonged here. He acted as if he were unaware that they were surprised that he was talking and joking instead of huddling nervous on the fringes. Jarnsaxa felt certain he was not.

It was Bolthorn who decided to test him. “We are being discourteous! Our guest should be served a drink. I shall fetch some kymyz!”

“Kymyz?” Thor looked more cheerful at the prospect of alcohol.

“Our favorite drink,” Jarnsaxa replied mildly. She could see what Bolthorn was about. When he returned with a flagon a moment later, the Jotuns all conjured goblets of ice and Bolthorn served them all. They sipped casually, with genuine enjoyment, and Bolthorn created a goblet for Thor and filled it.

“Many thanks!” Thor tipped his head back, clearly meaning to drain the cup in one long draught.

When he had quaffed half of it, Bolthorn remarked, “It is made of fermented bilgesnipe blood.”
When she knew him better, Jarnsaxa would see that it had been foolish to think they could make Thor choke and spit with that information. He had battled on a hundred worlds and eaten all sorts of bizarre and revolting things. After the tentacled mollusks of Haragon or the rotten tubers served on Nelpha, bilgesnipe blood was not so fearsome.

And so without a blink Thor chugged down the rest of the drink and then laughed. “So bilgesnipe are good for something!” He smashed the ice goblet on the ground. “Another!”

“What did it taste like?” Loki asked, looking at Thor’s goblet warily.

“Like fermented bilgesnipe blood. But at least it gets you drunk.”

“I think I would stay sober.”

Jarnsaxa snorted. Thor laughed.

Thor’s reaction to kymyz made them all more favorably inclined towards him. Which was precisely the point, a strategy he had used many times on many worlds. Later he confided to Jarnsaxa that on Midgard he had had to drink a vile brew called “coffee” and pretend to relish it to flatter the natives. Unfortunately, Midgard lacked the custom of breaking cups after a drink and so the gambit had not been entirely successful.

When it grew late and the Jotnar began to stretch out to sleep, Thor pitched a tent he had carried on his back to shelter his frail warmblooded body during the night. He had come prepared for life on a realm hostile to his kind.

Jarnsaxa slept on one side of the tent, Bolthorn on the other, keeping themselves between the son of Frigga and those who would slay him.

The very next day Prince Helblindi challenged Thor to a duel. Thor was willing but Byleistr forbade it; Frigga would not allow her precious brat to be slain.

After a couple of days of tedious negotiation, a compromise was reached: the duel could be held, but it had to stop at the first broken bone, not at death. Helblindi was far from satisfied, but he had begun the matter and must follow through. It wasn’t as if Thor had any chance against him without Mjölnir.

Helblindi was nearly twice Thor’s height. He could conjure blades of ice at will. Thor had a completely unmagical axe and an equally unmagical dagger and if he dropped them he could not will another into existence.

Thor triumphed.

Asgard had sent healing stones as part of its treaty with Jotunheim. Helblindi was not mollified at the swift healing of his broken leg. Thousands of the Jotnar had watched the duel, held in a huge valley often used as an arena, and seen the tiny Asgardian defeat their prince.

The cheers caused an avalanche of snow from which Jarnsaxa and Thor’s other guardians had to protect him, clustering around him to block the snow from him with their Jotun bodies and then digging them all out when the snow settled. Snowslides were the mark of a truly great fight. All around them Jotuns were cheerfully struggling out of the snowbanks, already composing verses about Thor’s feat.
People of every realm loved when the underdog won.

Except, of course, for the overdog.

Thor never complained.

What little skin he had to expose to the frigid air became red and chafed. Occasionally his lips turned blue, which for a warmblood was a bad sign. He worked long hours on their behalf, sometimes at pleasant tasks such as hunting big game but often at tedious ones like hauling rubble. He ate the raw meat, fungi and fruit offered him without enthusiasm.

He had to be unhappy here, but he did not complain. No pampered prince, he. Spoiled, in many ways, but not coddled.

Jarnsaxa began watching for more sheltered places to camp. Caves, when they were available. And one day she suggested he make a fire and burn his food.

“I can eat it the Jotun way.”

“We’ve noticed. Let us taste it your way. Who knows, we might like it.”

So they gathered sticks and bits of moss—it took a while to find any dry enough for the purpose—and Thor built a fire and constructed a spit over it. Jarnsaxa had assumed warmbloods just set their meat on fire, but apparently not.

When Thor decided the deer was sufficiently burned, all of his companions tasted it. Most of the Jotuns hated it. A couple considered it edible. Hymir loved it.

Jarnsaxa took one bite and promised herself, never again. But after that, he burned his meat every other day, alternating with eating it raw with the Jotnar.

“I beg your pardon if it is impertinent to ask, but… where are your women?” Thor asked after a few days on Jotunheim.

The conversation that followed was embarrassing to Thor and amusing to Jarnsaxa. Warmblood males and females, it turned out, were far more different in appearance than they were among the Jotnar, and all Jotnar looked masculine to warmblood eyes.

Jarnsaxa laughed until her sides ached when she found out Thor had thought she was a male. And laughed even more at his embarrassed attempts to apologize.

Occasionally Jotuns tried to assassinate Thor. He was a capable fighter, even against warriors twice his size, but Jarnsaxa saved his life once, when his axe was propped against a nearby tree trunk and his hands too far from his dagger. The would-be assassin moved swiftly into the tiny gap, seizing the fleeting opportunity, but Jarnsaxa was there willing a blade into existence and driving it deep into the Jotun’s heart.

“Thank you,” Thor said when the stranger’s death throes had ended, looking startled.

Jarnsaxa made no reply. Thor knew why she had saved him. She hadn’t done it for him.
Thor kept up a cheerful facade, but in idle moments his face became grave. One day when no one else was nearby Jarnsaxa became exasperated enough to demand, “What has the golden prince of the realm eternal to mope about?”

Thor was startled into answering frankly. “My father is dead. My mother was his assassin. I thought my brother dead but instead he has become my foe. And my dearest friends are far away from me.”

Jarnsaxa was surprised, but now that he had summed it up she could see. Thor had lost his family, his entire life as he had known it—and his future was no longer assured.

It occurred to her the following day that Thor had not listed dwelling on Jotunheim among his misfortunes.

Thor was a good hunter, enjoying the sport. He aided them in slaying a bilgesnipe that had been making a nuisance of itself on the outskirts of the northern forest and cheerfully helped them drain its blood for fermentation. When Thor had been with them for two months, Byleistr determined that it was time for a frost dragon hunt; one of the king’s duties was to watch the dragon population and determine when they were so numerous that a few needed to be killed before they overran the planet, or when they were too few and the Jotnar must wait for their numbers to replenish.

Haphlius sneered when Thor joined them for the dragon hunt. “You expect a puny Asgardian to hunt a frost dragon?”

“I slew a frost dragon when I started the war between our realms!” Thor never shied from the subject. Such was not his nature.

“Yes, with Mjölnir. What are you without the magic hammer your father gifted you?”

Haphlius always had been inclined to cause trouble.

Thor rose to the challenge. “Without Mjölnir, I am still the son of Odin and Frigga. I do not need a magical toy to slay a dragon! Or the power to conjure ice out of the air!”

The idiot was going to get himself killed for his own vanity and Frigga would rain destruction on Jotunheim.

But as it turned out, Thor was right. He had hunted big game on many worlds and knew many methods. He attacked the creature and let it chase him to a trapping pit, which he had covered with the tent he slept in. (Later, he explained that usually his brother would cast an illusion to conceal the pit from their quarry.) The fall severely injured the dragon and Thor promptly dropped upon its back and severed its neck, not prolonging its end.

Songs were composed about the feat that very night as Thor ate burned dragon meat and drank kymyz. He had to sleep in the freezing open air for a few weeks until he had hunted enough deer to make a new tent for himself. He did not complain.

At first the Jotnar watched their words in Thor’s presence. But Thor settled in as if he had always been here, and soon they started to forget, as much as was possible. So it wasn’t long before Thor heard of the loathing Jotunheim felt for his foster brother.
He said nothing at first. Even Thor could see that it was unreasonable to expect the Jotnar not to hate Loki. But encouraged by his silence, their imprecations grew worse, until one day Thor could endure no more. He threw down the small boulder he’d been carrying and amid the splintered bits of it roared out his rage.

Loki had done a terrible thing but he was Thor’s brother and Thor and Odin shared the blame. Thor had started the war; Odin had conquered the realm a thousand years ago; Loki had not done his deed in a vacuum.

The Jotuns ended up spending the rest of the day listening with mounting horror to the tales Odin had told his young sons about his valiant slaughtering of frost giants. Of childhood games, pretending to chase and kill Jotuns. Of the more sophisticated vilification they had heard as adults. The doomed attempt at reclaiming the Casket.

(It was a year later that Thor learned that Odin himself had arranged the attempt. Before that they all assumed it had been Loki, trying to ruin his brother’s big day.)

They had all been feeling more at ease with Thor, but this recitation reversed things. Knowing that the Aesir had held them in such contempt. For a few weeks, they barely spoke to Thor except for “get that boulder there” or “we’re hunting bilgesnipe today”.

Odin had not been content with conquering their realm, preventing Jotunheim from creating a rival empire, robbing them of their highly sorcerous infant prince and stealing their Casket. He had also felt the need to poison all the other realms against them. Including his own heir, and the stolen prince he meant to make their king.

Odin had intended for them to be ruled by a king who hated them.

Thor was gloomy but still uncomplaining at the way he was shunned for a time. He was not solitary by nature, and so he remained with the group despite the awkwardness. Bit by bit, they spoke to him again, served him kymyz again, but it was a long time before he again reached their former levels of comfort with him.

It was midway through this strained time that Jarnsaxa fell into step beside him one day as they and the others were searching a forest for the tough sweet fruits of Jotunheim. “You never knew that Loki was the son of Laufey?”

The words burst out as if held in for a long time. “Father lied so I would believe he had a choice of heirs!”

Jarnsaxa stopped in surprise. “What?”

Thor stopped walking but turned away from her, weary disgust in every line of his body. “Asgard has no tradition of primogeniture. Father would never have made Loki his heir, because Loki was not his son, but I did not know that. Whenever Father thought I was being defiant, whenever I displeased him in the smallest measure, he would begin to broadly hint that Loki might make a better king than I. That is why he told everyone that Loki was his son. So that I would believe I had competition. To keep me in line.”

Jarnsaxa took that in. “But now everyone knows Loki’s true parentage. Your place is assured.”

Thor shot a glare over his shoulder at her. “Loki is our mother’s favorite. He always was. She truly believes that he will be a better king than I, whether she bore him or not.”

“So Loki will be the next ruler of Asgard?”
Thor stomped off through the trees. Jarnsaxa was too paralyzed by alarm to follow and question him more.

Loki on the throne of Asgard would mean war for Jotunheim. Not because Loki would seek it, but because Laufey’s other sons would.

Jotunheim’s next war with Asgard was years in the future, however, and for now, Jotunheim had daily business to attend. Such as the trade negotiations with Nidavellir.

It was Vosud who suggested that Thor should attend. As a prince, he was accustomed to such meetings. No one put it into words, but all knew that the mere presence of Asgard’s prince would make Jotunheim’s bargaining position stronger.

Thor assented with resignation. The dwarves arrived. Byleistr specified how much honey Jotunheim wanted. The dwarves named the amount of uru they desired in return. Thor scornfully pointed out that Jotunheim would get a better deal by selling the uru to merchants in Asgard or Vanaheim and buying the honey from them. The dwarves were not amused, but after some grumbling agreed to more reasonable terms. The deal was concluded and the dwarves left. The meeting had taken less than an hour.

Thor was baffled. “Is that all?”

“What else should there be?”

“Do you trade nothing else?”

Jarnsaxa shrugged. “We do not need as many things as your warmbloods do. You require shelter from even the sweltering air of your own worlds. We do not need clothes and buildings to keep us warm. We do not require metal to forge weapons. But we love sweetness, and honey and sugar cannot be found on our world. Now and again we mine some uru to trade for it.”

“Do you not need gold? Or crystals?”

“For what?”

“To conduct seiðr!”

Jarnsaxa considered. “Our sorcerers have never had that habit. Perhaps that is why we have had so few sorcerers of the caliber of Farbauti or Frigga—or Loki.”

Perhaps, Jarnsaxa thought, if Odin had not stolen Loki away, his seiðr would have benefited Jotunheim.

Or perhaps without the training of the warmblood realms Loki’s ability would never have reached the power that it had. The Norns alone knew.

“So that is the entire meeting? There is no more?”

“What more would there be?”

His hair-covered face relaxed. “In Asgard, negotiations like this take days.”

Jarnsaxa snorted. “You warmbloods waste time.”
“We do.”

“You’re lucky Father took you away from here.”

Loki stared at Thor, disbelieving. Oblivious, Thor went on.

“You’d hate it. There’s nothing to read.”

Trees were so plentiful on the hot realms that the warmbloods cut them down and rendered them into paper to record everything. Even had Jotunheim had enough trees to waste in this manner, its climate was unfriendly to the process. The Jotnar kept their records by oral tradition, putting every important event or technique to verse. Every Jotun knew thousands of songs. Their bards knew hundreds of thousands, keeping the ones which were less favored in the realm’s memory until they were again needed. Often while they worked one of them would sing, reminding each other of important things.

After Thor had been with them for a few months, one day without preamble he began singing a song of his own composition. The tune was simple and the choice of words straightforward, but it was a confession of his own wrongdoing in bringing war to Jotunheim. There was no attempt to excuse himself, nor was there groveling apology. He simply told exactly what he had done and why and described himself as foolish, rash, cruel.

When he was done he resumed his work dragging boulders away from the shore of Jotunheim’s largest lake, boulders shaken loose by Loki’s attack.

For a time, no one spoke.

Perhaps an hour later, one of the Jotuns present began a new song. It was about how Thor, realizing his error, began atonement by battling his own brother and saving Jotunheim from complete destruction.

Once Thor returned from a visit to Asgard carrying a large box which proved to be full of little reproductions of himself. A gift from his shield-brothers on Midgard, he explained. Humans liked to buy tiny statues of their heroes, not only warriors but also favored bards and other notables. They wore clothing adorned with images of those heroes. They played with toy replicas of them.

It was most odd, but it was the human way of honoring those they admired. His shield-brother Clint Barton, known as “Hawkeye”, had wanted him to have them. By that time Thor had begun sleeping in a cave when he was in the capital city, sheltering him from the winds if not the cold, and he kept his few possessions there. Extra weapons, a supply of furs for when the ones he wore became ragged. Jotuns owned few objects, conjuring most of what they needed from ice on the spot, so they had not contested Thor’s claiming of this cave.

Jarnsaxa watched Thor carefully arranging all the tiny Thor statues and shirts in a sort of alcove in the cave. When he was done she asked why the humans had made them.

Thor spent the rest of that day regaling Jarnsaxa and several other Jotuns with stories of his time on Midgard. First of his banishment, then his mission to stop the Chitauri. His brother, it turned out, had begun his own atonement by sabotaging the invasion of Midgard he had been forced to lead. Thor made this clear in between boasting of his own valor in the battle, wanting the Jotnar not to think
worse of Loki than they must. By the following day, several songs had been composed about Thor’s Midgardian exploits.

Jarnsaxa enjoyed all of the tales, except for the bits about Jane Foster. What good would a mortal sorceress be to a warrior of Asgard? Really.

The Jotnar engaged in frequent border disputes. It was tradition, going back generations, tiny wars over a few miles of land. It was an accepted part of life in this realm. One of the Jotun king’s chief duties was to step in if these wars went on too long, if too many Jotuns fell, if the common people began to feel the harm instead of only the warriors. Thor joined in when Byleistr sent warriors to halt such conflicts.

In time Frigga agreed to send Thor to other worlds now and then to fight for a few days. Thor needed to fight as he needed to eat and breathe. He would return to Jotunheim cheerful and relaxed.

A year into his service, he received a message from his queen bidding him go to a planet called Sogonor to fend off an attempted invasion by another world.

“Usually I get a respite from the cold when Mother gives me missions.” The grousing was mild, however; his strange hairy face was wreathed in smiles at the prospect of the fight.

“Sogonor is cold?” Jarnsaxa asked.

“Warmer than Jotunheim, but not by much.” Suddenly Thor met her gaze, grinning. “Why don’t you accompany me? I could use another warrior.”

Jarnsaxa had never left her homeworld. She had no desire to experience the scorching heat of Asgard or Vanaheim or many of the other worlds, but seeing another world without being roasted alive was an exciting prospect.

Sogonor was about as warm as Jotunheim’s warmest moments. Quite tolerable. She fought at Thor’s side and at the feast after the battle, he demanded that a place far from the fire be kept for her and that raw meat and Sogonese ale be served to her. He moved back and forth throughout the evening, sitting by the fire trading stories for a time, then going to her side and boasting of her warrior prowess to the warmbloods. Enough warmbloods were sufficiently intrigued to stray from the fireside in order to talk to her, to hear her tales and watch her demonstrate how she could conjure blades of ice.

After that, whenever Thor had a mission on a tolerably cool world or region, he took Jarnsaxa with him.

More and more, Jarnsaxa saw Thor looking at her, and found herself looking as well. The furs he was obliged to wear thoroughly covered his body, unfortunately, but the shape of that body through the clothes was pleasing. As was his easy smile. Over time she even began to find his alien coloring pleasant, his gleaming yellow hair and pink skin.

At last one night after a day of hunting and an evening of drinking and feasting, she followed him into his cave, leaned down and kissed him.

His touch burned her. Scorched her, even.

She didn’t care.
In Norse mythology, one of Thor's wives was a Jotun named Jarnsaxa.
Chapter 98

Chapter Summary

Thor finds his destiny.

“How did the civil war start?” Loki asked.

“Jarnsaxa and I and a few others were on a bilgesnipe hunt. When we returned it had begun. Helblindi mustered enough supporters to attempt a coup. It failed and they fled to seek reinforcements. I offered to fight under Byleistr but he refused.”

Loki nodded, understanding at once. “Byleistr didn’t want anyone saying he only ruled with Asgard’s support.” He huffed a laugh, shaking his head. “I think he chose wrong.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

From there Thor launched into a recitation of Byleistr’s folly. After a few disasters ending in heavy losses on both sides and no clear victor, Thor began to offer his counsel.

“I know you’re more clever at strategy than I, but Byleistr was terrible at it. And even when that became clear he refused to listen to anyone about it.”

Loki lifted an eyebrow.

“The war could have been over in a few months if he had only—Helblindi and his warriors went into the North Forest, where there’s scarcely room for a grown Jotun to move between the trees and plenty of places to hide.”

Loki put his hand over his eyes.

“Exactly. It’s ideal for ambushing. Jarnsaxa told Byleistr, I told him, Fornjot told him not to be drawn in, but he kept trying to chase Helblindi into the forest and kept losing warriors until even he realized they were on the brink of mutiny.”

The Jotnar were fiercely split on the matter of Asgard. Enough of them were enraged that Byleistr was willing to make terms with the realm that Helblindi was able to muster support for his claim. If he were king, Helblindi declared, Jotunheim would kill every last Asgardian warrior—including, of course, both of its princes.

Most of the Jotnar realized that Jotunheim could not withstand another conflict with Asgard. They would lose all they had left.

Byleistr was willing to grit his teeth and tolerate Thor’s presence, but the storm in his eyes when Frigga’s younger son was mentioned could not be hidden. And so the more certain Thor became that Frigga would name Loki as her heir, the more Jarnsaxa feared the future war with Asgard. Because while Byleistr was willing to parlay with Frigga, he would no more keep peace with King Loki than would Helblindi. A doomed war with Asgard was inevitable either way.
Jarnsaxa actually began to ponder if she should ask Frigga to demand Jotunheim’s throne for Loki after all.

Then one day Thor brought down a bilgesnipe single-handedly and amid the cheers of observing Jotuns, a far better idea came to her.

Jarnsaxa watched for the opportunity to nudge Thor into conceiving the same idea. He would resist and argue if she simply suggested it plainly.

Not long after, he went to Asgard to visit and returned in a matter of hours in a foul temper. Jarnsaxa refrained from asking any questions. They set to work with several other Jotuns clearing the debris from an avalanche that had occurred during Loki’s attack, rendering a square mile uninhabitable by Jotun or beast. Thor hurled the boulders he hauled, letting them break into shards at the bottom of the cavern. He scarcely spoke, intent on his own brooding.

They continued until late, when every unwanted rock had been removed and all were exhausted. Thor did not bother to burn his share of deer, just ate half a portion without appetite before leaving the rest and stalking off with a large goblet of kymyz.

Jarnsaxa gave him a while before seeking him out.

She found him standing at the edge of the cavern, despite the Jotun night’s freezing winds. He had become hardened to cold during his service here. As she neared, he took a swallow of kymyz. He no longer grimaced at the taste.

The wind was strong, but still his sharp ears caught her approaching footsteps at some distance. He glanced back, recognized her, and resumed his brooding.

She stood a little behind Thor in silence for a moment. As it turned out, she did not have to ask.

“Mother’s going to make Loki heir to the throne.” Thor said it without fury for the first time, having used up all of his rage already.

Jarnsaxa made no reply, only waited. After a few moments, Thor went on.

“She’s too coy to say so, keeping everyone in doubt is useful for all her machinations within the court, but we all know it. She’s been promoting him to Asgard every way she can. She loves me, she bore me, but he was always her favorite and she is going to make him king.”

She placed a hand on Thor’s shoulder.

“She thinks he will be better at it than I. I, Odin’s only son, raised for this from birth. She thinks that his cleverness and honeyed words will serve Asgard better than my courage.”

Jarnsaxa chose her words carefully.

“And when she does? Will you take oath to your foster brother and serve him as your king?”

“Loki as my king.” Thor huffed, rueful, shaking his head—in disbelief, not denial. “My sneaky little brother. I can’t even imagine it. He was always loyal to me. I never doubted him until I learned he had lied to me about my exile being permanent. And now I am exiled again. Perhaps when Loki is king, he will banish me here or to Midgard, to make certain I cannot seize his throne.”
“Will you seize it?”

“That is not the question. The question is, am I to fight my own brother? Again?”

Jarnsaxa took a cautious risk. “Given how clever Loki’s tricks are… if you do try to seize the throne, are you certain you will succeed?”

Thor stared into the falling snow. “Jotunheim now curses the names of both its princes. Helblindi cannot win and Byleistr will not. They have made their realm hate them both by dragging out their war.” He drained the rest of the kymyz and let the goblet fall. “I cannot do that to Asgard. I have no wish to make the Aesir hate me.”

She hesitated. “When Loki is king, will he keep peace with Jotunheim, if we keep peace with him?”

Thor turned to look up at her. “Forgive me. I forgot that would be your chief concern. I believe he will, yes.”

“But neither of Laufey’s sons will keep peace with King Loki.”

“King Loki.” The headshake again. “Father used to tell us that we were both born to be kings.”

“You both were.”

At the quiet significance of her words, Thor looked back up to her, startled.

And then thoughtful.
Chapter 99

Chapter Summary

The sons of Frigga form an alliance.

“Mother’s giving you the throne that should have been mine,” Thor informed his foster brother, “so I took the one that should have been yours.”

Thor did not claim the Jotun throne by force of arms. Indeed, at his request Frigga swore to the Jotnar not to send warriors or magic to support his claim. If Thor became king of Jotunheim, it would be without Asgard’s aid.

No, Thor merely offered himself. If the Jotnar wanted him.

Thor had been raised to be a king. He found the customs of diplomacy tedious, but he did know them, knew far more of the other realms than any noble of Jotunheim. He had friends and allies on all of the realms. All the realms respected and feared his prowess as a warrior.

And Thor would be a king whose very existence would protect Jotunheim from Asgard for millennia to come. Neither Frigga nor Loki would covet or fear the realm if it were ruled by Thor. After over a millennium of fearing Asgard, Jotunheim could rest easy and attend to its own affairs again. No more would it be sacrificed to the personal ambitions and grudges of Laufey and his spawn.

Not even the Laufey-spawn who would rule Asgard one day. The warmblood realms could have him, and good riddance.

The Laufeysons could not maintain enough support to resist the Jotnar’s almost universal acclamation of Thor as king. Byleistr seethed with resentment as he accepted Thor’s offer of a large estate in exchange for renouncing his claim. Helblindi was dwelling in the wilds of the North Forest with a tiny handful of accomplices, outlaws too few to challenge Thor.

“Keep an eye on them both.” At Thor’s look, Loki nodded apology. “Of course, you didn’t need me to tell you that.”

“I’m not as dumb as I look.”

“Not quite.” The brothers grinned at each other. The flyting had the tone of something said many times.

Seeing it, Jarnsaxa relaxed inside. Despite recent events, the brothers loved each other. As kings, they would make peace.

The sons of Frigga spent a few minutes making plans. The frost dragons on Midgard would not be slain, but transported to Jotunheim to replenish the breeding population. Loki would attend Thor’s wedding, of course. In service of improved relations between the realms, Thor could call upon Loki for magical aid when required. Loki explained that he had been studying his own physiology in Jotun form with Midgardian sorcerers and offered to share what he had learned with Jotun healers.

“Come to Jotunheim and instruct our sorcerers,” Jarnsaxa invited the instant the idea entered her
Thor glanced at her, then gave his brother a smile. “When your service on Midgard is done? If Mother agrees, you could spend a few months here, teaching. Jotun sorcerers don’t have all the books and things you did.”

“With my queen’s permission… and if you don’t think I will be too unwelcome.”

“I will not allow anyone to harm you, brother.” At Loki’s wide eyes, Thor leaned forward and put his hand on the side of Loki’s neck. “With a prince of Asgard on the throne of Jotunheim, and a prince of Jotunheim on the throne of Asgard, there will at last be peace between our realms. And now that there is no longer a throne between us, we may at last be the brothers we always should have been.”

“There is nothing I want more.” Loki’s eyes were now wet in the way warmbloods’ got when they were emotional.

“Nor I. And there is one more favor I must ask of you.”

“Ah.” Loki nodded, resigned. “You want Mjölnir back.”

Thor was surprised. “What? No! I miss it, but it was hard enough for me to live down what I did to the Jotuns with it. I had better not take it up again.” He lapsed into sorrowful silence for a few seconds, then shook his head. “It ill befits the King of Jotunheim to carry a weapon which murdered hundreds of innocent Jotuns. You take it.”

“Then what….”

“Father used magic to turn you from a Jotun into an Asgardian, yes? Are you a powerful enough sorcerer to turn me into a Jotun?”

Loki just stared at his brother for a full minute.

“You are asking me… to turn you… into a frost giant?”

Thor was impatient. “I have grown used to the cold here, but I am to spend the rest of my days here. It would be far more comfortable if I were suited to it. And,” he looked at Jarnsaxa, “there is the succession to consider.”

Jarnsaxa smiled at him. In the corner of her eye she could see Loki looking as if he’d just been hit on the head.

“Thor,” she purred, “give your clever brother a moment to think. Sorcery is complicated, you must know that.”

Thor chuckled, clasping her hand. She held his gaze, allowing Loki a moment to recover himself.

Loki thought it over for a minute. Huffed. “I can’t make you bigger. You’ll still be your present size.”

“I know.”

“And Jotuns are not mammals. In a few weeks your hair will fall out.”

Thor looked up at Jarnsaxa. She smiled fondly, running a careful hand over his golden mane. “I will miss it.”
Thor stood up. “Brother, help me.” And Loki stood up and twined Thor’s long hair into a braid. Thor took out a dagger and cut it off, then fastened it ceremoniously around Jarnsaxa’s wrist.

“I can cast a spell to preserve it, if you like,” Loki offered, and when Jarnsaxa nodded, made a hand gesture that made the braid glow green for a second.

“So, can you transform me? And when you do, will Jarnsaxa and I be able to produce heirs together?”

“Yes, and yes.” Loki chuckled, giving his head a rueful shake. “Poor Mother. Her sons keep turning into frost giants.”

The transformation only took a moment. As usual, Thor did not complain; he always disdained griping about physical discomfort, though the tightness of the muscles around his mouth gave him away. But when his skin was blue and his eyes ruby red, he looked down at his hands and a smile spread across his bearded face.

Then Thor tore off the layers of furs he wore and threw them to the ground, laughing aloud. “At last! I have been freezing to death for three years now.” Unself-conscious, newly blue muscles rippling with every move, he fastened one of the furs around his waist while Jarnsaxa resolved to order proper kilts made for him.

She traced the whorls on his forehead with a fingertip, touching her betrothed without being burned for the first time. He grinned, no doubt thinking the same thing.

“The royal lines of Farbauti,” she murmured.

“It seemed appropriate to give you lines like mine in that form.” Loki bit his lip. “After all… we are brothers.”
Chapter 100

Chapter Summary

Loki stops by Asgard before returning to Earth.

His business on Jotunheim concluded, Loki allowed the Bifrost to take him away, only to find that he landed not on Earth, but in Asgard.

His mother was waiting for him.

“I hope you enjoyed that,” he chided.

Frigga dissolved into giggles. “Thoroughly!”

He grinned and embraced her. “You have been waiting for months for this, haven’t you.”

“I have.”

“Did no one know?”

“I tried to keep it as quiet as I could until now, because I was anticipating the look on your face too much.” He jostled her and she giggled again. “I believe Gullveig knows of it.”

A sudden thought ended his smile. “Mother, does Sif know?”

Frigga looked up at him, brushing his hair back from his face. “Yes. I told her as soon as he betrothed himself to Jarnsaxa.” She took his arm and let him escort her out of the Observatory.

“He seems happy.”

“He does. I have been watching.”

“I am glad.”

“You look more disbelieving than glad.”

“Can you blame me?”

She chuckled as they entered the palace.

“As I said… my sons are full of surprises.”

“We take after our mother.”

They proceeded down the corridors, Loki following his mother’s lead. “You must have heard Thor and his bride asking me to spend some time in Jotunheim teaching their sorcerers, after my service on Midgard is done. Do you approve?”

“Do you think it wise?”
“I do.”

“Then you have my permission to go there, if you wish.”

“Thank you. I shall.”

“When you are king,” she asked, “you will keep peace with your brother’s realm?”

“I will.”

She pressed his arm. “In a month, we shall have a ceremony. I will formally declare you heir to the throne.” And she would see to it that the ceremony was as glorious as any Thor had ever received. “Invite your Midgardian shield-brothers to attend.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

“I was thinking of passing Gungnir to you perhaps a century hence. I do not mean to cling to the throne until I must be carried off of it, as Odin did.”

Loki squared his shoulders unconsciously. “When you think best, my queen.”

“Besides, I intend to spend my old age advising my king and playing with my grandchildren.”

“When I return to Asgard, I will give you some.” His gaze turned inward. “I shall have several, but the eldest will be my heir. There will never be any contest among them. And they will all have a place.”

“They will all be loved.” Frigga did not doubt it.

“Yes.” He blinked a few times. “Mother, I should return to Midgard. Already I have been gone longer than expected.”

“Tarry another hour. You need to practice.”

“Practice?”

She only smiled and a moment later stopped at the entrance to the weapons vault. “With your new weapon,” she said, opening the door with a flicker of magic.

Loki inhaled sharply, understanding at once.

Frigga descended the stairs, her younger son following after a moment. “The weapon of the prince of Asgard. Liftable only to him.”

They came to a halt in front of Mjölnir.

“Take it up,” she instructed softly.

For a long moment he regarded the hammer, long the symbol of his father’s unattainable regard, of his brother’s unearned good fortune.

He did not reach for the hammer. He embraced his mother.

“Mother… thank you. For everything.”

“You have earned it.”
He held her more tightly. “I still owe it all to you. If you had not saved me, I would be dead. Or in Asgard’s dungeon. Or on the run, fleeing from my own brother. Because you did what had to be done, both of your sons are serving the realms well. Both of us are happy. Jotunheim is better ruled than ever before, as is Asgard. Midgard will take its place among the advanced realms. All because of you.”

Frigga closed her eyes and let herself have this moment. The day she had executed her husband in order to save her sons, she had not hoped things would work out as well as they had. The Norns had smiled upon them. Her sons had risen to the occasion.

Then she stood back. Nodded at the hammer.

“Take it up,” she repeated.

Loki did.

For centuries, the damned hammer and everything it stood for had divided her sons from each other. No more.

“Practice a bit with it before you return to Midgard.” She gave his free hand a squeeze and left him. She knew he would need a moment alone.

A few minutes later, in her study, Frigga heard a familiar rumble of thunder. She looked out the window to see a caped figure flying over the city.

She watched, smiling, as the figure alighted on a distant mountaintop and summoned lightning.
Epilogue: The Dark Elves and Thanos

Chapter Summary

Loki deals with the last of his enemies.

Chapter Notes

If Loki were not held back by incompetent screenwriters, he would take care of these guys easier than I can swat a mosquito.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

From Hlíðskjálf Queen Frigga saw the Dark Elves awaken. At once she summoned her younger son.

Scarcely an hour had passed before a portal delivered him to Svartalfheim. Loki addressed Malekith and his fellows.

“I am Loki, prince of Asgard.” At the snarls that last word elicited, he added, “The line of Bor no longer rules Asgard.”

Malekith glowered. “I can barely remember a time before the light.”

“The universe has changed,” Loki agreed. “Your kind cannot survive in it as it is now. But the queen of Asgard has offered to send sorcerers to transform you so that you can.”

“Change our nature?” Malekith’s face was a stormcloud.

“Or we could defeat you again.” Loki surveyed the Dark Elves. “You do not have the numbers or the Aether to withstand us.”

“Our survival will be your legacy!” Malekith declared. “The Asgardians will suffer as we have suffered.”

Loki kept his eyes steadily on Malekith.

“I will reclaim the Aether. I will restore our world. And I will put an end to this poisoned—”

A sword erupted from Malekith’s chest. Loki watched him fall dead to the ground, then raised his eyes to the Dark Elf who had killed him.

“As queen of the Dark Elves, I accept Asgard’s offer,” she said, then turned to face the others.

Without hesitation, the remaining Dark Elves cried, “Long live Queen Alyfse!”

A moment later a portal opened, and Asgardian sorcerers emerged. Within a day, all of the Dark Elves had been transformed and their realm brought back to life.
Back on Midgard, Loki went straight to Jane Foster. Bruce and Tony had been trying to understand the bizarre things that had been manifesting around her since the Convergence had begun, and the rest of the Avengers had been keeping anyone and everyone far away from her.

“I know what to do,” Loki assured them as he moved to Jane’s side. Jane was sitting on the floor, shaking, taking deep breaths to calm herself.

She gripped his hand as he knelt beside her. “What?”

“This force that has entered you, the Aether… I must take it into myself.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you hurt.”

“A human body cannot contain this force. An Asgardian one can.” Loki held a palm a few inches in front of Jane’s heart. The fluid force emerged from her body and flowed into Loki’s.

Loki closed his eyes and shuddered, but in a moment the Aether had merged with him, become a part of him.

Jane drew a relieved breath. “Are you okay, Loki?”

“I should be asking you that.” He looked at his hands, feeling his new power. “What I could do with this power….”

“Are we gonna have to give you another hot Earth boyfriend to keep you on our side? At this rate we're gonna run out.”

Loki winked at her. “Fortunately, my head is a bag full of superheroes.”

When at last Thanos found a relic which could take him to the Nine Realms, his first act was to seek revenge on Loki of Asgard. He opened a portal on Midgard and came through with an army of Chitauri.

The Avengers and Midgard’s armed forces were ready for them. Thanks to Loki’s sabotage, the Nine Realms had had years to build weapons capable of opposing the Chitauri.

As the human warriors decimated the Chitauri, Loki took on their master.

“I will make you long for something sweet as pain,” Thanos promised, raising his hands.

Loki lifted Mjölnir, but as it turned out, only a flicker of the Aether was required to send Thanos to his beloved as a failure.

With their master gone, the Chitauri were routed in a matter of minutes and the portal closed. The Nine Realms were safe.

Loki’s debt was paid.

THE END

Chapter End Notes
I started posting this two years ago today to break out of a bad case of writer's block. It's now the longest thing I have ever written and the one I worked on the longest.

Thank you all for staying with me and the story for so long.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!