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**Plausible Deniability**

by lord_hades

Summary

After Loki’s fall from the Bifrost, the wormhole threw him nearly half a millenia back in time in Midgard. Over the centuries, he has forged a new identity for himself and is content with his tenuous grasp on inner peace and he will do everything in his power never to return to Asgard, even if the most stubborn, tenacious god of thunder is trying to kick down his front door.
Chapter 1

Chapter One

Lachlan Williams believed in the cover of darkness and stealth. He also believed in silence, efficiency, and getting a damn move on when you were doing something which could attract really nasty forms of punishment, was probably illegal in four different realms, morally dubious, or all three of the above.

Which explained why his foot was tapping the ground with increasing speed and urgency, a scowl marring his handsome features, as the container literally passed through the glimmering portal at the speed of a crawl and all the ogres pulling the goods through were grunting and cursing loud enough to wake half the neighbourhood.

His dark elf client stood nearby, arms crossed, a displeased expression to mirror Lachlan’s own on his face.

“I thought you said the gateway would be wide enough for my goods to pass,” he commented archly, flicking back a ponytail of bone white hair.

Lachlan bristled at the insult. His fingers itched to curl into a fist and punch the arrogant elf in the mouth, but instead, he schooled his emotions and smiled, bright and pleasant. Don’t fuck with me. I’ll fuck you twice over.

“Ceroden,” he said using that infuriatingly reasonable tone which drove people mad, “I recalled the agreement was for a gateway large enough to pass through a shipment two by two by three meters long. I don’t know about you, but your container is at least three meters tall and two and a half meters wide. For the additional energy I’m now going to have to expend in order to allow your container to pass through, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask for an additional twenty percent to my commission.”

The dark elf spun on him, ebony, pupiless eyes dark and despairing like the abyss where nightmares were born, darker than the starless night sky above. His wine coloured lips curled, revealing sharp, pointy teeth. “The container is the size we agreed!” he hissed.

“Yeah, and your bum doesn’t look fat in those leggings,” Lachlan scoffed as Ceroden’s eyes flickered down and he stole a nervous glance at his behind. “I can get a tape and do some measurements, but you are way behind schedule, and who knows when those pesky Midgardians will hear this racket, wake up and call police. Or else let me put it this way: do you really want to risk SHIELD showing up to seize your goods and make you provide answers to a bunch of highly self-incriminating questions? It’s up to you.”

For all that Lachlan was lean and tall and towered over his client, the elf still tried to physically intimidate him, deliberately stepping into his personal space. Lachlan held his ground, maintained his smile, but there was no longer any humour left in the expression, only a cold, disturbing, vicious and murderous edge. He kept smiling that smile until Ceroden was the first to look away.

It also helped that Lachlan had an oversized, starved and feral looking wolf by his side who slavered and licked his chops as if the dark elf was going to be the first decent meal he’d had in a decade.

“You play a dangerous game, wizard,” Ceroden said lowly.
“Of course I do,” Lachlan laughed. “Otherwise where would be the fun if the game was safe and we played by the rules? Now, we are agreed on the twenty percent surcharge?”

The elf shot Lachlan a look of disgust but nevertheless nodded. They each reached into their pockets for their smartphones, Lachlan making a mental note that Ceroden was in fact a closet Apple fanboi, and a few clicks later, the bank transfer had been effected.

Smug with satisfaction, Lachlan hefted his ornamental cane, stroked the platinum reptilian figurehead with its glittering emerald eyes, and whispered a few Words of power which tore the fabric of reality and perception wide open.

The ogres gave a small cheer, and with one last heave, the container passed through into Midgard.

Pleased with his work and his substantially bloated bank account, Lachlan felt generous enough to throw in an invisibility charm over the goods and the couriers. “That’ll take you off anybody’s radar for a good six hours. Use it wisely.”

Ceroden nodded, cautious, if not bewildered by the sudden change in Lachlan’s mood from downright bloodthirsty mere moments ago, to the jovial and magnanimous spirit he now felt. “It would seem Malvavan was correct. You do fulfil your end of your bargain and you don’t ask unnecessary questions.”

Lachlan shrugged, long and slender fingers idly running through his pet wolf’s mane. “I just open doors,” he said airily. “Who goes through, and what they bring with them, is entirely not my damn business. Keep your presence and activity discrete and don’t rock the boat. We all have a good thing going on here. As long as the Midgardians remains ignorant of who we are and what we’re doing, then we’ll all be doing just fine. Capiche?”

The dark elf frowned, unfamiliar with the Midgardian colloquialisms, but inclined his head in the barest form of a nod and motioned for his crew to depart.

Lachlan stayed behind, lingering in the shadows of the containers at the docks just long enough to stitch up the portal and dispel any traces of magical residue. The thought of sealing another big deal, the fifth that fortnight, made him cackle and he wondered how he could blow all his earnings in one appalling go. His wolf grunted.

“That sounded almost like highway robbery there,” his pet remarked dourly in a smooth baritone bass, baleful blood red eyes boring into his own.

“Ah, Fenrir, a deal is a deal, and I placated him in the end, did I not?”

The wolf rolled his eyes. “Not without a little help from me, you didn’t. I always have to act like I’ve got rabies. Why can’t I be the cute, adorable and sympathetic animal that doesn’t give your clients four types of panic attacks and stomach ulcers?”

“Because you are neither cute, adorable nor sympathetic,” Lachlan said without much sympathy. “Ever since you ate Grandma, you’ve been typecast as the big bad wolf, and it’s not going to go away.”

“I never ate anybody’s grandma,” Fenrir grumbled.

Lachlan petted him on the head and unhooked the leash from his spiked collar. “Well, you look like him, so you ate Grandma. Nothing I can do about that for you, pal.”

“Real pal you are,” Fenrir grumbled some more and deliberately stepped on Lachlan’s foot,
chuckling at his startled yelp of pain.

“Do that again and I’ll twist your ear!”

Fenrir stuck out his tongue and lopped off ahead into the silent night leaving Lachlan to scramble in an undignified fashion in pursuit.

~*~*~*~*~

Arrelorna clung to her husband, fingers like talons digging into his arm. She bit her lips and restlessly cast her gaze around the café.

Gareth sighed at her jumpiness even though he was no less nervous than his wife. This was going to end badly. He could already taste the failure bitter and sour in his mouth and it made him nauseous.

When your wife is royalty of an alien species and she gave it all up to be with a mortal who still had a mortgage to pay off on his modest suburban townhouse with a middle manager’s pay cheque, and the alien royalty had now sent someone to hunt them down, who’re you gonna call?

Not ghost busters, that’s for sure. And they didn’t have some extra-terrestrial equivalent, unless Tommy Lee Jones was really Agent K and the MIB already had tabs on their relationship and were watching his back.

So Arrelona, being the one with experience in all things alien and extra-dimensional, suggested they take a trip down Brighton Beach, which was disconcerting at first because eating a hot dog and sun baking wasn’t exactly how Gareth thought they would get out of this mess. But Arrelona had made a few hushed phone calls beforehand, and after they climbed out of the subway station, they took a turn from the beachfront, deliberately headed into parts of town which silently shouted ‘locals only!’ until they came upon a shabby looking family owned café that had never seen a tourist in its life.

The chairs and tables were sanitary but run down, and the few locals there enjoying their morning coffee, who all could have been cast as extras in a movie about Russian gangsters, ignored them and buried their faces in the daily newspaper.

“So this…Boris guy? He like…an old friend of yours?” Because despite being on the run from possible alien royal family assassins, a husband still had the right to feel jealous when his wife called on an old flame to get them out of a fix.

Arrelona’s alabaster complexion impossibly paled and her mouth pressed into a tight line. “Boris is not a friend.”

A derisive snort made Gareth jump in his seat, and he instantly regretted it. How the giant of a man some two meters tall managed to sneak up on him from behind without making a single damn sound or shaking the earth as he walked was a mystery. But now that this stranger had smelled his fear, a sick, demented smile splayed across his face and Gareth, against his primal instincts for survival, tried to bodily shield his wife from the homicidal thug.

“You’re Boris Andropov?” he managed weakly.

The Russian ignored him and laid unsettling ice blue gaze on Arrelona. “And you are elf princess.”

Arrelona sat up a little straighter and shifted in her seat as Boris took up the chair opposite to them uninvited. Underneath the table, she reached for Gareth’s hand and squeezed it. Hers was slick
with cold sweat and he realised he was shuddering from the chill as well.

“Let’s get down to business. You have problem. I fix problems.”

“How exactly are you going to fix our problem?” Gareth asked, hoping he didn’t sound as meek as he felt.

Boris shook his head and tsked. “We talk price first.”

Gareth shared a look with the love of his life and steeled his resolve. He took a deep breath. “We are just working class people. We can’t pay much. Why don’t you tell us how much you want and we tell you whether we can pay it or not.”

“Depends on what you need done,” Boris shrugged. “A kill is usually fifteen thousand. An unusual kill might cost twenty five – ”

“No killing!” Gareth immediately objected, choking on a wave of revulsion. “I don’t want bloodshed.”

Both Boris and his wife looked at him as if he had just proposed a hot and steamy threesome in a downtown cheap motel. “My love,” Arrelona began, stroking his arm. “My father is an unforgiving man, and he has not forgiven our elopement. Whoever he has sent, you should do well not to expect mercy.”

He gaped at her, astounded. “You can’t be serious. What we’re doing would be no different than hiring a hitman.” Then it suddenly dawned on him. “Oh my god, we are hiring a hitman!”

“Keep your voice down!” Arrelona hissed, jerking him by the sleeve closer back to her. “Why else do you think we’re here?”

“To find a proper solution,” he replied, stressing the word to show how utterly serious he was. “Your father can’t just send an assassin to Earth and think he can kill as he pleases.”

Boris chuckled. It was an ugly sound. “No! I require your services. It will be an unusual kill.”

“The quote is twenty five to thirty five thousand. Fifty percent deposit up front, and extra ten percent for contingencies. Who is the target?”

“Hang on! Just hang on a minute here!” Gareth hammered his fist on the table, anger making him forget his fear of the Russian hitman sitting opposite him. He glowered at the giant man. “You,” he said, accusation in his voice, “You came to Earth through the Gatekeeper as well, didn’t you?”

The smile fled from Boris’ face. His ice blue eyes narrowed and his shoulders hunched forward. “You threaten me with the Gatekeeper?”

“The Gatekeeper threatens us all,” Gareth corrected, determined not to lose his nerve. He recalled the Gatekeeper’s words as he cast a permanent glamour over Arrelona, transforming her into a human woman to allow her to blend flawlessly into humanity. He cautioned them to be discreet and not to rock the boat. Gareth left with the distinct impression that if he or Lona caused any waves, the Gatekeeper would hunt them down and scrub their very existence from the universe. By speaking to Boris, had their already attracted the wrath of the Gatekeeper?

“Whoever Lona’s father sends will be an alien. You’re probably an alien. And if we start an alien
blood feud on earth, humans, like the Avengers, are going to start to notice. I think that’s going to rock the boat. Do you want the Gatekeeper coming after you?"

The temperature around them plummeted. Boris’ upper lip peeled back and he emitted a growl that raised the hairs on the back of Gareth’s arms and neck and froze the blood in his veins. He cried out, breath condensing in the air, and almost fell out of his chair when the ice-blue in Boris’ eyes blinkered into a laser red that could cut him down where he stood.

“Gatekeeper will know nothing,” Boris hissed. “We keep this quiet. I make clean kill. Then you and I never see each other again. Deal?”

“The deal is you hold your hands up where I can see them and make no sudden moves.”

Without warning, a dozen men in balaclavas and full body armour imprinted with the distinctive black and red SHIELD insignia stormed into the café, overturning tables and chairs as they made a beeline towards them, levelling huge guns that Gareth didn’t believe existed or could only appear in science fiction movies.

Commanding the operation was a woman with flaming crimson hair, two giant handguns holstered on either side of her hip, and at ease in a black leather cat suit. She coolly met Boris’ hateful glare which promised violence and suffering as if she had seen a lot worse in her lifetime and gestured for the agents to close in on the Russian hitman with a set of customised cuffs.

Unfortunately for the agents, Boris was in no mood to co-operate and they couldn’t lever his hands close enough for the cuffs to fit. His malevolent red eyes settled on Gareth and Arrelona, speaking of betrayal, and Gareth was quick to launch into denials.

“You got slack, Andropov,” the red-haired agent said, casually covering him with her hand-cannon. “We’ve got you on security camera for half a dozen hits, and now we’ve just caught you in the act.”

Two agents became four, and four became six, with three men literally hugging each of Boris’ arm and trying to pull them together until they were all red in the face.

A dull sense of fear rippled through Gareth, and he openly backed away, dragging Arrelona with him until their backs were pressed against the counter bench and there was an overturned table they could duck behind when everything went to hell in a hand basket. Because everything was about to go downhill so fast they were all about to get whiplash, only SHIELD were unable to see it or unable to accept it.

Gareth didn’t know who Boris was, what Boris was, but whatever he was, he seemed damn confident in overpowering the small, armed-to-the-teeth platoon that SHIELD had dispatched to bring him in. Gareth didn’t like the way Boris grinned calmly at his would-be captors, and the way those muscles began to surge beneath tautening pale skin made Gareth’s stomach flip three times over.

Boris abruptly stood up. He swung his left arm forward and sent three agents flying into the far wall. He swung his right arm and the remaining agents were bowled out the front door, taking the rest of the agents through the front window with them.

The red-haired agent reached up to her ear and spoke into mic stitched into her sleeve. “Hawkeye, Code Red. Fire at will.”

No sooner had she finished giving the order, she dived behind the same table that Gareth and his
wife were huddled behind.

Gareth heard the faint ‘whoosh’ of something flying through the air at high speed, followed by three soft thuds leading to Boris’ ear-splitting scream of pain. Strobe light effects flooded the room. Gareth dared a peek over the rim of the table and saw what could only be described as the big Russian being electrocuted by something that looked like an…arrow jutting from his shoulder.

The electrical charge eventually faded and there was an indistinct smell of burnt meat even though Boris’ skin remained unmarked. The next arrow that zipped in (from god knows where) broke apart just before impact and spread into a metal net that collapsed over Boris.

Gareth’s insides shrivelled to nothing as Boris laughed briefly, an utterly inhuman sound. An artic gust of wind with the fury of a tornado rolled into the room, whipping up plates, cups, cutlery, anything that was not hammered down. Cold bit into Gareth’s skin, sunk through his flesh and settled deep like death into the marrow of his bones. White hoarfrost coated the metal net and with a shrug, the net burst apart into a million shards of ice.

Freed, Boris advanced towards them. The red-haired agent made a suicidal dive to another overturned table some two meters away, managing to fire her hand-cannons and fluidly somersault out of the dive so she was back on her feet in an instant.

Boris was thrown back a good meter by the successive blasts of energy, but apart from his singed clothing he was unharmed. Water then flowed from his hands, but before the liquid dripped to the floor, it solidified into long translucent blades.

“Hawkeye, going to need more backup. He’s resistant to electrostatic discharge. I have civilians with me and can’t use my grenades.”

The next two arrows that flew in to respond landed at Boris’ feet and splattered into a yellow sticky residue. Gareth fanned a small flame of hope that it could slow the Russian down so he and Lona could escape, and just as they prepared to make their dash to the exit, the yellow adhesive crystalised into ice and met a similar fate to the metal net from before.

“Hawkeye…” the red-haired agent said testily into her communicator and firing more shots over her shoulder. “Your party tricks aren’t working.”

The ground began to tremble and a great and terrible animalist roar rent the air. The last thing Gareth saw before he passed out from fear was a glimpse of radioactive green, a fist punching through the air with the force of a nuclear warhead, and two giants clashing against each other, engaged in colossal battle that happened only in myths.
Tony replayed the footage, drenched in cold sweat, hair greasy and dishevelled and smelling like he hadn’t showered in days all in the space of one afternoon. Nothing suggested that the clips had been tampered with. So that meant there was someone out there who could remain standing after two tonnes of green rage monster had slammed into them with the momentum equal to a meteorite the size of Cuba crashing into earth.

Not only did Andropov hold his ground after the Hulk collided into him, the Russian hitman then grasped the Hulk on the forearms and slammed the gamma monster into the ground before repeatedly stomping down on the Hulk’s head. By that time, Andropov had turned blue, as in not blue in the face from fear blue, but more like “I’m a little smurf” blue and that family owned café in downtown Brighton Beach transformed into an extension of the Antarctic in the blink of an eye.

Andropov’s skin turning a different shade of colour was hardly something to run to the media about in this day and age, nor was Andropov growing to almost twice his size and width something to write home about either. What made Tony do a double take and start zooming all cameras in like mad was someone capable of standing toe to toe with the Hulk and they weren’t the unfortunate victim of gamma exposure.

...Whoever Lona’s father sends will be an alien. You’re probably an alien. And if we start an alien blood feud on earth, humans, like the Avengers, are going to start to notice...

Aliens, Tony contemplated with a burgeoning sense of dread and excitement that made is mouth run dry and his left eye twitch spasmodically. These people weren’t mutants or bio-engineering experiments gone wrong. They were genuine ETs who had come to earth, successfully integrated into human society and had no intentions of phoning home. There couldn’t have been greater evidence than this.

You came to Earth through the Gatekeeper as well, didn’t you?

Tony’s eyes narrowed, the name triggering early signs of migraine, the stabbing pain at the sides of his head like someone trying to crack open his skull with a blunt sledgehammer and award-winning determination. He reached for his seventh cup of coffee that evening.

Damn Gatekeeper.

If he heard that title one more time, he was going to fire Jarvis, hire its brighter second cousin, and quit the Avengers and Stark Industries so he could devote himself full time to tracking down this guy known only as the Gatekeeper.

They had come across his name by sheer accident.

A year ago, the Avengers had been called out to Australia to deal with an outbreak of reptiles that the ADF couldn’t identify and could only presume to be prehistoric, and possibly from the late Paleozoic or early Mesozoic era, give or take a couple of million years.

Time meddling was a Doom thing, and unleashing a horde of primitive but extremely blood thirsty and savage as hell beasts was something he might do because he was a screwed up individual. However, SHIELD intel had him holidaying in Ibiza with an entourage of Romanian bikini clad
babes at the time of the incident, so after scratching his name off the suspect list, they decided the culprit must have been HYDRA in another one of their diabolical but poorly implemented schemes.

The quinjet deposited them in the middle of the Nullabor Plains where a secret holding facility had been built by one Terrence Rinehart, billionaire with enough money to spend through ten lifetimes as a filthy rich billionaire, who made his fortune in coal and mining in the resource rich country.

The prehistoric beasts that had escaped from the facility and were roaming the arid plains, picking fights with each other, frightening the local fauna and generally being loud and making a very bloody mess and had stirred enough of a commotion to be picked up by a routine RAAF flight over the region.

Captain America immediately launched into doing what he did best, clobbering the animals senseless with his shield, and whilst the Hulk and Hawkeye kept something which resembled a three-storey T-Rex with curved horns and sparkling purple scales occupied, Tony and Wasp headed their way into the facility to shut down the time device.

There wasn’t any time device or evidence of any mad genius’ laboratory of twisting test tubes and innocuous bubbling substances. Instead, there were sophisticated chambers with barriers made of pure, pulsing energy, not dissimilar to the cells in Prison 42, and lots of dead human bodies, most likely the poor bastards employed by Rinehart to monitor the chambers. Some of the fantastical creatures were still trapped behind the gossamer shields whilst other cells looked like a chain of grenades had gone off in succession and parts of the facility were structurally unsound and threatening to collapse.

Rinehart was found holed up behind solid, meter thick steel doors in his emergency safe room. He had soiled himself and was rambling Freudian incoherence about wanting his mommy. He was sedated, extracted from his facility and regained consciousness in one of SHIELD’s interrogation rooms.

As Tony suspected, the raptors, T-Rex and bus-sized carnivorous wombats that they had taken care of were not creations of science.

“We were told…” Rinehart had swallowed thickly under Romanov’s unwavering gaze, then distracted himself from the sense of inevitable death by painful evisceration by reaching for the glass of water and gulping it down. “We were told that these creatures were….uh…non-native to Earth. I paid the Gatekeeper twenty five…twenty five million for the three ‘bogboars’ and fifty million for the ‘bilgesnipe’ and…”

“Can I just ask a quick question,” Tony had interrupted, pushing his way to the front of the table much to Romanov’s suppressed annoyance. “You aren’t in my field of science and research, and I couldn’t find a single cog of any diagnostic equipment at your base so you clearly weren’t running any tests or experiments on those things. So why the hell did you pay so much money for these dinosaurs then?”

Rinehart stared at him, thrown by the sudden change in topic. His mouth opened and closed a few times before he found his voice, and his cheeks flushed. “It’s a symbol of status,” he said defensively. “I already have two Siberian Tigers, a black rhino, two pairs of polar bears and half a dozen orang-utans in my private zoo, but every Tom, Dick and Harry who’s got a few million lying around can easily get those on the black market. How else could I distinguish myself from that cheap, classless mob – ”

“Hang on, just hang on a minute,” Agent Coulson held up one hand and pinched the bridge of his nose with the other. He said very slowly, “Are you seriously telling me that you have accumulated
There was a long stretch of silence.

Rinehart delicately cleared his throat and averted his eyes. “Yeah, basically.”

Although Rinehart technically didn’t break any laws (as no one had thought they needed to legislate against the importation of really weird and crazy monsters who may or may not like the taste of human flesh), SHIELD and the Avengers made it a priority to put an end to the Gatekeeper’s business.

Because according to Rinehart, he wasn’t the only billionaire who had sought to elevate their status amongst their appallingly affluent brethren by buying alien animals from out of space and competing to see who could roll out the cash for the most bizarre, disgusting, frightening, blood curdling, vomit inducing, or a combination of the above, alien animal.

It then got SHIELD thinking that if the Gatekeeper could import beasts from another planet at the behest of some billionaires with way too much money and not enough sense to change a lightbulb, could he not also import sentient beings, genuine aliens who might take one look at earth, see that its inhabitants hadn’t developed tech to go beyond their own moon, and decide that humanity was ripe for being taken over?

In short, the Gatekeeper became classified as earth’s first intergalactic alien trafficker and his business had to stop, or at least come under SHIELD’s stringent regulation and strict controls.

The Captain immediately suspected that the Gatekeeper was a part of HYDRA. He’d had first hand experience battling Cyclops, ogres, wolves the size of a minivan, and managed to destroy a “portal” before a truly terrible and giant monster was able to come through to the realm of Earth.

They then apprehended Schmidt, put the poor sod through the wringer six times over until he was nice and pliant and malleable and more than willing to answer their questions.

“The Gatekeeper,” Schmidt sneered, spitting on the floor. “I’ll flay him alive the next time I see him, that vicious little shit. I merely tried to coerce him into providing me with the secrets of interdimensional travel, and he retaliates by co-opting my best agent and cursing me so that every portal I have tried to open henceforth ends in failure.”

Steve had no compassion for Schmidt’s woes of being unable to summon fantastical and horrific beings from out of space to aid in his plans for world domination under a neo-fascist order. He wrenched Schmidt onto his feet by the front of his shirt and shook the man like ragdoll. “How and when did you come into contact with the Gatekeeper?”

The Red Skull bared his teeth. In spite of his restraints he still tried to head butt the Captain. Clint and Coulson held him back and none too graciously dumped him back into his seat.

“It was perhaps ten, maybe fifteen years after the fall of the Third Reich. Baron Strucker and I were regrouping and trying to recruit a new team of scientists to continue our project. The Gatekeeper responded and I thought he was a believer in our cause. Instead,” and here, the Red Skull’s skeletal face twisted into a grotesque mask of rage filled with pure malice and bitterness, “he demolished our laboratory, obliterated decades of research, and told us that there was going to be one and only one Gatekeeper on earth, and if we needed things that were out-of-this-world, we had to go to him and pay him our pound of flesh.”

That got Tony nervous and paranoid. At worst, he assumed the Gatekeeper was a new kid on the
block who may have been operating unchecked for a year or so providing billionaires with unique playthings for kicks and giggles and a truckload of cash. If he had already been around since the freaking 1950’s and beating up the supervillains for their lunch money like they were the shy, wimpy kids at school, S H I E L D was most likely underestimating the extent of alien infiltration on earth, and the ruthless monopoly that the Gatekeeper had maintained and enjoyed.

His cabin door hissed open, and Tony looked up from his tablet.

“The man called Gareth is awake, and they’re ready to talk,” Natasha announced, and Tony had to smirk at the barely contained excitement in her usually calm and collected voice.

Sadriel stepped out of the bathroom, carefully drying herself off with a cheap, coarse towel, the rough texture scuffing her skin, unused to anything other than the light, luxurious pure cotton wraps of the palace.

The dark elf Ceroden’s black eyes followed her, a barely sated hunger smouldering in those near fathomless depths. He fluidly rose from the bed, naked, and shamelessly wrapped his arms around her, burying his face into her still damp hair. She felt his chest swell against her back and his hold tightened to the point of near pain.

She held herself rigid and allowed Ceroden’s hands to wander and do as he pleased. It was part of the bargain.

“The night is young, princess.” It was a low growl that made her shiver involuntarily with unexpected lust. “And I would have you all night.”

She supposed she should have been thankful that Ceroden was not violent or a perverted sadist who relished in the pain of others. He was nevertheless aggressive and dominating in bed, pinning her down as he will, tasting every inch of her skin as if it was his right, and determined to bring her to climax, witting or not, and took his pleasure in making her admit pleasure.

It was actually incredibly hot.

Being sixth daughter of Her Gloriousness Ladyship Queen Areth IV of Alfheim, and therefore a princess of the realm, she had to be discreet with her lovers, and they had tended to be subservient, treating her with reverence and gentility in bed that had become so utterly dull and boring over the years.

It would be wrong and reputation destroying for her to confess or outwardly show that she was enjoying herself, with a dark elf no less, because this was supposed to be an impartial business trade-off where she allowed Ceroden to do as he pleased with her body for one night in exchange for him smuggling her in and out of Midgard without raising the alarms of the native inhabitants.

Her younger sister, Arrelona, the ninth daughter of Queen Areth, had escaped to Midgard, settling with a mortal lover whom their parents disapproved, and Sadriel finally had orders to bring her home.

With a sigh that was more satisfaction than resignation, Sadriel allowed herself to surrender to this illicit and unspeakable indulgence of the flesh for the night.

A great horn blast startled her out of her sleep in the morning when the sky was still overcast and grey and the birds were not yet inclined to sing.
She was about to rise to investigate the source of the continued cacophony of dissonant horn sounds, some long and wailing, others staccato short, when Ceroden’s arms tightened reflexively around her and prevented her from leaving.

“Fear not. They are but the warning bells of Midgardian transport carriages,” he murmured, voice dogged by sleep. “Midgardian drivers sound the horns to express their frustration when the flow of traffic is not to their satisfaction.”

“Will that not startle their horses? Or render them deaf?”

Ceroden turned her around to face him and absently planted kisses along her brow. “Midgardians have long ceased to use beasts of burden. They rely on contraptions of metal fuelled by the energy release of combustion. You will come to sense for yourself the pollution in the atmosphere when you explore your surrounds today.”

Sadriel sighed and subconsciously leaned into his touch. “This does not accord with the knowledge and information I had collated before embarking on this mission.”

“And how old is your information, princess?”

“Just a little over a century.” She paused, suspicious. “Why?”

He pulled away and she observed a mocking grin on his face as if he meant for her to see it. “What you have, princess, is not information but history. Midgardians’ lives are fleeting. Change occurs at an extraordinarily rapid rate.”

She tore away from him as if she had been burned and ignored the sting of his soft jeering laugh in her ears as she hurried to the window and peeled away the curtain.

A frown naturally set on her face. Large, oblong contraptions of various colours and sizes arranged themselves in single file on the narrow streets below her, shuffling forward an inch at a time, belching dark fumes and growling with menace and impatience. The line of these noxious machines extended as far as her eyes could see in either direction and she wondered why the Midgardians hadn’t choked to death already.

On the table nearby was a neat stack of books. She motioned with her hand and the pages, glossy in texture, obediently obeyed her unspoken will and turned for her.

The bound manuscript was scarce on text and heavy on illustrations. Apprehension began to churn in the pit of her stomach as the images of the Midgardian females bore almost no similarities to the drawings found in the palace libraries, the most comprehensive and thorough in the realm. The chemise, corset and petticoats she had prepared found no place in this day and age and would only serve to distinguish her from the local population.

Her mission was destined for failure if she couldn’t even do something as simple as blend in and assimilate with the natives. It would be impossible to catch her sister by surprise if it was obvious that she was disparate and distinctive.

“I would recommend you adopt an appearance similar to this one,” Ceroden’s voice cut through her thoughts, and a gentle touch settled on her shoulder. The book now lay open at a page where a female stared directly at her artist with enviable confidence, and she was clad in clothing which looked reasonably comfortable and modest.

Sadriel closed her eyes and visualised her form superimposed on that of the picture, and she could feel the warm tingling of magic knit itself above her skin and solidify into garments which were an
Ceroden’s look was contemplative. “You are a witch skilled in conjuration?”

Sadriel grimaced, and took up a seat on the couch to study the rest of the text, mentally comparing what she knew to what she was now presented with. “That is an unkind comment. I am an Adept, and we have nothing to do with the dark arts.”

“Then you are not here for a blood contract.”

“Of course not! I am a princess of Alfheim. I will not sully my hands with that nefarious sort of endeavour! In any event, I am under no obligation to share my mission with you. What I am here to do is for me and only me to know. You will merely wait to hear from me as to when I am ready to return to my realm.”

Ceroden raised an eyebrow. “Suit yourself. I am just afraid that the moment you leave this hotel, you are going to get run over by a truck and that’s the end of Sadriel’s Grand Adventures on Midgard.”

“And why should you help? It couldn’t possibly be out of the kindness of your non-existent heart.”

He reached out for a lock of her chestnut hair and twirled it around his fingers, something he had done all night, even in his sleep. “You are quite correct. There is no kindness in my heart, but I would certainly be motivated to be helpful in exchange for another night like the last,” he said suggestively.

By all rights she should be mad and justified in flying into a violent rage, this horrid dark elf attempting to subjugate her to another night of humiliation. Sadriel knocked his hand aside but wasn’t prepared to deny his offer. She had to be prudent and sensible here and not let her pride get the better of her. There was no harm in keeping her options open. She kept her voice calm and even. “I am more than capable of finding my way.”

Ceroden sighed with exaggerated regret and shuffled closer next to her, brazenly gathering her into his embrace again and nuzzled her exposed neck. “Oh well, one could only try. Heed the Gatekeeper’s words and conduct your business without attracting the attention of the mortals.”

Her heart skipped a beat at the mention of the Gatekeeper, and her nostrils flared from the sudden and rapid intake of breath. If she had been afraid of how the night with Ceroden could have transpired, she was terrified of the sorcerer who had the ability to part the curtains of time and reality with such impossible subtlety and deftness. She heard his casual, near flippant voice when she was hidden inside the container, but Sadriel was no fool. Whereas other witches and adepts she knew lit up like bright sparks of light in her mind whenever they were near, the Gatekeeper was a gathering of shadows, vague, indistinct. He was a super nova of power absolutely obscured by shroud upon shroud drawn from the nothingness of the void and yet he managed not to succumb to oblivion.

Ceroden misinterpreted her fear. “Having second thoughts about my offer, princess?”

Sadriel tensed and ruthlessly bought her racing mind to a stand still. “Never underestimate the Gatekeeper,” she said quietly. “A powerful sorcerer is something to fear in itself. A powerful sorcerer who can conceal himself with such art is an even greater threat.”

He blinked at her, surprised by the free offering of advice. He gave a slow nod. “I gathered as much from Malvavan. Even after two hundred years of employing the Gatekeeper’s services, he
does not even know his name. The Gatekeeper is indiscriminate though; as long as you pay him his dues, he will build a portal to your desire. He only requires sufficient notice. Here, take this.” He handed her a rectangular object that fit comfortably in her palm, and she nearly dropped it when it flared into life of brightly coloured lights beneath a fine sheet of glass and began to sing.

Ceroden sighed as if he was dealing with someone exceptionally slow, and Sadriel silently berated herself for letting him see her fumble. “This is a Midgardian communication device. You press this….this……and then input this number,” he fished out a slip of paper where a string of ten numbers was scrawled. “Then hit that button, and...” The dark elf produced another similar device which began to sing as well, a tune different from the other. “You press the phone to your ear, just like me, see, and we can speak to each other over long distances at any time.”

She tentatively copied his actions and heard his voice as if he was speaking directly in to her ear like the way he did last night when he insisted on luridly commenting on her every physical reaction which served only to excite her more. She fought the heat rising to her cheeks and concentrated on the contraption in her hand. “How ingenious,” she muttered, but then fumbled again when her fingers brushed against something on the glassy surface which cut Ceroden’s voice off.

The dark elf caught the phone before it hit the floor and he sighed, longer, and more exasperated this time. “Princess, you need not tell me what you intend to do in Midgard, but I cannot let you proceed alone. There is no way you are not going to draw attention to yourself if something as benign as a phone startles you. If you attract the Gatekeeper’s ire, it will flow through to me as well, and I will not risk my business.”

Sadriel hesitated. She had been trained to respond to foreign environments and unforeseen circumstances, but there was too much at stake here, and moreso when there was a nameless sorcerer and his unspoken threats hanging above her like an executioner’s blade.

So she told the dark elf everything.

~*~*~*~*~

“They’ve been together for over seventy years and don’t look a day over thirty!” Tony continued to ramble, making sounds of puppy-like annoyance whenever Pepper’s attention strayed to the other regulars who practised warm-up stretches and spins with their partners with confidence that escaped her and took refuge six states away at the moment.

It was all Jan’s fault. Carol found a great dance partner and had been taking ballroom dancing lessons for six months before she convinced Jan to bring Hank along for a class, and on a bet that Tony lost (when had Clint ever missed a target?), she was now here with him trying to fix up his vest and shirt whilst he was more interested in recounting the events of the past few days to her.

Jan shot her a sympathetic look but her commiseration evaporated when Carol arrived, revealing a side to her that the Avengers had not seen before. As Ms Mavel, Danvers was tough and uncompromising and that had thoroughly permeated into her civilian and private life. It didn’t help that since high school and all throughout her career, Danvers had been wallowing knee deep in the testosterone of the military and kicking up a fair share of her own so as to make even the hard-as-nails generals question their own manhood at times.

Today, she was all soft curves and feminine flattery in well-worn dancing shoes and a sequenced dress fit for the occasion.

Apparently, the transformation was all attributable to her dance partner of six months.
Pepper and Jan were going to meet him for the first time, but they had already heard enough about him from Danvers to write a book longer than Lord of the Rings and all its other side stories and histories combined. Even though they hadn’t met the man, they were already familiar with his life story: he was a trust fund baby whose parents died young leaving him a hefty inheritance which could see him through life without a day’s work. He was also an avid dog lover, spoiling his own rotten, dabbled in fringe New Age occultist movements and boasted latent telekinetic abilities that were about as impressive as calling a coin toss right half the time. His sexual orientation was not confirmed, but he acted like every girls’ dream of the perfect gay BFF, accompanying Carol on extended shopping trips, nights out at the broadway and the opera, and never failed to turn up to their monthly pampering spa sessions.

Carol nudged Pepper in the ribs. “Is Tony still going on about the aliens?”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “There’s no getting him to stop. He’s now becoming obsessed about turning the arc reactor into a portal to other “realms” when he doesn’t have the faintest clue where they are and he’s ignoring every question that starts with ‘why’?” Pepper lowered her voice so only Carol could hear. “I swear, if he doesn’t shut up about the aliens, I’m going to pretend to be very clumsy and step on his toes so many times that he’s got to limp through the next HYDRA or AIM or whatever attack.”

Carol stifled a laugh but they eventually burst out into a fit of giggles, earning certain looks of distrust from the men. Jan detached herself from Hank’s arm and joined them.

“So,” she wiggled her eyebrows and said meaningfully, “when do we get to meet the new man in your life?”

Carol blushed and she tried to tough it out. “Don’t talk about him like that! We’re just very good friends.”

Pepper was a straight-talking shark of a business woman and she knew bullshit when she saw it. “Just good friends?”

“Yes! He’s a good friend….” Carol shuffled her feet and fidgeted with a loose sequence on her belt. “Well, a different type of good friend, one who convinced me that I shouldn’t forget to do things like this, dancing, go to concerts, you know, have some time off now and then from the whole law and order and Avengers business.” She paused, eyes downcast, lips pursed. “And…he’s right. It’s not that I don’t love you guys like my family, but life can’t be all about work and I really enjoy spending time with him and having a bit of fun.”

Jan dramatically clutched her chest. “You are living the dream, woman! I wish Hank was one-tenth as attentive. If I wanted to chisel Hank away from his lab or his study, I’m going to have to find that lamp and the genie first.”

“I’ll translate – Jan is envious, deeply envious, of your man.”

“For the last time, he’s not my man!” Carol said hotly to the both of them. Then suddenly, her entire demeanor transformed, from a hissing and spitty alley cat to a pampered and unruffled persian blue, and her smile brightened as she waved to the newcomer who entered the studio. “Lachie! Over here!”

Pepper was taken aback, and so was Jan. ‘Lachie’ was the name you gave to a cute baby nephew or lovable budgie. ‘Lachie’ did not suit the tall, lean, handsome man in his early thirties, who had eyes of an unusually intense green colour and who was completely at ease with braiding his waist length hair into an immaculate fish-tail plait.
‘Lachie’ headed straight for Carol, and they did the whole ‘kiss-hello’ thing, grasped each other’s hands in delight and immediately started to giggle at some private joke.

“I’m sorry I’m late. RiRi was having a bit of a tantrum about being left at home by herself and it’s so hard to keep her indoors when it’s such a nice day outside, but you remember what happened last time I bought her here,” he explained in a rush, giving Tony a run for his money in terms of speed talking. “Anyway, I managed to flee without getting mauled and I’ll have to make it up to her somehow tonight. So,” his eyes sparkled with mirth and he swept his gaze back and forth the dance studio, “are your friends here today?”

Carol brought ‘her man’ to meet them all, a tense and nervous smile plastered to her face as if she had thought that introducing her dancing partner to the Avengers was a great idea at first when she invited Jan to come, but soon thereafter began to have nightmares about how the various psychological dysfunctions of each Avenger would permanently scare her wonderful dancing partner away. On a good day, Tony was a narcissist with delusions of grandeur actually made possible by his genius brain and tech; Jan was an upper class socialite with an abnormal tolerance for life threatening situations which she equated with ‘fun’; Hank was a pacifist science geek who thought Zemo just didn’t get the hugs he needed as a child; and as for herself…well, she was a masochist for putting up with the lot of them.

‘Lachie’ shook each of their hands, exchanged names (his full name was in fact Lachlan Williams) in a boyish and pleasant manner and Jan immediately took a liking to him, winking and turning up her inner flirt almost to the point of ‘unfaithful’, while Tony and Hank openly studied him if trying to deduce whether he would be a threat to the romantic interests in their lives.

“You look familiar,” Tony said brusquely, arms crossed and back straight. “Have we met?”

Lachlan smiled easily. “I don’t think so. I wouldn’t even know where the front door was for the social circles you move in, if there even is a front door. However, you may have seen me on the seventh season of American Idol,” he said with a faint hint of pride. “I made it into the top 100 at Las Vegas.”

There was silence and stares all around.

“You know, the one they said had a great voice and was an entertaining performer, but tended to over-sing and was just too karaoke-ish?”

More stares, this time accompanied by clueless shrug and apologetic look from Hank.

Lachlan sighed. “Oh well, I only got around five minutes of screen time after all the edits any way. And the judges were right; I do a lot better at the state karaoke contests.”

“Is that how you and Carol met?” Jan asked.

“At a karaoke contest?” Lachlan flinched, sounding a little bewildered. “No no no. I moved to New York about eight months ago for a change of scenery. RiRi and I were just being tourists and walking around visiting all the landmarks in town. The Avengers Mansion was on the route and I guess we met by chance.”

Carol chuckled, some of her nervousness ebbing away as Lachlan hadn’t bolted for the door they moment they said ‘hi’. “His dog did a dump outside the mansion, and he rang the doorbell asking if we had a spade and a plastic bag to clean up the mess.”

“That is another way to remember it,” Lachlan conceded grudgingly. “However, I prefer my
version where the start of a beautiful friendship was not precipitated by dog poo. And to be entirely honest, I was afraid that the Hulk or Captain America would have chased me down the streets and accosted me or something, issued an infringement ticket, or beaten the living daylights out of me, for letting my dog defecate outside your headquarters and trying to get away with it. Speaking of which, where are Captain America and Dr Banner anyway? Too shy for some ballroom dancing? I can promise them it’s the ultimate test of masculinity.”

“The Hulk is house sitting and Cap is babysitting our alien guest.”

Pepper inwardly groaned. “Tony, are you sure you should be going around telling civilians about this? Didn’t Phil say something about champion security classification or something?”

“They’re no weirder or more insane than the supervillains splashed across the front page of our newspapers every second week. Hell, they even look normal compared to freaks like MODAK or Armin Zola. These people just happen to come from another planet, ’tis all.”

“Aliens?” Lachlan echoed, peering at them with some guarded doubt as if he wasn’t sure whether they were joking or not. Maybe he suspected this was some sort of initiation ritual or test of his gullibility, where if he failed, he would never be part of the ‘in’ crowd.

“Aliens,” Tony confirmed, straight face and all. “Or one alien anyway, married to a human in an epic, twisted, galactic version of Romeo and Juliet, where Juliet decided this time that rather than going out on a suicide pact, she would hire some blue giant alien assassin to deal with anyone who disapproves of her choices as a big fat ‘fuck you’ to her daddy instead.”

Lachlan’s look was half disbelieving and half bemused. “And you now have Juliet under house arrest?”

“Juliet and Romeo are under protective custody and the Avengers are now dealing with the situation so that giant blue alien assassins don’t have to get involved.”

“Wow…that’s…Carol, you guys lead really interesting – oh, excuse me,” the phone in his jacket’s breast pocket started buzzing and he checked the incoming on the screen, “I have to take this call.”

Lachlan shuffled away, but they could still hear the conversation from his end. “Yeah, look Barnes, I’m really sorry. I’ve just realised that I hadn’t sent your pay cheque and it’s sitting on my kitchen counter. Can you go to my house and pick it up, and then take RiRi out with you for a walk?….Great…thanks…no, she’s eaten this morning…I’ll feed her when I get back. Okay….seeya.” Lachlan returned to the group with a sheepish smile. “Housekeeper,” he explained. “Never pay them late or you find that you’ll always run out of toilet paper with no spare rolls at the most inopportune time.”

Carol’s dancing partner would’ve kept going about the conveniences of having a housekeeper, but the instructor was ready to begin and called out for them to take up their positions.

Towards the end of their two hour class, Jarvis alerted Tony to an intruder in the Avenger’s Mansion and they all took off, leaving Pepper and Lachlan behind.

“Yeah….that tends to happen quite a lot,” Pepper said by way of consolation.

“I totally get it. It’s their job and we’re all safer for it,” Lachlan replied, an easy smile on his face and an outstretched hand open and inviting in her direction. “Our partners have just run off to save the world but we’ve still got a quarter of an hour of class to go, so…”

Pepper considered it for a total of two seconds before accepting Lachlan’s hand and they wrapped
up the dance class with an energetic arm swinging, foot stomping and kicking jive.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who was kind enough to leave a kudos or a comment. It's my first Avengers fanfic and the feedback is most appreciated. I thought after lurking all this time enjoying the fruits of everyone else's Loki/Thor labour, I should contribute a little something of my own as well.

I work full time, but I am trying to get back into the habit of writing a few hundred words each night. At this stage, I think updates once a fortnight, with some discipline, is feasible. I hope not to disappoint, and please don't hesitate to leave your comments and thoughts!
Bucky had to give it to the Boss. He didn’t believe him at first when the Boss said he’d get the location of the elf princess straight out of the mouths of the Avengers, and Bucky had already put up his feet for the afternoon with a chilled six pack of beers and sank into a sofa recliner waiting for the football match to start.

But what do you know. The Boss got what he wanted. And how the Boss managed it, it wasn’t Bucky’s place to know.

The Boss gave orders, and he followed them. And if there were times when the Boss’ orders were questionable or it made Bucky feel as if a little part of his conscience, or his soul, had been put through the blender and the lacerated wounds coated with salt, Bucky did as he was told anyway.

Because you see, there had been people in the past who didn’t do as the Boss had asked (and he always asked nicely) and not so nice things therefore happened to these people.

The Boss’ power and ability were an enigma, ranging from the utterly useless (the curse of acne on the most important days for the rest of your life? Really?) to the most senseless and mindlessly violent (what’s this stuff I’m stepping in? Roberts? Roberts is primordial goo? Reeeeaally?).

All Bucky knew was that if you didn’t provoke the Boss and simply did as he asked, you got to breathe and live to see the next day.

Bucky had abided by that philosophy for the better half of a century, and he wasn’t going to stop now. Even if the Boss had just asked him to break into one of the most heavily fortified buildings on the planet, guarded by an AI with access to advanced weaponry that could turn him into nothing but a smear of red on the walls to be scrapped off by a spatula. Fortunately, he had a few gadgets and gismos of his own.

“So are we going to knock on their front door or sneak in through the back? What’s the plan, soldier?”

Yeah –and the Boss owned a talking wolf, a lean, mean, throat-snapping machine. He spoke with a deep voice all too human but moved with animalistic killing intent that Bucky sometimes wondered why the Boss even needed him at all.

Boss called him ‘Fenrir’, after the sun-devouring badass monster wolf from Norse mythology because he flawlessly fit the part. But he had also seen the Boss do his crazy magic shit and cast an illusion over the beast so that he became an adorable fluffy white samoyed called RiRi who everyone went gaga over and just wanted to pet and lavish with treats.

Bucky suspected the Boss told him to bring Fenrir so that the wolf could keep an eye on him in case common sense kicked in and he made a run for the horizon of the next dimension rather than face off against the green demolition giant that ploughed through a platoon of tanks like marshmallows, or worse, Captain America.

Not that he had ever confronted the national iconic hero before and tested the man’s physical and combat prowess. It’s just that every time there was a breaking news story or the Captain’s face and name were splashed across the front pages of the tabloid news with a narrative of his superhuman
feats, he’d instantly feel queasy, the kind of queasy where it’s the middle of the night and it’s still
dark until you hear a strange, unidentifiable noise and your body locks up and your stomach
cramps and you can neither fight nor hide.

Malevolent red eyes captured his every expression and move. “If it helps, Lachie-boy has given me
full liberty to bite your nuts off if you so much as think about backing out of this mission. We
break in there, waste the elf, and get the fuck out without getting caught. Think you can manage
that?”

Bucky scowled hard and put his mask and goggles on. The colours of the world washed away into
a million shades of green, and in the verdant haze, his sight penetrated through the layers of walls
and defense mechanisms, into the heart of the mansion and the headquarters deep into the earth.
There were five distinct bodies, the elf and her human, the Hulk, Captain America and the agent
with the bow and arrow.

“Target’s in guest room fifteen in the basement with the Cap. Hulk and Hawkeye are on ground
floor.”

“And there’s a cat on the roof.”

“There’s no one on the roof.”

“There so is a fucking cat on the roof. I can smell him from here.”

Bucky adjusted the focals on his googles and snarled. “How the hell can you smell someone two
hundred meters away?”

Fenrir grinned, all yellow and gleaming canines and no humour. “That’s why I’m here. All right,
how about I distract the crew and you go straight in for the kill?”

“You want to take on the Hulk, Hawkeye and Black Panther by yourself?” Bucky asked, voice
heavy with doubt. “And how do I explain to Boss that all that remains of you is a few fistfuls of
fur?”

“Not that I think that’s possible, but how do you want to do this then?”

“We blow up the launch pad to cut off an aerial escape. Then you draw the Hulk away from the
mansion, lose him two hundred kilometers out of the city. I’ll neutralise the archer and the panther,
flush out the Captain and the elf and do what needs to be done. You follow?”

Glassy red eyes, old with cunning and intelligence, stared pensively across the New York skyline
and onto the roof of the Avengers Mansion where Hawkeye joined T’Challa for some fresh air, sun
and a few laps up and down the pool. “I’ll need something to lure that overdeveloped troll away,
and I’ve found just the thing I need.”

In a silent eruption of shadows, Bucky and Fenrir materialised on the roof of the Avenger’s
Mansion using the Boss’ One Way Ticket (actually, the device was unnamed. Bucky christened it
himself as it could teleport him to any location within sight of his goggles, but would thereafter
crumble into an untraceable pile of ash). He threw himself at the Black Panther before the
Wakandan king had a chance to overcome his surprise. The full weight of his first punches landed
on the Black Panther, not enough to knock out the man, but enough to fatally disrupt the other’s
centre of balance. Black Panther tried to rally, but Bucky pressed his momentum and attack with a
rapid succession of aerial round house kicks followed by soundless bursts of his energy gun. One
blazing emerald green blast hit the Panther square in the chest as he was too late in leaping aside.
The panther was sent flying for two meters, and Bucky was all over the man in an instant, ripping aside his mask with his right hand while a retractable nozzle opened up in the palm of his left cybernetic hand, spraying all over the Panther’s face an odourless chemical which could knock out a charging rhino with just one whiff.

Black Panther’s struggles beneath him ceased and his body went limp. Bucky stood up and wiped the sweat off his brow and activated the EMP, crushing the ruby in his hand, mindful not to stare into the light as it exploded in his fist. Again, the stone had no name; Boss simply tossed some his way one day, suggesting it may come in handy and told him how to activate it. Because it shorted every single electrical current in a thirty meter radius with a ridiculous voltage surge, Bucky thought an EMP was appropriate.

The wailing sirens fell quiet and Bucky hoped that he had killed the AI before it got the warning out to the rest of the Avengers.

“Took you long enough. Let’s move.” Fenrir’s maw was coated thick and slick with red, and the beast dipped his head down and easily dragged a very bloody and unconscious Hawkeye by the throat. “Bait,” Fenrir gargled around the man lodged in his mouth in response to Bucky’s questioning gaze.

The bait was tossed at the Hulk’s feet in the Avenger’s Mansion lobby like it was nothing more than a wet sack of meat, and what better way to goad the rage monster into a blind, foaming frenzy than to diabolically smile like Charle’s Manson’s evil twin with the Hulk’s friend’s blood still fresh and dripping from your canines.

“I’ve hunted field mice who put up more of a fight than this sad excuse of an Avenger,” Fenrir laughed before loping off with the Hulk charging after him like a heat-seeking guided laser missile, not even realising that Bucky was crouched in the shadows of the tall stone columns near the staircase.

With Panther out cold, the AI shut down and destruction-on-two legs chasing after the Boss’ supernatural wolf, Bucky had only Captain America left to contend with.

The super soldier met him head on in the lounge room, the false fireplace having been manually prised apart and left ajar revealing the secret passage down to the basement.

Something like déjà vu or nostalgia hit him with the force of a wrecking ball in full swing and full credit to Bucky that he was still standing, and not floored in an epileptic fit of emotions that would have him crying and laughing and careering into a homicidal berserker rage at the same time. He throat clenched, his heart seized before kicking up a few gears and hammered against his ribcage like it was trying to break free as his mind was suddenly bombarded by sharp shrapnel fragments of memories that threatened to tear his consciousness apart.

If he worked up the courage, and if the Boss was in a generous mood and would allow him to fraternise with the enemy, he would like to ask the Captain, have we met? Are you important to me? How do we know each other? Would you like coffee? When I’m not slitting the throats of HYDRA douchebags, disobedient elves and swindling cheats that are dwarves at the capricious whim of my fruitloop of a Boss, I work as a barrista in a coffee shop and I get great tips. Must mean I make a decent swill, no?

He was jerked back into the present as Captain America decided to test the waters by flinging his vibranium shield at him. Bucky knocked it aside with his gloved fist, instantly regretting it as his right hand numbed and aftershocks shot up the rest of his arm, momentarily paralysing it. As the flying disc of decapitation rebounded off the wall and came whizzing towards his head, he
launched a high kick, altering its trajectory and delivering it up to the ceiling where it embedded itself halfway into the plaster and safely out of the Captain’s reach.

“So you are the assassin sent by King Syrnalorn to kill Gareth.”

King who? “Yes,” he deliberately altered his voice, making it lower and harsher to suit the part of some faceless killer from a B grade Hollywood movie who you could tell was unmistakably dumb, evil and villainous even before he did anything dumb, evil and villainous. Rule number one when working for the Boss: Always deny you work for the Boss. “And if you just let me do my job, things won’t have to get any messier than it already is. You have a comrade out there in the lobby who’s losing a lot of blood and needs urgent medical attention.”

Rogers smirked at him, as if he isn’t going to be the sucker who’ll fall for the lame ‘look out behind you’ line. “What do you know, a killer with a conscience. Are you sure you don’t want to just give yourself up now, son? Before you cause any real damage?”

For a moment, those words hit home and distracted Bucky from his situation, turning his mind again to those incoherent shards of recollections that would take him a million despairing years to piece together. The distraction meant he didn’t react until Captain America was right in his face, about to remake it for him, and Bucky back flipped away just in the nick of time.

He couldn’t afford to spend anymore time talking, or even being in proximity of Captain America, not unless he wanted to fail this mission and get caught. He generated distance between them with some deft and smart ambidextrous shooting that forced the Captain into a deadly game of dodge and pockmarked the fancy wallpaper on the walls real good. In the midst of the chaotic fuselage of bullets and ricocheting energy beams, he slipped in a flash grenade that rolled unnoticed to a stop and exploded right at Captain America’s feet. The Captain cried out in surprise as light flared up with the brilliance of a new born star and he fell back, hands flying up into a defensive position.

Rather than deal the killing blow, Bucky made a dash for the crack behind the fireplace and ran like hell down the stairs as if Fenrir was snapping at his heels. He goggles picked up signs of heat and life a hundred meters further ahead down the twisting and winding metal corridors, and he thought his mission was nearly over until he caught the faint hiss of wind rushing past, and the edge of Captain America’s shield clipped his ear.

The shock was enough to send him crashing to the floor in an indignified heap. To make matters worse, the AI had managed to reboot the systems, lights blinked back on, and a polite British voice overhead informed Captain America that the rest of the Avengers team had been alerted to the security breach.

Fighting the ringing inside his head and buckling knees, Bucky groped the wall to find his feet and was too slow to block, copping a solid punch to the jaw, followed by another to his stomach which crushed all the air out of his lungs. He doubled over, wheezing, weakly deflected the knee which was intended cave in his nose and stumbled back, trying to re-establish his personal space by covering Captain America with his customised energy guns.

This was bad. He was in a narrow, confined space, surrounded by reflective surfaces and Captain America had his shield again looking only slightly worse for wear with puffy, reddened eyes that still leaked tears on the edges. If he was caught, they’d eventually figure out he wasn’t working for King Whatshisface, and he would get close to offending Rule Number One. But if he turned tail and run, aborting the mission, he might as well tie concrete blocks to his ankles and throw himself off the harbour now.

His saviour was in the form of Fenrir who pounced on the Captain’s back, toppling the man down
and sending the shield clattering down the corridor.

“Go! Terminate the elf! I’ll deal with this one.”

Bucky nodded once, turned and fled. Thanks to years of life and death missions, his refined sixth sense suddenly screamed danger, and he bought up his cybernetic left arm just in time to swat aside a beam of energy which carried the unearthly tingling of magic not unlike the atmosphere that saturated the Boss’ penthouse suite.

Where she came from, Bucky didn’t know, but she didn’t fit the profile. His target was supposed to be dainty, blonde and blue eyed, ‘think Legolas, but female’ the Boss had said. This one was probably more ‘Arwen’ with wavy chestnut hair, a steely hazel gaze which suggested she was no stranger to combat, and a lithe and muscular build more suited to a someone trained in covert operations or recon than a pampered lady in waiting.

“Jarvis, activate the mansion’s internal defence systems!” Captain America shouted whilst wrestling with Fenrir, clamping Fenrir’s snout shut with a death grip so as to avoid a messy death by excessive exsanguination courtesy of a torn jugular.

Metallic tentacles sprung from hidden traps and slots along the walls and latched onto his good arm, twisting and winding their way up towards his torso. Probably squeeze and suffocate him like a boa constrictor if Bucky let them, but he didn’t, and he shot the metal coils apart with his free hand, and went on a shooting rampage, classic western style, as the tentacles lashed out at him.

He faintly heard a gasp from behind him from Captain America, but paid it little heed in favour of demolishing the rest of the defence apparatus and figuring out whether the female newcomer was a neutral or unfriendly.

She didn’t fare as well as he did against the rebounding lasers or the sting rockets that zeroed towards them by their hundreds. Most were thrown off course by an elaborate sweep of the hand and some words uttered in a language he couldn’t even repeat in his mind, but a few landed, drawing a surprised cry of pain from her as if she didn’t expect the rockets to embed in her body and then explode, tearing chunks of flesh out of her arms and her abdomen.

Dark red blood the colour of aged wine spilled onto the floor. From out of nowhere, another man appeared, dipped in a swan dive and caught her before she crumpled and hit the ground, and it was then that Bucky deduced they had been cloaked in some invisibility spell that he would have seen through had he thought to adjust his goggles to scan for it.

“Hang on Cap, we’re coming!” Tony Stark’s voice boomed over the speaker system, obscuring his actual location in the mansion much to Bucky’s growing panic.

“Which part of don’t rock the boat don’t you fucking understand, Ceroden!” Fenrir snarled, snapping viciously as he writhed and twisted to free himself from Captain America’s bear hug. “A pretty little light elf spreads her legs and you’d do something as stupid as cross the Gatekeeper? Winter Soldier! Target them with extreme prejudice!”

Bucky welcomed the order; it gave him something to focus on when the mission was collapsing under the weight of competing objectives of killing the blonde elf, not getting killed, not getting his cover blown, not standing and gawking at Captain America like some awestruck fanboy, crushing any stupid delusions that he could perhaps have a conversation with the Captain where he wasn’t trying to de-brain him with the shield and he wasn’t aiming for his vitals, and not being pulverised into a burning chunk of meat by Iron Man’s unibeam.
Doing wetwork for the Soviets was never this complicated.

The man called Ceroden didn’t look like a pushover and probably knew a few vicious back-alley moves that primarily consisted of stabbing his opponent when they weren’t looking or had their back turned. Whatever fight the man had, though, was extinguished by concern in shielding the dying woman bleeding out in his arms.

Bucky levelled his guns at the pair and remorselessly squeezed the trigger. The green energy beams missed target, struck the wall two inches next to Ceroden’s head and all of a sudden, Bucky was sailing down the corridor, straight towards the dead end of the T-junction ahead. He righted himself, somersaulted in mid-air, hit the wall feet first and flung himself out of the way just in time as a blazing golden ball of guaranteed pain slammed into the wall as if the metal was nothing but paper.

Shit! Backup was here in the form of one very pissed off Ms Marvel who no doubt thought he was the one who peppered Arwen with holes when all he was going to do was put her out of her misery by blowing her head off.

“Incoming!”

Bucky had only intuition to tell him to hit the force shield button in his left arm and tuck himself into a tight ball behind a flimsy and flickering sheen of magical energy before a raging white tidal wave of cold crashed into the shield and washed all over him like an avalanche.

Biting and glacial winds of the artic swirled around him and bit through muscle and bone like invisible blades, and crystalised his breath in the air so that tiny ice shards fell to the ground in silver tinkles. Bucky gritted his teeth and braced against the numbing pain of being frozen alive, inch by inch, but to his rising horror, he realised the gradual fiery burn in his chest was the particles of moisture in the air freezing to the insides of his lungs.

“This mission’s a fucking disaster. We pull out now!” Fenrir shouted above howling winds.

Boss’ goggles guided Bucky through the temporary white out, and he bit his lip and forced his body beyond human endurance, pushing past the deathly chill of the corridor and back up into the lounge where Fenrir impatiently circled, ears twitching for signs of reinforcements.

Bucky knew the routine. He urged his frost bitten body, one stiff and uncoordinated step at a time, towards Fenrir, and when they were standing in the middle of the room, the wolf let out one alien howl. The air rippled around them, and then Bucky was freefalling down a black tunnel without end.

~*~*~*~*~

If Fury’s glare could actually blast heat, his fiery gaze would have set the room alight, burned through six inches of solid steel floor, continued to burrow down two kilometres of earth like boiling magma and turned the Avenger’s headquarters into nothing but a large puddle of steaming slag.

Tony met Fury’s glare with an enraged scowl of his own, because if Fury was angry, then Tony was fucking ropable. Three hours later, as he was being debriefed by the head of SHIELD, he was still shivering beneath layers of thermals with the six portable heaters arranged in a semi circle around him going full blast. He had his feet soaking in steaming hot water and he continuously blew into his cupped hands.
“Just how are you going to explain to me that earth’s mightiest heroes got taken down, on their own turf, by an urban myth and a talking wolf?”

“You’re looking at me like it’s somehow my fault,” Tony’s teeth chattered. He reached out gratefully to Pepper for the cup of coffee she made. “Hank’s Ultron-droids are still defrosting my basement and we’ll get our revenge, once we can get the bottom half of the Hulk out of ice.”

Fury revealed the barest of grimaces and his fingers traced the edges of his cell phone, screen blank and switched off. The Hulk was supposed to have been on guard duty at the time of the incident, but there may have been a decoy or something that lured the Hulk away from the mansion. He was later spotted by junior rangers from the local primary school in the Gettysburg National Military Park some two hundred miles out of the city and suspended inside a pillar of ice very much in the fashion of the mosquito trapped in amber.

So not only was Fury confronted with news that the Avengers had been floored inside their own base, his phone had been buzzing non-stop with text messages from General Ross, who had creamed himself and was desperate to find out how the Hulk could be immobilised by something as simple as a block of ice, or was it really ice, and not some super bio-chemical ice with gamma absorbing properties that SHIELD had secretly developed to one-up his Hulk Busters.

“Haven’t you guys been able to melt it all off by now?” Fury asked, allowing a hint of irritation to infect his voice.

Tony pulled a face. “It was absolute zero, which in reality should defy each and every law of thermodynamics, or make it sit in corner and cry. Just be glad that the Hulk is still with us in one piece, and not many pieces.”

“And your basement? Was it absolute zero down there as well?”

The subject got Tony fired up and he nearly spilled his coffee in his agitation. “Damn close. I got my shields up in time or else Cap would have been capsicle, again, and Hank would have found some really horrible way to kill me if all that was left of Wasp was a chunk of ice. All of this means I’m going to need to talk to that blue guy you’ve got locked up in 42.”

“I will trade you for the two other aliens you now have in your custody.”

Tony grunted and rolled his eyes, a noise he often made to substitute ‘dream on’. “One’s in ICU and the other’s in too much shock to talk. You can have them when we’re done. But I want to speak to the blue giant. Now. Pronto. Yesterday. He practically did the same thing to that café in Brighton Beach and I want to know how, and I want goddamn answers about this bloody Gatekeeper who’s just crossed some really personal lines by breaking into my house and damn near killing my friends.”

Tony was cut off mid rant by Pepper’s grip tightening on his shoulder, and he looked up to see that Steve had come into his office some time earlier, made himself comfortable on the guest sofa, and was staring intently at the tablet in his hands.

“Hey, Cap, don’t stare too hard or you’ll go cross-eyed.”

Steve appeared not to have heard him, which roused both Tony and Fury’s interest. “What’s got your attention, Cap? Is that the security camera footage from earlier this afternoon?”

“Um…” Captain America blinked and looked up, eyes pleading for something that even he himself couldn’t identify. The poor bastard suddenly looked so helpless even though he had recovered
fastest of them all and easily walked around in worn cotton sweats and a SHIELD t-shirt as his suit was taken away to be tested while the rest of them nursed frostbite and other injuries. “Yeah, Jarvis finally put something together…”

Tony waited, but when the Captain said nothing more, he made an exasperated noise and snapped, “Jarvis, put the security feed on the big screen so we can all see.”

As best as the AI could retrace the invasion of the mansion, it started on the rooftop. The two unknowns appeared out of nowhere, making Tony half leap out of his seat with wild thoughts of ‘teleportation! It’s not science fiction! It’s real!’ and then knocked out T’Challa as if he was an amateur WFC fighter coming up against the protégé lovechild of Bruce Lee and Jason Bourne with the magic of Michael Jordan’s hang time. Tony winced as Clint, stripped of his gear for his swim, was defenceless against one scrappy, rabid looking wolf who gouged deep claw marks into Clint’s torso as if he was just another slab of meat on a butcher’s hook.

The scene then jumped to the time when Captain America and the Winter Soldier were fighting down in the basement.

“Woah! Back up, back up! What happened in between?”

“Sir, the intruders activated a somewhat crude but effective electromagnetic pulse which temporarily disabled all systems. By the times I came back online, the Captain and the intruders were downstairs.”

Tony’s lips twisted in disgust and his brows knitted together in a deep frown but he didn’t argue and continued to watch the clip. Much to his surprise, it was in fact the animal, not the human, who seemed to be barking out the orders and leading the mission.

“Here!” Steve said suddenly and paused the film. “The wolf mentions the Gatekeeper, but earlier, when I was fighting this…Winter Soldier back in the lounge room, I asked him whether he was sent by King Syrnalorn, and he said yes.”

Fury chewed on that thought. “So the Winter Soldier works for the Gatekeeper, and the Gatekeeper works for this elf king. This really is becoming an intergalactic family feud.”

“I don’t think so,” Tony said, the wheels and cogs churning away in his canny mind that he wondered if the others could hear it. “The Gatekeeper is the one who spirited Arrelona to earth in the first place, so why would he now take orders from the King? And besides, Gareth is the one the elf King wants to kill, whereas that bloody wolf ordered the Winter Soldier to assassinate the elf.”

“I thought he was lying too,” Steve mumbled. He glanced to and from the wide screen and the tablet in his lap. He had a freeze frame of the Winter Soldier on the tablet and zoomed in to the masked face, peering at it as if he could make the picture talk by staring at it hard enough. “There was something about him which seemed…off.”

“Well, there ain’t nothing off about his aim, that’s for sure,” Tony grunted, again, his expression scrunching up in extreme distaste as he rewound the footage and scrutinised it for a second time, inwardly cursing how one lone man could whip out his guns and blow apart his state-of-the-art defence systems like it was no different to a carnival duck shooting gallery. “How is that even possible?” he asked, outraged. “What kind of insane reflexes do you have to have to do that?”

As Ms Marvel’s energy beam then threw the Winter Soldier further down the corridor, Tony began to slo-mo the action down to five frames per second.
“See, Fury, Wasp and I have just made it downstairs and we’ve almost reached the Captain, then the wolf gives the Winter Soldier the warning….Ms Marvel turns just in time to cover the two other elves and I’ve got my shields up….wait for it….there it is!”

Tony did leap out of his seat this time, tipping his cup and coffee onto the floor in his carelessness, and gestured in the air to draw the screen out into a three dimensional holographic so he could study it on all angles. It began as a vortex with the wolf at the epicentre, and readings from the mansion’s sensors suggested that all heat and energy was being sucked into the vortex in a form of reverse entropy, explaining the sudden plummeting temperatures and formation of ice from the hydrogen and oxygen in the air.

“I want that wolf. I want that wolf, in my lab, strapped down for Bruce to dissect. That animal has the ability to eat away heat and bring on a freaking ice age. One billion shares in Stark Industries says that’s how he trapped the Hulk.”

“You can keep your billion shares,” Fury replied dryly. “And you’re probably going to have to take a ticket and get in line to smack this puppy down once the Black Widow hears what it did to Hawkeye.”

Tony momentarily sobered from his excitement. “Clint’s much harder to kill than that. A few stiches and blood transfusions, and he’ll be up and about in a week. I’m actually more worried about T’Challa. I’ve swabbed his cheeks and got Jarvis to run an analysis on the chemical compound that put him to sleep. Where are we with that, Jarvis?”

“It’s not in my list of conventional poisons, sir. The composition remains unknown.”

Tony sighed and his shoulders slumped. “You know, Jarvis, I’m kind of getting tired of hearing how you’ve got nothing.”

“I’ve got nothing,” Jarvis confirmed, unabashed and too straightforward for his own good. “I can make a few educated guesses as to the means by which the intruders appeared on the roof. I can also run facial recognition against every accessible media file on the planet to build you a profile on the Winter Soldier, but that will take some time. I can also offer an opinion on how the intruders then departed the premises which includes but is not limited to the creation of a wormhole – ”

Tony dropped the blanket that had been drawn around his shoulders and Pepper kindly closed his hanging jaw. “A wormhole? Here in the middle of my lounge room?” If it was undignifying how his voice had climbed up two octaves into a terrified mouse squeak, Tony didn’t care. What he cared was that the entire Manhattan could have been swallowed up in one uncontrolled blackhole, wiping out a hundred thousand lives in the blink of an eye.

“A wormhole,” Jarvis repeated, impervious to the emotions of mankind. “The sensors and readings strongly describe a distortion in the time and space continuum suggestive of a rift not unlike a wormhole.”

“Well fuck me,” was all Tony could say, and then he was uncharacteristically out of words. There were those infrequent times when he was exhausted, and he succumbed to his body’s demands for rest, but he couldn’t convince his mind to shut down, to stop the unceasing factory of creativity and ideas, and believe there was a place within that infinite mindscape for a patch of tranquillity.

Now that his mind was an utter and complete unfamiliar blank, he felt all that stuff about zen and tranquillity and still lake surfaces to be absolute bullshit.

He wet his lips with his tongue and focused on ushering the sweatshop workers back into the
factory of creativity and ideas that was supposed to run 24/7. “It’s ok. I’m ok. This isn’t a set back. It’s just a little challenge to overcome. I am not terrified by the idea that there’s an alien wolf out there that can spew freezing cold and create blackholes just by howling at the moon,” he said, but it sounded more like a question than an affirmation. His breaths were coming short and shallow, creating a dizzying effect, and maybe his voice came out a bit thin and strained, and maybe his sniff was a little self pitying, but when Pepper looked at him with a combination of expectation and concern and he thought about how the Avengers were taken down for the count inside their own headquarters, his competitive spirit wouldn’t let him back down. “Just so you know,” he said to Fury, in case the master spy had any misapprehensions about the magnitude of their newest target’s powers and abilities, “this isn’t the Serpent Society or the Wrecking Crew. This Gatekeeper takes it to a whole new level, drops his daks and pisses on everyone below.”

Fury nodded, so unfazed that Tony felt like swearing. “I’ve contacted Dr Foster and Dr Selvig to come and study the residual energies in the lounge room, to see if they can make any more sense of things.”

“And the blue guy?” Tony insisted.

“I’ll arrange a time. Get this place cleaned up, Stark, and leave the rest of the supervillains to SHIELD. I want you and the Avengers to devote every resource you have to tracking down the Gatekeeper.”

“And what do you think I’ve been doing for this past year? I need a lead, or a confirmed sighting, something to get me started instead of vague rumours and innuendo.”

Fury raised an eyebrow but his steady snake like stare never wavered. “Pump those elves you’ve got in your custody for every drop of information they have, and set the Black Widow on them if you have to. And you know that the Gatekeeper has dealings with the billionaires of this world. I suggest you speak to one of your affluent friends and convince one of them to be part of a sting.”

Chapter End Notes

I could have posted an update on Friday but struggled with the Bucky's character, past and relationship with Steve. Originally, I was going to write the Bucky-version from Avengers: Earth's mightiest heroes, but eventually decided to stick with the Bucky from the movie-verse.

I continue to enjoy writing this fic and thank everyone for their comments and kudos. Loki is supposed to be the central character of this story, and I do realise it's now 15k words or so and there hasn't been narrative from his point of view. The majority of the next chapter will be from his perspective, so thank you again your patience and persistence this far.

As for Thor, he'll make an appearance soon, but Loki and the Avengers really need to lock horns first before Thor can come charging in to make things even more complicated.

I hope you all continue to enjoy! Comments most appreciated :o)
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lachlan, otherwise known to close friends as Lachie (but often misspelt by them as Lockie – close friends, bah!), stretched luxuriously after he had sat hunched over his workbench for the past five unrelenting hours, wincing at the creaks and cracks of in his spine. Scattered all over his table were a number of fine instruments including miniature chrome and platinum spinning wheels the size of his fingernail and even tinier spindles that could not be picked up by conventional means.

At work on one of the wheels was a dream weaver, a being he dredged from the obscure and veiled depths of myths within the innuendo and inferences of untraceable legends, using such skill and technique that if he had an audience, he would have been instantly canonised as their cult leader. When the dream weaver took a breather and looked up to smile at him, Lachlan quietly adored her silver coloured eyes crinkled in affection above cherry blossom pink lips on skin so pale as to be translucent against the shock of electric blue hair that trailed down her back and splayed over the table top.

With dainty fingers only visible under a microscope, the fey creature continued to work a delicate, frayed and brittle strand of gold finer than hair or thread from a spider’s silken web from a gradually diminishing pile, feeding it into the wheel, using Lachlan’s magic to repair the damage and imbue strength and tensility to the thread. The refined and restored gold thread then wound itself on a spool, glimmering with its own inner rainbow light that hinted at uncountable secrets and cherished memories.

“Are we almost finished, dear Greta?” he asked fondly, using dainty tweezers to further separate the unrefined heap of thread for her which earned him a trill of delight. He had done most of the work this afternoon untangling the final knots and marshalling into some semblance of order the broken pieces for his Greta to fuse together before running it through the chrome and platinum spinning wheel.

The little dream weaver sighed, dedicated to the one task for which she had been created and summoned. It was a sweet, delicate sound reminiscent to flower petals rustling in the wind. “Five hours,” her murmur swept through his mind.

Nodding, Lachlan stood up, coaxing stiff legs to move, and made his way over to Barnes who lay unconscious in the velvet chaise lounge, hands folded on top of each other above his chest like those waxen corpses lying in state or about to be transferred into his coffin. Lachlan grimaced; if he hadn’t tended to Barnes’ injuries as soon as he did, maybe he would be digging a hole somewhere out in the forests to dispose of the body.

Now that would have been a real shame. He didn’t spend all those years trying to piece together this man’s past after claiming him from the grubby hands of HYDRA goons just to lose him to some mission which derailed, hurtled down the mountain side and then spectacularly exploded at the bottom of the rocky ravine. In fact, he owed a small debt to the mortal, not that Lachlan would ever tell him that. In piecing together the shattered and crumbled fragments of memories for the Winter Soldier, who Lachlan otherwise only knew as James Barnes, Lachlan had inadvertently gained a singularly unique and powerful insight into the human mind.

In learning to repair Barnes, Lachlan had learned to fuck with other people’s minds.
He had always had the ability and the right spells to place someone under his control. But after embarking upon this endeavour to patch up Barnes’ memories, Lachlan only then realised how unpolished and unsophisticated is earlier methods were. His previous understanding of mind control was little better than taking a sledgehammer to someone’s consciousness and slapping on some shackles while shouting express and uncomplicated commands, inflicting pain as an incentive for obedience. It completely robbed his subject of their personality and rendered them little beyond a walking construct of blood and bone, or in Midgardian modern day terms, a robot constantly requiring guidance and direction.

Like an old man suffering arthritis, he lowered himself onto a small stool by the head of the recliner and carefully brushed aside limp strands of hair out of Barnes’ peaceful sleeping face, which was ironic given the man’s violent and blood-soaked past working for one of the more nefarious organisations in this realm. Seizing control of Barnes had been out of whim to spite more than anything else such as the lofty principles of justice. The crimson skull-headed freak had pissed him off big time by abusing the power of a Norn stone, which he had the divine fortune to find on this mudball of a planet, and doing something as mundane as building a portal using the most primitive of means. That, and he called Lachlan a wolf-humping fairy, which was really unfair on Fenrir.

So Lachlan demonstrated his displeasure by tearing down the HYDRA research facility and co-opting who he thought was the Red Skull’s best man to drive the insult home, through the living room and all the way into the neighbour’s backyard.

When he returned to his tower with Barnes in tow, he was surprised to find that the man spoke Russian and identified with the communist regime of the USSR instead of the German neo-fascist dirtbags trying to muscle in on his business of importing alien goods for the utterly pointless aim of a hostile take-over bid of earth instead of something as practical and useful, like pure profit.

Barnes, eyeing Lachlan like some defenceless lamb who he could slaughter in thirteen different and hideous ways because that to him was art, told Lachlan that he had been on loan from one General Vasily Karpov to Herr Schmidt on a short term protection detail, as a kind of ‘thanks’ for HYDRA’s earlier tech and installation of that useful bionic arm towards the end of the Great War. Lachlan had mentally slapped his forehead; the grisly red star on the shoulder of Barnes’ left arm should have been a dead giveaway of the killer’s commy origins.

“Do you enjoy working for General Karpov?” he had asked, tone flippant, because back then, he didn’t really care what the master assassin’s response was going to be. He had riled up the Red Skull, made him lose face before his minions, clobbered into smithereens years and years of research in inter-dimensional travel with an oversized spanner, and that was all that mattered.

However, the Winter Soldier’s face drew a blank and there was no answer. Eventually, as if there had been a great debate inside Barnes’ head to which Lachlan was not privy, the man slowly confessed, “No one’s asked me that before. Sometimes I get asked whether I will stop working for the General for the price of a small apartment stuffed from floor to ceiling with hundred dollar US bills, but I wouldn’t know what to do with all that money. I get put on ice between missions, clobbered into smithereens years and years of research in inter-dimensional travel with an oversize spanner, and that was all that mattered.

That response had struck all the wrong chords within Lachlan. Loathing was a toxic combination of bitter, vile and acidic in his mouth that made him dry heave and contort his face into an ugly mask of cold fury. An insane rage, something which he thought he had vanquished and put to sleep long ago, resurfaced with a vengeance from the abyss of his subconsciousness and screamed at him
to annihilate all the mind controlling fuckers, hell, plunge the whole Soviet Union into an everlasting nuclear winter if he found them guilty by association. He would set their cities alight with napalm and fire until there was nothing but ruin, and among the smouldering wreckage and debris and stench of burning meat and mangled corpses, he would dance and sing like Hela of glorious victory and triumph.

Because when people use you, treat you as nothing but a tool for their ends and purposes, the only right thing left for you to do is to break free of the chains, and with a mega bullhorn aimed in their general direction, start singing at the top of your lungs as you admire the trail of destruction you’ve left behind:

_Fuck you, fuck you very, very much_  

’Cause we hate what you do  

And we hate your whole crew  

So please don’t stay in touch….

“Soldier, put the gun down,” Lachlan had said with chilling calm at the cold press of the metal barrel against the side of his temple. “I am not your enemy.”

Barnes shook his head. “No can do. You’ve jeopardized boss’ client’s safety on my watch, and Department X will think I’ve been compromised, not unless I bring your head back with me to prove my loyalty.”

Lachlan’s jaw set and his expression hardened even as he had felt his blood freeze, the warmth forever chased away and his limbs were clapped in rusted irons and chains. The storm of deafening shrieks and howls of rage inside his mind descended into cackles of mad glee that stung his ears and corroded the foundations upholding his sanity. The soldier was so pathetic that Lachlan could have cried had he not surgically excised his own tear ducts so that he could offer no more tears to cry. If there was ever a mistake that Lachlan would eat humble pie and admit to making, it was his foolish folly in believing, even for one crazed and desperate second, that he could have purchased an affirmation of love, or ‘proven his loyalty’ by laying the dead of his father’s most embittered foes at his feet.

Little did Lachlan know then that even if you were to pay the greatest personal sacrifice, even if it was by your hand that your birth father met his ignoble oblivion, it is all for naught and means _nothing_ to those who never loved you.

The simplicity of the revelation and the accompanying pain and humiliation had nearly killed him. For all his genius and intellect, it cost a broken heart and broken dreams and a shattered spirit to learn that one should never yearn for those who had never looked upon you in the first place.

He might have been the chump, the loser who fell for idyllic family act and craved the attention and love of his false parents, but here was one poor soul he could save, one he could spare that bitter and ugly lesson.

_Only give your loyalty to those who deserve it. Only give your love to those who would treasure it. Never give yourself if it may be turned and used against you._

He straightened and threw aside his glamour of the easy-going mortal for a stern and commanding god, tall and towering in height and in presence, whose will was implacable and would not be denied. “You, my friend, are going to get a taste of freedom,” he declared. “I am the god of self-
determination, and no longer will you have to give loyalty to those wretched curs who otherwise cannot garner loyalty other than by crass threats or gilded lies.”

“Freedom?” the Winter Soldier mouthed as if it was a foreign word and not completely trusting it not to bite him in the face and tear a chunk off.

“Freedom, liberation, independence, call it what you will. Now let’s start with a name, Soldier, your real one.”

Again, the Winter Soldier’s face had drawn a blank. The poor sod never even stopped to consider what his name and identity was outside of the world’s most feared communist assassin.

Lachlan sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, the imperious aura he had worked up dispelled when someone couldn’t follow the prompts and the cues. It was going to be a long night.

That long night from fifty years ago translated into long decades of study and toil. There were treacherous metal contraptions, which Lachlan later discovered were called ‘implants’, embedded inside Barnes’ brain, and it was arduous, tedious labour to remove these implants which had been designed not to be removed without doing massive brain damage to the man.

Lachlan kept those implants in a small tin. He figured one day, if this General Karpov, or any of his successors, came knocking on his door trying to reclaim their pet assassin, he’d stick these same implants in their brains, sign them up for the Chippendales and make them strip for a living and have bills stuffed down their g-string by the molesting hands of horny, unattractive old women for the rest of their miserable lives.

After removing the implants then came the real problem of restoring Barnes’ mind. To that end, he researched, deliberated long and hard before settling on conceptualising and reproducing the man’s memories as one continuous and unending thread that captured recollections the way motion pictures were recorded on film. Ideally, he would finish up with one neat spool that could then be unravelled and run through a spinning wheel, the symbol he’d chosen for the vehicle of the mind, and allow the man to recall the memories stored therein.

Unfortunately, what ended up in his hands was a chaotic mess of broken strands all tangled in one hideous and intractable Gordian knot that defied unravelling and a spinning wheel that was cracked and chipped in more than a hundred places, had come off its hinges and lost all its spokes.

Never one to be told he couldn’t do something, Lachlan then spent an even greater period of time researching and designing Greta, who he dubbed his dream weaver, to rebuild the spinning will and to reconstruct the life of the man he later knew to be called James Buchannan Barnes.

He devoted years to learning about the substance and composition of these frayed golden ends, gleaning useful knowledge about how one might come to alter or insert new material into the molecular-thin strands that made up the thread, and rebuilt the spinning wheel using chrome and platinum, pleased by the imagery of something beautiful, pristine and treasured. Once he had fixed up the mess that was Barnes’ memories and fitted the spinning wheel back into place, he would simply have to step back and let the man’s consciousness work the machinery.

During his studies, he kept Barnes in stasis. There was no point restoring his memories if he was going to be an old man by the time Lachlan was done. But when Fenrir drew parallels between suspending the soldier in time and the Soviets putting Barnes in cold storage between missions, Lachlan was forced to derive a new alternative. He was not going to end up as a mirror image of the mind perverting bastards.
So he hammered out an agreement with Barnes; in exchange for a spell that could lock in his age until such time as his memories were returned, Barnes was his mercenary. If Lachlan was to hole himself up in his tower for years on end to study the human mind and the way the consciousness interacted with memories on the mental planescape, he would need someone to monitor the activities of all the extra-terrestrials he had introduced to Midgard and take action where anyone threatened to rock the boat. And should Barnes get bored enforcing the Gatekeeper’s unspoken law, the honour of wiping out HYDRA secret facilities around the world was open to him. For an extra dash of excitement, Barnes was also at liberty to infiltrate Soviet satellite states, liquidate key political commissars and other figures propping up the Communist regime as a personal kind of ‘fuck you’ to the Red Room and Department X and anyone else who ever thought to start a hobby in mind fuck.

“Hey…Boss…”

Shaking off the reverie like a droplets of rain on a coat, Lachlan looked down into a weary expression of a man wearing the face of a twenty five year old with eyes that had already seen ten lifetimes worth of bloodshed. Barnes’ mouth pressed into a flat, apologetic line.

“Fenrir told me all about it. There’s no need to concern yourself.”

“But…”

“The world has caught up to my antics, and sooner or later, SHIELD, or SWORD or the Avengers would have cottoned onto my game. It’s finally my time to step into the spotlight, but if that be the case, then it will be the time and circumstances of my choosing.”

Barnes’ mouth hung open. “You gonna come out?”

Lachlan couldn’t help the humorous twitch of the lips and gave in to a chuckle. “Yes, out of the shadows. Eventually. But not right now.”

Barnes did not share his amusement. “After today’s botched whack job, I don’t think they’ll be throwing roses on your premier night,” he grumbled.

“Oh well,” Lachlan shrugged, voice light and untroubled. “So they won’t like me, nothing new, been there, done that, still alive, like ah-ah-ah-stayin-alive-staying-alive-ah-ah-ah-stayin-aliiiiive,” he paused, processing Barnes’ apprehensive silence and uncomfortable stare, and disappointedly abandoned the Bee Gees song.

“Your falsetto is terrible,” Fenrir muttered, coming to sit on the other side of the recliner and poked his wet and cold nose into Barnes’ cheek, a sign of affection which made Lachlan double over in laughter at the look of sheer terror that froze on the man’s face. “How you feelin, soldier?”

Barnes bit both lips, afraid to say something which might offend Fenrir and end up with the wolf mauling his face off. Granted, it was a handsome face. “Okay?” he meekly replied.

Fenrir nudged Barnes’ cheek with is nose once more, Barnes nearly falling off the recliner in a not-so-discreet effort to shy away, and then turned to Lachlan. “So, what do we do now? The elves have sanctuary with the Avengers. Do we want to prepare a full-scale assault on – ”

“First thing’s first. Barnes,” Lachlan declared, brimming with some pride and accomplishment. He cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “I am pleased to announce that today is the day all your memories will be restored.”

Lachlan didn’t expect accolades or a shower of confetti and streamers. But a word of ‘thanks’
would have been appreciated. Instead, all he got was this puzzled stare that quickly made him irritated.

“I…I think I got flashbacks…or something when I came up against Captain America.”

Lachlan stilled, back stretching straighter still. “Is that so?” he asked sharply, angry at himself more than anything else. “Did I not salvage every scrap of memory from your mind? Or maybe there are pieces of the spinning wheel, microscopic particles of debris that float around the edges of your subconscious and simply cannot be recaptured or”

“Lachie! Lachie-boy, you’re starting to rave! Slow down.”

Lachlan silenced himself, breathed deeply, felt blood receding from his cooling cheeks, and turned over the puzzle in his mind with some better care and thought. Of course Barnes would have flashbacks when he encountered Captain America, the mortal called Steve Rogers. The story he had pieced together of James Buchannan Barnes’ life, when cross referenced to every scrap of objective documented information available, told of a young orphan raised by the military, sent marching off to war in Europe with the Super Soldier and taking down human-experimenting HYDRA bases before becoming separated by death. Captain America was his partner, a friend who Barnes had laid down his life for in a heartbeat without care for his own self-preservation. Whatever memories Barnes accrued during those years coupled with those deep, unshakeable feelings of love and loyalty for his Captain and partner would have become etched into his soul itself.

No amount of mind-burn or twisted mental screw by the Soviets could undo that which had been grafted to the soul, Lachlan thought in resignation. Even without the great Lachlan Williams, James Barnes would one day have returned to being James Barnes, and he had been there just to speed up and smooth out the process.

“Boss? Is that…will that… I mean what happens?”

“I didn’t mean to cause alarm,” Lachlan reassured. “The flashbacks should not hinder your recovery. I think it’s going to be more of a gradual process rather than an information dump so you will have ample time to adjust.”

Barnes shuffled up into a more comfortable sitting position, one hand raking through his dishevelled hair and levelled a look of unshakeable conviction at Lachlan. “I know Captain America, don’t I?”

Lachlan deliberately kept his expression neutral. “You might and you might not. I have accumulated quite a lot of information about you during this little project. Do you want me to edit and paste what I have into a short novel or feature clip, or do you want to find out yourself?”

Barnes fell into a contemplative and troubled silence, not helped by Fenrir continuously nudging him in the face with his snout. It was his pet’s way of distracting Lachlan from ruminating on bygones which should be buried and forgotten lest they end up in a drunken escapade involving bondage gear, naked middle-aged swingers, alpacas and outraged villagers with torches and pitchforks. Unfortunately, it meant that Fenrir, bless his simple and uncomplicated animal mind, mistook everybody else’s introspection as a precursor to events which were only bearable with irreversible amnesia.

Barnes pushed Fenrir away and sighed. “I think I’ll take it slowly for now. You can always dump the information on me later, right?”
“Right,” Lachlan said brightly without the slightest idea of the answer to the question. “So while dear Greta applies her miraculous finishing touches, there’s real work to be done.”

“Finally,” said Fenrir, rolling his carmine eyes. “Let’s pull out some heavy-duty artillery and nuke that mansion into the next dimension before Teen Wolf starts at seven tonight.”

“I was thinking of going straight to the root of the problem. Arrelona would never have gone to contract a Jotun hitman if King Syrnalorn hadn’t targeted her mortal love in the first place.”

“So King Syrnalorn’s at fault?” Bucky asked.

Lachlan paused for dramatic effect. He waggled a few fingers and conjured up an impressive suit of body armour stitched together with leather and black ballistic carbon polymers and sparingly adorned with silver so it glinted like the knife in the dark before it plunged into someone’s back. “Put this on, soldier,” he ordered, lips stretched into a thin, razor edge smile promising destruction and mayhem. “We going to Alfheim to shakedown elven royalty.”

~*~*~*~*~

Bucky was alive when Armstrong and his crew landed in the Sea of Tranquillity on the moon in 1969 and, conspiracy theories aside, the world feted the team as the first humans to travel beyond earth’s orbital pull.

Bucky now privately hailed himself as the new hero in interstellar travel for finding himself uncountable number of light years and solar systems away from earth in another ‘realm’ called Alfheim.

Boss liked using many Lord of the Rings allegories whenever he got onto the topic of elves, because the Boss had apparently known “JT” himself. “Dear John’s portrayal of the elves is quite true to the denizens of Alfheim, except there is some undue exaggeration about their closeness and affinity with nature,” Boss once explained when reminiscing about the time he had to silence a light elf who had ultimately attracted undue attention to herself when she told the masses of hundreds of thousands poor and starving to ‘eat cake’. “The Vanir witches and warlocks have mastery over the elements, whereas the elves, taking advantage of their light build and stature, make exceptional scouts and snipers and work best camouflaged in the forests. I never could quite get dear John to understand that point, or perhaps he thought turning elves into some tree hugging hippies living in trees made a better story.”

It made materializing in the middle of the throne room of the House of Syrnalorn exceptionally daunting as Bucky expected there to be a sniper stationed in every shadow of the marble and granite galleries above the throne room.

The size and splendour of the throne room had Bucky gaping like a tourist. It was built in the gothic fashion of those famous medieval churches, like the St Vitus Cathedral in Prague, with its towering stone columns and yawing arches that brushed the tips of the sky. He needed to squint to see the coloured frescoes of fair-haired nymphs and goddesses on the ceiling, and panels of intricate stained glass windows venerating kings and heroes of eons past lined the walls of the hall and towered over him at twenty meters tall. The throne room could host two thousand people with room for a dance floor to spare, and his steps had a hollow ring that seemed to resonate forever around the vast and solemn chamber.

“Stop spacing out and look intimidating, damnit!” Boss hissed at him without moving glossy black lips which had been fixed into a feral grin.
Bucky squared his shoulders and narrowed his eyes into his best imitation of a serial killer who enjoyed disembowelling little girls and puppies on every second Sunday. He dressed as the Boss had ordered, and while he felt somewhat self conscious about the overt intimidation his costume was meant to inspire, the get-up was highly functional with slots and pouches in all the right places for his ammo, grenades and throwing knives. The Boss extolled the defensive properties of the armor, anti-magic and bullets and sharp pointy arrows, and he insisted Bucky complement the outfit with a calf length trench coat that closed about his form the way a great bat folds its wings into its body, and he was the walking definition of the silent, menacing killing machine who couldn’t comprehend mercy or compassion.

He stole a glance at Fenrir standing on the other side of Boss, and had to give the old wolf kudos. If one look at him didn’t inspire any sensible, life-loving person turn tail and run, then he did this great ears pricked forward, hair-standing-on-end shtick and an unwavering I’m-going-to-hunt-you-down-and-tear-your-head-off stare that suddenly made you think about rabies, your will and how to distribute your earthly possessions.

As for Boss himself, he held himself with the commanding poise of one who was the centre of the universe, the type who whole heartedly believed ‘you exist at my pleasure’. His long raven hair was piled on top of his head in an inky mess that alluded to a deadly strain of chaos and madness. His pale face was caked with white paint and bold, stark, black arcane symbols were drawn down one side of his face and covering one of his eyes, giving him a quietly disturbing and sinister look when his black lips stretched wider in a maniac’s grin. He wore long sleeved robes of crushed black velvet that reached the floor, pooled about his feet, and were stitched heavily with more gold mystical symbols along its hems. Fingers laden with thick chunky rings encrusted with glittering precious gems and stones from a dozen worlds wound around the shaft of an ornate golden spear-tipped staff that all but screamed ‘make way, Real Power coming through, scram before I turn you into something that even a slug can defeat!’.

If ever there was a villainous sorcerer who bought kingdoms to their knees and cast the world into darkness, then Bucky was standing right beside him.

The Boss didn’t walk. He accentuated his alien unnaturalness to the hilt by floating an inch above the ground and gracefully glided towards the throne where King Syrnalorn sat with his elderly Prime Minister doing a very bad job of looking brave as he stepped in front to protect his king from the unexpected intruders.

King Syrnalorn was an elf who, if judged in earth years, looked to be in his late fifties with healthy streaks of prematurely grey hair in his auburn mane. Years of consternation and worry marred furrowed deep lines on his forehead and on the corners of his eyes. He was not a particularly brave man, but he was a king of the realm, and he did not dignify the Boss by shrinking back on his throne as they came to a stop mere meters from him at the bottom of the dais, but his face was drawn and pinched, pale hazel eyes wide and unblinking. His Prime Minister stuttered and garbled some useless warnings of dungeons and execution with much hand wringing, which immediately destroyed any credibility in his threats.

Boss smiled at the blathering old man, and he turned to stone right before Bucky’s eyes. With a negligent wave of the hand, the stone statute scraped across the flawless marble floor, screeching like fingernails across chalkboard, and Boss then floated up the dais and bore down on the king of the elves.

Boss bowed, florid and low. Syrnalorn swallowed visibly, uncertain as to whether the gesture was one of goodwill and submission or not.
The Boss’ poisonously sweet smile never wavered, and the king’s voice betrayed his fear as it shook when he spoke. “Who…who are you?”

The Boss spread his arms out wide. “I have been known by many names throughout the centuries, but to you, elven lord, I am the Gatekeeper,” he announced grandly, his voice authoritative and carrying, more kingly than the elf on the throne.

Bucky watched signs of recognition gradually dawn and morph into horror on the elf and slender hands clutched the arms of the throne until the knuckles were achingly white.

The Boss’ smile impossibly widened. “So I see you have heard of me. Then I can cut short the introductions and move onto matters which have displeased me of late.”

Syrnalorn winced. His eyes darted from side to side, as if he was looking for an escape or for his honour guards to storm the throne room and take them prisoner, so Bucky positioned himself so that the king’s view of the antechamber exit was blocked off and replaced by the implacable gaze of a psychopathic killer. Boss simply laughed, a terrible sound that chilled blood, and what little hope Syrnalorn tried to protect died and he slumped back onto his throne.

“I have heard of your prowess, sorcerer,” the elf said thickly, tiredly. “You control all passages to the realm of Midgard using magic beyond the skills of the Vanir and even the Aesir. One hundred and fifty years ago, you whisked my daughter off to that realm without my consent, and you begrudge me for sending another to retrieve her?”

“Your failings in keeping your brood in check are not my concern,” Boss replied archly. “And how you choose to resolve your family affairs is something I have even less interest in. However,” dark shadows gathered around the Boss, gradually bleeding the throne room of light. Syrnalorn pressed himself against the back of the throne and audibly gulped. “I have a very strict policy for all those I escort to Midgard, and that is not to rock the boat and invite the Midgardians to become aware of our presence. You have disturbed this very fragile peace and caused havoc in my realm.”

The king lifted his chin and tried to steady his voice. “Then you bring my daughter back to me. I still have a chance of re-negotiating her marriage to the prince of Asgard.”

The Boss slammed the butt of his staff into the ground, splintering and cracking the marble, and he literally loomed over Syrnalorn like those ephemeral monsters in nightmares who you could never kill no matter how hard you tried, as the latter slid lower and lower in his throne. “I will not do the bidding of others!” Boss hissed, almost nose to nose with the elven king, and Fenrir emitted a low, terrorizing growl that preluded certain doom. “No one may command me, you will do well to remember that.”

“I will turn this entire realm against you to cement our alliance with Asgard through marriage. Even if you kill me, others will continue my will, and there will be more rocking of the boat, Gatekeeper!”

The Boss suddenly fell back two steps, shelved away the bully-boy approach and tried something less physical but no less sinister. He turned to Bucky, as if seeking an audience, and the artificial smile was back on his face.

“What is that wondrous brew that you so cherish, elven king? The bitter-sweet beverage which dispels fatigue and keeps you alert throughout your court sessions?” he rhetorically asked with vicious amusement and crueler light twinkling sickly bright in his eyes. “Ah, that’s right! Coffee! A Midgardian drink imported into your fair realm by disreputable black market smugglers who I provide passage between the realms. What if I were to shut down all bridges between Alfheim and
Midgard? How *could* you continue to function without your coffee?"

Syrnalorn stubbornly clung onto the last shreds of his defiance. “Do your worst, Gatekeeper,” he whispered.

The challenge provoked a laugh delirious with madness and glee. “Then how about I open all doors and allow everything and *anything* from Midgard to come through, including this,” his voice gained a nasty, gloating edge as he dumped a brown paper bag onto the king’s lap.

Bucky blinked. The bag had had a distinctive red and yellow logo.

“What is this?” Syrnalorn asked in barely suppressed hysteria. Openly shaking fingers picked apart the top of the bag and the smell of burgers and fries hit Bucky’s nostrils.

“MacDonalds,” Boss declared.

“MacDonalds?” Syrnalorn echoed, none the wiser.

“Highly processed food that is extremely cheap and common in Midgard, appallingly rich in fat, salt and sugar with not an iota of nutritious value. It contains chemical additives which can cause ill health and hyperactivity in children, but is supported by a marketing campaign so deplorably successful that it is a significant contributor to the obesity epidemic currently ravaging Midgard,” Boss leered with savage delight, in his element, and rejoicing at the opportunity to shine.

“Obesity?” Syrnalorn gulped, although whether he fully understood the word was debatable.

The Boss snapped his fingers, and phantoms of the contestants from the latest season of The Biggest Loser dressed in their lycra crop tops and bike shorts surrounded the king on his throne, displaying in plain view their incredible and wobbly rolls of fat and distended bellies that drew a sharp cry of disgust from the elf. Syrnalorn hid his face behind trembling hands and curled into fetal position on his throne.

“You can’t say no to MacDonalds,” Boss relentlessly pressed on, enjoying himself far too much. “It’s tasty, cheap and convenient, so easy to become addicted to, and if you’d like a supersized fries and coke with your meal, I can *guarantee* your people will become exactly like these grossly overweight Midgardians within *months*. I will flood Alfheim with MacDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut, Burger King, Crispy Creme and every other junk riddled franchise from Midgard. Then I will watch you *try* to sic your mighty realm on me, but I imagine by that time, your people will be much too preoccupied battling high cholesterol, high blood pressure, blocked arteries, type II diabetes and sleep apnoea than to deal with me!” he finished with a ringing declaration of undeniable *truth* that had King Syrnalorn quietly sobbing like a sorry child on his play throne.

“Stop, please stop, make these hideous creatures go away!” Syrnalorn pathetically waved his arms about, head turned to a side and eyes squeezed shut. “I’ll do anything. Please. Leave my people alone!”

“Now if you only had that attitude in the first place, there needn’t have been any of this nastiness,” the Boss admonished, all trace of venom and wrath gone from his voice. “So here are my list of terms and conditions…."

Chapter End Notes
Apologies in advance if there are any glaringly obvious typos and grammatical errors - I will be making some minor edits over the next day or so, but wanted to stick to my fortnightly deadline and publish this chapter.

For those who are still following this story, as promised, this chapter was entirely dedicated to Loki/Lachlan. I think I have a fairly good idea of how I want to portray and explain the way Loki is now in this day and age, with his eclectic and unlikely family comprising a wolf and an ex-KGB assassin.

I like taking my time in developing my characters in my stories, so to those who want Loki's identity as Gatekeeper and brother of Thor to be revealed, I'm afraid that's still some time away. I hope the story getting to that critical juncture will keep you entertained though, and Thor will be making his first appearance in the next chapter!

Thanks again to all those who commented and have left kudos. I'd be grateful for feedback :o)
Chapter 5

It was humid and stuffy, his formal shirt and robes were damp with perspiration, sticking to his skin like a second layer, and the air was still and thin and difficult to breathe. The Asgardian summer was renowned for its stifling heat and being packed in a room with twenty other men where the only windows were arrow slits two fingers wide at every five paces was a potent recipe to turn one’s brain to mush.

The drone of old men’s voices rolled on like so many bloated flies. Thor blinked hard in a futile bid to stave off the drowsiness and concentrate on the security briefing between the Grand Spy Master, security advisors and Asgardian ambassadors about the state of affairs in other realms.

The Queen sharply nudged him in the ribs as his vacant expression must have given away the fact that his mind was wandering onto more interesting topics, like grass growing or paint drying. He let out a sigh that was a touch too audible for it earned him a silencing glare from the All Father.

“…it is a seditious movement that has been around for a little over a century. They continue to derive their influences and philosophy from Midgard, in particular this nonsense about ‘self-determination’ and demo-cracy.”

Thor racked his sluggish brains into motion. He had read the briefing scrolls last night and acquainted himself in the early hours of the morning with terms now being bandied by the Farnarr, the spy chief. Self-determination was a Midgardian principle regarding the right of nation states to freely choose their sovereignty. Democracy was a dangerous and highly chaotic political philosophy based on governance through the will of the people. It was anathema to absolute monarchy, such as the governing system in place throughout all the Nine Realms bar Midgard.

“Has King Syrnalorn still not captured the ringleaders? Did they not make an attempt on his life by collapsing the bridge while he was visiting Nimthor last winter?” Odin asked.

“Oberon and Titania prove elusive, my king. They have developed an extensive underground network of contacts beyond their own realm, providing them with sufficient support and resources to remain one step ahead of Syrnalorn’s Inquistors. The elven king faces a formidable adversary and there are rumours that Oberon has long had the tacit assistance of the Gatekeeper.”

A gale of exasperated sighs arose from all around the table, and Odin palmed his forehead in fatigue.

Ever since Thor started paying attention at the security meetings in the past two years, the Gatekeeper had constantly rated a mention. No one knew who he was, what he looked like or where he came from, except for fact that he was most likely an exceptionally gifted sorcerer who could even conceal himself and his activities from Heimdall’s omniscient view. The Gatekeeper was also allegedly responsible for trafficking denizens of other realms into Midgard through channels beyond the branches of Yggradsil, and feeding corrupt Midgardian goods and ideology back into the Nine Realms.

The Gatekeeper’s agenda was undiscernible. Did he purposefully act to disturb the stability of the nine realms, or was he simply reckless to the consequences of his actions and created secret passages between the realms and Midgard for other objectives such as profit?
Whether the consequences wrought by the Gatekeeper’s actions were for the betterment of the realms, Thor could not judge, but clearly, the All Father and all the security advisors were concerned by the unprecedented pace of change in the past couple of centuries, not to mention that this Gatekeeper’s influence was so wide and far-reaching yet Asgard’s comprehensive net of intelligence had not been able to yield a single clue as to his identity or origins.

When he was still alive, Loki had been absolutely fascinated, riveted, by the Gatekeeper. The countless times he would prattle without end after these meetings, hypothesizing who the Gatekeeper was, trying to step into the shoes of the sorcerer so as to divine his agenda, had driven Thor to crippling boredom and confirmed what Thor already knew: that magic, and its practitioners, were either perverse or walking natural disasters or an unpleasant combination of both.

Why be troubled by one man who did no more than open portals to and from Midgard? he used to bemoan.

Loki’s eyes had a twinkle of irrepressible excitement, and emerald sparks of magic danced between his fingertips. It was one of those pitifully few moments Thor could now recall where Loki spoke with honest sincerity untainted by his trademark derisive sarcasm. “Have you not been listening to Jarl Farnarr? In three hundred, no, perhaps even just a hundred years, I believe there will be revolution in the realms. Established orders will be overthrown, dynasties will come to an end, history rewritten, and it will all be made possible by a sorcerer who need not raise a sword or lead an army to topple kings and queens!”

“You speak of him as if he were someone to idolise when he would, if your predictions hold true, be nothing but a bloody harbinger of chaos and death.”

Loki had never replied to his retort and accusation, holding tightly against his chest his true thoughts and opinions so no one may see, as he had done for so long Thor that could not even remember when the habit ever began or say with any certainty whether his brother’s nature had always simply been secretive.

He wondered if Loki would be crowing now about the accuracy of his foresight if he had lived to sit through this tedious briefing session. Would he advocate a journey to Midgard and attempt to make contact with the Gatekeeper, or elect to sit back and watch the other realms grapple with their own political upheavals and civil wars?

“This Gatekeeper has run amok and with impunity for far too long,” said Gudarr, ambassador to Nidavellir, with the gravity of a judge pronouncing a criminal’s death sentence. “His lack of accountability is distressing, to say the least. But I might also add that in the past five summers, I have been observing increasing signs of agitation and discontent among the dwarven servant class. Riots even fifty years ago were unheard of, but King Etrius’ praetorian guards have been more and more frequently dispatched to deal with unrest.”

“Why would King Etrius have need to send his own personal guards?” old toothy Steinvir, ambassador to Vanahem, asked. “What danger or threat can a bunch of untrained and illiterate serfs pose? Do they rattle their pick-axes and shovels at their guards?”

Gudarr’s bushy russet brows drew close together in annoyance at Steinvir’s dismissive attitude. “Not unlike Alfheim, opposition to the King is beginning to show signs of coordination. Last month, production in one of Nidavellir’s major mines in the north shut down for a whole week. The mine-serfs had managed to collapse the lower levels and the main hoisting shaft.”

“They let the mine-serfs gain access to magic?” Farnarr asked in alarm. “What idiocy is this?”
“It wasn’t magic that blew up the tunnels, but more of these wonderful Midgardian imports, courtesy of the Gatekeeper” Gudarr said, contempt so thick in his voice that it made Thor sit up and take notice. “This time, it was something called ‘gunpowder’, a seemingly innocuous powdery substance which violently reacts to fire, and in sufficient quantities is capable of bringing down half the side of a mountain.”

“I know of guns!” Thor happily offered, keen to shift away from his default position of ‘mute’ during these meetings and be able to contribute. “They are weaponry employed by the Midgardians and come in a variety of designs and styles to achieve different utilities.”

“Aye,” Gudarr agreed, eyes narrowed. “And did you not notice during your exile in Midgard, my prince, that it takes very little skill or effort to be able to use these ‘guns’. Unlike magic, guns are simple to replicate, especially for a race as gifted as the dwarves in the art of metal-craft, are cheap to produce, and can cause massive damage even in the hands of one who has never handled a weapon before. My king,” he turned to address Odin with a grim nod, “I was granted a demonstration by the dwarven soldiers, and they showed me this contraption only a little bigger than one’s hand. It has this trigger mechanism, similar to a crossbow, which one pulls, and instead of a bolt sailing through the air to find its mark, this ‘gun’ spits out a metal ball which travels faster than an elf eye can follow. Imagine the force that it must use to achieve this phenomenon! All one needs to do with these guns, as I was shown, is ‘point and shoot’, and these metal balls, or ‘bullets’ as they call them, will tear through armor, flesh and bone as if it was cheese left out too long in the sun!”

There was a stunned silence as the harrowing implication of Gudarr’s words reluctantly sank in, deep into their bones, and left them with cold shivers of fear in midsummer.

“Highly destructive weapons which are easy to make and require little training to use?” Odin muttered, and in an unusual display of weakness, cradled the side of his temple in one hand as if he was nursing an intractable headache. A flicker of deep worry passed his mother’s face, but she immediately regained composure and expressed support for her king with an inconspicuous move of laying her hand on top of his free one. Odin’s breath out sounded dangerously like a sigh of unspoken gratitude. “This is dark and terrible news indeed. How is King Etrius proposing to deal with this revolt?”

“At present, he is intent on crushing all uprisings. Sooner or later though, he will begin to realise the toll on both sides will be too much to bear, and he will have no option but to find a solution other than brute force.”

Steinvir snorted. “The solution is simple. King Etrius just has to restrict all importation of Midgardian weaponry. After a dozen or so black market smugglers are hanged and left to rot in the gallows, the rest will heed the message and stop prodding this beehive. With no weapons, the serf rebellion will not even have a chance to get off the ground.”

The spy master rolled his eyes. “If it was that easy, do you not think King Etrius would have followed this course of action by now? Of course he wishes to stop the influx of gunpowder and Midgardian technology into his realm. Of course he wishes to maintain the peace of his realm. But the Gatekeeper’s sorcery is insidious and beyond the skill and understanding of any witch or mage in Vanaheim. If it pleases this Gatekeeper for the dwarven serfs to have Midgardian weapons, then the dwarven serfs will have their weapons. We are better off persuading King Etrius to come to an agreement with the serfs and end the bloodshed before the violence escalates to the level of civil war. All the realms must stand strong and united now more than ever when there are signs of stirring and activity in Jotunheim.”
Old Steinvir with his crooked teeth and flaky weathered skin sneered at Farnarr and slapped his hand on the table. “There you go again, trying to shut down any debate with frost giants. Is the big bad monster lurking underneath our beds waiting for a chance to strike when we are asleep? Should we be jumping at our own shadows and locking our children up at home because the bloodthirsty jotuns are banging on the gates of Asgard and long to crunch and suck the marrow out of the bones of our young? So what if there is activity in Jotunheim? They so much as look at us funny, and we will give them another hiding the likes of which they will still be smarting over ten generations later!”

The legs of Thor’s chair squealed in agony across the marble floor as he abruptly pushed back, slammed his fists on the conference table causing great fissures to crack and splinter through the wood and he stormed out of the room.

Outside, gunmetal grey clouds gathered and thunder roared in the distance.

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Harpa, 3rd week, Year 15282

Sigyn, I have trawled through centuries of my writings, over a millennia, and I am hard-pressed to find any entries in which I might have described happiness or come close to expressing such emotion.

I would think that taking delight or joy in the misery that I cause to others hardly counts.

And so it is perhaps not surprising to find that I likewise have not been able to derive happiness from wielding Gungnir and becoming king in the Allfather’s sleep and Thor’s banishment.

Or maybe I have forgotten what it means to be happy and would not identify the sentiment even if I should now be so lucky to chance upon it.

However, spite and scorn have for too long been my unshakeable companions, and I will know them by their taste, their smell, their suffocation even if I was to be robbed of sight. And I all too keenly feel the spite and scorn of the people crush me like ton upon ton of boulders even though I have barely warmed the seat of the throne.

No sooner had Sif and the Warriors Three marched into the throne room today to beseech the Allfather recall Thor’s banishment and discovered that I was now their lord and king, their loathing and hostility towards me was immediate and visceral. A lesser man would have been skewered under their sharp and unforgiving glare.

Perhaps deep down, despite this sophisticated Aesir glamour which the Allfather has cast over me my entire life, the people of Asgard have always innately known that I was disparate, that the get of their sworn enemy lives in their midst, ridiculously pretending to play at being one of them much to his apparent and repeated failures.

I do not want the throne. I do not want to become the concentrated focal point of the collective abhorrence of a people whom I have always despised in return.

I want to leave this hateful realm and find a place where I might rediscover this happiness which so freely visits all but does not even deign to cast a glance in my direction.

Sigyn, there is nothing for me here, and now that I have been allowed the truth of my heritage, my presence in Asgard is even more untenable. I will fix this mess that I created, and then I shall
depart and never look back, even if the attempt should cost me my life.

I realise this may be my last entry. If that be the case, then Sigyn, I sincerely thank you for your centuries of kind patience and bearing with musings and thoughts I have been unable to find another kindred spirit to share.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Thor rubbed his eyes as he set the journal down and silently pleaded with the tight unforgiving ache in his chest to relent. Heavy drops of rain continuously hammered against the glass windows, the flame of his sole candle sitting on the sill shuddering at the vibration of each impact.

The downpour began late in the afternoon and showed no signs of abating. Water flooded the training and combat grounds, transforming them into unrecognizable fields of mud and sludge such that they had to cancel the Testing tournaments which Thor was supposed to have presided over today.

After two years of painstaking introspection, occasionally interrupted by fits of grief and guilt, Thor believed he had finally managed to pinpoint the exact day when everything went wrong.

It had been almost a millennia and a half ago, on a day much like this one, the heat oppressive, sweat rolling off his forehead and stinging eyes as Thor tried to affect a regal and austere form in his heavy (hot!) ceremonial armour and cape at the Testing tournament.

The grounds were dry and warriors-in-training, all young virile men eager to prove their skill and courage, kicked up small dust storms as they stamped back and forth during their duels. Depending on their performance today, they could shed their titles of trainees and be formally admitted into the warrior ranks of the Asgardian army.

No man was exempt from this rite of passage, including the sons of the royal family.

Thor had completed his training and attained his warrior status almost a century earlier and was already beginning to compile a collection of tales of his exploits and accomplishments from the handful of campaigns and skirmishes that he had joined in along the frontiers of Asgard’s realm.

Loki, on the other hand, clearly lacked the natural instinct or talent for fighting, and struggled to ascend through the training levels to qualify for the Testing tournament. The tutors toiled long and hard to help Loki adapt to swordplay, but his brother didn’t have the physical fortitude for the weapon, not when the average Asgardian was as heavily built as Thor and could easily slap the blade out of Loki’s grip with the same effort as swatting aside a fly.

Loki then laboured with a staff but despite additional strength and endurance exercises, his brother’s arms tired faster than he could put down his opponents, and for all his intelligence, he could not detect gaps in his opponent’s defence even if his life depended on it.

For a while, Loki played with a bow, an option which their father was reluctant to entertain, but even that weapon had to be discarded for no matter how hard Loki worked on his aim, it was only ever ‘mediocre’, and the legendary patience with which he applied to his magic and studies rapidly evaporated every time he was forced to notch a bow and aim at his most hated foe who wordlessly taunted his incompetence, the scarecrow with a bright red cross in its torso three hundred paces away.

Eventually, and with much pursed lips, averted eyes and hushed criticism, Loki took like a lame duck to water with a combination of daggers and throwing knives. And if these were the usual
tools of the trade for assassins who cowardly struck from the shadows and never confronted their adversaries head-to-head in honourable battle, then Loki’s title as a Prince of Asgard kept those murmurings confined to the kitchens, servants quarter and barracks.

Therefore, on his day at the Testing tournament, it pleased their father greatly when Loki trampled onto the grounds with a polished, steel-capped wooden staff in his hands and his usual leather bandolier of throwing knives nowhere in sight.

That was when everything went wrong.

Loki’s opponent, Otkell, towered over him by at least two heads and three times his weight. Chuckles rippled through the spectating crowd; Loki was a child in the face of a giant and every odd was stacked against him.

Thor remembered frowning as the lieutenant judging the match ordered the combatants to shake hands before the fight, and from where he was sitting, Thor just managed to catch the gleam of a fine silver needle in the palm of Loki’s hand prick Otkell’s extended palm and then vanish with a stiff gust of wind.

It all happened so quickly, and with such deftness and stealth, that Thor was sure even Heimdall would have missed it.

Thor guessed that the needle must have been coated with some sort of virulent, fast-acting poison as Otkell, a promising young warrior who Thor had observed on many occasions putting in more hours in the day than anyone else on the sparring fields, moved like a drunkard, his footwork sluggish and untidy, his swings wild and thoughtless. Loki, on the other hand, thrilled the crowd with his nimble darting and unerringly accurate strikes and blows to Otkell’s exposed and undefended joints which rapidly demolished his opponent in record time.

His eyes were bright with triumph and his smile beaming with victory and pride as Otkell crashed to the ground and did not stir. The spectators were on their feet, loud with applause even as the Allfather vied with crowds around him to cheer the loudest.

But Thor was glued to his seat by a gut wrenching guilt and a primal sense of injustice which made him grit his teeth and ball his hands into fists until white hot anger propelled him to his feet and he jumped down from the stands into the arena and stalked towards his brother.

Loki was all smiles and joy at first, but when he finally noticed the black frown and electric glare in Thor’s eyes, the smile dropped and he turned an unhealthy shade of grey.

“You have tarnished this hard working man’s honour through deceit,” Thor growled as he wrenched his brother towards him by the front of his tunic so that they were nose to nose. “Is this how you think to prove yourself a man, by crippling the other through means of underhanded tricks?”

Loki tried to stutter his denials. “Baseless accusations, brother! Where is your proof?”

“Proof?” Thor snarled, giving his brother a hard shake. “Of course, you are so clever, Loki, that there will never be proof. But I saw the needle in your hand, and when Otkell rouses, he will testify to feeling the pin prick upon greeting you in honourable combat.”

“He will say anything to excuse his poor performance today!” Loki spat at him venomously and managed to pry Thor’s thick fingers off his shirt front. “I won, fair and square and –”

“Admit to your disgraceful deceit!” Thor roared back, startling Loki out of his indignant rage. “Or
else we will summon the healers and mages, take a sample of this man’s blood and analyse what poison you have fed into his systems.”

Thereafter, under Odin’s stern one-eyed glare and pointed grilling, and the torn, anxious and altogether admonishing looks from Frigga, Loki haltingly confessed to debilitating Otkell with a needle coated with a poison which dulled the mind and slackened one’s limbs. For his foul play and attempt to cheat, the standard punishment of a public flogging applied, except since Loki was a Prince of Asgard, he was spared the humiliation and received his lashings in the private gardens of the palace with Otkell’s parents as witnesses.

Afterwards, shirt and skin still in strips on his back and blood not yet quite dried, Loki hunted Thor down at the local tavern and began an epic brawl which set the benchmark for all epic tavern brawls to come. But there would never be a brawl like this, because no tavern brawl would ever involve a first class sorcerer wreathed in poisonous green eldritch fire and dark crackling curses and phantom beasts so real that their claws and teeth drew blood and they left Thor a torn, broken and mangled mess which he would not have survived if the Warriors Three had not preserved enough sense to rush him off to the infirmary in time.

Thor didn’t know what happened to Loki as a result of the fight during his month’s recuperation where Loki’s last words, screamed like a vengeful wraith as his hands were wrapped around Thor’s throat trying to choke the life out of him, ‘I just wanted to shine for once, just once, and you won’t even allow just this once!’ haunted him in his dreams. Mother and father visited, as did his friends, but never Loki, and no one mentioned him.

Eventually, Thor recovered and discovered that a frosty and silent tension had the palace in its pitiless grip. He spent most of his time away from the palace, preferring to be surrounded by his warriors and friends in the taverns and training fields, and all he heard from the maid servants was that the second prince had locked himself up in his own quarters and had not seen a single soul since the Testing tournament, not even the King or Queen.

Then, one day, Thor heard from his mother that Loki had been granted leave to travel to Vanaheim so that he may spend time in their large cavernous libraries to meditate and reflect on the wrongs he had committed against Otkell and his own brother.

Loki was already gone by the time Frigga conveyed the news to him, and they all expected him to return after two months. Two months became half a year, then a year, and then two years. Each time Frigga dispatched an emissary to retrieve the second prince, Loki would send word back, one excuse after another, that justified prolonging his sojourn in Vanaheim. He was involved in a research project with the Vanir scholars, on the brink of a breakthrough, had met a wise mage, needed more time to learn to refine his control on his power, believed his new research into lyrium would advance crystal technology by leaps and bounds, was furiously courting and very much in love with a Vanir maiden.

It wasn’t until the Queen threatened to personally collect him from Vanaheim that Loki returned to Asgard thirty years later.

Thor was out on an expedition to hunt trolls with Sif and the Warriors Three in Nidavellir where an explosion in the local troll population was threatening the dwarven above-ground encampments that he did not spot his brother until two weeks after his return when Loki was in the gardens shaking the soil out a herb he had just uprooted for another potion.

Loki smiled blandly at him from afar and waved in greeting but had already turned heel and headed back to the laboratories in his private quarters before Thor had a chance to return the gesture.
Thereafter, Loki was assigned tutors personally vetted by the Captain of the Guard himself, and after further training, when his skills in hand-to-hand combat were to the satisfaction of his tutors, was privately awarded the rank of warrior without passing through the Testing tournament again.

Neither apologised to each other for the incident many years ago, never bought it up again, forgot about it through the passage of time and resumed life as if all was well. Loki was polite, courteous even, to Thor and his friends, and smiled and laughed and clapped along to stories of his grand quests and adventures and turned them into catchy and memorable songs upon request.

And if the humour and mirth never really touched those cold, green eyes, if Loki’s laughter was somehow always hollow and cut off shorter than the rest of his friends, if it felt like he only said things which pleased rather than words from his heart, and if his words increasingly had a biting and cruel double meaning that disparaged Thor’s intellect or the competence of his friends, over time, Thor came to accept it as just a part of his brother, an aspect of his personality. Sincerity became something which Loki famously lacked, he came to be widely known as one who considered honesty disposable when it became inconvenient, and sweet lies and charms that could fool an ancient dragon became Loki’s apparent and strongest skill set.

It was as if Loki had always and only ever been the gifted, but twisted, silvertongued trickster.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Goi, 2nd week, Year 15281

Father took me aside today and told me he had arrived at his decision to pass on the crown of Asgard to Thor. His eyes were steady and searching and he carefully regarded me as he conveyed this news as if bracing for some unexpected reaction on my part.

I smiled and congratulated father on his incredibly wise decision and reassured him that none in the realm would be happier than I to see Thor ascend the throne.

Father was visibly relieved to hear those words, and he petted me on the shoulder like I was a hunting dog who had finally learned to respond to command.

Sigyn, for a moment, I had expressed truth to father. For a moment I believed this nightmare would finally be at an end. With Thor on the throne, what need have they of a spare prince? I was about to offer my voluntary and permanent exile and had prepared all my arguments: I should not remain in Asgard, I would become a liability, a tool of instability always available to be used by those unscrupulous and power-hungry enough to overthrow the Thunderer and replace him with the spare prince so long as I remained in the realm.

How else did Srynalorn come to be King of the light elves when he was sixth in line behind three princes mightier and worthier than he?

But then father looked at me and my heart sank and I felt desperately sick that I tasted the partially digested remains of breakfast as it surged up my throat and into my mouth.

He expects me to stay in Asgard, to stay by Thor’s side and assist him in rulership of the kingdom and the nine realms.

It is a life sentence, Sigyn, for which there is no possibility of freedom of parole.

I must stay, for the despisal of the people, for the mocking and derision of the Court and captains of the guard, for the endless expressions of disappointment from father, for the hapless sighs of
pity from mother, and for the constant yet baseless boasts and gloating from my brother. I must stay so that the radiant and golden child, unfit and incompetent as he is even to the blind and mind-addled leper, may lord over the kingdom and realms while I remain consigned to the shadows of the great Thor, forever mopping up his messes, patching up the debacles, and smoothing over the scandals so that Thor can pretend he’s a great king reigning over Asgard’s golden age.

Sigyn, this is the life that father and mother have in store for me. And they expect me to be thankful to them for it. Show gratitude, that I may now spend the rest of my uncountable years performing the thankless chore of cleaning up after Thor and hauling him out of the holes that he has dug and will continue to dig for himself even as history marks him as the infallible one and I, if I am ever so lucky, a mere footnote.

Damn it all to Hel. I will show them my bloody gratitude.

~*~*~*~*~*~

The deluge lasted all night long and only broke in the early hours of the morning when Thor set down the journal and fell into a restless, fitful sleep.

~*~*~*~*~*~

“Are you sure this is safe?’”

Bruce Wayne studied what looked like ancient vellum parchment with his name scribed in cursive calligraphy at the top, and shot Janet and Tony a look of incredibly uncomfortable unease which suggested the two of them were about to throw him into a shallow pool of sharks, really hungry sharks that hadn’t eaten in months.

Janet’s laugh was at a pitch which someone as observant and insightful as Natasha Romanov may say was a sign of nervousness, but really, there was everything to be nervous about.

The five of them were gathered around a bench in Tony Stark’s labs, putting Jarvis and his mechanical comrades to work to analyze whether there were any booby-traps embedded in the aged and yellowed scroll.

Janet and Tony had pooled their social charms and connections in high society together to convince the only one decent civilian who may entice the Gatekeeper into taking the bait as part of their sting to lure the enigmatic man out of hiding. Tony had initially offered himself, given he satisfied the criteria of being fabulously wealthy and was not averse to rolling up hundred dollar bills to smoke, but Natasha had to remind him of the small niggly and unfortunate fact that every man and his dog and the dog’s second cousin knew he was Iron Man and an Avenger, and she was pretty sure the Gatekeeper wasn’t going to be dumb enough to accept his request for something like a cosmic tree climbing squirrel.

Bruce Wayne, head of Wayne Enterprises, on the other hand was the proverbial king of the hill compared to the other two-bit billionaires that the Gatekeeper had been supplying his alien beasts and monsters to. Whereas the likes of Rinehart handed over some millions of dollars for bogboars and bilgesnipe, Natasha and Coulson prepared a missive, in Bruce’s hand, to the Gatekeeper advising that this classy entrepreneur was prepared to hand over one billion for the Gatekeeper’s most exquisite and exotic fauna in his collection.

As per Rinehart’s instructions, Bruce donated some of his blood to sign off on the missive, and personally burnt the note whilst self-consciously muttering the gobbledygook that Rinehart had
also had to memorise in order to attract the Gatekeeper’s attention.

After a day or so, Bruce Wayne was starting to regard the Avengers and SHIELD as bunch of merry jokers who believed in voodoo, until he was in the middle of a catch-up with Van Dyne at the Ritz Carlton when the parchment literally materialised in his hands.

“According to Rinehart, the Gatekeeper’s all business and interested only in money. You just need to deal with him the way you usually do with your average bloodless Wall street hedge-fund manager – ”

“You mean punch them in the mouth?” Bruce asked with a chuckle.

Tony paused, unimpressed by the interruption even though Janet playfully slapped Bruce on the arm. “No, I mean knee him in the groin, put him in a chokehold until he passes out then haul him back here to the Avengers Mansion, all with one hand tied behind your back.”

“Boys…” Natasha had to gently remind them.

Bruce had the grace to look apologetic. “All I’m saying is that we’re still no better off than where we started and I’m still no closer to meeting this Gatekeeper. Rinehart mentioned nothing about magically appearing paper. He said he got a phone call.”

Van Dyne shrank down to wasp size to get a closer look at the parchment. “Maybe you’re getting the special VIP treatment because of the money you’re putting up – oh!”

They all crowded around the table some more as more words in impeccable joined handwriting surfaced on the paper.

Due to recent mishaps by some of my customers with their otherworldly purchases, I now require all prospective clients to complete the following survey and agree to a set of terms and conditions.

“Hey, that’s like one of those commitment forms they get you to sign these days when you go to the pound to adopt a dog!” Coulson remarked.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “What on earth would you be doing in a dog pound?”

“Niece. Six years old. Wants a pony. Will get to save an abandoned dog instead.”

“Gentlemen,” Natasha said with forced calm, “could we please concentrate on the words appearing on the page in ways which defy scientific explanation?”

All otherworldly purchases require maintenance in some form or another. For the amount you are offering to pay, I have selected the jewel among jewels of all the realms, which means she’s going to be high maintenance. How much are you prepared to spend in upkeep each year?

“Do you think I’ll come across as stingy if I say one million?” Bruce looked to all of them for answers.

“The first rule of thumb in charity when making a donation is to always take your first number and multiply it by five,” Janet said automatically. “Five million it is,” she said and scribbled the answer underneath the block of text before anyone had a chance to argue or object.

They all held their breaths and only permitted themselves to exhale when the writing and black ink continued to flow.
That is satisfactory. I warn you now that this specimen is not fit to be caged behind bars or force fields like the other mundane beasts which I have supplied to your acquaintances. She should be relatively comfortable in a two storey dacha by the lakes in Sochi during the winter seasons. Do you have such a property?

‘No’ was Bruce’s blunt answer.

Do you intend to buy such property?

Bruce was about to pen another ‘no’, because he was based in the United States and hardly had any reason to travel to Russia, let alone in the winter months, but Tony wrestled the pen from him.

“I’ll pay for it, ok! Good grief, Charlie Brown, don’t blow our one and only chance at catching this guy by being such a tightarse!”

That is pleasing to hear. I appreciate that you are prepared to commit a significant investment of your wealth into this otherworldly specimen – why?

Coulson rubbed his hands and audibly sucked in a deep breath. “Okay guys, this is the trick question. We’ve got to think of an answer that the Gatekeeper can’t twist and turn against us into making Mr Wayne look like some self absorbed narcissist who only cares about himself.”

“I want to feel loved is out then, I guess,” said Tony.

“I want to provide a good home to some impoverished alien pet to soothe my upper-class guilt probably doesn’t quite cut the cake, does it?” Natasha asked dryly.

“Oooh! How about ‘I want to broaden and develop my understanding of the wonders of the universe?’”

“Janet,” Tony said with heavy reproach, “that could mean I want this alien beast on my table for dissection to further my own R&D project into the secret of eternal youth.”

While they were debating among themselves, Bruce had already jotted down his reply: I am curious about life beyond earth. For the amount of money I am paying for this creature, you can bet that I won’t do anything that would devalue my investment.

Tony winced. “Damn, that’s cold. You’re buying a pet here, you can’t go around calling it an investment.”

“I am not the one buying anything here,” Bruce said flatly. “I am here lending you my name but now I’m having to fend off allegations that I’m some selfish, narcissistic creep who – ”

“Oh my god,” Janet gulped. “There’s no response. I think we blew it. Tony, I think the Gatekeeper’s pissed off.”

Natasha broke off into a soft litany of inventive Russian curses which made everyone back away from her very, very slowly. Never trust a bunch of amateurs to do the work, she darkly seethed, especially two egotistical but hideously accomplished businessmen with enough self love to create their own black holes.

“No wait! My bad! It’s started again!”

Natasha could honestly strangle Wasp. With years upon years of training and discipline, she redirected her attention back to the parchment.
That is not entirely the response I am seeking, but we could work on your point of view, or maybe your attitude will change once you have inspected the goods. As I was saying, the otherworldly purchase I have selected for you is in a completely different league to the mindless beasts your compatriots seem to be satisfied with. Do you intend to parade her in front of your ilk like a trophy?

Bruce judo-threw Tony aside when the latter made a dive for his pen to stop Bruce from scribbling down his answer before they had a chance to debate it. Not if you do not recommend it.

A full, tortuously slow minute passed before the next question formed on the page.

I certainly do not recommend it. Let me be very clear, Mr Wayne, this otherworldly purchase is a life-long commitment –

“Ha!” Coulson exclaimed, vindicated.

- and is deserving of the respect and love you would otherwise show to family. She is also likely to outlive you. How will you ensure she continues to live comfortably and in relative safety and security against the prejudices of your not-as-enlightened race?

Bruce rolled up his sleeves. “Who does this guy think he is? I’m going to give him One. Billion. Dollars. and he carries on like I’m trying to short change him.”

“The Gatekeeper wants you to put his alien on a pedestal, worship it, treat it better than you would your own mother and make it the centre of your world. Are you prepared for that kind of commitment, Mr Wayne, are you –”

“Knock it off, Phil, or are you preparing a change of career to be a volunteer at those dog pounds?” Jan interrupted, coming to rest on Bruce’s shoulder. “I say the Gatekeeper genuinely wants to make sure whatever alien he’s going to sell to Bruce is going to have a good home. Like he said, this one’s special.”

“All right, people leave millions in their will to their own pets these days. I can do the same thing, set up a trust fund and instruct any executor of my estate to properly apply those to this alien if she does outlive me and I don’t have any family who I can entrust her to,” Bruce said, sounding sceptical and still looking to them all for a second opinion. “Worst case scenario, if I go bankrupt in my lifetime, my good friends the Starks and Van Dynes, will guarantee any amount necessary for the creature’s upkeep.”

Natasha liked the response. It was simple yet plausible, and the waiting time for the Gatekeeper to respond was terminable, but she remained patient and alert.

Which explained why, when the words Deal was signed off on the bottom of the parchment and there was a clap of thunder, a blinding flash of light, a billowing coil of fetid green smoke around Bruce Wayne and everyone’s first instinct was to recoil, she leapt for the billionaire and had her first experience warping through time and space.

Chapter End Notes
Just made it in time for my fortnightly update! Yes! Sticking to the time table.

I am so grateful for all the feedback I received in my last chapter - glad you guys all enjoyed Loki's little bit of humour :o)

Loki in this fanfic is being built up to be a god of chaos that introduces change in a realm that has been stagnant and rigid for the past millenia. As Thor has said, whether that change will be for the good or better remains to be seen. But it seemed such a waste for Loki to be a god of mindless chaos that simply derives pleasure from order cast into disarray.

I'm slowly building up the fanfic - slowly, but surely, I'm going to get there.

Thanks to all again for persisting :o)

(There may be some minor edits over the next few days if I spot any glaring typos or grammatical errors)
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She was falling without end. At first she tried to keep her eyes open, maintain some sense of direction as to which way was the sky and which way was down to the bowels of the earth. She expected darkness to close in on her until her mind was shut and there was nothing but the disquieting silence and peace of death.

Instead, bright lights spotted her vision, and as she cast her head side to side in barely suppressed terror, stars and suns, whole galaxies, sped by like faded fireworks on New Year’s Eve and her pathetic attempt to understand and embrace the enormity of space threatened to stretch her mind beyond its human limits.

Without warning, she impacted hard on cold and unyielding stone, out of breath and gulping in deep mouthful after mouthful of freezing air, wincing at the burning in her lungs. The bone-deep weariness and ache inside her muscles made her content to lie there for some time until her pulse no longer thundered in her ears. It felt like an eternity, but the spinning world around her eventually came to a standstill and her sense of direction managed to reassert itself enough to allow her to prop herself onto her hands and knees and study her surroundings.

A circular room? No, a tower straight from the Grimm fairy tales, the foreboding lair of the evil sorcerer, with a winding staircase hugging the wall that spiralled up and up into the darkness seemingly without end. She squinted at an incandescent ball hovering in mid air, pulsing and shedding peals of silver and white light that unnaturally elongated their shadows so they stretched across the floor and slid up the walls in awkward angles like twisted and hideously deformed shades of themselves. She breathed out, a hollow sigh, and the ghostly sound took flight with the stiff gust of biting cold wind that came from nowhere and soared into the hidden heights of the tower’s pinnacle.

She whipped around at the rumble of a long, suffering groan, and her heart resumed beating when she realised it was just Bruce Wayne.

Wayne defied expectations and surprised her. He looked healthier and less disorientated than she did, but poor Coulson was still gasping and coughing on the stone floor like some sick child with tuberculosis in the last throes of life.

Natasha frowned and pursed her lips. How does a dandy, playboy billionaire in the same vein as Tony Stark and who spends more time than Stark on his private yacht with the nubile women from the Bolshoi ballet, than doing real work like keeping an eye on his stock prices, cope with this better than a highly trained SHIELD agent? That point alone was embarrassing to the point where she was starting to have second thoughts about the outfit she had joined and whether she’d be better off striking out on her own and starting up her own agency. She’d sure pay herself more than what she was currently earning.

Launching herself onto unstable feet, Natasha staggered over to Coulson, rolling him onto his back before slapping sense back into his face.

“Pull yourself together, Phil. This is no time to be freaking out.”

“I must say this is not your most welcoming reception,” Bruce commented, a bit too blithely and
Non-plussed for Natasha’s comfort. One of her eyebrow’s quirked. _Of us three, shouldn’t you be the one who’s panicking and irrationally demanding explanations that I don’t have?_ 

Natasha tucked that little query into the back of her mind to dwell on another time, and for now, helped Coulson into a sitting position. The older man’s teeth chattered, breath coming in puffs of white mist, and his palour waned to a bluish grey reminiscent of so many cadavers she had studied on the autopsy table.

“Pay attention, we have company.”

Natasha’s head snapped up and her eyes followed the billionaire’s line of sight.

Descending down the stone spiral staircase was a man shrouded in a floor length black trench coat that seemed to blend seamlessly into the shadows and was at one with all the dark places in the world. The long bangs of brown hair and the domino mask he wore did nothing to conceal his predatory, inhuman gaze, and it conveyed an all-consuming hunger to devour them all.

Natasha’s mouth ran dry and her tongue was thick in her mouth making it difficult to swallow. She covered Wayne and raised her wrist gauntlets, and in the stark face of her own mortality, took small comfort in the small whirr of the weapons charging up and missiles locking into place even though every other odd was stacked against her.

She knew this feeling of primal fear, of being hapless and pathetic like a little toddler armed with a lollipop pitted against a state-trained assassin proficiently dual-wielding two K-bars. The last time was when she stood in the path of the rampaging hulk, mesmerised by the boundless rage glowing from his toxic green eyes as certain doom barrelled towards her with deadly intent.

The dark menacing figure chuckled, a spine shivering sound which made Natasha grit her teeth. She fought her body’s natural survival instinct to retreat and forced her chin up in defiance.

“Strange company you keep, Mr Wayne. I didn’t take you as the kind of man to hang out with secret service agents and contract killers.”

Bruce had the nerve to casually shrug and moved so he was by Natasha’s side, one hand tucked in his trouser pocket, the other buffing his nails on the lapel of his blazer as if he was dealing with no more than a disgruntled board member whose pay rise didn’t match his expectations. “I don’t discriminate based on occupation. These people happen to make excellent company.”

“Do they entertain you with stories of their black ops missions and sometimes let you play with their big guns?” the man mocked, closing the distance between them with long, languid strides.

Natasha tensed. She knew she should stand her ground, extract as much information as she could out of this man and turn it to her advantage because she was stuck in god knows where and had nothing but her wit and weapons. That was very hard to accomplish when the hairs on the back of her neck and arms were standing on end, which had nothing to do with the chill, and every single fibre in her body just wanted to pepper this man with so many holes that you couldn’t tell where he started and where the mess ended.

She hoped Bruce felt as confident as his smile, because she was under no illusion that this man, whoever he was, was as remorseless a killer as she, worse because she was reformed and he clearly wasn’t interested, and they could all be gutted and hung by their own intestines on whim. This was one of those few occasions in her life where everything in their perfectly laid down plans of catching the Gatekeeper in a sting went to hell in a wheelbarrow in the blink of an eye due to unforeseen contingences _like being magically transported instantly to where-the-hell-am-I._
was no longer in control, and no longer confident she could get out of this alive.

“They introduce me to unique individuals like your boss, the Gatekeeper. So, is this where you confirm the money’s in your account and you hand over the goods?”

*Yes, that’s right, divert his attention from us and keep him focussed on the transaction,* she thought as she savagely suppressed the budding hysteria and made herself come up with five different ways she could take the masked man by surprise, and seven ways in which to gouge out his eyes, deprive him of his balls and run like mad in any direction so long as it was away from this alien place.

Natasha was a practical realist and firmly believed in discretion being the better part of valour. She had no qualms whatsoever about retreating back to base to lick her wounds just so she could hatch a better plan to stick it to the Gatekeeper the next time around.

“They are putting the final enchantments to your goods so that she can acclimatise to Earth.” His eyes narrowed and he swept his gaze back and forth between Natasha and Coulson, weighing up whether they would be potential threats to him, or maybe he was simply debating in his mind who would give him the most amusement as he put them through terminal hours of unspeakable torture.

Coulson’s unmanly squawk broke the tension. The agent jumped a good meter into the air, and Natasha’s remaining hold on calm shattered, and she was adamant that her erratic and racing heart rate was not doing any favours for her health. She spun around and fired off a round from her gauntlets without thinking, only to have the air punched from her lungs as she was flung back and pinned to the floor with a weight of a mountain on top of her.

The rank breath of a beast washed all over her, suffocating, and she choked for air as a long narrow snout crammed with yellow teeth and glassy red eyes embedded in off-white hair dominated her view.

“Well, well,” a deep base voice leered above her, long tongue licking a sickening long wet stripe from the base of her neck to the edge of temple where the hair meets the forehead. “It seems we have landed ourselves an Avenger. This female has the scent of the Archer all over her.”

Disgust was swept away by a burst of rage, a surge of strength and Natasha worked one arm free to level her wrist gauntlet into the wolf’s smiling face. Her satisfaction was brief and premature as one moment, she had zeroed in on the target, and the next moment, the wolf was gone and the weight on her suddenly lifted. She viciously twisted and was on her feet in an instant, only to fend off lightning fast strikes from the masked man.

His technique was cold and uncompromising, relentlessly seeking out her vitals like her throat and eyes, or critical joints like her elbows and knees, intending to permanently maim. She had the advantage of dexterity and flexibility, dodging blows that came at her from impossible angles and ducked in time to avoid a kick that would have ripped her head clear from her neck.

She unintentionally gasped aloud when cold metallic fingers closed around her wrist like the steel jaws of a bear trap and ruthlessly squeezed, grinding muscle against bone. Natasha lashed out with her foot, aiming to connect the tip of her boot with his chin, and the threat was enough to force him to release his hold but not before he tore off her of one of her gauntlets.

Amidst her own battle royale, she made out the darkly alluring voice of the wolf chuckling and speaking uninterrupted despite the volley of shots fired from Coulson’s gun.

“You would threaten a mighty supernatural creature such as I with mundane mortal weapons fit only for mine serfs?” the wolf taunted, setting Natasha’s teeth on edge as she the memory dozen
black criss-crossing stitches down the front of Barton’s chest surfaced in her mind. “Your Archer was no match for me, and you certainly are not half the man he was.”

There was a deafening howl made of pure elemental force. The pulsing shockwave crashed into her with the impact of a tidal wave and it left her wobbling on buckling legs, vulnerable and dazed. Even as the ripples in energy subsided, the high pitched noise of feedback continued to white-out her mind and an unbearable pressure began to build in her head and behind her eyeballs as if trying to force out her soul.

Coulson had copped whatever nasty inexplicable magical attack point blank and didn’t bother trying to hide the fact he was badly affected, dumbly staring at the wolf with eyes glazed over and arms hanging limply by his side. Bruce Wayne held his head in his hands like he was experiencing one massive hangover he would trade his entire fabulous fortune to find a cure for.

Apart from the masked man, the Winter Soldier, they all stood like statues for what seemed like years. The spell was finally broken by a soft, sibilant tone that managed to right any unnaturalness in the world and hauled Natasha back into her body.

Disarm them all and bring them up to the Library.

Like sheep, and just as uncomplaining, the Winter Soldier stripped Natasha of her remaining gauntlet and assortment of hidden knives, confiscated Coulson’s service weapon, and they followed him in single file up the winding stairs, the wolf happily out in front bounding up the steps three at a time.

They must have climbed fifteen storeys from the ground and passed seven doors before the wolf nudged aside heavy velvet curtains and disappeared into an adjoining room.

The Library looked more like someone’s personal study with towering stacks of paper built wherever there was space on the floor and which didn’t interfere with any of the fire exits, bookshelves about to collapse in on themselves due to the weight of thick tomes that made dictionaries look like light reading, and a long wooden study table that had seen too many centuries of use and was stained with inkblots and other markings. There was a chaise upholstered with worn leather, and beside it a rickety stand holding a dark green bottle, half empty, and no glasses.

This was the room of a recluse, and from the cosy, intimate set-up, Natasha deduced that the Gatekeeper was a solitary creature who spent long periods of time alone with no one other than his wolf and his thoughts.

The Gatekeeper materialised in a glorious swirl, a mini tornado of twinkling magical emerald green sparkles and silver glitter so flashy that it had Natasha making unjust comparisons with Sailor Moon and wondering if the Gatekeeper also had a fancy wand and transformation routine.

The intergalactic alien-trafficker didn’t take too kindly to her giggling, loudly clearing his throat with a sharp ‘ahem’ and crossing his arms and tapping his feet as he pointedly waited for some respect whilst the Winter Soldier shot her a I’ll-enjoying-pulling-your-teeth-out look in warning.

Natasha finally calmed down enough to mop away the tears but had nothing left to reign back the big grin still stitched to her face as she insolently stared back into that heavily made-up face and fancy hair that was lavishly adorned with gold filigree pins and priceless jewels worth a third-world country’s annual GDP.

Bruce also struggled to keep the corners of his mouth from turning up, and his voice wobbled and cracked as he introduced himself, sending Natsha doubling over into another fit of giggles.
In the end, it wasn’t the razor-edged teeth of the wolf or an attempted karate-chop to her throat that quieted her down, but Coulson’s foot coming down hard on her own.

“If you are all quite finished,” the Gatekeeper said archly in a snobby high-class English accent commonly heard in the House of Lords, glowering at Natasha the whole time, “I would like to get down to business. Mr Wayne, I have waited a long time for you to approach me but it seems you had designs other than to acquire yourself an otherworldly creature.”

Knowing his cover was blown, Bruce Wayne held his hands up as gesture of co-operative surrender. “I confess, the Avengers asked me to help them lure you out.”

The Gatekeeper rolled his eyes, sniffing dismissively at the confession. “As you can see, you have done less to lure me out than I have in reeling you all in. The Avengers and their hopelessly transparent plans do not matter. I already had my suspicions when you contacted me. It seemed to me that throwing away millions of dollars for some exotic pet so that you can brag about the same to your peers hardly fit the profile of a costumed vigilante hero dedicated to justice.”

Come again? The Sailor Moon joke completely forgotten, Natasha paid close attention, especially to the tightening of the muscles around Wayne’s eyes or the way his lips pressed into a neutral, flat line which was determined not to give any information away, only it was, and it was shouting a whole heap of things to Natasha, including ‘how do you know?’.

The Gatekeeper’s expression crinkled into faint amusement from their collection reactions. “Oh, so your friends aren’t aware that you moonlight as the Dark Knight in Gotham City? I do my own research, Mr Wayne, especially when I am about to entrust one of the most precious beings in this universe to a mortal such as yourself.”

“Hold on a minute here,” Coulson interrupted, sticking up for Bruce. “This guy just admitted to being used to make you show yourself. He doesn’t actually want to buy anything from you.”

The Gatekeeper stared long and hard at Phil, and it was a pretty good intimidating look which had the SHIELD agent eventually fidgeting in his shoes before principal who was about to hand out a whole term of after-school detention.

“Mr Wayne has signed a contract,” the Gatekeeper explained, slowly, as if Phil was a child with learning difficulties, “and Mr Wayne has signed said contract in his own blood and swore to abide by the terms and conditions I set for the acquisition or else his life is forfeit.”

“What?” Bruce asked, aghast. “When?”

“When you summoned me,” the Gatekeeper said, looking as equally surprised as the billionaire. “You penned your name in your own blood and you swore you oath as you sent me the missive.”

Bruce’s jaw hung open. “You…you mean that gibberish was some friggin blood-oath?”

“That wasn’t gibberish,” the Gatekeeper snapped, partly in offense but predominantly in disgust at their levels of ignorance. “That was one of the oldest and most powerful tongues in the universe and it is binding and unbreakable. You pledged to buy from me, and now you will do so.”

“What if I don’t?”

“Then blood will come spurting out of your every orifice and you will die a very slow and excruciatingly painful death.”

There was a tinge of green in Bruce Wayne’s complexion. He swallowed hard before setting his
forehead into a deep frown with his jaw locked and shoulders squared. He looked to argue, being a man who had not been told ‘no’ since he fired his nanny when he was three years old, but his first words were drowned out by the sounds of the roar of a waterfall, and with an elaborate hand gesture, a pillar of blazing light cascaded into the room.

“This miserable reluctance you show is truly disappointing, Mr Wayne. I have sourced for you one of the greatest gems in the universe, to match the calibre of your wealth and in line with your character. Behold, a *Snedronning*, or in the Common tongue, a Snow Queen, collected from the ice plateaus of far, far away Jotunheim.”

They all rubbed their eyes and blinked as the light gradually receded. When everything wasn’t just balls of fluff and fuzzy lines, Natasha made out a monster standing in the centre of a dimming spotlight, dwarfing them all with its impressive height of over two meters.

Against his will, Bruce Wayne was hauled by invisible chains to the feet of this creature, and he openly gaped without shame as he stared up into her face whilst a triumphant smile lit up on the Gatekeeper’s face.

She was wrong to have called the creature a monster. It was alien, no doubt about it, the planes and angles of her face subtly unnatural and enough so that, at first glance, it was unsettling. But there was nothing distressing about the smooth, polished glass-like surface of her face and diamond shaped eyes the colour of the ocean floor that whirled like liquid beneath the marble surface. Her hair was hundreds and thousands of floating strands of glittering ice crystals each the size of a grain of sand, and they tinkled and chimed, shimmered with the colours of the rainbow as she moved to bow her head in acknowledgement of Bruce Wayne.

The Gatekeeper decked her in a simple white chiffon wrap, probably to hide more of her unusual anatomy, but like her face, where the Snow Queen’s skin was exposed, Natasha could see that it was hard yet malleable like liquid metal, smooth and gleaming with a mirror finish. Bruce Wayne was Pygmalion and the Snow Queen his statue whom the gods had breathed into life.

“The changing climes of Jotunheim are wiping out this fair race of faery,” the Gatekeeper solemnly explained with a touch of genuine grief in his voice as he guided Bruce closer so that he could place the Snow Queen hands in the billionaire’s own. “Their numbers were never great to begin with, and now they have dwindled to the brink of extinction as their frigid fields begin to crumble. Annelie is one of the last of her race and I have searched far and wide to find someone capable, someone worthy of sheltering her from such an ignoble doom. Take care of her, Mr Wayne.”

Bruce stiffly bent down and brushed his lips over the glassy knuckles, and when he looked up, there were tears in his eyes. “I will,” he croaked, throat constricted with emotion. “Until my dying breath, I will.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

Carol found Ceroden by Sadriel’s side again in the ICU, fingers idly carding through sleeping maiden’s hair and occasionally stroking the side of her face. Every now and then, Sadriel would crack an eye open to let him know she was awake, and then went back to sleep.

Sadriel had been rushed to Tony’s medical bay as soon as they were thawed enough to move. Perhaps it was a blessing that the Avengers basement had been locked in snow and ice as the sub-zero temperatures had helped somewhat to staunch Sadriel’s blood flow.

The best surgeons were called in from around the world to treat the elf, but after four weeks, her
progress and recovery were still slow. She regained consciousness after day sixteen, but aside from demonstrating some level of awareness through a nod here or the shake of the head there, she showed no other signs of being able to talk and all muscle reflex tests were still negative.

Arrelona had been able to identify her sister, but not the other man, who they only knew as Ceroden because the Gatekeeper’s talking wolf had addressed him so. Even under the Black Widow’s interrogation, the man wouldn’t even proffer is own race or the reason why he was on earth. He seemed to have been through his fair share of death and violence in his lifetime and none of the Guantanamo methods extracted anything aside from a bored sigh.

Romanov postulated that Ceroden’s fear of the Gatekeeper was greater than whatever methods SHIELD could hope to dream up, hence the man’s ongoing radio silence.

So Carol volunteered another approach.

“Ceroden, please follow me. The interview room has now been set up.”

He followed her without resistance or any outward reaction but she heard a noticeable intake of breath when he saw who was also in the interrogation room.

Arrelona’s eyes narrowed into feline slits and she hissed her dislike of the man.

“Why don’t you two sit next to each other.” She gave Ceroden a hard nudge and a swift kick to the back of the knee, sending the slighter man stumbling into his chair. “I’ve got us some coffee and something to eat on the way; just trying to keep this as informal as possible.”

“I thank you for your hospitality, Ms Danvers, but I object to this man’s presence. He has the stench of a dark elf about him, and I am sickened that you allow him to visit my sister.”

Carol determinedly kept a pleasant smile on her face but her voice came out terse. “Lona, what you said there almost sounded racist, and I’m not a big fan of judging people by their skin colour. It’s also illegal in this country.”

Arrelona turned up her nose in the way so many stuck-up little princesses do and looked away, but Carol knew she wouldn’t keep it up for long. Not when there were distractions, like Jane Foster stumbling into the interrogation room, one hand juggling a carton of four coffees, the other a box of pastries.

“Hey guys, sorry I’m late. I got us cupcakes, and had to defeat four secretaries in mortal combat to get it. They were about to sell out!”

Carol introduced Jane to the aliens. “This is Dr Foster. You may have seen her poking around the mansion these past two weeks. She is an astrophysicist and has been studying the energy signals and residues in the tv room upstairs where the Winter Soldier and the Talking Wolf disappeared the other day.”

Ceroden’s eyes shifted from Carol to Jane, contemptuously disinterested. Carol decided to push it a little further. “Dr Foster’s specialty and niche area of study is in Einstein-Rosen bridges, a theory that we have on earth about space-time which may one day enable us to travel beyond our own solar system.”

“For all of human ingenuity, I am always amazed that its study and understanding of the universe has also been so limited and confined,” the elf princess haughtily remarked. “All realms, bar your own, have long understood Yggradsil and the branches which connect us, yet you humans so readily dismiss this as myth and fairy tale.”
“I don’t!” Jane protested. “Thor told me about the world tree, and how it divides the universe –”

What was important for Carol was not that the aliens were impressed by Jane’s credentials or the prattling of her personal beliefs. It was the fact that once Jane mentioned Thor’s name, both elves stiffened, and their indifference did a complete one-eighty U turn.

She could tell that Ceroden had questions but no pressing desire to reveal his curiosity in case it could be turned against him. Arrelona on the other hand displayed outright astonishment and pressed one hand to where her heart would be as if she was about to have a panic attack.

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“Who is the Prince of Asgard to you?” Arrelona slammed her hand down on the table, tipping over the coffee, and suddenly she had the look of a wild, caged animal searching for an escape.

“Take it easy, Lona. Dr Foster is just an acquaintance of Thor. They met when he crash-landed on earth two years ago.”

A light of understanding dawned in the elven princess’ eyes and she warily sank back into her seat.

“I felt a tremendous magical disturbance two years ago, further down south, nothing like the Gatekeeper’s style. I didn’t realise it was the Bifrost connecting with earth.”

Ceroden smirked, and Arrelona favoured him with a dagger sharp glare. “That’s what happens when you hole yourself up on a backwater planet like Midgard. Things happen, and you don’t hear about it until it’s old news.”

Carol discreetly encouraged Ceroden to keep talking. “Was it common knowledge? Did everyone know that this Prince of Asgard came to earth two years ago?”

There was a long silence as the dark elf took his time contemplating the consequences of any information he divulged, and for a moment, Carol thought she had lost him and that he had retreated back into his reclusive shell.

“I know you can’t talk about the Gatekeeper. I don’t want to know about the Gatekeeper,” she quickly reassured. “You see, I am also an agent of SWORD, the Sentient World Observation and Response Department, and we are interested in aliens and what lies beyond our moon. Can you talk about that?”

After another deliberate and charged silence, Ceroden nodded. “I can. And yes, everyone knew about Prince Thor’s banishment. He had charged into Jotunheim and broke his realm’s non-aggression pact for reasons unknown and even crossed paths with King Laufey, that idiot. I heard his banishment didn’t last long though. His younger brother tried to seize the throne in his absence so the Thunderer had to return to deal with the usurper. They fought, destroyed the crystal bridge, and the second prince plummeted to his death.”

Jane gasped and her hands flew to cover her mouth. “That’s terrible!”

The two elves stared at Jane as if she’d sprouted another head. Carol did not expect that reaction.

“Good riddance, I say,” Arrelona muttered. She reached out and helped herself to a cupcake, but only picked and crumbed it on her plate. “Loki was a treacherous little viper with a forked tongue far too skilled at lying. It was only a matter of time before he bared his fangs and struck.”

“But he was Thor’s brother. Were they not close?”

Arrelona shrugged at Jane’s quiet disbelief. “Perhaps Thor thought he was close, seeking his brother’s counsel all the time not knowing that the double-crossing demon was ever guiding him in
the direction of ruin. They spent a summer one year in Alfheim and I had the misfortune of accompanying the princes and providing them a tour of the realm. I made up my mind afterwards that I would rather die than be married off to Asgard.”

Jane sat with her back hunched and her head hung low as she kept her eyes trained on her hands in her lap. She tried, but failed to hide the quivering of her lips by feigning an understanding smile. “I thought Thor was nice.”

“Thor is nice –”

“- and he’s a hot-headed fool who believes might is right,” Ceroden finished with a cruel sneer that bought water to Jane’s eyes.

“There is that,” Arrelona admitted, reluctant to be seen to agree with anything the dark elf said. “The crown prince of Asgard is generous with his friendship and is well loved by the people of his realm. That cannot be denied. However, he...lacked certain qualities required of ruling, governance, and in the four months that I spent with him in my realm, there was not a problem which he believed his hammer could not solve.” She sighed in resignation. “And then there was his brother.”

Carol wiped down the table, poured them all fresh cups of tea and covertly passed a tissue under the table to Jane. “It’s the age old story isn’t it? The second prince, not satisfied with his lot in life, undermined his older brother at every opportunity hoping one day to steal the crown from him.”

“That would be a very nice way of putting it. Let’s just say that if my father married me off to Asgard, I was going to become a nervous wreck who would have hung herself before the the year’s end. Prince Loki was…” she threw her hands up in the air in exasperation, “I don’t know, strange? Different? The odd one out?”

“He was a renowned sorcerer,” Ceroden supplied. “Talented, immensely skilled, and used it for all the wrong purposes. There was this one time he messed with Brokk....”

“Prince Loki was a sorcerer in a realm that had little use for sorcery. I actually thought he was mad. He hid it well, but he despised the people around him, especially his brother, and yet still managed to smile and sing and dance for them. And the funny thing was, Thor just couldn’t see it. Even his closest friends warned him about Loki’s duplicity but it continually fell on the deaf ears of an indefatigable optimism that refuses to see ill in anyone, even when it’s staring him in the face and dripping poison in his ear.”

“And there was this other time when Thor lost his hammer to Thrym, and of all the ways his intelligent sorcerous brother could devise to retrieve the hammer, he had his older brother do it wearing a dress...”

“So you see, Dr Foster, I was determined to die rather than join such a dysfunctional and blatantly dangerous family. Thor was too honest for his own good and his brother exploited that at every opportunity out of malice and spite.”

“Thor loved his brother. He spoke highly of him,” Jane said, her voice hardly louder than a whisper.

“Let’s move onto another topic.” Carol turned her attention to Ceroden, leaving Jane to her conflicted thoughts. “I know you can’t talk about the Gatekeeper, but can you tell us why Sadriel came to earth?”
“It was to murder my husband,” Arrelona said flatly.

“Actually, that was only her secondary objective. She came to earth to bring her sister home.”

The elf princess scowled. Carol kept a close eye on her in case the elf decided to throw scalding hot tea all over Ceroden. “My father was always a controlling and petty man. I knew sooner or later he could not abide by one of his daughters flouting his commands.”

“It runs deeper than that, princess. Your realm needs you.”

“What do you mean by that?” Arrelona demanded.

“It means that King Syrnalorn needs to marry you off to Asgard to gain their support in dealing with the growing rebellion movement.”

Carol blinked, interested piqued. “Rebellion?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Arrelona scoffed, taking a small sip of her tea and pulling a face before adding two more teaspoons of sugar. “The rebels are just a small group of malcontents trying to stir up trouble with the peasants. They’ve been at it for centuries, but they never rise above being a bunch of rabble.”

“The malcontents made a bid for Syrnalorn’s life last year in Nomthor when they blew up the bridge he was on,” Ceroden countered, enjoying the look of shock on Arrelona’s face. “Your father was safe, but it claimed the life of his Defence and Trade Ministers, two of his staunchest supporters who have been in his inner circle for the past five hundred years. This small group of malcontents are now rumoured to almost have enough firepower to confront your father’s honour guards head on, and if Syrnalorn doesn’t capture Oberon and Titania soon, Alfheim will be plunged into civil war.”

The elf princess was lost for words. She buried her face in her hands and dry sobbed. “I will not return to Alfheim. I have my Gareth. I love my Gareth. I will not be parted from him.”

“Thor has agreed to marry you?” Jane asked, horrified.

“As far as anyone’s heard, Syrnalorn hasn’t made the deal yet.”

“So Thor isn’t going to marry her?” Jane sighed in relief.

“No, it’s more like Asgard doesn’t want to get involved in Alfheim’s internal politics. They want nothing to do with the Gatekeeper’s machinations. Hell, no one is stupid enough to incur the wrath of the Gatekeeper.”

Carol’s hands tightened around her glass. From out of nowhere, the Gatekeeper became not just earth’s problem, but a greater interstellar menace. “The Gatekeeper is behind Alfheim’s rebellion?”

“Not so much so,” Ceroden said, choosing his words carefully. “The rebels have the Gatekeeper’s services, and it helps them avoid capture or procure and transport weaponry from other realms. Magic and sorcery is a unique and difficult skill to acquire, but a semi-automatic, a rocket propelled grenade, even an IED takes little time to learn or build.” He raised his eyebrows and grinned. “You get my drift?”

“Oh holy fucking big pile of steaming shit!” Carol swore gruffly, reaching across the table and grabbing Ceroden by the front of his shirt, shaking the man like a senseless ragdoll but doing nothing to wipe that infuriating smile off his face. “You’re a gun runner, aren’t you? Jesus,
you….traffick arms on a galactic scale and you are smuggling human weapons to other realms and inciting civil war for profit!”

Ceroden laughed, unrepentant. “Your country is built on the principles of freedom, and yet you would deny the same to the oppressed peasant and servant classes in other realms? I merely supply goods where there is a demand. You can lock me up, put me out of business, but as long as the Gatekeeper keeps the paths of travel between realms open to any and all, your ideals and values, your goods and your technology, will be transported to other realms and there is nothing you can do to stop it.”

Carol didn’t stick around long enough to hear the rest of Ceroden’s gloating, and Arrelona could tear him apart to pieces with her bare hands for all she cared, she was racing down the corridors, phone in hand and calling an emergency meeting with Director Fury ASAP as fear wrapped its invisible tentacles around her heart and squeezed.

King Whoever wanting to arrange a marriage for Arrelona – that she could live with. Ceroden being an arms smuggler – who cares! The Gatekeeper facilitating the rebels and subversive elements of other realms and spurring them on with human ideals and human weapons – earth was in a shit-load of danger.

Because you can bet that if the Gatekeeper cannot be caught or stopped, then the simplest thing for all these alien monarchs to do would be to wipe out the source of the seditious philosophy and armaments – i.e. blow up earth.

The aliens could travel light years between galaxies, and all humans had were satellites and mobile broadband. They were as good as defenceless.

“We are so totally fucked,” Carol darkly muttered, and it was all that blasted Gatekeeper’s fault.

Chapter End Notes

Arrgh! I am a week late in publishing, and I haven't responded to comments either.

I am so sorry this chapter took longer. Writing from Natasha's perspective should have been straightforward, but for some reason, I had a small stumbling block along the way.

This chapter is posted in haste - minor edits may follow throughout the week, and I absolutely promise to respond to the comments.

Thank you again to all the readers and those who have left me feedback. It is extremely encouraging and gives me added incentive to stick to my timetables! :o)
It had been like knowingly drowning, still awake, still aware and alert to the death congealing at a glacial rate around you, feeling each individual cell in body dying, a true death by the inches.

He hung onto the precipice that loomed above the yawning abyss of oblivion, always wondering, always dreading that the rocky ledge would break away or that his aching arms and numb fingers would finally yield and he would tumble away into the vortex of nothingness.

And when he truly passed into death, the last thing he would remember would be the malicious green eyes of Odin’s double-crossing viper of a son, the one who so convincingly professed his hatred for the One-Eyed king and his witless thunder child.

Had that been a lie too? Old and wise King Laufey, fooled by words he desperately wished to hear?

In the far off distance of this unnatural place uncomfortably settled betwixt life and death, a star began to shine in the distance, brighter and brighter and drawing closer.

*Focus on my voice. Gather your will and come to me.*

He stared, mesmerised at the shining light on the horizon, like a new dawn over the gleaming icebergs and artic shelves of purest white, and then his body gained a weightless quality and he began to float up.

*To me. To me. Awake and open your eyes.*

His body started with a jolt and a gasp, sucking in air like the first breath of a new born, and he felt rich life flooding into him as hands pinned his thrashing body down.

“Whoah! Calm down, calm down,” he heard someone say from above with sharp concern.

“I take it you weren’t expecting this sort of reaction?” a deep voice mildly enquired.

“This area isn’t exactly my forte,” the other retorted.

His vision was beginning to focus and adjust to the unusually bright spots of light, all lined in neat rows in the sky. He was familiar with no constellation of that arrangement anywhere within the boundaries of Jotunheim. Where was he? And what cursed magic was this?

Laufey squinted once and made to rub his eyes in a bid to clear them, but the pink-white colour of the skin on his hands, and its diminutive, shrunken size shocked him into another fit.

“Hey! Be still. Work with me here, damnit, and calm down.”

He heard a high-pitched, keening cry that grated on his ear drums, emitted in short bursts, some longer and more ear-splitting than others. It corresponded simultaneously with a burning sensation stabbing into the back of his throat, and Laufey realised in horror that he was the one making that deplorable noise.

“Lachie-boy, I think that thing is in a lot of pain. This was a bad idea. Just slit its throat and put it out of its misery.”
“It’s not in pain,” the other voice above him grated, irate, as it struggled to still his flailing limbs. “He’s panicking because coming back to life after spending two years trapped in limbo probably does that to you.”

“You sure it’s alive? It don’t smell living to me; in fact, it still stinks of death and decay, no different to the day you stole it from the city morgue.”

“Really?” the other sighed, fatigued, disappointed. “The soul’s taken hold, but you are right, she is looking a little pale. Maybe a day or two in the sun will put some colour back in her cheeks…”

Laufey’s struggles began to still as he contemplated these strangers’ words. Were they talking about him? Dead, for two years? Had their trapped his soul, kept it prisoner so that he could not pass away into the beyond? What monstrosity was this, to interfere with the fundamental and immutable laws of life and death?

“Who are you?” he croaked, barely managing to find and control his voice amidst the unforgivable clenching of his stomach and the overwhelming sensation of being sick. He rubbed his eyes and tried to focus his vision, only to find himself staring up into those same damnable green eyes of Odin’s filthy get.

“You…” he whispered, hands clenched in rage and poised to strike. But no, something was different. The eyes may be the same hateful shade of green, but they appeared somewhat dimmed, tired even, having lost the spark of ambition and youth, and they were set in a face that was beginning to show the tell-tale signs of age and mortality. Cheekbones stood out prominently on the gaunt face, the taut skin stretched tightly over the bone and creasing about the corners of eyes that sunk deep in their sockets.

This was not the immortal and youthful Aesir godling who had sent him to his doom. He had his face, but this wasn’t the same man.

“The name’s Williams, Lachlan Williams,” the sorcerous stranger smiled tightly, stepping back, one uneasy step at a time with his hands held up in supplication. “And this is my friend, Fenrir.”

Laufey swallowed hard, his skin breaking into gooseflesh and tiny shivers as he felt himself being scrutinised within an inch of his life by a great white beast with glowering red eyes who stood as tall as Williams’ shoulder.

“And how is it, Williams, that you have come to acquire an ice warg as a companion? They are the emblem of my House and bred only to bear those of royalty.”

His response was an indifferent shrug. “That is unimportant. I have just officially raised the dead. I think that’s cause for celebration.”

“Are you sure it’s alive? I know a corpse when I smell one, and it still smells like chicken that’s gone off.”

“The warg speaks!” Laufey exclaimed, scrambling into an upright position and leaning forward as far as he could without falling off the steel bench that his unfamiliar body was placed on. “It speaks! What heresy is this?”

“The same heresy that brings you back to the plane of the living, jotun king. The soul gem is stable, and the soul has bonded with the body. This is a true text-book resurrection if there ever was one, and to think I managed it on my first try!”

The soul gem to which the sorcerer referred was the jewel slung around his neck by a slender
silver chain. It was no bigger than the size of a coin, transparent but for a stark smear of red in its opaque centre and it faintly glowed with its inner light that pulsed as a heartbeat would.

“The gem gives energy to your soul and reinforces its bond with your new body. It took me two years to get the balance right. Break that gem, and you’ll end up right back where you were, do you understand?”

Laufey palmed the jewel and frowned as he was no closer to unravelling the inscrutable agenda of the sorcerer. “Why am I here? Why have you pulled me back from the brink, Odinson, when it was by your hand that I was first destroyed?”

There was a long silence, an uncomfortable moment of tension when each individual breath could be heard, finally broken by a bitter chuckle. “There is no son of Odin here. I’ll repeat it again in case your mind’s still a little foggy – my name is Lachlan Williams. As to why you’re here, there really is no particular reason. I bought you back because I wanted to see if I could do it.”

Laufey stiffened. “I have been reduced to being a mere experiment for some crazed seidmadr?”

The ice warg’s snout prodded his small, miserably pathetic body and he shrank away at the sight of its teeth and steaming breath. “Show some respect to Lachie-boy,” it snarled lowly, instilling in Laufey a sense of dread and mortality he had not tasted in centuries, not even when he stared down the pointed end of Odin’s golden spear. “He took pity on you as you were collateral damage, another victim of that one-eyed bastard’s treachery.”

“You are Odin’s second son,” Laufey slowly repeated, eyeing the long-haired Aesir who had his back turned to him as he idly packed away heavy tomes that tested the strength of his gangly arms and curious and bizzare instruments from the surrounding steel benches. “There is less than a handful in the Nine Realms who can reclaim the dead without dismantling the balance of the universe, and you would be one of them.”

“I have already said,” Williams responded quietly, “I am not a son of Odin. Never was. Never will be.”

The answer finally dawned on Laufey. It made him laugh aloud in sweet delight at the natural justice inherent in the fabric of the realms. “So you failed in your bid for the throne, bested by the Thunderer, and you have been stripped of your title and cast out! And to think they did not make you a hero for slaying the king of Jotunheim, or did that arrogant princeling claim that glory as well?”

Fenrir snapped at the air just in front of his face and Laufey flinched and recoiled, taking a tumble off the steel bench and groaning as his flimsy body hit the hard stone floor. One great paw the weight of a mountain descended on his chest and he uselessly fisted the white fur as he struggled to breathe. “What did I just tell you about showing some respect, you little zombie!”

“It’s ok, Fen, respect is always earned and not freely given, and I do not particularly care what he thinks of me. The only misconception I insist on righting is that I am not of the house of Odin, and I am not Aesir.”

The warg snorted and stalked back to his master’s side, folding his legs beneath his body and laying down on his stomach. He rumbled with pleasure as Williams rubbed his ears.

“If you’re not Aesir, then what are you? Vanir? Or one of the light elves?”

“Neither,” Williams casually replied and upturned his palms. Light and shadow warred between his
outstretched hands and from the murky depths emerged a rectangular object swathed in layer upon layer of the most oppressive seals Laufey had ever seen in his life. One by one, Williams peeled them back, and tears sprang to Laufey’s eyes as a familiar and aching song called to him.

“You have the Casket,” he said, voice hushed in awe.

“I took this from Odin’s Vaults. If Thor should be gifted with Mjolnir, why should I not have an artefact of equal power?” Laufey’s heart skipped a beat as he watched the sorcerer grasp onto the handles, fearing for a fraction of a second that the eternal frost of the casket’s powers would consume him whole. But instead of howling in agony and shattering into a million shards of ice from the onslaught of a thousand winters, the sorcerer’s form rippled, and as if his Aesir skin was nothing but the flimsy reflection in a mirror, blinked and flickered once, and was then gone.

Laufey leapt to his feet. The sorcerer was Jotun! He was washed all over with the deep, rich colour of cobalt, burgundy eyes like aged wine. Just above his brows sprouted two great curved horns and a sleek raven hair spilled down his back like some dark unholy veil, harking back to the bygone days of the powerful jotun Witch-Kings who terraformed planets and toyed with the rifts between the realms. His eyes hungrily traced the curved markings on the sorcerer’s face, eager to know which tribe this runt belonged, and something like the taste of bile and sickness filled his mouth.

“Those are my lines. Tricks!” he growled. “Lies! You live up to your reputation, trickster!”

Williams merely raised an eyebrow. “I know little about the designs of these markings, save that they signify which family you belong to. Tell me, did you ever leave one of your own in a temple?”

“In a temple?” Laufey repeated, still grappling with his fury, but the words gave him pause, and he closed his eyes, repeatedly muttering the question under his breath until realization flashed in his mind like an arc of lightning. “Ymir’s balls,” he breathed out in astonishment. “The whelp I stowed away in Audumbla’s Shrine…you…”

“Lived,” Williams finished for him, tone short and flat. “Did you not intend for it to be so?”

Laufey scoffed at the innuendo in the question and his upper lip curled at the suggestion that he would abandon one of his own. “Audumbla’s Shrine is sacred and inviolate but the magics which fuelled its protection were tied to the very Casket in your hands. As soon as that was seized by Odin, there was no sanctuary to be had. The warm-blooded barbarians thoroughly sacked Utgard.” He stumbled forward, movements awkward as he was unaccustomed to the shortness of his new legs, and climbed up the chair beside sorcerer until they were finally face to face.

He wanted to reach out, to run his fingers along the ridged markings, to look deep into the sorcerer’s eyes and see if there was any hint of familiarity, to feel the power and song of the casket course through his veins again.

Williams pulled away with a frown. “You know the properties of your own race. Your hands will burn.”

“Of course not. My soul is that of a Jotun, and it will never shun one of its kind.” He demonstrated this by confidently laying his hands on either side of the sorcerer’s face and felt his lips twist into a sad, crooked smile as he thumbed away a solitary tear that slipped out the edge of Lachlan’s eye. “We never shun one of our kind.”

“Even if he be an aberration or a crazed seidmadr?” Lachlan questioned, voice hard and unyielding, hinting at a character who had long been immersed in falsehoods, whether he be the
one to tell them or were told them, and was now wary of words even if spoken in truth.

Laufey shook his head. “I confess, you would have been different, you would have stood out. That you were born of lesser stature to the rest of your kin would have been inescapable, and though you may not have had the strength of your brothers, nature will have compensated you in other ways.”

“You mean by magic?”

Laufey blinked, shocked by the savage resentment in the sorcerer’s voice. “Yes. The last Jotun shaman was Angrboda, but he died centuries before the Great War with Asgard. Before then, when I was still a young enough to be carried by my dam, when the universe was still expanding and Yggdrasil a seedling, her branches yet to connect and bind the realms, Jotunheim was ruled by great and terrible sorcerous Witch-Kings, already legends when the realms were young. They pushed the boundaries of Jotunheim by transforming planet after planet into great frigid stars of ice and cold, and the crowning glory of their achievements was the forging of the Casket of Ancient Winters. And you are in their true splendid like and image. You would have been the herald of the new dawn, the resurgence of our people!”

Lachlan furiously scowled and slapped his hands away. Unused to the centre of gravity in this body, Laufey lost his balance and crashed to the floor again. He glared as the ice warg lazily snickered.

“Odin took you, didn’t he? Raised you in Asgard under the illusion you were one of their own…” Everything suddenly made sense to Laufey, and it shook him to core of his being as if the world about him was disintegrating into ruin. “Raised you as an Aesir, raised you to despise your own kind, raised you to – ”

“Supplant you, seize your throne and forever be the puppet, the cringing, beaten dog forever at the beck and call of Asgard.”

Laufey shuddered, wrath building in him like a turbulent storm, and the icy burn searing through his veins made him fear that it would disintegrate his small fragile body. From the depths of his immutable Jotun soul, a spark of power burned until it overflowed from his body allowing him to shape them into deadly blades of ice in his hands. Alarmed, Fenrir jumped to his feet and crouched as if ready to spring at any time to rip out his throat, and Lachlan materialised a glistening spear, remorselessly lowering the tip and pressing it just above Laufey’s heart.

“That perfidious dog! You have the Casket, son. Let’s you and I return to Jotunheim to wage war – “

“I am not your son,” Williams said coldly, cutting short Laufey’s diatribe and proving his point but driving the point of his spear forward until it broke skin and a trickle of blood ran down the former king’s naked chest. “You are my biological creator, nothing more, nothing less.”

“If not for me, then do this for yourself!” Laufey hissed. “You have the power seize any planet you so desire and transform it into a glacial paradise. Have your revenge!”

At that, the casket was sealed, disappearing back to the void from whence it came, and Williams was silent and unreadable as he reverted back to his pale Aesir shell. “Did you mourn?”

Laufey blinked at the unexpected question, and his surprise must have been apparent to Williams.

“I said, did you mourn?”

There was no hint of anger or grief or expectation in Williams’ neutral expression, and it left
Laufey lost, grappling for words. If he did not provide the right answer, the sorcerer may turn him into a being lesser than a newt.

But surely whatever elaborate tale he spun could be unravelled by the renowned liesmith himself.

So Laufey opted for the plain and unadorned truth. Odin probably never gave it to the boy, and he deserved that much at least. “Yes. Briefly. There were an uncountable number of dead, the city was smouldering ruins, and the anger and suffering of my people was suffocating. You were just another fatality.”

“Just another fatality,” Williams echoed, still offering no clue as to his true feelings.

“I cannot imagine the life you had in Asgard, raised among people who you could not have felt were your own. Tell me, how many years, how many centuries, did you spend questioning your own disparate nature?”

“That is none of your concern.”

Laufey growled, vexed. “There had to be an ounce of truth when you came to me with your plan. You may have the gift of words, but I am not such a fool to mistake truth when I hear it. Asgard treated you poorly, cast you out. Unleash the terror of a thousand winters upon them and take your reparations!”

“You are no better than the rest of them, this use of force, this talk of war,” Lachlan said, favouring him with a look of utter disdain.

Laufey barked a laugh at the blatant hypocrisy. “And you purport to be a proponent of peace? Not likely!”

“You think the only way to bring a realm down onto its knees is by open war? You think that the obliteration of a realm can only be achieved by brute strength?” Lachlan suddenly flashed a wolfish grin. “Perhaps there is more in common between the Jotuns and the Aesir than you care to admit.”

“You speak in riddles!”

“The wheels of change are already in motion and I will plunge all the realms into chaos without so much as a soldier or the power of a legendary artefact such as the Casket.”

“Then what is your purpose of returning me to the land of the living?” he asked heatedly.

“You,” he said, softly and slowly with a soft dangerous tone which promised violence, “are a contingency.”

And the sorcerer would not explain himself further.

~*~*~*~*~

Washed out. Drained. Incredibly tired. An old man shackled down by the countless centuries of his unnaturally long life.

Lachlan let the sun’s warmth wash over him as he basked in the light on a park bench in an area a little off the usual running track where he might have some privacy to be alone with his muddled thoughts and exhausted emotions.

It had been more than five hundred years since anyone had referred to him as Odinson, and he
didn’t realise just how much weighted baggage came with those memories that he was more than glad to disown and be rid of.

Loki Odinson was a terrible person who lived an equally terrible life. Trickster and Silvertongue they called him, forced to barter and bargain for every bit of fame and infamy which seemed to effortlessly land in his illustrious older brother’s lap.

Loki Odinson, seidrmadr, filthy cheat, perhaps the only Asgardian ever alive to attain the rank of Warrior without (legitimately) passing through the Testing Tournaments.

Loki Odinson, who shut himself for months, sometimes years, on end in his private quarters and alchemical chambers practising magic that was the proper domain of women, and pretended at greatness by throwing tricks and illusions on the battlefield amidst the clash of steel on steel or the fantastic rumble and call of lightening.

Loki Odinson, the prince who at the same time was the base object of ridicule, even to the servants and maids and kitchen scullions.

Loki Odinson, who turned out not to be a prince or an Odinson afterall.

Fenrir hopped up onto the seat beside him, the bench groaning and creaking under the added weight, and nuzzled him on the cheek, whining petulantly that Lachlan was becoming lost in his own thoughts and ignoring his BFF.

One arm lazily reached up, slung itself about the wolf’s shoulder blades and wrapped around so it could scratch the fine fuzz along the long vulnerable column of throat that Fenrir tilted his head back and exposed for him.

A rough, hot tongue lapped at his cheeks. “Don’t cry, Lachie-boy.”

He let out a shuddering breath he didn’t know he was holding and opened his eyes, and with the other free hand felt his un-licked cheek and noticed that his fingertips came away glistening wet.

He tiredly swore under his breath and pulled Fenrir closer, burying his face in the generous pile of pure white fur.

Of all the years in his long, long life, he had only found contentment and happiness as Lachlan Williams.

Lachlan Williams was a Midgardian mortal who was born during the twilight years of the Black Death and lost his parents to the plague. Infected himself, he dedicated himself to the study of the mystical and alchemical practices, delved into the occult and mastered the arcane arts at the dawn of the Renaissance, becoming a sorcerer without peer and won an unnaturally extended life.

Lachlan Williams was urban myth and folklore, the faceless man who counselled generations of kings and queens, the man in the shadows, the head of the Illuminati who commanded the rise and fall of civilizations.

Lachlan Williams walked through the eras in human history in numerous guises, inspiring modern philosophical and political thought and guiding the revolutions that transformed Europe and the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Lachlan Williams made it into the top 100 in season seven of American Idol and knew every Disney chorus line and enjoyed full audiences at every lounge he sang Buble and Sinatra at.
Lachlan Williams was the mighty and feared Gatekeeper, a man whose past was as ambiguous as his identity, who opened doors to and from the realm of Midgard and whose control over the secret pathways between the planet and the stars bordered on the absolute.

Lachlan Williams lived a charmed life, and whatever he desired he inevitably got.

“I am glad that you have only ever known me as Lachlan,” he sighed, scratching Fenrir between the ears where the wolf loved it most. “I am glad you never knew the wretched creature called Loki.”

“I agree.” Fenrir licked his face again, determined to replace his tears with wolf drool, because the latter was infinitely preferable. “Lachie-boy is a much better person.”

“I am not Odinson,” Lachlan wearily mused, “and I certainly am not Laufey-son. So it’s just you and me, big fella.”

Fenrir leaned into him so that Lachlan could properly wrap his arms around the large animal in his Samoyed form. “And that’s the way things were meant to be. You feed me, and I make you happy. That’s my idea of perfection.”

Lachlan couldn’t help but laugh and feel the tightness of his chest loosen.

“Believe it or not, I think a small part of me thought, or maybe hoped, that Laufey and I would… spontaneously form some sort of father and son bond the moment he woke up and looked into my eyes,” Lachlan quietly confessed, comforted in knowing the fact that Fenrir would never use this knowledge against him. “I had some wild idea that he’d recognise me straight away and we would run into each other’s arms and weep and reconcile and look forward to catching up on all the times that we had spent apart. Instead, I am just one of hundreds of thousands who died, one he almost forgot.”

Lachlan’s voice trailed off into a despondent silence. It seemed that everything in his life, fate, had been stacked against him since he was born. Abducted from his home before he could even comprehend the world, raised to hate his own kind, running a race he was never meant to win, finally learning of the truth only to be devastated by the same.

“Lachie-boy, you have me, and we have each other. That’s all that matters. How does that song go again?

_We've got to hold on to what we've got_

_Cause it doesn't make a difference_

_If we make it or not_

_We've got each other and that's a lot_

_For love - well give it a shot_

Laughing aloud, delighted at Fenrir’s pseudo-rock voice, Lachlan joined in the chorus:

_Whooah, we're half way there_

_Whooah, livin on a prayer_

_Take my hand and we'll make it - I swear_
Still humming the celebrated anthem, mood significantly buoyed, Lachlan eventually sauntered into a hair salon in Chinatown made prominent by its flashing neon sign of little grammatical sense, “Hair Beauty Care”, by eleven o’clock and beamed at Carol and Janet who were sitting huddled on plastic chairs still in their plastic wrapping and leafing through Chinese magazines they didn’t understand. Lachlan had bought Carol to this establishment before, but her upper-class friend had a permanently pinched expression and constantly darting eyes on alert for hideous rash causing bugs or germs.

“Ah, Mr Williams, you bring dog today!” The salon owner, Meilan, was a Chinese woman who was short and plump but compensated for her lack of stature with an abundance of inexhaustible good will and beaming smile, greeted Lachlan with a double-handed handshake and slipped a biscuit to Fenrir with practise which demonstrated a long-established ritual between woman and beast.

Van Dyne, who had never met Fenrir before, ‘ohmigoshed’ six times before gushing about how fantastically adorable and cute and handsome he was, and when Fenrir played the big, docile dog with the large, gentle eyes and passive demeanor, she ran her hands all through his fur, scratched his chin, cuddled him and declared she was going to take him home.

Lachlan just laughed as Mailan ushered them into the salon, passing cautiously through a curtain of gaudy plastic beads, where there were just three chairs reserved for them and three hairdressers ready to please. Perhaps he need not have befriended Danvers to get direct intel about the Avengers. He should have just left Fenrir on Van Dyne’s doorstep with a big pink bow on his collar and let the wolf engage in his charm offensive.

Clearly, just mere seconds of contact with Van Dyne, and Fenrir already had her eating out of his hand.

Lachlan wiggled and made himself comfortable as the seats tilted back and his braid was loosened. A jet of water that was not too hot and not too cold began to pool around his hair in the basin as Lachlan leaned back in his recliner and strong fingers like a comb began to card through his hair.

Not long after, the strong, experienced ladies in an apparently run down and tacky looking hairdressing salon had one of the wealthiest women in New York and one of the most powerful woman on earth groaning in pleasure and satisfaction.

“Oh, this is just what I need,” Carol sighed, eyes shut in an expression of bliss and contentment. “You would have no idea just what a shit week I’ve had, Lachie.”

“I’m all ears,” Lachlan murmured, which was only partially true because like Carol, he was drifting off into an untroubled sleep, just teetering on the brink between consciousness and dreams and loving every second of it.

“You know that troublesome guy I’ve been going on and on a about?” Carol groused, “He just became the official Avenger’s Public Enemy Number 1.”

Lachlan made sure he kept his breathing regular and the rise and fall of his chest even, though Carol was too absorbed by the relaxing head massage to notice any micro-expressions which may have flickered across his face. Besides, Lachlan was too old, too experienced to let such tell-tale emotions show. “That’s odd. He hasn’t blown up any buildings in this city or made threats of world domination. The Daily Planet would have reported on it.”
Carol rumbled something unflattering, her language infected by years in the airforce and when she felt like it, could swear until Lachlan was a blushing little an innocent little girl, which was some rare feat. “I wish he was some AIM nerd. They’re straight-forward and flashy, you know? I mean aside from publishing their own manifesto and dropping leaflets that say ‘send your applications to this PO box’, they want us to know who they are, what they do and what the hell we want. This other guy? Fuck just talking about him gives me a headache.”

“There, there,” Lin, one of their hairdressing ladies who looked like she had just finished high school, crooned. “How about some lavender oil? Fragrance help you relax.”

“Yes please!” Carol said with a tinge of desperation. “I like my enemies up-front. Come at me, and I’ll arm-wrestle them into the next dimension, you get what I mean?”

And here was one of the reasons why Lachlan was so fiercely fond of Carol. She was a no-nonsense, beat around the bush type of woman. If she didn’t like you, chances were you’d know because you’d be missing a few teeth and nursing a broken, and painfully disjointed nose from where she had repeatedly rammed your head into the nearest concrete wall. On the other hand, she had sense enough to know when to hold her temper in check and will heed counsel that there were some things even her Kree-enhanced fists alone could not solve.

“You could arm-wrestle anyone into the next dimension,” he said in whole-hearted agreement.

“I mean, what the hell does this guy want? He’s smuggling aliens into earth, and he’s exporting our guns and weapons back to all these other ‘realms’. These arms fall into the hands of goddamn rebels who are destabilising establishments which have apparently been in place for thousands of years. You could even say that the whole fiasco down in Brighton Beach a couple of months ago was this guy’s fault. If he hadn’t gone around letting people in and out of earth, no friggin elf king would have sent someone to assassinate a human and abduct an elf back to her snobby planet.”

“You seem to meet all sorts of wonderful people in your job.”

Carol snorted, but the disgruntled sound died down as the fragrance of lavender filled in their air. “I’ve got a John Doe who we only know is called Ceroden, and who may or may not be some dark elf, even though he looks human enough. I have another elf still in ICU and no idea why she isn’t getting any better, and another stuck-up, racist Aryan princess who keeps asking when she can leave. Even the Kree weren’t that complicated. They wanted to take over earth, we set off a nuclear bomb under their asses and sent them packing, then cracked open some bottles of champagne before sunset, and all this in just one day.”

The Kree invasion as something that Lachlan classified as a ‘close call’. Their technology had threatened to overwhelm his monopoly over the portals in earth’s solar system, and even he doubted how one sorcerer and his wolf might have fared against the masses and legions of the Kree Empire’s highly trained army. So while the Avengers all believed that sheer luck was what transported them to the homeworld of the Kree after they rode Damocles into the blackhole, Lachlan had to spend a whole month recuperating from the energy spent in manipulating the energies so he could ensure the Avengers landed on the same planet as the Supreme Intelligence and take down the floating head to avoid a genuine hostile alien takeover. Lachlan liked to think that he had a large role to play in averting the enslavement of earth, even if he only had the Winter Soldier and Fenrir to brag to about it. “And what about the blue guy?”

“He’s one resilient bastard. Got him sitting in a cell with the heating turned on to 40 degrees Celsius and all he does is snarl at us.”

“So still no closer to tracking down this jerk then?”
“We had a small break through,” Van Dyne pointed out. “The other day, a few of us got magically teleported to somewhere Far, Far Away and met the Gatekeeper.”

Carol sniffed, disappointed. “Problem was that when our team mates returned, they could hardly remember anything, let alone what the Gatekeeper looked like. Coulson’s suddenly developed a phobia of dogs and can’t sleep when he hears them howling at night and Romanov sat through a marathon three seasons of Sailor Moon. I’m not sure if that’s trying to tell us something.”

“Ah, back to square one, I see,” Lachlan grinned, relaxing more into the head massage and feeling his tensions being kneaded away.

The way he figured things, Ceroden and Arrelona had talked, about themselves more than him, and whatever they gave to SHIELD was still not enough to allow them to piece together what he looked like, how he worked or why he did the things he did. The dark elf was smart and keenly conscious of self preservation whilst Arrelona didn’t know enough about him to make her in need of termination.

Only Boris, kept captive in the negative zone, hadn’t talked, but given the way the humans were torturing him with heat, his breaking might only be a matter of time. Would he die and take Lachlan’s secret with him to the grave like the legendary stoic frost giants of old, or would he succumb to his craven desire for life and rock the boat?

Usually, a near impossible break and enter into the planet’s most heavily guarded prison called for someone like the Winter Soldier, whose ability to look like any ordinary gun-totting schmuck whether it be a HYDRA or SHIELD uniform allowed him to infiltrate organizations with uncanny ease. However, since regaining his memories, Barnes was noticeably MIA.

“Good afternoon, sir, are you here for an appointment?” he could hear Meilan ask from the front reception area.

Lachlan cracked an eye open at a familiar presence. The plastic beaded curtain clinked as they were pushed aside accompanied by the light, regulated footsteps of a highly trained assassin.

“Bos – I mean, Mr Williams?”

“Barnes?” Lachlan acknowledged in surprise. If thinking of the man summoned him, he should do it more often, instead of leaving snarky and bitchy phone messages and texts filled with angry faces on Barnes’ phone.

“This…er…” the Winter Soldier helpless gestured to the young girl, about five years old with long black hair and even blacker eyes wearing a pink polka-dot dress clutching at his trouser leg. Lachlan hid a smile at the obvious discomfort on Barnes’ face, as if a horny dwarf with a wart on his face bigger than his nose was humping his leg and excreting a foul-smelling fluid all over the fabric.

“Ah, thanks for picking up Lailah from ballet class. I know your schedule’s been busy lately.”

Barnes’ eyes narrowed. “Yeah, well, I gotta rush off to an appointme—oof!” He staggered back, caught by surprise as Fenrir flung himself at him, front paws scrabbling at his shirt front and long pink tongue trying to coat Barnes’ face with wolf drool.

Carol nudged Lachlan arm. “Who’s the good looker?” she asked without bothering to lower her voice.

“That’s Barnes, my former dog walker and housekeeper. He’s found himself a more stable job
now, so doesn’t walk RiRi much these days, but as you can see, she deeply misses him. By the way, this is my second cousin, Lailah. Lailah,” he said sweetly to Laufey, who glared back at him with commensurate sugary cuteness that was so utterly wrong on the face of the former jotun king, “say hello to Ms Danvers and Ms Van Dyne.”

Laufey’s peeled back his lips and bared his teeth, drawing dubious looks from Carol and Janet which they tried to cover up with weak, understanding smiles of their own.

“Does she come from a broken home or something, Lachie?” Danvers hissed under her breath. “She looks like she could audition for the part of the lead in The Ring.”

Lachlan patted ‘Lailah’ on the head and pushed her towards the direction of the chairs, motioning for her to keep ‘herself’ entertained with the magazines until their head massage and wash was finished. “Yeah,” he whispered back with some false pathos and downcast eyes. “Her parents were unfit to look after her and I didn’t realise she’d gone into the system. I got her out of foster care as soon as I found out, and I’m caring for her in the meantime until her mum and dad get their shit sorted and can properly look after her again.”

Van Dyne’s eyes shone with sympathy and she literally blew kisses at Lachlan for the (non-existent) kindness of his heart.

“Knock it off, RiRi, stop it!” Barnes was growling as he wrestled with the large dog, trying to save himself from being licked to death.

Lachlan raised an eyebrow. “She obviously missed you. Why don’t you take her out for a walk around the block for old-times sake?”

“I have an appoint – ” Barnes gave up the argument mid-way and threw his hands up in the air as Fenrir started to piteously whine, tail between his legs, and tried to imitate a cat doing figure eights around Barnes’ feet only to step on the Winter Soldier’s foot, many times, most of them deliberate.

Barnes stormed out of the salon with RiRi practically prancing beside him and they all relaxed again and lay back in their seats as the conditioner was worked through their hair by those lovely dexterous fingers of the hairdressers.

“These girls are good,” Van Dyne commented. “We should bring Jane here next time. She needs to unwind, the poor thing.”

Lachlan feigned ignorance. Danvers elaborated to fill in the perceived gaps. “You remember Dr Foster when you dropped by the Avengers Mansion the other day? She’s just arrived in town herself and staying at the Mansion, but hasn’t been able to sleep a wink since. Has nightmares, and spends most of her day trying to get some shut eye although I think she’s actually starting to black out during the day. It’s putting a real spanner into the analytical works that Fury wants her to do and none of the sleeping pills the doctor’s have prescribed are helping.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Lachlan mumbled, digging deep but finding very little compassion for Jane Foster’s plight.

Especially since he was the one who planted Greta into her head in the first place to make sure she saw her nightmares even with waking eyes. He imagined that she would descend into psychosis soon with the sleep deprivation.

You see, the Gatekeeper’s control over the portals to and from Midgard was close to absolute, and it was only that way because he made it so.
Thank you again for everyone's encouraging comments.

It's taken another 3 weeks to post a chapter! And again, I may have to intermittently review and edit this during the week. Sorry for the delay.

In other news, I will be travelling overseas soon and will be away until the end of August. The next chapter won't appear until mid September, earlier if I manage to prepare some drafts while I am away.

For all those still following this story, Thor and Loki's worlds will soon collide, and three guesses as to what Barnes has been doing since he recovered his memories....

Lastly, I realised I hadn't been referencing the lyrics.  
The song in Chapter 4 was Lily Allen's "Fuck You"  
The song in this chapter was Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer" - Whooah!
Bucky kept his head down, eyes to the ground and shoved Fenrir down the nearest dark and danky alley. Amidst the stench of rotting garbage and human filth, man and animal stared each other down, willing the other to be the first to back down.

The Winter Soldier was the first to break the silence. He said with all the bluster and defensiveness of a man with much to hide, “What the hell is that thing? A ghoul?”

Fenrir’s eyes lit up and his ears pricked forward. “You think so too? I keep telling Lachie-boy the same thing, but he refuses to believe me.”

“It is a ghoul?” Bucky’s voice shot up by an octave, pained expression flickering across his face. “What the hell was it doing in the middle of my apartment?”

“How would I know? He was supposed to be locked up in Lachie-boy’s tower, but he must have been poking around the drawers and found the port-key to your place.”

“He?” Bucky’s voice shot up to the highest registers of falsetto as confusion and dismay made him bury his face in his hands. “Look, whatever fucked up experiments you have going back at the tower, I don’t want to know about it anymore. I’m my own man now. I’m out. Leave me alone.”

“What do you mean ‘you’re out’,” Fenrir whined, sidling up to the assassin again in an attempt to convey affection. “Just because you’ve got your memories back doesn’t mean….hey…” The deep bass voice paused, interrupted by a succession of pointed sniffs, button black nose burying into places where sexual harassment cases have been won for less. Suddenly, the warm black eyes and cajoling attitude dipped into cold, cold distrust that took degrees off Bucky’s hot blustering. “Why do you smell of America?”

It was not a question. It was the promise of I’m going to eat you, tear chunks off you whilst you’re still alive and screaming and feeling every second of it that make Bucky wish he had died after the explosion from Red Skull’s rocket.

Instead of doing the smart thing, like confessing, or explaining his situation and trying an angle for some sympathy, or falling to his knees sobbing and pleading for his life, the words for the most unconvincing lie blurted out. In the very back of his mind, he heard the soft but distinct wail of despair for hope of a long life and a happily ever after slipping away.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Fenrir eyed him as he would small, fluffy rabbits, i.e. as tiny, defenceless morsels that he had between snacks during the day. “You forget I fought that human to save your hide when you botched that last mission. I never forget someone’s scent and I can trace them anywhere in the realm.”

“You must be mistaken,” Bucky stammered, wondering in dread whether the wolf had detected the imperceptible tremor in his voice.

“Are you hanging around America? Odin’s eyepatch! You’re going out this afternoon with him, aren’t you?”
Bucky scowled. Here he was, in the budding dawn of the twentieth century, his memories finally intact and slowly coming back to him, his life of wetwork and days of vapourising Red Room agents a fast fading bad dream, and for the first time in what felt like forever, he finally made a connection with someone which didn’t involve a bullet to the heart as a way of first greetings. Why on earth did he now have to justify his choice of friends with a wolf of all things?

“It’s none of your damn business, Fenrir, so butt out.”

Bucky was all tensed to repel any sudden lunge by the wolf. He had seen Captain America wrestle the animal to a standstill and was fairly confident that so long as he could avoid Fenrir’s ice breath or stunning howl, he could replicate the feat. But Fenrir’s tail dipping between his legs and a long, piteous whine coupled with round, pleading eyes made him blink twice.

He was suddenly choked by an irrational surge of guilt, a horrible, clenching sensation. His conscience launched into an chastising tirade.  

Shame on you! Does it make you feel like a man to bully a dumb beast who only wants your affection?

Fortunately, the rational, and hyper cynical side of him, honed over years of never flinching from his reality that he was nothing more than a highly trained and proficient murderer, whether he was doing it wearing the US army uniform or the black body armour of the Soviets, reminded him that Fenrir was one of the most savage and ferocious beings known to man. The ancient wolf was no pampered pooch or indoor house pet; he had a keen nose for a person’s weaknesses, physical or emotional, just as a drug hound could catch a whiff of cocaine through a tonne of rotten fish.

And now that damned monster was targeting his (admittedly limited) sense of decency, it made him scowl harder. “That might work on some Fifth Avenue housewife or a genetically engineered crime fighter the size of a wasp, but it’s not going to get any mileage out of me,” he all but growled.

Fenrir persisted with the down-trodden doggy act and sidled up to him, rubbing his face on his trouser leg, the same area where that horrid, freakish little girl-thing had clutched onto him earlier.

“Aw, don’t be like that, Soldier. Think of all the great times we had together, you, me and Lachie-boy. We’re friends!”

“We’re not friends,” Bucky spat, shaking off the animal and dusting his pants free of white hairs that Fenrir liberally moulted on whim. “I was boss’ lab rat, one damaged mortal he happened to stumble across and fix because he was curious and bored.”

Fenrir stared at him, stunned, making Bucky’s stomach churn with guilt. “You think of Lachie-boy like that?”

“Okay, so he might not have been the worst boss that I could have had…”

“He gave you freedom,” the wolf said, voice torn between feral rage and dull incomprehension. “Lachie-boy spent years hunched over his study table and locked up in his tower figuring how to get back your freedom while you were free to happily waste your enemies when he had to spend centuries, alone, shedding blood and tears to throw off the shackles of his old masters.”

Bucky’s shoulders sagged and the fight died in him. He crouched down and reached out for a conciliatory head rub that sent another haze of white hairs flying. “Sorry Fen, I guess I got carried away making new friends that I neglected my old ones.”

“It’s ok. Lachie-boy wanted you to enjoy being your own man again. But if you have some spare
time tomorrow, drop by our place. Lachie-boy is going to get all the elves out of the Avengers Mansion, dead or alive, but we need you to break out that frost giant from 42."

Bucky rolled his eyes and sighed. “Why don’t you just ask to liquidate SHIELD while we’re at it? I seem to get all the missions marked ‘Impossible’.”

Fenrir chuckled, delighted, tail now wagging at speeds of a ceiling fan on high. “Lachie-boy will give you back-up. He’s also been working on some upgrades lately as well. It’ll be no harder than the time you slipped into the Kremlin and stuck your gun up Kruschev’s right nostril and…what was it you said again? Yeah, that’s right, turn those motherfucking missiles around and sink them in the middle of the Pacific of I’ll do a Jackson Pollock with your brains!”

“Those were the hey-days,” Bucky murmured, suddenly feeling all warm and fuzzy in reminiscence of those years in the late fifties and early sixties that had been the height of the Cold War. While the Boss was smuggling aliens into earth, shipping AK-47s and M16s abroad, or experimenting with crochet on mind threads, he’d make daring passes through the wall into east Berlin and play cat and mouse with the horribly ruthless and efficient Stasi while picking off high ranking KGB officers and politburo members. “All right. I’ll come for the briefing tomorrow.”

Fenrir slobbered over his face with his coarse pink tongue. “Don’t make it sound like this is such a chore, Soldier. I bet civilian life bores the hell out of you and you’ve been itching for some blood-letting and action.”

“Get out of here, you violent, vicious animal, before someone films me talking to a speaking dog and puts the clip up on Youtube.”

“Woof woof!” Fenrir grinned and made his way back to the hair salon, tail up in the air, leaving Bucky behind in the shadows of the buildings shaking his head, mildly disturbed by the grain of truth in the wolf’s last statement.

~*~*~*~*~

Thor’s mother found him in the armoury, polishing his breast plate and cuirass to mirror finish with a patience that he had only acquired in recent times. Her brows drew together in the premature signs of a frown which was hurriedly smoothed away by a tentative smile frozen in place by a consternation unable to be concealed.

Thor was sick of his mother’s troubled look but knew he couldn’t do what she wanted in order to banish away the quiet suffering from her ageing face.

“I have spoken at length with your father,” she began. His hand stilled and body tensed. They had all given him time and space to grieve the loss of his dearest brother, and in dread, he realised that the time might have finally run out and he still wasn’t ready to carry on down the road of his future, a solitary figure venturing into the wilderness unknown with contrition and remorse the weight of the universe on his back.

“You are not his keeper,” Hogun had said to him, shortly after Loki’s fall, his expression grimmer than the darkest winter day. “He became what he chose to become and you tried your utmost to save him.”

And therein lay the problem. Guilt gnawed away at his conscience day and night until it had become pathetically thin and frayed. The King had been vague and otherwise silent on the exact circumstances in which the second prince had perished, and Thor could only find sleep if he drank enough to convince himself, however fleetingly, that Loki had slipped from his grasp.
When Thor did manage to find sleep, it was wracked by dreams of violence and blood. Awake, he saw the shadows of his nightmares lurking in the corners of his vision and the dead voice of brother would whisper in his ear, *I let go.*

He set aside the armour to clear a seat for his mother, the Queen starkly out of place in her light finery amongst the tools of brutality and slaughter.

“I do not believe confining yourself to the palace anymore will do you any favours,” the Queen began, her words sounding practiced and rehearsed. “You hoard all the blame for your brother’s fall when each of us are at fault.”

Thor opened his mouth to argue, but Frigga held up her hand and cut him off with a steely gaze.

“You have lost your brother, and I have lost my son. Do not think your grief is greater or deeper than anyone else’s. I held Loki as a babe and nurtured him to adulthood. I had invested no less love than you did in him.”

Thor hung his head, and thought, *perhaps you loved him more than I should have.***

The Queen continued, “Your father and I believe you should act as Asgard’s representative and head to Midguard to make formal reparations for the damage your brother caused when he sent the Destroyer after you.”

“The Bifrost is ready?”

The accusation and disappointment in his mother’s eyes could have smothered Thor in shame. “It has been functional for two months already. Have you not observed the long lines of caravans and other trade carts passing in and out of the city gates?” There could have been a lot more scolding, but the Queen sighed and let the subject drop. Suddenly, she sounded so tired and worn. “The King wishes to personally brief you and impart some words of wisdom. See him immediately, for you will leave before midday.”

She left him to sulk in the armoury over the fact that they had cut his preparation time so as to limit his chances of protest and delay. Thor decided to keep his objections to himself for now, taking consolation in the belief that this sojourn to Midgard would take him out of Asgard for no more than a week. He was headed towards his chambers for a fresh change of clothes to make himself presentable and to pack some provisions when a procession of mage apprentices began to file out of Loki’s room, arms bundled full of his brother’s belongings: heavy leather bound tomes and other magical trinkets and artefacts, all his memories of what remained of Loki.

His rage erupted in a battle cry that had made berserker giants halt in their tracks, and he accosted one of the senior acolytes who appeared to be orchestrating this despicable plundering of a dead prince’s chambers.

The old man wheezed, fear bright in his eyes as if he had no idea, or had been told that the crown prince would not be aware of his nefarious actions. Yet here he was, hauled a good four feet in the air like some broken scarecrow without his stuffing and staring down the eye of the tempest storm that could flatten Asgard in the blink of an eye.

“You have much nerve to disturb my brother’s chambers,” Thor began darkly.

The acolyte spluttered incoherence, knobbly old fingers accentuated by arthritis futilely grabbing at the uncompromising hold around his neck that threatened to squeeze every ounce of life out of him.

“This is what you will do,” the crown prince raised his voice for all the young apprentices, who
had stopped dead still upon his arrival, to hear. “You will replace each and every item in exactly
the same place you found them, and then you will hand yourself over to the Captain of the Palace
Guard, or so help me, I will make you suffer dearly for this gross transgression – ”

“Sweet Idunn, what are you doing, Thor!”

Sif, dressed in full regalia befitting of one of the Valkyrie, came running down the corridor and
prised the old trembling man out of Thor’s steel grip.

“I have caught this despicable thief red-handed – ”

“What thief?” Sif exclaimed, exasperated as she pushed the senior acolyte out of Thor’s murderous
vision and ushered the rest of the young apprentices away, away with all the treasured remains of
his brother.

Thor swung his deadly glare onto Sif, who returned it with a challenging stare of her own. “This is
the will and order of the Allfather,” she explained, but not unkindly, sympathetic to the grief that
had defeated Asgard’s greatest warrior. “Loki may have had information, research or theories
which – ”

But Thor had already stopped listening and was gaping in horror at Loki’s chambers, ransacked
and stripped of every item which radiated arcane energies, robbing it of personality and any history
of the person who once lived there. Thor’s fingers dug so hard into the door frame that the metal
groaned and began to yield under the pressure. “Where is my father?” he asked through gritted
teeth.

Sif sighed and held Thor’s face, making him look at her, and not the ruins of loss around them. She
banked on their centuries of friendship and camaraderie to speak frankly and openly with him
without incurring his infamous rage. “I have been instructed to accompany you to Midgard. For all
outwards intents and purposes, the Allfather sends you to make reparations to the Midgardians for
the damage that the Destroyer caused. The true purpose of our journey is to conduct our
investigations of the Gatekeeper, and to ascertain whether his base of operations is founded in
Midgard or not.” Her voice softened as she tried for a nostalgic tone and a soft smile. “You recall
Loki’s monumental interest in this character. His fascination was no secret, and his research may
have surpassed anything that the monarchs of all the other realms have managed to piece together.
If he was still with us today, he would have traded a year’s stable duties with you to go to Midgard
himself.”

Thor cast a despairing look about him. The young apprentices had been thorough, tearing down the
bookshelves in their determined search for hidden compartments in the walls, breaking apart the
study table and drawers suspecting false bottoms, and going to far as to gut the mattress and
ripping out the springs and stuffing. “Loki never spoke of the Gatekeeper being in Midgard, he – ”

Thor trailed off and he frowned as another nauseous wave of regret hit him. Loki never spoke of
the Gatekeeper being in Midgard because Loki had long stopped speaking to Thor about anything
of importance, let alone his studies or his thoughts. If Loki did believe the Gatekeeper to be hiding
in plain sight amongst the billions of mortals, he would have kept it to himself. Even if he had told
Thor, Thor gravely suspected he would have been uninterested, told Loki to be quiet and enjoy
Volstagg’s operatic rendition of the great drinking song, Hail Brunhilde.

Despondent, he kicked aside shards of an ancient and priceless vase from only Loki-knows-where.
He must have acquired it long ago on a quest or adventure he undertook alone. “Asgard does not
interfere in the affairs of other realms. The Gatekeeper is of no concerns to us.”

And that was when Sif told him the story of Alfaud Svanvarr.
Alfaud, the son of Anbert and Salotta Svanvarr, had been described by his friends as an ordinary lad who, after completing his basic studies had a desire to join the warrior ranks of Asgard’s mighty golden army. He enrolled at the local barracks as a trainee but struggled to complete the gruelling training courses. In contrast to the other recruits he was of slighter stature and his fleetness of foot would have seen him advance in the ranks of the scouts but for his poor eyesight where a childhood accident left his right eye with only partial vision.

Unable to qualify for the Testing Tournament, Alfaud quit the recruits and took up his father’s trade as the local blacksmith. Those who knew Alfaud claimed he found such life highly unsatisfying, and though his dreams of joining Asgard’s army were extinguished, he nevertheless still dreamed of being someone greater than the local man to whom you turned when an axle on the wheel of your cart had snapped.

After working hard and saving up a sizeable pouch of gold, Alfaud took some time off to travel to the friendly realms of Vanahem and Alfheim and see what could command his interest and spark a new change of direction in his life and career.

Alfaud was gone for six months and what he did during this intervening period no one knew. All they knew was that when Alfaud returned, he was a deeply changed man. He expressed anger and resentment against the army that rejected him, and the establishment which empowered the army to discriminate and exclude him in the first place. Then his dissatisfaction turned towards the ruling dukes and jarls, whose privileged and cosseted lives were in no small part also courtesy of the army.

Alfaud postulated that though there was a whole legion of tradesmen and other men and women labouring just as hard to maintain the most elite force of the Nine Realms, they received pathetic little recognition and oftentimes regarded as second, lesser citizens.

Alfaud was not alone in his malcontent. His dissatisfaction spread to similarly disenfranchised youths. They engaged in what later would be known as ‘civil disobedience’, deliberately and consciously flouting traditions, revelling in their non-warrior status, disparaging those they once exalted.

It quietly started an underground movement comprising namely disaffected girls and boys on the cusp of an adulthood, despising the fate in store for them, who celebrated their nonconformity through aggressive and excessive displays of recklessness, drinking to stupor in all-night bacchanals. Eventually, they began to experiment, whether by smoking, injecting or snorting in no particular order a new drug innocuously called ‘pixie dust’ which was smuggled in from Vanahem.

The new drug was highly destructive with an almost endless and horrific list of crippling side effects. But in return, it liberated the user for a few precious hours from their mundane and inglorious reality as the faceless nuts and bolts of the army. And what people would give just to feel exultant and invincible for those precious few hours.

Asgard had done little to regulate or monitor these bacchanals, and in hindsight, they would regret not closely examining the source of the dust when Alfaud, and his successors, began to discretely import the product from Vanahem for mass consumption. For if they scrutinised the origins of Alfaud’s newfound rage and the rebellion of dust, they would have made the grim discovery that the product and ideology bore the taint of Midgard.

On the fifth day of the first week of Skerpla, Year 15283, in one of Alfaud’s personal bacchanals in the slums of Lunansholt, something terrible occurred. The forensic healers later called to the scene initially suspected overdosing, but later corrected their reports and noted that the pixie dust was
corrupted with other unknown compounds, creating a toxic combination that killed 34 men and women who had only recently attained adulthood, and left another 26 in a sleep from which they would never rouse.

Alfaud had not taken his own product and he eventually received the infamy he so desired, albeit as a prisoner paraded around the main streets of Asgard’s capital city in chains, heading towards the Ting and swiftly to a very public execution.

That was just two weeks ago, and Thor had none of Loki’s skills to conceal the shock and anger that followed. He was shocked by his own obliviousness to such a tragic and atrocious event, and then vengeful that the mischief of the Gatekeeper had finally arrived on Asgard’s virgin shores.

For the past two centuries, the Gatekeeper’s meddlings had been confined to all other realms and it appeared that the mysterious sorcerer had given Asgard wide berth. Perhaps the sorcerer did not wish to pit himself against the powerful magic of the Allfather, or perhaps he was simply bidding his time and setting Asgard up for an even greater fall.

In Alfheim and Nidavallir, the Gatekeeper had provoked the underprivileged and slave classes. In Vanaheim, he twisted and poisoned their thinking and philosophy towards treasonous directions, leading them to become complicit in stirring up the vortex of instability now shaking the very branches of Yggdrasil. And finally, the Gatekeeper’s malice was beginning to infiltrate Asgard, targeting not the slaves or the servants, but the masses of young men and women who, up until now, had ignored the small but bitter voices inside their heads complaining of the disparity in the recognition and accolades between the warrior class and the rest who clothed, equipped and fed them.

The Gatekeeper’s chaos had finally arrived and his first act was to inflict death and endless grief, to rob parents of their sons, to rob brothers of their siblings.

And he keenly understood what it was like to lose a brother.

Thor’s hand reached for Mjolnir and the sparks of retribution set alight the blood in his veins. He stalked all the way back to his chambers, Sif in tow, and for the first time in two years since Loki’s fall, he had someone, something else to fix his attention on.

“We will not be like King Syrnalorn or Etrius. The Gatekeeper’s menace will be cut off before it has any chance to take root here in our realm.”

Sif’s eyes shone with relief and her smile was unburdened by worry. “Pack only your essentials. The Allfather is already in the Observatory awaiting to brief you.”

Energised by his newfound conviction, Thor and Sif rode hard on their mounts out of the capital and along the renewed crystal bridge. They left their sweating horses by the mouth of dome and swept inside the magnificent ornate gold and chrome chamber.

Odin smiled, buoyed by the determination Thor exuded in each step and grasped his son on the shoulder in greeting. Thor’s eyes narrowed when they fell on his father’s face, seeing for the first time an exhausted old man ready to pass the baton of command onto his most effective and trusted soldier who had finally arrived on the battlefield. Jarl Farnarr, the spymaster, and Heimdall were also with him.

“Why the rush, father?” Thor immediately asked. “Knowing who our opponent is, why not carefully prepare an elite force of warriors and mages and mount a campaign to bring this miserable cretin to justice?”
Jarl Farnarr answered for the king. “Time is not on our side, Prince Thor. King Etrius loses patience with the stalemate between his honour guards and the mine serfs and will soon resort to measures which will take more than two generations to repair if that is what it will take to secure his power and throne. King Syrnalorn has also recently been visited by the Gatekeeper himself.”

Thor blinked, suddenly at a loss for words. Sif recovered first and asked, “Do the Light Elves have the sorcerer in their custody?”

The spymaster’s look was one of immense pity that made Sif flush with shame and embarrassment. “My Lady Sif, the Gatekeeper has petrified Prime Minister Gamalian with a spell none in Alfheim has been able to undo and King Syrnalorn has developed an inexplicable fear of something called “McDonalds” such that he has not held court for more than two months.”

Thor turned on Asgard’s guardian. “And why did you not report this for two months?” he demanded.

“I did not see it, my prince,” Heimdall quietly admitted, unfocused eyes sweeping across the sea of stars beneath them as if searching for any trace of the elusive Gatekeeper. “He has power to hide him from my sight, and travels through the cracks and crevices of reality. We only guess his location is in Midgard from King Syrnalorn’s interrogation of captured rebels and some dark elves engaged in the black business of smuggling contraband.”

“All Thor could think of was those twenty six fathers and mothers burying their children who had died such utterly senseless deaths, suffering the same unbearable pain that he had endured for the past two years. No order short of caving in that wretch’s skull and splattering his brains all over the ground with Mjolnir was going to be acceptable.

“I would send Amora to provide you with magical support if only there was a chance her powers would not be sucked away from her by a sorcerer infinitely greater than she. The energies of the Bifrost cannot be masked, and every magically attuned being in Midgard will be aware of your arrival. Entering that realm alone is already a great risk. Do nothing else to draw the Gatekeeper’s attention to you, but ask your friends to covertly aid us in gathering as much information on this sorcerer as we can so we can better decide how to strike.”

“Understood,” he said thickly, then drew a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “I am ready.”

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If Wasp ever found out how they’d met, she’d never let him live it down and for the rest of his life, at every party or social function, somehow the story of how Steve Rogers made a friend of his local barista would crop up and he’d have to explain over and over again, ‘Yes, he just so happens to also be called James Barnes’.
To be fair, Steve had been no less immune to the shock.

It had been an uneventful autumn morning two months ago, and he was winding down from his morning run when he turned into the local café, a family owned business that had been set up shortly after the end of the second world war. Steve had developed a taste, a need, for a small miracle cup of pick-me-up each morning and the elderly owners, a married couple called Tom and Amy, always had one waiting for him at a generous discount given, you know, all his city-saving heroics.

Dr Foster’s friend, Darcy, was behind the counter arranging macaroons and mint hedgehog slices into neat stacks in the display when he entered, and she flashed him the broadest, slyest grin like the cat got the milk, the cream and all the goldfish. She had followed Dr Foster to New York, ostensibly to keep her company, but really to get in on all the action and perhaps get an invite to join SWORD, but she needed to find work in the meantime, so Steve asked Tom and Amy to offer this part-time job to Darcy until she found something a bit more permanent.

“There’s a new guy,” she whispered, mouthing the words in exaggeration. “He’s out the back, checking the stock. He is hot.”

Steve nodded without much enthusiasm and took a copy of the day’s paper from the counter to his usual table outside when Darcy audibly sucked in her breath and won a gold medal for eyebrow gymnastics.

Obligingly, Steve turned to the direction of the cashier leading to the storeroom out the back and was struck by proverbial thunder that sucker-punched him in the gut and crushed every molecule of air out of his lungs.

He didn’t resent the younger man for being fit or good looking or that Darcy Lewis was in the late stages of devolving into a swooning teenage girl as the new guy asked her how many bacon and egg sandwiches he should preheat for the morning rush. Steve was beholden by striking cobalt blue eyes of unnerving familiarity and a boyish grin that he could just imagine would widen with brashness.

As if his someone was pulling his strings like a puppet and had overridden his own thoughts, Steve headed straight to the counter and awkwardly stuck out his hands between them. “Nice to meet you, I’m Steve,” he said in a rush before the pair staring at him managed to register their surprise.

Slightly bewildered at first, the younger man placed a tentative hand in his own but the grip was firm. “James.”

“I’m Darcy’s friend,” Steve then rambled on, as if being Darcy’s friend meant that he now had a connection with James.

“Tom mentioned you before he hopped into his campervan and took off with Amy for their cross-country tour. First customer of the day. Always. I should make up your usual order.”

James tried to retract his hand, and for one insane moment, Steve seriously contemplated not letting go. The moment passed, he released his grip, and there were awkward smiles all around.

But then Darcy punched James in the arm and her mouth was open in astonishment. “No way, pal! Your surname is Barnes! You’re James Barnes and that’s Captain America!”

The blood drained from Steve’s face and James ducked his head down, hiding behind deep brown bangs, privately mortified by the revelation, before an icon and legend such as Steve Rogers of all
people. He sighed, long and suffering, and gave an explanation as if he had said it many times in the past. “My grandpa was a marine during the war and took part in the Normandy landings. Says he wouldn’t have made it back if it wasn’t for Captain America, so when mum just so happened to marry a Barnes, he insisted I be called James. I’m pretty sure if mum married a Rogers, I’d be called Steve.”

Darcy squealed in laughter and slapped James on the back as if they were long-time buddies already while James bobbed his head apologetically in Steve’s direction before hiding behind the coffee machine to grind up the beans and boil the water.

When James later came over to his table to serve him coffee and complimentary muffin, the backs of their fingers inadvertently brushed against each other, setting off sparks in Steve’s vision and making his mouth run dry. He guessed that James must have had a similar reaction because there was another charged silence before James found an excuse to help Darcy out with the growing number of customers filtering in through the doors.

It took a whole week before Steve worked up the courage to enquire about the prosthetic left arm and found out that James was a recently discharged marine who had done one tour of Afghanistan and two tours of Iraq before he got permanently taken out of action by an IED and lost his arm.

It took another week before Steve managed to ask James what time his shift ended and whether he wanted to go grab a hotdog together or something, provided some evil, deranged or fringe lunatic group didn’t have plans to blow up half of New York for some front-page tabloid spread and attention.

Two months later, they were good friends and jogging buddies, and Steve was more than a little miffed that the younger man had no trouble keeping up with his pace.

“Don’t think I’m going to give up and let myself go because of my left arm,” James smirked as he began to overtake Steve on the final lap in the park. “Come on, old man, keep up.”

Steve gave him an ‘oh really’ quirk of the eyebrow and surged ahead with a burst of speed, but James was right there by his side again, refusing to be shaken off, like he had something to prove.

*Aint going to get rid of me that easily, Cap.*

His breath hitched in his throat and he almost tripped on his own feet, stumbling forward without his usual grace. James slowed and his good right hand settled on his shoulder, filling Steve with a warmth that he wished he could forever cling onto.

He was about to shake off the voices from the past when a distressed yell and a succession of yips and barks made the pair stand to attention.

“That way!” James ran off towards the copse of maples and Steve was immediately right behind him.

It was a group of six men of your average gangsta breed stomping and kicking another man down on the dirt path while the fluffiest white dog Steve had ever laid his eyes anxiously circled the mob and nipped at an exposed ankle where he could or otherwise barked at the men to leave his owner alone.

James was already in the thick of things, his military training no less dulled by his prosthetic arm, and Steve laid into the four of the men and quickly dished out good old fashioned street justice.

“Barnes? Gods, Barnes, is that you?”
“Mr Williams, what happened?”

“You know this guy, James?”

“Yeah,” James replied, heaving the beaten man up onto unstable legs while Steve took a firm of the dog’s collar to bring the animal to heel before it mauled the thugs to death while they were out cold. “I do a bit of dog walking and house keeping for him for the extra cash. Mr Williams, are you all right?”

There was a nasty cut to the side of the forehead that was gushing blood and plastered long strands of black hair to the side of his face, a face which might have once been described as handsome by the ladies was now marred by dark bruises and swelling. He was in a bad shape, and his dog yipped again and strained against Steve’s hold on its collar.

Lachlan squinted through his one good eye and threw his arm around James’ shoulder for support. He clearly could not walk on his own.

“Thank god you were around, Barnes. These guys just came out of nowhere and started having a go at me. Don’t muggers usually demand you have over your stuff first before they beat your living daylights out?”

“Who knows, Mr Williams. We need to get you patched up.”

“Ow…” Lachlan complained, limping as he tried to place weight on his left foot. His other free hand gingerly reached up and explored the egg-sized bump on his cheek and he grimaced. “It’s such a pity. Carol and I were going to be in an amateur ballroom dancing competition this afternoon. I was on my way to the Avenger’s Mansion to set her hair and makeup. Now I think my knee’s busted.”

“Sir, let’s get you to the Avenger’s Mansion. We have medical facilities there you could use.”

Lachlan nodded, grateful, then coughed and spat out a mouthful of blood. “That would be most appreciated.”

As Steve turned to lead the way, he missed the look shared between Lachlan and James that silently communicated between master and servant, all systems are go.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, chapter eight is done!
Apologies for such a long break in updates. I had an overseas holiday and came back to find twice my usual workload sitting on my desk waiting for me. It makes one query the benefits of holidays when you've got to work twice as hard to catch up afterwards *grumble grumble*

Anyway, with Thor 2 coming out on 31 October here in Australia, I'm even more revved up about keeping this fic going. Thor's on his way to earth and Loki still has to get rid of the elves and spring Boris out of prison while Bucky slowly works his way back into Steve's life and I'm going to have a fantastic time playing with it all.
To all the readers who have persisted with this fic, thanks so much for sticking with it, and please feel free to leave me a comment with your thoughts.

Lastly - I've got compulsory leave over the Christmas/New Year period. I will be spending those few days revising the earlier chapters and weeding out any residual typos and run-on sentences. Otherwise, let's get the show on the road!
Carol Danvers was beside herself when Captain America and the cute dog walker half carried Lachlan into the medical bay of the mansion. Lachlan apologised that they now couldn’t put on their sparkly outfits and shimmy their way across the ballroom, but the dance competition was the last thing on Danvers’ mind.

She washed the blood and dirt out of Lachlan’s head, disinfected the sound and stuck on strips of plaster when Jarvis determined that it didn’t require stitches. She then stepped back as the AI’s laser light shows lit up, scanned Lachlan’s body, and to her relief, declared there was nothing seriously broken or ruptured.

“Minor concussion, three fractured ribs and massive bruising, huh,” Lachlan wheezed as he was helped off the sick bay table and hobbled his way to the sofa in the lounge room when blankets and a pillow were set up. “That’s some good news for the day.”

“Rogers, you’d better have taught those goons a good lesson,” Carol growled, implying that if Steve didn’t do a thorough job, she’d go out right now, hunt those brutes down and do things to them which would breach several international conventions. Lachlan audibly winced when the ice compress she held to his swollen cheek was threatening to create a new bruise.

“I’m sure they’ll think twice before mugging anyone again,” Steve said with resignation, shrugging as he caught James looking at him and the two of them grinned as they shared a private joke.

“I second that,” James said with all the seriousness he could muster without breaking down into a fit of laughter. “It’s not every day that your average gang-banger gets personally rabbit-punched, right hooked, karate chopped and judo-thrown by Captain America – ”

“– or a former marine,” Steve added. His expression then turned thoughtful. “Say, James, is your arm ok? I saw you giving it a good go back there. Are you sure the prosthetics can handle that kind of pressure?”

Carol blinked, and it took several seconds before the other shoe dropped and she blurted out, “You’re called James Barnes?”

Steve and James rolled their eyes at each other in a ‘here we go again’ and James gave his obligatory, well rehearsed response that had Carol doubled over laughing.

“Well kid, you better go down to the medi-bay, have Jarvis take a proper look at it and make sure everything’s still in their sockets,” Carol suggested after wiping away a tear. “Imagine that, Lachie, seventy years later, and Captain America is friends with a James Barnes again.”

The two men shook their heads and retreated back downstairs, but not before Lachlan caught Steve settling what he thought was a more-than-comradely arm over the Winter’ Soldier’s shoulder and drawing the brunette closer until their hips were brushing against each other.

He filed that little piece of information away to leverage upon on a rainy day and leaned back into the comfort of the fluffed up pillows. Carol drew the blankets up to his chin and stroked his head, hooking stray strands of long hair behind his ears, and then plugged a random rom-com into the
DVD player.

“Carol, would it be ok if RiRi wandered about the mansion by herself? I’m not so sure she’s a fan of Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts.”

Bless her cotton socks, the toughest Avenger patted Fenrir on the head and shoed him off and never noticed that his collar was adorned by an extra, shiny bauble the size of a golf ball.

~*~*~*~*~

It was another dull, uneventful day for Ceroden at the Avenger’s Mansion where Sadriel was still trespassing between the boundaries of wakefulness and sleep and her bitch of a sister who perfectly ignored his existence and spent her days doting on her mortal lover.

**Arrogant, stuck-up royalty**, he thought darkly, and wondered whether Sadriel had entertained the same revulsions as she surrendered her body to him to fulfil her part of the bargain. In Midgardian terms, Ceroden thought they had ‘chemistry’, backed up by the fact that before they snuck (very badly) into the Avenger’s Mansion, they had embraced in night after night of passion.

He wouldn’t call sex love, but at the same time, for a dark elf like him with no permanent realm to call home and struggling to live on the fringes of society without falling off the grid into the wilderness, it had felt like an eternity since he had another willing body to warm him in the dead hours of the night, not to mention a precious creature as soft and warm as an Alfheim princess. If Malvavan found out, he’d jeer him as one lucky bastard, or as the Midgardians would say, “punching above his weight”.

“Seriously? Do dark elves really spend all day thinking about their dicks and their next lay? You’re emitting a mushroom cloud of pheromones that I’m surprised you haven’t got every single bitch in a ten block radius wanting to lift their tails up for you.”

Ceroden jumped, startled, and his heart skipped a beat as he caught a flash of deadly crimson eyes. The Gatekeeper’s wolf, disguised as a hound! And it had somehow managed to worm its way into the heavily fortified mansion and prance around in a disguise of fluffy white fur without triggering a single blip on the disembodied guardian’s radar.

His eyes darted around, noting with some relief that the wolf had picked a blind spot from all the roving cameras. Still, he kept his voice down to a quiet hiss and one hand crept towards the daggers tucked in the back of his jeans.

“Don’t even bother,” the wolf said scornfully. “Mundane Midgardian weapons will not even penetrate my coat, let alone cause me any real damage. Now are you going to listen to me or do something stupid like tempt me to eat you?”

“What the hell do you want? I have upheld the oath and said nothing about your master.”

The wolf grunted. “Good. Because if you did, the Winter Soldier would have used you as target practice for his shiny new guns by now. Ok, listen carefully. See the healing stone on my collar?” The wolf tilted his head up, exposing the aquamarine jewel hidden amidst the mass of white hair. “Take it.”

Ceroden stared as if Fenrir had just asked him to stick his head between the great beast’s jaws. The wolf made an impatient noise and repeated his command, and the dark elf quickly snatched the gem away.

“Here’s what you’re going to do. If you follow my master’s commands, you, and your pretty light
elf, get to walk away from this mess alive. Otherwise, you may as well call SHIELD’s forensics team in now because it’s your brains they’ll be scooping from the ceiling and the walls.”

Ceroden shuddered and forced himself to pay attention. The Gatekeeper’s plan was audacious, required impeccable timing and utter commitment on his part. One moment’s hesitation, two steps out of line and the Gatekeeper will obliterate them rather than chance the Avengers gleaning any more information about him.

“Remember, do this right, and you go back to being a bottom feeding, gun running drow,” the wolf growled, making Ceroden silently fume at the use of that derogatory term, “or you kiss your life goodbye.”

“There is no need for threats,” Ceroden replied icily, marvelled by his own restraint. “You and I are professionals.”

The white Samoyed snorted, a haughty gesture that he had no difficulty pulling off in his ridiculously show-dog pedigree looking form. “Don’t talk to me about professionalism. You walked right into the Avengers Mansion because a pretty little light elf had you pussy whipped that you couldn’t even sniff stupid when the stench could’ve made my nose shrivel up and die. Be thankful my master will spare you and allow you to return to your life as you remember it and think twice before crossing my master again.”

To be rebuked by an animal, intelligent and sentient though it was, had to be the lowest point in Ceroden’s life. He may have spent his childhood wandering with his parents from one squalid refugee camp to another, scrounging for scraps on the outskirts of bright, civilised cities that discriminated and rejected the dark elves, but he had managed to carve out an existence operating as one of Malvavan’s lieutenants. Who else but the Gatekeeper and dark elves could tread the insubstantial tracks of the shadow paths which meandered and skirted around the farthestmost edges of the realms? Who else but the dark elves could smuggle in Midgardian goods and weaponry that so many of the dwarves and dandelion munchers in Alfheim desperately depended on?

He burst into Sadriel’s room, slamming open the door and startled Arrelona out of her chair. She clutched at her sister’s blankets with hands in fright. Gareth hastily put himself between the pair.

Ceroden ignored their defensive attitude and veered straight to the corner of the room, reached up and ripped out the wires to the CCTV cameras. No doubt the bodiless guardian’s alarms would have been immediately triggered by the deliberate sabotage, but the Gatekeeper had left only a very small window of opportunity

“Out of the way, human,” Ceroden then snarled, sweeping the human aside and shoved the elf princess into her husband’s arms with not much courtesy. He caressed the sleeping Sadriel’s cheek and placed a chaste kiss to her forehead before producing the healing stone from his pocket and placing it on her breast directly above her heart.

“Don’t you violate my sister!” Arrelona’s demanded, making Ceroden wince as the shrill sound scraped against his eardrums like fingernails across chalkboard. He felt like telling her all the hot, sweaty and dirty things he had been doing with Sadriel all for the satisfaction of watching the princess come apart in a ball of apoplectic rage of biblical proportions. For the sake of his and Sadriel’s survival, he bit his tongue, returned to focus on the task at hand, and muttered the activation words that the wolf had taught him.

The orb burned with life and energy and encased Sadriel in a web of light. The pulsing rays stung Ceroden’s eyes, forcing him to turn away as the song of magic filled the small room in the medical unit, bringing a piece of that ageless immortality from a land far, far away to the sterile, clinical
As the light diminished, absorbed into Sadriel’s body, she finally began to stir.

“Lo…Lona?” Sadriel mumbled, her first words in weeks as her delighted sister kissed her hands and beamed at her through tear-stained cheeks.

“Oh, thank Mythal for her blessings and protection,” Arrelona exclaimed. “You are finally back with us.”

“I…feel strange,” Sadriel sighed, blinking hard to dispel the fog in her vision. “How long…?”

“Never mind, Sadie. I’m so glad you’re all right.”

“Save the reunion for later!” Ceroden harshly interrupted, finding himself unexpectedly irritated that he wasn’t the first person Sadriel saw when she awoke. This isn’t some fucking fairy tale and there is no bone in your body resembling Prince Charming, his survival instincts howled at him. Shaking his head to clear it, he strode purposefully to the bed, hauled Sadriel into a sitting position and ran rudimentary tests to check her level of awareness.

“Can you stand? I need you to be able to walk,” he said tentatively, loathe to bring himself to do any harm to Sadriel. “We need to run.”

Sadriel stared at him, expression blank and confused while Arrelona’s face was dark and contorted with rage, but given that he had just magically revived her sister from her the dreadful realms of a minimally conscious state, reined in her temper and shut up for the time being.

Off in the distance, there was a muffled ‘boom’ like the first parting shots of a cannon in the prelude to war. The building shivered and fine grains of plaster fell from the ceiling.

“Save the questions for later,” Ceroden said, noticing the confused, ashen looks on Arrelona and Gareth’s face. “That’s our cue to move. Help Sadriel get up or we will all end up dying here.”

~*~*~*~*~

Bucky and Steve were helping themselves to the best of the ingredients stocked to the brim in the pantry, thinking to try their hands at whipping up a gourmet breakfast of African eggs and smoked salmon on toast on the side when Jarvis’ alarms went berserk and the kitchen was flooded by blinking red lights.

“Intruder alert! Intruder alert!”

Something akin to fear clenched ghastly cold invisible hands around Bucky’s heart. Not fear for himself or his secret identity, but the sick realisation that Steve was wearing nothing but t-shirt and slacks, flimsy fabric that would offer no protection against whatever it was that was brave enough to launch an assault on the Avengers Mansion.

There was no further time to worry as a floating, pulpy mass of what Bucky could only describe as yellow playdough filled up the doors leading into the kitchen, and squinty, demented eyes filled with insatiable hunger peered from the bulging folds.

“Doughboy!” Steve exclaimed in recognition, moving around the kitchen counter to put himself in front of Bucky. “It’s Zola and he’s probably hooked up with Hydra. James, I want you out of the mansion.”
Bucky scowled. “And leave you behind? That’s not the marine way,” and it certainly isn’t my way, he added silently. “Sempre fi, Captain. We’re either in this together or we’re not!”

Steve spun around, incredulous. He opened his mouth as if to argue, but Bucky pushed him aside as Doughboy lashed out at them with one elongated and sinuous arm that ended with a sharp sickle blade on the end which buried itself into the ground and ripped up tiles and concrete. Captain America rolled over the kitchen counter table, landed gracefully on his feet and simultaneously lifted up a stook to haul at the bioform, hoping to distract its attention away from Bucky.

Bucky watched in dismay as the stool, thrown with Steve’s superhuman strength, did nothing but sink into the rolling yellow mass. A hideous grin split open, but Bucky was the hardened Winter Soldier. For the past four decades, at the behest of the Boss, he had dealt with the alien and sometimes the supernatural, and he never flinched.

He tossed a bottle of cooking oil with deadly accuracy above Doughboy’s head, and those pudgy eyes dumbly rolled up and stared as the oil was dumped all over it. It might have then caught sight of a small orange glow of a light matchstick flicked towards it, but as with all large organisms, it compromised agility for brute strength.

There was an inhuman shriek as Doughboy lit up like a ball of grease, feeding frenzied crimson flames and billowing toxic black smoke. Steve grabbed Bucky by the good hand, led him out the kitchen, ducking under the noxious fumes and heat as they went, and raced up the stairs back towards the lounge room.

“That thing will recover in a minute or so. We need a plan.”

“You need your suit and get your shield,” Bucky replied, also wishing he was in his usual body armour and leathers. Better still, if he had his set of enchanted combat knives and rifle, he could take down a whole army of Doughboys by himself and laugh as he was doing it.

They skidded to a halt when they reached the top of the stairs. It was pandemonium. Streaks of green and vermillion beams of laser sizzled through the air, stabbing through furniture and splashing dark scorch marks on the walls. The Hydra foot soldiers appeared to be deploying human wave tactics, believing in strength in numbers, and they held Ms Marvel at bay with the onslaught of their attacks, forcing her to a standstill in the middle of the lounge room. She was swathed in layer upon layer of pure golden energy, gritting her teeth and determined to soak up the damage, and every now and then, when she wasn’t being stung on all fronts, she lobbed balls of power amongst the ranks of the enemy, a feral smirk on her face as she watched them blow to kingdom come.

Shivering in the corner of the room, close to the fireplace, was the Boss, still feigning fragility and weakness, while Fenrir bravely barked at anything that came too close.

“Take Williams and get out of here, James,” Steve ordered. “He’s definitely a civilian, and he will get caught in the cross fire the longer he stays trapped in here. I’m going to get my shield and help Ms Marvel.”

Bucky wanted to protest, but Steve had already taken off, stealthily hugging the wall until he cleared the lounge room. He hoped Captain America would make it to his equipment before he ran into more enemy combatants.

“All right, come on,” he sighed in resignation, and helped Boss to his feet before leading him away to somewhere safe and out of the range of Jarvis’ all seeing cameras.
They were a good three blocks from the Avengers mansion when Lachlan Williams ceased to hobble, straightened his back, and brushed his fingers against any residual patches of dried blood on his clothing, making the stains vanish. At his heel, Fenrir shook himself back into his sleek wolf form and grinned at the huge columns of smoke drifting up from the mansion.

“I thought you said no one was going to get hurt in this plan of yours,” Bucky said, a gleam of accusation in his worried eyes. Police cars with their sirens screamed past as they hurtled towards the outbreak followed by vans bearing the logo of various news stations.

Lachlan watched them dispassionately pass by, and cast Bucky a look of sheer indifference. “I take it you are now in a relationship with Captain America.”

“What relationship?” Bucky said, voice even, refusing to stammer even though his heart was suddenly pounding at a million miles an hour inside his chest.

Williams raised one perfectly plucked eyebrow, but then shrugged. “They’re your memories, and it’s your life, Barnes. Those are yours to enjoy. But my anonymity is important to me as well. How many have we silenced in all these years in order to retain the freedom that we have today?”

“I’m not here to argue philosophy with you. I’m going to head back and make sure Steve is all right.”

“All right?” Williams scoffed, fixing back his long black hair into an elaborate braid with practised ease. “Your Captain America is a supersoldier. Nothing short of a direct hit by a Dreadnought is going to put a dint in him.”

From the streets, the people who had stopped to watch the rising tides of battle take to the skies suddenly erupted in cheers as a red and gold figure streaked past them, blasting upbeat AC/DC tunes from the Iron Man suit’s speakers.

Iron Man shot up into the atmosphere in a series of spectacular spins as his suit deployed every available missile towards all the retreating Hydra jets, the pitiful remains of the invading forces.

As the missiles funnelled and zeroed in on the aircraft, Ms Marvel also darted into the sky, screaming, “No, Tony! No!”

“And that’s my cue to get going,” Williams said, narrowing his eyes at the firework of debris and mangled steel and machine parts fell out of the sky like so many dead birds. He and Fenrir shimmered out of existence, and Bucky elbowed his way past the crowds back to the mansion.

He found out from Steve later that the three elves and the human Gareth had attempted to escape during the chaos of the attack by commandeering one of Hydra’s jets which Tony shot out of the air.

~*~*~*~*~

The Gatekeeper was waiting for them in that very delicate place between the reality and limbo, dressed in full regalia of flowing black robes and ornate and arcane jewellery, face unreadable beneath the thick white makeup and stark black symbols trailing down the side of his face.

In laymen’s terms, Ceroden had been given a ticket to one of the outposts that the Gatekeeper had created over the centuries, temporary resting points in the long, dark and dangerous paths between the stars and galaxies. Ceroden was no scholar, never having had a chance to be properly schooled, but he understood from the lore and stories uttered by the elders that the dark elves originated from darkness at the beginning of the universe, and there were remnants of that darkness that refused to
fade into oblivion at the dawn of Light. These formed the hairline cracks and fissures in reality, creating a place that was there but was not there, and no sane being would travel these paths where the darkness was alive and oppressive, save for those who were birthed in the dark.

And so, it wasn’t a coincidence that the mighty modern network of smugglers consisted mainly of the dark elves.

Ceroden herded the elven princesses and the mortal towards the outpost, a small, flickering speck of pale blue in the distance, and exhaled a long sigh of relief as they stumbled into the clearing.

Arrelona was in shock from the planar shift while her husband was robbed of speech. Sadriel raised her pale face, damp with sweat, at the Gatekeeper, and tried to turn away, burying her face in Ceroden’s shoulder.

“Now that wasn’t quite so hard, was it?”

A spasm of anger rippled through his body, but Ceroden clamped his mouth shut, breathed in and out with exaggerated slowness, and mentally counted to ten in his head until whatever he was about to say wouldn’t end up with the Gatekeeper throwing him into the abyss of oblivion.

“As your servant said, it was all about the timing,” he said thinly, bowing low. The last time they met in the docks, the Gatekeeper adopted the veneer of an unassuming mortal. Now, he appeared in his true and awful form, as one of those ancient wizards from legend whose contests of magic tore entire realms apart.

A plain brown paper bag was tossed at Gareth’s feet, and one look from the crazed and half starved wolf had the mortal scrambling to pick it up and study the contents. Two New Zealand passports, a bank book, a title deed and completely re-written resumes.

“That’s your new identity and your last chance.” The Gatekeeper gestured, sharp and succinct, and aching bright lines slashed across the darkness, cutting out a section of unreality and leaving something more terrible and incomprehensible in its wake. A portal of the most sophisticated kind, created into existence simply because the Gatekeeper willed it to be so.

Gareth backed away, but Arrelona stood her ground and tightly held her husband’s hand as she dared to stare into those poisonous emerald eyes of the sorcerer before bowing low and deep. “You have our sincerest and deepest gratitude.”

The Gatekeeper goddamn floated to where the couple were standing and loomed over them, a monstrosity sculpted from nightmares born from the beginning of time. Sadriel fought to tear herself out of Ceroden’s hold to defend her sister, but he wrapped his arms tight around her and would not let her do something the equivalent to throwing herself in front of a charging bilgesnipe.

“I do not want your gratitude,” the Gatekeeper murmured, a soft, dead sound which chilled blood. “I want you to do as I told you one hundred and thirty years ago when I bought you to this realm. Do not rock the boat. Do not attract attention to yourselves. Do not divulge anything about me to any mortal of this realm. You appear to have offended these very simple rules, and it is only your connection to Syrnalorn which has allowed you to keep your pretty little head. Do I make myself very clear?”

Gareth did his best to placate the immortal being. “We are so sorry to have caused you this trouble, sir. You see, Lona, I mean we heard that her father was sending an assassin – ”

“The Elf King did no more than send another of his daughters on a mission from which there was
little hope of return. Princess Sadriel, I am surprised you were not smart enough to refuse this suicide run altogether.”

Sadriel shivered despite the warmth from the dark elf’s embrace. “I am the Captain of the Holly Scouts. I am loyal to my realm and I am duty bound to obey the orders of my King, whatever they may be.”

“Duty,” the Gatekeeper sneered, his insolent tone burning incensed spots of pink on Sadriel’s cheeks. “Duty is a convenient way for one to live their life without responsibility. Duty is the refuge for fools who would rather march into battle towards certain death than think for themselves. Loyalty is a glamorous euphemism for the chains and shackles that subjugate one to another’s will. Duty and loyalty are what your sister cast aside in order to discover her freedom.”

Ceroden stared, transfixed by the oratory of the Gatekeeper. His smooth words were uttered with such compelling reasonability that it incited a quiet outrage which made you want vehemently agree with everything he said. Appalled by how easily he was succumbing to the Gatekeeper’s influence, Ceroden forced his mind to clear and clutched onto his own raw memories and experiences, of childhood, of his turbulent youth, of his shady adulthood, otherwise his sense of self would be swept away and supplanted by the Gatekeeper’s own thoughts and ideology.

“It’s all your damn fault!” Sadriel cried, an uncharacteristic outburst from the quietly determined warrior he had come to know. Successfully freeing herself from Ceroden, she stole one of his daggers and pointed it at the Gatekeeper.

Words to call her back were stuck in his throat, and his body was locked up in fear. Even Arreloan froze, transfixed by Sadriel’s audacity.

“Everything bad that’s happening in Alfheim is your damn fault!” Sadriel screamed at the Gatekeeper, who calmly regarded her with such casual disdain that it made Ceroden want to duck his head in shame. “You feed poisonous lies to my people, turn them against their king, and place in their hands weapons which would bring ruin to my realm.” Tears cascaded down Sadriel’s cheeks, but her hand and the point of the dagger aimed at the Gatekeeper was steady. “I have seen so many of my sisters-in-arms die, torn apart by those dreadful Midgardian weapons until they are unrecognisable even to their mothers. You have not heard the wailing of parents burying their children. You have not seen the devastation your treacherous ideas have wrought!”

She recklessly lunged but slammed into an invisible barrier and was then flung back like a broken doll, back into Ceroden’s arms. The Gatekeeper silently glided across the darkness until he was towering over them, and a litany of useless apologies gushed past Ceroden’s lips as Sadriel quietly sobbed.

“What is happening in your realm, little elf, is the inevitable end point of your system of rule,” the Gatekeeper explained, patiently, kindly. “Kings were made to be toppled, dynasties replaced by one after the other, and civilizations rise and fall. And thus it is when you oppress someone long enough, even the most idiotic will eventually realise they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. What you are witnessing now are the death throes of your father’s rule, and perhaps the closing of an age, and the beginning of a new one.”

“There will be civil war,” Sadriel choked through her sobs, “And the blood of innocents will be on your hands.”

The Gatekeeper shook his head. “Even you must realise that a tree must shed its dry and withered leaves before new shoots will burst forth in spring. But I agree with you, Princess, in that it is a brutal, and highly inefficient cycle; that we must pay the cost of lives and suffering in order to
bring about change. Would you believe me, princess, if I told you that this may be the war to end
all wars?”

Sadriel spat at the Gatekeeper’s feet before burying her face into Ceroden’s shoulder and curling
into his protective arms.

“It’s such a shame, princess. I thought you would be unlike the others, the unquestioning mob. I
thought you would have the strength and will of your sister, to defy that which has been ordained,
and to commit your life to your will and not that of others. She is no more traitor to your realm than
you would be traitor to yourself.”

“Go away,” Sadriel said plaintively, a child, frightened and beaten.

“Unfortunately, I am here to stay, as will you, princess. You will not be returning to Alfheim any
time soon. Ceroden, Malvavan is ramping up the number of shipments to Alfheim. He needs a
liaison officer permanently attached to Oberon and Titania, and he has nominated you. Both of you
will be staying in Midgard for the foreseeable future.”

The Gatekeeper turned and swung his attention back to Gareth and Arrelona. “Go. Do not ever let
me hear from you again.”

Arrelona bade a tearful and heartbroken farewell to her sister before making the leap into the portal
with her husband. It was the last time Ceroden or Sadriel would ever see the couple again.

“Now then, let’s send you two off to the rebels.”

~*~*~*~*~

It might have been that constant, unrelenting heat, draining him of all his strength until he was
nothing but a shrivelled husk, lying prone on the slab of metal that passed for a bed inside his
prison cell. On better days, he could open his eyes and lift his head as his jailers passed him his
meal by pushing it through a slot two inches wide. Most of the time, he conserved what little
energy he had by sleeping and dreamed of a time long ago before he was called Boris Andropov.

The skies were dark. He hadn’t seen the moon and stars for more than three cycles, and all the
children in the village like him had somehow forgotten how to laugh, how to smile.

“Bolverk,” his sire called from the open doorway of their hut, gesturing for him to follow. “Come.
It’s time to go hunting.”

His dam raised an expectant brow, and grudgingly, he dragged himself away from his half-finished
ice carvings and fitted his hunting belt to his waist and donned on his furs.

It seemed ironic that, as a frost giant, he would have cause to grit his teeth and shiver against the
chill in the shrieking winds. He drew his furs tighter about him, and copied his sire, head down,
chin tucked firmly against his chest, body bowed forward as they confronted the storm head on.

It had snowed in what passed as the morning, and Bolverk grimaced, dragging his legs through
knee-deep snow as he tried to keep pace with his sire and the other members of the hunting party.

Everyone tried to protect what small, flickering hope they had in that life would somehow get
better, or they would find other ways to survive. But Bolverk, young as he was, grew up in a time
where hope was lost to Jotunheim and he had little experience beyond the dreary weight of
despair.
His great grand-sire had told him stories by the hearth of a great and epic battle between two realms, or pink-skinned, warm-blooded barbarians encroaching upon the pure snowfields of fair Jotunheim, plundering as they slaughtered and razed whole villages and townships to the ground in the unquenchable greed and thirst for violence. His great grand-sire fought in the Jotun army, and they did what they could against the invader but found themselves increasingly pushed back towards the capital.

In his great grand-sire’s day, Utgard, the capital of the realm, was a city of beauty, with towering ice spires adorning the roof of the great palace, temples carved into a mountain and a monumental plinth reaching up towards the heavens as it housed the heart of the realm.

The spires were pulled down and smashed, the great palace looted and burned, the temples blasted apart and the plinth blasted into nothing but smithereens. However, nothing could compare to the devastation of losing the heart of the realm to the invading hordes.

Bolverk was born into a realm in its twilight days. The skies were always dark and he had never seen the spread of constellations or the glitter of starlight light up the night like gems. Before he perished from starvation, his great grand-sire spoke wistfully of the three moons that orbited the planet, and the tradition of celebrating the solstice once every ten years when the moons would align and wash over the lands with a magical silver light that the snow fairies would dance to all night.

“I’m sorry we lost the war,” his great grand-sire said on his deathbed as he stroked the stumps protruding from Bolverk’s forehead. “In my youth, Jotunheim was a fair realm as any. There was plenty of game, the ice was clear, the snow was crisp and the wind was soothing. We were a proud and contented people, and now we have been bought so low. I’m so sorry…”

Bolverk didn’t blame his great grand-sire. He didn’t blame the warm-blooded invaders either. He was just a young, scrawny frost giant, not yet declared independent, and he was simply preoccupied with when he was next going to eat, and whether they would live to see the next cycle.

He no longer felt the bitter disappointment when they returned to the village empty handed. The lakes were frozen solid, and whatever was able to dwell in the cold, bitter depths was beyond the reach of any of their abilities or tools. The mountains had become treacherous places to climb, and any remaining roving packs of hund were feral as they were lethal, driven into savagery by the brutal, merciless turn of the climes.

It was late in the night and he was helping his sire with the finishing touches on repairs to the roof beams to ensure the ceiling did not collapse under the constant battering of gale force winds when there came a knock on the door. Visitors at that time of night were unusual, and his sire hefted his hunting knife in his dominant hand and eased the front door back by just an inch.

There was a low murmur from outside, a request for shelter. Though suspicious, his sire allowed the stranger to enter, as in these poor and desperate times, one didn’t refuse aid to another.

Bolverk caught himself staring. The stranger had a rare mass of black hair and long curved horns protruding from his temple like the extinct hjort who would butt heads and lock horns in a violent clash of supremacy during mating season. What struck Bolverk as odd was that the stranger was no taller than he, yet clearly he carried himself with the airs of the adult and independent. Trailing behind him and making a beeline straight for the dying hearth was a dire warg, an animal bred for royalty.

The stranger removed his cowl and cloak, dusted off the hoarfrost and draped it casually across the back of his sire’s armchair. “Yours is the first populated village I have come across in my
travels for the past six cycles. I would seek an audience with one of your village elders.”

His sire frowned. “There is another township approximately two weeks of travel by foot north of here. Did you not pass by them before you reached our village?

The short black-haired stranger shook his head. “That town appeared to have been abandoned for at least five years. Either its residents all perished, or they have moved in search of better lands, although it saddens me to say that their search will be a futile endeavour. There are precious few places left in Jotunheim capable of sustaining life.”

His sire swayed on his feet, overcome with hopelessness at news of the loss of another town, that the stranger had to help him into a chair. A cup of pure spring water appeared from nowhere in his hands, and he placed the rim of the cup to his sire’s lips.

“You, child, what is your name?”

Unprepared for the sudden address, Bolverk frankly gave it.

“And when was the last time you properly ate?”

He hesitated. They gnawed on some preserved fish for dinner that night, his dam and sire satisfying themselves on the bony head and fins, leaving the few lean shreds of meat for their two children. But it did little to supress the hunger, a long, constant ache that he had grown used to living with.

The stranger sighed, conjuring a full jug of spring water and a tray of thick slices of cured alg meat that instantly made his mouth water with desire.

“Eat your fill. There is nothing beyond your village other than barren lands bereft of life or sustenance. Sir, have you considered moving?”

“What’s the point?” his sire replied, his voice coarse and harsh with bitterness and regret. “As you have said, there are few habitable places left in this realm. We are doomed to a slow, painful and pointless death.”

“That need not be your only option,” the stranger said quietly, feeding a piece of the alg meat to his warg who hungrily tore it from his fingers, and then licked the fingers thoroughly clean afterwards. “The question is whether you are willing to adapt – for the survival of your family of course.”

Bolverk woke his dam and sister, and the whole family gratefully ate the rest of the meat and drank the fresh water as tears silently rolled down their cheeks.

“My name is Williams,” said the stranger with a small bow. “A shaman, known to some as the skepp mastare, and I am here to offer my services to you and your village.”

Bolverk stopped midchew. His great grand-sire had spoken of shamans healing the wounded in the great war, tampering with the weather and environment to wreak as much disturbance in the enemy ranks and formations as possible. There had been none since, all executed by the warm-blooded barbarians to deprive the jotuns of any chance of a resurgence.

“What ship do you steer?” he asked without thinking, interrupting a conversation between adults. His father glanced at him, annoyed by his lack of manners, but the shaman offered a soft smile.

“I set sail on the sea of stars and travel between realms.”
The stars! Bolverk would have leapt to his feet in excitement but for the restraining hand of his dam on his arm.

“I’m afraid I do not follow,” his sire said, hands tightly wrapped around the conjured cup. “Are you suggesting there are other planets in this realm which we may settle in?”

“Alas, all the planets of this realm are succumbing to the same, slow death. You may find some relief in the planets on the outer reaches of this realm, but eventually, you will meet the same fate and the same end. No, I am offering you, as I have offered the hundreds and thousands of others before you, passage to the realm of Midgard.”

“Are you mad? It was our invasion of that cursed realm which led us to this wretched state we are in. Midgard is under Asgard’s protection, and those Asgardian brutes will annihilate us the moment we step into that mortal realm!”

The Gatekeeper chuckled, an intentionally knowing sound, which captivated Bolverk’s attention as a starved hund eyes a fresh piece of bloody meat. “Not if the Asgardians cannot distinguish you from the mortals amongst whom you will seek refuge.” From within the folds of his finely embroidered clothing, the shaman withdrew four talismans dangling off simple black thread. They were the size of his baby sister’s palm and its design was a simple circle, but if he squinted in the dim candlelight and inspected the fine engravings on the silver, he was able to make out a sea serpent biting its own tail.

“These charms will give you the veneer of the denizens of Midgard, and also insulates you against the warmer temperatures on that realm. There are some places in Midgard with a climate similar to Jotunheim, but it only lasts for six or so cycles before the turn of the season wards off the winter chill and thaws the ice. Nevertheless, food is in abundance, and there is space for the Jotun to continue to thrive.”

In the morning, his sire discussed the shaman’s proposal with the rest of the village elders, and by midday, when the two suns managed to penetrate the near-permanent depressingly grey blanket of clouds, they all reconvened in the village square to negotiate terms with the shaman.

All the villagers had come to watch and listen, and to marvel at the shaman who was so much smaller in stature to them all, being no taller than Bolverk, yet commanded an aura which was suffused with powers beyond their limited imagination. It mattered little that he was a runt, that he had a head of unusual black hair or that his horns, rather than being short and stout like the average male, curved up long and proud. He was jotun, and he was something else altogether.

“We are a poor village. What can we offer a mighty shaman as you for passage to Midgard and the sorcery to allow us to live among the mortals?”

Williams smiled easily at them all, as if the effect of his stunted form in the presence of fully grown Jotun standing at three meters tall was negligible to him. “What do you reward a scholar?” he asked rhetorically in good humour and a carefree chuckle which Bolverk had nearly forgotten the sound of. “Why, information, of course. In exchange for my services, I ask only two things: one, that you abide by a simple set of rules whilst living on Midgard, and two, I should like to know your customs, your dialects and your histories. Jotunheim is a vast realm and the empire essentially comprises clans and tribes living separately and independently until they are welded as one in defence of the realm. Tell me everything. I wish to know everything.”

The shaman lived among them for two cycles, teaching them the rites and customs of the Midgardian mortals and allowing them to move about in their new form so as to effortlessly integrate with the indigenous peoples when they finally landed in Midgard. In return, Williams
spent each night dwelling from house to house, speaking to the families, listening to stories and asking a multitude of questions on family, hierarchy, rituals and customs.

Finally, on one still and quiet morning, all the jotuns gathered once again in the village square, everyone with their talismans slung around their necks and shivering in their now mortal forms, soft, pink skin, fair haired and pale eyed. A large golden ark descended from the skies, and with much awe, Bolverk nearly sprinted up the plank and boarded the ship, and when he first stepped onto Midgard and looked up at the clear night sky, he was moved to tears by the galaxies twinkling above him.

His mind was muddled, sluggish, and a new, harsher white light now stung his eyes. What’s this? The temperature against his skin was not that leaching heat, but something cooler, more refreshing and bearable. His chest rose and fell with ease as the invisible clamp against his ribcage seem to have all but disappeared.

“Boris…Hey, Boris…”

It sounded like his name was being called from afar, but when his eyes finally adjusted to the light and came into focus, he saw that he was now surrounded by unfamiliar faces, not his usual blank eyed robotic wardens, but human beings and…

Boris bolted upright even as his weary body, atrophying after weeks of disuse, screamed in pain against the sudden movement.

There wasn’t only humans in the room. The fiercely glowing auras of two Asgardians were here, and they were staring at him in grim determination.

Chapter End Notes

I went and saw Thor 2 today and came home trawling through Tumblr and other people's reaction, otherwise I would have had this chapter up hours ago!

In any event, Thor 2 has given me inspiration to try to set up a somewhat happier and decent ending for Thor and Loki than I first imagined, although how exactly I'm going to get there is the million dollar question.

I'm happy with the way Steve and Bucky are coming together and the future chapters will start to dwell heavily from Loki and Thor's point of view with Bucky/Steve thrown in the lot.

Thanks so much to all who have continued to stay on and read this fanfic and leave me feedback and comments. They are dearly appreciated as always.
Chapter 10

He could never admit it out loud without tarnishing his reputation as Asgard’s mightiest warrior, the crown prince of the Aesir, who had faced a legion of draugr alone in the fog riddled canyons of Niflheim two centuries ago, but Thor was absolutely petrified of spending time alone with the Lady Jane and was grateful for his official business with SHIELD and the Avengers. Her expression wilted and that youthful and exuberant playfulness that could light up any dark room died from her smile whenever an agent from SHIELD or SWORD approached him with further requests for conferences they insisted on calling “debriefings”.

He supposed if he had witnessed such despondency in Lady Jane while he was still in exile on Midgard, the sight would have wrecked his heart, driven him to self-loathing that he was the cause of such melancholy, and he would have moved sun and moon to inject happiness into his beloved again.

However, when one was impoverished of happiness, one has none to give. And it was the inescapable truth that his own heart and soul had been left numb and deadened by his own grief and private suffering that he was now incompetent in alleviating the troubles in others.

Sif frowned at him. “I believe that’s possibly the sixth time you have preferred the company of these men and women of SHIELD to the attentions of Lady Jane.”

“I…” – am no good for her was the truth, but as he recently learned, the truth was sometimes so incredibly difficult to utter, so unfathomably painful to bear. So instead, he learned to tell lies. “Not now, Sif. Not now. We are here on business.”

Sif wisely kept her peace and they maintained a companionable silence down the long corridors and down multiple levels to SHIELD’s dungeons. How long Sif’s silence would last, whether Sif would soon speak again of his active avoidance of Lady Jane, Thor could not tell, but the dread was already setting in uncomfortable coils in his stomach, a poisonous snake waiting for the most opportune moment to strike.

“But you truly believe that the mortals have captured a frost giant?” Sif ventured onto more neutral territory after a while. Thor’s hands relaxed at his side and a cold wave of nausea passed.

“I’m inclined to believe they have a mistaken mountain troll for a frost giant. Some trolls from Vanheim are a vivid hue of blue, are they not?”

“Verily so,” Sif nodded. “It would be a rare accomplishment indeed if these Avenger mortals had managed to incapacitate a frost giant. That would make them on par with the elite of Asgard.”

Thor shared Sif’s dubiosity. The son of Coul had introduced him to these ‘Avengers’, were a motley crew of individuals who didn’t seem to live up to the powerful title. The one introduced as a doctor Banner fizzled enough nervousness and insecurity that one felt as if walking on eggshells around him. The was also the man and woman, dressed in fitted black, both sombre, both carrying the same unwavering and penetrating gaze which suggested long hours and days submerged in shadows, tracking and stalking their prey, a pair of ruthless assassins. Lastly, there was the flamboyant man, son of Stark, who spoke so rapidly that his words tripped over each other vying to be heard and who was considered the unofficial leader of this band of Avengers. Apparently, he
was the strategos of the group, well to do, intelligent, and wielded influence over the leaders of the Midgardian tribes.

Thor had his doubts as to whether Stark truly did half the things Coul-son said he could.

“I do not trust this Stark,” Sif said, as if reading his thoughts. “He takes nothing seriously, fails to show you the respect you are due, and parades around in that ridiculously coloured metal suit.”

“I hear from Agent Coulson that his metal armour is his pride and joy. Perhaps we will see him in action, and our opinion of him might change. At the very least, he pursues the Gatekeeper as keenly as we do.”

Sif agreed. “I will credit him that much, insofar as he appreciates the threat that this Gatekeeper poses. His companions, apart from those two paid killers,” and she mentioned the two in savage, despising tones, for Sif has never had any love for those who flout the proper rules of combat, “appear weak and unreliable. If the combined efforts of King Etrius and Syrnalorn have failed to bring the Gatekeeper to account, what hope have this disparate group?”

They pushed open a set of steel double doors and immediately copped a blast of cold wind in the face which stung their skin and made them squint. A handsome young male agent with dark brown hair pulled back in a pony tail threw a smart salute at their arrival and asked them to follow him deeper into the guarded compound.

“The alien was transferred from Prison 42 two hours ago and is being roused,” the agent said, clearly reciting information he had memorised. “Under no circumstances are you to make any contact with the alien. Their touch – ”

“Burns, yes, we know,” Thor finished curtly, a touch insulted that a Midgarian should have the temerity to advise him of the dangers of frost giants. Sif sniffed audibly, probably also thinking that she had killed more frost giants in her life than this young man had even seen.

“Agents Romanov and Barton together with Director Fury will be monitoring the interrogation from the control room, Stark will be sitting in on the interrogation, as well as Dr Banner – astrophysics and planar travel are not his forte, but he’s back-up, in case the giant goes berserk on us again.”

“How is Dr Banner a ‘back up’?” Sif asked, baffled by the very suggestion.

The young agent smiled, an unexpectedly disarming expression that bought colour to Sif’s cheeks. “Let’s just say Dr Banner was the only person able to fight that giant to a stand-still last time. No offence, you guys are probably more than capable, but having extra help doesn’t hurt.”

The agent left his cryptic comments at that and opened the final set of doors leading into the cell where the two assassins and Dr Banner and Stark were standing a cautious distance away from a cot and calling out to the frost giant.

The jotun immediately bolted upright as soon as Thor made his presence known. He stared, aghast, at the miserable, enervated creature before him. He had none of the strength and intimidation of his kind, withered into an emaciated set of skin stretched taut over bone, the deep ocean colour of his skin dulled and diminished into a sickly slate grey.

He was moved to irrational fury and he shoved the humans aside to get closer to check for any other signs of brutality and torture.

*What’s this brother, your newfound love for frost giants?*
His hands shook visibly as he reached out, thinking to set the jotun at ease, but he hesitated as in those deadened crimson eyes was a spark of defiance.

“Is this how Midgard treats its prisoners?” he demanded, rounding on the Avengers, trying fervently to forget those last, bitter and razor sharp words of hate and spite he had exchanged with Loki before he fell.

Sif played peace-maker, pulled him back and spoke softly to him. “At ease. It’s only a frost giant, Thor,” she said in tentative reproach.

He recoiled from her, stung by her callous barbarity, because this prisoner could have been Loki, which meant it would have been forgivable to Sif to treat him in such an inhumane fashion, simply because he was a frost giant.

“Look, Goldilocks,” Stark began, mouth firing off as quickly to diffuse the growing tensions. “That guy is immune to gamma and radiation and can smash his way out of any conventional prison. The only thing which slowed him down was heat, and we’re turning the air-con back on, all right? A few good meals, and old Boris here will be as good as new.”

Thor grudgingly allowed himself to be placated as Agents Romanov and Barton cleared the room leaving four chairs for the rest of them. Stark happily seated himself right next to Sif, smiling suggestively, making Thor add ‘womaniser – on par with Fandral – to Stark’s list of traits, while Dr Banner preferred to pace at the back of the room, as far away from the prisoner as possible. So much for back up.

“Water,” Boris croaked. Thor wordlessly handed him a jug from the nearby table. His fingers briefly brushed against the back of the giant’s as the exchange occurred, and he sharply withdrew his hand as sparks of cold like an electric shock numbed his hand from the wrist down.

Sif brandished her dagger in alarm but Thor gestured that he was all right and rubbed his hand until sensation returned.

“So, they tell me your name is Boris Andropov,” he began, steadily meeting the flat gaze of those blood red eyes which ran up and down Sif’s form, tracked the family insignias carved into the epaulets on his shoulders before settling on Mjolnir hanging by his side. The eyes widened in recognition, and Boris sat up against the wall a little straighter.

“You are Thor the Thunderer, Prince of Asgard,” said Boris with a hint of astonishment in his voice.

“You have heard of me?” Thor asked, hoping his growing unease was not visible.

Boris cracked a smile, a vicious expression on a frost giant. “There is always chatter, gossip, in the realms, and it makes it way to Midgard.”

Thor slowly nodded, wondering which tales of his exploits had made its way to earth, and whether they were mostly the good ones or not. “Since you know about me, why don’t you let me know a little about yourself?”

The giant shrugged although his gaze always returned to Mjolnir and Sif’s weapons, cautious, calculating. “What do you want to know?”

“Let’s start with why are you here in Midgard?”

There was a long, incredulous stare which eventually morphed into something of a cynical glare.
“The legacy of your father.”

“Thunderboy’s dad sent you here?” Stark asked, eyebrows raised in Thor and Sif’s direction, not bothering to hide his suspicions, and Thor could already feel the mortal’s goodwill evaporating.

Boris laughed aloud, but there was no humour in the sound. “He may as well have. Our realm is slowly falling apart you see, its heart having been stolen by Odin the Butcher. I watched my great-grand sire and grand-dam die of starvation. There was no life left for us on Jotunheim, so we did the one thing we could to survive.”

“You mean you crashed our pad and decided to make yourselves at home without telling us?” Tony corrected, hoping to come across accusing but only revealing just how unprepared he had been to receive that answer. This was clearly beyond his expectations. From the information SHIELD had shared with Thor, the Midgardians’ understanding thus far was that the Gatekeeper smuggled exotic alien beasts into Midgard to sell for profit, and otherwise provided passage and temporary haven to the rebel elves and dwarves or “VIPs” like the elven princess Arrelona. It was beyond their wildest dreams that Midgard could be used as a refuge, least of all for jotuns, their would-be conquerors turned asylum-seekers.

“How many of you came to Midgard to escape the deteriorating conditions of your realm?” Sif asked warily.

“In total? I don’t know. From my village, there were eighty nine of us.”

Tony boxed out at the space in front of his as if defending himself against an invisible opponent, or in this case, the intangible but hard-hitting truth that had just delivered a knock-out uppercut to his chin. “Christ in a cream cheese sauce, we have eighty nine frost giants roaming around in cognito on earth?”

“That’s only eight nine from my village,” Boris unkindly pointed out with a savage smirk. “Ours was not the only village to make the decision to quit our planet. The skepp mastare, or in your tongue, the Ship Master, has helped countless other townships and villages over the years make their way to Midgard.”

Stark’s stare was unwavering but his body otherwise quivered with overwhelming, overflowing curiosity and excitement prevailing over a normal and more acceptable reaction, such as fear or anger. “Hawkeye, Widow, Fury, are you all getting all of this? We could have hundreds, maybe thousands of frost giants disguised as humans all over earth at this moment. Are they all Russians? I knew it! No offence, Widow, but I always thought there was something wrong with the Russians, them being a bunch of hard, grim, depressed fuckers who drink too much vodka and all. I mean, who in their right minds would want to live in places that come down to minus thirty degrees in winter? It’s coz your balls don’t freeze in those temperatures, right? Your balls are probably perfectly fine. You probably wear shorts and go skinny dipping in the lake when it’s minus thirty degrees because your balls are immune to the cold and – ”

“Tony, you need to stop talking about this giant’s balls,” Dr Banner quietly urged, forcing Stark back into his seat.

“Bruce, you’re not appreciating the enormity of what Boris is telling us,” Stark replied, trying to squirm out of Bruce’s iron grip. “This is totally Men in Black territory. Hey, Fury!” Stark twisted his neck at a severely dangerous angle to look up into the surveillance cameras. “Tell me there is an MIB, like they’re another department of SHIELD or the World Security Council, and that you’ve always known aliens were living among us.”
“Even if there was another secret division, I’m pretty sure Fury isn’t going to tell you,” Bruce sighed. “He’s usually a bit more behaved than this,” he said apologetically to both Boris and the Asgardians, in a resigned matter suggesting routine. “Please, just ignore his rants and continue and pretend we’re not here.”

“Is that mortal correct?” Thor asked. “Are there possibly thousands of the jotnar living in Midgard?”

Boris shrugged. “You figure it out. If the Ship Master finds, on average, two villages of approximately eighty frost giants, each year and both villages accept his offer of a passage to Midgard, how many of us do you think there are?”

Sif humphed and said in ridicule, “You cannot complete the equation unless you tell us how many years the Ship Master has been operating.”

There was another brief pause, before a sly and vicious smile stretched wide on Boris’ face as if he knew he was about to say something which would deeply upset them all and he would very much enjoy their upset. Thor swallowed hard and found is hand subconsciously crawling towards Mjolnir’s hilt. What was it with Truth and its ability to cut through the comfortable world he had created and the accompanying set of beliefs necessary to sustain it?

“I came to Midgard as a youngling more than four hundred years ago, and Ymir knows how many years, if not decades or centuries, the Ship Master has already been at work before he came across our village.”

Tony Stark then gave a demonstration of his impressive intellect by immediately blurtling out, “There are over sixty four thousand frost giants pretending to be humans on earth?! Wow, that’s gotta be Code Red! No, Fury, I think you might need a new colour for a new category of threat, like we-are-catastrophically-screwed-on-so-many-levels-that-I’d-prefer-a-nuclear-holocaust type of threat. Poke a stick at Warmachine and watch him fart. We may potentially have a fifth column. In fact, we probably already have an alien fifth column here on earth. There are sixty four thousand giant smurfs who are all as strong and tough as the Hulk. That’s bigger than the armies of Guinea, Gabon and Malawi combined!”

Bruce smiled pleasantly at them all and to the cameras, a twinge embarrassed, grunting with effort at keeping Stark in his seat. “Like I said, just ignore us and continue on.”

“But the ramifications are great,” Sif said gravely, her complexion pale. She was just as affected by the answer as Stark, but to Thor’s pride, she had a warrior’s discipline to beat her panic back into its rightful place where the sun don’t shine. “Mass migration on such a large scale would have been, no, should have been seen by Heimdall. But it was not picked up by him and reported at all, and we all know who is able to travel between the realms unseen.”

And Thor’s stomach-rolling foreboding and suspicions were confirmed. “The Gatekeeper,” he ground out the name as if it was a terrible curse as he thought about all those parents burying their children who died from the tainted pixie dust. Boris slid further down his cot, putting more distance between himself and the prince of Asgard.

“We from Jotunheim know of him as the Ship Master, but I know he trades by other names, including Gatekeeper.”

Thor surged to his feet, Mjolnir in hand, the mighty blunt headed trained on Boris. The frost giant scrambled back until he was pressed up against a corner. “Speak!” Thor commanded, authority swirling about him like a cape he was born to wear and everyone stopped to listen. “For what
reason did the Gatekeeper bring you to Midgard. Will he ask you partake in another invasion against this realm?"

The tension in the air was an electricity wire stretched tight, and everyone tensed, waiting for the moment to snap and for all hell to break loose.

Except it all dissipated by a shaky, bewildered laugh from Boris. “The Ship Master is one of us, a jotun shaman. Why should he not want to help his own people survive?”

Thor’s eyes snapped wide in alarm as he felt his nerves being thoroughly tested. “The Gatekeeper is a frost giant?”

“Your father might think he has executed all of the jotnar shamans at the end of the great war and damned us to a slow death by the inches, but one of the shamans survived, and he lived so that he could cast a life line for the rest of us.” Boris broke off into a half-mad, half-defiant laugh. “Despite Odin’s blood thirst and cruelty or his theft of the heart of our realm, we will survive, we will live, and we will still be here long after he is dead.”

“My father did not damn your realm,” Thor said weakly, unsettled by the gaping lack of conviction in his own voice and small doubt beginning to gnaw away long, deep tunnels of doubt in the back of his mind. “What…what is this ‘heart of the realm’ that you constantly speak, that you accuse the Allfather of stealing?”

“Are you some witless dolt?” The insult was achingly familiar, harking back to golden days of youth and boyhood that Thor fought to swallow an unbidden sob. “Everyone knows that the Casket of Ancient Winters was the heart of our realm. It tempered and controlled our climes, it was the fulcrum by which equilibrium and harmony rests. By taking our Casket, the great Allfather knew my realm would eventually collapse on itself and take us down with it. But even if he obliterates Jotunheim from Yggdrasil, we will defy him and find other realms to live on.”

Thor’s shoulders slumped and his arms hung limp by his side, Mjolnir hitting the floor with a dull thud. He was at a loss of words because his father had displayed the Casket to him as a child in the weapons vault, only proclaiming it a trophy of Asgard’s glorious victory over Jotunheim. He was never told and never knew that the glamorous artefact sitting on a pedestal, gathering dust, was the falling of fate’s gavel to condemn another realm and the rest of their future generations to a long suffering demise. Stark’s mutterings offered a welcome distraction from these deeply disturbing revelations.

“I need to go back to my lab. I need to develop Phase 3 weapons of ultra-hyper-uber-awesome mass destruction and appalling overkill or some magic x-ray vision glasses that lets me see through these human disguises – ”

“So has the Gatekeeper any plans for an invasion or a take-over of Midgard?” Sif said loudly over Stark. “Surely he has not gone to all this effort for no reward.”

Boris sighed and shook his head as if they were thinking on parallel tracks, each not understanding the other. He held up three fingers. “When the Ship Master bought us to Midgard, he laid down three conditions: Do not rock the boat. Do not attract attention to yourselves. Do not divulge anything about him to the mortals of this realm. He intends for us to live in peace, undisturbed, on this realm by imposing these rules. In return, he sought knowledge. All he wanted from us was knowledge. Tell me everything. I want to know everything. That’s all I know. I haven’t seen the Ship Master since my family settled here.”

Thor was relieved by a further distraction when the young agent, who led them into the
interrogation room and had made Sif blush like a young maiden, re-entered, worry apparent by the tightness of the muscles around his eyes. “Um, guys, sorry to interrupt, but there’s been a security breach and protocol says we’ve got to take the prisoner back to 42 immediately.”

“Security breach?” Dr Banner cocked his head to a side anticipating flashing lights and alarms as was usual, but there was just the white fluorescent lights and the muted sound of their suppressed breaths. “Where?”

“Right here.”

The dark-haired agent rolled a spherical object the size of an apple onto the floor among them. Long years of wars and skirmishes had honed Thor’s sixth sense and survival instinct into his own personal guardian valkyrie and he reflexively grabbed Sif and pulled her to the ground.

There was a spectacular soundless explosion that rocked the entire room, deafened Thor and made his head spin. He saw blurred shapes, colours bleeding out of the edges and running into each other, but he made out the figure of Stark lying down with his back flat on the floor, and Dr Banner slumped against the far wall.

The agent moved towards the frost giant, injected something into the jotun and the temperature in the room rapidly began to plummet.

Thor grit his teeth, rolled off Sif and forced himself onto his feet into an automatic defensive crouch with his weapon drawn. He was already recovering from the effects of the stun weapon and he needed all his wits about him because he had a very nasty feeling that the agent had given Boris a rejuvenating serum of sorts, judging by the gooseflesh now prickling the naked skin of his arms reminded him of the fateful day he travelled to Jotunheim for retribution.

Then came a growl both beastlike and human. Thor tracked the origin of the sound to Dr Banner, who was sickly and green in the face.

“Oh shit,” the young agent swore. “He’s hulking out. Run!”

From the small of his back, the agent drew a gun and fired it point blank at Thor without warning or hesitation. Despite his bulk and his height, Thor was actually quite agile and he dodged the projectile, but it gave the agent and frost giant an opening in which to slip past, through the door and out into the corridors.

Ice bloomed and fountained wherever Boris touched with his hands or bare feet. Its purpose was made clear when Thor and Sif tried to give chase but ended up skidding and falling gracelessly on puddles of ice as if they were newly born calves just learning to walk on uncoordinated and trembling legs.

Another scream rent the air, forcing Sif to clap her hands over her ears as she wildly cast her gaze about her. “Who in the Nine Realms is making such a dreadful noise.”

“Hulk angry!” a voice insane with inexhaustible rage roared, the awful sound drawing nearer. “Hulk smash!”

And then the green troll was upon them before they realised what was happening. Huge and powerfully built, fuelled by a frenzied and unbridled anger, the vibration from its shout shattered all the ice that clung to the walls and floor. It charged past them, chasing after the dark-haired agent and frost giant with singular intent and Thor saw no reason not to follow.

Up ahead, the agent tossed a few more of those spherical objects over his shoulder, but it did little
to slow the berserking green troll as it simply shrugged aside the shockwaves.

With a sudden burst of speed and power, the green troll flung itself onto the frost giant, and the two great beings tackled each other in the narrow corridor, slamming each other into the walls, creating large dents and craters from their destructive fists, and they grappled and wrestled, gnashing their teeth at each other.

Sif surged ahead past the grunting giant forms. Her shield was up and sword drawn, and there was a hungry gleam of retaliation in her steely gaze, payback for the surprise attack in the dungeon cell moments earlier. The dark-haired agent coolly returned her challenging look, withdrew a knife strapped to each boot and struck, hard and fast in a whirlwind of blades.

Thor stepped back, giving the combatants space, and watched despairingly as the narrow halls restricted his movement and he could not wield Mjolnir without collapsing the levels of the building above them. The agent probably knew that and lured them into these paths to wherever he was going as a means of stifling Asgard’s greatest warrior.

Still, he clenched hard onto the hilt of the hammer and watched for even just one opportunity to hit out, but for the time being, he had to impotently wait on the sidelines as the human agent’s spinning and twirling blades battered against Sif’s shield, shredding it to pieces, and sliced through her chainmail, drawing blood from a dozen cuts and wounds. When Sif launched a counterstrike, he parried aside her sword blows with laughable ease, his knives notching her blade. They slammed into a corps-a-corps, Sif grunting under strain as the young male began to overpower her from above, and then, she stumbled back as her own blade was cut in half.

“Besda’s tits,” Sif swore breathlessly, eyes wide as she stared at the stump of metal that remained. “Those daggers are made of enchanted adamantine to be able to cut through my dwarven alloy steel. Where or how did he acquire such highly prized metals in Midgard?”

Arcs of electricity danced on Mjolnir’s head and the smell of ozone suffused the cramped corridor as Thor stalked towards the young man. “It is because he’s a servant of the Gatekeeper. Stay, villain! I would have words with thee!”

He was about to unleash a blast of lightening, but suddenly his vision was dominated by a green troll growing in size.

“Thor!” Sif cried out as he was sent crashing to the ground with a two tonne green monster on top of him. His back was stung by the cold, and as he scrabbled around for purchase and to lever himself back up, he found all the surfaces slippery with ice.

“They’re getting away!”

“Go follow! I will be with you shortly!”

Thor managed to extricate himself from the green troll an eternity of seconds later and he and the troll raced after Sif, soon catching up with her with the frost giant and human in this network of stairs and corridors.

Just as Thor thought they were gaining on the escapees, the agent dropped another sphere in his wake, and this time, it released the godawful shrieking of banshees which bombarded their ear drums. Thor and Sif doubled over in pain as the wretched noise made its way inside their heads and hammered against the insides of their skulls with unholy vengeance.

The troll stumbled about, like the way Volstagg would stagger his way out of the tavern in the wee
hours of the morning, inebriated and deliriously happy. In his disorientation, the troll stepped and crushed the device, and Thor supported himself against the wall as he fought to clear his mind and regain his centre.

“Tricks!” Sif snarled. “Come back and face me like a warrior, you coward!” she hollered, pushing herself off against the wall and resuming the chase with the green troll.

Thor vaguely recalled the layout of the building and was aware that they were heading up towards the roof. The Gatekeeper’s servant exhibited exceptional shooting skills, forging a path littered with dead and wounded SHIELD agents, while Boris persisted with his tactic of leaving a trail of ice in his wake, and twice the troll slipped and gave them a further lead of invaluable seconds.

By the time they caught up with the escapees on the roof, panting harshly after the desperate chase, it was empty save for the tell-tale residue of magic being worked.

Sif threw her broken sword down and cursed, then looked up at the clatter of footsteps spilling onto the open roof.

Agent Barton was sporting a black eye and favouring his right ribs while Agent Romanov avoided placing weight on her right leg and her left arm hung limp, dislocated, by her side.

“They escaped from right under our noses,” Sif fumed, kicking aside the remains of her sword in disgust. “One man; how in the Hel did we let one man steal a frost giant from right under our very noses?”

Agent Romanov and Barton performed a full inspection of the roof, carefully peering over the edges to ascertain whether the Gatekeeper’s servant and the jotun were dashing off under cover of the canopy of the surrounding forest instead. When the red-haired assassin was satisfied there were no signs of them on the ground, she dusted off her pants and looked Sif steadily in the eye. “Don’t beat yourself up over it. That man was Winter Soldier. We’re going need an army to stop him and bring him in. Barton, let’s summon the rest of the Avengers. We need to go back to square one.”

~*~*~*~*~

Lachlan whooped with joy as Fenrir raced across a field that was covered in pure white snow as far as the eye could see. Frigid, stiff winds whipped his hair back until he could feel the tugging sensation on the roots in his scalp. The arctic chill seeped past his skin, sank through muscle and into very marrow of his bones, and it felt like he was born anew and charged with energy ample to fly around the world twice over.

A lone wolf howled at the full moon in the distance, and Fenrir raised his great head, nose pointed at that giant luminescent pearl in the clear black skies, and returned the greeting with a long, haunting sound that seemed to echo forever into the night.

Riding Fenrir in his true dire warg form was a dream. He moved with lithe grace, his long strides light and swift, barely touching the ground, and he was smoother, more powerful and fluid and agile than anything the engineers at Bugatti or Rolls Royce could dream of.

Poor creature, cooped up in New York for the past six months, unable to stretch his legs and run to his heart’s content. Across the vast winter wastelands of Siberia, Fenrir found his freedom and he revelled in every liberating moment, leaping high into the sky before landing effortlessly, the great muscles in his legs absorbing the impact that to Lachlan, it felt like he was in a boat drifting with the flow of calm waves.
“Come on, Lailah,” he said to the little girl in his lap. “Stop being such a sour puss and smile for once!”

Laufey sniffed and crossed his arms. “You have imprisoned me in this meek, decaying body and now you insist on calling me by that ridiculous name. What occasion do I have to smile?”

“Well, do you want me to go around calling you Laufey so that everyone knows that the former king of Jotunheim is now some little dead girl?”

That elicited more grumblings, and Fenrir laughed breathlessly as he bounded across the steppes. “Where we’re going, you’re probably going to desperately wish we don’t have a slip of tongue and reveal your true identity.”

“Where are we going? You have been unusually quiet since this morning, and we have been riding now for the better part of the day and night.”

“Let poor Fen have a good run!” Lachlan exclaimed, fondly leaning down to pat the great beast on the side of the neck.

“If this was simply about letting the warg get some exercise, it doesn’t explain the trunk you were packing.”

“Observant, aren’t we. Should I be concerned that you might try to stab me when I’m asleep?”

Laufey scowled, and swatted aside fur that came up to just beneath his chin as he squirmed to position himself more comfortably. “If I can sneak past your warg, then yes, you should be afraid. Though I have to say, dire wargs are beasts of burden on Jotunheim, nothing more. That you have made yours a guardian and companion is most unnatural indeed.”

“You speak for yourself,” Fenrir snorted. “I carry Lachie-boy because I choose to carry him, not because I’m some dumb animal without no purpose in life other than to be ridden by others. So screw your mangy mutts on Jotunheim.”

“He can even take offence,” Laufey remarked in genuine marvel. “Son – ”

“Don’t call me that,” Lachlan stiffly reminded the man-child.

“Williams then,” Laufey sneered, “why waste your talents on frivolous endeavours such as bestowing the gift of speech to animals when you could be usefully deploying them on greater endeavours, such as reviving Jotunheim!”

“Because Jotunheim is beyond my skill. It has been without its heart for far too long and even if I were to return it now, it cannot undo the damage that has already been set in motion. I barely have enough power to wrest control my own destiny, let alone alter the course of fate for an entire realm.”

Laufey stared up at him disbelievingly through clouded eyes which long stopped seeing since the original soul of the body departed for the Beyond. “Is this humility I hear? Coming from the Silvertongue who mastered the art of hubris? Surely you jest, and if so, it is an unfunny one.”

Lachlan bit his tongue and refused to snap at the bait. Fenrir growled, low and deep in his throat, and anyone who treasured their lives and wished to see tomorrow’s sun would have been sensible enough to dig a hole, curl into a ball and wait for death on four legs to pass.

Silvertongue and Odinson were titles he hadn’t heard, hadn’t been addressed by for a good half
millennia, and Lachlan was glad for it. There was a time, a brief, fleeting three decades in Vanaheim, where he experienced the luxury of requiescence, where he learned of the peace that anonymity granted. It was his first tantalising taste of being free to be just himself, nobody’s son with no reputations to meet or expectations to live up to. This was then followed by fifteen hundred miserable years of lying awake in bed at night ruminating, wistfully dreaming of ‘what ifs’ or ‘I should have’ run away, blended into the faceless crowd and never returned to the golden prison of Asgard. Then he could have avoided one thousand five hundred years of self loathing and bitterness and never allowed the rot of jealousy and spite eat away at his soul.

“We are going to meet our realm-folk,” he announced, forcing a change in the subject and keeping his voice light and carefree. “Frost giants, storm giants, ice giants and mountain giants – all the jotnar who I have smuggled into this realm.”

“So you are the reason for our diminishing populations.”

Lachlan raised an eyebrow. “Hardly. The realm was doing a good enough job cannibalizing its own creations. I just got involved in real estate and became a travel agent of sorts. There, up ahead is our destination.”

Cradling Laufey in the crook of his arm, Lachlan slid off Fenrir’s back, set Laufey on the ground and dusted the frost off his clothing.

“Better readjust our appearance,” he muttered to himself and let his glamour slip, revealing his true form beneath. As he opened his crimson jotun eyes, the snow covered plains began to blossom in a cascade of a thousand ultra-violet shades of white, purple, blue and gray that transformed the entire landscape from desolate wind-swept fields to a glittering alien paradise.

He knocked twice on a rickety wooden door of a dilapidated hut and let himself in in a sweep and billowing of black velvet robes.

His grand entrance was ruined as he misjudged the height of the door, forgot to duck and ended up banging his curved horns against the top of the door frame.

Laufey didn’t even bother to stifle his chortle and smirked in amusement as Lachlan quickly closed the door behind him, pretending nothing had happened.

The smile on Laufey’s face gradually faltered as he took in his surroundings, astonished by the height of the ceilings that loomed far, far above as if they were in the heart of a mountain or deep down in the dwarven halls carved from marble and rock. And the place was teeming with frost giants, the old and the young, the former all gathered around tables laden with food and drink as they traded stories and gossip, and the younglings wrestled and grappled, butting heads and trying to outdo each other in escalating raucousness.

In a quieter area of the cavern, sectioned off by curtains of ice beads were frost giants reclining back on large slabs of polished stone, attended to by other jotnar of smaller-than-usual stature who checked heart-rate, body temperature and monitored the strength of life-signs coming from bloated stomachs.

“But outside was just a – ”

“Farm shed? Yes, it’s a gate of sorts. This, Lailah,” he waved a careless hand at his surrounds before planting his hands on his hips with a smile of self congratulation, “is one of the birthing houses that I established four centuries ago. The recently emigrated jotun discovered they couldn’t get the essential nutrients and minerals necessary for a healthy gestational period. So I thought to
build this place, where I would visit three or four times a year, replenish supplies shipped direct
from Jotunheim, and make sure dam and child were doing fine.”

“I…sweet Ymir,” Laufey stuttered. “I haven’t seen so many pregnant jotnar since the great war.”

“So everyone tells me,” Lachlan agreed. “I think us frost giants are in the throes of a baby boom,
but thanks for my foresight, we are equipped and trained to deal with it. Here, say hello to Misha,
one of my more talented students. He is the equivalent of your modern day midwife.”

A frost giant nearly twice Lachlan’s height had been attending to one of the pregnant giants but he
cought sight of the sorcerer and ambled over. He bowed low in greeting, petted Fenrir on the head
and sniffed curiously at Laufey.

“Dabbling in necromancy, Master Williams?” Misha grumbled, deliberately giving Laufey wide
berth in case death was contagious. “It is a bad omen for it to be among the living.”

“Nonsense, Misha. Don’t be a slave to superstition. All I have done is stick one soul to another’s
body. Ignore him if that makes you more comfortable. Now, how is everyone doing?”

“Varya has been faring poorly. Her mate, Boris, has been missing you see, and her mind is
constantly preoccupied by his absence – ”

Lachlan pinched the bridge of his nose and felt the twinges of a migraine settling in. “Oh yes,
Boris, that Boris. Trouble maker. Did you know he thought whacking people was a good way to
make a living?”

Misha bit his lips and averted his gaze and had the decency to look guilty. “Boris is good with his
hands you see…”

“Yes, and that means going into some trade, like being a carpenter or an electrician or a plumber,
or even a process worker on a conveyor line in a factory. Not some goddamn wetworker who has
run-ins with SHIELD!” Lachlan said impatiently. “Who on earth encouraged him to think being a
hit-man was a good idea? Where is his father? I think I shall have some words with him.”

The very heavily pregnant Varya waddled up to Lachlan, concern having etched deep lines in her
face. She fell to her knees so she could be at eye level with Lachlan. “Boris? You have news of
Boris?”

Lachlan tried hard to hold onto his anger, because he had only asked for everyone to abide by three
rules, rules which weren’t overly complicated. However, being cruel to a pregnant woman was
really no different to kicking puppies, and Lachlan happened to like puppies. “Boris got himself
cought by the humans. SHIELD agents to be exact. They’ve had him locked up for the past few
months, but he has information that the humans want, so he is still alive.”

Varya broke down into heart-wrenching sobs, whether it was of grief or joy, Lachlan couldn’t tell.
“He was let go after the factory closed down two years ago. They’re relocating all our
manufacturing jobs to China, curse those Vanirs. Boris just wanted to make sure the child and I
would be well-off. He’s been very careful.”

“Careful is not sticking your nose into Alfheim politics,” Lachlan retorted. “Gah, never mind. I
have sent my servant to pick him up. He should be with us shortly.”

Lachlan then did his rounds, checking the work of his students and proudly introduced to Laufey
the half dozen or so budding young shamans who were all less than five centuries old and who
Lachlan had helped their dams deliver. They reviewed the components and proportions of
additional herbs able to be sourced in Midgard and discussed suitable substitutes, natural or synthetic, in anticipation of the day that Jotunheim became too treacherous to venture into in order to harvest the necessary medicines.

The discussions took the better part of two hours, and then Lachlan neatly stepped away from the group as he felt his teleportation receiver tingling after its partner had been activated from halfway across the world.

There was an explosion of light and a muted explosion before two bodies were ungraciously dumped onto the cold stone floors.

Boris was sprawled across the stone, a dementedly happy grin on his face, and Winter Soldier was panting like he had just come out of a marathon as he ripped off his latex mask which clung to his face like a second skin.

Instantly, there was a swell of murmurrs and curious stares, and a cry of joy from a pregnant frost giant.

Winter Soldier screwed his face up in disgust as he saw Boris and his wife make out, then glared at Lachlan as he continued to suck in large mouthfuls of air, his whole body still shuddering from the after-effects of an adrenaline dump and the most daring escapade in the annals of SHIELD history.

“If I’m going to keep doing this sort of shit for you, boss, I demand danger money. Humans and disobedient dark elves, I can handle, but Xena and Conan the Barbarian and the Hulk? Do I look like I’m from Krypton?”

Lachlan kept smiling, but he felt the bottom of his stomach give way and he leaned ever so slightly against Fenrir’s supportive form when his worst fears were confirmed.

Thor was on earth, and he had allied himself with SHIELD and the Avengers. His past was finally catching up to him, waiting for a chance to clasp on the shackles and chains and then to drag him kicking and screaming all the way back to Asgard. Lachlan swallowed the lump in his throat but found his hands trembling by his side before he fisted them and let the scorching burn of rage take hold.

How dare his past haunt him so. How dare anyone attempt to derail him from the path that he had chosen for himself. Let them come. Let all who would try force him back into that ill-fitting and despicable life and role of Loki be met with total and utter annihilation.

“It’s not over yet,” he said to Bucky, and his voice was atypically faint and faraway. “It is time to implement Plan B.”

At that, Winter Soldier paled and Laufey looked on with great interest.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all those who have commented! I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and didn't find Thor too mopey.

The Thor I have in mind in this fic is still greatly troubled by his brother's death. It has been hinted in the earlier chapters that no one, apart from Thor and Odin, knows that
Loki let go. For Thor, figuring out, to some extent, why his brother let go, and how Loki preferred death to the future in store for him, is a guilt that is slowly killing Thor inside.

I am loving writing Loki and Bucky. For Loki, there is an element of self-pity insofar as he recognises what a wretched and miserable person he used to be. He's kind of like the kid who never fit in at school and got picked on all the time, but after leaving school, discovered what a big world it was, found others like him, and became determined to live as a better person. It is quite apparent that Loki's interest in Jotunheim and his endeavours to help the Jotuns migrate is partly an attempt to accept who/what he is, as well as to privately atone for his past deeds. I think Thor will find it difficult to convince Lachlan that he should be Loki again.

As for Bucky, I'm trying to still flesh out his character - jaded, cynical, smart-ass and reckless. It amused me greatly to write this chapter when I just had Bucky walk right up to Boris, grab him and run, even though Boris was under heavy guard.

I love this Marvel/Thorki community (and especially that it's active!) - so hopefully it will inspire me to continue to write and finish this fic.

Thanks again for all your review and comments. Most appreciated :o)
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Boss had reassured him, no, promised him, in his usual infuriating, puffed up and self important way, that all his memories had been patched up. He should have had full access to his memories from the time he could squawk ‘mama’ to the fateful day when the explosion ripped off his left arm and he fell into the merciless clutches of the Russians.

At first, Bucky felt no different. There was no blinding flash of realisation, no epiphany, and though every day he woke up holding his breath in anticipation that the horrible and persistent sense of freefall in the very core of his being would magically ground itself, nothing happened. To say he was disappointed may have been an understatement, if you asked the fist-sized holes that pock-marked his apartment walls.

But then, slowly, as if by stealth, certain feelings, and odd but highly specific pieces of knowledge became impressed upon him.

For example, he had never been blown away by food per se. He ate when he was hungry, and what he ate, he didn’t really care as long as he wasn’t sharing it with small white pulpy things that wriggled. Even if it tasted like cardboard, scraped down his throat like sandpaper or looked so unappetizing that even a starving, malnourished mutt preferred to continue to go hungry, it wouldn’t deter Bucky. He just thought he was an easy going, practical type of guy.

So when he was clearing out the fridge, wolfing down four-day old Chinese because that meant he didn’t need to hit the streets after spending the whole damn day on his feet playing shop with the excitable and inappropriately imaginative Darcy Lewis, his stomach suddenly rebelled, his tongue railed against the violation, died, and he rushed to the bathroom spitting and squeezing a tube a toothpaste into his mouth.

Thereafter, he craved only the best of the best.

It was to do with something in his distant childhood, begging for scraps, being deprived, which drove him to now seek only the finest. No more junk and take-away for Bucky, no more left-overs. He became a gourmand, an aficionado of fine dining.

And he had Steve to share it with. He picked up the local food guide, installed Urban Spoon onto his phone, and ate his way with Steve through downtown New York, sampling classic soul food, spicy curries, gourmet pizzas, finely sliced sashimi, dumplings by the dozen, and gorging themselves senseless on good-ol fashioned slab of medium-rare rib eye steaks.

Then they broke the bank, or rather, Steve realised his monthly pay check couldn’t keep up with Bucky’s expensive dining demands. One way to solve the problem was for Bucky to rob a bank, which Bucky figured couldn’t be that hard if he could liquidate Red Room assassins with nothing but dogged stalking and a sniper rifle fitted with the best scopes. However, Steve might find out and be upset and the rest of the Avengers might think their PR would be better served if their poster boy wasn’t hanging out with a felon whose capture and conviction was just a matter of time.

No, he couldn’t have that. Not when Steve was just about his strongest anchor to reality, a constant he could trust to reassure him that even if the sky turned pink and all the people he’d ever killed in his life returned as killer bunnies out for his blood, there was always someone he could count on.
He’d never had that in his life before, never felt what it meant to have a partner who had your back and slotted into your life with the interlocking perfection of a dovetail joint. It meant he had someone to share in his experiences, a friend to help him back onto his feet should he stumble, a soul-mate should he ever have to confront the everlasting dark.

Tentatively, they picked up at random Jamie Olivier, Gok Wan and Bill Grainger’s cook books and after setting fire to Steve’s range-hood and calling in the fire department two or three times, they begun to get into the swing of things and whipped up a frenzy each night in the kitchen, each being nothing short of a belly stretching three course meal. There wasn’t a fish Bucky couldn’t scale, gut and fillet in under two minutes, and Steve, to both their surprise, had an innate sense of timing and knew exactly when to take pan off the heat before meat became over-cooked. In the kitchen, they made a killer pair. Out on the field, they would probably invincible.

His thoughts continued to drift through the phases of abstract, introspection and subconsciousness. At one stage, a light flickered on, causing him to flinch, and he heard footsteps of one deliberately trying to move stealthily but failing, and a large hand brush aside hair matted to his forehead by sweat while sweet nothings were mumbled in a deep rumbling tenor.

It was dawn, with large streaks of blazing red and orange light piercing through the gaps in his curtains and dancing on his face when he finally roused.  The ceiling was unblemished white paint over plaster, there was a bladed fan lazily spinning overhead and the pillow his head rested on was too fluffy and not stiff like his memory foam.

Alarm seized him out of sleep and into painful alertness as he realised he was not in his own room, and the rest of his body screamed bloody murder at him for suddenly going into fifth gear in the space of one breath.

“Whoah! Chill, buddy, relax.”

Steve. The reassuring and comforting voice belonged to Steve. What on earth was happening?

“I think the fever has finally broken. How are you feeling?”

Fever? What fever? Bucky elected to remain silent as he rummaged through his muddled, sluggish mind, coaxing it to remember how exactly he ended here, flat on his back with Steve’s concerned face just inches from his own – not that he disliked the proximity.

His last moments of consciousness came to him in frustrating grabs and snatches. It was a Tuesday morning, the day after he had extracted Boris from SHIELD’s maximum security prison and ended up somewhere halfway in the middle of nowhere between the Urals and Vladivostok.

Boss had told him that Boris was a frost giant, and for Bucky, dealing with a frost giant was a first. Throughout his decades of service for the Boss, he had targeted, with extreme prejudice, dark elves who were becoming too cavalier in the way they did business and were at risk of exposing the Boss to the humans. Intervening in extended family disputes amongst Dwarves was also fast becoming a specialty for Bucky, as was disentangling love triangles amongst the wood elves. Bucky simply assumed that Boris was just a giant who was accustomed to living in the colder climes and didn’t think much more of it when he received Mission Impossible.

Someone should have told him that frost giants, unlike the elves and dwarves, were essentially primordial elemental beings who embodied the essence of winter, the chill that sank deeper than bone and threatened to permanently numb the spirit. Running alongside Boris was like being trapped in the epicentre of Fenrir’s sub-zero ice breath and feeling his muscles and organs shut down one by one while his survival instincts lashed out at him to outrun the Hulk. His left lung had
collapsed, his capillaries and veins were gradually crystallising and splintering inside him, and half his brain had started to freeze and making him see triple as he madly dashed up the building.

Miraculously, he and Boris made it to the roof where the teleport circle had been set up, and after a hair-raising roller coaster ride through some wormhole, Bucky landed in an enormous white, glittering ice cave, ten times the size of Syrnalorn’s throne room, which was teeming with giant blue smurfs and that black-haired zombie girl. It was bewildering enough already, to have so many strange blue aliens stare at him through unhuman glassy crimson eyes, and his body convulsed, felt physically ill, when Boris and some other giant started to make out just meters from him.

The day after, pretending that he was just a disabled marine vet readjusting to civilian life by working in a coffee shop, he served Steve his usual cup of black coffee with two slices of buttered toast. His muscles and joints were like those of a withered old man creaking with arthritis that morning, and he had as much motivation and energy as a koala high on eucalypt. Still, it surprised him when the world tilted sharply to one side for no reason and his sense of balance packed its bags, slammed the door shut and sped off to the never-never.

He hit the ground with a dull thud, not before knocking his head on the counter, and darkness overcame him as Lewis’ screams and Steve’s frantic calling of his name faded away.

So despite not catching the slightest whiff of a cold or even a sniffle in the past seventy or so years, Bucky was now down and out with the worst flu he believe had ever been inflicted on mankind.

His eyes rolled back to Steve and a weary, but playful grin cracked on his face. “I could be better. Thanks for taking the day off to look after me.” And when the realisation sunk in, that Steve was probably here all this time fussing over him, it suddenly sent a flush of warmth straight to his face. Bucky would be horrified if he was blushing.

Steve doubled over with a chuckle, his fingers affectionately combing through Bucky’s hair and scratching his scalp. “You’re kidding me, right? You’ve been out for almost three days!”

“I’ve missed Thai Wednesday and Afghan Thursday?” Bucky cried out in real outrage at the missed meals, then cringed as he fell into a coughing fit. He was helped into an upright position so that Steve could run his hands up and down his back.

Bucky stilled when he discovered that he wished Steve was running his hands over other parts of his body instead, and he swallowed, hard.

“Sore throat?” Steve asked. He turned away, almost drawing a protest from Bucky at the loss of the one-sided intimacy, but the panic was quelled when Steve turned back with a tall glass of water in one hand and half a squashed and abused lemon in the other. “Lemon and honey is the best remedy.” He then stirred vigorously before proffering the warm glass to Bucky. “Drink this, and see if you’re okay to see yourself into the bathroom for a shower. I’ve got to clean your sheets. They’re soaked in sweat.”

His throat was sore and parched, and he gulped down the sweetened water to the very last drop, wondering if Steve’s eyes were lingering over the way his tongue flicked out to collect the droplets near the rim. Steve then slid his arms under his shoulders to help him up onto his feet and Bucky found he was holding his breath and leaning into the contact, wishing, craving for more. It was not fair to have Steve pressed up against him but to put up the fabric from their shirts as barriers. There was a sudden, irrational and fierce compulsion to tear away Steve’s shirt and his own and throw Steve down on the bed, but Bucky would then be both a potential bank robber and sexual predator.

Steve caught him staring, and both of them stopped, an awkward silence binding them to
wordlessness. Bucky was all too keenly aware that Steve’s parted lips were just centimetres from his own, and if he pretended his knee buckled, leaned in….

The moment slipped through his cybernetic fingers like water. Bucky gulped, suppressed that unexpected spike of lust, and made his own way into the shower all the time feeling the hot burning of Steve’s gaze on his back.

*~*~*~*~*

Thor sighed. Three days after the debacle with the “Winter Soldier” and his brazen (and dare he say heroic?) infiltration of SHIELD’s most closely guarded dungeons, Thor had enough of endlessly reviewing the interview footage with the frost giant and those bitter accusations of atrocity committed by his father.

“But we need you here to analyse the tapes, Thor,” the red-haired assassin explained for the umpteenth time with inexhaustible patience, for she no doubt had stalked and shadowed her quarry for longer than she took to explain to Thor why his physical presence was necessary when the recordings were played back. “You see, the few words we managed to get out of Andropov before you showed up were all like this.” She relayed some short segments to him with the deft touch of buttons on the keyboard, and in general, the frost giant offered nothing useful by way of information and generally tended to say bad things about people’s mothers which he found distressing.

Romanov took a deep breath, very much in the fashion of his father on those countless occasions in his rambunctious youth just as the king launched into a tirade at Thor or Loki for doing something ridiculously stupid which jeopardised the safety of Asgard and the lives of its people. “To our ears, Andropov is Russian and has a very thick accent. However, during your interrogation the other day, we heard what we thought was fluent English. Yet when we replay the tapes, all we get is gibberish. However, as soon as you are within breathing distance, the gibberish translates back into fluent English again. Do you get what I mean?”

We are blessed with an innate ability to communicate with all the denizens in the Nine Relams, he recalled Loki once droning on a stifling hot summer’s day when the training grounds were baked dry and dust storms were whipped up with only the slightest breeze. Warriors ended up with badly peeled noses and shoulders from the sun burn and fights were interrupted by coughing fits and watery eyes from the blown up dust particles. They sought refuge in the coolest place in the palace, which happened to be the Great Library with its towering ceilings, narrow lancet arch windows and polished granite floors. Off-handedly, Loki plucked out a book closest to him and had started to read aloud. The All-Speak is inherent and understood by all, even the unforgiving monstrosities who dwell in fiery Muspelheim. Those in reasonable proximity to the Aesir share in this wondrous gift and can open their ears to the All-Speak, which is the common language of the universe.

Thor could grasp the fundamental concept; he had communicated with the frost giant in the universal tongue but could the humans not transcribe the conversation so that he need not be subject to repeated, if not tedious, replays of the same exchange over and over again.

The female assassin tried at a imparting some sympathy but failed, most likely because her line of work did not require her to call upon such sentiment and as such it had fallen into rusty disuse. “Afraid nothing beats hearing the actual tones and inflections in the voice. Body language, micro-expressions, the slightest strain in the voice tell us whether someone is lying, or whether there’s more that hasn’t been said,” she said before fixing her ear muffs back in place and returning to her work studying the frost giants in the projections.

He was therefore glad to be free from the perpetual monitoring and demands of SHIELD’s servants
by taking up on Iron Man’s offer of a short retreat and break at the home of the Avengers.

Having grown up in the glittering gold and marble palace of Asgard, with its enormous columns, domed roofs and cavernous ceilings that seemed so faraway and out of reach as a child and even as a fully grown man, the Avengers’ mansion was still decked in opulence as much as it was functional and served as the heroic group’s command centre. He had been shown the deep, subterranean tunnels and complex, all constructed of metal, concealing the headquarters from the prying eyes of their enemies, while upstairs, in the main body of the building were living quarters fitted with technology described by Stark as “multiple states beyond art”, which Thor suspected simply meant “highly advanced”, but the son of Stark was always fishing for praise.

Kind of like the way Loki would grandly declare his breakthroughs on any new spells and provide impressive, light-filled demonstrations when he was young, when he still desired recognition from his peers, before he shut himself away into polite hate and disdain and would only reveal his new spells against opponents whose deaths were imminent and would not live to breathe another word of Loki’s skill. How often had Loki returned to Asgard from quests, undertaken by himself, smuggling in his trophies, heads of hydras, great sea serpents, drakes that would take a decent sized army to defeat, that he was sometimes unable to hide from Thor and the Warriors Three. Evasive was one term to describe the way he responded to Volstagg and Fandral’s excited questioning about the undoubtedly powerful and awesome methods he used to fell these legendary beasts.

“Nothing for the minstrels to sing about, I’m afraid,” Loki had replied in trite humility as he dragged the carcasses into his research laboratories under Sif and Hogun’s suspicious gazes.

“More of your trickery again then?” Sif asked, but it never sounded like a question.

A practised, bland smile that never showed a hint of anger or bitterness. “A bit of that, yes, but mostly just luck.”

That was one lie even Thor could see through. You could not slay a hydra based on luck; there were not enough leprechauns alive to generate enough luck to fell those beasts, and if Loki’s paler-than-usual complexion, sunken cheeks and damp forehead were anything to go by, he must have worked unbelievable spells to single-handedly kill the hydra.

“We would be glad to have you and your aid on our next quest,” Thor recalled declaring with earnest praise and pride for his brother’s skill.

But Loki always declined his offer. “I do not believe that is a good idea; most likely, I will just slow you down, and in the worst case, I would end up dishonouring your kill or you will all become bitter and resentful if I hog all the glory. Then the minstrels will really be angry at me that I have deprived them of another chance to compose an epic tale about Thor and the Warriors Three and they will write me in the next story as some selfish, untrustworthy, double-dealing magic-wielding crippled crony…which they currently do now anyway. Why give them more material?”

“You still haven’t properly visited Lady Jane?” Sif’s sharp question shook him out of his depressing reverie and back into the present, and she pressed a tall tankard of mead, or ‘beer’ as the Midgardian’s called it, into his hands.

Thor gave her a hard look. “You insist on provoking me with this topic.”

Sif shrugged. It took more than a hard look to make her nervous. “The last time you spoke of her, I heard of a great love, yet I am not seeing it.”
“Love,” Thor muttered, and took a great swig of his beer, but an ocean of mead would not be enough to drown his sorrows. Quietly, trusting Sif would not think any less of him, he confided in his closest friend. “I sometimes lay awake in bed at night, thinking. I have been…thinking about a lot of things since Loki died.”

Irritation flickered across Sif’s face even though Thor could tell she was trying to maintain a bout of neutrality out of respect for the love Thor still had for Loki’s memory. “It’s that damn diary of his. If Sigyn was a real woman, I would say you are besotted with her, and I would tell you to sever your ties with her for she is no good for you.”

Thor’s face creased into a disbelieving frown. “How can you say that? She is the confidante, the keeper of Loki’s memories –”

“She is presenting you with a view skewed and coloured by Loki’s perceptions and prejudices,” Sif interrupted severely.

Thor’s shoulders sagged, feeling the exhausting roil of regret and anguish smother him until he choked and couldn’t breathe. “It doesn’t make them any less illegitimate. Sigyn holds his beliefs, it was to her he confessed thoughts he never shared with us. It is as if…I never truly knew my own brother.”

“Oh Thor,” Sif rose from where she sat and embraced him, from one dear friend to another. “So many things in this universe are beyond our control. You cannot know someone who wishes to hide from you and you certainly cannot demand they stop doing so.”

Sif’s words hardly registered as a sharp, searing spike of pain lanced through his chest, paralyzing him and leaving him numb with grief and guilt. “I lay awake at night thinking how terrible it must have been to have had no one but the vellum pages of a leather-bound journal to open one’s heart to. I think that my brother was so desperate for companionship that he bestowed a name for his journal just so he could at least experience a pale imitation of conversation and interaction.” His hands shook and the beer almost spilled from his tankard, ruining Stark’s thick pile carpet, as his voice dropped to a whisper. “I cannot sleep at night because I am thinking that Loki will now never know what it is like to have a true friend and never know love, yet I still live, supported by friends, able to pursue my love. I am thinking that there is great injustice in such an ending, and that I do not deserve to have love or happiness with Jane Foster when Loki will never know the same.”

“Thor,” Sif sighed, heavy with sympathy. She hugged his shuddering form closer and pressed his forehead to hers. “You must not think that. You cannot stop living your life because of this. In fact, you should embrace life with twice the vigour, for Loki is no longer with us, so you must also live his life for him.”

Thor felt a build-up of pressure and scorching heat in his eyes and he fisted them before hot tears scalded his cheeks. There was so much more that he wanted to say, hurts and grief which had scored deep lacerations in his most vulnerable heart, but his throat mercilessly clenched shut and his tongue was heavy and dry in his mouth.

Then came the sound of bells.

“Mr Odinson,” Jarvis addressed him with impeccable politeness. “Could you please attend to the door? There is a visitor for Ms Potts, but she is stuck in traffic and will be half an hour late. Captain America is just finishing his shower after his gym work-out and will be up shortly.”

Slightly dumbfounded, Thor and Sif followed the bodiless guardian’s instructions and opened the
double front doors and admitted the guest in.

Straight away, Thor could sense power and authority radiating from the man. Though out of his prime, with silver hairs almost matching the number of pale blond ones, his back was still ramrod straight, his ice blue eyes alert and alive with intelligence and they immediately raked up and down Thor and Sif’s form, taking in with mute surprise their garb which was so out of place in Midgard.

Ms Pott’s guest was dressed in a black suit, tailored, finely cut for it defined and distinguished his form and enhanced the austere aura that he projected so that you felt you could only speak only if spoken to.

“I am here to see Pepper.” And his voice and articulation was precise, clean and clear; a man of accomplished study.

“Jarvis advises Ms Potts is late. Would you like to come in and wait?”

Thor wasn’t sure if had authority to admit the man’s entrance, but he assumed it was permissible for the house guardian raised no objections and even suggested they pass time in the drawing room.

So the three of them sat, facing each other, an uncomfortable silence overstaying its welcome, until Captain America burst into the room, a signature of life, and unhesitatingly stretched out his hand towards the guest for a handshake.

“Steve Rogers.”

“Eon, Robert Eon,” their guest rose to his feet and introduced himself with a respectful, curt inclination of the head as he caught Captain America’s hand in a firm grasp. Cultured, sophisticated. “Honoured to meet you in person, Captain.”

Rogers flushed, a celebrity who remained shy to attention and fame and the expressions of homage that complete strangers pay to him. “Just Steve will do, if you let me call you Rob.”

The fair-haired guest smiled broadly and gestured for Steve to sit, and somehow, Thor believed he had played ill at host.

“So, you are here to see Pepper? Do you do business with Stark Industries?” Steve asked, and the interest in his voice was sincere.

“Some business,” Rob said, choosing his words with care. “In my younger days, I designed medical equipment and pioneered the way MRI machines are built today. However, I only had a head full of ideas and Howard had all the capital, so we formed a partnership of sorts for some time. When Tony took the helm of his father’s business, I undertook some weapons design and manufacturing, but discovered it was not my forte or entirely to my taste. These days, Pepper is kind enough to indulge an old man like me in a few charitable organisations.”

Captain America started upright in his chair. “Oh my god, how did I not recognise you? You are the Rob Eon, one of the most prolific philanthropists of our age. Thor, Sif,” Steve could barely restrain himself as he was throbbing excitement that was infectious and made Thor fidget. “This man here has done more good in his lifetime than all of the Avengers combined. I have read all about your great works, sir. You set up refuges all around the country for battered women years before domestic violence and marital rape were recognised by law. And your stance on human rights, racism and apartheid was way ahead of your time, even if you were hounded and harassed for expressing your views.” Rogers hammered a fist to his chest. “Respect, sir, respect.”
Near colourless pale eyes glinted at the stream of accolades but Eon did not affect any smugness, just a deep seated sense of satisfaction. A man of words who brings about action, and though Thor did not understand half of what Rogers alluded to (marital rape? Rape in marriage? How was that even possible?), if even the upstanding Captain America stood in reverence of this man, then good works he must have accomplished indeed.

“Pepper and I are in the midst of establishing a new outreach program and support centre for children, predominantly victims of abuse and bullying. Depression and self harm are major issues affecting many hundreds and thousands of teenagers these days, not helped by that godawful social media, and now frequently ending in needless violence.”

“Bullying?” Sif echoed, unfamiliar with the term.

Eon shot her a puzzled look which spoke volumes of his silent rage and astonishment that they should even need to ask. “Behaviour, repeated behaviour, whether it be physical, verbal or social, intended to harm, humiliate, intimidate or victimise.”

Sif was taken aback, and it showed in the way her eyebrows rose in surprise and her lips pressed into a thin line. “Is it not just some ribbing? Rough horseplay? Children cannot be sheltered. If you do not let them weather a few storms, they will grow up into adults unable to cope with the slightest of life’s challenges.”

“Except these are children, juveniles, who do not have the proper skills or faculties to cope with day after day of behaviour designed to break their confidence, their self esteem. Some try to weather it,” he said, so scathing that if his words were a blade, Sif’s raven locks would be shorn from her scalp, “and fight back, arm themselves with guns, bring it to school to destroy their aggressors before they become destroyed in turn. No young life should have to be lost this way.”

“That is terrible,” Thor rumbled, a sickly sense of cold dread forming in his gut. Eon’s definition of bullying struck an awful chord within him, and the haranguing dissonance harked back to his past, of careless and callous barbs and name-calling casually tossed at Loki, of lavishing titles and monikers to him which were in reality back-handed compliments. Loki paid them back in kind, and sometimes in double serves when he was feeling particularly vicious, but at the end of the day, Thor and his Warriors Three always managed to laugh it off.

But Loki never laughed it off, that Sigyn had plainly told him. He hoarded each insult and belittling like some twisted and demented magpie, turning over each poisonous sally in his mind in all the time he had alone with just his too-quick mind and superb memory until he was convinced of his lack of worth and believed everyone had only hostility and scorn reserved for him.

Sif had never read through the journal. Thor desperately needed to believe that Sif had truly, if mistakenly, thought Loki had become unaffected by their playful taunts and jibes over the centuries, or else she had intentionally set out to break his spirit until she drove him into the most desolate corner of despair and….

“These are sad stories indeed,” Eon agreed, and there was reproach in his voice which Thor felt was meant solely for him. “And children being children are always the most innocent and thoughtless of all. We are social creatures, and the collective demands uniformity, but it is preposterous given our intellect and will grace us with personality and individualism.”

Thor averted his gaze, deliberately looking down at calloused hands clasped tightly in his lap until his knuckles were frosty white. Eon had a way of looking at him, looking through him, as if he could see all the shame in Thor’s utterly, utterly ignorant past.
“It is just so easy to pick on someone for their differences. Classically, the smartest kid in the grade would be shunned and abused. Perhaps it is resentment, and maybe it is easier for the other children to feel better about themselves by denigrating that which they did not have and possess.” Thor’s breath painfully hitched in his throat, strangling him into penitence, and he hoped no one noticed. “Sometimes it could also be fear. Anything, like sexuality, gender, race, can cause children to lash out at the unknown, that which they do not understand, that which they do not want to understand.”

The words flew at him like solid blows, and Thor maintained a stoic front, keeping an attentive look lest he attract any unwarranted attention to himself. How could he explain to the mortals that it was by his hand, his words, which ultimately drove his brother to….

Robert Eon, with his frighteningly intelligent eyes and piercing gaze that cut through Thor’s excuses with the razor sharp edge of an ice blade, unnervingly directed all his attention to Thor and Thor felt like the insects Loki used to pin to boards before cutting them open to study. “Long time ago, I was a teacher. One day, a boy, almost a man, came to me. He was in an agitated state, torn between rage and guilt and hopelessness. You see, he had the most terrible fight with his brother, an older brother whom he once adored and admired with all his heart.”

Thor tried to swallow the lump that lodged in his throat and wouldn’t go away, but his mouth was desert dry. “Go on,” he said hoarsely.

“His brother had grown up into a person much different to himself. They increasingly had little in common, but this boy tried, tried so hard to fit into his brother’s new life. But it was all in vain, and instead, they came to blows, and his parents sent him away so that he may reflect. He was a bright, talented boy, and it was unfortunate so few had encouraged him to harken to his true calling. It seemed to me at the time he resented his natural gifts but was in despair because he realised he just could not be like his brother.”

“He should be himself,” Sif interrupted, steel in her voice, eyes hard like flint. “Why should he care what others say or think?”

“Because he really was still just a boy at heart, not ready to lose his best friend who was his brother. And because he eventually became sick and tired of being different and hated who he was just as those around him despised his disparate nature. He had that futile wish of becoming someone he was not but found he could not escape his own skin.”

Captain America stared at Eon, mesmerised, or perhaps entranced by something in his past which resonated so strongly with his words.

“I did my best to help, but my time with him was limited and, against my advice, he returned home.”

Rogers blinked. “You told a kid to run away from home?”

“He was almost an adult. I wish he had taken my advice, started life anew elsewhere, away from the entrenched prejudices that were acceptable in his home town. It was an unhealthy environment from which he would have been better served avoiding. But no, he felt compelled to return home.”

“What happened to him?” Steve asked, apprehensive of the direction of the story, and Thor closed his eyes for he already knew how it would all end.

“I lost contact with him after he left, but I heard he took his own life two years ago.”
“Oh,” Steve said in a small voice and eyes shining with sympathy while Sif bristled and seethed.

“What fool gives up on life?”

“One who believes death is more preferable? It is difficult for us, who have much to live for, to know what it is like to be lost in the vast wastelands of despair. Pray you never visit it. But in the meantime, in memory of this boy, I am now more determined than ever that I should do whatever I can, give whatever guidance and support that I can afford, so as to give these children hope that there is an end to the torment and ridicule.” Eon paused as his communication device, a “cell phone”, chimed. “Excuse me, I need to take this call.”

Rob left the drawing room but Thor heard him rearranging his meeting place with Ms Potts as there had been a road accident and Ms Potts wasn’t going to be moving fast in her car any time soon.

“Very well, dear, three blocks from here, at that delightful French patisserie. I shall see you in ten minutes.”

The old philanthropist bade his farewell, shook Captain America’s hand again, and inclined his head towards Thor and Sif although his penetrating eyes never left Thor and the intensity of his gaze shook him to the core.

“Wow, that’s what I call passion. You don’t get to meet guys like that everyday,” Steve remarked aloud after Eon left, but Thor’s mind was filled with passages from Sigyn, and he hurried to his chambers.

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_Ylir, 1st Week, Year 13789_

_It has already been four weeks since I have arrived in Vanaheim and it is difficult to know what to make of the realm, even though I have visited on prior occasions. The Vanir are laid-back and carefree but they are serious about their studies, certainly more serious than us Aesir, which explains why their magicks are generally more advanced than Asgard._

_However, there are an amazing set of restrictions of what can and cannot be studied. These limitations are fascinating – anthropology and history are highly discouraged, but geography, cosmology and the sciences are popular. If you are caught engaging in political discourse other than about the accepted theocracy, it is punishable by terms of imprisonment. Similarly, the Vanir attempt to enforce a strict moral code. It is permissible to write poetry and sing songs about the purity of love, but texts and other written expressions on the carnal nature of love again attract imprisonment._

_For a race as intelligent as the Vanir, these restrictions must be frustrating, for isn’t the ultimate pleasure of scholarship to explore and test the limits of knowledge?_
studies on my own as I have done all these years. These sods are doing nothing but repeating what has been said in the past and trying to pass it off as new insight. There isn’t learning to be had here, just dull repetition.

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Ylir, 3rd Week, Year 13789

Dear Sigyn, at last, there are signs of wit in this stagnant realm, perhaps enough to take my mind off recent events (and yes, the erotic fiction and pornographic art are wickedly amusing). There is, of all people, a wood elf lord here in self-imposed exile, not unlike me, except from the whispers I have picked up, he has been in Vanaheim for at least three centuries. For someone who has fled his own realm (or rejected it?) he does not seem particularly spiteful of his homeland, though when I casually dropped some names from the ruling high elf family, I definitely saw a flare of hatred in his eyes.

The tensions and woes between the wood elves and high elves of Alfheim is something that I would not recommend touching, even with a cosmic ten light year barge pole. The indigenous wood elves, the glorious ancients of their realm, are fading to their more industrious progeny, but I suppose that does not mean the wood elves will meet their end without a lot of kicking and screaming.

I do not know what this wood elf lord is here in Vanaheim for. Has he given up on his realm and turned his back on it altogether, or is he simply biding his time, marshalling his forces and waiting for a more opportune time to strike? I may unwittingly become involved in something that’s Not My Business if I were to get closer to this wood elf lord, but on the other hand, having cheated at the Testing tournament, bought shame to the house of Odin and then tore Thor a new one that left him on the precipice between life and death, how could I sink any lower or get into any more trouble?

I shall approach the wood elf lord and see what mischief is to be had. Wish me luck, Sigyn.

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Einmánuður, 2nd week, Year 13790

I have been granted leave to extend my sojourn until Skerpla, but I anticipate by that time I shall seek a further extension, and I will keep pressing for leave until poor exasperated Mother’s patience with me is finished and I shall be ordered to return to Asgard, their useless and lame second son.

Othorion, the wood elf lord, is wise and magnanimous with his knowledge. Since I turned towards the sorcerous arts four centuries ago, I have not met a more engaging and inspirational a mentor as Othorion. The mage guilds of Asgard are an infestation of super-sized egos and even bigger personalities, where wizards and sorcerers are only interested in grandstanding, name-calling and one-upping the other. Their collective narcissism could drown the entire realm, and any actual desire to share and build upon knowledge would barely fill one of Mother’s thimbles.

Othorion’s specialisation is in healing and enchantment, though I got him royally inebriated the other night and he let slip that he is well versed in wild magic, the transcendental power tied to the sustenance of Yggradsil and birth of the universe!

I must learn as much as I can from him, Sigyn, because there is only so much I can do with Illusion and Evocation. You would have been proud of me when I demonstrated my personally crafted offensive spells and curses to Othorion; he was so impressed by my age and skill that he was
appalled and then he turned a curious shade of gruel when I boasted that I had another dozen or so epic and killer spells lined up for research and development. Bid farewell to your basic fireball. I am going to be the first sorcerer supreme to invent the Helball, an orb of complete and utter destruction raining down not just fire, but acid, lightening and psionic damage to all caught in the blast radius!

Othorion does not seem to quite understand why I should devote so much of my time and effort to making things go boom, but that is because I did not reveal to him that the perfect and wonderful golden first born is in line to win Mjolnir, jewel of Odin’s vault, and possibly the mightiest weapon in all the Nine Realms. As for this mewling coward who cannot be trusted to even cheat properly, there will be nothing for me, not if you have seen the disappointment in Mother and Father’s eyes. They do not have say it out loud, for when they now do not even deign to speak a single word of admonishment to me for my mischief, I know I have passed the point where they held any hope that I will meet any of their lofty expectations or do something productive with my life. Their silence shouts Useless and Failure, and the Captain of the Guard and other jarls of Odin’s court all say the same of me.

Enough of these sordid thoughts. I will craft and perfect the Helball to match, no, to surpass Mjolnir, and then I will laugh and be able to say that I have succeeded totally on my own without relying on some relic hammered together by four-foot burrowing runts with serious grudge issues.

In the interim, I should sit at the foot of Othorion and increase my repertoire of spells. He seemed somewhat dubious of my ability to branch out and specialise from more than two schools of spells, but I have already begun to excel in Conjuration. There is simply no reason why I cannot specialise in all schools of spellcasting, if only because none have succeeded before me.

Heyannir, 4th week, Year 13792

It will soon be three years that I have spent away from Asgard, Sigyn, and how time flies when you are having fun.

Yes, your ears have not mislead you. I am having fun. It is exciting to be part of a small but radical and subversive movement that dismisses authority with a belch and a fart. It is exhilarating to spend endless hours debating arcane theory with another master of the art.

Perhaps it is my title that makes Othorion give me the time of day, but this may be insulting to him as his anti-monarchical views are staunch as they are passionate and personal.

We prefer to develop our skills, or rather, my skills. Othorion tells me that he has already reached his peak in his power and ability and that he is somewhat astounded by my limitless capacity to learn and absorb new spells and craft.

His astonishment made me giddy, Sigyn. Giddy. I, a man, a prince of Asgard, feeling giddy. It’s unheard of. I do not believe I have felt light headed or carried a silly grin around on my face all day since…since I made coloured balls of light dance during Mother’s birthday when I was barely five decades old and Mother was so delighted she could not stop kissing me and Thor continually nagged and pestered me to teach him the spell too (those days seem like eons ago. I imagine Thor would dig a hole and dunk his head into it if I mentioned to his friends that at one stage, he had wanted to know how to perform these “parlour tricks” too).

I am not sure whether Othorion is trying to put wind in my sails when he speculated whether one day, I could even surpass Father’s sorcery as well.
Well, Sigyn, here’s to trying!

~*~*~*~*~

Mörsugur, 1st week, Year 13810

I wish I had met Othorion earlier. His benevolence and compassion is different to Mother’s tolerance (worn and tested) or Father’s diffident acknowledgement of my real strengths and abilities.

I have persevered with my studies all this time not because I am in love with study or cannot wait to get up in the morning so I can finger through dusty tomes twice my body weight.

I have thrown everything into magic and sorcery because that’s all I have. It’s all I am good for, and if I can’t even get that right, I might as well toss myself off the Bifrost now and save being reminded every day of my other gaping inadequacies.

But it is a vicious cycle, Sign. You see, the only thing I am good at is good for nothing. No one needs or wants what I do well in. Sometimes, I do not know why I am perfecting the Helball for them if, at the end of the day, they will merely thumb their nose at it.

These days, Othorion and I talk less about our research. He senses the disquiet in my soul (what can’t those eyes discern?) and though I never speak of the pain (like Hel will I give those buffoons the satisfaction of knowing or seeing that they have hurt me) he knows. Does he have personal experience? Or does he relate it to his own unadmitted persecution complex?

In any event, I do not deny that his words have caused me to think twice. About Asgard. About Mother and Father. About Thor. Othorion alludes to a permanent move to Vanaheim for me, so I can devote all my time to becoming the first sorcerer supreme to specialise in all schools of spells. Not for Asgard. Not so that I can prove I am Thor’s equal or his better. But for my own personal pride.

There is some attraction to that suggestion. Sigyn, imagine living a life without the constant judgement and jeering from others. I could live my life as I please and not be made to feel worthless and inadequate.

I wish Othorion could return with me to Asgard. If not in spellcraft and theory, I still have much to learn from him. But having an elf, a wood elf no less, as a tutor for an Asgardian prince? What kind of laughing stock would I become? What subtle and unintended diplomatic message would it send to Alfheim?

I am running out of excuses, Sigyn, and Mother’s well of patience is not inexhaustible. In fact, it’s almost dry. There will be an end to her lenience, and she will return me to Asgard in cuffs and chains if that is what it takes to make me go home.

Bless me, Sigyn, for I will commune with Mother tomorrow to seek a further extension of leave. What will move her to agree? Some sickly sweet tale of my first true love maybe? I will spin some yarn made of gold so fine and pure that dwarves will weep, and see how many more years it buys me.

~*~*~*~*~

Ylir, 2nd week, Year 13819
Dear Sigyn, there is that hateful idiom which states all good things must come to an end.

My end is here. Othorion has read Mother’s letter, which is filled with much upset and reprimand and accusations of cowardice and running away from my mistakes. She now demands I return home and make peace with Thor.

Othorion disagrees that if I were to run away, it would be an act of courage, not cowardice.

It is easy for Othorion to speak of running and hiding when he does not have the all-seeing guardian to contend with. Try as I might, if I should take flight tonight, Heimdall will immediately know where I am (if he is not tracking me already) and within hours, a host of the Einhejar will travel on the Bifrost to pick me up. Then I shall definitely return to Asgard in cuffs and chains, and nothing but more pain and humiliation will come from my attempt to run.

There is little Othorion can do to dispel the despair clouding my mind, but I have tried to reassure him that Despair and I have walked hand in hand for many years already, and holding its wretched hand for the next millennia should be no different to what it is like now.

Othorion has taken great pains to advise and caution me. He warns on the nature of despair and its destructive capabilities which will dwarf any Helball I create.

But what choice do I have, Sigyn? If I cannot run, then I can only return.

I spent last night like a little boy crying on Othorion’s shoulder. He tried to impart his final precious pearls of wisdom on me, how I might act and behave when I return to Asgard to avoid the wrath of Thor and his friends, how if I cannot mend bridges with Thor, I should strive to settle for a non-aggression pact. He fears for my safety, from the warriors and guards, from myself and what I might do once despair has consumed me whole.

Oh, I don’t know, set off a Helball in Thor’s favourite tavern and the barracks before I go out in a blaze of unholy glory?

We had a bit of a chuckle at that jest, but Othorion reinforced his advice that I should endeavour, at all times, to stay in Mother and Father and Thor’s good graces, and if ever I were to lash out or strike back, then I should do so in such a way which does not appear to be retaliation.

I will return to Asgard. I will bide my time and push my knowledge and skill in Illusion to the limits so that one day, even Heimdall and his sleepless watch cannot see me, and I will then do as Othorion has recommended and make a bid for freedom.

So long, Othorion, my first treasured friend and mentor. May we meet again, and when we do, I hope you will get to know a better me.

~*~*~*~*~

It was midnight when Thor barged into Stark’s private chambers, taking the door off its hinges as Jarvis would not grant him entry. He turned his back so that he may not catch Ms Potts in a state of indecency, but he used his most authoritative voice and made his demands clear.

“You need to summon your Spymaster, Fury. I have important information about one of the Gatekeeper’s associates and how he may lead us to him.”

Chapter End Notes
Merry Christmas and happy holidays to all!
This chapter is weeks late, but it is a tad bit longer than usual.

Some thoughts on this chapter:
- Please do not hate or rag on Sif. Both Thor and Loki are entirely unreliable narrators here. Thor is consumed by grief and survivor's guilt, and so he greatly exaggerates and amplifies the damage he thinks he and Sif and the Warriors Three had inflicted on Loki when he was alive. Sif on the other hand speaks as one very determined person who defied the odds and succeeded to become the first female warrior of Asgard, and expects others to do the same. I expect Sif was met with just as much taunting and ridicule in pursuit of her dreams, but unlike Loki, she used these put-downs as fuel for her determination and will to fulfil her dreams. At the end of the day, I actually deeply respect the Sif I am trying to portray here: she is in love with Thor but knows he is still grieving over Loki's death, and even if it means pushing him into the arms of another woman, she will do it if she thinks it will make Thor happy. That's a major +1 for the sisterhood!
- Loki, through Sigyn, is similarly an unreliable narrator here as Sif pointed out. His diary is only accurate as a representation of his own thoughts and views at the time; it does not necessarily mean the actual circumstances were as he described.
- Eon's discourse on bullying: came about largely from the mountain of angsty Loki fics I have read over the past few days and also on my own reflections on Loki's character and what personal circumstances in his life growing up led to him developing such a huge chip on his shoulder. Can it simply be put down to the fact that Loki is a spoiled little shit, or does two millennia of constant put-downs and derision make him want to retaliate twice as hard? I hope I have not treated this topic insensitively, including my reference to school shootings, but if harassment and facebook bullying can lead to teen suicide, surely this must be accounted for in the choices Loki makes in life.

Lastly - all references to spells and spell schools are shamelessly lifted from Dungeons and Dragons.

Work has forced us to take leave. I plan to spend the majority of the coming days writing :o)

Have a wonder and safe holidays, all! And thank you so much for your ongoing support and comments!
It was dead in the middle of the night when the God of Thunder ripped aside his door with his ridiculously muscular arms and divine strength, sent Pepper diving under the covers thinking the doombots had finally snuck through Jarvis’ defence system and were here to assassinate him, and then struck an arrogant pose before ordering Tony Stark to summon Nick Fury.

Thor needed a reality check and remember who was the proverbial master of the house.

Point Break also needed to be handed a memo that Fury found Tony useful, convenient, used to purchase tech and weapons from Stark Industries, and that was pretty much the limit of their dealings. Phone calls in the middle of the night to summon some highly paid agents to babysit an immortal space Viking was a big no-no.

When the lights came on in his room, Tony took a good, hard look at Thor and found that the self-proclaimed god looked like shit. He was still dressed in the same gear that Tony had seen him in eighteen hours earlier, smelled like he needed a good bath and exfoliation, and the redness in his eyes looked like a horrible medical condition that was contagious. It suggested Thor was seriously smashed if he had figured out where the wine cellar was and raided it, or he’d been bawling his eyes out for the better part of the night.

“Now you listen here,” Tony began testily, padding over to the giant mountain of a man in plush slippers.

“This is urgent,” Thor cut him off, and suddenly, standing an arms length away from death on two legs didn’t seem like the best idea and made him keenly aware of his own mortality. Had anyone checked out the goddamn width of Thunderboy’s barrel chest? A charging bull would probably just bounce off. Hell, those chunks of rock solid muscle could probably repulse tanks!

“Iron Man, are you listening?”

Thor had his great big hands and sausage thick fingers on his shoulder and was shaking him, so hard his brain was bouncing inside his skull like a ping-pong ball. He wasn’t seeing stars. He was seeing strobe lights.

“Hey! Hey! Stop that, you’re hurting him!”

Pepper, bless her bold spirit, had picked up the heaviest thing she could find, an antique wooden chair, and slammed it down onto Thor’s back. It broke apart into a million pieces like some movie-set prop on impact, pelting Tony with a shower of wooden splinters and shards.

At least Thor felt an itch or muscle spasm and stopped the shaking, then on seeing Tony’s tongue lolling out of his mouth and eyes rolled back so only the whites were visible, realised he had almost killed the man and gently set Tony down on the edge of the bed.

“Are you crazy?” Pepper berated Thor in tones that usually saw senior CEOs of rival companies whimpering for mommy as she held Tony’s hand and gave it an assuring squeeze. “What is so important that it can’t wait for the morning?”

“Yours shall attend the war council as well,” Thor declared.
“No she will not,” Tony growled, though perhaps an undignified squawk was a more accurate description. “Pepper doesn’t get involved in Avenger’s business. She’s got enough running Stark Industries for me.”

Whatever belligerence Tony was projecting obviously didn’t faze Hammerboy. “The man who came to the mansion this afternoon, he is an acquaintance of Ms Potts, no?”

Exasperated, Tony rolled his eyes. “Who came to the mansion this afternoon?”

“It…” Pepper hesitated, unsure if she was giving the correct answer. “It was just Rob, Rob Eon. I was stuck in traffic and eventually met him elsewhere.”

Tony scowled as he finally got his bearings again and could stop hyperventilating. “What in your crazy cosmic tree does an old social do-gooder have to do with anything?”

“Summon your Spy Master and the rest of the Avengers, and I will explain everything,” Thor promised.

It took the better part of two hours for Fury and Coulson to arrive at the mansion and for the Avengers to assemble. As Pepper got a brew of coffee going and arranged more seats, Tony surreptitiously watched Thor and his personal friend-cum-retainer bicker and tapped some commands into his palm-sized tablet for Jarvis to turn up the volume in his ear-piece. It wasn’t eavesdropping if he owned the building and everything in it.

“What madness is this, Thor? You look as if you have not slept in days!”

“I am fine,” Thor said through gritted teeth, deliberately avoiding Sif’s interrogating stare, but he needn’t have bothered as the washed-out leather-bound book in his hands caught Sif’s attention, and man, did she look like a principal from hell intent on confiscating your phone.

“You’ve been reading Sigyn again!” she hissed and made to swipe the book from Thor’s hands, but the big guy, despite his size, was too quick for her and held it out of reach. It descended into a schoolyard fight, two kids squabbling over a toy. “Give her to me this instant, or so Brunhilde help me, I will inform Jane Foster that you are being unfaithful to her.”

Since Thor landed on earth and asked for their help in tracking down the Gatekeeper, Tony made sure he did some cursory research into Norse Mythology. Sigyn was a familiar name, and calling up Wikipedia took only two seconds on his tablet, and another five seconds to scan the contents and figure out that she was the misfortunate wife of the God of Mischief and instigator of Armageddon, Loki.

Wait, was Thor reading some girl’s diary or something?

“Stop it, Sif!” Thor grunted amid flailing arms and the occasional knuckle to the chin. “I am being serious, and there is important information contained in this journal!”

“All that wretched Sigyn contains are the twisted thoughts of a self-pitying fool. Do not elevate it to anything beyond that.”

Thor’s eyes darkened and there were sounds of the distant rumble of thunder, or a sleeping giant being aroused to wrath. “He is dead, Sif, dead, and yet you continue to slander him so! Will you never relent?”

Sif’s bottom lip trembled as if Thor had just accused her of being the town bike that everyone had ridden, and she grabbed fistfuls of his shirtfront, snarled, and gave him a good shake.
So maybe this shaking business was some weird Asgardian cultural norm. It was not in Wikipedia. He’d have to make some edits later.

“It is truth! What do you call someone who would spend years on end locked up in his chambers being angry at the world and crying ‘woe is me’? You gave him so many chances to leave behind the solitude, to join us, to be a part of us and yet – ”

“Really, Sif?” Thor snapped, eyes flashing with the spark of lightening. “Can you honestly tell me you really wanted Loki to be a part of us?”

Xena balked, taken aback by the brutal recrimination and suddenly at a loss for words. She let go of Thor’s shirt and spoke in low, calm tones. “We had our fights. We had our arguments. But he was your brother, and I accepted long ago that no matter what he did or who he was, he was a part of us.”

Thor’s face scrunched up like he might suddenly burst into a fountain of tears. “We accepted, but we didn’t like it and never stopped reminding him that we didn’t like it.”

There was a long, drawn out silence making Tony assume that was the end of that illuminating conversation, but then the raven-haired Amazon slowly got down on bended knee and knelt in front of Thor and looked up at her prince with eyes shining in earnestness. Yeesh – this wasn’t Shakespeare in the park, this was Shakespeare in Tony’s basement headquarters and he had a front row seat that he didn’t even ask for!

“Thor, when my time comes, when I die and happen to meet Loki in the netherworld, I will sincerely apologise that I was a part of his misery in life, and I will beg his forgiveness. But he is no longer with us, and nothing we can do can bring him back. You must stop clinging onto these bitter and tattered remnants of his will. I am sure Loki will forgive you if you, if we, have all learned of our mistake and vow never to repeat them again in our lifetime.”

“Are you recording all of this, Jarvis?” Tony tried to whisper without moving his lips. “Create a database on our alien gods, starting with that book called Sigyn and a dead God of Lies. There wasn’t anything in Wikipedia about Loki being Thor’s brother. I thought he was Odin’s BFF or something at one stage, which is why he got an invite to permanently camp out in Asgard.”

There was a brief pause. “You didn’t read the briefing notes from Ms Marvel’s interrogation of Ceroden, did you.”

Tony felt his face flush. “I got the important bits!” he blustered. “The Gatekeeper smuggling our human weapons to other realms and pissing off multiple thousand-year-old-establishments and all that.”

“Loki, Mr Odinson’s brother, was also discussed at length.”

“Oh. Didn’t think it was important then.”

Jarvis produced a burst of static, the closest thing the AI could come to an annoyed sigh. “Mr Odinson has been like this all afternoon. I have analysed his earlier conversations with Ms Sif and the following are my conclusions. Loki is dead and Mr Odinson believes he is to blame. His heart rate went up alarmingly when Mr Eon discussed childhood bullying. I give it an 87% probability that bullying played a part in Loki’s death – ”

“Hold on a minute, 87%? That’s very specific.”

“Information on other alternatives leading to Loki’s death are scant but cannot be discounted. He
did send the Destroyer machine to New Mexico to kill Thor two years ago. There was then a fight on this Crystal Bridge. Perhaps Loki jumped off the bridge and took his own life rather than face punishment when Thor returned to Asgard. Alternatively, he could also have been unintentionally fallen as he tried to flee. Or he could have been killed by Thor during the fight and his body then thrown from the bridge.”

“Hence the 87%?”

“87% precisely.”

Tony felt the twinges of a migraine coming. “Very well. Go on.”

“Mr Odinson’s sense of guilt is troubling. I fear it could be clouding his reasoning and judgement.”

“Ripping someone’s door off and roping everyone, including the director of a far-reaching and legally questionable organization, in for a midnight conference already suggests his reasoning and judgement are impaired,” Tony softly snorted, and quickly turned away when Sif’s hawkish gaze swung towards him.

“So what’s the bottom line, Jarvis? Did you manage to zoom in on that journal while Thor was reading it in his room? Can I get a good look at it and make up my own opinion about it?”

“I tried, sir, but that book gives off strange energy fields which I am still trying to break down into conventional equations. These energy pulses prevented me from getting any clear image of the text.”

Oh, so the journal was some kooky magical artefact then. Apart from the ice-spewing, heat-chewing wolf that turned his basement into the largest freezer in all of New York, Tony now had another magical item to add to his Santa’s wish list. He was going to be especially nice this year.

Fury was his usual unimpressed self as he strode into the war room like he owned it, as if it only existed because he permitted it, and boy did he have a reason to sneer. Steve looked presentable and immaculate at all hours of the day (or night) but Tony had only thrown on a casual tee and pants. Van Dyne still had rollers in her hair and dared anyone to comment, Hank couldn’t stop yawning and Clint was downing cups of coffee like it was nobody’s business.

The seat next to Tony was free so Fury claimed it, made himself at home, laced his in a fair impression of Mr Burns and raised an expectant eyebrow. “Well?”

Thor rose to his feet. His left hand tightly gripped onto the journal as if he was afraid it could be taken from him (Sif definitely looked like she wanted to burn the damn thing) but there was only pure self-belief and confidence when he spoke.

“I understand you had captured a Dökkálfar recently and he mentioned a rebellion in Alfheim, the realm of the elves, and the potential for the realm to descend into civil war.”

Danvers nodded. “The Elf King sent one daughter here to look for his other daughter who ran away from home. The idea was to marry her off to you,” she gave Thor a pointed look while Sif opted for a stony, silent stare into the distance which suggested that she was counting the infinite number of horrible and UN-convention-breaking ways she could kill the elven king. “It sounded like a desperate move of a very desperate man.”

“King Syrnalorn does not have the unanimous support of his people. He is loved, but not well loved, and those who have no love for him are resorting to acts of violence.”
“So these rebels, what are they? Freedom fighters or power-hungry terrorists?” Steve asked.

“Alfheim politics are complicated, and things are not always black and white. It is best not to get involved. But you have heard this dark elf mention Oberon and Titania?”

“One more reference to Shakespeare tonight, and it’s going to be a repulsor blast to the face and I’ll make sure it gets messy,” Tony muttered under his breath.

Thor frowned at him but continued. “Little is known about the pair, but there is deep speculation that Oberon is one of the ancients of Alfheim, the first elves created by the Celestials and the light of Illudivir. They are keepers of the realm –”

“And servant of the Secret Fire and wielder of the flame of Anor?” Tony snickered. It got a bark of a laugh out of Clint and a broad grin from Bruce. Fury glared daggers at him so Tony mumbled an apology, feigned repentance and gestured for Thor to centre stage again.

“They became known as the wood elf lords, but they began to fade with the rise of the Light Elves and High Elves such that, for a long time, it was widely thought they had all disappeared. However, Loki, my brother,” Thor choked on the last few words and gritted his teeth, composing himself being ploughing on. “He came across such a wood elf lord fifteen hundred years ago on Vanaheim. His name was Othorion, and I believe he has adopted the alias of Oberon and is here in Midgard, disguised as the mortal Robert Eon.”

Natasha bit the insides of her cheeks, chewing on the thought with the savagery of a pitbull in a fighting ring staring down a dog twice its size, but in the end, she was not convinced. She leaned back into her chair, arms crossed, eyes cool and calculating. “It’s a bit of a leap to say Oberon is this Orthorion, just because one of them happens to be the only wood elf lord you know. But say you’re right, and Oberon is Orthorion, it doesn’t seem to be any of our business which despot becomes the next King of Elf Land.”

“Yeah,” Clint chimed in, and Tony swore that he had seen the archer tip the entire pot of sugar into his last mug of coffee. “Best not to get involved. Your words.”

“This may be the case,” Thor argued, his body rigid and tense, as if held back by a very short leash because he was the type of guy more comfortable clobbering others into submission with that magic hammer of his rather than fence with words. This meeting was making him incredibly uncomfortable and though he hid it well (the ultra self-belief must be to do with growing up as crown prince of a sprawling galactic empire and not being told ‘no’ enough as a child), it didn’t escape Tony and Jarvis’ scrutinizing attention, in the heavy way he swallowed with the exaggerated bobbing of his adam’s apple, or the micro-movements of the muscles pulling tight around his eyes and mouth.

“Oberon is a thorn in Syrnalorn’s side and has been impossible to capture. While Asgard has no interest in the bounty which King Syrnalorn has placed on his head, we believe the only way Oberon has managed to elude Syrnalorn’s honour guards for so long is due to the great assistance he receives from the Gatekeeper. Think about it,” Thor urged, though it sounded more like a strangled plea of a man on his last gasps. “Oberon and Titania have enormously benefited from the smuggling of Midgardian weapons and ideology into Alfheim and Nidavellir, and it seems that they themselves travel between the cracks of the realms with ease and in ways that our own gatekeeper, the all-seeing Heimdall, cannot track.”

“So you’re saying that if we track Oberon, he’ll eventually lead us to the Gatekeeper,” Bruce concluded, not dismissing the idea altogether. “But Natasha still has a point. Oberon can’t be Orthorion just because he is a wood elf lord. And how do you figure that Oberon is Robert Eon?”
Thor stole a quick glance at the journal in his hand and deliberately shifted his weight so that his back was, in part, turned to Sif. “The reasoning process goes backward. I am convinced Robert Eon is Orthorion.”

Steve coughed out loud to interrupt without appearing rude. “Thor, we met the guy for a total of, what, fifteen minutes? Was it…did you feel magic from him or something?”

“Nothing that I could feel,” Sif interjected bluntly, “and trust me, I spent near two millennia with a first-class sorcerer and I know what being around magic feels like.”

“Not magic,” Thor said quietly, eyes now red-rimmed and firmly fixed on the journal in his hand. “It’s what he said yesterday, about the boy he taught a long time ago. He was talking about Loki. He…Loki wrote of him in his journal, of the time he was sent to Vanaheim.”

Sif pursed her lips, perplexed, and Tony got the feeling that they were now less being spoken to and more an audience to a private conversation. “Since when was Loki sent to Vanaheim?”

There was a sad, self-chastising smile on Thor’s face which made the big guy look so fragile and vulnerable that even Tony felt moved to want to get up and give the man a hug. A man of his height and muscle mass shouldn’t be allowed to have such a delicate and fragile side, damnit!

“It was a long time ago, Sif. You may not recall Loki’s attempt to pass the Testing tournament and he – ”

“Weakened his opponent with a poisoned dart! Yes! How could I have forgotten?” Sif’s nostrils flared at the memory, and her upper lip curled into a ferocious snarl that had Tony checking his nearest exit. “He tried to kill you after you exposed his foul play, and…Odin’s beard, Eir told us that if we had gotten you to her infirmary any later, you would not have been able to be revived. Then that viper didn’t have the courage to apologise to either you, or…who was the name of the warrior he tried to shame in the tournament? And fled to Vanaheim! Stayed there for twelve, no, fifteen years!”

“Thirty,” Thor corrected, soft and heartbroken. “He stayed for thirty, and wished he never came back to Asgard. He nearly killed me because I called him a cheat in front of the entire city at a tournament he only enrolled in because that was the only way he thought he could fit into my circle of friends.”

“You’ll forgive me,” said Sif tightly, biting each word, “if my recollection of that day was largely overridden by memory of your blood gushing out from your arteries faster than a broken faucet after Loki’s summoned creatures nearly ripped you apart. All I could do was put my hands on those terrible wounds and pray to Bor to preserve you.”

Thor had no answer for that and turned back to the Avengers. “Rob Eon knew who I was, and he was trying to tell me, or perhaps taunt me, by alluding to his acquaintance with my brother and the circumstances of their meeting.”

Steve sighed. “So if Rob Eon is Orthorion, how do you figure he’s also Oberon?”

Pepper turned out to be the first to notice, and her hands flew to her mouth as she gasped in horror. Though she tried to maintain her composure, her face had turned ashen grey and she nervously wetted her lips with her tongue as bought up Rob Eon’s name on the main screen and rearranged the letters.

Oberon
It could have been one hideous and unfunny coincidence like how Battle Royale and The Hunger Games shared almost exactly the same plot despite the latter’s author swearing dead she’d never read the former, but then Pepper started to bring out the whole dossier on Rob Eon, having Jarvis trawl through all the world’s databases and servers for anything related to the man, dating back to the 1940s and 50s when he first made headlines and established business dealings with Howard Stark.

Fury maintained an ice-cold demeanour but for another twitch of the eyebrow whilst everyone else went into differing states of shock and disgust for having missed something so goddamn obvious!

Throughout the decades, though the style of his suit or the cut of his hair may have been dictated by the ever-shifting trends of fashion, Rob Eon’s face did not appear to have aged a single day, and his eyes were as ancient and knowing as ever.

Everyone turned to Pepper with various degrees of accusation, some more deadly than others.

Tony held his hands up. “All right, guys, let’s not suddenly morph into a pack of feral dogs and turn on each other. I’m sure Pepper has a very good explanation, right honey?”

Pepper stared at him owlishly, face now entirely drained of colour, her pallor stark against the flame red of her hair. She hopelessly shrugged. “He’s British?” she offered meekly to a collective of sighs and groans. “I just thought he aged gracefully, or had one hell of a good cosmetic surgeon with regular botox injections. I mean, this is New York.”

“It’s ok. No harm’s been done right,” Tony said, but his own conviction was lacking as he tried to dredge up every meeting that he did have with the philanthropist which he actually did attend. “I mean, he just good at fund-raising, right, and….oh jeez…”

Fury’s one good eye narrowed and the rest of the Avengers stilled. “What is it, Stark?”

“Yeah…um…” Tony raked his brain furiously for a way to put it so that he wouldn’t come out of this looking like the biggest ignorant loser who couldn’t appreciate a clue even if it socked him across the face with a bag of bricks. “Well, you see, in my former career as er – ”

“Merchant of death?” Hawkeye helpfully supplied.

“Call it whatever, anyway, Eon used to run some of his own designs past me, and I produced a few…” under Natasha’s uncompromising stare, he cleared his throat and his fingers fidgeted with his tablet, “okay, a lot of weapons for him, but that was before we each had our private epiphanies and went on to do world-saving stuff!”

Fury pinched the bridge of his nose. “So let me get this straight. Rob Eon, aka Oberon, aka Orthorion, aka Elf Land’s equivalent of Bin Laden, most likely has several tones of high-tech weaponry stock-piled or already distributed from your days as an arms manufacturer, is an intergalactic terrorist and wanted criminal…. and you continue to give him lots of money?”

“Every dollar we put into his charities is accounted for,” Pepper said defensively, bringing up more documents onto the holographic screen. “He is audited annually by Deloittes and publishes their findings on his website. In contrast to most other NGOs, his expenses on administration are only at 8 to 12%, which is on the low side!”

“And those shelters and safe injecting rooms that he’s established are real,” Steve quipped up.

Fury waved his hand dismissively, because goodwill and charitable works by the piece-meal was a pale contrast to the harm that the elf could do, on earth and in the other realms. “Romanov, Barton,
put together a team of watchers. I want at least two men and video surveillance on Eon at all times starting now. Coulson, speak to our friends at the NSA and let us into their servers so we can put together Eon’s movements for the past six months. Every place that he goes to, every person that he talks to, I want it investigated. Danvers, redouble SWORD’s efforts to track down Boris, bring in and interrogate all his known associates. If they literally can’t stand the heat, I want to know about it.”

Danvers’ brows furrowed. The indiscriminate element in Fury’s orders was giving her pause for reconsideration. “What authority do I have to bring every known contact in for questioning? The bodega owner that Boris gets his cigarettes from could really turn out to be just a human bodega owner making couple of bucks selling cigarettes to a frequent customer. And with the potential number of persons of interest, exactly where am I going to be interrogating them?”

Fury tried staring her down with his one menacing good eye. He was uncompromising in his resolution which only inflamed Danvers’ defiance and in turn, Captain America’s good conscience was mulling over Fury’s trampling of all sorts of civil rights and liberties.

“Romanov can set up a mobile blacksite for your persons of interest and keep it moving to stay off the Gatekeeper’s radar. Danvers, let me make this clear,” Fury declared in low, hard tones that permitted no argument, “if, in the hunt for the Gatekeeper, I inconvenience a few of our fellow human citizens, that’s a price I’m willing to pay to at least get a face for this guy who thinks earth will give asylum to any terrorist or fugitive.”

“Indefinite detention and no legal representation is an inconvenience for you?” Bruce remarked, astounded. “Using illegally obtained information to take away someone’s right to privacy is an inconvenience for you? What next? SHIELD can’t work our which of the sixty-some thousand frost giants on earth are hostile, or who and where they are, so let’s just inter all the Russians who live in Brighton Beach into camps for who knows how long until we are satisfied they’re not frost giants? It’s just an inconvenience, right?”

Fury scowled and said testily. “Dr Banner, if you and Dr Foster could analyse the energy readings from the last time the Gatekeeper attacked the Avengers mansion and developed an algorithm to track and trace it, we might not have to resort to such drastic measures.”

“Wormholes and astrophysics are not my field,” Banner replied with heat, face flushed. “Dr Foster’s the one with the expertise and she can’t get enough sleep to function during the day, something which your doctors were supposed to be looking into but haven’t come up with any solutions.”

“Jane’s still having nightmares?” Pepper asked in shock. “It’s been five months. Have the doctors at least discovered the cause?”

“If SHIELD cared so much after Dr Foster and her work, they’d be putting more resources to helping her instead of throwing prescription drugs at her and going on wild goose chases.”

“Rob Eon is a solid lead,” Coulson said in a calm voice, hoping to be the voice of mediation and reason. “The best of SHIELD’s medical teams are looking out for Dr Foster. She will be going into an induced coma tomorrow so we can do more thorough scans and studies of her brain.”

“Excuse me,” Thor rumbled, suddenly looking like deer in headlights. “What is this coma?”

Coulson diplomatically schooled his expression into one of sympathy and concern with practised ease. “It’s short for comatose. Dr Foster came close to self-harm the other day when she began to hallucinate and thought zombies were going to eat her alive. She cannot sleep and wakes up
screaming. The doctors all believe putting her into a comatose condition is the only way for her mind and body to shut down and get some rest while they figure out what’s wrong.”


“I led my brother and the Warriors Three against a Lich King one time who was capable of placing thoughts that were not our own in our heads.”

Sif shuddered at the memory and subconsciously rubbed her arms. “It created distressing images in my mind, of my friends and brothers-in-arms slain on the battlefield, in an attempt to drive me to despair.”

“Oh yes,” Thor said grimly. “And it attempted to seduce me and lull me into relinquishing Mjolnir.”

“The bastard,” Tony hissed without realising he had spoken aloud. He sighed, exasperated when everyone stared. “And Jarvis accuses me of not reading the briefing notes. Remember what the Red Skull told us? He hasn’t been able to open a portal since the Gatekeeper put him out of business in the 1950s. He wants to have a monopoly. The Gatekeeper eliminates his competition and ensures only he continues to dominate the field.”

“Speaking from personal experience, Stark?”

“One more smart-arse comment, Hawkeye…” Tony left the threat hanging despite the archer’s broad grin saying ‘bring it on, down in your garage at 6pm’. “The selfish prick doesn’t want anyone, like Dr Foster, knowing how to open portals and gateways like he can. I’m willing to bet Stark Tower that the Gatekeeper is behind Dr Foster’s condition. He can’t come into the mansion to sabotage her work, but if he takes her out of action altogether, there won’t be anything he needs to sabotage.”

Thor started looking distressed and vengeful, a bad combination considering he had in his hands Magical Hammer of Planetary Destruction +5 as well as a bonus +4 to attack against People Who Piss Him Off. “The Gatekeeper would do that to someone who had never harmed or crossed him?”

“Typical of magic users,” Sif sniffed in disdain. “Cowardly, selfish and cruel.” And not unlike someone I used to know, she seemed to silently add, and perhaps there was a ring of truth to it. Tony paid attention to it, because if magic users all carried certain personality traits, her profiling, whether it be offensive to Thor’s dead brother or not, would be invaluable.

“My knowledge and understanding of the arcane is limited, but I will offer your healers whatever assistance I can,” Thor solemnly pledged.

“Good. Hank and T’Challa are also part of the medical team looking after Dr Foster. There is a meeting tomorrow morning. You should be there. As for you, Van Dyne, and you, Stark,” Tony bristled. It was automatic, but he never liked being ordered around. It was against the natural state of the universe. “Go and lean on your billionaire buddy, Bruce Wayne. He’s cut off all communication with SHIELD since our last sting got botched. I still don’t know what fabulous alien he got for his one billion dollars.”

“Watch out for his butler,” Coulson added. “He’s got a black belt in karate.”

Hawkeye’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re also speaking from personal experience?”

Coulson smiled blandly. “Let’s just say that he didn’t take too kindly to me insisting that I’ll wait on his front porch until Mr Wayne came back from his alleged round-the-world cruise.”
He was being dragged along the ground by the hair, the sharp tugging pain prevailing over the
general dull ache that was eating away at his body.

Pain.

Pain meant that he was alive.

Pain meant that it wasn’t over.

Pain meant that he couldn’t even die properly.

A tidal wave of desperation surged in him, fuelled by a rush of the last memories of shattering
rebuke which completely undid him, and now lent him a sudden, frenzied burst of strength. He
thrashed, clawed at the hold in his hair, and screamed fury and damnation at the cruel and
decieving One-Eye.

“Still got some fight left in him,” someone directly overhead grunted.

“Deal with it and take this spy to the Master.”

There was a blinding blow to the head and then the world faded into sweet silence and darkness.

When he came to, there were soft touches running through his hair, a damp compress on his
forehead and small bubble bursts of relief and sedation happily coursing through his system.

Groggy, he tried to sit up. Someone spoke, the sound oscillating into a garbled jumble in his head,
and an insistent pressure on his chest urged him to recline.

Then the Observatory, the brilliant and awesome energies of the Bifrost beam hammering down on
Jotunheim, Thor all golden and righteous and noble, the glittering bridge splintering and cracking
under his feet before being torn assunder, No Loki, all came flooding back and an animal howl of
loathing and despair was ripped from his vocal chords.

I will end you all. End this. End me. End me or I will set fire to Asgard until it all burns, the
brightest of all stars in this galaxy.

His boiling and tempest rage suddenly quelled to the mirror stillness of a lake in the dead of night
and he let out a great, tremulous breath which had been choked in his lungs before his body fell
limp and he was embraced by a dreamless sleep.

The next time he awoke, it was to excruciating pain wracking his entire body, weak and trembling
under the merciless onslaught, and he tasted blood in his mouth as his feverish mind skittered
between delirium and unconsciousness. When he tried to move, he was punished by sizzling pain
from his joints that shot right up to the back of his brain and made his teeth chatter and clench. It
was as if the entire weight of the universe was pressing down on him, trying to crush him, to
swallow him, chew him and spit out his remains. He was being drawn and quartered agonizingly
slowly so that he could feel each and every dislocation of his joints or the snapping of tendons.

“Hold him still until I complete the workings of the healing spell.”

“No,” he rasped even though it was like swallowing a bucket of nails and the effort made his chest
spasm and cough up another mouthful of blood. “Don’t. End it. End me.”
“My bright-eyed and talented child, rest, and let me heal you.”

Hot tears leaked out of his eyes. “Just let me die, or I take them all with me.”

“Sleep.”

And his mind was mercifully shut down.

The third time he awoke, he was met with indescribable fatigue and exhaustion, his limbs nothing but leaden weights, and he felt inclined to close his eyes and return to sleep.

“Up. And drink this.”

Like a puppet, he was manoeuvred until he was upright and propped against fluffed up pillows, and the rim of a goblet was pressed against his lips. A hot, bitter brew sloshed down his throat before he could refuse, leaving him frantically looking for something to scrape his tongue against to be rid of that awful flavour.

There was a low, humoured chuckle that had a ring of familiarity. He blinked bleary eyes clouded by sleep until it cleared, and he beheld a visage that was the ghost of a beautiful memory or the figment of wish-fulfilling imagination. Sleek, blond hair so pale it was almost silver, set against white skin like polished marble, and an ageless and exquisite face from which a pair of eyes, all-seeing and all-knowing, kindly studied him.

“M-mentor?” he whispered, afraid if he uttered the man’s name he would disappear like a faded illusion, leaving him with nothing but reality and all its bitterness. Tentatively, he reached out, to touch the man, and the man captured his hand in both of his own.


“It really is you,” he quietly sobbed.

The old wood elf lord smiled fondly though the grip around his hand tightened. “You bear the face of one of my dearest and most incorrigible of students, and your magical signature is markedly familiar, but there are many confirmed sightings of the second prince of Asgard with his brother and a small band of Aesir’s finest currently along the southern mountain ridges of Nidavellir keeping troll populations within sustainable limits. What has happened? Are you a homunculus, an experiment by my most intractably inquisitive of students gone wrong?”

Loki blinked and felt his chest tighten and heartbeat begin to race at the first signs of panic. The grip around his hand tightened further, providing an anchor and calm through which his mind could put together the pieces of his thoughts into a coherent theory.

And though his vocal chords were strained and raw, he nevertheless pushed himself and recounted the events which accumulated and snowballed into his current predicament. He told his mentor of Odin’s announcement of his imminent abdication and the crowning of Thor as the new king. He spoke of how he took Odin’s decision as a personal insult. He described the ruin which he thought was to be Asgard’s now seemingly inevitable future. And then he laid bare his machinations and schemes, the luring of frost giants into the Vault, an abrupt and sour interruption to a glorious crowning ceremony. He cherished those few simple words which, alone, were sufficient to send Thor storming off towards Jotunheim. And then the sounds of something breaking, perhaps his sanity, when his skin turned the same shade of blue as the frost giants.

During Thor’s exile in Midgard, he described the loathing and abhorrence he had for the throne and for the people whom he now had to govern and protect. People who were not even his own. People
who long ago treated him different, even if they did not know of his true heritage.

Then he delivered his ultimate act of vengeance against Asgard, by killing the one whom they desired should be king and to force them to forever bow to the one whom they detested, as much as he detested them in return. A poisonous and hateful embrace, for that was all either of them had deserved. But Thor prevailed, even over death, and when the mighty blows of Mjolnir destroyed the crystal bridge and drove the Bifrost out of control, there opened up a vortex, an abyss which was deep and dark and might swallow and obliterate even a god.

He’d decided that that might be a good place for it all to end and let go.

“The Bifrost was spewing forth pure energy, and the vortex was an incomprehensible void of time, space and probability at war with each other. I thought the chaos would be enough to tear me apart, but instead, it appears I have been hurled back in time instead. Pray tell, what year is this according to the universal calendar? Is this Vanaheim?”

Orthorion stared at him for a long time, trying to strip away any deceit. At last, he murmured, “It’s the year 14759. You are on Midgard.”

Loki couldn’t help but laugh bitterly, and the effort cost him as his lungs burned and the metallic taste of blood began to creep into his mouth. “Thrown back more than half a millennia onto the same, cursed mud ball planet which made Thor so sentimental.”

“That is one pretty tale you spin. What truth can you offer? The second prince’s jealousy of his brother is well known.”

Loki took no offence. If he were in Orthorion’s position, he would have demanded proof and then some. Stitching together his waning concentration and calling to him the last of his energies, he reached into his personal pocket dimension which rested at right angles with the world, and plucked out the Casket of Ancient Winters.

There was, and will only ever be one casket, and its power and age was not something even a sorcerer of Loki’s calibre could mimic. It sat innocently in his hands even as its latent energies worked to unhinge the bindings of Odin’s illusion, driving away his façade and revealing steel blue hues beneath.

He watched as Orthorion stiffened at the sight of the artefact and the changes that it worked upon Loki. Hesitantly, he reached out and laid one hand against Loki’s cheek, showing no emotion even as his own pale skin burned at the touch.

“By the Nine, what has Odin done?” he whispered, horrified.

Loki stared at the casket in his hands. He didn’t have any answers.

“And you say in five centuries time or thereabouts, Thor will be due to ascend the throne of Asgard?”

Two fat droplets of tears trickled down Loki’s cheeks. “Can I tell you a story, mentor?”

Orthorion coated himself in his own powerful healing magics such that when he pressed his lips to Loki’s forehead and brushed away the tears, he remained unhurt. “Anything. I am here, listening.”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for the thoughtful and insightful reviews for my last chapter. The delay for this chapter was due to the fact that I got side-tracked and started on Chapter 13, which already has 2000+ words. Hopefully there will be an early update for the next chapter.

Apologies if this chapter seemed a little slow, but I am loving about writing the interaction between Thor and Sif; one who feels too much guilt, and one who was ignorant and still remains ignorant of the impact of her own actions. However, this won't turn into pure Loki-apologia, and hopefully I will be able to flesh that out some more in the story that Loki tells to Orthorion in the next chapter.

Although I intended Oberon to be a minor character when I first started this fic, I am quite pleased with the position he currently occupies - sort of like the father figure Loki should have had. As stated above, I don't intend for this fic to be Loki-apologia, and it would be shallow if Odin was simply cast as cold-hearted and manipulative. However, in Thor 2, Odin's willingness to simply lock Loki away for life, when his first option was death, seemed like it was a decision he arrived at too easily. It almost seemed as if Loki had outlived his intended use and death was a means of discarding him. Punish the man if you must, but surely show some private reluctance for it??

Anyhow, am wondering whether there should be some sort of show-down in the future between Othorion and Odin. In any event, I have to deliver Plan B first. Loki and Thor will soon meet, and *gasp* the plot-line will finally start to move again.

Thanks again to all for your patience.
“I am embarking on a quest to slay evil!”

“Great. See you in two moons. Please shut the door on your way out.”

“I mean for you to accompany us,” Thor groused, moving close enough until he was leaning over Loki’s shoulder and peering down at the parchments and open tomes spread about his study table. “You have been secluded here in your study all season and your absence was noted at the Midwinter Night’s feast. What has your undivided attention this time?”

“The reason for grass,” Loki easily lied and ignoring the rest of Thor’s questions with practiced indifference. “Highly important stuff. Must finish it. See you in two moons.”

Without looking up, he could literally hear Thor’s frown. “Even I know you’re not being truthful. There, that’s the rune for bridge, and that rune means an absence of light. What in the realms – ”

“Congratulations on being able to read,” Loki snapped, vanishing away his scrolls with the wave of his hand and finally turning around to face his brother, noting the deepening furrows on his brow. “Did Mother send you?”

Thor’s silent reproachful expression was answer enough.

“Do not invite me to accompany you on account of Mother. Go. I shall placate her in due course.”

“She will have my ear, and then some, if I leave for Niffleheim without you. She was most insistent that you join us.”

“If you cannot bear Mother’s chiding, you are unlikely to endure the challenges of your quest. Consider it a warm up. Now go.” He stood and began to push Thor back towards the entrance to his study chambers, eager to return to his solitude and studies.

“Our quest is to annihilate a nest of draugar, led by a necromancer!” Thor declared in hopes it might arouse his interest, for in the past, he had successfully enticed Loki into journeying with them on promises of strange and unusual artifacts or a chance for Loki to demonstrate his superiority over another magic user.

Loki smiled politely. “Good for you. Out.”

“Loki,” Thor whined, now straining against the push and easily winning out with his bulk and size. Loki grunted and swore with effort, but Thor refused to budge. “I desire your company and your tricks and illusions will be of use every now and then.”

Loki silently seethed though the politeness in his smile held. “How generous of you, brother, particularly in your appraisal of my limited skills. But I am sure you are more than capable of completing this quest without my cantrips and illusions, all of which are ineffective against the undead anyway. So again, thank you for thinking of me, but I –”

“- are coming along,” Thor said firmly, arms crossed. “There may even be vampires consorting with the necromancer, and where there are vampires, there are likely to be werewolves,” he
stressed the word with heavy and blatant meaning, accompanied by the wriggling of eyebrows, knowing how much capturing a werewolf meant to Loki. For all of a troll’s regenerative ability, Loki had always wanted to acquire samples of lycan blood to examine its properties of legendary healing and near instant regeneration. While trolls were in abundance over the plains of Nidavellir, werewolves had intelligence and cunning and revealed themselves only under the blight of a full moon and never with fanfare or announcement. The last sighting was more than two centuries ago.

Though the possibility was remote, Loki never gave up an opportunity to go hunting for werewolves.

He had barely nodded his acquiescence when Thor slapped him on the back in jubilation, nearly sending him half flying across the room, informed him that the departure date was two days hence, and swept up of his study, billowing cloak and all, no doubt to inform their Mother of his successes.

Loki’s shoulders slumped. He would have to go begging from one of the Warriors Three for further information about the quest so that he could adequately prepare the spells, charms and other apparatuses which he might need for the adventure.

Volstagg was vague and unhelpful, Fandral too busy wenching and telling tall tales and Hogun out of town shopping for last minute supplies, which left only Sif, and she did little to hide her contempt and disgust.

“How many days has it been since you’ve groomed,” she sniffed and glared at him, “or taken a bath for that matter.”

Loki blinked for he had no ready answer. His study was underground beneath his private chambers with no window and lit only by inexhaustible crystals or witchlights that never waxed or waned. Time was defined not defined by the passing of the days but by the turning of pages, the length of writing in his scrolls or the irregular hunger pangs. He shrugged, “Two and a half tomes?” he guessed.

Sif scowled at his incomprehensible answer. “What do you want?”

“Information,” Loki said, pleased by Sif’s directness. It meant neither needed to endure the other’s presence for longer than was necessary. “Thor has invited me to join your next quest in the coming days.”

He took no small delight in Sif’s horror which she could not conceal before it descended into outrage. “Has he, now?”

“Mother’s orders, I am afraid,” Loki sighed with feigned resignation. “And now that I’m coming along, I will do my best not to get killed. It would help if I knew more about this proposed quest other than some reference to a necromancer meddling with the dead.”

Sif’s scowl darkened. “It’s no necromancer. There was a deranged magic user,” she said, pointedly looking at him and he deliberately smiled wider because he knew that it annoyed her, “who turned himself into a lich and is building no small army of the undead along the borders of Svartalfheim and Niflheim. We are to put a stop to this lich before he turns Svartalfheim into his own personal playground.”

Loki blinked and his mouth ran dry, earning him more scorn from the female warrior. Perhaps she was unaware of the ridiculous complexity and skill needed of a sorcerer to transform into a lich, and the powers one inherited on becoming the walking undead. Maybe this quest wasn’t such a
Sif smirked. “No one would blame you for backing out now. Shall I inform Thor that you will not be travelling with us after all?”

What Loki would give to see Thor and the Warriors Three crawl back to Asgard, their dignity in strips and tatters, their bodies mangled and broken by defeat. It would almost be worth swallowing the indignity of Sif’s unspoken insult. But on the other hand, the lich’s grimore and study notes would be an acceptable consolation prize in the event no werewolves showed up.

“Unfortunately, the Queen has ordered that I go,” he said smoothly with no hint that he had been stung by Sif’s words, again because he knew it would annoy her the most. “So go I must. Is there any other information which you could impart? Have scouts been sent to report on the size of the nest or the numbers?”

“We have no information on numbers, merely that there is just one lich and a small army of undead at the foot of Mt Hunger. Thor has put together a company of thirty men, veteran swordsmen who have all seen at least two wars and three campaigns.”

It wasn’t much to work with, so Loki prepared the usual draugar-fighting tools – an array of fire-based spells, fire bombs, blessed water, rune-stones inscribed with divine wards and the like. He had a flawless star-diamond the size of a quail egg set into an elegant platinum pendant and slung it on a long chain around his neck, a key component for one of his new, killer area-effect spells that could re-write the ways of undead hunting and cast sorcerers into prominence. Maybe for once, he’ll have a starring role in the tales spun by the bards.

His jewellery and other finery earned him snickers and smirks from the assembled company of warriors all dressed in full battle armour and regalia as they assembled at the Observatory of the Bifrost. Thor was first to articulate his surprise.

“Brother, we are likely to do gruesome battle with things that should be dead, not host the ambassador from Vanheim. I do not believe they will appreciate your rings and your bangles. You are better off with a chain shirt and a cold-iron sword than…that,” he gestured to the delicate silver engraved wand hanging from his belt without even coming close to guessing that the power stored in that shard alone was worth a king’s ransom thrice over.

Loki rolled his eyes. “Knowing the way I fight, I will end up in the shadows taking pot-shots at any nasty critters that come too close. I will not be in the thick of battle to require heavy armour or something pointy.” That, and I don’t require a blade to kill, he added silently, though he knew nobody would appreciate the sentiment for what was the point of glorious questing if your hands never got dirty?

Not wishing to pursue the embarrassing line of questioning any longer, Thor hastened to change the subject, and spun around to address the captain of the squad of thirty men. “Captain Oktell, all prepared?”

Oktell seemed to be another six inches taller and twice as wide from Loki’s last memory of the man, and he threw a sharp salute as the rest of the warriors drew their swords in the traditional oath of fealty. “All ready to go, my prince.”

“Then let’s go and vanquish the undead and restore peace to the realms!” Thor cried, never one to need long and elaborate rallying speeches.

The Bifrost beam deposited them somewhere in the middle of nowhere in Niffleheim, and the
deathly chill of the realm immediately made them unwelcome by biting into their skin and burrowing deep into their bones as if all their furs and leathers were for nought. An impenetrable fog and thick clouds hung low overhead, obscuring the moon and mountain tops, casting the landscape in an endless stretch of oppressive barren monotony.

Thor brushed aside the hoarfrost crystallising on his naked tanned arms and squinted as he surveyed the bleak horizons before him. “There,” he pointed off to the east towards a ragged stretch of mountain ranges, sharp like the razor teeth of a saw, veiled in unnatural, dark swirling mists and smog that clung ominously to every ridge and crag like the rags of death’s shroud. Loki was immediately filled with a sense of foreboding and morbid anticipation as he tasted fear and desecration in the stale, stiff air.

Thor led the company and rode them hard, bursting into rallying songs every now and then to keep up the men’s spirits as the atmosphere, repressive and heavy with decay and death, weighed heavily and clawed at their souls with poisoned talons. Loki fortified his mental shields against the subtle intrusions into the mind, which was the cause of everyone’s discomfort and quiet agitation, and was somewhat proud that he was able to shrug off the chill of the realm even as Volstagg, with all his natural and abundant layers of insulation, drew his furs tighter about him.

“Oh, how the great bards and minstrels will write great tales of our heroic deeds here when we lay waste to this necromancer,” Volstagg declared, sounding smug.

Fandral gave a jolly laugh. “And think how all the ladies will swoon when they hear of Fandral and his astonishing sword-play which defeated a legion of the undead!”

Loki looked away and snorted softly to himself at the inherent ridiculousness in the boasting. At best, the dandy could see off a small pack of zombies, but pit him toe to toe with an Alghoul, or worse, a Revenant, and he’d bet a heavy pouch of gold that Fandral the Dashing would quickly find himself among the ranks of the undead as Fandral who was Dashed to Pieces.

Sif’s sharp ears picked up the contemptuous noise he made. She cocked an eyebrow. “And how do you think the minstrels will describe your contributions to this quest, Loki?” she asked archly.

His hands clutched onto the reigns of his horse tighter in reflex at the keen challenge and barbed scorn ever present in Sif whenever she addressed him, because to her, his title meant nothing if she could knock out his teeth on the sparring grounds with the pommel of her sword or her gauntleted fist. He kept his voice light and affected a tone of jest. “The usual, my lady, an invaluable asset to the questing warriors, raining down fire, whipping up winds, parting the earth to swallow the hordes whole. I expect they will want to erect a statue of me in every local town square with the inscription: *Loki, greatest wizard of our time.*”

The company broke out into uproarious laughter, and Loki laughed the loudest and hardest of them all even if felt no different to plunging a knife into his own heart and savagely twisting, because the other alternative was to turn this knife on the lot of them, slaughter them like pigs, then die under the merciless might of Mjolnir.

Volstagg wiped away the tears as his mirth diminished into chuckles and hiccups. “That is one of your better jokes in a long time.”

“Indeed it was,” Fandral agreed, broad grin unable to be erased despite the overall gloom and dreariness of the realm around them. “You should accompany us more often. There’s only so many times we can endure hearing Thor recount the time he faced three mountain trolls with nothing but his strident will and an oak branch all the while wearing only his loin-cloth. I miss the wit in your banter.”
Loki indulged with a playful answer, though deep down, he was certain another little part of him died, forever being reduced to nothing more than the questing company’s jester. “I shall do my best to oblige. Would you like to hear of the time I single-handedly cleared the Threlfall catacombs of bruxas and devourers who had been hunting and eating the young men in the surrounding villages?”

To more jeering whoops and sniggers, Loki told the tale with flare but no less accuracy, down to the gory details of offering himself as tribute to the Cemetaur, the powerful leader of the coven and self-styled Queen of the Night, and being stripped half naked before they discovered the scabbed runes he had carved in his own flesh with an alchemical silver dagger. Their eyes burned out of their undead sockets merely from the sight of them, and when they tried to lay hands on him, they disintegrated into sludge, melting away into thick rivers of foul smelling decay and decomposition. Their queen, the cemetaur, overcame his arcane defences and knocked him down, and as he lay on the ground, stunned and winded, she opened her mouth, crammed with rows upon rows of shark’s teeth, and tore a good bite out of his shoulder.

“How did you get yourself out of that fix?” Sif asked in disbelief, suspecting a catch.

Loki prettily shrugged his shoulders. “I had smeared my skin with necrophage oil and imbibed a potion of Black Blood moments before I allowed myself to be captured. Sure, it felt like I had set my own stomach and intestines on fire, but my blood thereby became transmuted into a poison lethal to their kind. She rolled over and was dead before she even got a chance to complain that I gave her indigestion.”

“There’s no such potion,” Sif scoffed, eyes boring into his back and refusing to accept his explanation.

“Trust me, dear lady, there is. An expert alchemist with my level of skill is able to concoct this darkly wondrous elixir and drink it with the confidence that the only harm it will do to me is that I will crap blood for a week afterwards.”

“Brother, I am not keen on you ingesting brews which seem to do you more harm than good.”

“Thor, I liken it to you copping a dozen crippling blows in the course of taking down your quarry.”

“The damage I suffer is not-self inflicted,” Thor wryly pointed out.

Loki smiled, entirely humourlessly. “Same difference.”

They made camp for the night on an outcropping of rock that shielded them from the harshest of the shrieking winds that ravaged their eardrums and made the horses nervous. The warriors all grumbled as they struggled to set up their tents and nursed a small fire, the only speck of light and warmth in the relentless dark for leagues in all directions. With no more stories to tell for the day, mundane conversation and boasts of valour kept everyone’s minds away from their empty desolation of the dead realm, boring Loki to tears, so he took his chance to slip away when no one was looking.

Niffelheim was one of those realms he had not had a great urge to delve into studying. Necromantic arts were low on his list of schools of magic to master as he never imagined that his path to power and prestige would be through the raising and control of corpses to do his bidding. That would never sit well with the populace of any realm, let alone Asgard. Picture the look of horror from his Father if he were to raid the graveyards in order to summon an army in defence of the Golden City. Loki was quite certain that Asgard would disown him, lynch him, crucify him, then burn him before it would allow itself to be defended and protected by desecrating the glorious
dead.

But now that he was here, there was something enigmatic about death, its temporal permanency and the mysteries of the soul which had its own unique appeal. Perhaps when he cemented his mastery of the shadow paths, he would turn his attention to these forbidden arts.

The sound of scuffling and hushed argument made his ears prick and he followed the source of the sound in interest. It required only a medium strength dispel chant to wipe out the camouflage.

He froze. Suddenly, a hundred sets of eyes from a hundred miserable, malnourished and disfigured dwarves were all staring at him, and prowling around the edge of the group was what he had sought for two centuries.

A werewolf.

It was white and silver, stood well over two meters tall on hind legs that bulged with muscles like cords of steel, rippling under the snow white fur. Eyes glittering like flawless rubies full of fire fixed on him and Loki stood, rooted to the spot as fear and excitement warred for dominance within him.

The lycan headed directly towards him, his movements fluid and agile, his feet hardly leaving any impression on the ice sludge and dirt on the ground. He was death on two legs, primal, fearless, violent, and he was powerful and magnificent and stunning under the wane light of the moon that filtered past the dark stranglehold of clouds.

Loki knew he was a dead man. He should be shouting, raising the alarm and attracting the attention of his brother and the Warriors Three, but instead, he stood there gaping in pure adoration at such a splendid specimen of a nature’s perfected killing machine staring him down. Unbeknownst to himself, there was a ridiculous smile of joy plastered on his face, visible in the reflection of those crimson eyes which peered at him in curiosity.

“You never saw us, got it?” it said softly as it lowered its great head to see eye to eye with Loki, its voice a deep, smooth and entirely reasonable bass that made you nod your head and want to agree.

Finally, he put two and two together in his dazed but quickly recovering mind and he let out a breathless laugh of pure, unbridled wonder, a little boy again. “You are a servant of the Gatekeeper!”

One giant paw clamped over his mouth, and the great beast’s eyes suddenly darted around, as if concerned there may be eavesdroppers other than the hundred or so dwarves sullenly glaring at them. Loki giggled as the stiff fur on the outer coat pricked him in the face.

“For goodness sakes, keep it down, all right!”

“These are mine serfs?” Loki asked, gesturing to the sorry looking group of dwarves, slaves born to work in the mines for that magical, and highly profitable substance known as lyrium. Any realm which worked with magic and constructed machines which ran on magic relied on lyrium, though few cared that prolonged exposure to the malleable substance gradually destroyed the bodies and minds of those condemned with the task of gathering the product.

A good two dozen or so of the healthier looking men with fuller beards had crude, makeshift weapons in their hands, and they looked like they knew how to use it. They formed the outer ring of the crowd, whilst crippled women and broken children huddled in fear in the centre.

“There are dead things which walk around here,” the werewolf said, not answering his question.
and always looking about, sniffing the air and exhaling great puffs of condensation. “Didn’t expect it. They drove us from our designated transfer point and now we have to wait for alternative transport which requires a moon that keeps getting blocked out by those damn clouds!” The werewolf suddenly paused, and then looked down at Loki again. “Say,” he said slowly as the hairs on the back of Loki’s neck began to stand on end in anticipation. “You’re a magic user, aren’t you?”

“And what if I am?”

The werewolf raised a hand and waggled the fingers on a great paw, displaying gleaming curved claws that left Loki mesmerised. “Couldn’t you, you know, part the clouds for us and allow the moon to shine?”

Loki laughed again, drawing curious stares and dubious mutterings from the crowd of dwarves, who must all have thought him mad. For some utterly unknown reason, Loki instantly took an immense and deep liking for this creature and forgot his fear.

“A trade,” he said, plucking an empty vial from inside his leather jerkin. “I have long desired to study the regenerative abilities of lycans and require a sample of their blood. Donate some to me, and I shall see you home.”

“Just prick your finger and give it to him so we can get out this accursed realm!” one of the dwarves complained.

The werewolf snarled and he spun around, ears twitching, glowing red eyes trying to pinpoint the guilty party who made the outburst before sighing as he gave up. “Ungrateful midgets. How much do you need?”

Loki was in the process of uncorking the vial when he heard the telltale whoosh of an arrow sailing through the air. Before he knew it, he had been gathered up in the werewolf’s arms and he felt the impact of four arrows sinking into the beast before it grunted in a combination of irritation and pain.

He had shielded Loki from an attack. The werewolf barely knew him but had used its own body to protect Loki.

An emotion unknown to him welled up in is chest, choked him, the pressure threatening to burst through his ribcage, and his eyes became hot and wet. Tears? He was familiar with tears, but this creature had done nothing to upset him. Had not made fun of him, demeaned him, or belittled his magic. And yet, Loki was upset. Incredibly, upset. So upset that all the usual controls and barriers he had in place to contain his magic were flattened in an instant as his rage was comparable to the colossal colliding of tectonic plates and the seismic shuddering of continents.

“They’re coming back! The undead are upon us!” one of the dwarfs shouted.

“Stand your ground! Men at the front, women and children at the back!” another barked out orders.

Loki shrugged out of the werewolf’s clutches, stalked to the front of the group of stunned dwarven warriors and glared at the advancing horde before jabbing a finger in their direction.

For a moment, all was still, and then dark, crackling tentacles of pure energy burst from the ground in the centre of the pack of zombies, lashing out with fury and wrath commensurate to Loki’s own, strangling, mangling and cutting down the rotting carcasses.

Loki then lifted his head in defiance to the closed heavens, punched one fist pulsating with energy
into the air above his head, and on his spoken command, great meteors of burning rock tore through the sky, blazing trails of red destruction, and crashed into enemy.

The dwarves cheered and clapped, but the werewolf caught scent of the enemy approaching from another direction, and without warning, countless undead were spilling across the plains, heedless of the fire as their dead flesh felt noting, and implacably advanced.

“Back to camp!” Loki snapped to the hundred serfs and pointed in the direction of the Aesir campfire. “It is a more defensible position.”

Camp was no safer. Thor and the Warriors three with the company of Asgard’s thirty veteran swordsman were fighting tooth and nail for their lives. The horses were the first to perish, torn apart and trampled underfoot, as the undead swarmed all over them with rusty, notched axes and swords while animated skeleton archers took to the higher ground and rained poison-tipped arrows down on the living.

Mjolnir was alive with power, burning with brightness equal to a star in his brother’s hand as he summoned great forks of lightening to stab into the heart of surging throngs of undead, bursting them apart. Chain lightening seared through the hungry dead, and the air soon stank of rotting and burning flesh.

It was killed or be killed. The dwarves with weapons and the werewolf threw themselves into the fight with a myriad of differing war cries. Loki watched, mesmerised, as the werewolf tore through the undead with lethal grace and power. He shrugged off the hundreds of wounds, regenerating instantly at the same time as a powerful swipe of his arms ripped heads and limbs off. Soon, he was a blood soaked avatar of pure destruction who was utterly beautiful to behold.

“Lachie, do something!”

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Loki materialised his staff and inserted the rune-inscribed wand into the core before stamping the butt of the staff hard onto the ground.

Let them see, let them all see his growing mastery over space and time and give him the respect and dues he deserved.

He forced alien words of power not meant to be spoken past his lips, creating ripples over the surface of reality that caused the entire battlefield to crash to an unnatural standstill. In the epicentre of the fight, with his crimson cloak blazing like a beacon rallying the remaining troops, Thor looked about him, bewildered as all the zombies and ghouls and other undead were still as statues, frozen in time.

Their eyes met briefly in a moment of understanding, and Thor raised Mjolnir, launching into the skies. The hammer spun, gathering to it dark crackling storm clouds that continued to accelerate, gathering force and speed until it became a raging tornado.

Gale force winds capable of uprooting hundred year old trees with roots burrowed miles into the earth blew away the undead like brittle dry autumn leaves. The corpses tossed around in the maelstrom of whipping, razor sharp winds colliding into each other and breaking into a million pieces.

Loki let go of the breath he was holding. His body shuddered from the exertion of such working but a rush of pride and adrenaline kept him standing as he leaned on his staff for support. There were cries of disgust as body parts fell from the sky like so many dead and diseased birds, but when the dwarves and men discovered what had happened as the storm died down, they cheered and
hugged and jostled for a chance to clang vambrace against vambrace in the old Asgardian tradition of respect with Thor.

It was then that they discovered that Hogun, Fandral and seven other warriors were missing and no amount of rummaging through the foul pile of torn limbs and parts would yield their bodies.

“They must have been taken!” Volstagg deduced.

“Where to?” Sif said, grimacing at the smell of decay as she continued to turn over dead, wet flesh.

One of the dwarf mothers spoke up. She pointed to a small crevice in the rock wall up ahead, innocuous and discrete in the night, just another blemish on the rock face. “In there. That’s most likely the entrance to tunnels leading deep underground.”

“Are you sure?” Thor asked, doubt heavy in his voice.

The female dwarf grunted, planting both her hands on her hips as she tilted her head up to the crown prince who would one day inherit all nine realms. “I was born in rock and until this morning knew nothing about the open skies or the stars or the moon. One hundred and seventy three years I have spent in the tunnels mining for lyrium. I would know the shape, colour and purpose of rock in my sleep. Ahead of you is a doorway and I saw some of the dead disappear into the shadows within.”

The Asgardians fell into a gloomy silence until Thor raised his voice and addressed the remaining troops. “Then the answer is simple. We go into the dark to rescue our friends.”

“Are you mad?” Loki hissed, stalking up to his brother’s side. “You have no idea how far, how deep those tunnels go, or what lies down in the depths waiting for us. We barely survived this wave. How many more are crawling down there – ”

“And where were you before the throng set upon us, before our friends were snatched, when we could have had the benefit of those spells you so often boast of?” Thor retorted, cutting him off.

Loki gaped, suddenly at a loss for words. Was he being blamed for this ill-prepared quest falling apart and Hogun and Fandral’s untimely disappearance?

Thor was not done with him, and his gaze settled on the mine serfs as if it was the first time he properly saw them, and he scowled. “Where does this scraggy bunch of dwarves suddenly come from, and what is this hideous…thing doing with them? With you?”

Hideous thing? The werewolf is the most singularly magnificent creature he had beheld since Slepnir was created, Loki wanted to scream back. Instead, his body shook in barely suppressed indignation and he couldn’t trust his voice not to break. “We have to return to Asgard, amass a proper battalion of warriors and a company of mages before we mount a full-frontal assault against this lich king.”

“By the time we return with reinforcements, Fandral and Hogun could be dead! Eaten!” Thor exclaimed. “No! They deserve a far better fate, and a far more honourable death. I will not entertain any decision other than immediate action. We go in there now with the numbers that we have. The element of surprise is on our side.”

“Thor,” Loki said heavily, “we barely survived the first wave of undead. There is a bloody lich king down there and you propose to confront him with just a handful of men?”

“Enough!” Thor bellowed, shocking Loki into silence. “This cowardly talk is not befitting of a
prince of Asgard. Know your place, brother. I am the leader of this quest, and I say we march into the halls of the lich king now and rescue our friends from his dark and nefarious clutches.”

Loki bit his bottom lip, eyes welling up with tears of frustration as his pleas for caution fell on utterly deaf ears. After all these years, why did it still sting, why did it still hurt, why did he still so foolishly and vainly hope that Thor might listen and carefully consider his words of counsel after all these centuries?

A heavy, comforting hand fell on his shoulder, and to his surprise, it was the werewolf, not Thor. “You are unhurt?”

It was almost galling that a complete stranger, rather than his own realms-folk or his brother, would express greater concern for his wellbeing following the aftermath of a mighty battle against insurmountable odds. The odd pressure in his chest and tightness in his throat returned. He roughly rubbed his eyes and squared his shoulders. “I am fine.”

“Let’s go. The Thunderer can charge into folly and death on his own. You need not follow in his foolish footsteps.”

‘Excuse me?’ Thor interjected as he stood between them, hammer cocked in one hand, eyes raking up and down the werewolf’s form where blood was still dripping from his matted fur. “Who are you? And do not stand so close to my brother.”

Loki gritted his teeth, feeling infuriation burn in his cheeks and magic spark at his fingertips as Thor now even sought to rule his choice of acquaintances. “Leave him alone,” he said with unexpected harshness that lashed out and forced Thor to stumble back a step. “He is only passing by and is no concern of yours. Go rushing into the unknown and to your glorious death if you must. I will do nothing to stop you, but I will also have nothing to do with this. I am going to call on Heimdall to take me back to Asgard.”

“You are coming with us, brother,” Thor declared, jaw set and eyes hard. It was not an invite but an order. “I need every man I have, and besides, think of what the people, what the Allfather, will think if they see you run home with your tail between your legs, abandoning your own kinsmen! But if we succeed, we will be hailed as heroes!”

You will be hailed a hero, Loki glumly thought, eyes trained on the ground. It didn’t matter what he did, he could never win. Thor could risk his life and the lives of his friends but be showered with accolades, while Loki, who did what no mage in five hundred years had done and stopped freaking time, would be berated for his cowardice.

“Salvage what equipment you can! We move in half an hour!”

The werewolf pulled him to one side and spoke quietly and urgently. “You have no obligation to do as that brainless dotard says. Ignore him and do as you will.”

Loki laughed, soft and hollow. No one had ever said those words to him, not even the Allmother, and he scarce trusted himself to believe he heard it. “Thor’s word carries almost the weight of law. If I defy him, I fear my mother and father’s disappointment in me will be complete and I will truly have nothing left. I will disperse the clouds for you and reveal the moon. Go.”

The lycan whined, long and low like a pained moan. He lowered his head, pushed his face close to Loki and suddenly a long, pink tongue flicked out and lapped at face, again and again, and then a big, cold, black nose pushed against his cheek in what could only be described as a nuzzle or else he was being prepped as a snack.
A small flush spread across the bridge of his nose. Impulsively, he reached out to touch the lycan, maybe pat it on the head, then quickly retracted his hands as he realised how ridiculous that might have looked in front of Thor and the rest of the warriors.

Impossibly, the werewolf smiled at him, and it was a kind, affectionate expression which hinted at something more, something deeper, something Loki didn’t see very often being aimed at him. He felt like a man wandering lost in the dry deserts for eons, half mad and delirious with thirst and who had finally stumbled across a lush, wet oasis.

“Send the dwarves on their way. I will stay long enough to accompany you in this suicide run and make sure you make it out in one piece.”

“You don’t owe me that much.”

“My choice,” the werewolf grinned. “And wouldn’t it be much easier for you to cast your spells without having to guard your back all the time?”

Loki didn’t argue with that. He sent up his will to the skies, flexed his magic and prised apart the thick blanket of clouds long enough for a single shaft of moonbeam to hit the camp.

One by one, the baffled dwarves vanished, popping out of existence, the pendant slung on their necks pulsing with rainbow colours as they were touched by the soft light of the moon. The remaining Asgardians stiffened at their sudden disappearance, then shot Loki a variety of dirty looks as Thor urged them to ignore the spectacle and finish their final preparations.

“And here. Take as much of my blood as you want. I’m covered in it,” the werewolf gestured up and down his body and the blood soaked fur. Loki easily collected three vials, then muttered a basic vanity spell and vanished away the rest of the stains so that there werewolf was pure white and glistening silver again.

What he would do to have a companion as arresting and brilliant as the lycan.

“Loki! Stop chatting to that thing and move. The rest of us are ready.”

Loki pulled a face and sighed as reached inside his pocket dimension, plucking out a beaker sloshing inside with an oily inky liquid. He broke the wax seal and the werewolf’s paws flew up to cover its nose.

“Rotting fish and stale vomit in the sewers have smelled better,” it grimaced. “What in the realms is it?”

“One dose of Black Blood,” Loki replied with none of his earlier cavalier attitude. He steeled himself against the godawful taste and raised the rim of the beaker to his lips. “If I die, I’m taking as many of them with me.”

He gulped down the foul viscous substance in one go, smashed the glass onto the ground as was tradition, and wiped away any traces lingering on his lips. Instantly, the blood began to boil in his veins, transmuting into a toxin lethal to the dead and the damned. The pain was near unbearable and he bit down hard enough to hear his teeth start to crack. The first time he imbibed the potion, he was a wreck writhing on the ground, clawing at his throat as he screamed himself hoarse. It hurt no less now, and his legs trembled like a newborn calf, but he wouldn’t give Thor or the other warriors the satisfaction of seeing it.

“Even your eyes have turned black,” the werewolf quietly observed.
“Loki! Come on!”

Sighing one last time, Loki straightened his back and followed his brother into doom.

Hogun was always the most intelligent of the Warriors Three, quiet and contemplating. He had left a trail of rings from his chain shirt for them to follow in the dank, ghostly tunnels that twisted and turned at every five paces, a labyrinth determined to trap its hapless and disorientated prey.

The werewolf remained at Loki’s side, as if that was where he naturally belonged, and would press his paws against the stone or sniff the air every now and then.

“This whole place stinks of the dark arts. Even the rocks are tormented by the desecration,” it remarked to Loki.

“Nothing good ever comes out of those who practice magic,” Thor muttered darkly, his mood souring with each mile they wandered deeper into the earth with the disquieting sensation that their every move was being watched. “Unnatural plagues, meddling with people’s minds, interfering with the natural order, fuelling their power often with the lives of others, and this, disturbing the dead. They are walking disasters, harbingers of misfortune.”

The werewolf raised his hackles and his eyes narrowed. “I am sure you entertain these same ungrateful thoughts as the healers mend your bones and heal your hurts.”

Thor snorted. “Hardly. That’s the white magic of healing, practised by kind women with not a single rotten bone in their body.”

“Quiet!” Sif hissed, silencing the bickering pair and led the warriors to a halt. “There’s…I heard something. A scratching…”

“Like toenails being scraped against stone by ghouls dragging their feet?” The werewolf stilled, ears twitching and argument forgotten. “It’s coming from both directions of the tunnel.”

Thor swore. “Run! We can’t afford a fight on both fronts in these cramped quarters!”

Three hundred meters later, the Aesir warriors collided with the welcoming party, a host of alghouls with fierce, snarling smiles hungering for flesh ripped straight from living victims, and a four ghastly garkains, terrible and ugly monsters with unnaturally pronounced incisors on a face largely dominated by their rank mouth, and hands ending in fingers like long, sharp, skinning knives. The very sight of them had already caused some of the warriors to freeze up, paralysed by their foul visage that they didn’t even have time to cry out.

Mjolnir began to thrum with power, summoning to her the elements until Sif shouted above the din of battle. “There’s not enough space down here, Thor! You’ll fry us with the lot if you call your lightening!”

Snarling in irritation, Thor hurled the ancient hammer through the masses, grinning as the meteorite head solidly connected with the garkains who did nothing but dumbly stand in its path. He blinked as they brushed off the blow and continued to stalk forward.

Loki felt helpless. He was in a similar situation like Thor where if he hurled a fireball, he’d burn the undead and all the warriors. Instead, he conjured a ring of swirling silver blades which shred apart anything that came close, lobbed one in the air and directed it hurtling like an arrow to pin one of the garkains to the wall. It shrieked, twisted, writhed and kicked as its wisps of smoke began to curl from where silver penetrated the flesh.
“They are immune to stun and weak to silver! Let me handle them. You deal with the rest!” Loki hollered to make himself heard. In that one moment’s distraction, an Alghoul scrabbled past the werewolf, slipped past the dancing blades and triumphantly sank its teeth into Loki’s arm that he’d raised to shield himself.

He winced at the pain as the ghoul’s teeth scraped against his ulnar bone, but then came the exhilaration of watching the twisted, dead creature jump back as if stung and hit the floor unmoving, eyes bulging out of their sockets and tongue sticking out.

Sif, who witnessed this, gawked, and there was no better feeling than proving someone wrong.

Laughing a slightly mad and demented laugh, Loki doubled the silver swords fanned out around him, and like a grand conductor, sent volley after volley in the direction of the gargains. His magic swords impaled them into the walls as Thor and the rest of the warriors cut, hacked and bludgeoned the rapidly diminishing mob of alghouls. Not long after, there was just a piled of mangled corpses and the living leaning on their weapons, panting harshly.

Thor frowned at the four gargains pinned down by the blades, wounds burning from the touch of silver. They snarled at Thor, gnashing their slavering teeth and tried to dig out the sword impaling them, only to cut off their own fingers off along the keen edge.

“Lok, this is sick. Put them out of their misery.”

Loki smiled wolfishly, left arm where the alghoul had bitten into him hanging limp by his side. With the other, he gave a theatrical twirl and the gargains were set alight with a blistering emerald fire that burned silently but with ten times the ferocity of ordinary flames.

The tortured shrieks didn’t last long and the tunnel fell into an unsettling silence, broken at last when Sif muttered, “For a moment, I almost felt sorry for them.”

“Save your pity for our friends, who are still in danger,” Thor said brusquely, though Loki noticed that his eyes lingered on the dark smudges on the stone, all that remained of the monsters, as the silver blades disintegrated into silver dust. “Let’s keep moving.”

When they entered a circular antechamber, Loki had that instinctive feeling that they had all walked into a trap. Predictably, the opening back into the tunnel where they came from clanged shut, and all above them, hidden doors opened and terrifying revenants, powerful undead with sentience and intelligence, leered down at them. Loki counted over fifty, and swimming in their midst, bobbing up and down in mid-air leaving a tell-tale trace of ectoplasm were the repulsive wraiths.

Thor hefted Mjolnir a little higher to bolster his confidence, but Loki suspected it would do little good down here, not unless Thor wanted to collapse half a mountain over their heads in order to take their enemy down.

“Stand back, unnatural creatures, and return our friends!” Thor’s demand rang around the cavernous space to an unappreciative audience, rebounding off the hard granite and stone walls. Spots of purple witchlight lit up at random, projecting long, flickering shadows at odd and unnatural angles that diminished Thor’s presence even more.

From nowhere came a terrible voice that made their minds recoil and their ears bleed. “Welcome to my kingdom, warm things,” it hissed. “Soon you and your friends will join me.”

The revenants leapt from their crows nests and landed hard on the ground, leaving small craters in
the stone all the while still smiling their leering, ghastly smiles as they flexed their clawed hands and the wraiths circled overhead like despicable carrion birds.

“Form a defensive circle. We make our stand here!” Thor said in such a way that even though they were faced with certain death, he was going to clobber it senseless over the head until it yielded and let them walk away alive. His courage and determination inspired the warriors in ways Loki never hope, and their swords were a little steadier and their eyes were no longer as bright with fear.

Loki clutched at the star sapphire hanging around his neck. If there ever was a time for this spell, now would be it.

He wedged himself in the dead centre of the defensive formation and tugged on his brother’s cape to draw his attention. Thor spun around, annoyed. “Thor, draw them all close. I will take them out in one go.”

“And turn us to ash like you did to those vampiric sods back there? I don’t think so.”

“Nothing of that sort,” Loki tersely bit back, his patience at its end. “It will damage only the undead. But I need to concentrate, and time to set up the spell.”

For a moment, Thor wavered between acceding to his plan which might save them all and resorting to his initial idea of dying gloriously. Finally, he relented. “How much time?”

“Two minutes at most.”

“My Prince! They are upon us!”

Loki closed his eyes, muted the sounds of shouting, stamping feet and steel clanging on steel around him. He focused on visualising the activating runes derived from his study of the brightest burning stars orbiting Asgard in his mind whilst he chanted low under his breath to translate his will into power. All this he channelled into the gem around his neck, a star on the cusp of super nova thrumming with incredible power.

Sweat was pouring down the side of his face when he spoke the activating words that resonated through all his bones and he lifted his arms up in exultation as searing daylight exploded from the star sapphire and drenched the entire antechamber.

The revenants howled, ripping their own eyes out, and the wraiths screeched ear-splitting screams as they all spontaneously combusted, burning up like dry tinder under the onslaught of Loki’s mimicry of the sun and dawn.

The light cleansed the antechamber of the foul reach of death and burned away the lich king’s concealment charm, suddenly revealing a throne roughly hewn from rock and adorned with skulls, and a stained sacrificial altar where a half-naked Fandral was tied, and beside it, kneeling in chains was Hogun and the other warriors.

The lich was once a dark elf, his white hair now the colour of piss, his dark skin leathery in places, peeling with rot in others. Blood stained teeth filed down into points were displayed when cracked lips stretched into death's-head grin at them, and with a sickening glimmer from the fist-sized amethyst embedded in his crown of bone, they were all suddenly transported to Asgard.

Only it wasn’t Asgard. It might have been the distant future of the realm when they were dead and long gone for they would never allow the golden city to be razed into nothing but great heaps and mounds of smouldering rubble and ruin against a bloody red setting sun.
Without warning, Thor cried out and ran off, fortunately not far. He dropped to the ground, and was cradling something in his arms. When Loki cautiously approached, he realised it was the broken and battered body of Frigga, and just paces to his right were Odin’s mangled remains, Gungir nothing but splinters of gold amongst the dirt and wreckage.

Loki was numb. A part of him realised this was nothing but an illusion that the lich had placed in their minds, and a part of him simply felt hollow.

He should be like Thor, crying his loss, swearing vengeance, but as he cast his gaze around the apocalypse constructed by lich, and let the idea sink in, of Asgard torn down, cracked apart and gutted, its people dead, the streets awash with blood, the air choked with noxious fumes, a part of him, a very, very small part of him, was gleeful.

He let that absurd feeling come to the fore, and Sif stared at him with reddened eyes as he doubled over, laughing in unfettered joy and release.

“Have you gone mad!” she fumed, pulling on his shirtfront. “Asgard is obliterated and you gloat?”

Tears were streaming down his eyes as he laughed harder still and ended up gasping for breath. Sif was right. He was enjoying the scene before him too much, and his reaction was too unexpected, even to the lich king, such that the foundations of the illusion began to crumble.

He wasn’t given time to explain or point out to Sif that he was weakening the lich’s control of their minds when she punched him square in the mouth and hauled him back as her fist wound back for another blow.

He tasted blood in his mouth and felt a gap where his front teeth should be, but the impression of pain was faint and he knew that it wouldn’t be long until they were all back in control of their own consciousness. Still, he levelled a cool look at Sif which made her stiffen.

“So what if I’m celebrating? The lich has placed images in our mind, thinking we would break with despair. Alas, I rather fancy this vision he has created. There’s…a certain sense of comeuppance to all this.”

Sif snarled in hate as she glowered at him. Her second punch would have landed but for Loki’s loud, clear ringing laughter cutting through the stitches holding the illusion together.

As everyone returned to their own bodies and minds, Loki grabbed onto one of the retreating tendrils of corrupt power and hitched a ride straight back to the lich’s own mind. All he needed to do was mentally hold the lich in place long enough for Thor to smash the body to bits, and show’s over.

That’s what you get for directly interfering with someone’s consciousness. You never knew what germs and other nasty surprises you bought back.

When Loki opened his eyes again, he was flat on his back on the floor, something wet being consistently applied to his face.

It was the werewolf, licking him again as Thor raged on in the background, demanding he quit it.

Dimly, it occurred to Loki that the werewolf hadn’t been sucked into the lich king’s illusions, which meant that the Gatekeeper had ridiculously powerful defensive charms woven in the lycan all the way up to his eyeballs.

“What is all over?” he croaked, voice rusty as if it had been silenced for years.
Loki struggled into a sitting position, momentarily giddy from the swimming vision, and allowed the werewolf to help him to his feet. After he could see straight, it was clear that Thor had summoned one heck of a blast of lightening which made dust of the altar, the throne and half the antechamber. The dust still hadn’t settled.

Hogun and Fandral were safe, the latter still looking rather pale and unnerved, and the remaining freed warriors bear-hugged their rescuing compatriots.

“Where is the lich?”

The werewolf shrugged. “He rests in bits and pieces. Looking for anything in particular?”

Loki nodded eagerly, roving eyes searching for his prize. “The jewel in its crown.”

“Afraid Zeus-wannabe broke it when he smashed the lich point-blank with his hammer.”

Loki made his way to the wreckage and began to salvage shards of amethyst which still glinted and pulsed with twisted power. The lich’s body lay close, its head half sunken in and brains splattered all over the place. Loki dared to part away the front of its robes and confirmed his earlier suspicions. There was a hole in his torso where the heart used to be, the skin, bone and muscle all cut away with surgical precision.

“That was an impressive spell back there,” the werewolf remarked and Loki preened at the praise. “You have a name for it?”

“What do you think has a better ring to it? Searing Light? False Dawn? Or simply Daylight?”

The werewolf grinned. “I like Daylight. What other badass motherfucker can call Daylight to them in a hellhole where the sun don’t shine?”

Loki didn’t understand half of the werewolf’s syntax but he positively beamed and his grin stretched from ear to ear, feeling like a little boy again.

Together with the werewolf, he prised apart a hidden door that had fallen ajar from the impact of Thor’s mighty assault and wandered into the lich king’s private chambers and study. Loki pilfered as much of the grimores, tomes and scrolls as he could until Thor’s thudding steps and demanding impatience urged him to go.

The journey back to the surface seemed to take only a fraction of the time it took for them to descend into the heart of the mountain, and Loki regretfully turned his face up to the sky as he willed the clouds to part.

He was covered in wolf drool again.

As the werewolf began to shimmer out of existence, Loki left him with the following parting words. “Tell your master I am truly envious that he has such a marvellous companion like you. May I at least have the privilege of knowing your name?”

The response was a whisper in the wind but he heard it loud and clear in his mind. “It’s Fenrir. We will meet again.”

Chapter End Notes
I had to break this chapter into two parts because it was getting so long!

This chapter is an interlude of sorts. I have had Loki, before the fall, express his views through Sigyn, but I really needed a detailed scene to show his interactions with Thor and the rest of the Asgardians.

In the same vein as earlier comments, while I think Loki was constantly put down by others, he hasn't done any favours for himself either, such as egging Sif on or displaying acts of casual cruelty, burning his victims alive after they're helpless and pinned down.

I hope I haven't done Thor too much of a disservice. I wanted to portray him as impulsive, reckless and arrogant, but not deliberately malicious to Loki. His immediate thoughts after Hogun and Fandral were taken was to go after them and rescue them, whilst Loki was ready to sacrifice them in order to safely take down the lich king. I think Thor is more comfortable being a "good person" rather than the "good king" that he distinguished at the end of Thor 2.

As for Loki and Fenrir, I get all fuzzy writing the love between them. When I reviewed this chapter, I was thinking that with the way Loki was gushing over Fenrir's magnificent werewolf form, it may even sound slightly romantic. Rest assured, the friendship between Fenrir and Loki is completely platonic, but master loves his wolf, and wolf loves his master, and Fenrir is going to lick Loki no matter what form he's in :o)

Chapter 13B will deal with the aftermath/fallout after Thor and company return to Asgard to inform Odin of their exploit and conquest, and we'll then be back in present time, advancing Plan B.

Thanks again for all your patience. As I said, I didn't think this chapter would be so long!!! At least I hope it's enjoyable and you get a kick out of some Neverwinter Night and The Witcher references.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirteen – Part 2

There was pomp, ceremony and every kind of pageantry you could think of complete with roads carpeted with petals, confetti and streamers as word of Thor and his company’s return raced across town like wildfire on a dry summer’s day.

It never failed to astound Loki how quickly one account of battle could undergo so many transformations, alterations and embellishment in the space of an hour that it took to travel by foot from the Bifrost Observatory back to the main gates of the city. One foe magnified into ten, enemy encirclement transformed into a bitter, bloody siege against inconceivable odds, and no man retreated or froze up on the battlefield in panic – everyone was unquestionably heroic and brave.

And to think they graced upon him the title of silver-tongue and deceiver when their own mighty and sterling efforts eclipsed his own!

Thor and his men didn’t bother waiting for the horses; they jogged the entire length of the crystal bridge. After battling knee deep in the dead, everyone was keen to return home to their loved ones before hitting the taverns for more mead and revelry. Though exhausted to the point where his eyelids were drooping and his vision swam, Loki tucked his chin in and forged on. It would do him no good to verbalise his complaints; it would be more fodder, more ‘evidence’ of his unsuitability for questing, a weakling hanging onto the coat tails of his more illustrious brother.

The enchanted gates recognised the royal bloodline and admitted their entry and Loki’s eyes burned, from the myriad colours and shining light reflecting off every polished gold and chrome surface from the gun-turrets, defensive spires and the outer walls of the palace. Loki flinched, unaccustomed to the bright glare after having spent what felt like decades deep underground, but mainly because of the side-effects of the Black Blood Potion. He stared longingly at the covered and concealed paths between the buildings and leading to the back alleys which he would often use to sneak back into the palace unnoticed. That way, he wouldn’t be subject to the critical gaze of the masses who were only to keen to remind him of his inferiority to Thor.

Scrounging for the last dregs of magic from his energy reserves, he wove a glamour about his persons, determined to look fresh and unmarked, as if he had just been attended to by a legion of groomers and dressmakers, in stark contrast to Thor and the warriors who bore the wounds, blood stains scuff marks on their armour like medals of pride.

Throngs of men, women and children lined the main road leading to the palace. Their cheers and shouts were deafening and Thor took it all in his stride, basking in the love and adulation as easily as a sunflower unfurling its petals in the face of the glorious rays of the sun.

Loki trudged behind on legs that were unresponsive as logs of lead and a body on the edge of collapse, quivering with fatigue. He nodded to acknowledge the crowd every now and then but he might as well not have bothered. They weren’t here for him. Not when the words whipping about like a midsummer storm were of Thor single-handedly defeating the lich king and upholding Asgardian bravery and honour.

They were escorted by the honour guards to the throne room where, again, the adoring masses
squeezed into the galleries and they elbowed each other, jostling for space, all just to catch a
glimpse of their golden prince. The All Father let the jubilation of the crowd take him, cut short the
formalities, which made him even more popular, and demanded his first-born deliver his personal
account of the quest.

And how glorious did Thor make it. A treacherous barren land veiled in mist, the dark whispers of
wraiths promising the return of loved ones long deceased. Then behold, hordes of the undead too
great a number to count running rampant, driven insane with rage against the living and their
insatiable and burning hunger. How commendable and marvellous was the courage and valour of
men (and one woman) and the strength of their sword arms as Thor led them to triumph against the
impossible.

“And what of the lich king? How did you slay such a mighty and terrible foe?” Odin queried in
irrepressible excitement as he sat on the edge of his throne while Frigga looked on in fond reproach
for the king lauding his son’s exploits like any proud father.

“It tried to meddle with our minds, tried to frighten us into submission, but we would not let it get
the better of us. You can kill an Asgardian by sticking a blade in him, bludgeoning him with a club
or skewering him on a spear, but you can’t defeat his indomitable will to fight and to win!”

The galleries above, shuddering beneath the weight of all the courtiers and commoners packed into
the tight space, erupted in thunderous applause and the fair ladies threw down thornless roses and
gauze handkerchiefs. One wafted down right in front of Thor. He caught it, bought it to his nose
and inhaled the perfume before tucking it inside his cuirass. Somewhere within the crowd, there
was a shriek of delight that trailed off as the lady fainted.

“I overcame its treacherous sorcery and threw myself at him, landing a great blow that caved in its
head and shattered the stone in its wretched self-made crown that was controlling all the undead.
The lich king was then no more!”

The roar of applause and cheers seemed to roll on without end. The All Mother descended from her
throne to embrace her golden child and whisper words of fierce love before she turned her gaze to
Loki. Her expression softened into something that was a suffocating cross between weary tolerance
and pity. When he had seen her broken and dead in Thor’s arms during the lich’s illusion, his first
reaction had not been grief, but frighteningly, a sense of relief that he was finally free of that tender
look that was always brimming with patience and compassion like he was some pathetic creature
always in constant need of sympathy.

“And what about my clever boy? Did you deploy your impressive sorcery to further your brother’s
quest?”

Loki’s jaw clenched, suddenly strangled by an overwhelming sense of futility. What was he
supposed to say when Thor had already established the foundations of the story with an
emotionally charged retelling that had the adoring crowds eating out of his hand and all their
adulation already spent on him? Without my help the entire company would have been wiped out?
They’d simply scoff; put it down as some tragic exaggeration or hyperbole confected by the woeful
second prince for some desperate attention. Or what if I confessed to aiding and abetting a known
criminal traffick oppressed dwarves? Wouldn’t father be pleased if he learned that I had insisted we
ditch our own men and leave them to face certain death alone miles underground. And to top it off,
I then had a hysterical fit of giggles when I saw Asgard burn.

Thor hadn’t thrown him any scraps which he could use to weave his part into those tiny gaps of the
story which remain untold, so now all that was left were mother’s stale crumbs.
He was tired. The residual poison from the Black Blood potion was still taking its time wear out and it left him groggy and lethargic. His famed quick silvertongue lay like lead in his mouth, and all he was capable of was an insipid smile and stock, wooden words of merry participation, doing his bit in the background whilst Thor charged off towards glory and victory.

The All Mother’s flawless face creased into a small frown. “What is this? Why do you hide your appearance behind your magic? Let mother see your face.”

Words of protest came too late. All jubilation and goodwill evaporated in the throne room as Frigga dispelled his façade then gasped and involuntarily stepped back. Thinking she had stumbled, Loki surged forward to catch her but instead, Thor’s steel grip wrapped around his arm and spun around until he was confronted by Thor’s visceral horror and dismay.

“How dare he ruin the buoyant mood of Thor’s victory ceremony by looking like some half decomposed corpse dug out of the sinner’s graveyard?”

Conscious of the attention now heaped on him for all the wrong reasons, Odin’s slumping shoulders, the sparkle in his eye extinguished, Frigga’s unbearable frown of concern and pursed lips, Loki muttered some excuse and headed towards the closest exit, heedless of Thor’s worried calling of his name.

If only it didn’t feel so much like fleeing.

~*_*_*_*_~

No one troubled Loki for the rest of the day. He deduced that they must all be preoccupied by preparations for the celebratory parties and feasts and allowed himself to soak in his tub until his skin was prune-like and the waters turned cloudy and toxic from the poisons which continued to seep out from the pores of his skin.

He was in the middle of cataloguing his spoils from the quest when the Captain of the Honour Guard himself came to knock on his door to escort him to the All Father’s private study. The scorn was there, in the fleeting sidelong glances and the curt, abrupt tones that killed off any budding conversation. There was nothing better than a stony, unresponsive back to tell Loki that he was an inconvenience, barely tolerated, a sickly, demented wizard who was a stain on the great house of Odin.

They walked the halls in silence, and whereas Thor always enquired about the family of his warriors, people regarded Loki suspiciously when he did the same, as if afraid that if their children were of the right gender or age, they may simply disappear one day and end up as one of his
twisted experiments.

Perhaps one day, he might just prove their fears to be true, he savagely thought.

Inside the study, his father appeared to be in a jolly mood, cheeks ruddy, grin dominating nearly half his face where it was visible above his silver-flecked beard. He was determined to down an entire decanter of fine aged wine all by himself, straight from the bottle in large, gulping swigs.

“A most impressive display of leadership and courage by your brother, was it not?” he declared, for it was a rhetorical question and the dim sound of late night revellers from all the taverns across the city celebrating in the triumphant and victorious return of their golden prince was answer enough.

Odin levelled his good eye at him all of a sudden, full of weight and evaluation. Normally not thrown even by the harshest of accusations and able to smile and delivery a devastating sally, Loki felt himself wanting to fidget.

“Are you ready?”

Loki blinked. “Come again?”

“I asked whether you were ready.”

Loki blinked some more, wondering where he had misplaced the context of this conversation to be standing here, stumped, by this obscure line of enquiry. He opted to be direct. “What should I be ready for, Father?”

“To aid your brother, give him guidance and counsel when he requires it.”

Loki felt inclined to remind his Father that he had been indentured with this unenviable task since time immemorial, but that might ruin Odin’s mood. Loki decided keeping quiet and letting his Father prattle, aided by the intoxication, would be more instructive.

“Loki, I think it’s time. See the respect and loyalty that Thor commands in the people. They love him. They will follow him. I think he is ready to take over steward of Asgard and peace in the Nine Realms.”

Privately, Loki would have collapsed in an uncontrollable heap of laughter at such a ridiculous assessment, seeing in his mind’s eye Asgard’s demise and all realms out of their blood in less than five decades under Thor’s bumbling, floundering so-called leadership (which, in his carefully considered opinion, was simply euphemism for getting his own way because he had a mighty hammer).

On the other hand, with Thor on the throne, tied down by kingly duties and responsibilities, governance, and the neverending stream of paperwork, Thor might have less time to go adventuring or callously trodding on the toes and sensitivities of other civilizations.

With Thor on the throne, it also meant the Court could not keep a second prince prowling around in the wings, waiting for a time when the king was vulnerable to strike and usurp the rightful ruler.

His eyes brightened, a fresh breath of life swelled in his chest and there was an inkling of something light and delightful burgeoning in his mind which he almost failed to recognise as that wonderful mixture of happiness and relief. Inexplicably, he suddenly felt weightless, able to soar and fly free in any sky of the nine realms.
“Loki? Loki, what have you to say?”

Odin’s voice sounded distant and concerned. Loki quickly grounded himself back in the present although the excitement building up in him was near irrepressible like raging floods crashing against a dam wall during a downpour. He had fought to keep the quiver out of his voice and marshal all discipline not to jump into the air and whoop for joy as the dwarven serfs had done when they were teleported out of Niflheim. He wetted his lips and chose his words with care. “I think it has been a long time coming,” he slowly articulated, pouring every ounce of sincerity he could muster even if such sentiments made his stomach cringe and gag. “Long has Thor desired the throne, and long has he worked hard and laboriously to prove his worth. It gladdens me that you have finally recognised his qualifications, as much as Thor will be gladdened to hear of your decision.”

Odin beamed, Loki having said exactly what he wanted to hear. “I have every confidence he will do me and his grandfather proud. With you to guide and aid him, these golden halls will stand for another five thousand years.”

That floating, fleeting sensation of freedom crashed to the ground without warning, a bird with its wings ripped off mid-flight and dropping like a stone, and the overwhelming pressure of reality crushed down on him. He swallowed hard. Something in what Odin left a taste of sour, curdled milk in his mouth. His head spun and the ground was falling away from under his very feet, the earth threatening to swallow him whole. “With me to guide and aid him?” he choked, convinced his heart had stopped beating.

“That’s right. You shall be his principal advisor, his Prime Minister. Thor has not your skills with words or your panache for diplomacy. He will need you to help maintain peace and order in the Nine Realms.”

But I don’t need him! he wanted to scream until his vocal chords were bloody and raw and his sanity whittled away. The more he heard, the more it was starting to sound like a life sentence. Prime Minister? Surely Odin meant Prime Target for Disparagement, Prime Figure of Public Loathing, Thor’s Scapegoat, or all of the above and oftimes simultaneously.

No. No no no no no. He had already done his time. Dutifully played his part as the craven, spineless magic user to make Thor shine all the brighter. Not seen the sun or felt its warmth on his face for over a millennia, eclipsed all the time as he was in the shade of Thor’s greatness. He had to run. But had he left it too late? Had he accepted his chains and shackles such that the metal had already fused with his skin? Was the portcullis clanging shut and the drawbridge being drawn up, denying him his final flight for freedom?

No! He had to escape. He must escape!

Mustering his determination, he sculpted his expression into profound regret and spoke softly but intently. “I am truly honoured that you have considered me for that role, but for the good of the realm, I must respectfully decline.”

It was Odin’s turn to blink, prompting Loki to explain.

“My presence here would only serve to destabilise Thor’s reign. In all the royal houses across the realms, no king has dared to keep a contender close.”

“Etrius’ brothers – ”

“Are lords of their own thaigs hundreds of leagues away from the capital, their main income
derived from taxes collected by the king’s treasury, and their soldiers trained in barracks garrisoned by captains and lieutenants loyal to the throne,” Loki finished off, sounding morose even though deep down, he was one hysterical and frenzied wild animal trapped and desperate to flee. “Given the place that Asgard holds in all the Nine Realms, the power that is available to it, I anticipate some may go to extreme lengths to topple Thor for someone more...understanding.”

Odin’s good eye narrowed, his previous good mood all forgotten. Cold sweat trickled down Loki’s back. “And would you be so understanding towards those hyenas and sharks circling the throne?”

Loki kept his face blank. The pressure was on to find the right words, and he had to employ the same care and precision one would apply when walking across a field booby-trapped with lethal explosives, invisible and buried in the ground. “There are countless tales, of great friends and brothers, turning on each other for what appears the most trivial of concerns: a weapon, a woman, the one way is received and viewed by others. I have not the abilities to scry into the future, but can you guarantee Thor and I will not one day come to blows of such magnitude so as to tear the realm apart?” His tone dropped lower, and his voice throbbed with patent conviction. “For the good of the realm, I offer to take a self-imposed exile, renounce my citizenship of Asgard, and vow never to set foot in this realm so long as Thor is king.”

“Absolutely not!” Odin snapped, appalled by the very suggestion. He spun around and reached for the decanter, sloshing wine all over his high pile carpets as he filled a glass to the brim. He offered it to Loki as an afterthought and as soon as Loki declined, gulped it down himself in one go. “I have full confidence that I have raised my sons to endure, together, through the worst that the universe can throw at them. Set your mind at ease, Loki, these things you fear will not befall you and your brother.”

Odin would not look at him as he said those words and Loki was dismissed soon after, a horrible, sinking feeling in his stomach and an unrelenting tightening of his throat that made him sick through and through.

Tonight, he was going to be the pathetic worm everyone thought he was and drown his sorrows in alcohol.

Tomorrow, he would regroup and plan.

~*~*~*~*~

“Loki! Loki! Can you hear me? Wake up!”

He cracked open one eye and sucked in a mouthful of air, only to nearly fold himself in half, violently coughing as every joint in his body creaked like rusted joints and bone grounded against bone, bringing agonizing whiplashes of pain throughout his whole body.

He waved aside arms striving to prop him up and fell back, cracking the back of his skull against something hard and jagged.

“What in blazes?” he complained groggily as the fog of sleep gradually dissipated.

“Loki? Can you stand? We need to get you to the healers.”

The words reverberated in his head, loud like bells and gongs being repeatedly struck right next to his ear. He grimaced as he rubbed and opened his eyes, then grunted in surprise to find Sif’s face mere inches from his own.
“What do you want?” he grumbled.

“What do I want?” she repeated two octaves higher. “I find you soaked in filth and in a condition worse than soldiers we have farewelled to Valhalla, and you ask me what I want?”

Blinking blearily, Loki squinted at the morning’s first rays that cast a glint on her polished cuirass, allowing him again to catch a glimpse of himself in the reflection. Overnight, more refuse had been excreted from his eyes and nose, crusting over his still-too-pale skin, though a verdant glimmer was returning to his eyes.

He sighed. “It looks worse than it actually is.”

“Loki, you spent the night in a pig sty. It is much worse than you think it is. Come on, get up. I’m getting you to Eir.”

Loki snorted. “I can take care of myself.”

Sif arched one eyebrow in disbelief. She slipped an arm under his shoulder and hefted him up as if he was weightless. Loki figured she had carried backpacks in her adventures with Thor which were heavier than him, but that was only because the seidr-dumb masses needed to work like pack mules, whereas a skilled mage like him could travel with all his worldly belongings at his fingertips. “Spending the night with barn yard animals is your idea of taking care of yourself? You can lie better than that. Let’s go, Thor’s going to tear the palace apart with his bare hands looking for you.”

He was like a newborn lamb, and Sif put up with him experimentally placing one trembling foot before the next, but never allowed him to fully weight bear as they trudged along.

“Your breath reeks of the sewers,” Sif sniffed, wrinkling her nose. “Have you been drinking all night?”

“Well it can’t have been all night because I passed out at some stage,” he soberly pointed out. He remembered raiding the royal wine cellars and helping himself to as many bottles of Asgard’s best that he could carry and deciding that he would find a nice, quiet, isolated spot in which to ball his eyes out.

“That’s quite unlike you. What is the occasion?”

_You shall be his principal advisor, his Prime Minister._

He suddenly doubled over and got sick all over his leather boots. Sif sighed and rubbed his back as Loki heaved and then continued to dry wretch, there being nothing left in his stomach to throw up but a persistent nausea he had no means of banishing away.

His heart pounded like mad in his rib cage from the sudden exertion, and the foul, acerbic taste of bile made him wince but at least his head was starting to clear. His fingers twitched the gestures for a basic vanity spell. The dirt and grime from the pig sty vanished, his garments straightened themselves, stain free, and the dried crusted black blood on his face crumbled away into dust and drifted away.

He reached into one of the many pockets of his robes and fished out a spare rejuvenation potion, uncorked the vial with his teeth and downing the translucent liquid in one go.

Sif regarded him dubiously, but then relaxed her guard somewhat as colour returned to his cheeks and he had strength enough to stand on his own legs.
“We need to talk,” Loki stiffly said, spurred on by a very personal desperation. “Somewhere private. My chambers.”

Sif rolled her eyes. “Loki, that has to be the worst attempt at wooing ever, and no, I am not interested, and no, I will not accompany you to your chambers.”

Loki sucked his teeth, riding the save wave of revulsion as Sif. He pulled a face. “It is nothing like that, I can assure you. I trust Thor has been told of the Allfather’s decision, explaining the sudden urgency in his wish to see me.”

Sif’s baffled scowl required Loki to give further explanation. He leaned in closer to her, his voice a strained whisper shared between conspirators and traitors. “Thor will soon be crowned King, and I his Prime Minister.”

Sif was torn between elation and happiness for Thor, and alarm and apprehension for Loki’s position as Thor’s most trusted advisor. He levelled a knowing look at her. “Now do you see why we need to talk? My chambers. Now.”

His personal quarters had long fallen into disuse, Loki having abandoned them in favour of his private and highly secured studies and laboratories beneath the lowest dungeons in the palace. He busied himself magicking away thick layers of dust that had settled over tables and benches, and mentally flung out the windows to expel decades old stale air.

Sif lingered by the doorway, eyes roving around every corner of his chambers, frowning now and then as her gaze settled on some artefact or trophy that resembled Asgardian body parts. She stepped in and quietly closed the door behind her, and cautiously lowered herself into a seat Loki pulled out for her.

“Something to drink?” he offered.

Sif politely shook her head and Loki shrugged, summoning a pitcher of water for himself.

“I would be grateful if you could deliver a message to Brunhilde for me. I would have personally conveyed the message myself, but I understand that I will be shot on sight if I set foot into Kona Lifandi.”

Sif was uncomfortable and put on a brave face to hide it, but the rigid squares of her shoulders and her frozen stare gave her away. “I will not be party to one of your infantile pranks.”

“This is no prank. In fact, this will directly affect the fate of this realm. As I said before, the All Father told me last night that he intends to abdicate in favour of Thor ascending the throne, which is good news for us all. Unfortunately, the All Father has declined my offer of exile and intends to name me Thor’s Prime Minister.”

Sif said nothing. Loki knew she was biting her tongue. He gave her his most understanding and sympathetic smile. “You can be honest with me, Sif. Tell me what is your view of the All Father’s decisions?”

Sif’s jaw clenched, and for a moment, Loki feared she would clam up and refuse to help. Finally, she tilted her chin up in defiance, something she had in never ending abundance. “Thor will make a great king. You will engineer the ruin of this realm. I saw you, Loki. I remember it, you, laughing like some deranged maniac as Asgard burned and your own mother and father lay dead at your feet. Thor may be blinded by his love for you, but I wouldn’t trust you to make a single choice that would be in the interests of this realm.”
Words which would ordinarily rile him up and draw ember sparks crackling at his fingertips now bought on a wave of relief instead which loosened the tension in his body, and he helped himself to another glass of water. “Then we are agreed that I will be no good for Asgard.”

Sif watched him carefully. “You…are not offended by my remarks?”

“Of course not, Sif. I invited your views, and am glad they accord with mine. Having established that I would be a most terrible Prime Minister, there remains that small problem of the All Father refusing my self-imposed exile.”

Again, she steadily eyed him and he noticed her right hand fall down to the pommel of her sword. “You would do that? Leave Asgard if Thor were crowned King?” There was a feverish light in her eyes; Loki knew that, if Sif believed she could get away with murdering a prince of Asgard, she would have wasted him, right there and then.

“I also offered to renounce my citizenship of Asgard, all of which the All Father rejected,” he added, deliberate in his cavalier tone as if he had arrived at such serious decisions by mere after a flip of a coin. “He insists, despite the consistent lessons in history, that Thor and I will rule happily ever after. I will be honest with you, Sif, as you have been honest with me this morning.”

“That’s a rarity,” she coolly commented.

Loki kept his smile even. “You don’t like me, and I don’t like you. As you’ve probably figured out by now, I also don’t like the Warriors Three, the guards, the captains, the lieutenants, the Einherjar, the warriors, the trainees, the councillors, the ministers…and anyone in this realm who doesn’t have two brain cells to rub together…which is basically everyone.”

“Your contempt for others is well known.”

“As is theirs for me,” he easily parried, an assertion he noted that Sif didn’t jump up to deny. “So now that we are agreed that I am no good for this realm, that I do not like the people of this realm and the people of this realm do not like me, does it not seem like an extremely reasonable and sensible solution that I leave Asgard for good as soon as Thor becomes King?”

Sif’s glower was intimidating in its naked lust for his death. If they had been out on the training fields, Loki would have armed himself with the heaviest, toughest shield, little good that would be in the face of Sif’s onslaught. “What’s the catch, trickster?”

“The catch is that this is too good to be true, and both you and I will end up with what we want if we can get the All Father to accede to my request for leave,” Loki snapped out of impatience. He took a deep breath and waited until he was calm before continuing. “The All Father will not listen to me alone, but what if others, like the Lady Brunhilde, Jarl Farnarr, the Captain of the Honour Guard, the Commander of the Einherjar, the Generals, even Heimdall himself were to object to my appointment as Prime Minister? If the objection against my appointment too significant to ignore, the All Father cannot rubber-stamp my prime ministership and will have no choice but to allow me my exile.”

Sif was silent for a long moment. At first, her annoyance and chagrin at him dominated her thoughts, but then her look became quietly contemplative, suspicious, yes, but also brimming with sombre curiosity.

At last, she asked, “Will you not miss the All Mother?”

His fists clenched reflexively and he swallowed hard. Of all the people in the palace, Frigga had
loved him the longest and the most, but her love had debased into pity for more centuries that he wished to admit, so long that even she could not tell the difference between the two no more. And he hated her pity the most. “Thor will look after her,” he said quietly, eyes downcast. “It will be enough to know that she will be well.”

“And you? What will you do?”

A small, genuine smile tugged at his lips. “Travel? Explore? So many uncharted words on the outer edges of Yggradsil. And then, perhaps Beyond?”

Sif was hardly persuaded. “What guarantee have I that you will not do mischief which will endanger Thor or Asgard?”

Loki shrugged. “You don’t, but anything is better than me walking around with the title of Prime Minister.” He suddenly leaned down towards Sif, a venomous, leering smile on his face. Sif jumped. “Do you know that, as Prime Minister, I will have control of the Treasury? Executive decision making powers, including the power to unilaterally introduce new or amend existing regulations? As soon as I become Prime Minister, maybe I will mandate all children to have at least twenty years of compulsory study in runes and magic. Perhaps no admission into the barracks as a trainee warrior unless recruits are able to demonstrate proficiency in at least one school of magic, can darn their own socks, and use a stove without burning down the house!” Loki’s voice swelled as his ideas took off, his words coloured with fresh excitement, and he spread his hands apart as if Asgard was putty between them while Sif’s jaw dropped in horror. “And when you become Queen, dear Sif, no doubt we will spend an incredible amount of time with each other, day in, day out. Won’t that simply be lovely? What riveting dinner time discussions we shall have about personal income tax loopholes, private inter-realm law, and labour reforms! It only seems right that I will be named your first-born’s godfather; oh, won’t I be the favourite uncle. Think of all the mischief your child and I will get in together! I will be one of the strongest influencing factors in your child’s life! And let’s not forget that I will be given a sizeable army of my own with power, possibly enough to draw level with Thor. You know what?” he asked with a brilliant, flashing smile. "Suddenly, the idea of being Prime Minister isn't so bad after all!"

Sif slammed her mouth shut stopped arguing. Together, they hammered out a short, direct message for Sif to take to Brunhilde, urging the leader of the Valkyries to speak up at the upcoming councillor’s session against Loki’s nomination as Prime Minister.

“And what will you now spend the rest of your day doing?” Sif asked as she was about to depart.

Loki sighed, flicking off an imaginary speck of dust off his sleeves. “Congratulate Thor and shout him a tankard or two. Then visit every single jarl of influence in the city, specifically those ones who wish that my head was on the end of a pike and suggest they vociferously object to the idea of me wearing the Prime Ministership while they still can.”

Loki should have known his luck was bad and fate his arch nemesis. He was born second in line, and obviously the desired genetics and traits had all gone into the first-born, leaving him junk attributes which left him tall and lanky like a beanpole and an obstinate inability to master the most basic of defensive and offensive manoeuvres with a staff despite his immense intellect.

He inhaled deeply, taking a long and luxurious drag from his joint, savouring the odd but pleasing blunt smokiness of the smouldering pixie dust combined with a hint of refreshment from a combination of freeze-dried mentha leaves.
Sighing, he blew out crooked smoke rings and lazily grinned at his own stupidity, for placing even an ounce of faith in those fickle bastards. How quick they had been to declare they would be glad to be rid of him, celebrating his move for self-imposed exile, but when subjected to the All Father’s challenging one-eyed stare, congratulated and applauded Loki’s imminent appointment.

Bloody bunch of hypocrites.

Only Brunhilde had the guts and the decency to shoulder past him after the council meeting and explain that while she loathed the very idea of him being Thor’s right hand man, she thought Loki’s plea to her was but another one of his intricate and vicious plans designed to pit her at odds with her King.

Bloody bunch of cowardly hypocrites. Loki couldn’t even trust them to hate him enough to do the job properly. He couldn’t even trust them to speak their minds. And to think this bunch of yes-men counted as the All Father’s advisers.

Stifling a yawn, he took another drag of his joint and then bought another bottle of the palace cellar’s finest to his lips, sucking like a newborn babe.

“There you are! Have you been here all this time?”

Loki frowned as his peace and quiet was shattered by Thor’s greater-than-life presence. His frown deepened as Thor picked aside the empty glass bottles and settled his great bulk down beside him.

“Almost didn’t think to look in this place. Haven’t climbed up the bell tower for centuries!” Thor joked, prodding him in the ribs with his elbow. Loki shrugged and blew out another succession of wobbly rings that framed the constellations as the curtains of dusk peeled back and the backdrop of the skies changed to night. “Ah, I remember we used climb up here just before bed time, track the stars and make up stories.”

Loki grounded the stub of his joint onto the white marble tiles, smearing jet black traces of soot and ruining the purity of the finish, and fished around in his tunic hunting for another. “We were different people back then.”

“Well, we were children.”

“Yes,” Loki sagely agreed, delighted to find another fat roll tucked away with his vials and eagerly lit it up. The conversation was awkward and going nowhere, and Loki would rather smoke the pixie dust until his mind was an utter blank so that he could forget the horrible turn of events today, if only temporarily. Alcohol also helped speed the process.

“Have you been drinking up here all afternoon?”

“Mmmhmmm.” He filled his lungs to the brim, feeling his chest ache with the bulge, then let out a blissful sigh as he reclined back and cushioned the back of his head with his hands, the joint hanging off his bottom lip. He closed his eyes, relishing as the volume on the world slowly wound down towards mute and he was left utterly to his own thoughts. Only Thor’s puzzled frown, louder than the silence, disturbed him from any prospects of complete relaxation.

“Is there some special occasion?”

“What do you think?”

Loki imagined he heard thunder rolling in the distance as Thor’s frown darkened. “Why are you being so cryptic with your responses?”
“Are they?” he asked, just to egg his brother on.

Thor growled low with frustration and the roof tiles trembled beneath Loki. “Be honest with me, Loki. Are you upset by father’s decision?” Are you jealous like you usually do?

“Upset about what?” he murmured without heat as he slipped further towards his destined goal of unremitting peace.

“That he made me king!” Thor blurted out, unable to say that he chose me over you; that he thought me better than you; that he thought me worthy and you not. Loki didn’t mind, not right now. The pixie dust made sure of that.

“Hel, Thor,” he yawned, “the throne had your name scrawled all over it three centuries ago after you vanquished Rostoff’s Marauders in Vanaheim. Naming you king had simply been a matter of time.”

“Oh.” Ashamed. Embarrassed. The closest Loki would ever get to receiving an apology from his do-no-wrong brother.

The silence stretched on between them, interrupted only by the flap of flags on the flagpole riding the wind and the occasional whistle of air as Loki exhaled another mouthful of smoke.

“Then why have you been here all afternoon?”

“Because.”

“And you are being honest when you say you’re not upset.”

“I am.”

“Loki, are you happy?”

Blearily, he cracked open an eye and dusted off the small but growing pile of ash settling onto the front of his tunic. “About what?”

Thor rumbled in frustration again. That he had not already throttled Loki meant he was testing the limits of his self restraint. “About my coronation! About your appointment as Prime Minister!”

Had Thor asked him that question immediately after the council had rubber-stamped Odin’s decree, Loki might have flayed Thor alive, or dipped him in a vat of acid, slowly, feet first, and then murdered every spineless, fickle son-of-a-bitch in the council who had promised to speak out and object but didn’t, in ways so terrible and appalling that Yggradsil herself would be so revolted she’d personally pluck Loki out of her branches and fling him far, far into the Beyond.

And the beauty of the pixie dust was that it took this unbearable rage away from him, sedated his anger, quelled his hate, and introduced him to a blissful nirvana free of negativity.

“Of course I’m happy.”

“Then what are you doing up here in the bell tower?”

“Celebrating.”

“All by yourself?”

“I can assure you the bottles have made excellent company.”
Thor raised an incredulous eyebrow. “How?”

“They don’t speak.”

“Loki,” Thor whined. Thick, calloused fingers which could easily bunch up into a fist and shatter skulls combed through his hair, uninvited. “Stop isolating yourself and join us for a night of revelry in Asgard’s finest establishment, the Crippled Cougar Inn!”

Loki made some noncommittal noises. “Maybe tomorrow,” he replied with no intention of honouring his word. No doubt Captain Oktell would have spread the word by now that Loki had argued with Thor and urged the crown prince to flee and leave his men behind to certain death. There would be no cheers or toasts to Loki. He would be lucky if no one spat or hissed at him or decided his hair would look better with a flagon of mead tipped all over it.

Thor saw through his lie and pulled him up into a sitting position. “I can’t believe you are so mellowed out on pixie dust. Isn’t it supposed to inspire a partying mood? A desire to rub bodies, drink and be merry?”

Loki squeezed his eyes shut and groaned out loud as that hard-fought tranquillity he so painstakingly collected was threatening to be torn apart. “No. It leads to galactic peace. Leave me alone. I’m tired and I want to go to sleep.”

And then Thor’s rough paws were on his face, peeling open an eyelid and inspecting his quivering and exposed eyeball with a pretense of knowledge or understanding of what he was doing or what he was seeing. “Your eyes are still black. Have you not been to see Eir?”

He shrugged off the hands, shuffled away to create some more space between them and lay back down again. “Nope.”

“You’re smoking when you still have poison in your system? That’s not good for you.”

“Have you spent at least a hundred moons studying the theorems of potion making?”

“No.”

“Are you an expert in alchemy?”

“No,” Thor replied, this time more defensively.

“Then you are in no position to tell me what is or is not good for me. I am the expert alchemist here.”

Thor sniffed, edging closer again. “I was just concerned. No need to be so narky.”

Loki grunted. Another apology-but-not.

“Are you going to sleep up here tonight?”

“Maybe.”

Thor sighed. “Well, if you decide you would like some talking company, the Warriors Three and I will be at the Crippled Cougar Inn.”

Loki’s response was to blow out a smoke ship that sailed off into the pastel purple and blue twilight.
Just before he tripped over into sleep, he heard Thor unfasten his cloak and lay it over him, even
though he didn’t need it, even though he stalked the palace in his summer tunics and leggings in
mid-winter as the servants and guards rugged up in thick furs. And then he dreamed of a decaying
planescape of snow and ice and bitter cruel winds where monsters of nightmare with flashing red
eyes glowered at him.

_Frost giants_, he thought with glee, as his unsleeping mind began to spin together a treacherous
masterpiece of retribution against everyone and _everything_ that had wronged him.

He was going to rid himself of Asgard one day, or get rid of Asgard itself. No one would miss him,
and he would miss no one.

Loki sniffed and pulled the hems of the cloak up until it was tucked neatly under his chin as the
evening breeze picked up.

Well, maybe Thor, just a little.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies that this chapter has been so long to edit and post. I actually had the
majority of it up about 2 weeks ago, but then everything at work went crazy and I
couldn't finish off the last scene.

This chapter concludes the (extra long) flashback, and chapter 14 will move back into
the present (OMG, we're going to be at chapter 14, and Thor and Loki STILL haven't
met??).

I promise you the fateful reunion will be forthcoming, if not in chapter 14 then in
chapter 15. Then the plot will really pick up pace.

Writing pre-fall Loki has been interesting. I hope you will notice a difference between
pre-fall Loki and Loki as Lachlan. I think the main problem with pre-fall Loki (at least
in this fic anyway) was his tendency to trap himself in negative thoughts and play the
victim role. In that capacity, he can only see that he has been wronged, how nothing he
does ever goes right and it's always someone else's fault. Sif was right in earlier
chapters about Loki being consumed by self pity. But I suppose the thing I had in
mind was that Loki couldn't free himself of that victim mentality by himself, and the
one person who really should have been supportive was Frigga, who herself has
confused pity and sympathy with support.

Given the way things played out for Loki in Thor 1 and Thor 2, I am not too keen
about the reconciliation camp; that Loki requires redemption and will find his place in
Asgard again. For those of you seeking a redemption fic, where Loki and people like
the Warriors 3 learn to see eye to eye and become good friends eventually, I can
categorically state this will not be one of those fics. I like Lachlan Williams, and for
me, I think Loki deserves his independence and his own will to build up his own character and identity in the void that Odin and the revelation that he was an adopted frost giant had left him at the end of Thor 2.

Loki doesn't have to play villain, he does not have to be Thor's shadow, and his life does not have to be defined by the amount of attention he gets from those who ignored him in the past. Thor can have his spotlight. Lachlan will simply find another stage.

So how is this eventually going to be a Thor/Loki / Thor&Loki fic? LOL - still working on it!!

And thank you so, so very much for the feedback for the previous chapter. I will respond to all the comments individually tonight to express my thanks :o)
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fourteen

“I do not believe this is a good idea,” Thor insisted. His expression was grim as he watched Jane busy herself with equipment from the back of half a dozen white vans parked in a rough semicircle meters from the edge of the cliff.

“Thor, how can I not come?” Jane rolled her eyes and tossed her hands up in the air. Barely a fortnight out of her induced coma, there were still dark circles beneath her eyes and an exhausted slump in her posture, but the snap and crackle of enthusiasm could not be smothered or dimmed. “Dr Banner has computed the energy readings from your hammer and discovered a resonance to the trace residue found in the mansion’s living room last time it was attacked.”

“And now, with the crude algorithm we’ve come up with,” Selvig grunted as he hefted a steel tripod onto his shoulder, “we can pinpoint to the exact location where the Gatekeeper’s portal is opening up.”

“I would like to meet this Gatekeeper,” Jane declared, pulling a face which Thor recognized by now was one of her dizzy spells that still suddenly afflicted her even though they had pulled the little demon from her mind. “I can’t believe he bugged my brain just to stop my research. Totally not cool. Science is a collegiate field of study. We should be sharing knowledge and information, not stifle other people’s research.”

Jane Foster’s ongoing sleep problems were solved the moment T’Challa and Hank noticed that all the medical equipment surrounding Jane like a small army of mechanical nurses started to give off abnormal readings whenever Thor got close. They deduced that the low level energy frequencies emitted by Mjolnir affected the monitoring instruments and in turn, that turned up an abnormality in Jane’s brain that none of their other sophisticated Midgardian imaging devices had been able to capture. The clarity of the foreign body residing inside Jane’s brain became clearer as Thor channelled his own innate powers into the hammer, and using methods which he struggled to understand but had been assured were reasonably safe (as compared to the alternative of Jane dying a slow, miserable death), the SHIELD medical team managed to expel something from Jane’s mind.

While no one could identify exactly what had resided in Jane’s mind and provoked nightmares even during her waking hours, Thor and Sif were convinced it was a display of the Gatekeeper’s insidious magic.

“I don’t think you would want to meet this Gatekeeper. He is powerful enough to hide himself from Heimdall’s sight; he would be a most fearsome opponent in battle.” His cause was not helped by the fact that while the Gatekeeper had at his disposal an extremely skilled warrior known as the Winter Soldier, SHIELD had no sorcerers with whom they could call upon to negate the Gatekeeper’s magic. More and more, Thor wished Loki was still by his side. Of all their quests and adventures, Thor had no doubt this would have been the one time where Loki would be the one leading the way, dragging him out onto the Bifrost to get a move along.

“Remember the All Father’s command, Thor,” Sif cautioned. “We should not make contact but confirm that he has established his base of operations on Midgard, and if possible, ascertain the
strength and size of his forces.”

Thor shook his head. “I do not believe the Gatekeeper commands an army. Sorcerers are not like Midgardian scientists. If they are anything like my brother, they are intensely private people, hoard knowledge and keep secret their research. How many servants and guards were seriously injured having unwittingly triggered the defensive traps and spells Loki had lain down in the corridor leading down to his alchemy and spellwork laboratories? As far as we know, the Gatekeeper has only two servants: Winter Soldier, and the wolf, Fenrir.”

“Will you squints and aliens keep it down? We’re supposed to be friggin spying on a bunch of dark elf smugglers at the moment and you’re commentating like we’re in the NBA grand finals!” Hawkeye hissed from where he lay flat on his stomach next to Black Panther, perilously close to the edge of the cliff with a pair of enhanced binoculars in his hands as he surveyed the flurry of activity in the valley below. “Stark says his equipment will shield us from view, but it said nothing about cancelling the ruckus you’re making!”

Jane bit her lips and ostentatiously crept around the vans, adjusting knobs, running calculations and studying the luminous screens. “There’s a spike in readings!” she mouthed, accompanied by exaggerated hand gestures, which seemed to only annoy Hawkeye more.

Thor picked up his binoculars and copied the archer, peering over the edge of the cliff and down into the yawning valley below. A large group of dark elves, their dark skin and bone coloured hair stark against the ochre rocks, were performing final checks on the contents of shipping containers before they were sealed and hauled off by a herd of massive horned coelodontas. Five mages, their faces all concealed beneath dark cowls and heavy robes, had set themselves up to form the points of a star and were chanting low and monosyllabic as time and space began to warp and twist to suit their purposes.

“Holy shit, there’s our dead elven princess!” Hawkeye suddenly exclaimed before adjusting the focus on his binoculars.

“And if I’m not mistaken,” T’Challa added, “There’s our dark elf smuggler, Ceroden as well. And friend Stark has been torn up with guilt thinking he blew them out of the sky when they’re clearly alive and well….”

“The Winter Soldier’s here too,” Sif pointed out, her voice as cold and dangerous as the whisper of a blade being unsheathed. Sif had her sword reforged on Midgard, but she hadn’t forgotten how the masked man bested her and made off with Boris the frost giant right in the middle of their interrogation. Sif was itching for a rematch. It’s what any warrior with an ounce of pride within her would want.

“Then that shipment must be hot shit, or Winter Soldier just likes carrying the mother of all RPG launchers around on his back for show. Hey, see that blondie standing next to him? The one with the white skin? He a light elf?”

Thor squinted, fumbling with the dials on the binoculars, and then after darting this way and that, from one group of dark elves to a band of scraggly dwarves and then to the wood elf herders strapping down the shaggy coelodontas, he finally managed to settle on the Winter Soldier and the swordsman beside him. He cut a solitary figure, statue still amongst the bustle of activity, tall and lean in black and silver armor with pale blond, fly away hair, pointy chin, sharp angular facial features and even sharper eyes cold like chips of ice.

“Verily so,” Thor mumbled, conscious to keep his voice quiet. “Never in my life would I have thought to see a dark elf and light elf standing side by side without attempting to tear each other’s
throat out.”

“You must share the histories of these realms with us when you have a chance. We are part of the nine realms, and yet us humans know so very little of the others. My country, Wakanda, once lived in isolation of the world and I have learned from the mistakes of my past.”

“Well, it’s really nothing to be that excited about,” a deep, smooth baritone voice suddenly interjected. “The light elves are a bunch of arrogant, racist Aryan pricks and the dark elves are unapologetic nihilists who would like to see us all living in black holes. Capiche?”

They all started, then stared at the wolf comfortably crouched on his belly and nestled snugly between them with what could only be described as a wicked ‘I ate grandma’ smile on his lips. Hawkeye yelled out in shock, suddenly remembering who put him in hospital for a week after comparing him to field mice, while Thor, having studied all the film that the Avengers had collected, recognized the animal and bodily threw himself on top of it.

“Oof. You’re a big guy,” the wolf commented with a smug cheshire grin, as if he knew something highly amusing they didn’t. It was a disturbingly human expression.

“How did you find us! Speak!” Thor thundered, taking a hold of the wolf by the silver hairs on the scruff of the neck. He knew the wolf could spit ice from its mouth and so firmly kept its snout pointed away from the rest of the party.

Fenrir chuckled. He didn’t struggle against Thor’s weight and even managed to wag his tail. “Fancy stuff you got in the back of those vans. State of the art camouflage technology? Pity it’s useless against a light elf’s True Sight, or my nose. Phew. How many days since you last had a shower, Asgardian Prince? I could smell your stench from halfway across the globe.”

“He knows us!” Sif exclaimed in alarmed. Her sword was already drawn and she approached, holding the blade double handed as an executioner would when at work.

Fenrir’s grin turned feral and there wasn’t an ounce of fear in the crimson gleam of his eyes, and soon, Thor knew why.

Hawkeye spotted it first, an innocuous glint in the sky which he could have easily mistaken as a passing plane. Then Hawkeye shouted “Incoming”, instinctually dived away with Black Panther, leaving the wolf and two Asgardians to stare dumbly at the increasingly bright star.

The bright light suddenly dispersed into a shower of fireworks, rained down on them like a neverending hail of needles that burned through the stone, pitted the rock face with a crescendo of hisses and laid waste to the vans and Jane’s equipment.

The thought of Jane hapless and defenceless against this magical onslaught made Thor’s heart leap in his throat, strangling the very breath from him, and he feared turning to see her mangled and broken body amongst the wreckage of the vehicles.

Time slowed as he could find no trace of Jane or Šelvig, and Thor was numb to the hundreds of bolts of energy that relentlessly hammered into him, protected as he was by the defensive enchantments that the All Father had imbued into his cloak at the Observatory.

“It’s all right, Thor! Black Panther’s got them covered!” he vaguely heard Hawkeye shout from afar. Thor blinked, and spotted T’Challa spinning his vibranium lance around like the blades of a fan as he repulsed the deadly golden blasts of energy.

Thrown back into the present, Thor heaved the wolf up by his neck, holding it out in front of him
like a shield, but Fenrir simply laughed as the shower of magic bolts slid off him like harmless drops of water.

“I am immune to my master’s magic, you dimwit!” he laughed, then twisted himself around and snapped at the hand bunched in his fur.

Thor immediately let go and reached for Mjolnir, but the wolf simply tilted back its head, let out one alien howl that sent shockwaves slamming into Thor and rocked him on his feet. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hawkeye and T’Challa flattened, though thankfully, the hailstorm of magical bolts had ceased. Sif was on her hands and knees and shaking her head as she fought against the dizziness, leaving Thor the last man standing.

He abandoned the hammer and grappled with the wolf as the animal pounced, and the animal’s weight and momentum sent Thor crashing to the ground with the animal on top of him.

“I will fucking bite your face off, tear off your scalp, rip out your jugular and piss on your corpse before feeding it to the vultures!” the wolf snarled with sudden fury and venom. It snapped and clawed and its teeth and jaws cracked the metal vambrace as Thor held up his arm to shield his face.

Sif charged from the animal’s blind spot and shouldered him off her prince. She quickly surged onto swaying feet but to Thor’s pride, her sword hand remained steady.

“How does an animal know who the Prince of Asgard is?” Sif said harshly, fighting to catch her breath. “Did the Gatekeeper send you to target us?”

“My master sent me to give you your one and only fucking warning. Get off his planet, or he’ll let me send you home in many, many small boxes.”

“No one threatens my prince and lives,” Sif growled and attacked. The wolf nimbly dodged her extended blade, and his ears pricked up as a flash of emerald green light struck the ground beside him.

Thor held his breath. Moments ago, Winter Soldier and the light elf swordsman were two miles below in the valley supervising the transport. Now, they flanked Fenrir, and both looked ready for battle and keen to spill blood.

The pale-haired swordsman wordlessly went for Sif with his sword already drawn and soon orange sparks flew as their blades repeatedly clashed and the air was filled with the sound of stomping feet and grunts. Winter Soldier circled Thor, wary of Mjolnir, while Fenrir bounded off and happily let rip another howl which disintegrated the remains of the vans and equipment.

“I would like to send a message to your master as well,” Thor said to Winter Soldier, who stonily stared at him behind green tinted goggles. If there was any humanity in that man, it was long gone. Thor had faced marauders and depraved killers in his time, but there was something unsettling that made the fine hairs on his arms stand on end when dealing with a stone cold killer who was at the same time intelligent as he was indifferent to dealing out death. “Tell the Gatekeeper that he has already incurred the wrath of Alfheim and Nidavellir, and he now has mine to contend with as well. The lives of thirty four young Asgardian men and women are on his head because the Gatekeeper has facilitated that vile substance known as pixie dust to reach our realm.”

“There are no gates to Asgard,” Winter Soldier automatically said.

“There might as well be,” Thor retorted. “Pixie dust gets imported into Vanaheim, courtesy of the
Gatekeeper, and from there, it easily finds its way to our realm, together with your heretical Midgardian ideals that are poisoning the minds of our youth and introducing chaos to the realms.”

Winter Soldier cocked his head to the side as he drew out his enchanted adamantine knives which gleamed pale blue and wicked in the noon-day sun. “You have problems with equality and free will?”

Thor hefted Mjolnir, feeling reassured by the familiar weight in his hands and the inexhaustible well of ancient and primal power ready for him to draw on. “I have problems with people not knowing their place and causing trouble with their discontent.”

Winter Soldier’s laugh was ugly and devoid of humor. “Says the man born a prince with all the nine realms laid at his feet like marbles before he was even toilet trained. Revolution is in the air, you medieval despot, and my boss will overthrow and topple all that you know and all that you love without needing to fire a single shot.”

Thor tensed, enraged. How could this faceless mortal so casually speak of chaos across the realms which would see blood flow freely like rivers and disown any responsibility for the mountains of corpses that will be built in the name of this so-called revolution? Anger burned like molten lava in his veins. His grip on Mjolnir tightened and his lips twisted into a snarl. “I will defend my realm until my dying breath before I let the Gatekeeper remake my home in his twisted image!”

“Yeah, pal, that magic hammer of yours has proven real effective against pixie dust, hasn’t it?” Winter Soldier taunted. “I’ll give you a hint of what’s coming to your realm: Elder Scrolls Online, Diablo III, WoW and every other MMORPG out there that has caused man to pay good money to be tortured by sleep deprivation. Everyone will get to do dungeon crawls, wield awesome weapons, trawl the plains of Azeroth, team up to fight the Lord of Terror, and slay dragons, all from the comfort of their own home. A new brand of hero will be born, Thunderer, and you won’t fit the new definition!”

Unable to bear the blasphemous threats anymore, Thor unleashed a battle cry that threatened to split apart the sky, then launched himself at Winter Soldier. Uruu steel met adamantinum, and Thor grinned in berserker delight at the tell-tale sound of metal fracturing and splintering as he hammered down on his foe. He utilised his superior bulk and weight to his advantage and inexorably pressed forward, pinning Winter Soldier down onto buckling knees.

“Shit dude,” the dark-haired man huffed through gritted teeth, “you ate a whole whale for lunch or something? Try this on for size.”

All the warning Thor got was a dud ‘clunk’ of something small and metallic hitting the ground. He let his eyes trail down to the ground between them just long enough to catch sight of a spherical object roll between his feet. Determined not to fall for the same trick twice, Thor tried to kick the metallic ball away but it soundlessly exploded into blinding flash of light.

Thor flinched and recoiled, regretting it immediately as he felt Winter Soldier plant his foot in his middle, sending him flying back leaving a deep trench in the rock. He flipped back, breaking the momentum with a well practiced roll that had him instantly resume a crouch position and prepared to block the next oncoming kick.

The strength in the dark-haired man was beyond that of a mortal, enhanced by the unnatural and insidious influence of magic infused in him by his master. Thor’s frown darkened as he traded blows that would ordinarily have sent rock giants fleeing but it only seemed to motivate Winter Soldier to fight harder, faster, more deadly, always aiming at his eyes, his joints and the gaps between his armour.
“Enough!” he bellowed, and a fork of lightening stabbed down, channelled into his hammer before he bought it down in a thunderous crash onto the ground.

Winter Soldier swore. He was caught by the incredible rush of the explosive energies and it flung him back with great chunks of rock and a shower of dirt.

Thor launched himself in the air, Mjolnir whirling and gathering to her speed and crackling electricity, energies enough to light up the entire new city of York. “For Asgard!” he cried and flung the lightening bolt down onto the dark, stunned figure struggling to get back on his feet.

Sickly green light enveloped Winter Soldier, and the unearthly glow spread until it was a fine harmless fog. Thor frowned. Surely the mortal did not expect to halt his attack with something so flimsy?

The lightening bolt never struck. It penetrated the fog and then…transformed into a gallon of water that splashed all over Winter Soldier.

The assassin gaped, and shook the water out of his hair. “This is bullshit,” Thor’s keen hearing picked up the bewildered muttering. “How the hell do I waste this guy with funky spells like this?”

While Winter Soldier was distracted, Hawkeye, who had recovered from the stun, loaded up three arrows into his bow and released them with extreme prejudice at his opponent.

Winter Soldier looked up and had no time to dodge, but again, as soon as the arrows were touched by that haze of smog, it…dispersed into a swarm of magnificent and colourful butterflies.

All the combatants paused to observe the spectacle, Sif and her opponent had lowered their swords, Fenrir sat on his haunches ears pricked forward, Selvig scratched his head. Hawkeye deadpanned “Fuck me,” notched and loosed another arrow at Winter Soldier, and this time witnessed his sonic-tipped arrow disintegrate into a shower of fragrant rose petals.

It began as a stifled chortle from the pale-haired swordsman at first, before it became a series of aborted coughs that soon had Sif clutching her sides in laughter and infected Jane with a few chuckles as well.

Unable to believe his eyes, Hawkeye picked up a fist sized rock this time and threw it at Winter Soldier. The assassin made no effort to avoid the projectile. On entering the fog, the rock transformed into a bright pink stuffed toy that harmlessly bounced off the side of Winter Soldier’s head. Winter Soldier glared at it.

Fenrir was rolling on the ground in hysterics as Thor sought to replicate the experiment and summoned another lightening strike on Winter Soldier.

The mortal simply stared as the blazing energies bore down upon him, but rather than dissipate the fog, the fog ate up his attack and showered Winter Soldier with small, multi-coloured pebbles smaller than the size of his fingernail with a white ‘m’ emblazoned on the centre of each of them. Winter Soldier plucked one lodged in one of his knife sheathes and unhesitatingly ate it.

As far as everyone but Thor was concerned, the fight was over. Any murderous intent or blood-lust singing in their veins had been overtaken by uncontrollable fits of laughter. However, he was having none of it. Winter Soldier was the Gatekeeper’s important right hand man. If ranged attacks would not work, then he would best the mortal in hand-to-hand combat. The Winter Soldier would be an important prisoner, if they were to have any luck in finding the Gatekeeper.

He had taken two steps towards the man when, from nowhere, a shrill “No” pierced the air and he
was tackled from the side. Blonde hair spilled over his vision as he staggered sideways and he caught a flash of green.

“Amora?” Sif exclaimed, almost dropping her sword, all the humour suddenly gone.

“That cloud of fog reeks of chaos and temporal instability,” Amora breathlessly explained to Thor, protectively shielding him with her body. “It has the taint of wild magic and it would be suicide to approach it. Be careful, my love.”

“Well if you’re so knowledgeable,” Sif all but snarled, “why don’t you do something about it?”

“Just because I know what it is doesn’t mean I can do something about it,” Amora retorted, more eager to fight Sif than the Gatekeeper’s assassin.

“Ladies, ladies,” Hawkeye began in an attempt to diffuse the tension.

“You stay out of it!” both Asgardian women rounded on him and snapped.

“How about we leave the catfight for another day,” Jane suggested, words cut short with panic. “I think that fog is growing, rapidly, and is heading towards us.”

Amora bit her lips and fired off a blast of verdant magical energies at the Winter Soldier. Thor had a very bad feeling when Amora’s glowing powers became a dark, rolling mass that made angry buzzing noises.

“Oh crap,” Hawkeye muttered with no shame in dropping any pretence of bravery. “Bees! Golf-ball sized bees! Run!”

Lately, he’d been having a problem with sleep. Dreams to be exact.

Bucky was not a man easily frightened. He was no stranger to evil or the dark and had done things that humanity might have already disowned him for. Ghosts couldn’t haunt him; they were terrified of him and the trauma he inflicted when they were still alive.

But that didn’t mean he still didn’t have nightmares. Nightmares of freefalling, the biting chill of winter and death creeping into him inch by inevitable inch. There were snatches of ragged and broken memories, like delicate pencil sketches that had been carelessly trampled all over, recollections of being dragged across the snow, a vivid steaming crimson trail spilling in his wake. There was the harsh glare of bright lights stabbing into his eyes and the face of a true monster, a demure, balding man with round spectacles and an unusually delighted smile as he waved a scalpel in his face, threaded wires to his nerves and welded metal to the stump that remained of his left arm. They drilled a hole in his skull, put in probes and needles and other awful bits and pieces of technology, and made him believe that he was loyal to them.

And then there would be the unbearable, terminal stretches of silence, a false death almost without end as the lid of his of his metal coffin closed over him and time was dragged kicking and screaming into a standstill.

They take him out of stasis when there is a mission, a target, death that needs to be dished out with precise and extreme prejudice. He is handed weapons which are always different, improved and enhanced from the last version he held god knows how many years earlier. They leash him to handlers as he is let loose on the world and it’s all over in a blur such that he hasn’t got time to consider who he is, what he is doing and why he does the things he does. In the end, he is strapped
into a seat, a bit thrust into his mouth like a beaten and overworked horse, and cold metal machinery clamp down around his head. It feeds a searing, nerve-wracking pain that makes his entire body jolt, that overloads in his skull, that tries to burn away that little bit of personality he had acquired in those precious few days that he is alive and aware. Rinse and repeat. Rinse and repeat, keep burning away his mind until there is nothing left, until he is nothing but the best, mindless killing machine they have ever pieced together.

The dream distorts. It always distorts, a gluttonous tyranny feeding on the feast of his fears. He is back in the clutches of the Soviets, or maybe Hydra, and they are determined to re-make him into a living piece of hardware with no thought or desires to call his own, no humanity to cause him to stay his hand. They have discovered his connection with Captain America, his deep and honest affection for the man, something all those years of torture and abuse could not erase, and they punish him, threaten to destroy that tiny patch of paradise that he managed to conceal and protect for seven decades. The pincers of the memory machine have him trapped, there is no way to escape. His vision is erased by a sizzling electric blue and that white hot fire scours away every cherished memory he has recovered. Despite his valiant efforts to cling to those precious strands of recollections, hundreds and thousands of still frames of experience held together by ephemeral gossamer strands called soul, the destruction is irresistible, a nuclear bomb has detonated in his mind, and all Bucky can do is scream and beg to die until his throat bleeds.

He was still screaming and thrashing in his bed as he awoke, and strong hands tried to still him.

“Hey, James, it was James, wasn’t it? Calm down. Just calm down.”

A surge of adrenaline propelled him upright and his eyes desperately darted around searching for Steve even as the world seemed to be spinning out of control. A wave of nausea struck him and he could near nothing beyond the frantic thudding of his heart and harsh breaths.

“Easy pal, easy there.”

Danvers. She sat at the edge of his bed cautiously holding him steady with one hand while soothing him as one might a rabid dog by rubbing long, smooth strokes down his back.

It was not the same. Steve’s hands, his soft words of condolence and encouragement in those long hours of torment filled him with reassuring warmth and grounded him in certainty that was like the resolution of a homecoming. So many things in Bucky’s life were uncertain or unbelievable; Steve was that wonderfully solid reality that was immutable.

Bucky swallowed hard at the sudden empty feeling of loss that momentarily left him floundering, a vulnerability he could never get used to and hated, something only Steve could make him feel, and he reasserted a steel grip on his rising panic and managed not to blurt out, “Did Steve send you?”

Danvers eyed him steadily. Bucky felt the imperceptible tightening of her hold on his shoulder. “You’re the only one in Rogers apartment. We were hoping you might be able to tell us where he is.”

We? Bucky blinked, silently cursing his senses dulled and made stupid by sleep. He stiffened as the figure in the doorway stepped into the light of his bedroom.

“We thought the racket you were making was Cap being murdered in his sleep,” Hawkeye snorted. Like Danvers, his eyes were fixed on Bucky, and Bucky realised that they were studying him for any outward reactions which might indict him for Steve’s disappearance.

The panic began to subside and Bucky was soon thinking clearly enough to feel the heat of outrage
in his cheeks. “I thought Steve was on one of your covert missions,” he snapped. “I haven’t seen him in two weeks.”

Barton’s eyebrow twitched, unimpressed, and began to rifle through Bucky’s possessions neatly tucked and folded in the drawers. “Who the hell are you anyway, and what are you doing in Cap’s apartment?”

“Clint,” Danvers admonished. “This is Steve’s friend, James Barnes.”

Barton’s eyebrows shot up and both Danvers and Bucky sighed. He was not going to repeat that bullshit story. Not now. Not when two complete strangers witnessed him in his most pathetic and helpless state and he was wearing nothing but a loose singlet and boxer shorts.

Barton let the peculiarity of his name go, but his SHIELD agent’s paranoia would not relent. “Still doesn’t explain why he’s sleeping in Cap’s apartment.”

Danvers looked at him with a degree of apologia, because she was curious as well and would have eventually asked the question herself, albeit with more tact.

Rather than let them know that this was all a part of his clever plan to worm his way back into the centre of Steve’s universe without having to have that very awkward conversation which might include words to the effect of Hi, I’m the real Bucky Barnes, but in the past fifty years while you have been iced, I have been spending my free time defenestrating Red Room operatives and gutting Hydra goons and strangling them with their own intestines, Bucky told a small, but well rehearsed lie. “I was behind on rent and got evicted from my last apartment. Steve let me crash here until I could find my feet. It’s also a lot closer to where I work.”

Except that now that he was here, he was quite certain he wasn’t going anywhere ever again. Not unless Captain America got a crowbar and chiselled him off.

“I know you can’t tell me anything about your secret black ops stuff, but could you…just nod your head if Steve is on a mission at the moment?”

Danver’s glum, downcast eyes and Hawkeye’s stony expression was answer enough for Bucky. He fingers involuntarily flexed into fists. His left shoulder ached. “He’s been missing for two weeks and you don’t think to check his apartment until now?” he all but growled.

“Hey, Cap’s a grown man. We’re not going to question how he spends his free time or who he spends it with,” Barton shot back with a particularly nasty emphasis on ‘who’ which perfectly encapsulated what little he thought of Bucky.

He guess he wasn’t much to look at right now; dishevelled hair in such a riot that it was an insult to birds nests in all of the Sequoia National Park, eyes bloodshot and puffy as if he’d been repeatedly punched, skin shining with sweat and a prosthetic arm that creaked with every move.

Who the hell was Barton to judge the people Steve chose to hang out with, anyway. The idiot archer gave Steve’s likely-kidnappers a two week head start and he was wasting time being a total prejudicial asshole. He tossed aside his bed covers and searched for where he dumped his clothes before he crashed into bed, a sullen and cantankerous mess for having had to eat a lonely dinner and clean out the rest of the fridge of food going off because one person without a super-soldier’s metabolism couldn’t possible polish off half a tonne of meat in a week.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

He didn’t bother hiding his disgust at Hawkeye as he shrugged into a sturdy leather jacket and
pulled the hoody from the sweater underneath over his head. “What do you think? I’m going to look for Steve.”

Danvers made a worried sound but it just pissed Bucky off even more. “James…”

He knew what she was going to say. That he was just one man, whereas they were the Avengers with the financial might of Stark Industries and the limitless reach of its Artificial Intelligence.

“I’m not going to just sit here. I’ve got to do something,” he muttered before leaving the two stunned Avengers in his wake. They had their methods of tracking people; Bucky had his own, and he’d bet money that he’d find Steve before they did.

~*~*~*~*~

Steve mostly dreamed about the war and the Howling Commandos. Ghosts from his past were real, solid and alive as they sat around the campfire with hands outstretched, trying to get the most of the flickering heat during Europe’s unforgiving winters. Other times, he dreamed of Peggy, still young, daring and intelligent, determined to fight a war which had broken many men before her.

And then there was Dr Erskine and his team of scientists, sitting in with Steve on endless briefings of what the super soldier serum was supposed to do to him. There was the short and round and highly chatting Dr Meyer, his best friend Dr Hoffman, the idealistic and well meaning Dr Becker, and lastly, the tall, silent Dr Wolfe with pale blond hair and knowing pale eyes that were so, so familiar, like….

He woke up with a start to a room mired in shadows and gloom, unable to fight against the frustrating creep of déjà vu and that one fragment of memory that eluded his desperate grasp. Beside him, Black Widow stirred, her chains clinking, as she moved into a sitting position and balefully glared at him and their surroundings, like somehow it was his fault that they were captured and stuck in this windowless dungeon. After all, he had only insisted on saving the young pregnant woman from a gang of local hooligans. How was he to know that she was armed with a canister of nerve gas?

“They’ll soon notice we are gone,” he declared, thought he didn’t feel entirely confident whether he said it to reassure Black Widow or himself.

“They’ve taken away every piece of electronic equipment which might Stark might have been able to use to track us,” Natasha said unkindly and with a very pointed look.

Steve sighed. They were beginning to recycle dialogue.

“What’s your internal clock say about how long we have been stuck here for?”

Natasha grunted. “They don’t serve food regularly but I’d say two, maybe two and a half weeks. You know,” she slowly rose to her feet and stretched as far as the chains would allow, “if they wanted to break us or soften us up before interrogation, they wouldn’t have kept us together.”

“That’s the part that doesn’t make sense,” Steve agreed.

“Would you humans stop yapping? Trying to get some sleep here!” the dwarf sneered.

“What really doesn’t make sense is locking us up with a bunch of aliens. Two dwarves, four dark elves and…what did you say you were you again?” Natasha turned to a young boy, no more than seven years old by Steve’s reckoning, with a head of hair the colour of flame that seemed to give off its own light in the gloom.
“Fire elemental,” the boy whispered, curled up in a ball in a corner of their cell.

“The Gatekeeper bought you guys to earth right? Does he know you’ve all been captured? Will he help you escape?” Steve asked for the umpteenth time, desperate for an answer which wasn’t –

“How many times do we have to tell you? We ain’t talking about the Gatekeeper! Not to you anyway,” the other dwarf snorted. The dark elves chuckled and the fire elemental’s eyes opened wide, black and smouldering like burning coals, and it made Steve swallow hard.

“Well, at least tell us something about yourselves if we’re going to be here for a while. I’m Steve, Steve Rogers.”

“And I’m Mind-Your-Own-Fucking-Business,” the first, supposedly sleeping, dwarf snapped, drawing a soft murmur of laughter from the elves.

Steve determinedly ignored the hostility and turned to where he thought the others were, friendly smile on his face even though he wasn’t sure whether the others could even see it. Heck, he could just make out the outline of his hand if he bought it within an inch of his face.

“Jarxanth,” the young boy offered in a soft voice. “Of the Royal House of Surtur.”

“Thank you, Jarxanth. Nice to meet you,” Steve said firmly. “This is my friend, Natasha.”

He jostled her in the ribs, and she grudgingly parroted a “Nice to meet you too.”

No one else shared their names, so Steve took a deep breath and tried another angle. “Nat and I were kidnapped in broad daylight. I don’t know who these people are, or what they want. Any ideas?”

“Did you see who bought you here?” the surlier of the two dwarves asked.

“They had masks on, all of them. White masks with faint lines and tracings,” Natasha recalled without any uncertainty. “And deep set black eyes and black lips. They didn’t speak, so I couldn’t discern their nationality.”

There was another ripple of soft laughter. Steve’s eyes narrowed. “Is there something amusing you want to share?”

“They weren’t masks,” one of the dark elves jeered. “They are Syrnalorn’s Honour Guard, the blood elves, the deadliest fighters of us all.”

“What the hell does the elf king want with us?”

“The elf king wants us. You are probably just a favour he has done for his mortal allies here on Midgard.”

Natasha breathed in audibly. “Syrnalorn is collaborating with humans? Who?”

“The owner of this god forsaken dungeon, that’s who,” dwarf two sniffed. There was a sudden, sharp rattling of chains as the dwarf gave them a good yank but was unable to rip them off the bolts in the wall. “I finally get out of Orzammar only to end up as someone else’s prisoner. Where was my promised freedom?”

“Freedom is only for the powerful and privileged,” a dark elf taunted with a bitter laugh. “Once a mine serf, always a mine serf.”
“Fuck you,” the dwarf swore, tugging at the chains again. “And the Balrog take this cursed place.”

“Freedom is a basic human condition,” Steve corrected the dark elf. “Man is born free, and has the right to be free.”

“Dream on, wonder boy. Slavery is alive, well and flourishing in your own realm. What has your basic human condition done for these people?”

“I didn’t say freedom cannot be taken from you,” Steve hotly argued. “You always have to be vigilant and be prepared to fight against those who want to take freedom away from you.”

“The argument is circular,” Jarxanth cut in, though his voice was never above the sound of a whisper. “Without power, you cannot fight. Without power, you cannot defend your freedom. That is why my father sent me to Midgard. To stay free.”

“And these humans have the temerity to hold a princeling of Muspelheim prisoner,” the dwarf struggling against his chains panted. He sat down to get his breath back. “I mean, I’m a nobody, just a blacksmith of the smith caste, as is my friend. You darkies aren’t even lieutenants, just low level dust smugglers. Why would anyone be interested in us?”

There was a whimper from the corner of the cell, farthest away from the door and almost totally concealed by the darkness. They all stilled. In the two weeks, or however long Steve had been in this cell, everyone had spoken to him at some point (even if the conversation was not constructive or particularly friendly). But that one other prisoner secluded in his own little corner never spoke. There were occasional smothered cries and muffled sobs or the scraping of nails across the metal walls. Steve assumed it was a man, but whenever he stirred, Steve got the feeling of something sick and wrong twisting and corrupting the air he was breathing.

“Does…does anyone know who he is?”

“No,” said one of the dark elves abruptly. “And we don’t want to know.”

“He has been tortured,” Jarxanth sighed, reminding Steve more and more of the soundless flickering of a flame. “His magical core has been forcibly ripped from him. He is harmless. Do not mind him.”

“Easy for you not to be afraid,” dwarf number one snorted. “You convert things you do not like into ash.”

Steve steeled himself against his innate instincts of fear and made himself crawl towards the desolate corner of the cell.

“Steve,” Black Widow hissed after him.

“If he’s sick or hurt, he needs help.”

“How can you help? You know nothing about magic.”

Steve let go of a breath he didn’t know he was holding. He knelt down beside the prisoner and was shocked by how fragile he felt beneath his hands, all brittle bone and wasted muscles. He spoke soft and reassuringly as he rolled the prisoner onto his back and laid a hand on the face then slid it to the back of his neck in a comforting hold, hoping that might focus the man.

“Bro…brother? Thor?” the wretched creature in his arms whispered, and Steve felt the bottom of his stomach falling away.
I finally got the chapter out and it's the Easter long weekend! *gets to work on the next chapter straight away*

Firstly, sincerest thanks as always to those who have reviewed and left me comments. I am so grateful for the feedback and the opinion and I'll turn it all into fuel to motivate me to keep writing.

I've been honestly torn in the past few weeks as to the ending of this fic (in fact, I've been contemplating the end from the start). Having watched TDW and saw the dickish way Odin was behaving, I really just wanted Loki to go off and do his own stuff, but then that just makes Thor's grief and guilt so utterly pointless. Then, I cam across the wonderful Loki&Thor fic called "Bargaining" (I suck at HTML script so I don't know how to link! It's here on Ao3 though! So go find it!) and it revealed to me just how it *could* be possible to bring Loki back to the fold, or at least resolve this bitter enmity he has for all of them. It's hard, no doubt about it, but the ending was so wonderfully fulfilling.

Perhaps I can find a middle road? Perhaps I can sculpt some sort of ending that will see the brothers reconcile?

The idea certainly appeals, and there are things which the plot I can do to make that happen. I hope you'll all stick with me on this roller-coaster of a journey.

And as for Bucky - I just saw CA:TWS, and it feels like sooooo long since I've had a teenage girl crush, but I have a teenage girl crush. Oh dear lord I just want Steve and Bucky to get together and live happily ever after. And in the wonderful world of fic, I'm going to make that happen. As soon as Steve gets out of this little pickle.

The pace of the plot should pick up from here and the long awaited meeting between Thor and Loki will finally happen next chapter. As I said above, it's the long weekend, and I'm going to get started right away.

Thanks again for staying the distance with me - or in the words of Bucky, I hope you'll all be with this story to the end of the line (work that line into the fic, damnit!).
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifteen

Heavy footsteps began to approach, stalking down the corridor outside with purposeful strides. Natasha scrambled in the dark, felt her way to where Steve was and dragged him back closer to where their chains terminated at the wall, and tensed for the arrival of the guard.

It was routine. Whenever any of the guards made contact, even if it was through the slot in the door to pass them their trays of food, they immediately stopped whatever it was they were doing, dropped any bickering with the dwarves, and paid the moment their fullest attention. It was their one and only chance to glean any information about their captors or seize an opportunity to escape (they’d tried the ‘she’s sick and needs a doctor’ trick to lure the guard and his keys into the cell, but that quickly went nowhere. Steve blamed Natasha’s poor acting skills). All it took was one mistake, one slip up, and Captain America, Black Widow and aliens would be out of that dungeon so quickly it would make Speedy Gonzales cry into his little white shirt.

It therefore took Steve totally by surprise when the cell door burst open, a switch somewhere outside was flipped and light flooded the room.

All the prisoners cried out in varying degrees of pain and shock as their eyes were stung by light which they had probably not seen for months, but Steve’s exclamation was the loudest and he nearly tore his chains apart from his excitement.

“James!” he blurted out, scarcely daring to hope this was not another dream.

“Hey Steve.” The younger man’s face lit up into an effervescent expression brimming with pride and satisfaction as cobalt blue eyes settled on Steve’s a little-worse-for-wear form. James flashed a wicked and boyish grin so heartbreakingly familiar that a lump lodged in Steve’s throat and he blinked rapidly to dry the gathering wetness in his eyes. Maybe Bucky had become his guardian angel.

Steve’s enthusiasm was not shared by Black Widow, but the other prisoners regarded James with a mix of cautious suspicion and hope. It could be the trap that they were all on the edge of their seats waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“You know this person, Cap?” Widow coolly asked, refusing to buy into his elation. It dawned on Steve that she might have thought James was the one who had betrayed him to whoever it was who kidnapped them. The thought that James might betray him had never crossed Steve’s mind, and he unhesitatingly trashed the idea. It was simply inconceivable and intolerable.

“It’s ok, Nat. This is James. He’s a friend.”

Natasha’s eyes never wavered from James’ face, a gaze filled with calculation and mistrust, trying to pick up as much information from the way James moved to the way he held himself when he bedazzled Steve with one brilliant and ridiculously happy grin after another in spite of their current situation. A disarmingly charming and handsome face wasn’t going to make the infamous Black Widow drop her guard. “Some friend. How’d you find us?” she asked with no more warmth in her voice.
Steve blinked. “Yeah. How did you find us?”

James chuckled as he methodically set about unlocking his cuffs with the big bundle of keys. All at once, the other aliens converged and immediately clamoured to be released with a mixture of bribes and threats. That he was Captain America’s friend was good enough for them.

“It was easy. Once Ms Marvel confirmed you were missing, all I had to do was sign up with an agency known for supplying foot soldiers to disreputable organisations, then get some insider goss to find out who is suddenly in need of extra manpower at the moment because of certain recent acquisitions and then get myself placed to work at their headquarters.”

Steve slammed his open mouth shut. “You…you make it sound so simple,” he finally managed to mumble.

Natasha studied James’ prosthesis through the bulges in the sleeve of his uniform and didn’t sugarcoat her words. “They’d hire a cripple like you?”

James happily shrugged as he moved onto her set of shackles which she unflinchingly held up for him to unlock. “Even evil syndicates practice equal opportunity and anti discrimination. Plus, with all you Avengers kicking ass on a daily basis at the moment, there’s a shortage of us grunts and minions. They’ve almost got to a stage where if you can lift and point a gun in around the general vicinity of the good guys, they’ll take you. My army training and experience actually made me a very attractive candidate.”

Steve frowned. Something James said was unsettling. “There are recruitment agencies for the likes of AIM and HYDRA?” he guffawed in genuine disbelief as he took some keys off James and started trying them on the locks around the dwarves wrists.

“Yep,” Bucky chuckled, all too pleased to have surprised Steve and made the older man proud. “You just need to ask the right people for the right directions on the DarkNet and submit a CV that demonstrates you know the difference between ‘its’ and ‘it’s’. Straightforward.”

The dwarves sniffed and nodded in gratitude at Steve when the clamps around their wrists fell to the ground with a resounding clang. “If it was that simple, why didn’t Star Spangled Banner’s friends come and bust him out of this joint sooner?”

Natasha rolled her eyes and moved on to help the dark elves. “Probably because none of them thought about where all the endless canon fodder comes from. A labour hire agency would’ve been the last thing they would’ve thought about.”

“No one ever pays any attention to the minions,” James agreed. “You guys always go after the big bosses and never stop to think about slipping some agents in undercover to bring these organisations down from within.”

It would have been such a typical Bucky thing to say. The younger man had relished being assigned the covert missions and infiltration assignments, using his peerless stealth to break into an enemy base and access the controls to open the front doors so that the main force could charge through. Could there be such an incredible coincidence, seven decades later, that he could meet another man bearing the same name and traits as his best friend?

“Someone’s coming!” a dark elf hissed.

James’ eyes narrowed. “Hands behind your backs. Pretend like you’re still locked up. Ma’am,” he addressed Natasha with sudden steel and cruelty in his eyes, “this isn’t personal.”
His fist connected with Natasha’s jaw, drawing a sickening crack and sending her sprawling onto the hard stone floor, just another man stepped into the room. A morbid chill settled in his bones, but Steve refused to allow any distress to show, straightened his spine and stoically faced his captors.

The man had dark hair that was precision parted to the side and slicked down with a full tub of gel until he achieved a rock hard, but wet, glistening finish. He wore the well cut and pompous HYDRA uniform in the fashion of nineteenth century Prussian aristocracy, complete with silver embroidered insignia just over the heart on the left breast and gold tasselled epaulets evidencing his status as Colonel. He was flanked by two junior ranking soldiers armed with submachine guns and cartoonish glares that couldn’t scare a baby into handing over their candy.

James wiped his face clear of any personality, sending subtle tremors of unease rippling through Steve’s body, and then proceeded to snap to attention with a double fisted pump into the air.

“Who are you? Where’s Johnson?”

“Martin, first week on the job, sir,” James barked like any soldier addressed by his C.O with an impeccable British accent, pleasing the Hydra colonel greatly. “Offered to take Johnson’s shift, sir!”

“Ah,” the Colonel raised a brow, amused. “I see you respect the traditions.”

James gave a small nod, his blank, unblinking eyes always fixed dead ahead. “Had a brother who served with Dr Doom for a while, sir. Was told probationary officers should offer to relieve their direct supervisors of their shifts.”

“Good, good. But didn’t Johnson tell you there is to be no contact with these prisoners? You’ve even left the door wide open. That’s a level 3 containment breach already, punishable by a four week period of solitary confinement.”

James feigned a very convincing look of contrition but never made eye contact with his superior. “Apologies, sir! My brother, the one who worked in Latveria, was killed by this bitch here. I… couldn’t help giving her a taste of her medicine. It’s what my brother would have wanted.”

The colonel laid a sympathetic hand on James’ shoulder, making Steve grit his teeth and see red as the Hydra officer used his other hand to tilt James’ chin up and to the side, like he was inspecting a piece of meat, and then proceeded to violate his friend’s face with his lecherous eyes. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said not sounding very sorry at all. “So few people are aware of the pain that our loyal soldiers suffer for their masters. Very well, I shall let you off with a caution this time.”

“Thank you, sir!” James smartly clicked his heels and pumped his fists in the air again, delighting the colonel even more. “Could I express my gratitude by offering to relieve you of some responsibilities or duties, sir?”

The colonel made a dismissive gesture with his pristine white gloved hands. He sneered disdainfully at Steve and the dark elves, but otherwise made no move to approach them. “There is no need. The duties and responsibilities of my position are mine and mine alone. See me in my private quarters at the end of your shift.” That vile hand gave James’ shoulder an affectionate squeeze and lingered on. It was a miracle of grace that Steve hadn’t charged and clotheslined the slimeball already. “You may express your gratitude to me then.”

“I’d prefer to service you this way instead.”
And before the Hydra colonel had a chance to respond, Barnes’ powerful left hook had the man sailing through the air until he slammed into the far wall and slid down, thoroughly unconscious. Then, just as the two junior officers were in the process of shouting accusations, raising and aiming their submachine guns at James, he had already whipped out two Desert Eagles from the small of his back and fired off two shots. The two young men instantly collapsed like felled trees, bits and pieces of skull and brains splattered all over the floor behind them as the bullet found their way perfectly between their eyes.

The room was deathly quiet for a moment at the visitation of sudden, deadly carnage. The heady smell of gunpowder from a recently discharged gun wafted in the air, and it was only lifted when James let out a soft, congratulatory laugh. “You,” he looked at the dark elves and jerked his head at the two corpses at his feet. “Strip them and arm yourselves with anything they’ve got. Quickly. We’ve got to get moving. And guys,” he motioned the dwarves to the colonel’s limp form. “Get me his access card. He has seventh level security clearance and will get us through most of this base. God, if I had to do that ridiculous salute one more time, I’m going to puke.”

“What do you want us to do with him afterwards?” one of the dwarves asked, expertly fishing through the colonel’s pockets.

“Up to you. I’m not fussed.”

“James!” Steve admonished, seized by a sudden spike of alarm. There was an uncomfortable tightness in his gut, the ground threatened to crumble beneath his feet and Steve got that horrible feeling where he couldn’t tell what was and was not real as the cold steel walls crowded in on him. *You infiltrate a deadly organisation like Hydra as if you just had to hand in a resume to get a job, you get your hands on the keys without raising any alarms, then you waste three ranking Hydra officers in the space of a heartbeat as if we were at the supermarket and you’ve just checked an item off the grocery list. Now you’re just going to allow these aliens to murder of an unarmed man? Who the hell are you? Bucky’s evil twin?*

James gave him a genuinely confused look and tried to ground him with a reassuring squeeze of his elbow. “Steve, these people are Hydra, the surviving remnants of a *Nazi* research organisation,” he said as if that explained everything. To some, it probably did. “There is a general “kill on sight” order for these sad excuses of a human being.”

“But…” Steve flustered, groping for the right words. He shook his head to clear it. “You can’t kill someone when they’re out cold. That’s just not right.”

James shrugged again. “I’m not the one killing them when they’re out cold. Grouchy and Grumpy are.”

On cue, Grouchy snapped the colonel’s neck, and Grumpy flicked the access card to him.

Steve’s mouth hung open for the second time that night. “James! You…”

“Nag, nag, nag,” James sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. “Come on, we still have to drop by the armoury to pick up your shield and Widow’s gauntlets.”

“Let me guess, you’ve got the keys to the armoury as well?” the eldest looking of the dark elves said sardonically. Steve distracted himself from his increasing apprehension of James’ behaviour by examining the secretive group of dark elves. Three looked to be young men with stoic, rigid expressions determined to deny any emotion, while the tallest one with long sleek off-white hair and half a face ravaged by scars held himself to be the leader, composed and in control despite their circumstances. The dwarves assumed they were low level contraband runners, but Steve had
moved in crowds ranging from new recruits and greenhorns to the presidents and prime ministers who commanded treasuries worth billions and armies comprising millions of men. He knew a man who held power when he saw one. And this tall dark elf was one of them.

“I relieved Taylor of his shift as well, you know, me being a probie and all.”

The dark elf’s violet eyes raked up and down James’ form appreciatively and there was a shark-like smile on his burgundy lips, all teeth and no humour. “I could always use a talented and resourceful man like you. Name your price. I can pay.”

“Oh my god, you can’t be serious. James, stop talking to this elf. And you sir,” Steve said sternly to the unrepentantly grinning dark elf, using his authoritative Captain America voice and positioning his body as a physical barrier between the dark elf and his friend, “are not going to proposition James into taking any part in any of your illegal intergalactic smuggling business. In fact, when this is all over, I’m going to invite you to come to SHIELD’s headquarters where we’ll have a chat over a cup of coffee and then you’ll tell me crimes that you would like to confess to.”

The three dark elves glared at Steve and formed a rough semi-circle around their elder, and the way they handled the submachine guns suggested they were not strangers to violence.

Widow sighed. “Guys, can we leave all this dick waving for later when we have actually escaped? If you haven’t realised, we are still in the very bowels of a secret Hydra base.”

“Hey, laddie, we’re breaking out. Can ya move on your own?”

Steve stiffened. He got so caught up in James’ sudden arrival that he completely forgot about the other prisoner. The one who just mistook him for Thor. Grumpy was crouched over the rag clothed creature and peering into its vacuous eyes, softly slapping him on the cheek to focus.

“He’s coming with us,” Steve declared grimly, daring anyone to argue with him. “I’ll carry him.”

James squinted at the bundle in Steve’s arms, and his face turned an interesting shade of sick. Steve didn’t blame him. Unlike the other prisoners, this one was a wasted shell of the man he used to be, pallid skin pulled tight over bone such that he resembled little more than a mummified corpse. Sometime ago, his hair had been brutally hacked off and it had never really grown back so you could see all the angry red and purple scars where doctors must have cut and peeled the skin back before drilling holes into the skull. There were old, circular burns all along the forehead near the hairline, suggesting months, if not years, of experimentation and monitoring.

“James…James…are you all right?”

The brunette stumbled back a step, his earlier confidence dashed, and he swallowed hard as his tongue tentatively flicked out to wet dried, cracked lips. It took a while before James found his voice, and all that time, he couldn’t tear his gaze away from the mishappen figure in Steve’s arms. “It’s the PTSD….” James finally muttered after taking several deep breaths. “Um…flashbacks…of Fallujah and stuff. Let’s….let’s go.”

He abruptly turned and headed for the doorway, doing one final check that the corridors were clear before he disappeared from Steve’s view with the aliens streaming after him in single file. Natasha haltingly followed.

“Laddie, are we just going to fight our way out of here after we pick up Mr Patriot’s shield?”

“Of course not. I’ve called for back-up. The Avengers should be here in the next hour or so. Let’s move.”
The bundle in Steve’s arms moaned as light pierced his foggy green eyes. Steve gently pulled some cloth over the face and secretly prayed that this prisoner wasn’t who he thought he was.

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“Who is this Lord of Terror? Where are the plains of Azeroth? I need to contact the All Father and ask him to prepare a battalion of warriors to do battle against this nefarious sounding villain before they are allowed to set foot on Asgard!”

Tony rubbed the sides of his temple and popped another aspirin for his incurable headache that was already giving him double vision and about to knock him out. He was tempted to turn off all the lights, put on a pair of high end Bosch headphones and plug in some whale songs and other nature sounds so he could filter out that incessantly booming voice that was overloaded with stupid. Five times. He’d explained the concept of MMORPG five fricking times already and even logged onto his WoW account to demonstrate, but the big blond mountain of dumb seemed to think that his computer was a form of communicating with characters who were real warriors but in a different dimension.

“No, the players are real,” he stressed that word as several capillaries burst, hoping against hope that Thor would understand the distinction between human gamers and virtual avatars. “This is a game, Thor, a game where we use make-believe characters and raid dungeons together!”

“Raiding a vile lair infested with lizardlings is no game,” Thor replied with that infuriating seriousness which screamed I can’t take a joke. “And I would certainly not dismiss your efforts at training, or levelling up, as nothing more than a child’s game.”

Tony buried his face in his hands and sobbed. This was simply too sad. Even Cap got the concept of online gaming more quickly than this. “Banner!” he yelled. “Have you and Clint logged on yet?”

“Done! Done!” came Banner’s slightly panicked reply. “The Quinjet’s capable of many things, but I don’t think you designed it with multiplatform TCP/IP connection abilities for gaming purposes.”

“Whatever!” Tony said, desperate. “Just give Hammertime a live demonstration. Please!” Before I jump out of this plane deliberately without my parachute on while gleefully laughing goodbye cruel world.

“All right, time to show the space vikings what I can do,” Clint smirked as he laced his fingers and flexed. He pulled out a chair beside him, inviting Thor to have a seat.

“I shall sit next to you, my love,” Amora quickly wheeled her own chair to wedge it between Clint and Thor. Sif rolled her eyes, physically restrained Amora, and insults, barbs and lots of gratuitous hair pulling started all over again.

“Ms Marvel, can you please separate the two of them?”

Danvers shot him an insulted look, which he met head on with an equal dose of exasperation. “Barbie’s magic doesn’t work on women. Take that up with her if you don’t like it.”

Amora had quickly demonstrated her prowess at enchantment and seduction when she first arrived with Thor back at the Avenger’s mansion. With a set of ‘come hither’ bedroom eyes and voice charged with lust and desire, she had instantly turned every man bar Thor into her ever-faithful drones, intending to use them to attend to her every whim – the first of which was to do away with Sif. It was a blissful but no less terrifying experience for Tony’s good ol’ intellect and reason to
lose out without a goddamn fight to his primal desires and urges and unquestioningly obey his poisonous queen. It didn’t even feel like coercion at the time, just dreamy satisfaction, even as the pommel of Sif’s sword nearly caved his skull in through his suit. But fortunately for him, Amora was eventually overcome by her fellow Asgardians and made to swear not to exercise her magic on any of the Avengers ever again.

Apparently, it was also due to her sorcerous ability to make men throw themselves onto burning pyres for her that she found out about Thor and Sif’s were even on earth.

“The only other people apart from Thor and the Allfather who knew about our secret mission was Heimdall and Jarl Farnarr. I cannot believe either of them would have succumbed to your cheap glamours.”

Amora’s smile, full of bitter smug and prickly malevolence, had made Sif second guess herself. “My dear Sif, I can assure you Jarl Farnarr’s son was eager to acquire me the information I required.”

Tony silently thanked the good lord that of his two closest companions, one was female and the other was artificial intelligence.

“Ladies, Bruce has two seats right next to him, and he’s keen to have company,” Danvers raised her voice above the rabble to make herself heard.

“Of course he would,” Amora said with grating haughtiness that made Tony’s ears feel like they were bleeding. Her eyes raked up and down Bruce’s (admittedly) unkempt appearance with so much scorn and condescension it could make a room full of emo teenagers cry. She was a total natural at it, and then had centuries to turn it into an art form. “Any man as self-disrespecting as him would pay an arm and a leg for my company.”

Tony mentally choked. I’d pay an arm and a leg to throw judgemental bitches like you out of my quinjet. His fingers twitched, itching closer and closer to the ‘Eject’ button until one steely look of warning and a sharp slap from Wasp forced his hand back away from the control panels.

Danvers eventually got them all to settle down and grudgingly take up their places next to Bruce. They became subdued as they watched Clint and Bruce logged in as a paladin and wizard on EverQuest II and joined up with a group comprising a cleric, a Berserker and a shaman. The group camped outside Crushbone Keep and began to dispatch orc centurions before raiding the keep and calling dibs to loot Crushbone’s body. After the first half hour or so, Thor and Sif began to understand the concept of simulation and likened the characters to puppets.

“So you prove your strength and worth through these puppets in a fictional realm created by other Midgardians? Levelling up is a way of demonstrating the fruits of your training of your puppet?” Sif summarised, looking to Bruce for affirmation which he gave with a patient nod of the head.

“And it means that you can dress and sculpt your puppet in any way you wish?” Amora leaned close to Bruce to inspect the characters on the screen. The man was suddenly extremely uncomfortable with his front-row-seat view of her ample cleavage. The enchantress caught Clint sneaking glances, but was indifferent. What’s the point of showing bosom if no one stared was probably her guiding philosophy. “For instance, if Master Banner so desired, he could create a female puppet skilled with sorcery, is this so?”

Bruce gulped, eyes strictly on his screen, and quickly nodded. “I have a level 65 female elf ranger, deadly sniper with a long bow. Kind of based her character development off Hawkeye actually.”
“My most bad-ass character is a male Arasai Warlock, level 79,” Clint proudly declared. “I chain cast Dark Infestation with Curse of Darkness and Dark Pyre then slap on a Dark Siphoning to shorten mana recovery time. I can solo and farm giants on my own.”

Half the jargon totally went over Thor’s head, but he was rapidly beginning to grasp the mechanics of gameplay now that he could actually watch it unfold before his eyes. Tony filed that little bit of information away in case he had to explain more of earth’s eccentric customs to the Asgardian later. Show, not tell. “As Iron Man said, this is all make-believe. You derive enjoyment in pretending to be someone you are not, and then as such a not-person, undertake grand quests and adventures with others without ever being physically endangered.”

Sif gave a wry grin. “If the Warriors three were here, Thor, we would all create a mighty group of fighters and berserkers and slay this Lord of Terror together.”

“You wouldn’t get very far,” Amora sniffed in disdain as she experimentally clicked on a mouse key that set off Banner’s wizard to lob a fireball into a group of orcs who had Clint’s paladin surrounded. “These games clearly encourage collaboration between a diverse range of characters. Correct me if I am wrong, Master Banner,” and the way she drawled Bruce’s name like poisoned honey gave Tony goosebumps and turned Banner into a stone statue. “But it appears each puppet has been deliberately designed with strengths and weaknesses, so that a wizard cannot travel alone because he has low hitpoints whereas a warrior cannot confront a drake by himself as the damage he is capable of inflicting with his weapons is limited. No?”

“This woman gets it! Finally!” Clint celebrated, wanting to high five Amora, but she gave him such a withering glare that he quickly retracted his hand. “Er…yes, teamwork. Your warriors are usually called ‘tanks’ or meat shields. They stop the critters in their tracks or taunt them so the enemy’s attention is on them while your whizz-bang masters stand back, prep spells and nuke the hell out of the enemy.”

Sif crossed her arms and regarded Clint with a patronising you know nothing puny mortal arch of her eyebrow. “Obviously, this is make-believe. In reality, all you would need to bring down a fire drake is a good company of swordsmen and a few skilled archers. We have no need of these shamans or warlocks and petty buffs to fight a good fight.”

“That is such a typical thing for you to say, Sif,” Amora seethed, pushing Bruce aside to glare daggers at her arch rival in love. “I could use my powers of enchantment and manipulate the guards into let down the drawbridge to this…who are we attacking again, Man of Iron?”

“Hydra,” Tony said testily, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“– this Hydra’s fortress, but you would still insist we sacrifice dozens of good men to scale the walls instead. Loki’s sorcery has aided you more times than you can remember but you would never lower yourself to acknowledge the worth of these petty buffs!”

“That’s not true,” Sif roared, rising to her feet, hands very close to her weapons. “He always had my thanks. I was raised to have better manners than you.”

“Oh yeah?” Amora retorted, abandoning all façade of feminine refinement. By now, Bruce had backed himself all the way to the tail end of the quinjet and was finding the monotonous stretch of sky and ocean outside a very interesting study. “Then why did we hear nothing of the new spell Loki used to defeat the Lich King’s revenants? I had to dredge that information out of Oktell, when he was drunk, to find out that Loki had called forth the very sun in the bones of the earth. Where was your acknowledgement of the good of sorcery then?”
Tony buried his face in his hands again and started to cry. He needed a distraction. He needed a stiff drink. He needed to put his suit on and get out and fly the rest of the trip instead. “Ms Marvel, how solid is your intel? Whose tip-off are we relying on here?”

Ms Marvel gave up trying to calm the two women down, welcoming the change in conversation. She took up the pilot’s seat beside Tony and helped herself to two aspirin tablets. “You wouldn’t believe it, but it’s Steve’s new friend, James Barnes.”

“Shut up!” he spun around in his seat and gave the Major his full attention. “He’s got a friend called James Barnes?!”

“He’s hot,” Van Dyne added, tossing Tony a devious wink. “He’s Lachie’s dog walker too.”

Tony’s jaw nearly dislocated. “Danvers, your dance partner’s dog walker is called James Barnes and is Captain America’s friend?”

“Well, we found him sleeping in Cap’s apartment and told him that the Cap had gone missing. That’s when he just took off and said he’d go looking for him.” Danvers stared at the crumpled piece of paper, the encrypted message she had received on the secure SWORD line just a couple of hours ago. It was a short, sweet message. Found Cap. Black Widow. Hydra. Pick-up. Samoa. ETA 4 hours. “Got no idea how he beat us to it though. I mean, how did he even know to look in the Pacific in the first place?”

Van Dyne murmured in agreement, but Tony became fixated on one, and only one, issue. The only one which really mattered. “You found him sleeping in Cap’s apartment?”

There was an awkward silence. “Look,” Ms Marvel began steadily, although the edges of her lips constantly twitched upwards. “He was in the guest bedroom. And Cap’s a grown man. It’s nice to see that he’s finally settled into the twenty first century, stopped clamming up whenever someone tries to reach out and has made a friend – ”

Tony couldn’t believe he was hearing this. His voice unwittingly scaled up an octave. “He’s got a new friend named after his dead best friend who he went, alone, thirty miles behind one of the most heavily fortified enemy lines in Europe at the time to rescue wearing nothing but a stage costume. And they’re living together already. After how long? Is this not concerning to any of you? It has ‘THIS IS A SET UP’ painted with big red letters all over it and plastered all over town!”

“Knock it off, Stark,” Clint exclaimed, eyeing Tony as if he had suddenly grown two heads. “It’s not like we ask intrusive questions about your private life, or ask whether you have a trophy room for all your one night stands. And besides, James Barnes isn’t an uncommon name. After the war, do you know how many kids were named after Captain America and Bucky, who then went on to name their kids after Captain America and Bucky Barnes?”

Tony slumped in his seat, defeated. “I try to be a good friend here, and you guys dredge up my not-so-perfect past. Low blow, totally low blow. And I’m surprised at you, Hawkeye. You’re a SHIELD agent. Shouldn’t you be saying ‘there’s no such thing as a coincidence’ and investigate the buggery out of this so-called James Barnes?”

Van Dyne smacked him on the back of the head, and Tony decided to pop another aspirin and shut up for the rest of the ride to Samoa.

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They reached the arms store without incident. Steve gently placed Thor’s acquaintance on the floor near the door and headed straight for his shield which dangled by its leather straps off the wall, while Black Widow made a beeline for her gauntlets and immediately checked the remaining charge in them. Grumpy and Grouchy helped themselves to a pair of sawn off shot guns complimented by machetes as did the dark elves.

“Guns run out of bullets. Blades don’t,” the dark elf leader said darkly, but didn’t say no when one of his underlings passed around an AK47.

On the other hand, James’ pockets were stuffed to the brim with magazines. He had an M16 rifle clipped onto his front, managed to score a grenade launcher that he had slung on his back, fitted as many throwing knives as humanly possible around his thigh, leaving space enough to holster a Beretta on each side. There was still the two Desert Eagles tucked away in the small of his back, and he slotted a pair of k-bars on either side of his tactical boots, then decorated himself like a Christmas tree with criss-crossing bandoliers of bullets and grenades.

Natasha and the dark elves stared, hard. “You trying to win the medal for deadliest one-man army or something?” the Widow asked, doubtful he could still move under all that equipment.

James looked like the kid who had been left all on his own at Toys R Us with his dad’s uncapped platinum credit card. “You can never have too many guns. Everyone should have a gun.”

Natasha cleared her throat. “There is still such a thing as overkill.”

“Doll face, there’s no such thing as overkill. There’s ten of us here, against a whole fortress crawling with Hydra agents and officers. And besides, until the Avengers arrive, there’s business to take care of.”

“What business do we have other than escape?” Grumpy demanded to know. He had taken James’ advice and now sported a bandolier of grenades of his own. Grouchy was spending way too much time examining the anti-personnel mines and happily loading up two cases full of them.

“They’re doing some kooky experimentation on the top floor. It’s a restricted area, but I managed to get a good look during my induction and orientation.”

Steve did a double take. “They even do orientations? For real?”

“Of course, Steve. They built this base inside an extinct volcano and it’s a maze. As an employer, they have OH&S obligations to show us where the emergency exits and first aid stations are. I even had to sit through an instructional DVD on manual handling and how to properly lift heavy items so we can avoid lower back injury.”

Steve slapped the base of his palm against his forehead. Repeatedly. “Forget I asked. Just continue.”

“Anyway, like I said, there were doing some kooky experimentation which looked a lot like the first Ghostbusters movie, you know, with that whole door of light and freakish androgynous dude walking through calling himself or herself Gozer type of thing. Figured if it’s Hydra, it can’t be good.”

Steve’s mouth ran dry, and it had been a long time since becoming a super soldier that he experienced the chilling stabs of fear paralyse him from head to toe. This was turning to be one big horrible groundhog day and history was repeating itself with a macabre sense of humour. His last mission, the last time when he would ever see Bucky alive, was when they stormed Schmidt’s
research facility and stumbled across these fantastical and terrifying creatures from myth. As the Skull had explained it, not fantasy, merely alien, mistaken by their ancestors as the magical.

And here they were again, seven decades later, pitted against the same enemy, trying to re-enact the same twisted play which saw him loose his best friend inside an exploding fireball.

Natasha peered into his face, concern etched in her frown. “Captain…Cap, are you all right?”

“It’s a portal,” he managed to spit out, his head bowed. “Hydra thought they could change the tide of war by bringing in all these trolls and minotaurs and other creatures, the very stuff of legend, but Bucky and I put an end to their plans in our final mission together.” He stomach churned and suddenly his limbs turned to jelly. “I thought Schmidt said the Gatekeeper put them out of this business in the 1950’s as well. How are they now able to manage a portal?”

“Probably the high elves.” The dark elf elder’s voice was bleak, his brows drawn tight into a pinch. The rest of the aliens uneasily stirred. “Syrnalorn figures that if he can’t kill the black market trade and stop the weapons smuggling, then he’ll simply destroy the man who builds all the shadow paths connecting the realms. He needs a portal so he can send his army here to wage war.”

Jarxanth, who had refused any weapons and kept his small hands tucked inside the pockets of his hooded jacket all this time, tugged lightly on Steve’s trousers. He recoiled from the sudden contact as a scalding wave of heat left a grisly burn mark on the skin of his shin. “We have to shut it down. The Gatekeeper still needs to clear a passage for my people to enter this realm. I will not allow him to come to harm.”

“I have my business interests to protect,” the leader of the dark elves added, a ruthless glint in his eyes, although Steve suspected there was more to the story that he hadn’t been told.

“And we owe him our freedom,” Grouchy hefted his machete in a menacing manner. “The revolution on Nidavellir needs the Gatekeeper. Without him, it will be another millennia, maybe two, before there will be another chance for the miners, the collectors and the tunnellers to rise up. The poor bastards shouldn’t have to wait that long.”

“You want to destroy the portal?” Steve finally found his voice, overwhelmed as he was by the stony determination exhibited by people who, only moments ago, were enslaved and subdued in shackles and chains. In the past, Steve had gone to war for his country, confident and assured in the knowledge that the man they had created him to hunt down was an evil man who he was to personally escort to the gates of hell. Yet now more than ever, he questioned SHIELD and the Avengers’ long hunt for the Gatekeeper. Sure, the sorcerer smuggled aliens onto earth, hundreds and thousands of them according to Boris, but weren’t the frost giants in fact climate refugees, the dwarves victims of slavery, and the wood elves in need of political asylum? Now, it seemed the fire elementals of Muspelheim needed some form of sanctuary on earth.

The Gatekeeper was no Adolf Hitler, and Steve wasn’t convinced that the Gatekeeper was building up a fifth column to infiltrate humanity and tear her down from within. SHIELD might be pissed off that someone could operate outside the parameters of their control, but that didn’t necessary make them evil.

They needed to find the Gatekeeper, bloody sit him down to talk and then discuss how earth may continue to accommodate the refugees in a more open and transparent manner without all this sneaking around.

“Cap,” James began, standing at his side like he belonged there, and gods, how right did it feel to have a partner you could trust your life with. He pulled back the barrel of his Desert Eagle to empty
the chamber, allowing the shell casing to clatter as it hit the floor. “It’s Hydra. They’re Nazis. ‘Nuff said. Call the play.”

Using the rough maps and diagrams James drew, Steve kept it simple. The problem with plans was that they tended to fall apart the moment the first shot was fired, so he gave basic directions, played to the aliens’ strengths and then got ready to take up his own position.

With the dark elves’ innate abilities, they slipped past the surveillance cameras under a veil of shadow, stealing down brightly lit corridors without triggering any alarms. Grouchy paused now and then to set up booby-traps, putting Macguyer to shame with his resourcefulness and ability to improvise with the sparse materials he could lay his hands on and carry. James (reluctantly) gave up his ammunition to the dark elves, pulled his hair back into a ponytail to resume his cover as a new Hydra recruit and scouted levels ahead to ensure there were no blood elves with True Sight whose vision could pierce through the dark elves’ shadow.

“All right, Cap. Good luck. I’ll see you on the outside,” James said with too much cheer and not enough care for his own personal safety as his comm link went dead and he joined a patrol of guards conveying large wooden crates up to the top floor of the research base.

“You sure he’s just a marine who’s done a couple of tours of Afghanistan?” Natasha was sceptical, an occupational habit, but when aliens started agreeing with her, it had Steve on the defensive.

“What are you trying to imply?”

“I would have an easier time believing he was Delta Force, SEAL or Force ReCon. They don’t teach ordinary marines about infiltration, assassination and extraction. He checks all the boxes.”

Grouchy tied up his beard and tucked it inside his shirt so it wouldn’t get in the way when things got messy. “Glad he’s on our side, not theirs.”

The dark elf elder looked like he was about to comment, but Steve held up a finger in warning. “Don’t you say anything. He’s not going to be a mercenary and work for you. That kid’s still recovering from PTSD and nightmares, thank you very much, and shouldn’t even be out here doing field work.”

“What are friends for, eh?” Grumpy smirked as the two dwarves fist-bumped then chest-bumped each other. “All right. We’re going to get moving and collapse one of the two entrances to the top floor then bust some moves that’s gonna make them regret the day they messed with the stout bearded folk of the rocky realms.”

“Don’t get killed, and wait for the signal,” Steve couldn’t help calling after them with growing affection. They may be gruff, abrasive and at times just downright rude with questionable hygiene, but they had hearts in the right places.

He turned to the dark elves and stuck out his hand in a gesture of conciliation. “At least tell me your name so that if you don’t get out of this alive, I can…let other dark elves I see know.”

The alien looked at Steve long and hard, weighing, judging, and decided he was worthy. The handshake was warm and firm. “I am Ceroden’s boss, Malvavan. I thank you, and your friend, for rescuing us. We would have met an unspeakable fate if they managed to transport us Alfheim.”

Steve resisted the urge to snatch his hand back. “You are the one fuelling the civil wars on Alfheim and Nidavellir by smuggling Stark’s weapons. I could detain you, keep you locked up with SWORD and let Thor and his dad decide what to do with you.”
Malvavan smiled knowingly and kissed Steve on both cheeks, his lips brushing like dead leaves across his skin. “But you won’t, my dear fellow, because deep down, you know would join our cause without a shadow of a doubt. You don’t like bullies, and you don’t care where they come from.”

Steve stiffened. There was only one person he’d ever said those words to. “How’d you – ”

“We’ll go now to seal off the second entrance to the top level, and rendezvous with the dwarves. That man you carry,” his eyes slid down to the pitiful thing slung over Steve’s shoulder in a fireman’s lift. “If that’s who I think it is, you will be richly rewarded if you take care of him. See you on the other side.”

The dark elves left with Jarxanth, leaving Natasha and him to set the attack in motion.

The top floor was as James described; it opened up at the mouth of the volcano with a retractable roof. The roof was open, showing the midday sky, an eternal stretch of blue with only wisps of cotton clouds, and the wind bought in wafts of the salty sea breeze. There were narrow platforms and catwalks hammered into the rock near the rim so that they could plant additional astronomical devices and magnetometers to capture magnetic, cosmic and stellar pulses interfering with the machinery responsible for stabilising the portal. Soldiers and scientists shuffled about below, constantly monitoring the equipment, clustered around large, reinforced plate glass containers of imprisoned alien beasts hauled out of the portal and noting down their reactions to the glowing collars around their necks.

Steve and Natasha peered down from a rocky alcove above and the red-haired assassin suddenly sucked in a deep breath. “Look, Cap, the blood elves.”

There were just a handful of them, almost two meters tall dressed in stark red and black armour, armed with a pair of swords slung across their back and some form of energy gun strapped to their belt. They all moved with the same fluid grace and looked down at the Hydra henchmen milling around them with cold, inhuman gazes which made even the hardest soldiers give them wide berth.

“James, be careful,” Steve muttered under his breath. He located the younger man dutifully helping two men in white lab jackets refit a power generator and hauling thick loops of cabling aside to make way for new plate glass cages. His sight trailed over to the centre of the room where glyphs and other inexplicable markings were etched into the steel floors, sending up an unnatural pillar of ethereal silver light that shimmered like a billowing gauze curtain, hung, suspended in mid air. Flashbacks from the 1940s bombarded his mind, only this time, Hydra had traded in their technology largely for symbols and mysticism, and the portal didn’t look like something he could turn off by yanking the cord out of the plug.

“Hey Cap, there’s a familiar face down there. Next time he finds himself in lock-up in The Big House, I’m going to accidentally flood the compound with ants.” Natasha handed him her binoculars and pointed to a man who walked with his hands clasped behind his back, inspecting one alien exhibit after the other with the inflated airs of someone who owned it all, knew it, and shamelessly flaunted it.

Steve felt warmth drain from his face as he recognised the digital mask favoured by Johan “Red Skull” Schmidt. His hands balled into fists and he gritted his teeth. “I think it’s time we permanently put him out of business,” he ground out.

Perhaps it was the glint from the lens of his binoculars or the flash of red from Black Widow’s hair, but as one, all the blood elves were suddenly looking at Steve, and Natasha swore in Russian.
“We’ve been made!” she exclaimed and pushed Steve aside in time to save his head being blown off by a sizzling blast of energy.

So much for the plan.

There was a swell of cries below, orders being shouted and the Red Skull screaming “Get him!” before shots began to ring in the air. Steve managed to see James break cover, unhesitatingly toss two grenades at Schmidt’s feet and neutralise three Hydra soldiers before the ground rocked from a massive explosion that brought down one of the doors where reinforcements had been beginning to pour through. Steve leapt down to the next catwalk to avoid being crushed by an avalanche of rock.

“Arsepickers! Codpiece fondlers! Now you die!” he heard Grumpy and Grouchy roar above the din as they charged into the room hurling grenades like confetti and fired off round after round from their shotguns like it was nobody’s business.

Schmidt’s soldiers then began to drop like flies as they were back-stabbed or had their throats slit from behind by the near invisible dark elves whose blades were already dripping blood. They walked in shadow under the full strength of a midday sun, an incorporeal flicker of a blurred reflection that disappeared as soon as you thought you had glimpsed it, then fell upon their next hapless victim. The floor was soon slippery with blood spurting from severed carotid arteries, the air choked with the final gasps of the damned.

Jarxanth ambled between the glass cages, his face serene, his hair standing on end, a blaze of metallic red and gold, and wherever he went, the plate glass exploded, steel ran in rivers of molten metal, and people who didn’t run out of his way fast enough spontaneously combusted. The nauseating smell of burnt meat and roasted flesh quickly pervaded the air.

The remaining Hydra troops rallied around Syrnalorn’s honour guards who fired off their energy guns that ripped away the dark elves’ camouflage. Two of them fought James to a standstill and the others had the dwarves and dark elves cornered.

Natasha sprung out of her hiding place and fired the stingers from her gauntlets with the vengeance of a spurned mistress and successfully drew one of the blood elf’s attention onto herself to give the others a chance to fight back.

Steve threw himself shield first at the last remaining blood elf, knocking him to the ground, and then Jarxanth stepped in, a whip of flame curling with wisps of black smoke in his hand wielded with the skill and daring of a ring master.

Gracefully coming out of his dive in a somersault, Steve’s first thought was to run to help James. Or not. James expertly dodged the slashing blades of the elves, returned fire with a combination of his throwing knives and deft shooting and wasn’t even close to breathing hard. Steve frowned. He had seen those moves before –

“So Captain,” Red Skull’s challenging taunt grounded him back in the moment and made him refocus, “we have come full circle and find ourselves standing opposed to each other once again on a very familiar stage!” The shots from Red Skull’s gun bounced harmlessly off Steve’s shield as he advanced. “Why do you insist on interrupting my plans of enlightening humanity with the knowledge that we are not alone in this universe!”

“I’m trying to save your arse here, Schmidt. The Gatekeeper’s going to hunt you down and do things to you I wouldn’t do to a dead dog; you know he hates competition.”
Red Skull’s black, pupiless eyes, narrowed on his diabolical red face. “I fear the Gatekeeper no longer,” he sneered. “The hunter shall soon be the hunted. My new allies here shall dispose of him and they have promised that I can do whatsoever I please with that miserable cretin.”

James cried out in surprise as he was judo-thrown by one of the blood elves and landed in a crumpled heap at Steve’s feet. He clambered onto all fours, roughly wiped away the blood teeming from a gash above his brow, and Red Skull abruptly recoiled as their eyes met.

He levelled an accusing finger at Barnes. “You!”

“He!” James’ grin was feral and full of teeth. In one smooth action he unholstered the Beretta strapped to his ankle, raised it up to Skulls’ crimson face and squeezed the trigger. Red Skull dove out of the way, and Steve and James had to duck behind the vibranium shield again as a column of Hydra war machines swarmed in, having ploughed their way through the rock to the entrance that the dwarves had collapsed. Humans and aliens alike all scrambled for cover as the war machines began to fire up a laser light show that would make a New Year’s Eve party look tame.

Without warning, a fork of lightening from the skies above smashed into the skull-like face of the war-walker closest to Steve, followed by the familiar electric blue repulsor blasts from the Iron Man suit. The cavalry had finally arrived.

“Captain, pleased to see you in one piece with your...friend,” Stark voice came from the suit’s tinny speakers. His shoulder guards slid back and launched a hundred tiny missiles that honed in on their targets. Two more war machines were crippled, but the blood elves had regrouped and matched Ms Marvel and Sif blow for blow whilst another three of them surrounded the Hulk and kept him contained.

“Um, guys, a little help here please,” Natasha called out, caught in a deadly dance with another blood elf intent on impaling her on his blade.

From out of nowhere, a woman with long blonde hair and dressed in green leotards appeared surrounded by a sparkling haze of emerald. She snapped her fingers, and suddenly, the Hydra guards who were thoroughly saturated by that mystical green glow unflinchingly trained their guns on the blood elf giving Black Widow a hard time and fired.

“Stark! There’s a wounded prisoner! We’ve got to – dammit…”

He was forcibly separated from James as chaos and pandemonium began to reign on the top floor of Schmidt’s research facility; the infernal heat stirred up by Jarxanth’s whip was burning up oxygen faster than it was being naturally replenished, the opportunistic pot-shots fired off by the dwarves with their remaining ammo, ogres and goat-headed giants running rampant as the collars that subjugated them malfunctioned and they turned on their tormentors, and the shouts of confusion and betrayal as the growing numbers of bewitched soldiers fired on those they had called their friend.

Steve began scaling the rock face to reach the crippled Asgardian he left up on the catwalks where he believed the man would be safe and out of harm’s way. Another earthquake, a deluge of rock raining from above, forced him back down onto the ground and he watched in heart stopping dismay as a stray photon blast from Ms Marvel hit that very same catwalk he was climbing towards.

A patch of black toppled off the mangled heap of metal and plummeted to the ground.

“I will save him!” Thor did a swan dive and swooped down, a streak of silver and vermillion, and
executed a perfect rescue and solid landing.

Time was dragged, kicking and screaming, to a halt. Everyone downed their weapons, the war machines powered down, perplexed by the *wrongness* in the air. No one dared to move.

It was the way the fight had inexplicably gone out of Thor, the unnerving quiet in an otherwise loud and boisterous man, an unwavering stare as solid and resolute as a mountain on the prisoner’s face, and the terrible, sickening undercurrent of a feeling Steve couldn’t name that roiled and thrashed beneath that artificially calm exterior, building up to detonate with an anger and violence like the collision of planets.

Thor’s cry, of insane grief, of endless suffering, of insurmountable wrath and fury, reverberated into the very core of the earth. Deafened, dazed, Steve dumbly gaped at the darkening vortex of clouds churning in the skies as arcs of lightening madly danced and growls of thunder from a dark and angry god shook the entire island nation.

James tackled him to the ground, mouthing two words over and over again (*Get down! Get Down!* as the first flash of lightning struck, a colossal column of pure power and destruction that vapourised all the war walkers and punched a hole in the floor and obliterated the twenty levels below, followed by another, and another.

“My brother! My brother! What have they done to you, my brother!”

Chapter End Notes

An update in one week! Thank you for the two back-to-back long weekends! Unfortunately, this means there's going to be a dry spell ahead, and the next holiday won't be until Queen's birthday. Hopefully, I still manage to sneak in an update in May, but for now, just let me bask in this sense of accomplishment.

The annoying thing about all this is I was stuck for 2 days on the final 500 words. Memo to self - writing about confined space, multiple characters, too many things going 'boom' is not your forte! On the other hand, writing about MMORPGs, tactics and teamwork *is* a very familiar area (I used to skip lectures to stay home and play, oh gods) and I thought it would be amusing for there to be a brief look at how one does play these online games and how Sif claims they fight in the real world. Sif's later experimentation with WoW will be a highly educational experience.

Sorry guys, I couldn't move this chapter any faster. For some reason, I just can't get anywhere even if you gave me 9k words to play with (and people have written epics with less >:oI ). I felt it necessary to take some time to (inadvertently?) let Bucky's particular skill set shine when he is in his element and perhaps show him having more fun that he really should have in these scenarios. After all, when you've spent 50+ years doing this kind of work, Bucky's probably more motivated that this one's a rescue op and not simply a mission to turn the research facility to dust.

Apart from Malvavan, there are probably just 2 more aliens to introduce and then all the stage is set for the next stage of the plot (yeah, and it's only taken 100k in words *grumbles*). Thank you again for your patience.

As for the cliffhanger, I can confirm that the man bundled in Thor's arms is and is not
Loki. Lachlan's Plan B bill be revealed in the next chapter. If I can stop myself devoting the next 9k words to a steamy smex scene between Steve and Bucky. So god help me, I was *this* tempted to head back to the cinemas to watch CA:TWS again this weekend. I need a good dose of Stucky porn. Where is it?!!!!
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixteen

The quinjet was a construct of beauty, embodying human ingenuity and the will to achieve the impossible. It could circumference the globe in half an hour, survive through black holes and cut through space, all without some fantastic origins story about being exposed to some highly unstable and unique super chemical. It was also designed to carry only the minimum load, at best five Avengers, so the aircraft could be forgiven if it struggled to stay in the air as half its onboard computer navigation systems were fried after Van Dyne just managed to swerve the plane away from being vapourised by Thor’s colossal Lightning Blasts of Massive Overkill, and it now carried about three times the amount of people it was ever intended to transport.

If they all managed to cram into the confined space of the sleek aircraft’s hold, rubbing shoulder to shoulder, knee to knee, recycling the oxygen until the air was uncomfortably warm and stale, no one complained. It seemed very much like a first world problem compared to a grief stricken crown prince, inconsolable over the horrific fate of his baby brother, who he thought had perished, and who frankly would have been better off dead. Everyone gave Thor all the space he needed, even if there wasn’t much space to begin with and had the decency not to grumble about it.

The god had his back turned to the rest of them. His head was bowed, shoulders hunched forward as he cradled the most precious cargo of all on the quinjet. Never mind that they had Malvavan, the greatest and most prolific of all dark elven contraband smugglers in the last two centuries of history, or some fire elemental princeling who gave six new different kinds of meaning to making something burn. The most valuable, and the most costly asset on the quinjet was the broken and misshapen form that was Asgard’s second prince.

Steve didn’t know much about Loki; only that he was Thor’s younger brother, a sorcerer who cheated at some tournament, wasn’t in Sif’s good books, and that he was presumed dead a little over two years ago after ‘a fall’. But Sif sat, rigid and still like a statue, while her helpless, wide bambi-like eyes stared dead ahead, though now and again, she else stole mortified glances at the emaciated figure bundled in Thor’s crimson cloak. The All Father had apparently blessed the garment and it was supposed to have healing properties, but whatever magic it had wasn’t damn near enough to repair the damage done to Loki.

Oh, that’s right. It was humans who tortured the second prince of Asgard, “ripped out his magical core” as Jarxanth had put it, and reduced him into one of those pitiful survivors they had rescued from the concentration camps during the Great War. Of all people Hydra could have put their twisted, evil hands on, it just had to be Thor’s beloved brother.

Thor had just demonstrated that he was more than capable of sinking an island and robbing a people of their nation with just an enraged cry. It might explain the grey, pinched expressions and deep lines of *we’re so fucked*, and *he’s going to use earth as target practice* on Danvers and Stark’s faces.

“Hey,” James murmured practically in his ear. The only solace and distraction sat by his side, their thighs pressed together, their hips comfortably rubbing into contact. “It’s going to be ok.
Somehow.”

The weight and burdens of a mountain lifted off Steve’s shoulders from James’ wry grin and indefatigable optimism alone. He returned the smile, and it just felt so natural to tilt his head to the side so that, just briefly, their foreheads touched behind the curtain of James’ long brown bangs and they could enjoy a quiet moment alone in the last place they could expect privacy.

Steve smothered the urge to fuss over James, check his wounds, patch him up, untangle the knots in his hair, but for now, he had to be content with holding onto James gaze and allow himself to briefly forget earth’s increasing intergalactic political problems.

It was the shuffle of feet as the shield maiden made her way her prince’s side that pulled Steve back into the present. At first, it looked like Sif wanted to lay a comforting arm over Thor’s shoulder, but then had second thoughts and knelt by his side at a respectful distance so as not to perturb the personal space only Thor enjoyed on the plane.

“Thor,” she implored, tentative and probing. “All is not lost. We have some healing stones back at the Avengers Mansion– ”

“Look at him!” Thor cried, a feral, wounded, animal sound that was a brutal stab in any heart that had known the joys and pains of love. The plane rocked and shuddered, and everyone stiffened as the sky began to darken with crackling storm clouds outside. Sif swallowed hard but was at a loss for words. As Amora had quietly shared with them earlier, it was only by some dark miracle that Loki was still alive.

And to make matters worse, Asgard’s Eternal Watcher would not open the Bifrost for them when Thor’s cry for help pierced through the time and space. Instead, projection of Heimdall materialised some half hour later and the guardian had the following pre-recorded message:

“Prince Loki cannot return to Asgard through the Bifrost. He is too weak, and the quantum energies of the rainbow bridge will rip him apart before he arrives in the Observatory. I also regret to inform you that the All Father also cannot send his healers to Midgard. The Royal Security Council have opposed the move, as they believe Prince Loki to be a traitor. His last acts as King was the attempted murder of the rightful crown prince of Asgard and the shattering of the age-old truce we shared with Jotunheim, bringing the threat of war and devastation upon both realms. Consequently, the All Mother is now being carefully watched by the Council. If she is seen to leave for Midgard, the All Father faces revolt from a number of Earls and Thanes sufficient to instigate civil war.”

Steve jaw had nearly dislocated when it fell open after his stupefied brained finally managed to process the unwelcome news. Were the Asgardians, no, were Loki’s own friggin parents serious? “You’re prioritising politics above family?” he had exclaimed, aghast. But the projection’s purpose was to only deliver the message and the image did not respond to Steve’s outrage, dissipating in an almost apologetic shower of gold dust.

And so Thor sank in an abysmal pit of despair so deep he was beyond recall. Thor’s figure hunched wretchedly further into himself and the deep, tortured breaths might be interpreted as sobs. “He doesn’t have long.”

Steve’s heart clenched at the naked and raw heartbreak in Thor’s voice. But this wasn’t right. They should at least leave some dignity for the god to mourn without a dozen strangers honing in on each vulnerable whimper or the pitter patter of tears hitting the floor. Outside, a fork of lightening came within inches of searing off the quinjet’s wings had it not been for Van Dyne’s quicksilver reflexes at the controls and yet the aircraft quivered like a dying bird.
Up towards the front at the control panels, trying to coax the remaining computer systems to reboot, Tony put on his best team rallying voice in what were possibly the most trying circumstances he ever had to confront. Rival businessmen with a shark’s nose for blood, international terrorists forcing the earth to the brink of destruction, and alien attempts at world domination were part and parcel of Tony’s everyday life. But what do you say, what can you say to a man about to lose his brother? “Hey, Thor buddy, just listen to me for a sec ok? Fury’s helicarrier is only forty minutes out, and half that time if I can get engine three to restart. The helicarrier has state of the art medical facilities, and when I say state of the art, I mean tech designed, supplied and installed by yours truly. We can stabilise your brother’s condition, ok, and that will give you, I mean all of us time to figure out how we get Loki back into shape.”

With Banner’s help, Tony made good on his word and got two additional engines back on online so that they managed to rendezvous with SHIELD in under fifteen minutes and had Loki on a stretcher and shuttled to the medical ward post haste. But the problem remained; how much time did they really have, and what could they actually do for an alien frost giant when their study of Boris yielded only minimal information about the jotun biology that wasn’t enough to even treat the frost-giant version of the common cold.

The aliens were shackled and bundled off into separate interrogation rooms while Fury called a snap meeting to strategize on how they would handle this monumental inter-realm clusterfuck because the Avengers were clearly not themselves, tormented by a voiceless guilt and burden that made Atlas’ task of hefting the world on his shoulders look like some light, warm-up exercise. The moment they sat down, Tony was back on his feet, pacing around the conference room like a man possessed, and Danvers replayed the grainy footage of Samoa, a whole island nation, being reduced to some glowing atoms, taking some bleak delight in watching Fury’s face pale a shade or two.

“I’m afraid the Damocles and SWORD can do little to slow Thor down once his brother….”

Danvers wiggled her eyebrows, then looked away outside the windows at some distant speck in the horizon that only she could see and said no more.

Judging by his raised eyebrow, Fury didn’t buy what he considered was hyperbole.

Tony sighed, his frustration magnified by fatigue. “Damocles will be nothing but a burned, blackened French fry once Thor goes batshit berserk. Using its long range ion disruptors will be no different to trying to kill him with a wet noodle. We’re all going to die. We’re all going to die, and this time, it will be our own bloody fault, because we are humans, and sometimes we are just capable of being disturbing sadistic shits with no survival instincts.”

Due to her superior Red Room training, Romanov was able to slip past the Iron Man suit’s inbuilt automatic defence mechanisms and punch Tony so hard in the mouth that it must have fractured his jaw. Hawkeye quietly golf clapped and planted Stark into the chair as he nursed his bruised jaw and alternated between glaring at Black Widow and copying Ms Marvel’s silent, despondent stare into the distance. At least his hysterics had stopped.

Fury took several deep breaths and made himself study the still shots from the quinjet’s cameras before they were fried out of commission by the radical surge of electricity in the atmosphere. Wasp had done an admirable job with an emergency landing on what tiny bit of rock was left of Samoa and salvaged as much of the its databanks and hard drives for analysis. The pictures were dominated by white, a poor imitation of the godly and unimaginable column of pure destruction that bore down on them, incandescent and crackling with the sum of Thor’s wrath. The vortex of power had also been captured on satellite; one moment there was the island, next, a gaping crater in the sea, trenches measuring almost two miles deep. The statistics were indeed depressing, but so
were the Nazis and the Communists, and Fury had fought against them all and prevailed. He wasn’t going to fold. Not just yet.

“Melodrama aside, I accept that we are facing a major political fallout with Asgard, or at least the people who matter, namely its all powerful King.”

Steve snorted at the descriptor, the projection of Heimdall still burning in his mind. “So powerful that he couldn’t overrule the will of his own council or send for help,” he seethed under his breath. Fury flatly glared at him in reprimand, then ploughed on as if he hadn’t been interrupted.

“Look, the situation is bad. I admit it hasn’t been assisted by Hydra deciding it was a good idea to recreate their own version of Auschwitz for Aliens and doing things to Loki in these past two years that prove they are the inhuman scum that actual scum would be insulted to be associated with. But there is some good news in all of this; that poor bastard is not dead yet, and was never dead. And if the Asgardians won’t send a medical team to treat one of their own, we’ll just have to fix him up ourselves. I’ve got Hank and T’Challa running diagnostics already and we’ll be back at the Triskelion in five hours where there’s another crack team of doctors on standby. Hell, we’ll beg a favour from Strange, once Coulson is able to track him down, and worst case scenario, we ice Loki, like how the Cap went under seventy five years ago, and buy ourselves more time to come up with the tech we need to heal Loki. It’s not mission impossible, so pull yourself together and stop acting like it’s the end of the world.”

Tony rolled his eyes at the pure fantasy in Fury’s words whilst Banner crossed his arms and bit his lips. Ever the scientist. Ever wanting to challenge and test theories. “How exactly do you propose to cryogenically freeze a frost giant? They…uh…probably invented the concept two thousand years before we did and most likely are immune to their own power.”

“Yes, but we’re not completely fumbling in the dark here. The blonde one,” Fury snapped his fingers as he struggled to grasp the names of the new arrivals. “Amora, is a witch of some kind, yes? Is she open to co-operating?”

“She is,” replied Black Widow.

“Well, there you go. Banner, Widow, consult with Amora to see what can be done about –”

Hawkeye coughed. “With all due respect, Director, Widow and I were planning on running an analysis –”

Clint was interrupted by the clamour of angry shouts and unmistakeable sounds of fists connecting solidly with bone followed by the barrage of pounding footsteps. Fury leapt up from his seat, checking his monitors to identify any security breaches. He reached for his comm device and bellowed, “What the hell is happening out there?”

No sooner had he made the enquiry, the conference room door swung open hard enough to rip the metal off its hinges. Barnes burst in, eyes widened like startled deer, hair plastered to his sweat stained face, and he made a beeline straight to Steve. A good dozen agents stormed in after him, armed with a variety of batons, cuffs and tranquilizer guns loaded with darts.

James neatly fell into step behind Steve and peered over the Captain’s shoulder at the pursuers. “No one is coming at me with any needles, probes, or any other instrument that has a sharp and pointy end.”

“What the hell is going on?” Fury repeated with a snarl, but his typical room-freezing, attention-arresting dominating persona was drowned out by the heated, bitter and highly juvenile exchanges
volleying back and forth between Captain America’s dubious friend (according to Hawkeye) and the SHIELD doctors.

“Sir, this man will not submit to his examination.”

“Examination?” James shrilly repeated, voice an unusual octave high, much to Steve’s astonishment. When Barnes infiltrated the upper floor of the Hydra base alone, armed only with a concealed combat knife and a couple of grenades, he did so with a smile and a swagger. When Barnes went toe-to-toe with the blood elves who were feted to be the most skilled and ruthless killers of Alfheim, he did it with Errol Flynn flair and bravado. Now when confronted with medical staff sworn to do no harm, he reacted like he was tied to a post in front of a firing squad. “Being stripped, poked, prodded, scanned and injected with knock-out drugs is not an examination. It is an outright violation of my privacy!”

Steve sighed as Danvers and Romanov looked on, much too interested for their own good. “James, they just want to make sure you’re ok.”

“Nuh-uh,” Barnes replied, the pitch in his voice still climbing and breaking. “I’m no one’s lab rat or guinea pig. No squint in a lab coat is ever going to look down at me like I’m specimen 1024X again,” he snapped with all the viciousness of a cornered animal, eyes darting around to find anything he could use as a makeshift weapon. “Back off you butchers! I have the right to refuse your so-called medical treatment!”

One of the more daring agents made a move and lunged at James. For that, he was rewarded with a very bloody and broken nose and James ducked behind Steve again when two female agents raised their tranquiliser guns and positioned themselves for a clean shot.

“Oh my god, James, they’re only doctors trying to help!” Steve exclaimed, becoming more and more disturbed. It was unnerving to see the naked fear in the younger man’s eyes when everything else that happened in the past 24 hours would have required the combined courage of Seal Team Six and then some.

“I heard them, Steve,” Barnes hissed, ducking as a tranquiliser dart sailed harmlessly over his head. “They’re going to take my arm away to study and ‘get readings’ from me and shit. Nuh-uh. Not today, Satan, not today! I’d rather take a flying lesson off the helicarrier in nothing by my underwear instead!”

Another round of darts were fired. One rebounded off James’ left metal shoulder, and the other he managed to deflect with his combat knife. Romanov was now staring very hard at the former marine and shared a conspiratorial look with Hawkeye that Steve did not fail to miss.

“For goodness sakes, James, why on earth are you still armed?” As if disciplining an unruly child, Captain America wrested the knife from his friend and also made him surrender any other weapons he managed to conceal after the initial pat down when they boarded the helicarrier (afterall, he wasn’t an Avenger and didn’t share their privileges, even if he was Steve’s friend, even if he did just singlehandedly locate two kidnapped Avengers and bring a Hydra base down while he was at it). Steve held out his hand expectantly. “And your arm.”

“What?” Barnes spluttered, horrified by Steve’s betrayal. He shifted, tilting his body at an angle to protect his prosthetic arm from the world at large.

“That arm has been hit by stray bullets and weird elf weapons. I saw you trying to bash it into place when you thought I wasn’t looking. It’s probably for the best you take it off and let these doctors treat you. I promise you that they won’t hock your arm on ebay.”
James bared his teeth, suddenly furious, but Captain America did not flinch. “Don’t try to tell me what’s good for me. Only I get to decide that. I have my own prosthetic specialist, and she doesn’t like people messing with her stuff!”

“But you’re in pain —”

“I can handle it,” James retorted, now refusing to make eye contact with Steve, opting to sweep a vigilant gaze between Fury and the SHIELD medics. “Now have I made myself clear or am I going to have to keep swinging? I'll use my arm as a club if I have to.”

Fury’s hands curled into fists by his side, and calmly, slowly, he began to advance on Barnes, still trying to assert his presence as the alpha male in the room. “And how long do you think you’ll hold out here, on my ship, surrounded by my agents? There is nowhere to go that we won’t be able to find you, tie you down, and let these good doctors do what they do best.”

Barnes nodded as the unsubtle threat sank in, but then his lips curved upwards into a nasty smile, cold and biting as the artic wind, utterly devoid of humour that had the medics gulping and stealing uncertain glances at each other for moral support. Word had spread after all, and they heard how this man dared to walk into the belly of the beast alone with no back-up to bust out Captain America. He was either crazy, or extremely dangerous, or made of stuff that made Wolverine’s adamantine claws look like brittle twigs, or a toxic combination of all the above. James Barnes had clearly been in places, seen things and done things that the monsters in their nightmares cried and whimpered about, and the lizard part of their brains told them to flee for their lives.

The fine hairs on the back of Steve’s neck stood on end, and Hawkeye and Black Widow did not bother to hide their alarm, taking up defensive positions to cover Fury. Danvers groaned and accepted a flask from Tony, then took a very long swig. Banner simply took himself out of the game, put some headphones on as he pulled out a tablet, and tapped into the diagnostics that Hank had started recording of Loki’s vitals.

“But there are plenty of places to go. I have allies here, the dark elves and that fire child owe me a debt for rescuing them from that Hydra prison. Do you really want to mess with a celestial being who likes taking skinny dips in molten lava, or stalkers of the night who can command your own shadow to strangle you?”

Fury met this threat, as he had met all threats in his life, with a cold, hard one-eyed stare that refused to waver. Keeping his voice even, he pointed out, “But that depends on whether you can leave this room. Rogers, can I count on you?”

Steve suddenly felt a horrible twist in his gut, and his throat constricted, squeezing his airways shut and making his heart pound unbearably fast in his chest. Fury couldn’t be asking him to choose between James and SHIELD, right? That’s put him in a position no different to King Solomon and the baby.

As Steve was in the process of mimicking a gobsmacked fish, James wasted no more time and made good on his promise. He wielded his prosthetic arm, channelling Conan the Barbarian, and the force of his blows sent grown men and women (never one to discriminate!) across the room and crashing into walls and toppling over furniture. One unfortunate medic clutched at her middle and howled in pain as she skidded down the conference table, straight into Fury’s neat stack of paperwork like a bowling ball. It was then in this chaos that James evaded the tenacious grasp of the Black Widow, pivoted around Hawkeye’s whistling arrows that exploded into clinging nets, then almost winked out of existence as he danced his way amongst the converging mass of bodies and slipped out the door.
Black Widow swore and instantly picked herself off the ground to give chase as Fury barked out commands down five open comms channels at once.

Steve didn’t know what was in Tony’s metal flask, or how much Danvers had drank, but it gave her the nerve to look Fury dead in his good eye, and posit quite unabashedly, “Really? We’re really going to hunt down a one-armed man who rescued Captain America?” She wrinkled her nose in obvious distaste, then dusted her hands, stood up and stretched.

“Since I can’t really do anything right now to stop Loki from dying, I am going to take a shower, get a massage, and then start interrogating the dwarves.”

“That sounds like the best thing I’ve heard all day,” Tony immediately pounced on the idea, taking a whiff of his underarm and pulling a face. “We still have Malvavan, smuggler extraordinaire. Now that’s going to make one heck of an interrogation. Call me if there’s anything Stark Industries can do to help Loki.”

Banner was lost in his own little world, which was infinitely preferable to him hulking out on board a metal flying contraption, which left only Steve as the object of Fury’s escalating ire. “Rogers, subdue your special friend, then get your ass over to interrogation as well.”

~*~*~*~*~

The ruckus racked up by Barnes died down after a forty-five minute stand-off in which the one-armed man holed himself up in interrogation room 3 with Jarxanth. Without the specially crafted wards that the blood elves had supplied to Hydra to suppress his powers, the kid was only going along with the SHIELD agents when he let them cuff him, thinking that might provide them with a false sense of security so that they wouldn’t bother him for the rest of the journey back to New York. The adamantine reinforced cuffs melted off Jarxanth’s slender wrists like ice-cream left in the midday summer sun, and his enigmatic Mona Lisa smile said all that needed to be said; nothing on the hellicarrier was capable of holding the elemental, unless they were all interested in a kamikaze mission and a mass watery grave.

The young boy liked James. He admired the way the human had the brazen daring to simply walk into their cell to free them, and to eliminate his opposition without hesitation. For James, Jarxanth was willing to provide him with sanctuary until they landed, and since the elemental was the nastiest, meanest and most powerful son-of-a-bitch on the hellicarrier, second only to Thor on the thunderer’s good day, Jarxanth commandeered the entertainment room and kept himself occupied with Xbox games.

All the SHIELD agents took one look at the sad puddle of molten metal on the floor of interrogation room 3 and yielded to the child’s every demands, up to and including pledging never to lay a hand on James Barnes again because Jaxanth informed them that spontaneous combustion was something he could make a reality. Only after Barnes received this reassurance (Jarxanth’s fleeting suggestion of making all agents sign a contract in their blood almost gained traction with James) did he finally speak to Steve again. James ignoring him was the worst hour in Steve’s life ever since he joined the 21st century.

“We’ve allocated you a room just down the hallway. There’s hot water with good water pressure in the shower, and a solid mattress if you want to get some shut eye. It’s been a very long day,” Steve informed James, hoping the latter would accept his olive branch.

The defiance gradually melted from James’ eyes and he even tried for a less intimidating smile, one he often spoiled Steve with when cooking as a single, fluid and cohesive unit in the kitchen. Steve found that he could breathe easy again and the world was suddenly not so bleak and hopeless.
“I will take you up on the offer of a hot shower.”

“Just give the kitchen a buzz if you’re hungry. There’s also a basic first aid kit in your room, and a fresh change of clothes.”

Barnes nodded. His jaw tensed for a microsecond that didn’t escape Steve’s astute attention, and then, as if forcing a deliberate casual tone, asked, “Do you think I could make a call from here? I realised I was supposed to walk Mr Williams’ dog today and I never got around to cancelling the appointment.”

Steve paused a fraction longer than was necessary, before showing James to the bank of phones capable of dialing out to any country in the world whilst the helicarrier was in flight. “Are you sure you need to call him straight away?”

Barnes almost winced and fumbled with the receiver. “It’s a side-job that pays well and he’s been an… accommodating boss. Plus RiRi has grown fond of me too. It is only polite to follow up with an apology, isn’t it?”

Steve was all for good manners that they regrettably didn’t teach kids these days, but James’ sudden cautiousness (or was it nerves?) made him mentally file this incident away to carefully analyse and dissect later.

“Of course,” he agreed in neutral tones. “Look, take your time. Duty calls and Fury wants me in the interrogation rooms with the dwarves and elves since, you know, I’m supposed to have bonded with them for the two weeks we were in captivity, even if all they really did say to me was shut up and stop asking questions about the Gatekeeper.”

They shared a chuckle that was part awkward and part rediscovery of common ground of friendship that left Steve in high spirits. However, the good mood instantly evaporated when he stepped into interrogation room six where the two dwarves had been deposited. Tony was already in the room, having helped himself to Fury’s personal bar fridge because he was born with a grossly inflated sense of self entitlement, and was sharing the amber liquid of joy that was Johnnie Walker with the dwarves. They downed shot after shot of the good stuff with jovial cheer and were full of laughs and back slapping as the interrogation got underway. Steve sighed and shook his head. What Widow and Ms Marvel must have been thinking as they watched the monitors in the neighbouring room.

Steve slid into the empty seat next to Tony, rubbed his eyes, straightened his back and did his best to follow the flow of the conversation.

“So guys, hey guys, let’s be serious here. You need to help us out – ”

“My gosh, laddie, you are just as insistent as Mr Perfect there. Two weeks. We kept telling him for two weeks that we aint gonna talk about the Gatekeeper, and you know what we’re gonna say now?”

“We aint gonna talk about the Gatekeeper,” the other dwarf dead-panned, and everyone doubled over in hysteric again.

Tony wiped tears away from his face and punched Steve in the arm, urging him to join in on the mirth, get with the program, but Steve believed in being professional and politely declined his shot of whiskey. He hadn’t been intoxicated since 1943 and was sick of pulling out the I metabolise faster than I can get drunk party trick.
“No, I don’t care about the Gatekeeper. I mean, I care, but I know you can’t talk about him. We tried the same schtick with this dark elf called Ceroden and really got nowhere either. You know Ceroden? Can you talk about him?”

The dwarves grumbled something in their mother tongue and then shrugged, pushing their glasses forward for a refill with an impatient thrumming of fingers on the table. “Ceroden’s nobody important. There’s nothing to say about him. One contraband runner out of too many.”

“Ok, all right.” Tony said easily, topping up the glasses and broke the seal to a new bottle, their third. “No talk about Ceroden then. What about yourselves? Can you talk about you, like, who are you are, what you do, why come to earth, that sort of thing?”

“How about we start with some proper names. He’s Tony Stark, Iron Man and head of Stark Industries. I’m – ”

“Bruenor’s balls, you’re Justice and Liberty. We heard ya the first time!”

Tony kicked Steve under the table, hard enough to bruise, and plied the dwarves with more alcohol again. “So it’s going to be Grouchy and Grumpy then.”

Grouchy scowled, miffed. “I mean what else could we possibly be? Dopey and Sleepy?” he drawled with heavy, stinging sarcasm. “You humans believe that we dwarves can only be dumb idiots fawning over even dumber idiot princesses who accept fruit from people who are unmistakeably villains. Or that we are all some noble folk dispossessed of our ancestral home by an evil dragon and about to embark on a quest with Thorin Oakenshield to reclaim Erebor.”

Tony blinked, feigning innocence. “No sir, I certainly don’t think that at all.” Steve bet he did. "You can trust me to be smart enough to realise that’s all fairy tales and high fantasy fiction by a venerable and respected author.”

Grouchy slammed his hand on the table without warning and curled his lip back in disgust, startling Tony out of his drunken act. “I promise you Thorin is very real and the esteemed leader of our revolution.”

There was a tense pause with Tony peering at the dwarves and making small noises of frustration, trying to gauge whether they were setting him up for another joke, and then coming to the sobering conclusion that they weren’t messing around at all. “There…really is a Thorin Oakenshield?”

Grumpy’s expression darkened with disdain at Tony’s perceived ignorance, as if it wasn’t so unreasonable to expect humans, whose greatest achievement to date in rocket science and astrophysics was to put someone on their local moon, to be fully up to date with the culture, history and who’s-who of all the Nine Realms in the past thousand years. There was a sense of impatience and annoyance as Grumpy clued Steve and Tony in on a figure of their society who they held in high regard.

“Thorin Blightflayer, hailed from Gundaar and was a smithy, like us! His sire, Thrain, was another blacksmith of peerless skill, and said to have been commissioned by the old High King Aeducan himself to prepare the ceremonial armour for his third son to don after his Proving. But house Helmi was jealous of the wondrous armour forged by Thrain and sought to buy it from Thrain. When Thrain rejected the offer, Helmi used the influence of his house to lay false charges against Thrain’s house and forced the family into exile above ground.”

“My pa told me that Thorin tried to seek justice for his family,” Grouchy recalled, a heated defensiveness permeating the way he spat the words out, as if daring Tony or Steve to mock their
tale. “He triumphed over every adversary from the warrior caste in the Honour Provings and won the right to address the Assembly. But the High King would not seek to make an enemy out of their allies over the fate of one blacksmith family, so they killed Thorin’s brother as means intimidating him into silence. That only enraged him even more, and he insulted the King and every single Noble at the Assembly, accused them of being craven, inbred and deformed cowards. Not surprisingly, the King’s guards stripped Thorin of every possession and sent him packing to the Deep Roads to face his savage and violent doom by the darkspawn.”

“Sounds like a real stand-up kind of guy. Die on your feet rather than live on your knees sorta thing, not so different to Cap here.” Tony murmured with approval.

That earned Tony a derisive grunt and scornful sneer. “He was an idiot,” Grumpy growled, “and proved to be a bigger idiot by surviving and becoming the Captain of all the unfortunate souls that the Nobles conveniently sent to the Deep Roads when it became too inconvenient for that dwarf to live.

“And then he transformed into local legend. He vowed that he would not die in the dark by the poisoned talons of the darkspawn and keep living until he obtained justice for his family, and every dwarf hence who was sent to the Deep Roads did not weep in despair and harboured hope that he may survive. Then, there was a great battle with the darkspawn, who were led by one fearsome Hurlock named Azog.”

Tony choked on his drink. “You shut your face and get out! He was not called Azog.”

“Five dwarves tall, he was. And Thorin and his army, after seven days and nights of the most vicious and bloody fighting in Dwarven history, bested him in battle in the Deep Roads after all the King’s guards had fled when Azog’s horde descended.”

Grouchy chuckled, recalling a rare, warm and cherished memory amidst a lifetime dominated by hardship and cruelty. His voice gained a savage, delighted edge. “I remember the day when word got around that the king’s prized guards turned tail like beaten dogs whilst slaves held their ground and triumphed against impossible odds. Caste be damned,” the dwarf roared like a battlecry. “A rag tag group of so-called criminals and outlaws proved that it wasn’t your fathers lineage, your house or your nobility which defines your worth and value as a dwarf. It is here,” he hammered his fist over his heart, eye suddenly wet and shining with an emotion that moved Tony into quiet contemplation, “and what you do that tells you what you are, and what you are made of.”

“Loud and clear, brother,” Grumpy held up his glass up in salute. “The scandal spread like wildfire and could not be quenched, would not be quenched. Everyone talked about it, the slaves, the servants, the miners, and the dusters. Slowly, inevitably, each dwarf started to wonder why they were locked into the caste they had inherited, and why they should be satisfied with a life predetermined for them. Were we not all dwarves, born of rock, creatures of flesh and stone and blood? Was it solely the case that, because some were born in the right family, in the right house, that they would then have power to control the life and death of others?”

Grouchy gripped his glass so hard that it shattered but he barely noticed it, and the jagged pieces could not penetrate the his skin on the palm of his hand, which after years of ceaseless toiling and working with the hammer and anvil had developed a leather hardness. “Every dwarf inherently knows that the caste system is unfair. Thorin embodied the courage to call it for what it is, and the vision to break out of it. He defeated Azog, not because he was from a pure line of warriors dating back to Endrin Stonehammer, but because he was a dwarf who was fucking brilliant with a sword and shield and had a cunning mind for strategy. The King’s guards from the mighty warrior caste proved they were no better than the dusters exiled to the surface.”
“And these very same dwarves, these jumped up paltry milk-drinking dragon-loving dirt-eaters, sent my uncle to the Deep Roads because he asked to be justly paid for his work!” Grumpy bawled, loud enough to blow out Steve’s earpiece. “And they ordered my neighbours to work the mines when they couldn’t keep up with the outrageous tithes. Do you know what mining lyrium does to us? How it kills us by the inches and drives us mad, but that’s all right for all the realms and their lace-wearing mages if you can’t see the mine serfs and acknowledge they are dwarves just like the rest of us. They just want their lyrium, and they don’t give a shit about how it’s done so long as they have it for their fancy little light shows.

“So you know what I said after that? *Fuck this shit. Fuck the King. Fuck the Nobles and their self-righteous arse-licking deshysrs. Fuck the entitled Paragons who think they’re made of mithril. And I wasn’t the only one sayin it either. “*

“Damn right. If the very structure and foundations of our society are so screwed up that it doesn’t recognise that the slaves and dusters who repelled the darkspawn horde were heroes, then this antiquated barbarity needs to be torn down so something new and better can be built. Thorin had five thousand men and knew he couldn’t possibly hope to bring down the wealthy and well-armed thaigs and lords at that time, so they broke out of the Deep Roads, made for the surface. But the King’s warriors chased them across the open plains, crucified any who were caught as an example to us all, and there was no refuge to be found on Nidavellir.”

Steve nodded as understanding finally set in. “So Thorin sought passage from the Gatekeeper and arrived in Midgard to establish his base of operations.”

Grouchy subjected Steve to a look, the one that was a mix of pity and poignant disappointment, which left him a distinct feeling of inadequacy and urge to lower his head. “Well we couldn’t go to Alfheim, could we, because elves are racist pricks. Jotunheim’s damn cold, Niffelheim is crawling with the undead nasties who want to snack on our brains and Muspelheim is a death wish. Midgard is a habitable realm with mild temperate climes, plenty of bounty, and not ruled by a single autocratic leader allied to King Etrius who would hinder us from building our new headquarters.”

“So let me get this straight,” Tony sighed, forehead resting in his palm. “Just as there are about sixty thousand or so, we guess, frost giants on earth, you’re telling me that we don’t have a couple of hundred, but five thousand dwarves on earth as well?”

This time, Grouchy’s pitying look was aimed at Tony, and Stark sighed even more loudly. “This is like a bad case of *déjà vu.* All right, out with it then. How many years ago did Thorin and his five thousand men come to earth?”

“Three hundred and eighty two,” Grumpy grinned without shame.

Tony just stared at the two smirking dwarves and didn’t even bother swearing. “With new arrivals every month?” he asked, although the defeated slump in his shoulders suggested he already knew the answer.

“Sometimes some, sometimes none. And sometimes men return to Nidavellir to take the fight to those butt-faced goblin-lovers.”

“Look, there’s something that’s been bothering, that I just can’t understand,” Steve intervened, mindful that Tony had his face buried in his hands and was dry sobbing. Grouchy poured Tony another shot of whiskey and urged him to drink. “Boris, this frost giant we captured, came to earth because his realm was falling apart, and his people couldn’t ask the Asgardians for help given they were enemies and all that. But isn’t Thor’s dad the All-Father, and the Asgardians the protector of all Nine Realms? The intergalactic police force? Couldn’t Thorin have gone to Odin for help?”
The dwarves burst into grim, pitiless laughter that had the fatalistic character of soldiers who had long given up on hope, and Grouchy said through gritted teeth, “Odin is the protector of order in the Nine Realms. He isn’t interested in the injustice or suffering of dwarves. He is in bed with Etrius because they all want to protect the status quo, keep things the way they are, because it has worked out so well for them all these thousands of years. There will be no help from Asgard. This is a dwarven matter, and will be resolved by dwarves and not outsiders.

“So let me ask you this question then, Soldier. What will you do if you ever catch up with the Gatekeeper? We know that Prince Thor is embedded with you Avengers. Does this put you at the beck and call of Odin and Asgard and make you allies or vassals of Etrius?”

The very idea that Captain America could ever side with the arbitrarily cruel and oppressive Dwarven nobility was so repulsive to Steve that it made him feel unclean. It was no different to suggesting that he was a Hydra sympathiser who liked to steal lunch money from pre-schoolers and torture puppies and kittens on the weekends during his time off.

“Because we will make our position very clear to you humans. Without the Gatekeeper, Thorin and his men and our hope for revolution would have been wiped up four centuries ago. Without the Gatekeeper, thousands of dwarves would not have found new homes and freedom here in Midgard. Without the Gatekeeper, the rest of the hundreds and thousands of dwarves in our realm will not have a chance to experience what we have had the privilege to enjoy. What did you say back in the prison? Man is born free, and has the right to be free? We will not let you rob our people of this one fighting chance.”

“Enough talk. What’s it going to be?” Grumpy demanded. “We going to have to fight you or not?”

It took a while for Steve to compose his response because he had no ready answer, and because he had been conflicted about SHIELD’s hunt for the Gatekeeper ever since Boris escaped from Prison 42. These aliens were souls hardened by the atrocities they had witnessed, been subjected to, in their very long lives, and were beyond pity. They burned with the fire to forge a destiny of their own choosing, and their cause was a selfless and admirable one. And though half blind, Malvavan had seen straight into his heart and knew that Steve would not stand in their way.

He never liked bullies, and he certainly didn’t care where they came from.

“I can’t speak for SHIELD or SWORD,” he said tentatively, wetting his dry lips with his tongue as he groped for the right words, “but I personally want to have a long discussion with the Gatekeeper, about what he does, and how his actions might affect earth. I can’t complain about you being here, because you’ve probably lived on earth longer than I’ve been alive, but there are consequences to the Gatekeeper’s actions, and he risks putting human lives in danger if Syrnalorn does send his army here to wipe him, and the Alfheim rebels out.”

Grumpy’s eyes narrowed in accusation. “So you blame us, elves and dwarves, who have not rocked the boat for centuries and lived in peace and harmony with humans, for the violent actions of a despotic elven king?”

Steve bit his tongue and balked. “I am not trying to blame anyone. But the consequences are the consequences, it is what it is, and it needs to be addressed and dealt with. Your lives matter. Human lives matter as well.”

“Well I won’t argue with you on that point, Mr Perfect, but the solution seems obvious. Syrnalorn doesn’t have a bifrost, so the only way he gets his army to Midgard is if he can open a portal on this end. Just make sure no one does it, and no white-faced knife-ears will come messing on your turf. Simple, right?”
Tony sighed again and pushed his chair so that it squealed and scraped against the floor as he stood up. “I have a migraine, and this interrogation is over. It seems like every time I talk to an alien, I need to up my dose of anti-depressant medication. Your declaration of war on us if we go after your Gatekeeper is noted. I will leave SHIELD to figure out how to deal with you. Come on, Cap, let’s go.”

The dwarves shrugged and enjoyed the rest of the Johnnie Walker as Steve rushed out after Tony.

“Cap, they’re not going to give us any intel on the Gatekeeper,” Tony said once they were outside of the dwarves’ earshot. “He is their lifeline and they will die before giving him up. Hell, if I were in their shoes, I would probably do the same.” He massaged the sides of his temple with his thumb and third finger, and then looked at Steve in a rare moment of honesty untainted by his usual snark. “I have to confess, Cap, I am starting to feel for these frost giants and little runts. They have had a hard life and want something better for themselves, and I can totally get that, and why not choose earth? We’re a great planet.”

Steve pulled back and raised a wary eyebrow. “I’m sensing there’s a but coming.”

Tony winced, upset at himself for whatever thoughts had formed in his mind. He dropped his voice down to a stage whisper. “I think this Gatekeeper might be a...a...” he sighed, long and loud as he gave up on his internal struggle. “He might be a goddamn hero. And Asgard and SHIELD want us to hunt a man who might just be trying to save lives. That’d make me the biggest douche in the universe, a bigger douche than John Edwards!” Tony raised imploring eyes at Steve, and Steve realised that his friend may be suffering from an attack of genuine conscience and decency. “It is what you do that tells you what you are and what you are made of. I’ve tried, Cap, for the past half hour, tried to find a way to mock it, to pick it apart, but I can’t. I’m a practical guy and not one for slogans, and this idealism is starting to get to me!”

It didn’t get to Tony for long, as Sif had stormed out of the surveillance room next door, stalked right up to them with the dark, deep lines of fury etched in her expression, then punched Tony so hard in the face that it knocked him out.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god, it’s been a year and a half since I updated! And I managed to update!

To all those dedicated readers who left me inspirational and encouraging reviews, thank you so, so much. It gave me the motivation to sit down during this New Year break to start writing again. The production of this chapter was very much due to your positive reinforcement that I should continue with the story (I didn't intend to abandon it, always wanted to return to it, but blasted work and life always got in the way!). I will also respond to your reviews individually to express my gratitude for your continued support that I should keep going.

Apologies in advance if my writing skills have rusted or there are some inconsistencies with previous chapters. Also apologies that there is limited action in this chapter, but I thought it was high time I fleshed out the background of the dwarves, having done that with the frost giants already, by helping myself to the lore from Dragon Age (damn I miss playing that game!).

I am not actively trying to deify the Gatekeeper and reduce this to a black-and-white
portrayal of goodies vs baddies. Hopefully in the forthcoming chapters, I will be able to strike a better balance..

So happy new year, folks, and thanks again for your ongoing comments and reviews these past 18 months. The New Year's resolution is to make sure I consistently update in 2016 and hopefully bring this story to an end before the end of the year :o)
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventeen

Bucky didn’t scare easy; his stellar 50 year career as Winter Soldier should be sufficient proof, yet the sight of his boss, mangled and broken, nearly made him lose his shit and plagued him with paralysing fear as if the noxious reaction had been directly injected into his veins.

Ever since Williams wrested him from the control of Department X, he had only ever known his boss as Lachlan Williams or the Gatekeeper. Of course, there had been some other choice names from competitors and hindrances he had steamrolled over to establish his monopoly as earth’s sole traffic warden, and none of that was flattering, but no one had ever addressed him as Loki. In fact, no one had ever hinted that his boss was some freaking Norse god and brother of big-blond-and-intimidating. He didn’t look like them to start off with, no beach bod and all, and never identified himself as Loki (Bucky thought that if it was Boss’ real name, his closest confidante, Fenrir, would always call him by such) and he certainly fell off no bridge two years ago. Although Bucky didn’t live with the Boss at his apartment or Tower, with Williams’ full schedule, running interference for Oberon, administering and maintaining the ever burgeoning network of shadow highways and rest-stops for the dark elves, and shipping people in from Jotunheim and Nidavellir, he wouldn’t have had had time to also moonlight as the second prince of Asgard.

No, Williams definitely could not be Loki of Asgard. But that thing Steve picked up at the Hydra base looked just like him, and worse, that thing looked like it had been there for a long time.

Bucky gulped as he handled the phone receive, and the polymer casing began to crack under the pressure of his grip. The muscle memory in his fingers dialled Boss’ number, and he tried to focus on the dial tone above the roar of the rush of blood pounding in his brain.

He almost sobbed with irrational relief when he heard the Boss’ voice. Boss dominated space and time like it was his personal playground and slapped kings of realms around just because they were pricks and deserved it. Boss could never be captured and dissected by Hydra goons.

“Barnes, where have you been?”

There was the sound of metal being hammered into place above the low whines of Fenrir in the background.

“Boss, is now a good time to talk?” That was their code for this call is being recorded so watch what you’re saying.

Williams gave an impatient harrumph which was followed by a short burst of static, and then the line was crystal clear again. “Speak freely. I need you at the Tower in thirty minutes.”

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to deal with one thing at a time so that the torrent of questions he had for his boss didn’t just come gushing out in one incomprehensible tidal wave. “I can’t. I’m on a SHIELD helicarrier and it’ll be another three hours at least before we dock at the Triskelion.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Barnes sucked his bottom lip on hearing his boss’ foot stomp. “What on earth are you doing? Has your cover been blown?”
“No,” he hissed, making sure his back was turned to the surveillance cameras so that they couldn’t try to read his lips later. “I’m here as James Barnes. Steve went missing you see, I went looking for him –

“So you played at being an Avenger with America, huh?”

“Absolutely not!” Bucky was desperate to reassure. There was an unbearable pressure building up behind his eyeballs and he felt a trickle of sweat slide down the side of his cheek. His grip on the receiver tightened still until bits of plastic came away in his hand. “Look Boss, I just came from a Hydra base where Mal and his darkies were being held captive with a couple of dwarves and a walking flamethrower. There was also another person. Another you! I swear to god, he had your face and everyone’s now calling him Loki, another prince of Asgard, and shitting themselves thinking Thor’s going to end the world. Are you Loki? Are you his evil twin no one talks about?”

“Barnes, calm down, you’re hyperventilating.”

“How can I calm down? I just saw you as someone’s Frankenstein, and you know how much I hate human experimentation. Makes me see not just red, but my hands itch to make them scream and scream and scream so they know what it’s like to be poked and prodded and –”

“James, that’s Plan B.”

The world started to spin and Bucky slid down to the floor, his back to the cold unyielding metal wall and clutched at the receiver like a lifeline. “This is making no sense, Boss. You can’t be Loki because that guy didn’t die until only two years ago and you’ve been on earth all this time. And how does making Thor upset help us in any way?”

“Soldier, if everyone is worrying about stopping Thor from cracking earth open like an egg, they’re not trying too hard to look for me, are they?”

Bucky was stunned. “That’s it? You riled up a god, spat in his eye, fucked his tender emotions and put this planet in the bloody firing line just to throw SHIELD off your trail?”

“My, my James, you sound upset.”

“Course I’m bloody upset! I happen to live on earth!”

“Don’t worry about Thor,” Williams cut him off sharply. “He will take my doppelganger back to Asgard and won’t be coming back too soon. Without him sticking around, our biggest worry is the Hulk, and he’s a green imbecile with a 50-word vocab range that Fenrir can outsmart in five minutes.”

Bucky was ready to explode at the sheer idiotic rationale. He clambered back onto his feet and almost yelled down the line, “Thor’s not going anywhere in a hurry!”

“What do you mean? The Asgardians will just beam him back to his realm like they did with Scotty –”

“They can’t beam him up like Scotty because the bifrost is apparently going to tear him apart!”

Williams made another sound of irritation like he was trying to teach Bucky very simple, basic trick that you could teach a toddler, and he just wasn’t getting it. “Really, Barnes, it’s not multi spell class specialising. They’ll send healers from Asgard to patch him up so he’s well enough to travel and then the Thunderer and She-ra will be out of our hair.”
It was Bucky’s turn to be annoyed. The words nearly tripped over each other as he rapidly explained, “No one’s coming from Asgard, no, correction, no one is allowed to come from Asgard. The King sent a freaky pre-recorded message saying this Loki guy was a traitor, tried to kill his brother, tried to start a war, and the councillors are not only stopping the doctors from helping, even their frigging queen can’t come or else people are going to rebel or some shit... Boss... boss... hey boss, are you still there?”

Bucky held his breath, horrified that the line had gone dead, but then a low, hollow chuckle began to build until he couldn’t tell whether Williams was laughing or crying. “Oh, this is so bloody rich. Even on the brink of death, they still want to fuck me over, those pernicious, petty little cunts. They’re upset with pixie dust? I’ll flood them with pop teen sensations and pre-pubescent boybands and their catchy girl power anthems and break-up tunes.”

“You wouldn’t!” Bucky gasped, appalled.

“Perhaps I’ll finally unleash Miley Cyrus and her Wrecking Ball!”

“Have some mercy, boss!”

“No, she’s too good for them. They deserve Justin Bieber, who’ll corrupt all their youth into rabid Beliebers!”

“Lachie-boy, you said you wouldn’t wish him on your worst enemy!”

“And Five Seconds of Summer without their auto-tune!”

“The inhumanity!” Fenrir howled in the background. “Oh gods, the inhumanity!”

“Whoah, boss! Breathe! Just breathe! Fen, you there? Do something!”

Explosions went off in the background, glass shattered, metal creaked and groaned and shelves laden with tomes crashed to the ground. Above it all, Fenrir yipped and whined, and Bucky could just imagine the great wolf sticking his cold nose at Williams’ face, switching between licking and burrowing his head into Williams’ chest.

“Lachie-boy, don’t be angry. Tummy rub? Wanna give me a tummy rub?”

“That place is cursed! I can’t trust those half-wits to ever get anything right! Burn! Let it all burn! I’ll see that realm reduced to dust and less than dust and then I’ll sell that dust as kitty litter for cats to piss and shit in, see how they like that!”

“Lachie-boy, don’t cry. Don’t cry. I love you. I love you. I love you. Wanna pat my head? Tummy rub?”

“Oh, Fen,” Boss sighed, and sounds of minor pandemonium died down, most likely because judging by the soft contented rumblings, Fenrir was having his tummy rubbed.

Bucky released a long, shuddering breath he forgot he was holding. “Boss,” he tentatively ventured, “you... you gonna be all right? Want me to go shake down some of these Asgardian earls and bigwigs with extreme prejudice and my biggest fuck-off grenade launcher?”

There was another period of silence, punctuated by the intermittent thump of Fenrir’s wagging tail hitting the floor reminding Barnes that his boss had not hung up on him. “I’m fine,” Williams eventually replied, voice wooden and flat. “It’s just been a stressful day with people banging on my door demanding this and that like I owe them money. Did you say Mal’s with you on the
“Uh, yes sir, he is.”

“Good. We can still patch this up, but I’m going to need you to play your part. Now listen carefully, here’s what you’ve got to do.”

~*~*~*~*~

Rogers may have disproved of her methods, but Danvers knew she made the right call. Based on every stereotype of dwarves Jarvis could source off the internet, she settled with the strategy of using Tony to befriend the stout folk with booze. Good booze. Fury’s best. Anything to get a permanent rise in his blood pressure. Plus, all dwarves loved drink, right? And they didn’t seem to be the type to take humans in sharp, form-fitting suits all that seriously, if their own fashion sense was anything to go by.

It was unfortunate Sif overheard Tony’s epiphany through the earpiece, although Danvers could sympathise with the Warrior Princess’ sentiments. After all, they were here on earth to conduct their own recon of the Gatekeeper after a number of their own overdosed on drugs now running rampant throughout the realms. The universe smells a bit better each time a drug smuggler is shot; pegging one as a hero may provoke extreme reactions.

Danvers watched Black Widow’s interrogation of the dark elves through the monitor, and would have liked to have paid greater attention but for the cozy blanket of apathy that had cocooned itself around her mind and increasingly muffled out the orders that Fury was giving. Give the man some credit, he was a duck in water when it came to matters of international security and keeping a lid on things, but for the sake of all that was precious and holy, keep that man far, far away from intergalactic relations as much as possible. She was the one who induced Ceroden to talk when Widow’s Red Room interrogation methods got nothing more than a yawn out of the dark elf. She was the one got the dwarves to spill their life story and manifesto in minutes by instructing Stark to play the bumbling idiot and playing him off against the straight and narrow Captain America.

Widow’s interrogation with two of Malvavan’s younger sergeants was yielding a great big fat nada, and Fury became increasingly agitated with the lack of results. He wasn’t interested in dwarven politics, you see, or global freezing on Jotunheim, and spurned everything that was not direct intel on the Gatekeeper. Well would you look at that, one of the dark elves just yawned.

Danvers bet she could get the dark elves to talk; about their origins and upbringing, their trade, their creed hand what they liked about earth. What Fury couldn’t see was that, somewhere entwined in the struggles and aspirations of these people, the Gatekeeper had a part to play, and how his actions have intentionally or otherwise influenced and shaped the destiny of these aliens said so much more to Danvers than direct answers to who he is, what can he do, and what does he want.

People don’t rebel for no good reason. They don’t risk their lives to make a jump light-years across the universe into a stranger’s realm for something that wasn’t worth so much more. Danvers bet there was a story to the dark elves as well, but Widow wasn’t angling for it in the interview, and Fury would have tossed it onto the heap deemed ‘irrelevant scrap’ in any event. What a wasted opportunity.

Danvers gave a tight lipped smile as she passed Jarxanth and pointed towards the cookie jar,
signalling her non-threatening intent. Never once did he tense or display even a flicker of anxiety as she plucked the largest choc chip cookie out of the jar and slotted a pod into the Nespresso machine for a cup of wake-me-up. She cocked her head as he blatantly studied her with serene calm, and decided, what the heck, he’s a kid, she could have a casual conversation with him. What harm could that possibly do?

“We don’t know much about the Nine Realms, only what little Thor has told us, but I take it you’re somewhere up there on top of the cosmic food chain?”

Jarxanth blinked. His gold and copper hair swayed gently like wheat field being consumed by fire, and the thermostat suddenly shot up ten degrees. Danvers began to sweat.

“I too have little knowledge of Midgardians.” She had to strain to catch the soft voice but dared not step closer. “The Gatekeeper had suggested to my uncle that Midgard would be a good realm to take refuge. He tells me that humans believed fire was a gift from the gods and that we would be welcomed.”

Feeling a little weak in the knees, Carol leaned back against the kitchen bench, and played it cool by taking a sip of her coffee before responding. “Fire has indeed been integral in our history, and was one of our earliest discoveries. Fire gave us light and heat, fire cooked our food, fire helped us create weapons, fire helped us build civilization. None of us would be here today if we didn’t discover fire.”

Jarxanth’s smile widened a fraction. “A gift from the gods,” he repeated, and Carol detected a note of pleasure. “So the Gatekeeper has chosen well for us. But those other Midgardians, the ones who abducted me and warded my powers, who were they?”

“They’re an organisation known as HYDRA. Bad men, poisoned by bad ideas. Please don’t think all humans are like that.”

“Are there more of them?”

Danvers blanched at the crackle in the elemental’s voice, like overheated rock splitting apart. She wiped the sweat off her brow and noticed that the oxygen in the room was thinning out because there was a fire somewhere that was burning it faster than it could be replaced, and holy, was that wisps of smoke emanating from his hair?

“Yes,” she swallowed, hard, and it was painful when her throat was dry like the Sahara. “They have this saying; cut off one head, and two more will take its place.”

“I know hydras,” Jarxanth said archly, every inch the princeling he claimed to be. “They know to steer clear of us, because no heads can regrow where we have seared the wounds shut. Once my brothers and sisters arrive, we will repay Midgard’s hospitality by cleansing it of this filth.”

*Oookay, Danvers, maybe talking to the kid wasn’t your finest moment. Now how do you tell Fury that you’ve accidentally started a blood feud between Hydra and the fire elementals? Yes, neo-fascists are evil, but they should be imprisoned, not spit-roasted.*

“Yes! I have plenty of minutes!” she prayed her desperation to get out of there wasn’t so obvious, and she clung to whatever life-saver was thrown her way and redirected all her attention on Barnes, who inclined his head into the hallway. Danvers internally whooped with joy as she broke into a near run for the door.
When Barnes detected that Jarxanth had turned the entertainment room into a sauna, he pursed his lips and deliberated on whether to comment. “Yo, buddy, you got everything you need? Anything I can get you?”

“No, I am all right. Perhaps I was becoming passionate. I see that human have a low tolerance for heat.”

“That’s about right. Now are you going to be ok getting home after we land? I could give you a lift.”

A sudden spike in temperature turned the room into an inferno and the plastic coverings on the chairs began to slowly drip and run. “You are well mannered and considerate. I will commend your services to the Gatekeeper, but I will be capable of returning to my domicile by myself.”

Barnes hastily nodded and slammed the door shut, wiping the sweat off his brow and raking a hand into his hair to push it out of his face. For a man who met aliens for the first time today, he seemed to be taking it all within his stride.

Now that Danvers wasn’t fretting about being cooked alive and put aside the impending genocide of HYDRA for the moment, she drank in Barnes’s visage as she took her time to get her breath back and liked everything she saw. He was in that glorious period of life in his mid-twenties where his body was at peak conditioning and there was still enough youth left to fuel fantastic adventures and dreams. The cobalt hue of his eyes was mesmerising and his shy boyish grin made her want to pinch his cheeks. The spare set of sweats he’d pulled on was half a size too small, thereby clinging to every chiselled inch of his upper body and captured every ripple of muscle as he moved. As for the slacks, they fit Barnes like sin, and if she surreptitiously craned her neck…sweet Jesus, the soft material moulded around those tight, perfect, round cheeks…

“Damn, Barnes, if you weren’t Cap’s boyfriend, I would seriously ask you out on a date,” she purred, smiling prettily at him, and feeling her smile split wider as a flush so handsomely spread across the cheeks. She could just spend the whole day looking at him.

He was making all sorts of protests and denials when she found some kindness to put him out of his embarrassed misery by returning to his original topic at hand. “What was it you wanted to see me about?”

He rubbed the back of his head, unable to make eye contact, and Danvers didn’t blame him; try as she might, she was probably still perving at him with bedroom eyes like Samantha from Sex and the City. “It’s…er…two things actually. Mr Williams, I spoke to him just now, and he said he’s got some emergency business back in London that he’s gotta take care of and he’s flying out tonight, and he’s wondering whether you could dog-sit RiRi for the next two weeks or so.”

Barnes carefully lifted his gaze back towards her to judge any negative reaction, and he breathed out in relief when she didn’t vigorously object. “I’d love to, James, but with all that’s going on, Loki and the extinction of the human race, I don’t know if I’ll have time.”

“I’ll walk him!” he offered straight away. “He’s a quiet dog. You can just let him mope about the Avengers Mansion, and I’ll take him out every day for walks so Jarvis doesn’t end up having to clean after him. Please. I’d take him, but I’m just crashing at Steve’s pad and I think building management said no pets – ”

Poor boy was almost distraught, and it made her almost want to mother him. “It’s ok, James. I’ll take RiRi. And I do appreciate your offer to walk her.”
Danvers did hope that Barnes would hug and kiss her in gratitude, but alas, that was just modest wishful thinking and instead, she was rewarded with a smile that could charm the pants off any woman, which was just as good. Why didn’t she have her phone with her so she could capture this moment forever?

“And what’s the second thing I can help you with?” she asked, and again, modestly hoped it may have been somewhere along the lines of can you help me out of this shirt? Can you give me a back massage? Can you perhaps cuddle me to sleep?

Barnes had worked up the courage to make his second request when Steve strode down the corridor, as if he had been looking for Barnes. Yup. The way Steve’s focus zeroed in on James as if Carol didn’t exist confirmed it all. The way Steve almost licked his lips as his eyes raked up and down Barnes’ body and mentally stripped him bare was just to sickeningly sweet that Danvers reminded herself to check her blood-sugar levels later to make sure she didn’t just get diabetes.

Cap’s steps quickened and Barnes gravitated towards him until they stood facing each other with no respect for their personal spaces. Cap frowned when he noticed the steri strips over a laceration just under Barnes’ hairline above his left eye and reached out to cup the face with one hand and sweep the hair back with the other so he could inspect the wound more closely.

Danvers wondered whether the two men realised their lips were only a centimetre or two apart, and clobbered back the unprofessional urge to yell out get a room.

“You sure you don’t want the doc to take a look at that?”

“It’s nothing serious. Just a few harmless scrapes and bruises here and there. I’ll get my mechanic to look at the arm later.”

Steve’s hands dropped to Barnes’ shoulders in a solid, grounding grip which coaxed another one of those shy grins meant only for Steve, and Carol had to break up this saccharine performance before clothes did start flying off right in the middle of the corridor.

She coughed to distract Barnes from his reverie, and then crossed her arms and looked expectantly at him.

“Oh, yeah,” he flustered, as though realising only just now that Carol had front-row seats to Steve being handsy and touchy with him, and Barnes absolutely letting him do it. “Um…how do I put this without sounding weird? You know that...Loki guy?”

“Yes?” she prompted.

“He…I don’t know if you noticed it, but…he freaked me out big time.”

“He’s been horribly abused,” Steve jumped in to comfort his boy-toy before Carol could even open her mouth. “Anyone seeing a person like that should be appalled.”

“Not like that. Well yes, that…but Ms Marvel, I thought that Loki guy was Mr Williams for a moment and…I mean, you gotta admit it, there’s a spooky resemblance, almost like they could be brothers or something.”

“Lachie?” Danvers echoed, not having drawn any comparisons herself, but was now admittedly curious.

“I mean I don’t mean to gawk or anything…but could I just take one more look at that guy and convince myself it’s not Mr Williams lying half dead in there? Also, I heard what Thor’s servant
said and all that and...just wanted to offer him my condolences so you know...he doesn’t hate us all and smash us to rubble.”

“I think that’s an incredibly compassionate thing to do, and I’m just heading to the medic bay myself. Come on, I’ll show you the way.”

Steve’s hand snaked around and settled comfortably on Barnes’ shoulder as he steered them away, and though Carol should be irked that Steve hijacked the conversation and had the privilege to feel up Barnes, she had no complaints about being given the opportunity to savour and burn the image of Barnes’ pert, perky ass-cheeks in her mind as she trailed behind them.

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Banner had taken over Loki’s care in the medic bay and operated a stripped down version of the Regeneration Cradle as Dr Cho looked on and gave a stream of instructions through the monitor. She was already at the Triskellion with her team of scientists, ready to receive Loki as soon as they arrived. For the time being, the nano-molecular technologies were able to pick up enough of a reading on Loki’s cellular make-up and began targeted tissue replication to repair organs which Banner believed were damaged the most.

Thor was forced to sit some distance away from the machines, flanked by Sif and Amora, and none of them acknowledged their arrival as they sidled up to Janet and Hank, who were busy running trace and obscure energy signatures from Loki to see if they could synthesise another magical core.

There were dark bags under Janet’s eyes, but she still gave them silent wave in greeting. Then she went statue-still and stared at Barnes in his tight t-shirt, and Danvers could totally sympathise.

“The condition is critical, but at least it’s stable,” Hank informed them in a whisper just a hair above mute. “If there is no deterioration, I don’t think there’s any immediate risk of death. We might have bought ourselves a few more hours, a day or so?”

“No more holograms from Asgard?” Carol enquired. “News there will be a medical evac crew coming?”

“If only,” Janet grumbled. “It’s been radio-silence ever since Heimdall’s message to us in the quinjet.”

Meanwhile, Barnes had taken some halting steps towards the cradle and studied the expressionless face that could pass off as an embalmed corpse ready for burial. Now that he mentioned it, there were quite a number of similarities between Loki and Lachie; the prominent cheekbones, tapered chin, wide forehead and hawkish nose all set on delicate fair skin. No wonder the kid got a fright the first time he saw Loki.

“A prince of Asgard is not a spectacle for mortals to gape over!” Sif shot out of her seat and stalked towards Barnes, gripping him by the front of his shirt and would have thrown him across the room had not Steve pulled her back.

“I meant no disrespect, ma’am. Your prince just reminded me a lot of my boss, that’s all,” Barnes choked.

“Your boss?”

“My ballroom dance partner,” Carol said coolly, and put herself between Sif and Barnes. The Valkyrie had already punched out one Avenger today. She wasn’t going to put another one down.
“I mean, this is real sad,” Barnes spoke up with big baby blues overflowing with contrition that it sapped Sif of her outrage. “You find your prince two years after you thought he died, and now he’s badly injured, and his parents can’t even come to earth to see him because your people won’t let them.”

“See him…Freya’s pearls, why didn’t I think of it earlier?” Amora exclaimed with a large dose of self-chastisement. “See. Of course! I need a mirror, a large one. Quick!”

Still not comprehending what realization had struck Amora, Hank fished out Janet’s compact mirror from her purse, sprinkled a few pym particles on it until it was as tall as he was and manoeuvred it next to the cradle. Amora immediately set to work, etching symbols into the metal frame with a scalpel while muttering incantations under the breath. She then nicked the tip of her index finger with the keen blade until blood was running freely and traced a complicated rune on the surface of the mirror.

The moment she settled her palm on the bloody sigil, their reflections gave way to a darkness illuminated by coloured lights that danced and swirled like the formation the Milky Way before another image, a room embellished in gold, began to flicker into existence.

Amora screamed in ear-splitting pain as sickly red arcs of lightening jumped from the mirror surface, lanced up her naked forearms and sizzled till the room smelled faintly of burning flesh. “My Queen!” she gasped, refusing to retract her palm from the rune even as another barrage of electricity from the silver surface and left long, ugly red-purple cuts that split apart skin and muscle until the ivory of bone was visible. Globs of crimson, a mix of blood and meat, splattered thickly onto the sterile floor. “My Queen, I am with Prince Thor and Loki. Please….please remove your magical barriers.”

Sif held up Amora as the enchantress’ knees buckled. The defensive spells which the queen of Asgard had installed to kick out spies and peeping toms chewed up what was left of Amora’s right arm, and black, charred skin began to peel and flake, but never did it look like Amora was tempted to break contact with the rune. After what seemed like eternity, the mirror surface rippled and suddenly, there was the All Mother herself, looking back at them all.

The title of All Mother conjured images of a middle-aged female, regal and refined, radiating waves of nurture and care as befit the mother of all things. The Queen of Asgard did not live up to that image, and appeared to have been faring poorly. Her hair hung down in loose, tangled braids that had not been tended to all day. Her palour was grey, eyes red and puffy and her tears, long dried, had left streaks in her foundation.

“Amora? Sif?” the queen’s voice was hoarse, on the verge of breaking after what must have been hours of shouting and crying. “Is Thor there? Loki?”

“Mother! We are here, on a Midgardian aircraft. Loki is alive. He is alive!” Thor exclaimed. Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks following a ragged, raw cry of pained delight, and she hastily mopped the wetness away with the back of her sleeve. “Let me see, let me see.”

They adjusted the mirror so it was facing Loki. The rags they had found him in were replaced by clean white scrubs that concealed the most devastating of disfigurements. They were able to remove some of the dyed surgical markings which had been drawn down the side of his face and up the top of his skull, but two hours in the cradle had done little to erase the undeniable signs of torture and experimentation, and the lines of scars showing where scientists had repeatedly cut to remove the flaps of skin to bore holes through Loki’s skull.
The All Mother let loose a wail of grief at having seen something no mother should have to see, and Carol dipped her head low in shame at the atrocities that her kind were capable of inflicting.

“My poor baby,” Frigga mourned, pushing her strained voice to the limit. “Let me get your father. Keep the channel open.”

Still propped up by Sif, Amora gave a weak nod and gestured elaborately with other, undamaged hand whenever the image on the other side of the image wavered.

Odin’s stunned silence was equally devastating as Frigga’s cries of agony. The two gods, looking down-trodden and weary like any old couple helpless to do anything for their child, huddled to view their lost son from the other side of a mirror millions of light years away when their most desperate desire was to touch and hold their children.

“Your Majesty,” Carol said, daring herself to hold the one-eyed god’s gaze. “Is there absolutely nothing you can do?”

“I have all my scribes reviewing every single case in the archives for a precedent which may overturn the Security Council’s decree. Farnarr is speaking individually to the earls to shore up our numbers.”

“I’ve sent word to Hogan. He is headed to the Observatory and Heimdall has been instructed to deliver him to the Avengers Mansion.”

Odin regarded his wife, horrified. “Frigga, what have you done?”

The All Mother tried to still her trembling and the hand clutching her handkerchief was white knuckled. “Thor has done no wrong, and Hogan is being sent to Midgard to offer support to his prince in his time of need,” she declared, then in a quieter voice, added, “and he’s taking some of our most powerful rejuvenation potions as a precaution in case he encounters…bilgesnipes in Midgard.”

Odin planted a wet one on his missus’ cheek. “Oh Frigga, my cunning queen, at least one of us has kept their head during these dark times.”

“Your majesty, I am afraid those potions will have no effect,” Amora spat out in anguish. “The humans have plundered Loki’s seidr. There is no magic left in Loki to activate the properties of any healing potion.”

The King and Queen’s silence was a crushing weight that bought the doom of earth one step closer to reality. Barnes gave a polite cough and kept his head respectfully bowed. “Really? Are you sure you don’t have any other potions that don’t require the recipient to know magic? Sounds awfully limiting.”

“Quiet, you insignificant insect!” Amora hissed. She would have bore down on him like Sif had done had not the All Mother’s security spells half killed her. “What would some pathetic, short-lived mortal know about…know about…”

“What is it?” Sif urgently asked, holding Amora up a little higher and closer to her.

Blinking like an owl in daylight, Amora grasped Sif’s hand and her pink lips stammered, “There is a formula for a powerful restorative potion. It will put Loki back together so that he will be well enough to travel the Bifrost when His Majesty has convinced the council to reverse their decision, and then he can have the care and attention of the masters of the healing arts back on Asgard.”
Sif swallowed, and she looked like she dared to hope. “How soon can you gather all the ingredients?”

There was a flash of realization and panic in Amora’s eyes as she realised she had offered something that she could not deliver, not with time against her.

“You’re looking to brew Nestarion’s Elixir?”

Carol nearly had a heart attack.

Malvavan was suddenly among them, standing tall and proud in his tattered black robes like an unwelcome shadow that stalked you in the labyrinths constructed by your subconscious to stow away your terrors. The King of Beggars bowed, low and insulting, at the King and Queen of Asgard. It wouldn’t be until much later, when they studied all the footage, that Carol learned that dark elven magic included camouflage on par with military grade cloaking devices which took them off radar until such time as they removed the camouflage.

Amora recoiled, stung, and she failed to conceal her desperation as she tried to address the dark elf in her most authoritative snarl. “What do you know of it?”

Malvavan chuckled, unperturbed by all the attention that was suddenly heaped on him. “Darling, what do you think I do? Who do you think I have connections with? The Light Elves and dwarves are waging civil war; I help source components for their medical supplies too.”

Odin’s face dominated the mirror. “What is a Dokkalfar doing amongst Midgardians? Who are you?”

Malvavan’s smile was sharklike and tainted with eager malice. “Just someone who would offer aid, your majesty, in return for your goodwill,” he said smugly with another small bow.

Suspicion stole across the fragile hope that had begun to buoy in the two Asgardian females. Amora was back in her element, her confidence bolstered by her belief that her knowledge of the arcane was greater than the smuggler. “As if there are any skilled practitioners amongst the ranks of the rebel trash,” she sneered the last two words. “There are only a handful of alchemists in all nine realms with the gift and subtlety of touch to concoct this elixir.”

This got Carol’s attention. “Are we talking like an instant healing serum or something?”

“This of raising the dead, Nestarion’s Elixir can cure any ill.”

Malvavan snorted. “And as if a witch like you who has only been around for eight hundred years would even know where to begin. So you managed to get your hands on a copy of the formula; are you certain it is not some hackneyed forgery? Do you have the skill to put it together? Did you know that that the ingredients have to be stirred, thrice clockwise and seven times anti-clockwise under the eclipse bought about by the alignment of all the planets in this solar system?”

Amora’s nostrils flared. She was psyching herself up to tear Malvavan a new one until Sif, in full Valkyrie mode with a harsh glare and an even harsher scowl, took up the baton change. “Amora is an extremely talented enchantress. Do not underestimate her abilities.”

Janet caught Carol rolling her eyes and muttering under her breath, “First they want to gouge out each other’s eyes, and now they’re besties.” Then, raising her voice to address the two Asgardian females, “Hey, honey, Tony has got advanced labs back at Start Tower. Whatever you need, I am sure he is more than happy to provide. SHIELD will also offer whatever facilities or equipment you might also need,” Danvers added. Now was the time for humans to play the good guys, prove
they weren’t a bunch of murderous dickbags that ripped open aliens and prodded them with needles and god knows what in the name of science.

Malvavan tsked, shaking his head in condescension and pity at their naivety. “Ambition is not a bad thing, but that’s all it is, ambition. Have you even seen a grand master alchemist whip up the elixir and the incredibly high level white magic spells that needs to be woven? You have some art in illusions and charm, enchantress, but this elixir is beyond you.”

“And a bottom dwelling drow like you is in a better position to put it together?”

Malvavan hissed at the insult and bared his yellow teeth and his hand moved to where his weapons once were before they were confiscated by SHIELD when he boarded the ship.

Steve had enough of the bickering. “Settle down!” he barked, a tone of voice he used to use to break up the ruckus and food fights in the mess hall when soldiers were trying to release the tension in between battles during the war. “Name calling helps nobody, least of all Thor and his family. Now, sir,” he addressed the dark elf with an uncompromising tone, letting him know that the time for pointless banter and one upmanship was over. Steve meant business. “By the sounds of it, you know someone who can make this potion?”

Malvavan’s smile was all teeth and no humour. “Maybe.”

“You deal with Oberon, the wood elf lord.”

The cocky self-assuredness in Malvavan’s demeanour was wiped out and in the mirror, they heard Odin’s sharp intake of breath. Intel that Oberon was a wood elf lord must have been news to him too.

“There…there are no such things,” Amora stammered, moving into Steve’s line of vision as if she could divine the truth by being able to study his face. “Wood elf lords passed into legend long before Odin became king of Asgard.”

“Your prince Loki knew one. His name was Othorion, who became his mentor of sorts.”

Amora’s eyes crinkled with disbelief. She turned to Sif, as if to verify Steve’s assertions, and the dark-haired warrior simply closed her eyes and gave a small nod. “It was a long time ago, when he was exiled to Vanaheim. We believe Othorion is the elven rebel king, Oberon.”

Against all expectations, the corners of Amora’s lips stuttered up into a timid, hopeful ruby smile, and relief washed away the tension in her voice. “But that is wonderful news, is it not, my King and Queen? I will beseech Oberon, ask him to show mercy and grant us his aid.”

“Amora,” Odin said, his voice unbearably strained, his one good eye downcast and wet with anguish, “We cannot deal with Oberon. He is a close associate of the Gatekeeper, the harbinger of ruin to all the realms. King Syrmalorn has a bounty on Oberon; if any of us of Asgard were to deal with him, Alfheim will likely consider it a hostile act and it will affect our alliance.”

There was a stunned silence as Amora worked her mouth open and shut a few times, but no sound came out.

“This is unacceptable,” Thor roared, glaring at them all and daring them to overrule him. “Loki’s family! If there’s a way to heal him, we should take it, whatever that might be, and let my hammer deal with any bloody consequences”

Odin pinched the bridge of his nose. His face was stamped with despair and guilt. “Son, there are
things beyond us, greater than the individual. At precarious times of chaos, Asgard cannot afford to be seen to – ”

“Hey, this is just an idea, but if Asgard must be seen not to be dealing with this Gatekeeper guy you people keep yapping on about, how about using earth as an intermediary?” James suggested with a shrug and toss of his hands in the air.

Carol caught on straight away, and she could have almost rushed James into a bear hug and kissed him for the genius. “Of course! SWORD will deal with Oberon through the dark elves and pass on the elixir to Thor. That’d work, wouldn’t it?”

Malvavan’s ghostly chortle, softer than the footsteps of an assassin in the dark, put a serious damper on Danver’s rising spirits, but she reigned in her temper and forced herself to hear what the dark elf had to say. “Everyone here assumes I will proffer this legendary potion out of the goodness of my heart. There are two fallacies with that assumption; one, that there is any iota of goodness in me, or two, that I have a heart.”

Thor reared up from Loki’s side, Mjolnir in hand, murder in his eyes. “You would barter with the All Father of the Nine Realms?”

“What better time than now when all circumstances are in my favour?”

“Name your price,” Janet got right to the chase, levelling her ruthless boardroom executive gaze at the dark elf. “Between Stark Industries and Van Dynne Technologies, there isn’t a ransom we can’t afford to pay. So what is it?”

“Ah, that’s the language I want to hear. I am not interested in your coin, Lady Wasp, for I have plenty of my own, but these are my conditions: You will cease all interrogation of my men and the dwarves from this point forward. When we arrive at the Triskelion, we will all be escorted to the Avengers Mansion, where the exchange will occur once we are released. The transaction will be conducted entirely through Ms Marvel, and no SHIELD agents are to be present within a hundred kilometre radius. These terms are non-negotiable.”

Carol didn’t bother consulting with Fury and unilaterally made the decision on behalf of SWORD, with Steve, representing the Avengers, agreeing to the deal. Sure, they were releasing their biggest and most significant capture, the putative leader of dark elf smugglers after a solid year and a half of investigation, but hey, the alternative was Loki dying in the next 48 hours and earth ceasing to exist.

“So, how do you dark elves seal a deal? No sacrificing of any first-borns I hope.”

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“You actually went for Plan B?” Othorion barked as he burst into the apartment, shaking the water out of his umbrella, courtesy of the sudden torrential downpour that had started since midnight and shown no signs of abating, casting a thick, ominous blanket of grey clouds over all of New York City. The elf’s hair was not like its usual sleek silver brocade, having been disturbed by the gale-force winds, and Othorion grimaced as he wrung out the excess water from his clothes and hair.

A sudden clap of thunder sounding as if a timpani had been struck right next to his ear made Lachlan’s heart skip a beat. Fenrir whined and prowled along the length of lounge room, up and down the row of floor to ceiling glass windows, his eyes never leaving the sky.

“Of course I activated Plan B,” Lachlan replied, using that tone as if every reasonable man in his
position would have done the same, although judging from Othorion’s aghast look of horror mingled with panic might have suggested no sane man would have touched Plan B with a ten-foot barge pole.

The wood elf lord was not deterred by his nonchalance. “Plan B has every single realm hearing the damned and pitiful cries of the Thunderer! The eye of everyone and anyone who matters will be fixed on Midgard. Do you welcome this scrutiny?”

Lachlan drew a deep breath to steady the hands which were frantically loading up his pocket dimension. “Everyone will be focused on the Asgardians,” he corrected, pleased by how even his voice sounded despite the desperate pounding of his own heart in his ears. “Imagine: Loki, second prince of Asgard, found mutilated and crippled two years after his own realm had presumed him dead! It will occupy gossip for the next year, and the Gatekeeper and the Alfheim rebellion will fall away from front page news.”

“If you truly believe that, then I have failed miserably as your mentor. That’s not the naivety that has kept you alive and prospering for the past five centuries.” Othorion’s tongue lashing had only just started, but he stiffened and frowned when he finally noticed Laufey, bound in the body of a long-deceased and nameless mortal girl-child, laying down on the couch and watching reruns of season two of The Walking Dead. Othorion blinked. “What. Is. That?”

Lachlan did not have the courage to meet his mentor’s accusing glare. Instead, he did one final check of his belongings, and satisfied he had everything he needed to survive a thousand years in a life-sucking blackhole, he snapped his pocket dimension shut. “That’s Laufey, former king of Jotunheim.”

There was a long, tense silence, punctuated only by harsh panting from Fenrir who was feeling the strain of Orthorion’s building wrath. The warg sidled up to Lachlan with his ears flat against his skull and tail between his legs as he nosed Lachlan’s palm for some comfort.

Finally, the old wood elf lord cracked, and in his anger, his power outlined his form in a searing blaze of white that reduced whatever it touched to dust. Lachlan flinched from the powerful light and heat.

“Necromancy?” Othorion stormed up to Laufey, who didn’t move from his prone position and merely shifted his gaze from the flat-screen up to the elf. He was already dead and had faced the abyss and the boundaries of oblivion; nothing, not even a legendary and mythic figure from fairy tales Laufey was told when he was a frostling, could faze him now. “Of all the challenges we face, you thought it was a good idea to disturb the fundamental principles of life and death?”

Shrinking into himself, Lachlan held up two open hands in a placating gesture and tried to give his most reassuring smile. Othorion’s frown darkened, and Lachlan cleared his throat and pushed the whimpering Fenrir behind him. “What can I say, I had mastered every other school of magic and thought I’d try my hand at the darker arts?”

The laser sharp glare made Lachlan swallow hard. His dry lips quirked again into another smile, hoping, perhaps in vain, that his charm might take the edge of his mentor’s anger, but to no avail. “Please mentor, you’re radiating so much energy that every magical doweling rod on earth is going stir crazy. Can we…can we not discuss this like calm adults?”

He eventually talked Othorion down into a hot cup of tea and some muffins he had purchased earlier that morning for a chat that Lachlan didn’t have time for. Not because Thor had just found his supposed-lost brother, but because of an urgent call from Muspelheim. His mentor wasn’t in the mood for sweets but accepted the steaming beverage, palming his forehead as his ancient mind
tried to rue over the ramifications of Lachlan’s actions.

“I cannot possibly fathom not one, not a single reason, why it would be in anyone’s interests to revive Laufey as you have done. For what purpose does this not-living not-dead thing do?”

Laufey merely raised an eyebrow. He’d heard worse, mainly names that he had given to himself in his unnatural state. “I ask myself that question every day too,” he dourly added.

“I can explain this, mentor, I can explain everything. Except time is not on my side at the moment. As you can see, I’m – ”

“He’s heading off to Muspelheim!” Fenrir blurted out. “And he’s not taking me with him. Tell Lachie-boy that’s stupid and make him bring me!”

As whole-heartedly as Lachlan loved his companion, and as much as the warg had been taught the common tongue and bestowed with intelligence for the last four and a half centuries, Fenrir’s animal nature to love, defend and protect would ever be overriding. Now, when Lachlan needed to keep his secret side-trip to the fiery realm from Othorion of all people, his faithful hound just couldn’t help pouring oil to the fire.

His mentor blinked once, then twice, and went awfully quiet, which was worse than a hailstorm of eldritch fire, because Othorion’s disappointment hurt twice as much as his wrath.

Laufey bolted off the sofa, his jaded affect and tv show abandoned, and he stared at Lachlan as if he had just volunteered for a suicide mission. “That is impossible. No jotun has set foot in the lands of fire since the Accords were signed and the boundaries of the realms were established. Neither shall encroach upon the other’s land, or else face instant annihilation. That is writ and immutable.”

Lachlan rolled his eyes. If he got a gold coin for every time someone told him something was impossible, and he proved otherwise, he could singlehandedly fund the Nidavellir revolt without having to peddle Asgardian wildlife to bored Midgardian millionaires.

“Sutur’s palace contains an archive, the oldest in all the nine realms. He has an original copy of the Accords, and the drafts of those Accords, and memoirs from the architects of the Nine Realms. He has promised me access in exchange for my services.”

Laufey crossed his arms. “You expect me to believe that you’d put your life at risk for a mere scholarly pursuit or intellectual curiosity?”

The dead girl’s quip was ignored as Orthorion steadily held Lachlan’s gaze with knowing and trepidation. “This…this theory of yours,” the wood elf lord sighed as if it was an argument that they had had many times, “you are intent on proving it.”

Lachlan helplessly shrugged. “You know me best, mentor. Of all the things that I have accomplished in these past five hundred years, this may be my most important work yet. I am on the verge of a breakthrough, and those original texts….they may hold the key.”

“What you have done and continue to do is important to many, many people already. There is a lot on your plate right now, with the Asgardians being here on Midgard and all, you do not need the added stress of dealing with the fire princes.”

Going against his Orthorion’s wisdom was not to be done lightly, but Lachlan had long made up his mind. “I have already agreed to go, and was going to beg a favour of you, mentor,” he said with a hopeful glint in his eyes. When the old elf kept quiet, Lachlan continued, “Winter Soldier is occupied at the moment, and I need some muscle just in case.”
Orthorion’s eyes narrowed, and he moved closer to the edge of his seat. “You think Syrmalorn’s agents will follow you Muspelheim?”

“No.” Lachlan nibbled on the dry skin of his chapped lips, and his fingers fidgeted with the jewelled rings on his fingers. “I told you the House of Surtur was experiencing some instability, but I have not been entirely honest. Muspelheim is under attack, from creatures beyond the nine realms. Now more than ever, I need to prove my theory, otherwise everything we have worked so hard to achieve in these last three centuries will be for nothing. I need to go to Muspelheim. Please.”

Plan B, his doppleganger and the attention of Asgard were just a blip in the radar that hardly rated to Lachlan at the moment. Because ever since he started travelling and exploring the realms, he uncovered a truth buried in ancient history that should not have been allowed to be forgotten, and those few crumbs of knowledge he had been able to salvage thus far outweighed everything he had, even his own life.

Chapter End Notes

I apologise. There is simply no reason or excuse for the long and terrible delays between updates. For those who still remember and follow this story, my sincerest gratitude and thanks for your perseverance. I intend to see this through to the end.

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